



The Cavern of the Nativity in Christian Esoterism

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*And those books of hidden mysteries were placed on the Mountain
of Victories in the east of Shir...in a cave, the Cave of Treasures of
the Mysteries of the Life of Silence.*

'The Revelation of the Magi', 5th century Syriac text

*That fire which is the means of attaining the infinite worlds, and is
also their ground, is hidden in the sacred place of the heart.*

Katha Upanishad

Certain apocryphal traditions of Eastern Christianity, preserved in the heritage of the Syrian Church, illuminate the Nativity and its associations in ways which enable a contemplative exploration of important elements of traditional symbolism bearing upon the motifs of the heart and the cavern as representations of the sacred Centre. Firstly we might note the presence of the cavern in medieval iconography of the Nativity as the locus of the Incarnation, which can be seen as such in various images and depictions from the Middle Ages. That the birth of the Messiah, the Incarnation of the 'Word made Flesh' occurs within a cave holds great significance within the context of Christic esoterism, relating this axial mystery to the numinous Centre where exists the Divine Principle, the eternal and uncreated *Logos*.

Rene Guenon, in respect of this symbolism has expounded upon how the supreme initiatic Centre, openly visible and luminous under the image of the shining apex of the primordial 'White Mountain' or 'White Island' in token of its accessibility to all mankind during the *Krita-Yuga* or Golden Age, eventually becomes concealed and occluded during the decline which characterises later ages of the cycle (and thus accessible only to a few, an initiatory elite) and therefore withdrawn and as it were occulted within the polar mountain. Herein lies the whole complex which simultaneously veils the symbolism of the initiatic Centre as the sacred mountain via the representations of the heart and the cavern, a traditional symbolism which obtains simultaneously upon the macrocosmic and microcosmic planes.

The apocryphal tradition related in the '*Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*' reveals how Adam had taught to his third son Seth (who embodies the sacerdotal-brahminic function and typifies the spiritual temperament of the *pneumatikos*, or the *divya-bhava*) the prophecy concerning the messiah who in a future age would be discovered within a cavern upon the 'Mountain of Victories'; it is told how Seth inculcated this prophecy to his sons and how the sacred polar

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mountain was ascended yearly by the 12 magi-kings who prayed within the cave, awaiting the light which had been foretold. This mountain *'having in it a certain cave in the rock, most pleasant with fountains and choice trees'* where the magi prayed in silence to God for three days. Finally they beheld the star descending from heaven *'in the form of a little boy and above him a cross'* and entered into the cave upon the holy mountain. According to this account the royal magi entered the cavern wherein they beheld the dazzling effulgence of a great star whose brilliance was that of the divine infant Christ. Related versions of this nativity legend are preserved within the Syriac traditions of the 'Chronicle of Zuqnin' and also in the 'Proto-Gospel of James'.

The symbolic assimilation of the mystical event of the Nativity of Jesus Christ to the cavern within the polar mountain as the locus of light at the 'heart of the world' is explicit: here the principal centre, corresponding with the intra-kardiac 'heart-space' or cavity of the heart, is the point of the hierophany, the place where the Incarnation of the 'Light of the World' is revealed, from whence the mystery manifests in divine irradiation. In terms of visionary geography the 'Mountain of Victories' is one and the same as the cosmic mountain *Hukairya* which rises up to the stars at the paradisaical centre *Eran Vej* according to Mazdean lore, the hallowed peak upon which the spring of the waters of life breaks forth and whereon grows the white *Haoma* plant of immortality - the Centre from whence emanates the Light of Glory, *Xvarenah*.

It is upon the cosmic mountain of the Terrestrial Paradise, *Pardes*, that the fountain springs forth whose cruciform streams are the rivers Pison, Gihon, Hiddekel and Euphrates flowing outward to the four cardinal directions on the horizontal plane. In respect of the archetypal pattern of this paradisaical topography the Zoharic kabbalah teaches that God placed Adam and Eve in Eden to cultivate roses and so it is that this primordial state, when mankind truly abode in the heart-sanctum of God in unitive harmony with Divine Being, is so aptly symbolised in the emblem of the Rose signed with the Cross. For the kabbalists the *Shekinah* is the supernal Garden of Eden and in Syrian tradition recounted in the 'Book of the Cave of Treasures' it is said *'Eden is the Holy Church, and Paradise which was in it is the land of rest and the inheritance of life which God hath prepared for all the holy children of men...True is this word and it proclaimeth the truth: that Tree of Life which was in the midst of Paradise prefigured the Redeeming Cross, which is the veritable Tree of Life...'* Here we see confirmed that symbolic equivalence between the Tree of Life and the 'Redeeming Cross', both situated at the spiritual centre and imaging man's re-integration with God.

Bearing this essential co-identity of the axial themes of the sacred mountain, the heart and the cavern in mind we may note further developments of this symbolism in Syrian Christian traditions preserved in the 'Book of the Cave of Treasures' (ascribed to Saint Mar Ephraim also known as Ephraim Syrus who died in 373 AD) wherein it is written:

'Adam took from the skirts of the mountain of Paradise, gold, and myrrh, and frankincense, and he placed them in the cave, and he blessed the cave, and consecrated it that it might be the house of prayer for himself and his sons. And he called the cave "Me'arath Gazze".'

The mystical gifts of the magi to the infant Christ at the Nativity are anticipated in the treasures of gold, myrrh and frankincense which Adam gathers and places in the cave 'in the top of the mountain' of Eden. We might note that it is precisely at the juncture at which occurs the Fall of Adam and Eve and their subsequent expulsion from Eden that the episode of the cave occurs -

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resuming the theme that after the Edenic epoch or golden age of pre-lapsarian man, the Hyperborean period, the initiatic Centre hitherto accessible and visible to all, underwent occultation and withdrawal from external perception, thereafter becoming interiorised and concealed.

The legendary magi, sometimes named as Hormizdadh, Yazdegerd and Perozadh (or the more familiar Caspar, Melchior, Balthazar) brought gold, myrrh and frankincense representing respectively the spiritual functions of the new-born messiah as sacral king, physician and priest to mankind, the Indo-Iranian eschatological prophecy concerning the Universal Saviour or *Saoshyant* finding its fulfilment in the Redemptive Incarnation of Christ. In certain traditions of the Eastern Church it is 12 magi who fare to the Nativity, four bearing each of the mystical treasures. The apocryphal narrative continues:

'And when the Magi had gone forth from Jerusalem, and from the presence of Herod, that same star which had been their guide on the road appeared to them, and they rejoiced greatly. And the star went on before them until they entered the cave where they saw the young Child swathed in bands and laid in a manger.'

The 5th century Syriac text *The Revelation of the Magi* tells us that the magi inhabit the mysterious oriental land of 'Shir' which we may identify with the realm of 'Primaeval Syria', the 'Land of the Sun', another appellation signifying the supreme initiatic Centre. In the *Revelation* the 12 Magi, at monthly periods, generation after generation, make a ritual ascent of the 'Mountain of Victories' and enter the 'Cave of Treasures of Hidden Mysteries' in which the repository of the books of Seth are preserved wherein they read the prophecy of the star of the coming Messiah, the star which Adam tells Seth he first beheld shining over the Tree of Life in Paradise (We are told that its radiance originally illuminated the garden of Eden but it disappeared at the Fall of Adam, again resuming the theme of the occultation of the visible light of the spiritual Centre at the close of the *Satya-Yuga*). This brilliant star *'shines forth from on high over the Mountain of Victories and comes to rest upon a pillar of light within the Cave of Treasures of Hidden Mysteries.'* This great light, the 'Light of the World', is the luminous theophany, the inward revelation within the Cave of the *'Son the exalted majesty, who is the voice of the Father; the offspring of his hidden thought...the will and image of His hiddenness, the all-engendering Word of His thought...the Son of perfect Mercy.'*

The original Adamic 'cave of treasures' as the primordial 'house of prayer' may be comprehended as the innermost secret chamber, the hidden temple of the heart where exists the light of the Principle, the Divine Intellect, located at the vital centre of man's integral being - equivalent to the shining flame of the *Atman*. Just as the Sanskrit *guha* denotes both a cave and the heart-cavity - the veritable hidden place (*kryptos*) of initiation. Concerning this 'heart-space' it is written in the 'Katha Upanishad': *'Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest, this Self forever dwells within the hearts of all.'* Likewise it was in the cave of the Nativity that the birth of the 'Light of the World' was beheld and known, the effulgence of 'God With Us', Emmanuel: as St John teaches regarding the manifestation of the Word - *'In him was life; and the life was the light of men.'* (John 1:4).