



Type: Unpublished Work

Celestial Twin Motif

Author(s): Robert F. Smith

Source: *Nephite Culture and Society: Collected Papers*

Last Updated: 1975

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1975

In his 1971 *Before Columbus*, Cyrus H. Gordon noted several important similarities between Old and New World deities – particularly within the celestial twin motif. I have come to believe that several of his comparisons could be broadened at several points. Here I first recapitulate Gordon’s main correlations:

- I. The Hero Twins, Hunahpú “Flower,” and Xbalanqué “She-Jaguar,” sons of Hun-Hunahpú (and of Vucub-Hunahpú?), were born of Xquic, who was fertilized by a god, just as Ugaritic Šahar and Šhālim “Dawn & Dusk,” were the twin sons of a woman impregnated by ‘El.²
- II. These Hero Twins mark a bird and offer it, just as ‘El streaks a bird (or birds) before cooking in Ugaritic Text 52.³
- III. These Hero Twins were put to death “in a bonfire” and crushed “on a grind-stone, as corn meal is ground,” just as Ugaritic-Canaanite Mot “Death,” was burned and ground before being resurrected like the Mayan twins.⁴
- IV. One-armed Hun-Hunahpú might be compared with the Egyptian fertility-god, Min⁵ (cf. also the Egyptian “Tale of Two Brothers: Bata & Anubis”).

All these parallels seem to me to be valid, but also interrelated. Taking the points in reverse, it is clear that Egyptian Min could be identified with Horus (Louvre C 30, obverse), the young solar-god incarnate as falcon or Pharaoh. One recalls, of course, Horus and Seth as a pair of falcons united as ‘Antywy (Greek ‘Antaios of Antaeopolis), the Lord of T̄bw – a dual god, not a composite? (cf. the union of H̄r and T̄šš as H̄rwyfy in the *Am Duat* and *Book of Gates*; a Janus figure, according to de Buck⁶; a unity of opposites, like day and night; Pyramid Text 141d, 798a, and Shabaku Stone 15c). A. Piankoff sees Horus and Seth as symbolic of Truth and Sin in Tutankhamun Shrine IV.⁷

¹ Taken from the Robert F. Smith letter to Cyrus H. Gordon, August 4, 1975.

² Gordon, *Before Columbus*, 158,164, on UT 52, and citing Goetz and Morley, *Popol Vuh*, 119-126; cf. Welch, *Ugaritic Forschungen*, VI:427, 433.

³ Gordon, *Before Columbus*, 156,158.

⁴ Gordon, *Before Columbus*, 156, citing *Popol Vuh*, 154-155.

⁵ Gordon, *Before Columbus*, 156, citing *Popol Vuh*, 96; cf. W. Krickeberg, in Krickeberg, Trimborn, Müller, and Zerries, eds., *Pre-Columbian American Religions*, 79-80.

⁶ H. te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, 68-73.

⁷ Piankoff, *Shrines of Tutankhamun*, 57.

Outside Egypt, in the glyptic art of the ancient Near East, the janiform deity (with horned cap) represented Baʿal-Šemed of Yadi-Samʿal (modern Zincirli), or Isimu(d), Us(u)mû, the vizier of Sumerian Ae (*Ea⁸), and he appears in the later art of Urartu, Cappadocia, and Ḫatti.⁹

The Horus-Seth and Seth-Osiris dualisms are well reflected in the cyclic “Tale of Two Brothers”¹⁰: Bata is transformed into the bull, Min. He is killed, and from his blood grow two trees. They are chopped down, but a splinter impregnates Bata’s unfaithful wife – who gives birth to Bata, heir to the throne of Egypt.¹¹ Osiris and Horus, as father and son, as well as brothers to Seth, naturally fit the competitive myths.

Seth was easily identified with Canaanite Mot “Death” (both are the same as Ḫoron, Shulman, Mekal, and Reshef-Nergal), who had offered himself as an expiatory sacrificial lamb. He was also ruler of the Canaanite rainless season and famine, and he annually sacrificed his rainy-season counterpart, Baʿal-ʿAleyin¹² (cf. Shagreel in the LDS Book of Abraham 1:9). Seth, as Seth of Sapuna, also paralleled Hadad Baʿal-Šaphôn – seen by Albright as a competitor of ʿAthtar, and thus of Baʿal-Shamêm. Ca. 830 B.C., King Mesha⁵ of Moab described on his famous stele (lines 14-18) how he sacrificed thousands of captives to ʿAshtar-Kemosh, the morning-star and lord of heaven (closely related to ʿAthtar, and the Hêlêl-ben-Shaḥar of Isaiah 14:12 ||III Nephi 24:12 = LXX Greek *Heosphoros* = Latin Vulgate *Lucifer* “Day-star”).¹³

Among the Quiché Maya, Hunahpú “Flower,” is the 20th day-name, while the corresponding Yucatec Maya day-name is Ahau “Sun-god; day-lord”¹⁴ (cf. Hun Ahau and Mexica Xochitl “Flower”). The eagle is the attribute of that very Maya day (cf. the Horus-falcon), and the jaguar is the opposing ruler of the night, as if the solar elements were divided into Xbalanqué-Ocelatl of the North (Shālim) and Hunahpú-Xochitl of the South (Shaḥar). A dozen or more parallels may be drawn between Old and New World twins on this basis. A Calaña Carib myth is, however, even more specific:

Amana gave birth to twin brothers, Tamusi and Yolokan Tamulu: the first was born at first light, the second at dusk

In this case, Tamusi, “lord of the celestial paradise, the ‘lord without evening,’” associated with the moon and the Pleiades of Taurus the Bull (Min²), is also known as Tamoi in Tupian myth. Yolokan Tamulu, “Nature-spirits’ grandfather,” was “the source of darkness” (cf. the Shipaya myth of the brothers Kunarima & Arubiata).¹⁵ Zerries sums it up:

⁸ Ungnad, *AfO*, 5:185, and Jacobsen, *AfO*, 12:365:34.

⁹ Y. Yadin in J. A. Sanders, ed., *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*, 209-215, 227-228, nn. 61-65.

¹⁰ See B. Gunn in Lewis, *Land of Enchanters*, 55-66.

¹¹ K. Baer, *Dialogue*, 3/3:116 n, 21.

¹² P. L. Watson, *JAOs*, 92:60-64; J. Burns, *VT*, 22:245-246; H. O. Thompson, *BA*, 30:119-123.

¹³ Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, 134, 187, 231-232, 239; Gordon, *Orientalia*, 37:427 §9.

¹⁴ Satherwaite, *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, II:609.

¹⁵ O. Zerries in *Pre-Columbian American Religions*, 246-247, 288.

In the legend of the divine twins, current in many parts of South America, one of the twins, in the shape of an animal, is killed by a hostile forest spirit, and the other brother brings him back to life from his bones, blood or dismembered corpse.¹⁶

Likewise, in discussing the South Central American and Andean cultures, H. Trimborn says:

A myth peculiar to the north coast cultures is that of twin gods one of whom must be slain that the food crops may spring from the several parts of his body.¹⁷

One of the twins may, of course, be the creator-god. Among the Sanemá, a Venezuelan Yanoáma group, the celestial twins are Omáo & Soáo. They kill the Great Jaguar, and Omáo creates the first people from trees (cf. the Mixtec creation at Apoala or Achiutla, at the origin of the Verde [Yutatnoho] River,¹⁸ and the Old World Aphaca [Afqa] Spring at the source of the Adonis River above Byblos).

Aspects of the Afro-Asiatic (Hamito-Semitic) myths are scattered throughout, but one may want to look further afield, e.g., at

- 1) the Dioscuri (Polydeuces), the sons of Zeus, of pre-Christian Baltic-myth, who parallel
- 2) the Vedic twins, the Ashvins “Horsemen” (Nāsatyas), husbands of Suryā, the solar gods who drove their three-wheeled chariot across the sky (they first appear in a 14th century B.C. treaty text at Boghazköy), and
- 3) the Aloadae, Otus & Ephialtes, Homer’s heaven-storming twin giants of the *Odyssey*.

John L. Sorenson remarked to me in 1975 that Michael D. Coe of Yale has a more synthetic view: Coe places the Mayan Hero Twins at the center of elaborate funerary rites-of-passage depicted both upon special funerary pottery and in the *Popol Vuh*, and he sees each as analogous to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.¹⁹ Moreover, the sequence and type of events in the journey of the twins, from creation, through Xibalba and death, and to the resurrection, matches the most significant points within Egyptian temple and funerary ritual – as indicated by Hugh Nibley,²⁰ though he does not mention the New World parallels at all. One even finds the earth rising from the primeval sea in ancient Egypt, as in the *Popol Vuh*.²¹

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁷ Trimborn in *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁸ P. T. Furst in M. P. Leone, ed., *Contemporary Archaeology: A Guide to Theory and Contributions*, 340; see also p. 352 n. 3, on celestial twin motif distribution bibliography.

¹⁹ Coe, *Visible Language*, V:293-307.

²⁰ Nibley, *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 1st ed. (SLC: Deseret, 1975).

²¹ Krickeberg, *Pre-Columbian American Religions*, 79.