

EPISODE 5

PILLARS AND SERPENTS

Hello everyone. Whether or not you are still on the path that you may or may not have ever been on. This is the fifth episode of my podcast, ManWomanSexGod. And my name is Michael Folz.

Now so far we've been laying the foundations. The stepping stones, as it were. And last episode I promised that on this episode I'd finally get into the plant based meat and potatoes, as it were, of the main presentation. Which I am now about to do.

But, as you'll remember, back in the introduction I noted that, even though the religious experience has been described across cultures and across time, due to the dangers that exist from just playing around with the energies involved, the keepers of the essential truths of said religious experience have mostly chosen to hide them behind mystery cults, parables, metaphors, arcane symbols, and outright occultism. And back then the true meaning of all of it would only be divulged to those whom the teacher thought were mature enough to handle it.

Although, of course, as time passed, what with the lack of any real first hand experiences, people tended to forget what any of it originally meant.

Therefore, if we want to plausibly reconstruct that meaning, perhaps the best way to start is to find some commonality in symbols and stories from various eras and various societies. And then figure out what the heck they were really talking about.

Which is what we're going to set out to do in this episode.

So now let's start the journey. And, since I'm using that metaphor, let the journey begin with sort of a travelogue.

Now I don't know how much you've ever thought about the country of Lebanon. But it was only created after World War I. And it was an attempt by the French to carve out a section of Syria which was predominantly Christian, the theory being that by doing so they were creating a permanent ally. (Israel and Jordan, by the way, were also carved out of Syria, this time by the British.) Anyway, that plan of the French didn't work out all that well, since today the country is predominantly Muslim.

But for our purposes here I want to talk about the geography, not the history, of Lebanon. Because basically there are three different geographical areas. First, there is the relatively narrow coastal plain. This is where Beirut, Tripoli, and the other major cities are. Rising quickly from the coast is a spine of relatively steep and rugged mountains, covered in pines and, of course, the few remaining cedars of Lebanon. Between these mountains and the Syrian border, though, is a kind of cleft in the Earth which is known as the Bekaa Valley. Populated almost exclusively by Shi'ites, this area is the spiritual and physical headquarters of the political group Hezbollah.

Needless to say, not many Americans have visited that region this century.

Which is too bad. Because, back when I went there in 2004, beyond the ubiquitous pictures tacked to telephone poles of the smiling face of Hezbollah's leader as he cradled his AK-47, the area was a quiet and friendly, if dusty, agricultural backwater. Its largest town is called Baalbek, and, although nothing much interesting has happened in the area in modern times, right adjacent to the town are what are perhaps the largest and best preserved Roman temple ruins in the entire world.

(Okay, here's the first example of why I brought up my earlier podcast in the last episode. Because as it turns out much of our popular conception about the ancient Western world—namely Greece, Rome, and early Christianity—has some major holes in it. So if you want a slightly fuller explanation of that ancient world, then I would suggest that you go to Episodes 13, 14 & 15 of Dial It Back Or Die.)

Anyway, back to the story. Because, once you really understand the actual ancient world, it's not that hard to figure out why such an expensive and elaborate temple complex would have been built in this present day middle of nowhere location. After all, during the time of its construction (which was from 100-200 AD) what we now call the Middle East was then the richest and most civilized part of the Roman Empire. Indeed, back then the eastern half of the Mediterranean had both a much higher population and also a much higher level of economic development than did the western half. And although your Bible stories might have led you to believe otherwise, this entire area was not just a land of shepherds and simple peasants. Nor were Jews (or anyone else, for that matter) isolated from sophisticated Greek (and other) philosophy, thought and culture. In fact, recent archaeological research has determined that even Jesus' hometown of Nazareth, about 150 miles to the south of Baalbek, was only four miles from a major urban center, the thoroughly Hellenized Greek city of Sephoris. Four miles. You can walk that in little over an hour. So that it is highly probable that Jesus, besides speaking Aramaic, would have also spoken Greek, and would have been relatively well educated.

And it's also extremely important to understand that Rome had gone about building its empire in a unique, innovative, and—especially for the times—a highly enlightened way. The usual method of conquest up until that time was to rape and pillage, kill off all of the old power structure, and then move your people in and treat the subjugated people as, well, subjugated people. But under the Roman model, once a group submitted to Roman rule, all that was required was that their leaders become Roman citizens and observe a few Roman customs. These men were then allowed to keep their local authority. And their subjects were by and large free to keep their previous customs and beliefs.

This especially applied to religion. True, citizens were obliged to make yearly sacrifices to the Roman gods. But these sacrifices were seen as mere civic duties, much as we would regard celebrating the Fourth of July or pledging allegiance to the flag. After all, the Romans themselves were soldiers and engineers, not philosophers or mystics. As long as the proper state sacrifices were made, they could have cared less what other religions that their subjects followed.

Nor—as hard as it may be to believe from our current vantage point—did they believe that their gods were the only gods possible. And they certainly didn't believe that there was only one way to becoming righteous or holy. Indeed, if there was any competition between all of the various religions and cults in the Roman Empire, it was an entirely friendly one to see which group could achieve the highest devotion or spirituality.

After all, the Latin word *religio* most likely meant to bind back. And in a mystical context it meant the process of binding the soul back to God. So how could such an idea co-exist with exclusivity?

And an important result of all this was that religions in the Roman Empire were highly *syncretic*, a word which means that ideas from one religion would readily attach themselves to ideas from others. Even Judaism and early Christianity were syncretic. For instance, scholars understand that both the concepts of Heaven and Hell and of the Last Judgment have been cribbed from the Zoroastrianism which Alexander the Great brought back with him from Persia when he conquered the region we today call the Middle East around 300 B.C.

And this syncreticism was especially true in the proliferation of the various mystery cults of the era. The word 'mystery' here both refers to the modern sense of the word (as in 'mysterious') and also to the idea of mysticism. These cults were characterized by a process of initiation, followed by rites and practices which were transmitted orally, and which were forbidden to be divulged to all non-initiates. (The Freemasons of the 18th Century—to which people as diverse as Mozart and many of the

Founding Fathers belonged—were a conscious, if somewhat hokey, attempt to re-create these ancient mystery cults.)

Throughout the Roman Empire there probably arose too many such cults to count. But some of the major ones included the Eleusinian Mysteries, the Dionysian Mysteries, the Orphic Mysteries, and the Mithraic Mysteries. Clearly, given their secretive nature, it is now hard to know what exactly they believed, or how 'mystical' any or all of them really were. But it seems clear that their common theme was the journey of the soul as it arose from this physical plane and then up into the higher realms.

Most of these cults were originally native to Greece, whose language and culture thoroughly dominated the eastern half of the Empire. But once Egypt was absorbed by Rome around 30 B.C., a whole other ancient, and very highly developed, way of thought and religion was also added into the mix. Thus the mystery (and definitely mystical) cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis quickly became one of the dominant, and most popular, of the cults.

Which brings us back to the ruins at Baalbek. Its temple to Jupiter was the largest in the Roman Empire. Even today the few 65 foot tall Corinthian columns that remain are pretty damn awesome. There was a smaller temple to Venus. And then there was a third one, still with its original roof, and almost perfectly intact, which was dedicated to Bacchus.



(Okay, sorry, but another brief interruption. Because I'm going to now be describing some things which are much better understood if seen visually. And if you do want to see them, then I suggest that you either go to Google Images, and type in Baalbek, which is spelled B-A-A-L-B-E-K.

Or you can go to this podcast's website, which, again, is www.ManWomanSexGod.com, and find the specific episode page.)

And back to the story again. Because if you sit in what was the central courtyard of the complex, you'll notice that there is a single lonely column, about forty or fifty feet tall, in front of you. Well, it's actually a pillar and not a column, since it was never intended to hold anything up. And next to it, a few yards away, is an identical base upon which it is obvious an identical pillar once stood.



So, given the amount of trouble it took back then to get something that tall to stand upright, and then also to have it engineered well enough so that it could stay standing through two thousand years of earthquakes and political turmoil, what purpose, symbolically or otherwise, could these two pillars, just standing there all alone at the entrance to a huge temple complex, have served?

To try to answer that question, let's now flash forward to the year 1910 and the publication of 'The Pictorial History of the Tarot' by Arthur Edward Waite. This is the most famous version of the Tarot deck, beloved by both hippies and fortune tellers. And it might seem ridiculous that I would be looking for something serious here.

But the author was not just some artist spinning intuitive ideas out of his head. Rather Arthur Waite had long been a student of historical and religious symbolism, a field which, by the way, was considered far more valid by intellectual society then than it is today. For instance, the poet William Butler Yeats was also absorbed by such things. Anyway, especially with the Major Arcana (which are the first 22 cards of the deck), Waite was far more concerned with symbolical accuracy than he was with fortune telling.



So, hopefully, you are familiar with this deck. If not, again, you can go to Google images or the website and see a depiction of card number two, which is one of the most significant ones. It's called the High Priestess. And most commentators agree that the lady in the forefront is supposed to represent that shadowy Egyptian god Isis, the guarder of otherworldly wisdom. Of the Great Mystery. Nobody knows, however, what to really make of the two identical pillars—one black and one white—that stand behind her and make up the rest of the simple painting. Clearly they must be connected in some way to the Great Mystery that she is protecting. But how?

Okay. Now let's travel to the year 1400. Because it's rather unlikely that Christians in France in the Middle Ages had any knowledge of the cult of Isis. So that one would assume that any mystical symbolism that developed there would have arisen independently.

Of course, you might be forgiven for thinking that any kind of sophisticated thought could have developed at all in the Middle Ages. After all, wasn't that time one of darkness and ignorance? Kind of like a Monty Python skit, where half-conscious creatures stood in the mud and whacked at each other with broadswords?

No, actually, it was not. Not remotely (And here, if you want a deeper look, I'll direct you to Episode 16 of *Dial It Back Or Die*.) In short, though, the period of the High Middle Ages (from

approximately 1000 AD to 1300 AD) saw inventions as diverse as the wheelbarrow, glass windows, eye glasses and crop rotation. It witnessed the complicated, subtle, and rational philosophy of Thomas Aquinas (he wrote over a million words). And it was when the formal Scientific Method, of all things, was first developed by, of all people, Franciscan monks. Virtually the entire Thirteenth Century passed without a single war in all of Western Europe. Which is why knights, with nothing else to do, took part in all of those jousting tournaments. And, to continue the Monty Python reference, I suggest that you stand in front of the magnificent cathedral at Chartres some day and try to imagine John Cleese and Eric Idle building it.

Nor was mysticism confined to the monasteries. In a land where absolute belief in God and in the necessity of the soul's salvation was the default position, it makes sense that there would be widespread interest in what the actual religious experience entailed.

Moreover, after centuries of being the bulwark against the actual darkness and ignorance which existed during the Dark Ages (from around 500 to 1000 AD), the Church was now the central and most meaningful part of society. And its message of a spiritual Love which was far more real and worthy than lowly physical, Earthly love had firmly taken hold. So it kind of follows that the ideals of Courtly Love and Chivalry—basically a belief in chastity and the Platonic Ideal—would become so important. And even academics readily acknowledge that the songs of the troubadours and the stories of the search for the Holy Grail were only slightly painted over accounts of some sort of mystical journey.

And along the path of that journey were unicorns.

Now today the unicorn is a cartoon figure that is marketed to little girls because for some reason it fascinates them. But back then it served a rather serious symbolic purpose. First, its white color signified absolute purity. Second, its single horn grew out of the middle of its forehead, right where a Third Eye should be. Finally, it was supposed to be a wild and out of control animal, which would, however, become inexplicably calm and obedient in the presence of a lady.

But it couldn't be just any old female. It had to be a perfectly chaste virgin.

The unicorn is thus very prevalent in Medieval imagery. And the most famous depictions of it are in a series of six large and renowned tapestries which are today entitled 'The Lady and the Unicorn'. Indeed, their display is the main draw at the famous Cluny Museum of Medieval Art on the Left Bank in Paris. Dated to around 1480, they were made almost 200 years after the end of the High Middle Ages. But their theme is so obviously pre-Modern that they fit right in with the rest of the exhibits.

It is also clear that they are trying to tell some sort of spiritual or mysterious allegory.



But what is it?

Again, if you are not already familiar with these, you'll have to go to Google images or the podcast website to see them. But when you do see them, you'll see that the image of the culminating tapestry, provocatively named 'A Mon Seul Desir' (To My One Desire) has a lion that is sharing the stage with said lady and her unicorn friend. These two animals also flank her in the other five tapestries. And it is pretty clear, even to non-religious scholars, that they are supposed to represent Male and Female energies, both of which have now been apparently tamed.

The symbolism of the rest, however—the birds, the dog, the book, the trees—is not so apparent. And each of the other five tapestries presents somewhat the same scene, but with a slightly different set of objects to puzzle over. Traditionally it is assumed that these other five are somehow related to the five senses, and although there is no historical evidence to support this, maybe it is so.

But what I would like to draw your attention to are the two long poles that each of the two animals is holding. These poles also show up in the rest of the set, and the common explanation is that they are holding the heraldic crest of the family which commissioned the works. But that is hardly a satisfying answer, since whoever commissioned this was clearly trying to express some universal message, and that message probably didn't have anything to do with his family's crest.

So did the message have something to do with the poles themselves?

And now let's go back to the Garden of Eden.

You probably didn't have that much prior knowledge about ancient mystery cults or Medieval symbolism. But, even in today's secular society, you no doubt know at least the outline of the Biblical story: How God created Adam and Eve and told them that they could eat the fruits of any of the myriad

trees of the garden, but that they should stay away from the Tree of Life. How a serpent had then tempted Eve, who in turn tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit and gain some hidden knowledge of Good and Evil. And how as a result Adam and Eve were banished from the garden, and how they and their descendants (which includes us) were thus doomed to existences of sin and death.

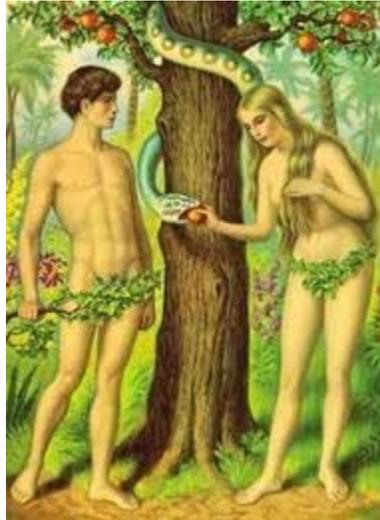
Bummer.

But what is even more depressing is what the Christian religion (or at least the Fundamentalist portion of it) has made of this story. Because although one of the central themes of the teachings of Jesus is that he taught primarily through parables, somehow this opening story of the Bible is seen as literal reporting. Even though, by definition, there was nobody else there to witness it or write it down. And even though, say there had been an oral tradition, there would have been a severe bottleneck at the time of Noah, when everybody else was killed off.

(By the way, modern scholars understand that Genesis was originally written in the Sixth Century BC by Jewish scribes living in Babylon. And that if any of those scribes had thought that he was getting a direct transmission from God, he would have surely begun or ended the book with a notation to that effect.)

So let's take the story for what it obviously is. A parable. A parable which is trying to explain some really essential and central aspects of the human condition. Especially vis a vis why we are stuck here on this physical Earth and why we are estranged from the Divine Spirit.

But although the parable must have been extremely important for the Jewish scribes to have started their scriptures with it, these scribes were not as helpful as Jesus was with most of his parables in providing for us a clear explanation of this one. One supposes that, as with the mystery cults, this was deliberate. Perhaps initiates were told the true meaning orally. Whatever the case, though, we in the present are left to try and figure out what it is the Book of Genesis was really trying to say.



Well, besides God there are four 'characters' in the story: Adam, Eve, the Tree of Life, and the Serpent. Of these Adam and Eve are, quite literally, the Male and the Female. The Tree of Life must be something extremely important; in a short while I hope to make its purpose clear. Which leaves the Serpent.

So why a serpent? Why not a bear or a squirrel or an ocelot or some other animal? After all, this creature is supposed to be clever enough to talk Eve and Adam into disobeying God, and no person and no culture has ever thought of snakes as being particularly intelligent. Wouldn't a monkey or a dog or an otter—something with personality—have made more sense?

Why a serpent???

And now let's turn our attention to ancient Rome and the Roman god Mercury. Well, actually the Greek god Hermes, since—as any scholar can tell you—the Romans were very capable engineers and lawyers, but basically they got just about all of their culture and their cultural ideas from the Greeks.

Whichever, you may recall that Hermes/Mercury was the messenger of the gods. But this does not mean that he delivered celestial telegrams between Zeus and Hera. Rather, his purpose was to communicate the Divine down to the human level. He also governed dreams and the unconscious. And he delivered souls to the afterlife. Quite an important position to have.

You may also remember his winged feet. This is worth considering. After all, any of the gods could at will go back and forth to this Earthly realm. So why was it such a big deal to emphasize wings on this one particular god?

You might not be quite as familiar with what is called the Caduceus, which is the staff that he carried, and which was, as you might imagine, also very important symbolically. For this staff had two serpents twisting their way around it. And on top of this staff was another, larger pair of wings.



So what's going on with that?

Would it help if I pointed out that one of the most popular of the mystery cults of the ancient world was the one devoted to Hermes? Or that when something is 'hermetically sealed' that means that nobody is going to be able to get inside and find out what is in it?

Perhaps I should also note that the Caduceus is not some randomly generated vision from some ancient Greek's fevered imagination. No, in the ancient world there are images of snakes going around poles dating back to the beginnings of Mesopotamian civilization. For instance, there is also what is called the Rod of Asclepius, which is very similar to Mercury's Caduceus, which has one snake going around a pole, and which is nowadays the universal symbol for the practice of medicine.



Now if you ask the experts why the practice of medicine should use such a (at least to modern eyes) bizarre symbol, you will get confused and unsatisfying answers, such as medicine started out with the removal of guinea worms, or some other such nonsense.

But let me now give a strong hint. The ancients always saw the primary purpose of medicine's goal of preserving human life was to preserve our precious human consciousness. And human consciousness is pretty much associated with the nervous system. And the nervous system is pretty much associated with the spinal column.

Which might explain the rod.

But, still, what about the snake???

Well, I've already given you enough symbolism for today. And now it looks like we've run out of time. And now I'm also leaving you here with all of these unexplained symbolisms. Not to worry, though. Because I'll be taking it all up again in the next episode. Which will be coming along soon enough.

First, though, my friend the engineer does have to cue the music...