

1 World Turtle

Introduction

There is a story reported by the philosopher John Locke (1689), which tells of an Indian “who, saying that the world was supported by a great elephant, was asked what the elephant rested on; to which his answer was – a great tortoise: but being again pressed to know what gave support to the broad-backed tortoise, replied – something, he knew not what” (Locke, 1765, pp. 13-14).

Islamic traditions

There is a similar Islamic myth based on a verse in the Quran which reads, “Nun. By the Pen and by the (Record) which (men) write” (Quran 68:1), about which there is the following commentary (“Nun” is the name of an Arabic letter):

Allah swears by the Nun, which is the whale that carries the earths on its back while in Water, and beneath which is the Bull and under the Bull is the Rock and under the Rock is the Dust and none knows what is under the Dust save Allah. The name of the whale is Liwash, and it is said its name is Lutiaya”; the name of the bull is Bahamut, and some say its name is Talhut or Liyona. The whale is in a sea called “Adwad, and it is like a small bull in a huge sea. The sea is in a hollowed rock whereby there is 4,000 cracks, and from each crack water springs out to the earth. (Tafsir Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn ‘Abbâs, on Quran 68:1)

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=73&tSoraNo=68&tAyaNo=1&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>

Note: ibn Kathir’s version translated by Google is at

<https://translate.google.co.uk/translate?hl=en&sl=ar&tl=en&u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.altafsir.com%2FTafasir.asp%3FtMadhNo%3D0%26tTafsirNo%3D7%26tSoraNo%3D68%26tAyaNo%3D1%26tDisplay%3Dyes%26Page%3D1%26Size%3D1%26LanguageId%3D1>

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3659-brazen-sea>

The bronze sea represented the world;

The whale is the Leviathan (similar to the quoted name of Lutiaya) relating to a serpent fountain, and the bull is the Behemoth relating to the twelve oxen under the bronze ‘Sea’ basin (see ‘The Dragon-Leviathan and Behemoth Explained’ <http://www.rwthetology.org/creation-stories.html>).

<http://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2518&context=etd>

pp40 p28

The molten sea may be compared to the Mesopotamian apsu, says Albright. Apsu was the name given to the subterranean fresh-water ocean,

Psa 136:6

To Him who laid out the earth above the waters,
nkjv

The bull/Behemoth is on a rock, yet according to Jewish legends there was a stone “called *Eben Shetiyyah* [Foundation Stone] because the foundation of the world had been laid with it. ... It is therefore asserted that the ‘Ineffable Name’ was engraved on this stone, whose power checks the *Tehom* from overflowing the earth” (Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2003, p. 11 note 39 [italics in original]); the “Tehom” is the “primeval ocean” (1906 Jewish Encyclopedia, ‘Cosmogony’ – ‘Earlier Versions’). So a stone which checks the waters from overflowing could easily symbolise a stone on which the twelve bronze oxen stood, upon which the “Sea” basin stood. Under the stone is the dust, which would be the normal earth we all walk on.

Hindu myth explained

On reading that “the term *nāga* has the double meaning of the serpent and of the elephant” (Dange, 1987, p. 71) – presumably comparing the trunk with a serpent – we could well be reminded of the Leviathan serpent fountain in the bronze “Sea” basin. Given also that this bronze “Sea” basin “represented the world” (1906 Jewish Encyclopedia, ‘Brazen Sea’ – ‘In Rabbinical Literature’) I think we can be sure of the source of this myth, as follows.

Presumably the tortoise is in place of the stone mentioned above: in one place in the Bible altars are described as tortoises, “their altars are as heaps in the furrows of the fields” (Hos 12:11), where “heaps” can be translated as “tortoises,” “a view which has the support of the Septuagint, the Peshitta, and old Arabic versions” (1906 Jewish Encyclopedia, ‘Tortoise’).

Islamic traditions cont

Story continued

The sea is then described as being in a “hollowed rock whereby there is 4,000 cracks, and from each crack water springs out to the earth.” The 4,000 cracks would be the four sides of the bronze “Sea” basin each having three oxen, with “thousand” being linked to the volume of the Tabernacle’s Holy of Holies, as above. Recall from above that water comes out from the nose/nostrils of the Behemoth, i.e., the twelve oxen.

Also ox==thousand in Hebrew

Fish shaking

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=GQvdc17cJkoC&pg=220#v=onepage&q&f=false>

and made it into seven earths on Sunday and Monday. He created the earth upon a (big) fish (*hūt*), that being the fish (*nūn*) mentioned by God in the Qur'ān: "Nūn. By the Pen."³⁶¹ The fish was in the water. The water was upon the back of a (small) rock. The rock was upon the back of an angel. The angel was upon a (big) rock. The (big) rock—the one mentioned by Luqmān³⁶²—was in the wind, neither in heaven nor on earth. The fish moved and became agitated. As a result, the earth quaked, whereupon He firmly, anchored the mountains on it, and it was stable. The mountains proudly (tower) over the earth. This is stated in God's word that He made for the earth "firmly anchored (mountains), lest it shake you up."³⁶³

(Notes: there probably was a small stone in the bronze basin to stand on, and the angel on the big rock is the behemoth (like the cherubim having animal faces))

Quranic reference given as 16:15

<http://www.islamawakened.com/quran/16/15/default.htm>

Mohammad Shafi And He has cast firm anchors [mountains] in the earth lest it should shake with you. And rivers and roads, that you may find your way.

Quotation in text combination of the two (fish=whale), and paraphrased

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=73&tSoraNo=16&tAyaNo=15&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>

Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn 'Abbâs

(And He hath cast into the earth firm hills) firm mountains (that it) the earth (quake not with you

Mountains pegs

<http://www.islamawakened.com/quran/78/7/default.htm>

And the mountains as pegs? (various translations)

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=74&tSoraNo=78&tAyaNo=7&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>

with which the earth is tied down like tents are tied down with pegs the interrogative is meant as an affirmative.

Tafsir al-Jalalayn

others

This is not in the video

It is not only Islamic and Indian cultures which have the world based on an animal, but the native American Indians also. Speaking of the Delaware Indians of the Eastern United States we read, "First there was only water, then the Great Turtle gradually rose above water level and the Creator placed mud on his shell. The mud dried and the Great Tree grew in the middle of the earth. As the Tree grew towards the sky a sprout became a man, then the Great Tree bent down and in touching the earth caused

a sprout to become a woman. From this man and woman all of humanity descended” (Miller, 1974, p. 306).

Presumably the Great Turtle is in place of the stone mentioned above. The mud is dust added to the water of the bronze “Sea” basin, as can be seen in the following Jewish legends,

God said to Gabriel: “Go and fetch Me dust from the four corners of the earth, and I will create man therewith.” ...

Then God asked him what his name was to be, and he said Adam, because he had been created out of Adamah, dust of the earth. ...

God took water and earth, and moulded them together in the form of man.

(Ginzberg, 1909, vol. 1, ch. 2, ‘The Creation Of Adam’, ‘The Ideal Man’, ch. 3, ‘Enosh’; Ginzberg, 2003, pp. 53, 59, 117)

(Given the square shape of the bottom of the bronze “Sea” basin, and that it represented the world, then there really were “four corners” of the earth.)

The mud is then the high priest (dust, “Adam”) in the bronze “Sea.” Speaking of rising, there is another Jewish legend about Jeremiah being thrown into a lime pit, “But a miracle happened. The water sank to the bottom, and the mud rose to the surface, and supported the prophet above the water” (Ginzberg, 1909, vol. 4, ch. 10, ‘Jeremiah’; Ginzberg, 2003, p. 1069); this, of course, will have a similar interpretation. The Great Tree is the Leviathan serpent fountain, likened to the Menorah, itself likened to a tree, and as the high priest could represent the Leviathan, the tree is also the high priest, “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree” (Ps 92:12).

“As the Tree grew towards the sky a sprout became a man” refers to the high priest coming upwards out of the waters as a new man. “then the Great Tree bent down and in touching the earth caused a sprout to become a woman” is a little harder to interpret, but it could refer to the heel of the high priest touching the ground: the heel can also represent the glory of God, “The apple (round fleshy part) of Adam’s heel outshone the globe of the sun,” and, “The name ... *Jacob* alludes to *Shekinah*, perhaps because She is the ... *heel*, i.e., the end of the flow of emanation” (Matt, 2003-2004, 2:293 note 257, 312 note 402 [italics in original]). Here we have the female Shekinah/Wisdom figure symbolised by the heel. This would be symbolised in turn by a woman, which would fit in with the tree/high priest touching the earth with his feet as he came down from the bronze “Sea” basin.

2 Bibliography

- 1906 *Jewish Encyclopedia*. (n.d.). From <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/>
- Dange, S. (1987). *Glimpses of purāṇic myth and culture*. Ajanta Publications.
- Ginzberg, L. (2003). *Legends of the Jews*. Jewish Publication Society.
- Ginzberg, L. (1909). *The Legends of the Jews*.
- Hawking, S. (1995). *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*. Bantam Books.

Locke, J. (1765). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding: In Four Books* (Vol. 2). A. Donaldson and J. Reid.

Matt, D. (2003-2004). *The Zohar*. Stanford University Press.

Miller, J. (1974). Why the World is on the Back of a Turtle. *Man* , 9 (2), 306-308.

Tafsir. (n.d.). (Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought) From Al Tafsir.com - Tafseer Holy Quran from all Tafseer Schools, Quran Translations, Quran Recitations: <http://www.altafsir.com>