

CHAPTER TWO - WANDERINGS OF THE YOUNG DRAGON

ON THE assumption, which seems fair, that the historic traces of the dragon have led us back to Egypt and Babylonia--and very likely would lead us much farther could we penetrate the obscurities of a remoter past--it is fitting to inquire next how we may account for its presence and varied development elsewhere. Two theories oppose one another in respect to the fact that this and other myths, prejudices, and customs that appear alike, not to say identical, are encountered in widely separated regions, often half the globe apart. One theory explains it on the principle of the general uniformity of human nature and methods of thought, that is, namely: that peoples not at all in contact but under like mental and physical conditions will arrive independently at much the same conclusions as to the origin and causes of natural phenomena, will interpret mysteries of experience and imagination, and will meet daily problems of life, much as unknown others do. This is the older view among ethnologists, and in certain broad features it finds much support, as, for example, in the almost universal respect paid to rainfall and the influences supposed to affect this prime necessity.

Contrary to this view, most students, possessing broader information than formerly, now believe that such resemblances--strikingly numerous--are not mere coincidences arising from a postulated unity of human nature, but are the result of a spread of travellers and instruction from centres where new and impressive ideas or useful inventions have arisen. One of the foremost advocates of this theory of the geographical dispersion of myths and culture, as opposed to local independence of

origin, is Professor Smith, quoted in the first chapter, whose books have been of much use to me in this connection. The theory does not deny the occasional independent rise of similar notions and practices here and there, but asserts that it alone accounts for all the important cases, particularly the central nature-myths, of which this of the dragon is esteemed the most important. The doctrine derives its main strength from its ability to show that in the very early, virtually prehistoric, times much closer contact and more frequent intercommunication than was formerly known or considered probable existed among primitive peoples all over the inhabited world. Assuming that at the dawn of history the most advanced communities were those of Egypt and Mesopotamia (with Elam), which were certainly in communication with one another both by land and by sea forty or fifty centuries before Christ, let us see how widespread, if at all, was their influence.

That the Egyptians were building large, sea-going ships as early as 2000 B.C. is well known. In them they traded with Crete and Phoenicia (whence the Phoenicians probably first learned the art of navigation) and with western Mediterranean ports. They sailed up and down the Red Sea, exploring Sinai and Yemen; visited Socotta, where grew the dragon-blood tree; went far south along the African shore; searched the Arabian coast, gathering frankincense (said to be guarded in its growth by small winged serpents); and made voyages back and forth between the Red Sea and the ports of Babylonia and Elam on the Persian Gulf. What surprise could there be were records available that these Egyptian mariners or those in the ships of the people about the Gulf of Persia sometimes continued on to India. Indeed Colonel St. Johnston elaborates a theory that not only the Malay Archipelago but the islands of the South Pacific,

especially Polynesia, were colonized prehistorically by a stream of immigrants from Africa and India, who crept along the shore of the Indian Ocean, and from island to island in the East Indies, gradually reaching Australia and going on thence to the sea-islands beyond; and he and others believe that they carried with them ancestral ideas of supernatural beings, whence they made for themselves fish-gods and sea-monsters which some ethnologists regard as not only analogues, but descendants, of dragons. It is stoutly held, furthermore, that the religion of the half-civilized tribes of Mexico owes its characteristic features of serpent-worship and dragon-like symbols to the teaching of Asiatic visitors reaching middle America via Polynesia; but this is disputed, and I shall be content to avoid this controversy--also as far as possible serpent-worship per se--and confine myself to continental Asia and Europe.

The southwestern part of Persia, or Elam, was inhabited contemporaneously with early Babylonia, if not before, by a people of equal or superior culture, and holding a like religion. Their capital, Susa, was the most important city east of the lofty mountains between them and the valleys of Mesopotamia, and attracted traders and visitors from a great surrounding space. Most numerous, probably, were those from the north, from Iran, the country about the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains--inhabited by a race that used to be called Aryans; but many came also from Turanic nomads wandering with their cattle in the valley of the Oxus and eastward to the foot of the Hindoo Koosh, and still others from the eastern plains and coast-lands stretching to the Indus valley.

We may suppose these herdsmen and hunters to have been very simple-minded and crude, and their only semblance of

religion to have been the rudest fetishism, animated by fear of ghosts and magic. Only the most enterprising among them, or prisoners of war brought back as slaves, would be likely to visit the more educated South, but there they would hear of definite 'gods' with stories behind them of the creation of the world, the gift of precious rain, and of unseen beings of immeasurable power; and they would learn the reason for representing these divine heroes in the forms they saw inscribed on monuments and temples, or in little images given them, thus getting some notion of the philosophy of worship. They would talk of these things by the camp-fire, when they had returned to Iran or Bactria or the Afghan hills, along with their tales of the civilization in Susa, and gradually plainsmen and mountaineers would grow wiser and more imitative. Sailors and merchants also carried enlightening information and ideas, crude as they may seem to us, into the minds of the natives of the shores of India and along the banks of the navigable Indus, whence this news from the West percolated into the more or less savage interior of the peninsula. Later we shall meet with some results of this slow and accidental propaganda.

Meanwhile, a stronger influence was affecting the North Persians. Soon after we first become acquainted with the Sumerians settled in Ur and other places on the lower Euphrates, we learn that they were conquered by Semitic tribes from the West, who created the Babylonian empire. After a while this was overthrown by still more powerful forces higher up the river, until finally the Assyrians became rulers of the whole valley, and ultimately of all Asia Minor north of the Arabian desert. The ancient gods received new names, but the old ideas remained. The antique dragon still stood at the gates of the Assyrian king's palace, and Ea, the fish-god, reappeared on the shores of the

Mediterranean as Dagon of the Philistines. But this is running ahead of my story.

North of Assyria, among the mountains of Armenia, dwelt the Medes, a nation of uncertain affinities, but apparently well advanced towards civilization even in the earlier period of Babylon's history. They were not, at least primitively, influenced much by the sea-born myths of their southern neighbours, but held a religious creed combined of sun-worship and reverence for serpents--a conjunction which has had many examples elsewhere.

There was born among them, according to good authorities, about a thousand years before Jesus, a man of good family, now called Zoroaster; but others believe he arose in Bactria, and probably at a much older time. He became the founder of a sect holding far higher ideas than those of any of the religious leaders about them. His sect was called Fire-Worshippers, because it kept fires burning perpetually on its altars as a symbol of the pure life believed to be received constantly from the supreme source of life and prosperity, Ormuzd, the All-Wise. It was thus a reform movement rather than a new religion, and inherited a stock of Medic practices and Vedic legends. Its founders and early communicants were evidently in close contact with the people of northern India many centuries before the era of Buddha or Christ, and were trying to elevate religious ideas which were based on faith in the endless conflict between powers classed as helpful to man or injurious to his interests, so that the same gods might be good at one time and bad at another. "Zoroaster established a criterion other than usefulness to determine whether a power was good or bad, by making an ethical distinction between the spirits." Thus the old nature-gods were still recognized but re-

classified on a new spiritual and ethical basis; yet they shrank into subordinate rank beside the Wise Spirit Ormuzd, who was in no sense a nature-god but "spirit only and withal the spirit of truth, purity, and justice." These refined ideas gradually sank, however, into the meaner old religion that underlay them; and in opposition to Ormuzd, the personification of All Good, arose a host combined of all the old malicious spirits and influences (demons), led by a supreme personification of Evil called by Zoroaster Lie-Demon, who afterward "becomes the Hostile or Harmful Spirit, Angra Mainyu, Ahriman" of Persian writings. "Among the beings opposed to Ormuzd a conspicuous place is taken by the dragon, Azhi Dahaka, whose home is in Babel (Babylon) a 'druj,' half-human, half-beast, with three heads. . . . This dragon creates drouth and disease." Here we have recovered the trail of the figure we have been studying, and find him travelling eastward with the mark of Babylon still upon him.

The most ancient writings that have come down to us are the Vedas-poems, fables, and allegories recorded in ancient Sanscrit perhaps a dozen centuries before the beginning of the Christian era. They picture weather phenomena as a series of battles fought by a god, Indra, armed with lightnings and thunder, against Azhi, the evil genius of the universe, who has carried off certain benevolent goddesses described allegorically as 'milch-cows,' and who keeps them captive in the folds of the clouds. This fiend was described as a serpent, not because that reptile in life was subtle and crafty, but because he seeks to envelop the goddess of light, the source of the blessed rain, with coils of clouds as with a snake's folds. In the Gathas and Yasnas, or earliest sacred writings of Persia, preceding the Avesta, the 'Bible' of the Zoroastrians, it is asserted that Trita smote Azhi before

Indra killed the "monster that kept back the waters." It is a theory of many primitive peoples that an eclipse of the sun or moon means that a celestial monster is swallowing the luminary: the Sumatrans say it is a big snake. Even at this day in China "ignorant folk at the beginning of an eclipse throw themselves on their knees and beat gongs and drums to frighten away the hungry devil." The moon and rainfall are very closely connected in many mythologies.

The forms and characters in which the sky-war appears are almost innumerable as one reads the mythologic narratives of India and Persia; even the summary sketched in his *Zoological Mythology* (Chapter V), by Angelo de Gubernatis, is bewildering in its changes of persons and scenes and methods, involving an exuberance of imagery in which may be discerned the roots of many an attribute characterizing the dragon-stories of long-subsequent times, such as their guarding of treasure, or kidnapping of women, or the grotesque horror of their appearance. And it was all a matter of weather and of the preciousness of rain in a thirsty land!

Superstition went so far as to imagine that human beings of malignant temper might adopt the character and functions of these celestial mischief-makers. It is related in the book *Si-Yu-Ki*, written by Hiuen Tsang, the famous Chinese traveller of the 7th century A.D. (Beal's translation), that in the old days, a certain shepherd provided the king with milk and cream. "Having on one occasion failed to do so, and having received a reprimand, he proceeded . . . with the prayer that he might become a destructive dragon." His prayer was answered affirmatively, and he betook himself to a cavern whence he intended to ravish the country. Then Tathagata, moved by pity, came from a long distance,