CHAPTER 2

Sons of Seth and the South Wind

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The present paper will combine the data of archaeology, historical inscriptions and literary texts to cast light on the circumstances under which the figure Seth in Judaism emerged. There is a linguistic and historical continuity between the Amorite tribe Suteans and the biblical Seth (Šēṯ), son of Adam (Diakonoff 1982: 19). The name Seth originates from the ethnic term for Sutean nomads in Akkadian, alternatively called Shasu/Shosu in Egyptian. The term Sutean is analogous to the term ḫabiru/‘apiru, which was widely used in the second millennium Akkadian and Egyptian texts for splinter groups, and continued to be used in the Hebrew Bible, although in a modified meaning (see Na’aman 2005, 252–274). The present paper will argue that the ancient terms for the tribally organized Shasu or Sutean nomads survived in the accounts about Seth and his sons.

The Akkadian word šūtu or sūtu denotes both the cardinal direction of the south and a pastoral tribe of southern origin. The Sutean tribes were exemplary enemies of Mesopotamian kings and gods, the south wind had a negative character, e.g. it was the antagonist of the sage in the Adapa myth. I will outline the idea that the account about Seth in Genesis polemically reverses the accounts in cuneiform literature about the Suteans. Both Adapa’s curse of the south wind and the accounts about destruction of Suteans are countered in Gen 4: 25, where God grants to Adam another child Seth in place of Abel. Pieces of historical memory about the Sutean tribes can be found in the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere in the Jewish literature in the stories about Adam’s son Seth and his progeny. It is probable that the Sutean pastoral tribes of Transjordanian origin indeed participated in the formation of the central hill country population during the early Iron Age (Rainey 2001). Secondarily, the accounts about “sons of Seth” became diversified within Jewish tradition itself, when different social groups started to identify themselves as such. There are instances in which “sons of Seth” are portrayed either in a positive or negative way.

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Whereas the motifs associated with Suteans in cuneiform literature can provide background for some traits in the “sons of Seth”, the Egyptian sources give a reliable account about their geographical location during the late Bronze Age. In the Egyptian texts of the second millennium BCE, Shasu/Shosu is the name for nomadic groups corresponding to Akkadian Suteans (e.g. Amarna letters Nos. 16, 122, 123, 169, 195, 297, 318). The Egyptian king Ramesses II in 13th century BCE claimed to have destroyed the land of the Shasu nomads and captured the nearby mountain Seir (Giveon 1971, No. 25). This account locates the Shasu nomads in the area of Edom, Seir and Transjordan east of Arabah valley. The Shasu in Egyptian texts are indicated both as a people and a territory (Grabbe 2011, 50). The “land of the Shasu” nomads in the Ramesses II inscription from the site Amarah is called with the toponym YHW’ (םת amalgamated yhw3), which is quite reliably the etymology of the divine name YHWH. It is probable that the name YHW’ denoted both the Sutean territory and the deity of their tribes. Aššur is another prominent example of a name functioning simultaneously as geographic and divine label (Tilly and Zwickel 2011, 75).

The account in Gen 4: 26 says that it was during the generation of Seth that humankind began to worship YHWH. This piece of information should be compared to the Egyptian texts, which mention YHW’ as the land of the Shasu nomads. The name of the land and the deity of the Shasu/Sutean groups locates them in southern Jordan during 14–13th centuries BCE. The Shasu/Sutean population joined the settler groups, which later became Israel (Grabbe 2011, 49). In other words, the Shasu/Sutean traditions also formed a part in the genesis of religious identity in the new states of Judah and Israel.

According to the written sources, the southern origin of YHWH was still remembered many centuries later. Numerous references in the Hebrew Bible place the origin of YHWH to southern arid regions. Habakkuk’s words, “YHWH came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran” (Hab 3: 3) should be compared to Jer 49: 7–8, where Teman is mentioned in relation to Edom and to Dedan in northwest Arabia. The inscriptions found at the 8th century BCE site Kuntillet ‘Ajrud mention both the northern deity “YHWH of Samaria” as well as the southern “YHWH of Teman” (Finkelstein 2013, 149).

The Suteans in Mesopotamian Sources

In Mesopotamian literature and historical records, the Suteans occur as West-Semitic nomads with their population centre around Jebel Biṣri in Syria. In the third millennium historical sources, the troublesome western Amorites were
called by a different name: *Tidnu, Didānu*, and other similar variant words. In the second millennium BCE, this name disappears and is replaced with *Śūtû* “Suteans”. The two names are equated in lexical lists (Heltzer 1981, 5). The depictions of Sutean nomads in Akkadian texts exhibit the characteristics of intercultural conflict and dehumanization. According to the texts of the first millennium, the Suteans lived in the steppe like onagers and gazelles, they did not have houses and lived in tents, their refuge was the mountain. They did not know agriculture, did not recognize agreements, nor human reason, and their speech was that of animals (see Malbran-Labat 1981, 74). The last references to the Suteans in historical sources occur in the 7th century BCE royal inscriptions (Heltzer 1981, 96–97).

The Sutean tribes posed an enduring threat to the sedentary population of Mesopotamia. According to Old Babylonian texts from Mari, the Suteans were active around the steppes of the Syrian desert and the Jebel Bîšri, a mountain range between Mari and Palmyra (Durand 1998, 505–511). In the cuneiform sources it is called mountain Šaršar and listed e.g. in the series of *Lipšur*-litanies as an Amorite location. The name of the mountain occurs already in a mythological text from Ebla as *sa-sa-ri₂₂*, which may refer to Jebel Bîšri (Lambert 1989, 17–18). Defeat of the Suteans and the establishment of border defences against them in conjunction with the mountain is mentioned by the time of the Middle Babylonian king Kadašman-Ḫarbe (see Glassner 2004, 278–279).

However, in Babylonian texts the term “Sutean” is not only ethnic, but also a designation of a witch. The Sutean man and woman occur in the anti-witchcraft series Maqlû 3: 77–87, belonging to the Babylonian host of malicious beings. In this incantation, the fire-god Girra and the river-god are invoked to destroy the “Sutean” and “Elamite” witches (Abusch 2015, 74). These two deities are metaphors for the exorcistic purification rituals with fire and water. The Suteans occur as witches also in Maqlû 4: 125–129 (Abusch 2015, 96). The demoness Lamaštu, whose izésesthehumanbabies,callsherself a Sutean woman. She is exorcised away with fire, she leaves human habitations like smoke (Lamaštu 2: 136–150):

“I am the daughter of Anu from heaven, I am a Sutean, I am ..., I am terrifying. I enter the house, I leave the house (as I please). Bring me your sons: I want to suckle (them). In the mouth of your daughters I want to place (my breast).” Anu heard (this) and wept, the tears of Aruru, Lady of the Gods were flowing: “Why should we destroy what we have created, and why should the wind carry away what we have produced? Indeed, take her to the sea, (or) to the (highest) outcrop of the mountain! Indeed, bind her to a free-standing tamarisk or a lone reed stalk! As surely as a
corpse does not have life and a still-born child has never suckled the milk of his mother, may the Daughter-of-Anu like smoke leave town, and never return!”.  

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In the cuneiform sources the Suteans are much hated nomadic neighbours of the sedentary Mesopotamians. They were secondarily demonized as witches and exorcised away with water and fire. In the following, I will explore how such cultural attitudes were narratively reversed in some Jewish accounts about the “sons of Seth”.

Seth and His Sons in Jewish Sources

The literary connection between the sons of Seth and the Suteans is an intricate one. While Adam’s son Seth was a forefather of mankind in Genesis, another tradition survives in the Hebrew Bible which more directly relates to Mesopotamian and Egyptian literary traditions. The “sons of Sheth” are mentioned in the oracle of Balaam in Num 24: 17–18 as the enemies of the Israelite monarchy. The Ancient Near Eastern royal propaganda presented Suteans as the enemies of civilization. For example, one of the last references to Suteans comes from Esarhaddon’s Nineveh inscription, where he recounts: “The Suteans, the tent-dwellers, whose places are far away, I uprooted like an angrily raising storm” (Heltzer 1981, 96). In Balaam’s oracle, the “Sons of Sheth” are associated with the location called Šeʿr (šʿr) just like Shasu nomads are in the Egyptian texts:

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh: a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab, and break down all the sons of Sheth. Edom shall be dispossessed, Seʿr also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed, while Israel does valiantly.

The rules of symmetry in Hebrew poetry compel to read “all the sons of Sheth” in parallelism to both Moab and Seir. One can see a pattern of similarity between Suteans on Šašar and “sons of Sheth” in the land of Seir, where the Egyptian texts often locate the Shasu nomads. Mount Šašar belonged to the mental map of ancient Mesopotamians as a mythical location, therefore its geographic identity was flexible. However, it is common to both Seir and Šašar that they are exemplary areas of rebellious Amorite nomads, who made
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problems to Egyptian and Mesopotamian rulers. The passage cited from the oracle of Balaam follows the literary topos of ancient Near Eastern royal propaganda which often described how the Sutean or Shasu nomads were defeated. Balaam’s oracle rephrases this traditional royal rhetoric as a prophecy promoting Israelite kingship. The mountain name Šaršar may even be alluded to in the Hebrew text by the word qarqar as the “forehead” of Moab.

The portrayals of Seth and descriptions of the “sons of Seth” as a group in Jewish sources depended on the earlier Mesopotamian traditions either by way of imitation (Num 24: 17–18) or as a counter story (Gen 5: 3). Apparently, it was impossible not to respond with a counter narrative to the negative and degrading Mesopotamian view of the Sutean neighbours. It is said in Gen 5: 3 that Adam begot Seth “in his likeness after his image”. This means that Adam fathered a normal child with a human appearance, it was not a monster. Seth became in a genuine sense the father of the human race. The phrase “after his image” fuelled the aggadic speculation that Adam previously begot demons and monsters. The book of Genesis with its naturalistic conception of the origins of civilization reacts here polemically to the Babylonian tradition that civilization was founded by hybrid offspring of the first humans (Tigay 1997, 147). Otherwise, the Babylonian primeval sages were also demonized as the sons of God in Gen 6: 1–4 (Annus 2010). In Jewish accounts, the progeny of Seth is the true origin of mankind, which survives despite every attempt to destroy it.

Mount Šaršar

In 1986 H.W.F. Saggs published the fragments of the Akkadian cuneiform tablet GM 1 found near modern Mosul, in the Neo-Assyrian period site of Sherikan. The tablet was once a large six-column manuscript which contained both the Anzu Epic and the Epic of Erra on its two sides. The fragments were found in the ancient temple of Nergal at Tarbisu (Saggs 1986, 1–3). The juxtaposition of two complex mythological texts on one substantial tablet was not a common practice in ancient Mesopotamia; on the contrary, it was very exceptional. The question of why the texts of Anzu and Erra were chosen to be written on the same tablet, can be answered with the reference to intertextuality (Machinist 2005).

The similarity in meaning and theological implications between the two epics is indicated already by their incipits: the Anzu Epic begins with the phrase “Son of the king of habitations” (bin šar dadmē) and that of Erra, “King of all the habitations” (šar gimir dadmē). The hymnic prologues of the two epics are
addressed to the deities Ninurta and Išum, who act as the neutralizers of the two dangerous threats to divine order, Anzu and Erra respectively. Both Anzu and Erra are half-demonic beings, outsiders of the established order of the assembly of the gods. In both epics, they are initially drawn into divine order to perform similar functions for a chief deity—Anzu as a guardian of the chamber of Enlil, and Erra as an advisor of Marduk. According to P. Machinist’s insightful analysis, Anzu and Erra proceed to disrupt the order by taking over one of the chief’s key possessions and emblems of sovereignty: the Tablet of Destinies in the case of Anzu, and Marduk’s royal seat and chamber in the case of Erra (Machinist 2005, 46). The seizure of seat and chamber is temporary in the Erra poem, since it appears that Marduk is able to return. Yet, both seizures of divine attributes give rise to a kind of anti-order, within which the usurper, Erra and Anzu, has to be stopped and neutralized.

In the Anzu Epic Ninurta defeats Anzu in battle, while in the Erra poem Išum defeats the Suteans and so helps Erra to assume his own orderly propensity. While the defeated Anzu was often given the new role of guarding the entrances of temples, Erra becomes in the last stage of the narrative the restorer and guarantor of the established order he had earlier dissolved (Machinist 2005, 48).

In the Erra poem Erra himself turns out to be an Anzu-like figure who finally takes on the character of Ninurta by conquering himself. The transformative power which turns the evil Anzu into a guardian image of the temple gate also makes the difference between the evil Erra and the god Nergal. When starting to restore the divine order after having made much damage to it, Erra’s first act is to send Išum to destroy the wicked Suteans, living near Mount Šaršar. This location is also a connecting point between the two epics. If one takes a closer look at the Anzu poem 1:25–28, it can be shown that the birth of Anzu is clearly located on the mountain of the same name (Annus 2001, 19).

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\begin{align*}
\text{i-na Šár-šár} &\quad \text{KUR-}i\text{-e-li-} [i\ x\ x] &\quad \text{On Šaršar, the high mountain […]} \\
\text{ina ut-li-šá} &\quad 4\text{-a-nun-[na-ki}\ x\ x] &\quad \text{in her bosom Anun[naki …]} \\
\text{ít-ta-[a]} &\quad \text{4lad\ an-z[a-a\ x\ x]} &\quad \text{Anzu was born […]} \\
\text{šá-áš-šá-ru} &\quad [a]\ p-p[a-šú\ x\ x] &\quad \text{A saw was [his] beak […]}
\end{align*}
\]

Later in the same epic, this birth-place is referred to as “its (= Anzu’s) mountain” (šadûssu), where it flies with the stolen Tablet of Destinies.¹ According

¹ Anzu 1: 83, 110, 131, 152; 2: 29, 147. The reading of the mountain name as Šár-šár is firmly established by a gloss in the lexical text Urra 22: kuršá-pá-as-a-a-a (George 2009, 12). That this
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to the god list *Anu ša amēli*, Šaršar was the god of Sutean nomads, who was equated with the Babylonian cattle god Sumuqan. In the Erra poem 4:137–151 the same mountain is flattened by the god Išum in revenge for the devastation of Babylonia by the Suteans:

The warrior Erra said these words to Išum his vanguard, “Go, Išum, the matter you spoke of, do as you wish.” Išum set out for the mountain Šaršar, the Seven, warriors unrivalled, fell in behind him. When the Warriors reached the mountain Šaršar, he raised his hand and destroyed the mountain, he reckoned the mountain Šaršar as level ground. He cut away the trunks of the cedar forest, the thicket looked as if the deluge had passed over, he laid waste cities and turned them into open spaces, he obliterated mountains and slew their wildlife, he convulsed the sea and destroyed its increase, he brought the stillness of death upon swamp and thicket, burning like fire, he cursed the beasts and returned them to clay.3

The epic of Anzu contains a very similar pattern: as Ninurta defeats Anzu at its mountain, so Išum helps to restore the divine order by flattening Šaršar and destroying the Suteans. The mountain name occurs as one of the names of Ninurta himself, as “Šaršarra, Ninurta of devastation” in the god-list *Anu ša amēli*.4 The same name of the mountainous domicile implies that Suteans and Anzu belong to the same category of demonic beings, and the two fulfill the same role in the divine plan. In the Jewish accounts about the “sons of Seth”, this divine plan is often reversed with a counter narrative (see below).

The mountain or the mountain range Šaršar also had another name, Tid(a)-nu, explained as “the mountain of the Amorites”.5 The Amorite tribal name Sutu was interchangeable with the name Tidnu and its variants, denoting nomadic tribes of the same territory in the east of Mesopotamia (Annus 1999, reading of the signs ḪḪḪ is correct is shown by the parallelism in the quoted Anzu passage with the word šaššāru, “saw” (Lambert 1989, 17–18; George 2009, 12–14).

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2 Line 104: *dšār-dār* *Sumuqan šā su-ti-i* (Litke 1998, 236). The name *dšār-dār* occurs in the god list *An = Anum* 2:163 as a name of Ea (Litke 1998, 87), and Ea is equated with Sumuqan in *Anum* 3:198. This speaks for a local Syrian image of Ea as a herdsman’s god (George 2009, 14).

3 Note also that Ezek 35 presents an unfavourable prophecy for Mount Seir that is very similar in phraseology to the passage in Erra 4:137–151.


5 In Gudea St. B: vi 13–14; see Steinkeller 1992, 261.
Tid(a)nu was the name of the tribe’s eponymous ancestor with the iconographic representation of a human-faced bull or bison, called *kusarikku* in Akkadian. This monstrous being was subordinated to the sun-god Šamaš who in his capacity as a warrior god held it under his control. This human-faced bull firmly belonged to the inventory of Mesopotamian demons. According to the Anzu Epic, Ninurta defeated *kusarikku* in “the midst of the sea” (1:12) as one of his exploits. On some pictorial representations Šamaš subdues the human-faced bison leaning against a mountain, being the personification of Mount Šaršar. Apparently, an ancient oral tradition told how Šamaš defeated this human-headed bull, which would explain why the beast was associated with the sun-god in art and literature (Steinkeller 1992, 261). This story is not actually hypothetical because if we consider that the fire-god in Mesopotamia was a hypostasis of the sun-god (Abusch 2015, 8), we get the following equations:

1) İšum = Šamaš

2) Sutu = Tid(a)nu = *kusarikku*

*Mutatis mutandis,* İšum destroying the mountain Šaršar and the Sutean nomads in the Erra passage should be considered a more recent version of the old story about Šamaš subduing the human-faced bull. The same fire-god İšum, who executes Suteans also burns the witches, who are often associated with Suteans in Mesopotamian literature. The representation of the demonic bull *kusarikku* takes oaths from those, who have heard about practices of witchcraft according to the Middle Assyrian Law Code 47 (written *GUD.DUMU.UTU*; see Roth 1997, 172). The son of the sun-god had best knowledge of witchcraft being committed.

Whereas the mythical mountain Šaršar is vanquished by the fire-god in the Erra Epic, it is destroyed by flood in the Anzu Epic, which is Ninurta’s divine weapon (see Annus 2001, 27; 3: 14–20). These comparisons help to understand the image of the Sutean as a witch in cuneiform anti-witchcraft literature. The images of witches were destroyed with fire and water as the most basic cleansing substances in Mesopotamian exorcistic rituals. The fire-god destroying Suteans and Ninurta defeating Anzu are mythical images, which relate to these cleansing rituals. The historical kings of Mesopotamia followed the example of warrior gods and carried out regular military expeditions to the western Šaršar area.6

6 I am convinced that the Greek word for Titans (Titanes) derives from the Semitic *ditānu*
Purification with Water and Fire

In Jewish tradition, the concepts of Sutean magic and witchcraft were countered with the accounts about Seth’s wisdom. Outside of the Hebrew Bible, Seth is often depicted as possessing great wisdom and credited with important inventions for mankind. The Jewish writer Josephus knew about a mysterious land Seiris in connection with the “sons of Seth” (Ant. 1.68–71). When Adam predicted the twofold destruction of mankind through water and fire, the sons of Seth erected two steles, one of brick and one of stone, to preserve their discoveries of “the science of the heavenly bodies and their orderly array” (Stroumsa 1984, 107):

He [= Seth], after being nurtured and coming to the prime of life that is able to judge beautiful things, strove after virtue and, being himself excellent, left descendants who imitated the same virtues. All of these, being virtuous, lived in happiness in the same land without civil strife, with nothing unpleasant coming upon them until their death. And they discovered the science with regard to the heavenly bodies and their orderly arrangement. And in order that humanity might not lose their discoveries or perish before they came to be known, Adam having predicted that there would be an extermination of the universe, at one time by violent fire and at another time by a force with an abundance of water, they made two pillars, one of brick and the other of stones and inscribed their findings on both, in order that if the one of brick should be lost owing to the flood the one of stone should remain and offer an opportunity to teach men what had been written on it and to reveal that also one of brick had been set up by them. And it remains until today in the land of Seiris.

FELDMAN 2000, 24–26

The tradition of Adam’s knowledge about the twofold destruction of the world and of Seth’s tablets survived in another Jewish work as well, the Life of Adam and Eve 49–50. The obvious implication of the earliest source for Seth’s writings, Josephus Ant. 1.71, is that Seiris was the land of the early Sethites, the place where they had once lived “without dissension and in prosperity” and where and its variants (see Annus 1999). Given the close connection of the Suteans with the tribal name Ditanu, one can plausibly speculate whether the Greek word for netherworld, Tartaros, derives from the mountain name Šaršar. To explain this etymology, a comparison can be made between Zeus imprisoning the rebel Titans in Tartaros, Išum flattening the mountain Šaršar and the sun-god subduing the Tidnu monster around the same mythical mountain.
they had erected the stelae, recording the antediluvian knowledge. It is this same land that Noah of Sethite genealogy was later said to have left (Ant. 1.76). The Tablet of Destinies which Ninurta gains back from Anzu after the battle on its mountain Šaršar, is a related tradition. The Suteans inhabiting the mountain Šaršar exhibit a similar pattern with “the sons of Seth” around the location called Seir(is) both in the oracle of Balaam and in the account of Josephus. But the Jewish tradition recorded by Josephus should be read as a counter narrative with regard to Mesopotamian accounts, in a way that evil has become good. The first catastrophe predicted by Adam according to Josephus by means of devastating fire is related to that recounted in the Epic of Erra, Išum being the god of fire (Akkadian išātu). The second devastation through the “abundance of water” has a forerunner in Ninurta’s measures against Anzu, because Ninurta is deluge (see Annus 2002, 123–133). Moreover, as pointed out above, the pair of water and fire figures prominently in Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft texts and rituals, where they are the main deities invoked to purify the patient and to destroy witches.

The eschatological oracle of Num 24:17 about the destruction of the “sons of Seth” is quoted in several Second Temple sources. The interpretive solution offered by Targum Onqelos and the commentary of Abraham Ibn Ezra explains the “descendants of Seth” as referring to postdiluvian humanity (Reeves 2010, 1221). The Josephus passage about the twofold destruction of the world can be compared to the Qumran passage from the Book of Giants, where the garden of the Watchers is destroyed by water and fire (4Q530: ii 10). Whereas the Watchers perish in the flood, the descendants of Seth preserve their knowledge for the postdiluvian humanity with the agency of Noah, who was from the lineage of Seth.

The story about the twofold destruction of the sinful antediluvian world historicizes the exorcistic practices of Mesopotamian purification rituals. The eschatological concept of a dual cosmic destruction, one of which employs water, and the other fire became popular in Late Antiquity. One form of it appears in Plato’s Timaeus 21E–22E, where it is imparted to Greek sage Solon by an Egyptian priest who teaches that the sublunar world periodically undergoes destruction by both conflagrations and floods. In the Hellenistic era, this doctrine is attested in a variety of Jewish and Christian sources. The idea of a recurrent destruction of the Earth by water and fire occurs in a fragment of the astrological teachings of Berossus, quoted by Seneca in his Naturales Quaestiones 3.28.7–29.1:

[Deluge will take place] in the same principle in which the conflagration will occur. Both will occur when it seems best to god for the old things to be ended and better things to begin. Water and fire dominate earthly things. From them is the origin, from them the death. Therefore whenever a renewal for the universe is decided, the sea is sent against us from above, like raging fire, when another form of destruction is decided upon. Berossus, who interpreted Belus, says that these catastrophes occur with the movements of the planets. Indeed, he is so certain that he assigns a date for the conflagration and the deluge. For earthly things will burn, he contends, when all the planets which now maintain different orbits come together in the sign of Cancer, and are so arranged in the same path that a straight line can pass through the spheres of all of them. The deluge will occur when the same group of planets meets in the sign of Capricorn. They are signs of great power since they are the turning-points in the very change of the year.8

The authenticity of the passage has sometimes been questioned and attributed to a “Pseudo-Berossus” (see Reeves 1992, 145). However, there is no serious reason to doubt its authenticity because the Babylonian forerunners for this Hellenistic concept can be found in the myths of Erra and Anzu, as was argued above.9 Of course, a tremendous amount of intellectual development occurred between the time of the Neo-Assyrian empire and the Hellenistic world, but the transformation of mythological images into eschatological ones is clearly discernible, even though the later concept seems much more systematized than the earlier Mesopotamian one.

Seth’s Wisdom in Later Texts

The dwelling place of the Suteans according to cuneiform texts was Mount Šaršar, and this association continues with the “sons of Seth” or Sethites living in the land Seiris as in Josephus (see above). The historical origin of the latter notion derives from the Mt. Seir, which was the dwelling area of the Shasu nomads according to Egyptian sources (Grabbe 2011, 49). The mysterious land of Seiris, Seres, or Šir often occurs as the origin of revelatory writings in Late

8 Translation is by T. Corcoran, from Loeb edition. See Drews 1975, 52–55 for a full discussion.
9 Drews rightly says: “Logic suggests that no impostor would borrow Berossus name for a pamphlet on astrology, unless Berossus were already known as an authority on the subject” (1975, 52).
Antiquity (see Reinink 1975). It is found in Hippolytos’ report in Refutatio Haer. 9.13.1–3, where a certain Alkibiades from Apamea brought to Rome a book of revelations of the Mesopotamian baptismal sect Elxaites. This happened in the early second century C.E., and the miraculous book originated “from the Seres of Parthia” (Greek: apo Sērōn tēs Parthias). This book was revealed by giants and it opens with a vision of two enormous angelic beings, the former being referred to as “Hidden Power”, son of God, while the latter is called the feminine “Holy Spirit” (see Luttikhuizen 1985). Accordingly, Seres was a land where divine giants were thought to live in early Christian age. In Syriac legends about Christ, the dwelling place of Sethians and their descendants, the Magi, is a mountain with the cognate name, Šīr. Both the Syriac Chronicle of Zuqnin and Latin Opus imperfectum in Matthaeum of Pseudo-Chrysostom mention the “Mount of Victories”,10 which was located in the Oriental land of Šīr upon which “book(s) of Seth” were hidden. The Magi climbed this mountain once a month and from there they finally noticed the star that would guide them to Bethlehem. The mountain Šeiris was sometimes conflated with the mountain of the flood story because the obvious place where the writings would be safe from the flood was Mount Ararat (Stroumsa 1984, 116). In the Syriac Cave of Treasures Mount Ararat is the Mount of Victories, which was also the original dwelling place of the Sethite Noah. This tradition poses Noah as a transmitter of Seth’s knowledge (Stroumsa 1984, 117).

The scholars of Gnostic mythology are well aware that the figure of Seth plays a very prominent role in the Gnostic texts of “Sethian” type. Among the Nag Hammadi codices, there are titles named after him: The Three Steles of Seth and The Second Treatise of the Great Seth. The Gospel of the Egyptians is ascribed to him and two texts have a strong interest in his character: The Apocalypse of Adam and The Apocryphon of John (Reeves 2010, 1221). In the same texts the patriarch Enoch plays no role at all. It is clear that the Seth figure in Gnostic mythology possessed the authoritative force that Enoch did for some other circles and ideologies. The Gnostic movement of Sethians believed in a heavenly Seth, who periodically visits earth in various human guises to impart revelations (Reeves 2010, 1221). The sons of Seth were often viewed as antagonistic to Watchers and their descendants. The sons of Seth survived the flood which destroyed the progeny of the Watchers as punishment. For example, Epiphanius of Salamis tells the flood story of a sect whose members called themselves “Sethians” (Panarion 3.3.1):

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10 Mons victorialis in Latin, tur neṣḥanē in Syriac.
Once Mother and Female saw a great deal of intermingling and unruly desire on the part of angels and men, since the two breeds had become mixed; and she saw that their unruliness had caused certain combinations of breeds. So she returned and brought the flood, and destroyed all humanity (and) the whole stock of her opponents, so that only the pure stock, if you please—the one that derived from Seth and was righteous—would remain in the world to propagate the stock from above, and the spark of righteousness.

Williams 1987, 257

The lineage of Seth proceeded over Noah, although the Sethians maintained that Noah’s son Ham was a giant offspring of the Watchers (*Panarion* 39.3.2). The Nag Hammadi treatise *The Apocalypse of Adam* appealed to Adam who revealed his secret knowledge about the course of world history to Seth. Seth then transmitted this saving knowledge to his posterity, the Gnostics. The reason why some Gnostic groups selected Seth as their antediluvian authority is his important role in the transmission of knowledge and divine secrets which his father Adam revealed to him (Reeves 2010, 1221).

Historically speaking, Seth’s presentation as Adam’s son in the Hebrew Bible was a politically motivated response to Mesopotamian negative view of the Suteans, functioning as a “counter narrative”. According to this counter story, the “sons of Seth” survived every attempt of Mesopotamian gods and kings to extinguish them and their progeny. According to the Adapa myth, the ancient Mesopotamian sage used magic to break the wing of the south wind, the word for which (*šūtu*) can also mean “Sutean”. The proposed etymology for the word “Sutean” makes use of the same root *sūtī'u*, “southern” (Streck 2002, 165). In the Adapa myth the primeval sage acquires control over sickness and witchcraft by cursing the south wind. In the Mesopotamian world view, Adapa the sage is the good exorcist and the south wind is a bad magician. According to the Jewish counter narrative, Adam is the sinner and Seth becomes the father of humanity acquiring Adam’s divine secrets. This counter story constructed the Sethian identity, which persisted for a long time in various times and places. It is certainly not the case that the Sethian Gnostics derived their identity from the ancient Sutean nomads of the Neo-Assyrian period. However, the detailed analysis of the narrative elements that occur both in the Mesopotamian and later texts helps to describe and understand the dynamics and changes of cultural traditions through polemical responses (see Frahm 2010).

Seth’s wisdom was important for many Gnostic movements, including Manicheism and Mandeism (Reeves 2010, 1221). The Byzantine chronologists Suidas,
Michael Glycas, Johannes Malalas and Joel reproduced the tradition of Seth’s astronomical knowledge and mentioned his invention of Hebrew letters, as well as the division of time into weeks, months, and years. Seth is said to have received this knowledge from the angel Uriel, who came to him as he later came to Enoch (Feldman 2000, 24, n. 164). Malalas writes that people called Seth “God” because of his piety and because he invented Hebrew letters, and possessed knowledge about astrology (Klijn 1977, 40). In the Life of Adam and Eve (ch. 25–29) Adam imparted to Seth antediluvian knowledge about God on his Merkabah. Seth is a scribe and astrologer and he has written revelatory books before the flood (see Klijn 1977, 48–60).

While the Mesopotamian model for the figure of Enoch has been recognized and amply discussed by biblical scholars, there has been little effort to trace the origin of the Saviour Seth in Jewish and Gnostic mythology. The Jewish origins of the “Sethian gnosis” are very clear, but another question is what gave the impetus for so high regard for the patriarch. The Josephus passage quoted in this paper serves as an example of a Jewish counter narrative against Mesopotamian cultural concepts expressed in poems such as Anzu and Erra. The “sons of Seth” in these counter narratives are the owners of the antediluvian wisdom, Seth is the ancestor of the “irremovable race” which the authorities of this world try to annihilate with the two global catastrophes. All this is in vain and the descendants of Seth prevail until eschatological times.

Bibliography

SONS OF SETH AND THE SOUTH WIND


