

Calendars  
begin for the  
benefit of ritual

THE MYTH OF THE ETERNAL RETURN

the months the "steps of the year" and the year the "passage of time." The beginning of the year varied from country to country as well as in different periods, calendar reforms being constantly introduced to make the ritual meaning of festivals fit the seasons with which it was supposed to correspond.

However, neither the instability and latitude in the beginning of the New Year (March-April, July 19—as in ancient Egypt—September, October, December-January, etc.) nor the different lengths attributed to the year by different peoples were able to lessen the importance attached, in all countries, to the end of a period of time and the beginning of a new period. Hence, as will easily be understood, it is a matter of indifference to us that, for example, the African Yoruba divide the year into dry season and rainy season and that among them the week numbers five days as against eight days for the Bakoto; or that the Barundi distribute the months by lunations and thus arrive at a year of about thirteen months; or, again, that the Ashanti divide each month into two periods of ten days (or of nine days and a half). For us, the essential thing is that there is everywhere a conception of the end and the beginning of a temporal period, based on the observation of biocosmic rhythms and forming part of a larger system—the system of periodic purifications (cf. purges, fasting, confession of sins, etc.) and of the periodic regeneration of life. This need for a periodic regeneration seems to us of considerable significance in itself. Yet the examples that we shall presently adduce will show us something even more important, namely, that a periodic regeneration of time presupposes, in more or less explicit form—and especially in the historical civilizations—a new Creation, that is, a repetition of the cosmogonic act. And this conception of a periodic creation, i.e., of the cyclical regeneration of

time, poses the problem of the abolition of "history," the problem which is our prime concern in this essay.

Readers familiar with ethnography and the history of religions are well aware of the importance of a whole series of periodic ceremonies, which, for convenience, we can group under two main headings: (1) annual expulsion of demons, diseases, and sins; (2) rituals of the days preceding and following the New Year. In the part of *The Golden Bough* entitled *The Scapegoat*, Sir James George Frazer has, in his fashion, brought together a sufficient number of facts in the two categories. There can be no question of repeating this documentation in the following pages. In broad outline, the ceremony of expelling demons, diseases, and sins can be reduced to the following elements: fasting, ablutions, and purifications; extinguishing the fire and ritually rekindling it in a second part of the ceremonial; expulsion of demons by means of noises, cries, blows (indoors), followed by their pursuit through the village with uproar and hullabaloo; this expulsion can be practiced under the form of the ritual sending away of an animal (type "scapegoat") or of a man (type Mamurius Veturius), regarded as the material vehicle through which the faults of the entire community are transported beyond the limits of the territory it inhabits (the scapegoat was driven "into the desert" by the Hebrews and the Babylonians). There are often ceremonial combats between two groups of actors, or collective orgies, or processions of masked men (representing the souls of the ancestors, the gods, and so forth). In many places the belief still survives that, at the time of these manifestations, the souls of the dead approach the houses of the living, who respectfully go out to meet them and lavish honors upon them for several days, after which they are led to the boundary of the village in procession or are driven from it. It is at the same period

that the ceremonies of the initiation of young men are performed (we have definite proofs of this among the Japanese, the Hopi Indians, certain Indo-European peoples, and others; see below, pp. 66 ff.). Almost everywhere the expulsion of demons, diseases, and sins coincides—or at one period coincided—with the festival of the New Year.

Naturally, we seldom find all these elements together in explicit conjunction; in certain societies the ceremonies of extinguishing and rekindling the fire predominate; in others, it is the material expulsion (by noise and violent gestures) of demons and diseases; in yet others, the expulsion of the scapegoat in human or animal form. But the meaning of the whole ceremony, like that of each of its constituent elements, is sufficiently clear: on the occasion of the division of time into independent units, "years," we witness not only the effectual cessation of a certain temporal interval and the beginning of another, but also the abolition of the past year and of past time. And this is the meaning of ritual purifications: a combustion, an annulling of the sins and faults of the individual and of those of the community as a whole—not a mere "purifying." Regeneration, as its name indicates, is a new birth. The examples cited in the preceding chapter, and especially those which we are now to review, clearly show that this annual expulsion of sins, diseases, and demons is basically an attempt to restore—if only momentarily—mythical and primordial time, "pure" time, the time of the "instant" of the Creation. Every New Year is a resumption of time from the beginning, that is, a repetition of the cosmogony. The ritual combats between two groups of actors, the presence of the dead, the Saturnalia, and the orgies are so many elements which—for reasons we shall soon set forth—denote that at the end of the year and in the expectation of the New Year there is a repetition of the mythical moment of the passage from chaos to cosmos.

See Greek ritual  
Purification  
" a New Year "  
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a purified

The ceremonial for the Babylonian New Year, the *akîtu*, is sufficiently conclusive in this respect. *Akîtu* could be celebrated at the spring equinox, in the month of Nisan, as well as at the autumnal equinox, in the month of Tišrît (derived from *šurru*, "to begin"). The antiquity of this ceremonial admits of no doubt, even if the dates at which it was celebrated were variable. Its ideology and its ritual structure existed as early as the Sumerian period, and the system of the *akîtu* has been identified from Akkadian times.<sup>3</sup> These chronological details are not without importance; we are dealing with documents of the earliest "historical" civilization, in which the sovereign played a considerable role, since he was regarded as the son and vicar of the divinity on earth; as such, he was responsible for the regularity of the rhythms of nature and for the good estate of the entire society. Hence it is not surprising to find him playing an important role in the ceremonial of the New Year; upon him fell the duty of regenerating time.

During the course of the *akîtu* ceremony, which lasted twelve days, the so-called epic of the Creation, *Enûma eliš*, was solemnly recited several times in the temple of Marduk. Thus the combat between Marduk and the sea monster Tiamat was reactualized—the combat that had taken place *in illo tempore* and had put an end to chaos by the final victory of the god.<sup>4</sup> Marduk creates the cosmos from the fragments of Tiamat's torn body and creates man from the blood of the demon Kingu, to whom Tiamat had entrusted the Tablets of Destiny (*Enûma eliš*, VI, 33).<sup>5</sup> That this commemoration of the Creation was in effect a

<sup>3</sup> C. F. Jean, *La Religion sumérienne* (Paris, 1931), p. 168; Henri Frankfort, "Gods and Myths in Sargonid Seals," *Iraq* (London), I (1934), pp. 21 ff.

<sup>4</sup> The same among the Hittites, where the exemplary combat between the hurricane god Tešup and the serpent Illuyankaš was recited and reactualized within the frame of the New Year festival. Cf. Albrecht Götze, *Kleinasion* (Leipzig, 1933), p. 130; Giuseppe Furlani, *La Religione degli Hittiti* (Bologna, 1936), p. 89.

<sup>5</sup> The motif of creation by means of the body of a primordial being occurs in other cultures: in China, India, and Iran, and among the Germanic tribes.

reactualization of the cosmogonic act is proved both by the rituals and by the formulas recited during the course of the ceremony. The combat between Tiamat and Marduk was mimed by a struggle between two groups of actors, a ceremonial that is also found among the Hittites (again in the frame of the dramatic scenario of the New Year), among the Egyptians, and at Ras Shamra.<sup>6</sup> The struggle between two groups of actors not only commemorated the primordial conflict between Marduk and Tiamat; it repeated, it actualized, the cosmogony, the passage from chaos to cosmos. The mythical event was present: "May he continue to conquer Tiamat and shorten her days!" the celebrant exclaimed. The combat, the victory, and the Creation took place at that very moment.

It is also within the frame of the same *akitu* ceremonial that the festival called the "festival of the fates," Zagmuk, was celebrated, in which the omens for each of the twelve months of the year were determined, which was equivalent to creating the twelve months to come (a ritual that has been preserved, more or less explicitly, in other traditions; see below, pp. 65 ff.). To Marduk's descent into hell (the god was a "prisoner in the mountain," i.e., in the infernal regions) there corresponded a period of mourning and fasting for the whole community and of "humiliation" for the king, a ritual that formed part of a great carnival system into which we cannot enter here. It was at the same period that the expulsion of evils and sins took place by means of a scapegoat. The cycle was closed by the god's

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<sup>6</sup> René Labat, *Le Caractère religieux de la royauté assyro-babylonienne* (Paris, 1939), p. 99; Götze, pp. 130 ff.; Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Uppsala, 1948), pp. 11, 101. There are also traces of a ritual combat at Jerusalem; see below, p. 60. A similar combat took place in the Hippodrome of Constantinople down to the last centuries of the Byzantine Empire; Joannes Malalas speaks of it in his *Chronographia* (Bonn, 1831, pp. 173-76) and Benjamin of Tudela also mentions it; see Raphael Patai, *Man and Temple* (London, 1947), pp. 77 ff.

hierogamy with Sarpanītū, a hierogamy that was reproduced by the king and a hierodule in the chamber of the goddess and to which there certainly corresponded a period of collective orgy.<sup>7</sup>

As we see, the *akitu* festival comprises a series of dramatic elements the intention of which is the abolition of past time, the restoration of primordial chaos, and the repetition of the cosmogonic act:

1. The first act of the ceremony represents the domination of Tiamat and thus marks a regression into the mythical period before the Creation; all forms are supposed to be confounded in the marine abyss of the beginning, the *apsu*. Enthronement of a "carnival" king, "humiliation" of the real sovereign, overturning of the entire social order (according to Berossus, the slaves became the masters, and so on)—every feature suggests universal confusion, the abolition of order and hierarchy, "orgy," chaos. We witness, one might say, a "deluge" that annihilates all humanity in order to prepare the way for a new and regenerated human species. In addition, does not the Babylonian tradition of the Deluge, as preserved in Tablet XI of the Epic of Gilgamesh, tell us that Ut-napištim, before embarking in the ship which he had built in order to escape the Deluge, had organized a festival "as on the day of the

<sup>7</sup> Documentary material, interpretation, and bibliography in Heinrich Zimmern, "Zum babylonische Neujahrsfest," I-II, *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Königlich Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* (Leipzig), *Phil.-hist. Klasse*, LVIII (1906); LXX (1918); S. A. Pallis, *The Babylonian Akitu Festival* (Copenhagen, 1926); see also H. S. Nyberg's criticisms in the *Monde Oriental* (Uppsala), XXIII (1929), 204-11; Raffaele Pettazzoni, "Der babylonische Ritus des Akitu und das Gedicht der Welterschöpfung," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, XIX (Zurich, 1950), pp. 403-30. On Zagmuk and the Babylonian Saturnalia, cf. Sir James George Frazer, *The Scapegoat* (Part VI of *The Golden Bough*, London, 1907-15), pp. 356 ff.; Labat, pp. 95 ff.; a rash attempt to see in the Babylonian ceremonial the source of all other similar rituals found in the Mediterranean basin, Asia, northern and central Europe, in Waldemar Liungman, *Traditionswanderungen, Euphrat-Rhein*, I-II (Helsinki, 1937-38), pp. 290 ff. and passim. Cf. also S. H. Hooke, *The Origins of Early Semitic Ritual* (London, 1938), pp. 57 ff. For the same New Year ritual in Tibet, see Robert Bleichsteiner, *L'Église jaune* (French trans., Paris, 1937), pp. 231 ff.

New Year (*akitu*)"? We shall find this deluge element—sometimes a mere water element—in certain other traditions.

2. The creation of the world, which took place, *in illo tempore*, at the beginning of the year, is thus reactualized each year.

3. Man participates directly, though to a reduced extent, in this cosmogonic work (struggle between the two groups of actors representing Marduk and Tiamat; "mysteries" celebrated on certain occasions, according to the interpretation of Zimmern and Reitzenstein<sup>8</sup>); this participation, as we saw in the preceding chapter, projects him into mythical time, making him contemporary with the cosmogony.

4. The "festival of the fates" is also a formula of creation, in which the "fate" of each month and each day is decided.

5. The hierogamy is a concrete realization of the "re-birth" of the world and man.

The meaning and the ritual of the Babylonian New Year have their counterparts throughout the Paleo-Oriental world. We have noted a few of these in passing, but the list is far from being exhausted. In a remarkable study, which has not aroused the interest it deserves, the Dutch scholar A. J. Wensinck has demonstrated the symmetry between various mythico-ceremonial systems of the New Year throughout the Semitic world; in each of these systems we find the same central idea of the yearly return to chaos, followed by a new creation.<sup>9</sup> Wensinck has rightly discerned the cosmic character of the New Year rituals (with all due reservations in regard to his theory of the

<sup>8</sup> But cf. also Efraim Briem, *Les Sociétés secrètes des mystères* (trans. from the Swedish by E. Guerre, Paris, 1941), p. 131.

<sup>9</sup> A. J. Wensinck, "The Semitic New Year and the Origin of Eschatology," *Acta Orientalia* (Lund), I (1923), pp. 158-99.

"origin" of this ritual-cosmic conception, which he tries to find in the periodic spectacle of the disappearance and reappearance of vegetation; the fact is that, for "primitives," nature is a hierophany, and the "laws of nature" are the revelation of the mode of existence of the divinity). That the deluge and, in general, the element of water are present, in one way or another, in the ritual of the New Year is sufficiently proved by the libations practiced on this occasion and by the relations between this ritual and the rains. "In Tisrît was the world created," says Rabbi Eliezer; "in Nisan," affirms Rabbi Josua. Now, both these are rainy months.<sup>10</sup> It is at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles that the quantity of rain allotted for the coming year is settled, i.e., that the "fate" of the months to come is determined.<sup>11</sup> Christ blesses the waters on Epiphany, while Easter and New Year's Day were the habitual dates for baptism in primitive Christianity. (Baptism is equivalent to the ritual death of the old man followed by a new birth. On the cosmic level, it is equivalent to the deluge: abolition of contours, fusion of all forms, return to the formless.) Ephraem Syrus rightly discerned the mystery of this yearly repetition of the Creation and attempted to explain it: "He has created the heavens anew, because inners have worshipped all the heavenly bodies; has created the world anew, which had been withered by Adam, a new creation arose from His spittle."<sup>12</sup>

Certain traces of the ancient scenario of the combat and the victory of the divinity over the marine monster, incarnation of chaos, can also be discerned in the Jewish remonial of the New Year, as it has been preserved in

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 168. See further texts in Patai, pp. 68 ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Rosh Hashshana*, I, 2; Wensinck, p. 163; Patai, pp. 24 ff. Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiba agree on this point: that the Feast of Tabernacles is the time when quantity of the rains for the coming year is decided in heaven; cf. Patai, p. 41. *Hymns on Epiphany*, VIII, 16; Wensinck, p. 169.



the Jerusalem cultus. Recent studies (Mowinckel, Peder-  
sen, Hans Schmidt, A. R. Johnson, for example) have de-  
fined the ritual elements and the cosmogonico-eschato-  
logical implications of the Psalms and have shown the role  
played by the king in the New Year festival, which com-  
memorated the triumph of Yahweh, leader of the forces  
of light, over the forces of darkness (the chaos of the sea,  
the primordial monster Rahab). This triumph was fol-  
lowed by the enthronement of Yahweh as king and the  
repetition of the cosmogonic act. The slaying of the mon-  
ster Rahab and the victory over the waters (signifying the  
organization of the world) were equivalent to the creation  
of the cosmos and at the same time to the "salvation" of  
man (victory over "death," guarantee of food for the  
coming year, and so on).<sup>13</sup> Of these various traces of ar-  
chaic cults, let us for the moment bear in mind only the  
periodic repetition (at the "revolution of the year," Exo-  
dus 34 : 22; at the "going out" of the year, 23 : 16) of  
the Creation; for the combat with Rahab presupposes the  
reactualization of primordial chaos, while the victory over  
the waters can only signify the establishment of "stable  
forms," i.e., the Creation. We shall see later that in the  
consciousness of the Hebrew people this cosmogonic vic-  
tory becomes victory over foreign kings present and to  
come; the cosmogony justifies Messianism and the Apoca-  
lypse, and thus lays the foundations for a philosophy of  
history.

The fact that this periodic "salvation" of man finds an  
immediate counterpart in the guarantee of food for the  
year to come (consecration of the new harvest) must not  
be allowed to hypnotize us to the point of seeing in this  
ceremonial only the traces of a primitive agrarian festival.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A. R. Johnson, "The Rôle of the King in the Jerusalem Cultus," in *The Labyrinth*, ed. S. H. Hooke (London, 1935), pp. 79 ff.; see also Patat, pp. 73 ff.

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Indeed, on the one hand, alimentation had a ritual meaning in all archaic societies; what we call "vital values" was rather the expression of an ontology in biological terms; for archaic man, life is an absolute reality, and, as such, it is sacred. On the other hand, the New Year, the Feast of Tabernacles so called (*hag hasuk-kôt*), pre-eminently the festival of Yahweh (Judges 21 : 19; Leviticus 23 : 39; etc.), took place on the fifteenth day of the seventh month (Deuteronomy 16 : 13; Zechariah 14 : 16), that is, five days after the *ïôm ha-kippûrîm* (Leviticus 16 : 29) and its ceremonial of the scapegoat. Now it is difficult to separate these two religious moments, the elimination of the sins of the collectivity and the festival of the New Year, especially if we bear in mind that, before the adoption of the Babylonian calendar, the seventh month was the *first* month in the Jewish calendar. It was customary, at the time of the *ïôm ha-kippûrîm*, for the girls to go outside the boundaries of the village or town to dance and amuse themselves, and it was on this occasion that marriages were arranged. But it was also on this day that freedom was allowed to a number of excesses, sometimes even orgiastic, which remind us both of the final phase of the *akîtu* (also celebrated outside the town) and of the various forms of license that were the rule almost everywhere in the frame of New Year ceremonials.<sup>14</sup>

Marriages, sexual license, collective purification through confession of sins and expulsion of the scapegoat, consecration of the new harvest, enthronement of Yahweh and commemoration of his victory over "death," were so many moments of an extensive ceremonial system. The ambivalence and polarity of these episodes (fasting and excess, grief and joy, despair and orgy) only confirm their

<sup>14</sup> See the references of the Talmud to orgiastic excesses in Raffaele Pettazzoni, *La confessione dei peccati*, II (Bologna, 1935), p. 229. Same state of affairs at Hierapolis; cf. Lucian, *De dea Syra*, 20; Patai, pp. 71 ff.

complementary function in the frame of the same system. But the chief moments indubitably remain the purification through the scapegoat and the repetition of the cosmogonic act by Yahweh; all the rest is only the application, on different planes answering to different needs, of the same archetypal gesture: the regeneration of the world and life through repetition of the cosmogony.

### Periodicity of the Creation

THE CREATION of the world, then, is reproduced every year. Allah is he who effects the creation, hence he repeats it (*Qur'ân*, X, 4 f.). This eternal repetition of the cosmogonic act, by transforming every New Year into the inauguration of an era, permits the return of the dead to life, and maintains the hope of the faithful in the resurrection of the body. We shall soon return to the relations between the New Year ceremonies and the cult of the dead. At this point let us note that the beliefs, held almost everywhere, according to which the dead return to their families (and often return as "living dead") at the New Year season (during the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany) signify the hope that the abolition of time is possible at this mythical moment, in which the world is destroyed and re-created. The dead can come back now, for all barriers between the dead and the living are broken (is not primordial chaos reactualized?), and they will come back because at this paradoxical instant time will be suspended, hence they can again be contemporaries of the living. Moreover, since a new Creation is then in preparation, they can hope for a return to life that will be enduring and concrete.

This is why, where belief in the resurrection of the body

is prevalent, it is also believed that it will take place at the beginning of the year, that is, at the opening of a new epoch. Lehmann and Pedersen have shown this for the Semitic peoples, while Wensinck<sup>15</sup> has collected copious evidence for it in the Christian tradition. For example: "The Almighty awakens the bodies (at Epiphany) together with the spirits."<sup>16</sup> A Pahlavi text given by Darmesteter says: "It is in the month Fravardīn, on the day Xurdāth, that the Lord Ormazd will produce the resurrection and the 'second body' and that the world will be saved from impotence with the demons, the druġs, etc. And there will be abundance everywhere; there will be no more want of food; the world will be pure, man liberated from the opposition [of the evil spirit] and immortal for ever."<sup>17</sup> Qazwīnī, for his part, says that, on the day of Nawrōz, God resuscitated the dead "and he gave them back their souls, and he gave his orders to the sky, which shed rain upon them, and thus it is that people have adopted the custom of pouring water on that day."<sup>18</sup> The very close connections between the ideas of Creation through water (aquatic cosmogony, deluge that periodically regenerates historical life, rain), birth, and resurrection are confirmed by this saying from the Talmud: "God hath three keys, of rain, of birth, of rising of the dead."<sup>19</sup>

The symbolic repetition of the Creation in the setting of the New Year festival has been preserved down to our times among the Mandaean of Iraq and Iran. Even today, at the beginning of the year the Tatars of Persia plant seed in a jar filled with earth; they do it, they say, in memory of the Creation. The custom of sowing seed at the time

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit., p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> Ephraem Syrus, I, 1.

<sup>17</sup> James Darmesteter, *Le Zend-Avesta*, II (Paris, 1892), p. 640, note 138.

<sup>18</sup> *Cosmography*, cited by Arthur Christensen, *Les Types du premier homme et du premier roi dans l'histoire légendaire des Iraniens*, II (Stockholm, 1917), p. 147.

<sup>19</sup> *Ta'anit*, fol. 2a; Wensinck, p. 173.