

1.1 MYSTICISM

Wherever man exists, so does mysticism. Man is a conscious being, and the essence of mysticism is a transcendental experience in the sphere of consciousness. It is something that a person lives, not a philosophy or doctrine which is read or studied. In its broadest sense, it is an expansion of normal consciousness, an awakening of hidden potential such that understanding beyond that of normal human reasoning and mental activity becomes inwardly manifest. Those who are fortunate enough to have such experiences also feel an interior joy and ecstasy, a bliss that brings them closer to God within themselves. The culmination of such ecstasy is union with God, within. Mystical and religious writings contain many descriptions of such experiences, and the mystics themselves – sometimes persecuted during their own lifetimes – are often heralded later as the foremost of their faith.

It is significant that no one who has experienced anything remotely mystical has ever regarded it as something other than a glimpse of a higher reality. Like awakening from sleep, the experience carries with it its own innate touchstone of validity. Those who discount mystic experience as simply the product of religious hysteria or an overheated brain have rarely studied the matter at first hand. If they had ever met and conversed with those who have been the frequent recipients of genuine mystic experience, they would have realized that this had only been accomplished by a balanced self-discipline and a control of the mind and emotions that is quite inconceivable to most people. True mystics are wise, understanding and balanced human beings, not fanatical, self-seeking or emotionally overwrought. In fact, uncontrolled emotion and imagination will actually prevent a person from concentrating their consciousness within, and make true mystic experience impossible.

No amount of theology or reasoning can replace mystic experience. True mystics do not use reason or philosophy as their primary means of understanding the nature of Reality, for they have realized that there can be no real understanding without direct experience. Even so, while reason cannot lead to or enhance mystic experience, mystic experience or simply a strong feeling for the mystical have illumined the minds of many of the world's greatest men and women:

Two facts in connection with mysticism are undeniable, whatever it may be, and whatever part it is destined to play in the development of thought and of knowledge. In the first place, it is the leading characteristic of some of the greatest thinkers of the world – of the founders of ... religions, of Plato and Plotinus, of Eckhart and Bruno, of Spinoza, Goethe and Hegel.

Secondly, no one has ever been a lukewarm, an indifferent, or an unhappy mystic. If a man has this particular temperament, his mysticism is the very centre of his being: it is the flame which feeds his whole life; and he is intensely and supremely happy just so far as he is steeped in it.

C.F.E. Spurgeon, Mysticism in English Literature, MEL p.2

The same author also comments on the certainty of the mystic concerning his experience:

The mystic is somewhat in the position of a man who, in a world of blind men, has suddenly been granted sight, and who, gazing at the sunrise, and overwhelmed by the glory of it, tries, however falteringly, to convey to his fellows what he sees. They, naturally, would be sceptical about it, and would be inclined to say that he is talking foolishly and incoherently.

But the simile is not altogether parallel. There is this difference. The mystic is not alone; all through the ages we have the testimony of men and women to whom this vision has been granted, and the record of what they have seen is amazingly similar, considering the disparity of personality and circumstances. And further, the world is not peopled with totally blind men. The mystics would never hold the audience they do hold, were it not that the vast majority of people have in themselves what William James has called a “mystical germ” which makes response to their message.

C.F.E. Spurgeon, Mysticism in English Literature, MEL pp.5-6

This is the point – the mystic faculty is the heritage of everyone, whoever they are. Undeveloped as it may be in the majority, or present only in its most elementary form, everyone has the capacity to develop experience of the divine. As a result, mystic teachings strike a chord deep in the hearts of many.

Mystical experience, then, is universal. Yet, when expressed or described, it takes on the colour of the culture, traditions and language of the individual. As the renowned Arabic and Persian scholar, R.A. Nicholson, observed:

It may be said, truly enough, that all mystical experiences ultimately meet in a single point; but that point assumes widely different aspects according to the mystic’s religion, race and temperament, while the converging lines of approach admit of almost infinite variety.

R.A. Nicholson, Mystics of Islam, MOI p.2

To seek out and present indications of this mysticism in the religious and cultural traditions of the world, past and present, is the intention of this *Treasury*. To set the scene for this exploration, it will be useful to review the religions and traditions which have formed the basis of this work.

1.2 SUMERIAN AND MESOPOTAMIAN SPIRITUALITY

Among the earliest civilizations known to modern man is the Sumerian of Mesopotamia, located in the fertile crescent between the twin rivers of the Tigris and the Euphrates, 500 miles and more to the east of Jerusalem and Palestine, in what is now Iraq. Dating from the third and fourth millennia BCE, the Sumerians were the first civilization to have left written remains. Archaeological excavations from all over the Middle East have revealed hundreds of thousands of inscribed clay tablets, from the Sumerian, Assyrian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Chaldean, Hittite and the various Semitic cultures and subcultures which rose and flourished in what are now Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait and other Middle Eastern countries. Details of great empires of the past and even chronological lists of kings have been discovered at the sites of ancient city states such as Uruk, Kish, Ur, Nineveh, Nippur, Lagash and others.

The vast majority of these tablets relate to the thriving business activities of the period. Invoices, quotations, procurement lists, shipping documents, letters and so on are all represented. All manner of goods, including significant quantities of building materials, minerals and metals of various kinds appear to have travelled between city states far in the north and dominions many hundreds of miles to the south in what are now southern Iraq and the Persian Gulf. There are even instances of sharp practice, short-shipping, complaints concerning inferior products, goods not precisely like those seen and ordered, and other such things that have always been a part of human commerce.

But among these tablets are also those of a more literary nature – psalms, poems and epic legends, including the famous *Epic of Gilgamesh*, together with scientific, historical and religious texts. The earliest of these tablets are written in hieroglyphics, analogous to the script of the ancient Egyptians, but the vast majority are written in the later cuneiform (wedge-shaped) characters, developed and probably originated by the Sumerians, and adopted by most of the people of the ancient Middle East. The deciphering of these scripts and languages long buried in the sands has exercised some of the best archaeological and linguistic minds of the last century and a half, though there still remain many differences of scholarly opinion. To someone with an interest in such things, the uncovering of these ancient cities, often revealing a multitude of personal details regarding individual lives lived so long ago, has a fascinating quality. But perhaps of the greatest interest in the present context are those texts that provide an insight into the background of biblical literature.

These ancient peoples shared a pantheon of gods whose names and characters changed and evolved as culture succeeded culture. Later on, some of them are even found – transmuted and transformed, having imbibed the colour of local culture – among the gods of the Hindus and the ancient Greeks. Many

temples dedicated to these Mesopotamian deities have been discovered, together with considerable religious literature, from which it is clear that their religious and spiritual beliefs profoundly influenced the peoples of the Middle East, including the Hebrews and the Greeks. Indeed, many of their concepts still pervade the modern world through their influence on Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Embedded in the extensive Mesopotamian mythology are indications that a mystic understanding was not far away, and antecedents are found of later and more familiar mystical traditions. For the Sumerians, the father of the gods was *Anu*, the first-born of the primeval Sea, equivalent perhaps to the divine Essence. *Anu* gave birth to *Enlil*, as in the Sumerian hymn:

The spirit of the Word of *Anu* is *Enlil*.

Sumerian Psalms 1:38–41, SBPL p.24

Hence, archaeologist and author N.K. Sandars comments, “*Enlil* is power in action, where *Anu* is power in being.”¹ This is the difference between the Creative Word and the Supreme Being of later mystical expression. In Sumerian mythology, *Enlil* is both a creative and a destructive power, as indeed is the Word, which underlies all activity in the creation – forming or dissolving.

Also in the Sumerian pantheon is *Enki*, the god of wisdom, he whose “particular element was the sweet waters bringing life to the land”.² He was a benign being and a peacemaker, “lord of wisdom who lives in the deep ... sometimes called the son of *Anu*, ‘Begotten in his own image ... of broad understanding and mighty strength.’ He was also in a particular degree the creator and benefactor of mankind.”³ In Sumerian mythology, *Enki* is the dispenser of the Water of Life or the Plant or Bread of Life, provided by *Anu*, which brings the dead to life, bestowing immortality. It is probably *Enki* who is depicted on Sumerian pottery, carrying an overflowing vase of the Water of Life.

The parallels here to later mystical expression are unmistakable. Father, Word, Wisdom, son, dispenser of the Plant of Life and the Water of Life, begotten in the image of God, creator and benefactor of mankind – all these are familiar themes in mystic teachings. Mystics draw their inspiration and knowledge direct from God within themselves, but they speak in the language and idiom of the times, explaining the real meaning hidden within contemporary religious beliefs and sacred writings.

In the early Mesopotamian myths are also found precursors to biblical legends. It seems, for instance, that there was a flood of unprecedented proportions in the ancient Middle East, probably in the low-lying lands between the Tigris and the Euphrates, for legendary accounts of a deluge are found among these ancient texts. The Sumerian counterpart of Noah was called Ziusudra, which means ‘he saw life’, while the corresponding Old Babylonian hero was named Atraahasis.

Also present in these ancient texts are the first extant occurrences of metaphors that were used repeatedly in later times with specifically mystical meanings. The Plant or Tree of Life and the River (of Living Water), for example, running out of Eden are found in *Genesis*, but they were common themes in Middle Eastern mythology long before any biblical books were compiled.

In the story of the goddess Inanna's descent to the underworld, Inanna, foretelling her own death, instructs her faithful messenger, Ninshubur, to seek help from *Enki*, god of wisdom, in order that she may be resurrected from death:

Father *Enki*, the lord of wisdom
 who knows the Plant of Life,
 who knows the Water of Life –
 He will surely bring me back to life.

Inanna's Descent II:65–67, SLW pp.297, 307; cf. KTL p.33, SMS p.90

Inanna does indeed lose her life when the “seven judges”, the *Anunnaki*, gaze at her with the “eyes of death”, her corpse being subsequently impaled upon a stake. But *Enki* lives up to the faith Inanna had placed in him, sending to the rescue two creatures of his own fashioning with instructions on how to revive her corpse:

Sixty times the Plant of Life
 and sixty times the Water of Life sprinkle upon it:
 Verily, *Inanna* will arise.

Inanna's Descent II:244–45, SLW pp.301, 310; cf. KTL p.33, SMS p.94

This they do, and Inanna is resurrected and ascends from the nether world.

The Plant or “Bread of Life” also appears in the *Myth of Adapa*, precursor to the Hebrew Adam. *Anu*, father of the gods, offers Adapa immortality through the “Bread of Life” and the “Water of Life”, which he keeps in the highest heaven. But, in the story, Adapa has been advised by his creator, *Ea (Enki)*, to refuse the gifts, for *Ea*, through envy, did not wish Adapa to gain immortality:

The Bread of Life they placed before him,
 but he did not eat.
 The Water of Life they placed before him,
 but he did not drink.

Myth of Adapa II:63–65, SVS p.194; cf. ABE p.98, KTL p.34, MRS p.181

At Adapa's refusal, *Anu* is angry and punishes him – and through him all mankind – with disease and tribulation. The fall of Adapa is clearly a precursor to the Hebrew story of Adam, although in the characteristically inconsistent nature of mythology, *Ea* or *Enki*, usually the saviour, is here the betrayer of mankind.

Though the legends of Inanna, Adapa and others have been reconstructed with reasonable completeness, many other Sumerian legends are preserved only as fragments or hints of a fuller story, long since lost. Images of some of these are found on pottery and other artefacts. A Sumerian roll cylinder preserved in the British Museum, for example, shows a woman and a man seated before a tree. The man, like Adapa, wears the horned headdress of a god or deified man, and behind the woman stands a serpent. The picture is clearly that of the first temptation of man, leading to the Fall. Images of this kind remained traditional long after Sumerian times. Among the painted pottery of Susa, an important Persian city of Sassanian times (224–651 CE), are designs of the Tree of Life around which is coiled a serpent, and of a naked woman, behind whom stands a serpent.⁴

In another Sumerian text, the Tree of Life is depicted as a *kishkanu* tree growing near streams of life flowing in paradise. Here, there is a double meaning, for Eridu, cultic centre of *Enki*, was a major city in southern Sumeria and *kishkanu* trees were indeed grown in the temple groves for their healing properties:

In Eridu there is a black *kishkanu* tree,
growing in a pure place;
Its appearance is lapis lazuli,
erected on the *Apsū*.
Enki (lord of wisdom), when walking there,
fills Eridu with abundance.

In the resting place is the chamber of Nammu.
In its holy temple there is a grove,
casting its shadow, wherein no man may enter.
In the midst are the Sun god and the Sovereign of heaven,
in between the river with its two mouths.

Sumerian Text, CTB XVI:46–47; cf. DES pp.200–3, KTL pp.5–6

Enki, walking in the garden, filling it with abundance, in which grows the Tree of Healing or the Tree of Life is seemingly a precursor to later old Semitic garden of Eden myths, as in *Genesis*. It is a part of the mythological milieu from which *Genesis* originated. Among the ancient Mesopotamian epics and legends are passages that suggest that parts of these ancient myths may at one time have been allegories of mystic truths. In one episode from the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the most long-lived of all great epic adventures, the semidivine hero, Gilgamesh, son of a goddess and a priest, said to be three parts god and one part man (symbolic perhaps of man's divine potentiality) goes in search of wisdom and immortality. On his travels, he journeys through passes and mountains (the inner heavens), overpowering and killing lions (human imperfections) that dance in the moonlight, coming at last to a garden of trees bearing jewelled

fruit (the eternal realm), another early intimation of the *Genesis* story. Such incidents and descriptions could easily have been metaphors for aspects of the inner journey of the soul to God. Part of the description of what must surely be the sacred Vine, the Tree of Life planted in Eden, reads:

Like carnelian are the fruit it bears,
 all hung about with tendrils.
 Fair to gaze upon, lapis lazuli the foliage is,
 and the fruit it bears, desirable to the eye.
Epic of Gilgamesh IX:5.48–51; cf. EGT p.43, KTL p.7

Later in this episode, Gilgamesh finds the Plant of Immortality – the Herb of Life – at the Spring or Fountain of Youth. These expressions have all been used as metaphors for the Word, the Power or Medicine that does indeed bestow immortality. In fact, Gilgamesh finds the Plant of Life on the sea bed, symbolic perhaps of this world as the floor of creation. Following the traditional method of pearl divers, he reaches the sea floor by attaching stones to his feet, and collects the Plant. But, on his homeward journey, encountering a pool of cool water, he goes for a swim and, while his attention is distracted, a serpent, attracted by the fragrance of the Plant, rises up from the water and snatches it. Bearing in mind the pearl-diving technique used by Gilgamesh, it is possible that the Plant of Immortality was also understood as a pearl, the pearl of wisdom, as in the gnostic poem of early Christian times, the *Robe of Glory*, and many other places in ancient spiritual literature. The serpent was certainly associated with gemstones because the skeletons of snakes, possibly dating from Assyrian times, have been found buried in pots along with a small gem, often a tiny turquoise.⁵

Themes common to later mystical literature are also present in other Mesopotamian religious texts. Images among the liturgies associated with the Mesopotamian cult of Tammuz, god of vegetation, are later found in Christian and Manichaean texts, where the ship of the Saviour ferries souls back to God. Thus, a Tammuz text reads:

A ship of joy is your ship,
 a ship loaded with treasures is your ship.
Tammuz Liturgies, DNP pp.128, 130, TLV pp.424–25; cf. MEM p.100

And likewise in an Assyrian incantation:

The rope of the ship
 is at the quay of Peace;
 The rope of the ship
 is at the quay of Life.
Assyrian Text, KAR III 196(VAT 8869):51–52 p.70, KMI4 pp.68–69, MEM p.102

Compare these with a later Manichaean psalm, where the meaning is specifically mystical:

The ship of Jesus has come to port,
 laden with garlands and gay palms.
 It is Jesus who steers it,
 he will put in for us until we embark.
 Let us also make ourselves pure
 that we may make our voyage....
 The ship of Jesus will make its way up to the Height.
 It will bring its cargo to the shore,
 and return for them that are left behind....

He will bring them (safely)
 to the harbour of the immortals.
 It is laden with garlands
 and gay palms for ever and ever.

Manichaean Psalm Book, MPB pp.151–52

Or with the writings of the fourth-century Christian, Ephraim Syrus, addressing the blessed soul who has steered his ‘ship of light’, his “glorious tree”, into the “harbour of Life”. Or perhaps the “skilful shipmaster” is Jesus on board whose ship the soul has sailed on the “glorious Tree (of Life)” into the “harbour of Life”:

O skilful shipmaster,
 you who have conquered the raging sea,
 your glorious tree has come to the harbour of Life....
 Blessed be he who has been a shipmaster for his soul,
 who has discovered and preserved his treasure.

Ephraim Syrus, ESHS4 601:15; cf. MEM p.98

It is not suggested that, in the form in which archaeologists have found them, the Mesopotamian writings are specifically mystical – only that mystical elements were present in Mesopotamian religion at that time. Perhaps such elements represented only hopes and vague religious aspirations to which later mystics gave substance as mystical realities that could be experienced. Or maybe there had been mystics who had used these metaphors, which later became embedded in cultural and religious myths, the result of a decline in spiritual vision after the departure of the mystic.

But mystics always seem to have been present, in every time and culture. Maybe they are a part of the natural economy, to provide spiritual leaven in the darkness of material existence, to guide those souls seeking spiritual assistance.

Whether or not mystics are remembered in history depends upon the religious and cultural atmosphere of their time and place. Moreover, there is no reason why mystics should have left any written record or should even have been literate. They would have been like the people around them. Literacy, after all, can also be understood as a part of the process of crystallization of material life from a more spiritual condition. Civilization is a materialization that requires literacy, record keeping, commerce, written communication and all those material things that mystics say hold the soul captive in this world.

1.3 ZARATHUSHTRA AND ZOROASTRIANISM

Zarathushtra Spitamā was born at a time when the ancient Aryan-speaking people were spreading their influence and their language both west and east of their Middle Eastern homeland. According to one tradition, he was the third of five sons born to a devout and learned man, Pourushaspa, and his wife, Dughdhōvā.

Zarathushtra's language was Avestan, the most ancient of the Iranian branch of Indo-European languages spoken in Bactria, corresponding in present times to Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan. Zarathushtra is his Avestan name, Spitamā his family name, and the Greeks later called him Zoroaster. In his name, the Zoroastrian or Parsee religion was founded, becoming the main religion of ancient Persia. And from his teaching, there is good reason to believe that he was a mystic and a great spiritual teacher. Certainly, the much later Iranian mystic, Mānī (c.216–276), taught that Zarathushtra had been a Saviour of the highest order. Some of the ancient writers said that Zarathushtra was the disciple of Pythagoras, one of the earliest known of the Greek mystics. Others have suggested that Zarathushtra was known in India as the Buddha, and that the two great sages were the same person. From a study of the dates, these suggestions seem implausible, but it demonstrates that the message of these great spiritual teachers has been held by some to be more or less the same.

Zarathushtra was almost certainly born in ancient Iran; but like many great mystics, his actual place and date of birth are a matter of debate. It was formerly believed that he was born in Rae, though some modern scholars believe that his place of birth was probably Amvi, in the district of Uramiah. Others say that he was born in Azerbaijan, to the west of Media.

Classical writers such as Xanthus of Lydia (C5th BCE), Plato (c.427–347 BCE), Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) and Plutarch (c.46–119 CE) date him variously between 6000 and 1000 BCE, but modern scholars, by a comparative analysis of his language and various historical references in the legends concerning his life, generally place him between 1200 BCE and 550 BCE. This is endorsed to some extent by Pahlavi (Middle Persian) writers on Zoroastrianism, during the period of Sassanian rule (224–651 CE), who say that he lived about 300 years before Alexander the Great, during the seventh century BCE.