

## THE OGYGIAN OAK AT MAMRE AND THE HOLY TOWN OF HEBRON

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### 1. THE MAMRE OAK AND THE CITY OF HEBRON.

M. Liverani's recent article on the Oak of *šrdn* mentioned in two Ugaritic texts<sup>1</sup> has drawn new attention to the sacred oaks that are recorded in Biblical tradition. Such sacred trees were mostly located in or near important sanctuaries, and Liverani rightly points out their symbolic value as connecting links between the human sphere and the cthonic and heavenly realms, that is intrinsic in their very nature and in their function as landmarks indicating the site of a sacred tomb or of a theophany<sup>2</sup>.

The most famous of such Biblical oaks are the Oaks of Mamre. Near these trees, we are told (Gen. 18), the Patriarch Abraham, who had built an altar to YHWH in Mamre (Gen. 13:18), was sitting in the heat of the day, when three divine beings appeared to him, who were offered a calf and flour cakes<sup>3</sup>, and announced the imminent birth of his son Isaac. Mamre is a mountainous spot in Southern Palestine, located in the region called *Har Yehudâh* (Jos. 11:21), the Mountain of Judah, near the Biblical town of Hebron and "in front" of the Cave of Macpelah, where Sarah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were buried. To this day the area has kept its ancient traditions and groves of huge, century-old

<sup>1</sup> M. Liverani, *Le chêne de Sherdanu*: VT, 27 (1977), pp. 212-216.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 212-213.

<sup>3</sup> On the food offered by Abraham to the three divine beings, see P. Xella, *L'épisode de Danil et Kothar (KTU 1.17 =CTA 17 v 1-31) et Gen. 18: 1-16*: VT, 28 (1978), pp. 483-488. On Abrahamic traditions see now J. van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, New Haven-London 1975; M. Liverani, *Un'ipotesi sul nome di Abramo: "Henoch"*, 1 (1979), pp. 13-18. Of course, after Th. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal narratives*, Berlin 1974, it would be more than ever ridiculous to place "Abraham" or even "Abraham's times" at any given period in history, for Abraham is a mythical ancestor (A.

oaks.

According to Biblical sources, Hebron was originally a pre-Israelite town of the Anaqim, the gigantic inhabitants of Southern Palestine, called Qiriat Arba', i.e., Four Quarters (Gen. 23:2; 25:27; Jos. 20:7; Num. 13:22). In Biblical times, Hebron, "conquered and re-named" by Josua, became an important (Calebite: Jos. 10:36; 12:10; 14:13-15; 15:13; Jud. 1:10; 1:20) town of the territory of Judah, a Levitical town, a city of refuge, the site of king David's anointment, his first "capital" (during seven years and six months), and the place where his son Absalom came to be proclaimed king. As for the Cave of Macpelah, we are told (Gen. 23:17-19; 25:9; 49:30; 50:13) that Abraham had bought it as his family's future tomb, along with the field in front of it, from its original "hittite" owner, Ephron the son of Zohar.

As for the topographical situation of Hebron and of Mamre, it is the following<sup>4</sup>. The modern town, that takes its name from the Abrahamic tradition, being called *el-Khalil* (that is, [God's] friend [Abraham]) lies in a small valley, around the sacred precinct or *Haram* containing the rocky cave believed to be the sepulchre of the Patriarchs: the city is one of the four Moslem sacred towns. The ancient town lay to the North-West of the *Haram*, on the rocky hill of *er-Rumeideh* overlooking *el-Khalil*, crowned by the ruins of *el-Arba'in*: sherds of Late Bronze have been collected in the area, as well as others belonging to the time of the later Israelite Monarchy and to the Persian period. On the same rocky ridge, about three kilometers away from the site of ancient Hebron, are the remains of a series of buildings connected with ancient cultic life around the Mamre Oak: these remains are the *Râmât el Khalil*, called by the Jews of Hebron the House of Abraham. West of the *Haram* and not far from the *Râmât el Khalil* is the *'Ain Judeideh*, where a vault is shown where Adam and Eve are said to have mourned for Abel: not far from this spot is the famous *Ager Damascenus* we shall deal with further on in this paper.

In a recent article<sup>5</sup>, É. Lipiński proposed to see in the holy Oak of Mamre one of the four tribal sanctuaries of the "fourfold" city of Hebron-Qiryat

Brelich, *Introduzione alla Storia delle religioni*, Roma 1966, p. 16), no matter how many Ugarits or Eblas are found.

<sup>4</sup> See the article by C. Warren, *Hebron*: J. Hastings, *A Dictionary of the Bible*, II, Edimburgh and London 1889, pp. 338-340; L.H. Vincent, E.J. Mackay and F.M. Abel, *Hebron, le Haram el-Khalil*, Paris 1923; O. Avisar (ed.), *Sefer Hebron*, Jerusalem 1970 (in Hebrew); the article *Hebron*: *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 8, Jerusalem 1971, coll. 226-236; F.M. Abel, *Géographie de la Palestine*, II, *Géographie politique. Les Villes*, Paris 1967, pp. 345-347.

<sup>5</sup> É. Lipiński, *'Anaq-Kiryat 'arba'-Hébron et ses sanctuaires tribaux*:



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Arba'. The sanctuaries he considers surely attested are, of course, the Tomb of the Patriarchs at Macpelah and the Oak of Mamre; the ones he strives to reconstruct from biblical allusions should be the sanctuaries indicated by the names of the two "friends" of Mamre in Gen. 14:13, 24, Eškol and 'Aner, *i.e.* the sanctuaries of the Vale of Eškol (cp. Num. 13:23-24), and of *bt 'nt rwm*, a holy place of the goddess 'Anath. Most of his reasoning seems sound, but his conclusions are only of relative interest to us, since we concentrate here on the two better-attested sanctuaries of the Hebron area, Mamre and Macpelah, and on other sacred places of later times, that I would not know how to connect with Lipiński's more hypothetical sanctuaries.

R. de Vaux observes that "the Roman and Byzantine ruins of Mambre are still to be found at Ramath el-Khalil, 2 miles north of Hebron, and beneath these later sanctuaries traces of Israelite occupation have been found"<sup>6</sup>. If to this one adds the Biblical data according which "Abraham was sitting by the Oak of Mambre when he welcomed the three mysterious guests... (Gn 18), and Mambre is the best site for the scene of the Covenant in Gn 15, if we retain that scene in its present context"<sup>7</sup>, then it is possible to reach the conclusion that "These two theophanies, and the presence of an altar and a tree, indicate that there was a sanctuary there"<sup>8</sup>. However, de Vaux adds, the cult practiced there "was regarded with disfavour by orthodox Yahwism. This would explain why Mambre was ostracized, and why it is never mentioned in the Bible outside Genesis; in Genesis itself, the text seems to have been deliberately obscured whenever Mambre is mentioned. In Gn 13:18; 14:13; 18:1, the Hebrew text speaks of the Oaks of Mambre in the plural, while the better ancient versions read the singular (which is in fact demanded by the story of Gn 18:4 and 8): the idea was to water down the superstitious veneration of a particular tree, and the Jewish commentators went a step further by substituting the word 'plain of' Mambre. Again, the editors of Genesis try to do away with the independence of the sanctuary by misleading the reader about its position: 'the Oaks of Mambre which are at Hebron' (Gn 13:18), and 'Macpelah, facing Mambre' in the five texts cited above, when in fact the tomb of the Patriarchs faced ancient Hebron. In the end, Mambre was simply identified with Hebron in Gn 23:19: 'Macpelah, facing Mambre,

VT, 24 (1974), pp. 40-55.

<sup>6</sup> R. de Vaux, *Les Institutions de l'Ancien Testament*, Paris 1958-1960. Here and henceforward I quote from the English translation by J. McHugh, *Ancient Israel, its Life and Institutions*, London 1974, pp. 292-293.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.



i.e. Hebron', and Gn 35:27: 'at Mambre Qiryat-Arba, i.e. Hebron'. All these texts were edited at a later period. It is no doubt possible that the sole aim of the redactors was to put side by side a tomb and a sanctuary which were both venerated, as when the nearby tomb of Rachel is mentioned in connection with Bethel (Gn 35:8), but it seems far more probable that they were trying to minimize the religious importance of Mambre"<sup>9</sup>.

De Vaux's observations on the Biblical efforts to water down the veneration of the Mamre tree and sanctuary seem correct; yet it should be kept in mind that throughout Antiquity and up to the present day the connections between the city of Hebron, the sacred tomb of the Patriarchs and the Mamre site and its traditions are strong and important: we have no reason to think that in Biblical times it may have been in any way necessary to exaggerate or stress such connections inside what was probably a single geographical, ecological and ideological unit formed by the town, the sacred burial-place and the suburban sanctuary<sup>10</sup>.

## 2. THE OGYGIAN OAK AT MAMRE.

The oldest non-Biblical mentions of the Mamre tree are found in Flavius Josephus' 'Jewish Antiquities' and in the same Author's *Bellum Iudaicum*. One single Mamre Oak is mentioned, in connection with the birth of Abraham's son Ishmael (A.I. I 186), with the visit from the three heavenly messengers (A.I. I 196), and with later Jewish history (B.I. IV 533). In the second passage quoted, the oak in question is called "the oak of Mamre" (ὄρυξ τῆς Μαρρῆς); in the third passage, it is simply referred to as "a huge terebinth, six stadia from Hebron". In the first text a strange name occurs, since the oak in question is termed "the oak called Ogyges, a place in Canaan not far from the city of the Hebronites": Abraham was living near it at the time of Ishmael's birth.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 292-293.

<sup>10</sup> The (usually implicit) attitudes of scholars towards this problem vary greatly: see for instance R. Brinker, *The importance of Sanctuaries in Early Israel*, Manchester 1946, who speaks directly (p. 177) of "the importance of Hebron as a religious center" and of "the shrine at Hebron", meaning Mamre; or G. Fohrer, *Geschichte der Israelitische Religion*, Berlin 1969, pp. 110-111, who mentions "a double sanctuary" (meaning Macpelah and Mamre). The most coherent attitude is that of Lipiński, *cit.*, pp. 40-55; but I do not think his emphasis on "tribal" organization, his comparison with Palmyra, and his hypothesis about four sanc-



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Now, in Greek language and tradition the term Ogyges is rare, but it has a very rich set of associations. Ogygos (Ὠγυγός) is the name of the earthborn primeval king of Thebes: in Attic and Boeotian mythical traditions he is said to have survived the flood that destroyed the rest of humanity, and he is quoted by H.J. Rose as "an alternative Deukalion"<sup>11</sup>. The gates of the city wall of Boeotian Thebes are termed Ogygian (Ὠγύγια πυλώματα): the city was said to be sacred (ἱερόν), and was famous for its mythical "Phoenician" origin and for its seven urban gates<sup>12</sup>. Ogygia (Ὠγύγια) was the island where the goddess Calypso tried in vain to detain the homesick Odysseus<sup>13</sup>; but the same name applied to other more real sites or countries, like the Aegean island of Cos, or even Egypt<sup>14</sup>. The adjective "ogygian" (Ὠγύγιος) is rarely met with as such, and refers to fire (Ὠγύγιον πῦρ) or to a type of myth involving animals and man's loss of his immortality (μῦθος Ὠγύγιος): in both cases, it seems to mean "age-old" or "primeval"<sup>15</sup>. Probably, the proper names we have quoted all had this same meaning, since they constantly refer to things, people and places that were believed to be extremely old, if not literally antediluvian. As for the mythical island of Ogygia, it is described by the Homeric text as "the navel of the sea" (ὄμφαλος θαλάσσης) and presented as centered on a florid vine and containing four rivers flowing away from the base of that tree: M. Eliade<sup>16</sup> and others<sup>17</sup> have argued convincingly that this is to be interpreted as the Homeric version of a wide-spread Cosmic Tree motif.

If one considers these data, the term Ogygian acquires a vast series of semantic implications, and reveals its connections with primeval times in which a recently created humanity risked total obliteration, and with the motif

tuaries plus one "federal" shrine can be accepted without qualms.

<sup>11</sup> H.J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*, London 1958, p. 242.

<sup>12</sup> On Boeotian Thebes see the article *Thebai (Boiotien)* by L. Ziehen in Pauli-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaften*, V. A, Stuttgart 1934, coll. 1423-1553. On the seven doors, see. coll. 1427-1434.

<sup>13</sup> Homeri Odyss. V. 57-62.

<sup>14</sup> See H. Stephanus, *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae*, IX (photostatic re-edition, Graz 1954), s. vv. Ὠγύγια, Ὠγύγιος, Ὠγυγός, coll. 1986-1987. See also the articles *Ogygia*, by J. Schmidt, and *Ogygos*, by J. Miller, in Pauli-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie*, XVII.2, Stuttgart 1937, coll. 2066-2078.

<sup>15</sup> See Stephanus, *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae*, IX, col. 1986: Ὠγύγιος: *pro antiquo sive vetusto accipitur*. On the "ogygian myth" see A. Brelich, *Un mito "prometeico"*: SMSR, 29 (1958), pp. 23-40.

<sup>16</sup> M. Eliade, *Traité d'Histoire des Religions*, Paris 1968, pp. 244-245.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance E.A.S. Butterworth, *The Tree at the Navel of the Earth*, Berlin 1972, pp. 8, 28.



of an age-old tree rising at the navel of the world. That such a name should be applied to Abraham's tree is not astonishing, not only because a tree that offered its shade to Israel's first Patriarch is obviously very ancient, but for at least one other reason. We should be reminded that though Abraham is not connected, like Ogygos of Thebes, with a flood, yet in his time a divine punishment in shape of a terrible natural calamity destroyed a large portion of humanity: Abraham was dwelling in Mamre when he spoke with YHWH and successfully pleaded his brother Lot's cause, so that Lot was the only manspared in Sodom and Gomorrah. The fact that Lot's daughters lie with their father after the cataclysm because "there is not a man in the earth to come to (them)" (Gen 19:31) seems to point to an original tradition involving the destruction of *all* humanity except Lot and his daughters: and this resembles a "proper" flood tradition very closely<sup>18</sup>. The name that Josephus gives the Mamre oak-tree seems thus to be expressive not of mere primeval antiquity but also of a mythical flood-complex that is similar to some of the Biblical Abraham Traditions; so that we may even wonder whether the name and its mythical "constellation" were first connected with the tree by Josephus or by some local archaic culture sharing its religious and toponomastic background with ancient Boeotia. The mythical Oriental connections of Boeotian Thebes, whose king Ogygos was, and the Biblical traditions about giants at Hebron and about the gigantic king 'Og, last remain of the primeval Rephaim, may all somehow be significant in this context<sup>19</sup>. But this is a problem we cannot solve here.

However this may be, it is sure that the oak in Mamre was considered at the time of Josephus to be extremely ancient, and that this fact explains its name Ogyges. In *Bellum Judaicum* IV 533 Josephus states that the huge terebinth that rose six *stadia* from Hebron was said to have stood there *ever since the creation*.

This specific tradition about the primeval character of the Mamre oak or oaks is not present in the Bible, probably for the reasons given by de Vaux and involving the unorthodox character of the local sanctuary. Yet, another tradition that is undoubtedly connected with the age of the Mamre tree, *i.e.* the belief in the great antiquity of the city Hebron, is handed down to us both

<sup>18</sup> This was noted already by S.H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology*, Harmondsworth 1962, pp. 140-141.

<sup>19</sup> On the connections between the gigantic king 'Og of Bašan and the Ogygos of Greek tradition, see M.L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, Oxford 1971, pp. 42-46.



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by Josephus and by the Bible. Josephus writes that Hebron is seven years older than Tanis, a very archaic town in Egypt (A.I. I 170): and here he merely repeats the Biblical passage (Num. 13:22) that states that Hebron is seven years older than Zoan (=Tanis) in Egypt. But in B.I. IV 530 Josephus seems to expand on this, affirming as he does that Hebron is more ancient than the Egyptian city Memphis, and that this makes the Palestinian town more than two thousand three hundred years old. The fact that in this passage Memphis, not Tanis, is mentioned, seems to be important since it is from the Egyptian name of that town (*Hwt-k3-Pth*) that the Greek name for Egypt (Αἴγυπτος) originated<sup>20</sup>; and we have already seen that an alternative denomination to Αἴγυπτος was Ogygia.

From the data we have examined so far we can reach the conclusion that a very old tradition identified Hebron as one of the most ancient sites in the inhabited world, the oak(s) of Mamre that were located in the neighbourhood of Hebron as primeval, sacred tree(s) connected with the Patriarch Abraham, with an ancient theophany and possibly with an ancient flood tradition, and the local Cave of Macpelah as the tomb of the Patriarchs. Surely Josephus bore all this in mind when he gave to the terebinth or oak of Mamre the archaic but meaningful name of Ogyges.

### 3. ADAM AND THE RED SOIL OF HEBRON.

The importance of the Hebron-Mamre complex in post-Biblical religious life and traditions was great. Not only did the Mamre oak(s) keep their sacred quality and function, but Jewish, Christian and Moslem tradition cherished the Cave of Macpelah as the holy burial-place of the primeval forefathers. Moreover, some Mediaeval descriptions of Palestine, who were possibly recording local popular beliefs, associated the Damascene Field lying in view of the Oak with the creation of mankind, alluding to the "fact" that the name Adam comes from *'ādōm*, meaning "red", and that the first man was named thus because he was made of the pure red earth of that field near Hebron<sup>21</sup>. The Damascene Field itself or, ac-

<sup>20</sup> See A. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs. An Introduction*, Oxford 1961, p.1.

<sup>21</sup> M. Grünbaum, *Beiträge zur Vergleichenden Mythologie aus der Hagada*: ZDMG, 45 (1877), pp. 183-359, specially pp. 298-299, where the Mediaeval sources are quoted, and the Author observes that, though the Arabic *Localsagen* are usually considered "*traditiones Hebraeorum*", they "finden sich in keiner der jetzt vorhandenen Jüdischen Schriften hagadischen Inhalts, wie jedenfalls die Sage, dass Adam...aus dem rothen Thon des Ager Damascenus erschaffen worden"; but also G. Rosen, *Über das*



According to other Rabbinic sources, the Macpelah Cave, were Adam's, Eve's, and Abel's burial place<sup>22</sup>. Today still, as we have noticed, another cave near that field is famous for being the site where Adam and Eve are said to have mourned for their son Abel. Finally, the Zohar texts inform us that one of the seven gates of Eden was identical with the Cave of Macpelah near Hebron, where Adam's ghost guards the access to the forbidden paradise<sup>23</sup>.

Now, the etymological connection between 'ādām, Adam, and 'ādāmāh, earth, similar to the Latin connection between *homo* and *humus* "discovered" by Quintilianus, is already present, if implicit, in Gen. 2:7<sup>24</sup>; but the further connection between both these words and the term 'ādōm, "red", is not Biblical. However, it is much older than the texts we have quoted, since we find it in Josephus' Jewish Antiquities, I 34, where that Author writes that "ὁ δ' ἀνθρώπος οὗτος Ἀδάμος ἐκλήθη, σημαίνει δὲ τοῦτο κατὰ γλῶτταν τῆν Ἑβραίων πυρρόν, ἐπελοήπερ ἀπὸ τῆς πυρρᾶς γῆς φουραθείσης ἐγεγόνει" τοιαύτη γὰρ ἐστὶν ἡ παρθένος γῆ καὶ ἀληθινή." ("Now this man was called Adam, which in Hebrew signifies 'red', because he was made from the red earth kneaded together; for such is the colour of the true virgin soil"). As for the word πυρρός, meaning "fiery", that is used here by Josephus in the sense of "red", we must note incidentally that such a name recalls an interesting series of associations, among which are the holy fire of the Mamre terebinth, the primeval fire of Greek mythical tradition called πῦρ Ἰγύγιον, and Pyrrha (Πύρρα). Deukalion's pious wife who was saved along with him from the Flood and gave birth to a new humanity by sowing stones in the virgin soil of Mount Par-nassos<sup>25</sup>.

*Thal und die nächste Umgegend Hebrons*: ZDMG, 26 (1858), pp. 477-513, specially p. 501: "Dass irgend eine dieser Legenden, wenn sie sich auch an Localitäten knüpften, je in Hebron selbst heimisch gewesen, ist nicht nachzuweisen, und wir irren wohl nicht wenn wir annehmen, dass sie sich durch Pilgerführer und Mönche von Generation zu Generation portgepflanzt haben". See R. Graves and R. Patai, *Hebrew Myths, The Book of Genesis*, London 1964, pp. 60-63; p. 81 (on a tenth century Irish tradition).

<sup>22</sup> Graves and Patai, *Hebrew Myths*, pp. 70-74; pp. 192-193, quoting the *Pirqê Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 36, on Abraham's discovery of the bodies of Adam and Eve buried in Macpelah and lightened by lamps.

<sup>23</sup> *Zohar Hadaš* (Levin-Epstein Edition, Warsaw, not dated), pp. 41, 158, quoted by Graves and Patai, *Hebrew Myths*, pp. 70-74.

<sup>24</sup> See the treatment of this problem in A. Zamboni, *L'Etimologia*, Bologna 1976, who presents this as one of the oldest documented etymological efforts of humanity; see also Eliade, *Traité d'Histoire des Religions*, pp. 207-228, on the religious complex that underlies such etymologies.

<sup>25</sup> Apollod. I. 47-100; Ovid. *Metam.* I. 260-300.



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The making of Adam from the virgin red soil could well be located in the primeval scenery of Hebron, not far from the holy cave of Macpelah and in view of the sacred tree of Mamre that existed since the Creation. Of course, we cannot say *when* this belief began to be a local Hebronite tradition; nor can we be sure that the whole mythical complex did not originate in Hebron itself; all we can say is that the belief that Adam was created from the red earth of Hebron near the Mamre terebinth was based on the real colour of the local soil not far from the Patriarchal landmarks, and that the tradition was still alive in Hebron in the XVII century of our era. An Italian Catholic prelate, Abate Biagio Terzi di Lauria, who visited Hebron before 1695<sup>26</sup>, informs us that a hundred paces away from that town, and in view of Mount Mamre where the Oak connected with Abraham was to be seen up to the time of the Emperor Theodosius, the famous Damascene Field, where God created Adam and Eve, was located. It was surrounded by low hills and its red soil was sold at a great price in Egypt, where it was extremely popular because of its miraculous properties. It was also possible to observe, Terzi added, that though the field was continuously excavated to obtain the wonderful substance, in the course of one year all artificial ravines and pits "naturally" (*i.e.* without man's intervention) disappeared, so that the surface of the little valley was beautifully levelled<sup>27</sup>. This information shows clearly that Moslems of Palestine and even of Egypt continued for a long time to pay tribute to the very ancient traditions and beliefs about the sacred quality of the site and of its very soil.

In the previous paragraphs we had tentatively reconstructed a mythical complex involving Hebron as an extremely ancient city and Mamre as a suburban sanctuary of primeval antiquity, centered round an oak that existed since the time of creation. The new data we have collected here allow us now to catch a glimpse of what seems to be a more complete system, involving also the veneration of the holy red soil from which the first human being was drawn. Since all the traditions we have examined seem to enhance the primeval and sacred quality of one single group of connected landmarks and sites centering around an important city, we can well venture the hypothesis that, semantically and/or historically speaking, they are *all* parts of *one* single traditional complex. Of course, the

<sup>26</sup> Abb. Biagio Terzi di Lauria, *Siria Sacra, Descrizione Istoricogeografica, cronologico-topografica delle due Chiese Patriarcali Antiochia, e Gerusalemme* [.....] *alla Santità di N.S. Innocenzo XII*, Roma 1695.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 260-262.



unity and continuity of the Hebron tradition would be more probable, if a cultic continuity were also attested. So now we shall turn to just this problem.

#### 4. THE CULT BY THE MAMRE OAK.

I have suggested elsewhere<sup>28</sup> that the account of Abraham's hospitality in regards to the three divine beings by the Oak at Mamre and of Sarah's sudden fecundity is a well-known mythical motif, as shown by the story of Hyrieus, a Boeotian hero of Greek mythology, who was visited by three gods at one time: he did not recognize them as gods, but nevertheless treated them hospitably and was therefore granted a child<sup>29</sup>. Another such myth is the story of Philemon: he and his wife Baucis were visited by gods in disguise and later awarded survival from the great flood that destroyed humanity in exchange for their kindness to the divine guests<sup>30</sup>. This motif, that shows human beings spared because they have fed the gods, is surely connected with the other widely diffused mythical theme of the just hero who, having been saved from the flood, offers the god(s) a savoury sacrifice as soon as he strikes land, thus filling them with joy: I quote here only two examples, Utnapištim<sup>31</sup> and Noah<sup>32</sup>.

If envisaged in this context, the killing of a calf and the baking of flour cakes or bread that Abraham organized in order to feed the newcomers from Above are bound to remind us of Israelite cultic practices and could well be interpreted as the foundation-myth of sacrifice and other offerings by the Mamre Oak near Hebron, not far from the Cave of Macpelah; and, as we have seen, there

<sup>28</sup> C. Grottanelli, *Notes on Mediterranean Hospitality*: "Dialoghi di Archeologia", 9-10 (1976-77), pp. 193-194. See P. Xella, cit., pp. 483-488, specially pp. 485-486.

<sup>29</sup> Ovid. *Fast.* V. 495-520; Nonn. *Dionysiaca* XIII. 96-135; SA I. 535.

<sup>30</sup> Phaedr. *Append. fab.*, 3; Avian. *fab.*, 22; Ovid. *Met.* VIII. 618-800. We can compare these myths to the Ugaritic myth of Šahar and Šalim, as interpreted by P. Xella, *Il mito di Šhr e Šlm, Saggio sulla mitologia ugaritica*, Roma 1973: in myth, the twin Ugaritic gods are given bread and wine by a human host: this establishes a relationship between the human and divine spheres that is henceforward expressed by the ritual offering of food to these gods.

<sup>31</sup> On Utnapištim, the Mesopotamian Flood-Hero, but not on the sacrifice offered by him to the gods as soon as he lands, see now A.M.G. Capomacchia, *L'eroe del diluvio" nella tradizione mesopotamica*: "Studi Storico-Religiosi", 1 (1977), pp. 5-16, with a bibliography; see also, for a summary of the usual but pretty useless world-wide comparisons, T. Gaster, *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament*, New York 1969, pp. 81-132.

<sup>32</sup> Noah's sacrifice to YHWH as soon as he lands is described in Gen. 8:



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is evidence in the biblical texts of the existence of a sanctuary in "historical" Mamre, that was probably connected with the Oak(s) and had to be "minimized" by the redactors. Yet it is only at a much later date that our sources inform us in detail of festivities and of ritual offerings by the sacred tree.

According to Socrates' IV<sup>th</sup> century A.D. *Vita Constantini*<sup>33</sup>, the Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea was sharply reprimanded by the Emperor Constantine for allowing sacrifices to be offered on altars under the sacred Oak at Mamre, and in obedience to imperial commands he caused the altars to be destroyed and an oratory to be built instead under the tree. But his contemporary Sozomenus wrote that in his time Mamre was a flourishing market-place and the site of an annual fair and feast: Christians, Jews, and pagan nomads met on that occasion, transacted business and performed their devotions, each in his own way. The meeting place was under a huge terebinth; sacrifices were offered there, and the well nearby, whose water was not to be drunk, was lit up with lamps. In the well offerings were thrown consisting of wine, flour cakes, coins, myrrh and incense. During that holy time the terebinth could be seen all alight with a great flame but, when that flame was finally extinguished, no trace of burning was found on the tree-trunk<sup>34</sup>. If we compare this last miracle to the episode of the burning bush on Mount Sinai we shall conclude that this miraculous happening can well be termed a theophany, and somehow assimilated to the appearance of the three divine beings in Gen. 18. Christians, of course, did not consider this a proper theophany, but worshiped angels by the holy tree.

The continuity of cultic practice round the sacred Oak(s) of Mamre is attested by archaeology, specially by the results of the German Görresgesellschaft excavation directed by A.E. Mader in the years 1926, 1927 and 1928<sup>35</sup>. A sacred

20-22. It is a holocaust of all kinds of animals.

<sup>33</sup> Socrat. *Vita Constantini* III. 53.

<sup>34</sup> See W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*, Edinburgh 1896, pp. 177, 192-194, quoting Julius Africanus, G. Syncellus, Bonn, ed., p. 202 (=fragm. 19), and Eustathius. See also Euseb. *Demonstratio Evangelica* 9. The market by Mamre is also mentioned in the Palestinian Talmud as Botnah (Abodah Zarah I. 39d; Midraš Cant. Rabbah 4; Šifrei Deut. 306 where the place is called Beth Ilanim). According to Jerome (*Commentaria in Jeremiam* 31) Hadrian brought Judean prisoners there to be sold in slavery after the Bar Kokhba uprising.

<sup>35</sup> Published much later: A.E. Mader, *Mambre, Die Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen im heiligen Bezirk Ramat el-Halil in Süd-Palästina*, Freiburg in Breisgau 1957; see also Mader's article bearing the same title in *ZAW*, 67 (1955), 162-168 and R. de Vaux, *Mambre*, *DB Suppl.* 5 (1957), 753-758. In this brief account of the archaeological data I have followed S. Appelbaum's account, *Mambre: Encyclopaedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, III, Oxford 1977, pp. 776-778.



enclosure was discovered on the site now called *Ramat el-Khalil*: though the site yielded pottery of the early phase of the Middle Bronze Age II, no other remains attributable to that period were found, and the most ancient structures discovered were the foundations of two towers of the *temenos*, containing pottery of the Iron Age II (ninth-seventh centuries B.C.), and a paved way and sections of a stone paving belonging to two periods earlier than the wall of the *temenos*. The first pavement has been dated to the Judean monarchy (probably the time of Jeroboam; cfr. II Chronicles 11:7, 10); the second to the Hasmonean period (second century B.C.). The main part of the large wall of enclosure is Herodian, but in the East wall four different periods were distinguished: Herodian, Hadrianic, Byzantine and Arab. It is clear that the enclosure in its present form was built under Hadrian, its construction being connected with the emperor's journey from Jerusalem to Gaza (A.D. 130). The Hadrianic wall was laid over the remains of the Herodian *peribolos* (that was probably not yet finished at the time of the Roman capture of Hebron in 68 A.D.), which had two ceremonial entrances, one of which only was kept over in Hadrian's time. On the rebuilding of the *temenos* under Hadrian, a shrine, probably of the god Hermes, was erected abutting the eastern limit of the enclosure: to this phase belonged findings such as a stele of Hermes, the head of a statue of Dionysos, and hundreds of coins of the second and third centuries. Constantine's church, that we have seen mentioned by Eusebius and Socrates, was built in the form of a broad house, in the eastern third of the *temenos*, thus filling the entire sacred area, since the western part of the *temenos* was the *atrium* of the church. In the course of the Byzantine period, rooms apparently serving to house pilgrims visiting Abraham's terebinth were built north and south of the church. The holy tree stood in the *atrium*, in a place marked today by a gap in the paving, northeast of the well that lay in the southwest corner of the *atrium* and is surely to be identified with the holy well mentioned by Sozomenus. Significantly, the well yielded numerous coins of Constantine; while other coins ranging from the Hasmonean to the Crusader periods were found in or near it, none of them belonging to the emperors from Vespasian to Hadrian: this last detail still has to be explained, but the coins found in or near the well surely must be connected with the coins thrown into the sacred well as holy offerings that we have seen quoted by Byzantine authors.

So we learn that cultic practice continued under the Mamre Oak(s) up to early Byzantine times, and that the belief in the sacred quality of the tree(s) was a long-lasting tradition; and we are also informed that such a belief was connected, more than a thousand years after the first biblical mentions of Mamre,



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with a mysterious, fiery hierophany and with sacrifice and the offering of flour cakes and other objects, and that, in line with the best Cosmic Tree typology<sup>36</sup>, the sacred terebinth or oak was at some time accompanied by a sacred well. Cthonic water (not to be drunk) and heavenly (?) fire (that did not burn) were thus associated with the terebinth, forming a symbolic complex of great coherence, that can well be compared to the presence of heavenly messengers and of the Tomb of the Patriarchs near the biblical Oak(s) of Mamre. In spite of what we are told about Yahwistic and Christian interventions, the evidence we possess does not allow us to imagine any drastic interruption or renewal of religious tradition and cultic practice in Mamre between the Biblical and the Byzantine periods: probably belief and cult continued to live on throughout the centuries, not unmodified but surely evolving very slowly, and no less strong, sound and firmly rooted in the local soil than the sacred trees themselves.

### 5. THE HOLY HOSPITALITY IN THE HARAM EL-KHALIL.

I have already described the modern topography of Hebron, and shown that up to the present day the town, and specially the area of the *Haram el-Khalil*, is deemed sacred by the Moslem inhabitants because of its associations with Abraham. We have also seen that the belief that the Creation of Mankind took place in the Damascene Field near the town was alive in the late eighteenth century of our era, in a wholly Moslem context, and that the red soil of that field was then sold at a great price in Egypt, obviously because of its associations with the Creation.

Now, three long and complex Arabic inscriptions, dating to periods ranging from the beginning of the thirteenth to the end of the fourteenth century A.D., are to be seen in Hebron, where two of them were placed over the central door of the local mosque, while the third was walled near another door of the same building. The texts describe at length the donation of entire villages or groups of villages to the *Haram el-Khalil*, the sanctuary containing the tomb of the Patriarch, offered by Moslem monarchs of Syria and/or Egypt. Moreover, they explain how the revenues of the villages are to be used: in all inscriptions meals for pilgrims and visitors are mentioned, and the most recent text specifies

<sup>36</sup> Eliade, *Traité d'Histoire des Religions*, p. 242.



that for such meals wheat, oil and lentils are needed. G. Wiet, who studied these inscriptions<sup>37</sup>, connects the mention of these meals with the tradition of Abraham's hospitality by the Mamre Oak. The biblical tradition contained in Gen. 18 was taken up by the Coran (51, 24-27) and gave rise to the other Arabic byname of Abraham, *Abu 'l-aḏyâf*, the "father of hosts". In memory of Abraham's famous hospitality, every day an official, solemn distribution of food took place in the Hebron sanctuary, the *Haram*, for according to Arabic sources the Patriarch who was buried inside the sacred precinct rarely took a meal without inviting the poor he had previously summoned in from the neighbourhood. The Arabic and European texts that specifically mention such a custom date from the tenth to the late seventeenth century of our era, and in practically all of them the food offered to the poor inhabitants of the town as well as to travellers and pilgrims is said to consist of bread and a pap or stew of lentils cooked in oil; the ingredients of the meal were prepared and cooked inside the Haram in a special guest-house (*ḏiyâfa*) comprehensive of mills, ovens and kitchens. The sanctuary was very rich in money provided by donations and could provide as much as one thousand two hundred small round breads a day, so as to distribute them at three different times during the day together with the lentil-porridge. The ritual aspect of such distributions was enhanced by the fact that, while the lentils were distributed, it was publicly proclaimed that this was the Friend's (i.e. Abraham's, in his quality of *el-Khalîl*) hospitality, and drums, trumpets and other instruments were played, songs were sung, while some danced, all this being called the Friend's Parade (*naubat el-Khalîl*). Orthodox Moslems protested against these unorderly practices, just like Yahwists and Christians had probably reacted centuries earlier against the unorthodox practices by the Mamre Oak; and in particular one author, writing in the fourteenth century A.D., insisted that the popular equation between the distribution of lentils and Abraham's hospitality was not correct, for the Patriarch really had killed a calf in order to feed his divine guests<sup>38</sup>.

In fact, the lentils have to be explained, for, while the bread was distributed because it was the most obvious popular food, and probably also

<sup>37</sup> G. Wiet, *Notes d'Epigraphie Syro-Musulmane*: "Syria", 5 (1924), pp. 216-253: the paragraph in question is titled I. *Inscriptions du Haram d'Hébron*.

<sup>38</sup> Wiet quotes the *Madkhal* of Ibn el-Hajj el-'Abdari (who died in 737/1337), translated by A. Goldziher, *Das Patriarchen-grabung in Hebron*: ZDPV, 17, pp. 119-120.



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because flour cakes were mentioned as one ingredient of the meal offered by Abraham, a lentil stew, also popular and cheap, seems nevertheless not necessary, and surely was not "traditional". A late text offers a secondary explanation that may be suggestive: the Chevalier d'Arvieux who visited Hebron in the second half of the seventeenth century mentions the lentils "que les derviches distribuent libéralement aux passans et à tous ceux qui en ont besoin, en mémoire de ce qui se passa en ce lieux entre Jacob et Esau"<sup>39</sup>. The passage refers to the episode in Gen. 25:27-34 containing the famous sale of Esau's birth-right in exchange for a stew of lentils cooked by Jacob, that apparently took place in Hebron. Now, Gen.25:30 identifies the lentil stew as "red stuff", and the word for "red" here is, of course, 'dm: all commentaries see in this a clear allusion to the fact that Esau, whose name means "hairy" because he was born all covered by red hair, was to become the eponymous ancestor of the *bēnē 'Edôm*, Israel's southern neighbours. Gen. 33 is an account of how this happened: when Jacob returned from Aram Nahrain where he had fled before his brother, he met Esau, was reconciled with him, and then cunningly tricked his twin into preceding him to the land of Edom, where of course he did not follow him, preferring to settle in fertile Palestine: so "Esau is Edom" (Gen. 36:19b)<sup>40</sup>.

Since we now that throughout many centuries and up to the end of the seventeenth century A.D. at least the red soil of the Damascene Field near Hebron was deemed sacred because it had been used to fashion Adam, and was even transported and sold in Egypt because of its healing power, we should be ready to see in the red lentil stew offered throughout the same centuries to travellers, poor inhabitants and pilgrims in Hebron in "ritual" meals financed by Syrian and Egyptian donations a symbol of the holy red soil or at least an allusion to it. Such an interpretation is of course a mere hypothesis, but it does seem significant that, while money for distributions of the red lentil stew went from Egypt to the *Haram* in Hebron, the red holy soil from which Adam was drawn went from Hebron to Egypt.

A possible comparison with an "Egyptian" ritual practice of late Roman times, attested by sources such as the *Historia Augusta* and Iohannes Lydus (De Mens. IV.57), encourages me in submitting my hypothetical interpreta-

<sup>39</sup> Quoted by Vincent, Mackay and Abel, *Hebron, Le Haram el-Khalil*, p. 196.

<sup>40</sup> On this tradition see C. Grottanelli, *Per un mitico Giacobbe domestico, pastore e mago: AA. VV., Magia, Studi di Storia delle Religioni in memoria di Raffaella Garosi*, Roma 1976, pp. 127-145.



tion of the Hebronite lentil distributions. We are told that in Mediterranean countries, in particular in Italy, the Egyptian feast called *Pelusia* because of its connection with the Eastern branch of the Nile Delta was celebrated yearly on the 24th of March. Lydus writes that the feast drew its name from that of the mud from which a god emerged announcing the Nile inundation that would chase dryness, hunger and death away. That god was, of course, Harpocrates who appeared, emerging from the fertile mud of the yearly inundation, and holding a *cornucopia*; during his feast-day the faithful covered their faces with a pap or porridge they also distributed to all those who asked for it, as a remedy against all forms of sickness and evil<sup>41</sup>. We have here a series of data (the emerging of life from the holy soil, the soil's healing virtues, and the ritual use of cooked vegetable food to symbolize that soil and its qualities) that form a mythical and ritual complex of notable coherence. Since the primeval, cosmogonical quality of the yearly Nile flood in Egyptian religious thought is well known, the connections between the *Pelusia* and the Hebronite rituals seem extremely significant, so that we can not only compare the Egyptian complex to our Hebronite material, but also tentatively use it to enhance an interpretation. I think it is a good point in favour of the interpretation I have proposed.

Whatever solution we accept for this last problem, there remains the fact that a continuity in ritual practice has been proved beyond reasonable doubt for the Hebron area from the Biblical to the Byzantine and then possibly to the modern times. At all times, the local cult and/or ritual was considered to be unorthodox, untidy and somehow "vulgar" by the official religious ideology (*i.e.* by the ruling classes)<sup>42</sup>; but it was mostly tolerated, sometimes repressed and

<sup>41</sup> M. Malaise, *Les Conditions de pénétration et de diffusion des cultes égyptiens en Italie*, Leiden 1972. The sources quoted are: CIL I<sup>2</sup>, p. 260 (Philostratus); CIL I<sup>2</sup>, p. 261 (Polemios Sylvius' calendar); Capitolin. Marcus Ant. 23, 8; and finally Lydus, *de Mens.* IV. 57, that I have already quoted. I have found no other precise comparisons for the Hebron distributions, though I know of many other instances of symbolic food (*e.g.* the solar yellow round cakes of Mater Matuta in Rome: G. Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée III*, Paris 1973, pp. 115-131, 305-337), and a Greek myth in which goddesses plaster their faces with mud in order to escape from a river-god (Paus. VI. 22, 8-11).

<sup>42</sup> The same seems to be true of the feast *Pelusia* that we have compared to the food distributions in the *Haram*, for Capitolinus writes that the emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus "*Sacra Serapidis a uulgaritate Pelusiae summouit*": whatever this means exactly, it is surely an allusion to the "vulgar" rites of the Pelusian festival. See Malaise, *Cultes égyptiens en Italie*, p. 228 and note 5. As I have tried to show in my article *Possessione carismatica e razionalizzazione statale nella Bibbia ebraica*: "Studi Storico-Religiosi", 1 (1977), pp. 263-288, specially 275-277, in a "stratified" society some types of religious behaviour



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substituted by something more acceptable, sometimes encouraged and even financed through foundations. The unity and continuity of the Hebron-Mamre tradition seems now more probable in the light of the historical continuity of ritual in the holy areas of the site. We can thus accept that unity and continuity as a working hypothesis, and work on the basis of this assumption.

### 6. THE HEBRON-MAMRE TRADITION IN ITS URBAN SETTING.

If we accept the fundamental structural unity of the Hebron-Mamre tradition, we must consider the whole picture our data permit us to reconstruct, in order to understand that picture's meaning and function in its cultural and historical context.

The picture in question is the following. Hebron, a town built on a rocky ridge of Southern Palestine, is one of the oldest places in the world. On the same rocky Judean ridge, not far from Hebron, are the Oak(s) of Mamre; and one of these oaks is there since the time of Creation. The creation of Mankind took place not far from these landmarks, in a small valley from which the virgin, "true" red earth was obtained that was necessary to make the first human being. This same area was the site of the first mourning and of the first burial of the human race. But Hebron is connected with other, not generally human, but specifically "national", beginnings: the first land and the first burial-place ever possessed by an Ancestor of Israel were the Cave of Macpelah and the field in front of it, and in Hebron, near the Mamre Oaks, where Abraham had offered three divine beings his proverbial hospitality, he and his descendants lived, both before and after the great Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and were buried, during three generations. This was the land Abraham acquired and settled immediately after he and his progeny were awarded possession of Canaan and invited to enter that territory by their god YHWH, and it was by the Oak of Mamre, not far from the field and the tomb he later bought for his family, that the most ancient of Israel's forefathers was promised a son, made a covenant with YHWH, built an altar to his Lord, and led a peaceful and prosperous life; for here at last were his home, his land, his family's sepulchre, his deity's

may be qualified as "vulgar" because they are "not dignified" according to ruling-class standards; and this is often true of rituals involving music and dance, that were both present in the popular *naubat el-Khalil* by the Haram in Hebron.



shrine and the birthplace of his child. Rocky Hebron with its Ogygian Oak was a primeval spot indeed, and for more than one reason, for it was believed to be both the cradle of humanity and the first territorial possession and stable abode of Israel's most ancient Patriarch. The muddy soil of one of its small valleys provided the dumb, inert matter that was needed to form humanity; but its rocky mountaintops and huge solid trees offered the basis for Israel's firm connection to its land and god. The biblical texts clearly insist on the topographical opposition between the Cave of Macpelah and the Oaks of Mamre<sup>43</sup>; likewise, if we consider the Hebron-Mamre traditions as a significant whole, the local scenery, with its contrasts between the rocky mountain ridges and the deep caves, between its valleys with their virgin red soil and its tall trees, perched on its lofty hilltops, becomes a complex semantic system, whose common denominator is its venerable age.

It is clear, of course, that the single aspects and parts of the complex we have hypothetically reconstructed so far probably took shape in connection with different sanctuaries or sacred sites belonging to the suburban area of Hebron, and at different times, during a period of several centuries; yet we have also shown that their connection to each other is extremely strong, and that they are all very strictly related to the local natural scenery. So it seems safe to assume that the semantic unity we have logically deduced from our data is also a *historical* unity, being the product of a continuous local tradition. Moreover, we must presume that at least part of this tradition, *i.e.* the belief in the holiness and antiquity of the site and of its oaks, and their association with the first possession and stable abode, and with the burial-place, of the primeval ancestors as well as with an ancient hierophany, is somewhat older than the first redaction of the relevant Biblical texts, since it was surely not "invented" by the redactors, and we can also imagine that their connection with the creation of mankind, even though it is attested by later sources, is possibly very old, though surely not as old as the rest of our mythical complex<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> See de Vaux, *Ancient Israel, its Life and Institutions*, pp. 292-293. I refer specially to the expression "Macpelah, facing Mamre": Gen. 23:19.

<sup>44</sup> We should note here that the "pre-Israelite" name of Hebron, Qiriat Arba, may have some cosmological implications for, perhaps not by mere chance, it reminds us of the Four Quarters of the World of Mesopotamian tradition and of the four streams or colours indicating the four "Cardinal Points" often associated with the Cosmic Tree in Asiatic and other mythologies (U. Holmberg, *Der Baum des Lebens*, Helsingfors 1922, p. 73) as well as in the Homeric Ogygia (Hom.



We shall not dwell here on the comparative material that could easily be used to enhance the hypothesis of a great antiquity of the whole semantic and mythical complex we have reconstructed. We could quote Eliade's contributions on the Cosmic Tree, seen by many primitive and ancient cultures both as a Micro-cosm and as Cosmic Axis, providing a link between man and the celestial and infernal spheres and often associated, as the Oaks are at Hebron, with an altar or pillar, thus forming the most wide-spread and primitive form of sanctuary and repeating, in a kind of symbolic topographical synthesis, the basic elements of the whole cosmic landscape<sup>45</sup>. We could also quote A. Detering's volume on the Indo-European traditions that identify the oak with such a Cosmic Tree<sup>46</sup>. We could remind our readers of the firm connection established by Yakut and Tartar mythology between the Cosmic Tree and the First Man or the Ancestor of the nation, that has been illustrated by U. Holmberg: in the Tartar myth it was the Supreme celestial Being himself, Kudai, who placed the forefather of the Tartars by the sacred golden birch-tree, growing on a mountain, to guard it<sup>47</sup>. Finally, we could compare the Mamre Oak(s), so clearly connected to the graves of the Patriarchs, with the trees or groves associated with the burial-place of greek heroes<sup>48</sup>, of Moslem "saints"<sup>49</sup>, or even with the tree growing on the tomb of the Patriarch Joseph at Shechem<sup>50</sup>. Such a series of associations would make it clear that the mythical complex centered on the Mamre Oak is nothing but a specific instance of a wide-spread religious and mythical typology, involving huge primeval trees and their symbolic value. Yet, though this would lead us to accept the Hebron-Mamre mythical and topographical system as a credible and coherent religious formation, probably of a very archaic nature, it would not be of much use in

Od. V. 57-60): but this is no more than a possibility, too vague to be of any real use in the present context.

<sup>45</sup> Eliade, *Traité d'Histoire des Religions*, pp. 228-239, 255.

<sup>46</sup> A. Detering, *Die Bedeutung der Eiche seit der Vorzeit*, Leipzig 1939.

<sup>47</sup> Holmberg, *Der Baum des Lebens*, pp. 56-60.

<sup>48</sup> E. Rohde, *Psyche, Seelencult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen*, I, Freiburg 1890, pp. 194-195. Cf. Elian. Var. Hist. 5, 17; Paus. 2, 28, 7; 8, 24, 7.

<sup>49</sup> See C. Trumelet, *Les Saints de l'Islam*, Paris 1881: for instance, Sidi Yakub es-Serif is buried in an olive grove called the "holy wood", and the olive trees are "as old as the saint": p. 109, pp. 279-280.

<sup>50</sup> G.R.H. Wright, *Joseph's Grave under the Tree by the Omphalos at Shechem*: VT, 22 (1972), pp. 476-486, and other articles by various Authors quoted in C. Grottanelli, *Spunti comparativi per la storia biblica di Giuseppe*: OA, 15 (1976), pp. 137-140, specially H.M. Schenke, *Jacobabronnen-Josephgrab-Sychar*: ZDPV, 84 (1968), pp. 159-189, that refers mainly to post-biblical traditions. See also Liverani: VT, 27 (1977), pp. 212-216.



clarifying the *meaning, value and function* of such a system in the specific cultural contexts it belonged to through the centuries.

Now, the specific economical and sociological context we are dealing with here is that of a mountain city of the ancient Near East, connected with a sanctuary containing a very holy and ancient tree, and based upon an agricultural economy that is very old in Palestine. Moreover, during the Byzantine period at least, Mamre was an important commercial center where, we are told, a thriving market flourished, and where nomad (pagan) pastoralists exchanged their products with those of the local agrarian community<sup>51</sup>. Finally, we know of the town's importance as a royal city during the first century of the United Monarchy of Israel. If we bear in mind that the religious complex we have reconstructed must have had its significance in *this* context, we shall understand that the comparative data we have briefly quoted cannot provide us with much more than a vague set of general references, for the very primitive mythical material that must have been "used" to form the Hebron-Mamre complex surely acquired a series of new meanings in the more advanced and composite cultural setting it belonged to. It is the (royal and priestly) town of Hebron and, more in general, the ancient urban culture of Palestine, that reshaped and transmitted the local traditions and gave them the form that we know. De Vaux has pointed out that the yahwistic impact upon these traditions was rather that of a religious and ideological censure than that of a constructive contribution, and we have seen that the history of their formation begins before the time of the Biblical redactors and continues for many centuries after that time, during historical periods when Christianity, and then Islam, were the prevailing religions of the area. All this forces us, then, to consider the whole religious complex of Hebron-Mamre as fundamentally distinct both from the primitive Cosmic Tree ideology we have compared it with and from the monotheistic beliefs of Yahwism, Christianity and Islam. We can well say, then, that its correct sociological and cultural "setting" is located "in between" these two poles, in the sense that it is less "primitive" than the background of the Cosmic Tree mythologies we have quoted, but definitely anomalous and archaic from an "orthodox" Yahwistic, Christian or Moslem viewpoint. But this does not mean, of course, that the Hebron-Mamre complex ever became a perfect product of the ancient urban (pre-Israelite and Israelite) culture of Palestine: it is immediately clear, for

<sup>51</sup> See notes 33 and 34 of the present article; especially Hieronym. Comm. in Hierem. 31, for the mention of a slave market.



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instance, that the two main ideological systems of ancient urban culture, polytheism and royal ideology, exerted little, if any, influence on the local traditions and cults. This only means (but this is very meaningful!) that in their specific urban setting, the very archaic, even, in a sense, "primitive", traditions about the Cosmic Tree and the First Ancestor could be, and were, interpreted as the foundation-myths of the ancient city of Hebron and of its suburban sanctuaries, forming the religious sanction both of the holy and of the Israelite quality of that "primeval" town.

### 7. THE HEBRON TRADITION AND THE TYRIAN MYTHOLOGY.

If we accept all this, we shall then have to turn for a comparison not to the mythologies of primitive cultures, but to the religious and narrative traditions of other urban societies, as near as possible to Hebron-Mamre in time and space. We have already quoted Boeotian Thebes: we have seen it to be age-old, "sacred", and ruled by the earth-born antediluvian king Ogygos or Ogyges, who bore the same name as Abraham's oak-tree. Greek mythology also tells us that Thebes was founded by the tyrian hero Kadmos, who was guided on the correct spot by Apollo's oracle, that ordered him to follow a cow and to stop where that animal halted. The town's first inhabitants sprang up from the earth in which Kadmos had sown the teeth of a dragon he had killed on the spot. The sacrifice of the cow sanctified the site<sup>52</sup>.

All this is only vaguely similar to the traditions about Hebron-Mamre; but if we turn to Kadmos' original city, Phoenician Tyre, we shall find that the mythical origins of *that* town are strikingly similar to the Hebronite material we have examined. A 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Greek poet, Nonnos, born in the Hellenized Egyptian city of Panopolis, has handed down to us what seems to be a genuine local tale of the founding of Tyre: in the fortieth book of his *Dionysiaca* the god Dionysos approaches Herakles, *i.e.* Melqart, the great Tyrian god, and asks him to recount the story of the foundation of his city. The Star-Robed Herakles answers: "People dwelt here once whom Time, bred along with them, saw as the only agemates of the eternal universe, holy offspring of the virgin earth, whose

<sup>52</sup> See note 12. For a comparative approach to this myth in an Eastern Mediterranean context see C. Grottanelli, *Il mito delle origini di Tiro: due versioni "duali"*: OA, 11 (1972), pp. 58-63.



bodies came forth of themselves from the unplowed unsown mud". ("ένθάδε φῶτες  
 ἔναιον, ὁμόσπορος οὐς ποτε μούνοους / ἀενάου κόσμουλο συνήλικας ἔδρακεν Αἰών, / ἀγνὸν  
 ἀνυμφεύτοιο γένος χθονός, ὧν τότε μορφῆν/αὐτομάτην ὠδινεν ἀνήροτος ἄσπορος  
 ἰλῦς"). These were the people, Melqart explains, who "built upon foundations of  
 rock a city unshakable on ground also of rock" ("πόλιν ἰσοτύπων δαπέδων αὐτόχθονι  
 τέχνη / πετραίουσ ἀτίνακτον ἐπυργώσαντο θεμέθλοισ"). And this is how it happened:  
 one day, when the earthborn folk were resting "on their watery beds among the  
 fountains, while the sun was beating the earth with steam" ("καί ποτε πηγαῖσσι  
 παρ' εὐδύροισι χαμειναῖς / ἠελίου πυρδέντος ἱμασσομένης χθονὸς ἀτμῆ"), Melqart  
 appeared to them, and induced them to build and launch the first ship on the  
 sea in front of the Tyrian coast, and to sail it till they reached "two floating  
 stones, which Nature itself has named the Ambrosian Rocks". On one of these rocks,  
 the god explains to the earthborn people, "grows a spire of olive, their agemate,  
 selfrooted and joined to the rock, in the very navel of the waterfaring stone".  
 ("θάλλει / ἥλικος αὐτόρριζον ὁμότυγον ἔρνος ἐλαῖης, / πέτρης ὑγροπόροιο μεσόμφαλον").  
 An eagle and a bowl are perched on the top of the tree, while a snake writhes  
 round its trunk; and "from the flaming tree fire selfmade spits out wonderful  
 sparks, and the glow devours the olive spire all round but consumes it not" ("ἀπὸ  
 φλογεροῦ δὲ δένδρου / θαμβαλέουσ σπινθηρας ἐρεύγεται αὐτόματον πῦρ, / κατ' σέλας  
 ἀφλεγέος περιβόσκαται ἔρνος ἐλαῖης"). Once they have reached the Ambrosian Rocks,  
 they must catch the eagle, sacrifice it to the god Poseidon and pour out its  
 blood on the cliffs to Zeus the Blessed. "Then the rock wanders no longer driven  
 over the waters; but it is fixed upon immovable foundations and unites itself  
 bound to the free rock"; "on this rock they must found a builded city". The  
 earthborn folk follow Melqart's instructions, reach the Ambrosian Rocks, cut  
 the bird's throat: the blood gushes forth from the animal's neck and "with those  
 divine drops roots the seafaring rocks at the bottom near to Tyre on the sea;  
 and upon those unassailable rocks the Earthborn build up their deepbreasted  
 nurse"<sup>53</sup>.

In the primeval landscape of Tyre, a city that, according to what its

<sup>53</sup> Nonn. Dionysiaca XL vv. 429-500. For the "archaic" quality of this tradition, transmitted by the late poet Nonnos, see Grottanelli: OA, 11 (1972), pp. 53-58, and also E.A.S. Butterworth, *The Tree at the Navel of the Earth*, Berlin 1970, pp. 85-89. For the general problem of the archaic quality of many mythical traditions that are to be found in late authors, see A. Brelich, *Ad Philologos*: "Religioni e Civiltà" (SMSR n.s.) 1 (1972), pp. 621-629, where Nonnos is quoted as an example of such "late" sources: pp. 622-623.



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priests told Herodotus<sup>54</sup>, was two thousand three hundred years old (exactly the same age as Hebron in Josephus' account), a city termed 'Ογύγη Τύρος by Dionysios in his *Periegesis*<sup>55</sup>, a complete foundation myth is located, that is similar both to the Theban mythology we have quoted and to the Hebron-Mamre tradition. Just as happens in Thebes and in Hebron, on or near the holy site of the age-old town humanity itself is born from the earth; and, though Adam's origin is not spontaneous, the virgin earth (ἀνήροτος ἄσπορος ἰλύς) of Tyre recalls the virgin, "true" red soil (ἡ παρθένος γῆ καὶ ἀληθινή) of the Jewish tradition recorded by Josephus. At Thebes as well as in Hebron and Tyre the founder or founders of the holy city are guided to the site of the future town by the will of a divine protector: they reach that site and begin their activity there by offering a sacrifice or by erecting an altar. Moreover, both the Tyrian myth and the Hebron-Mamre tradition are centered on a great tree, that is in both cases as old as the world itself and reveals its supernatural quality by way of a gentle fire that enwraps it without consuming its trunk; and in both traditions a lofty, rocky landscape (a seascape in Tyre, a mountain scenery in Hebron) seems to be a significant symbol of the city's antiquity and firmness. Finally, if Hebron-Mamre seems to possess a "double" tradition, that connects it, and its famous Cave of Macpelah, with Adam as well as with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Esau, the foundation myths of Thebes and of Tyre both have two distinct versions one of which is connected with the very birth of humanity from the vast bosom of the Earth, while the other explains the town's origin with the activity of a pair of twin culture-heroes<sup>56</sup>.

### 8. SOME CONCLUSIONS.

In the light of the evidence we have examined so far, we can conclude by stating that the "urban" quality of the Hebron-Mamre traditions we have reconstructed is indirectly sustained by the comparative material furnished both by Greek (Boeotian) and by Phoenician mythical data pertaining to the foun-

<sup>54</sup> Herod. II 44.

<sup>55</sup> Dionys. *Perieges.* 911, quoted by Stephanus *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae*, IX, col. 1986.

<sup>56</sup> See Grottanelli: OA, 11 (1972), pp. 59-63, where the existence of such a "double" tradition in Tyre, Thebes, and Carthage is discussed from a "structuralist" point of view, and a possible explanation is (too weakly!) hinted at. I hope to return to this problem soon.



dation of the primeval sacred cities, Thebes and Tyre. At the same time, we can well say that the inner unity of the Hebronite narrative tradition, that we have assumed as a working hypothesis, is confirmed by the fact that a similar series of mythical data is found in *one* single and complete narrative, involving the foundation of a Phoenician town. As for the meaning and function of the three "urban" traditions we have examined, it is clear that the focal point in all cases is the will to enhance the great age and the holiness and importance of the city in question. In the Tyrian and Hebronite traditions, however, special importance is apparently given to the removal of a sad state of instability that is characteristic of the pre-urban stage of the narratives: in Hebron the sinful conduct of the first human being created from the red earth, and the long wandering of the "nomad"<sup>57</sup> Patriarchs, are in sharp contrast with the goodness and firmness of the life led under the holy oak, and of the land-and-burial rights acquired by Abraham; just as in the Tyrian myth the lazy life of the Earth-Born folk who sleep by the misty streams and the vague mobility of the Ambrosian Rocks before the sacrifice are strongly countered by the solidity of the "unshakable city" that derives its very name from the hard rock. Both in Hebron-Mamre and in Tyre, humanity's divinely guided progress from the lability of its muddy origins to the firmness of its well-organized life in a rocky, stonebuilt *habitat* is one of the most relevant messages transmitted by the traditional beliefs and narratives; yet such a message is granted by the "archaic" symbol provided by the eternal life of a great tree, a landmark indicating the community's sound grasp on its territory and its firm connection with the divine sphere.

Though their original contents are extremely similar, the Tyrian and Hebronite traditions differ greatly in regards to their ultimate fate, form and function. In Tyre, the well organized upper culture efficiently assimilated the archaic traditions, and the god Melqarth, whose very name expresses his urban and royal quality, became the protagonist of the local "cosmic tree" mythology: moreover, Ezechiel's text on Tyre seems to show that local traditions about primeval humanity were linked not only with the polytheistic pantheon but also, more directly, with the Tyrian kingship ideology<sup>58</sup>. In Hebron, probably because

<sup>57</sup> On the meaning and function of the Patriarchs' "nomadic" movements through Palestine and elsewhere, see Liverani, "Henoah", 1 (1979), p. 16 and note 21, quoting A. Brelich, *Gli eroi greci*, Roma 1955, pp. 138, 298-299.

<sup>58</sup> Grottanelli: OA, 11 (1972), pp. 53-63; E. Will, *Au sanctuaire d'Héraclès à Tyr: l'olivier enflammé, les stèles et les roches ambrosiennes*: "Berytus", 10



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of the weakness of the local "central power" that may be attested by the town's fourfold quality and by its very name, no such rationalization was possible, and the local tradition we have reconstructed, remaining ever a "folkloric" complex<sup>59</sup> within an urban setting, had to sustain directly the impact of the new, monotheistic religions. As we have seen, it did so quite successfully, much more so, indeed, than the Tyrian mythology, whose poet, Nonnos, ended up by being converted to Christianity.

(1950-51), pp. 1-12; R.D. Barnett, *Ezechiel and Tyre*: "Eretz Israel", 9 (1969), pp. 6-13; É. Lipiński, *La fête de l'ensevelissement et de la résurrection de Melqart*: Actes de la XVII<sup>e</sup> Rencontre Internationale d'Assyriologie (1969), Hams-sur-Eure 1970, pp. 30-58.

<sup>59</sup> On a similar long-lived "folkloric" religious complex see A. Brelich, *Un culto preistorico vivente nell'Italia centrale*: SMSR, 24/25 (1953/1954), pp. 36-59; and that same Author's observations on the same subject, written and published almost twenty-five years later: A. Brelich, *Storia delle Religioni, Perché?*, Napoli 1979, pp. 47-48: "...sospetto che nel folklore spesso non tanto sopravvivono - 'scaduti' - fenomeni delle civiltà 'egemoni' antiche, quanto piuttosto ciò che anche sotto queste era già folklore... E allora è giustificato con il concetto della 'continuità' al posto di (o accanto a) quello della sopravvivenza". But the case of Hebron is still different, for it is a case of continuity in a very "central", not at all in a "marginal" area, and within an "urban" context.