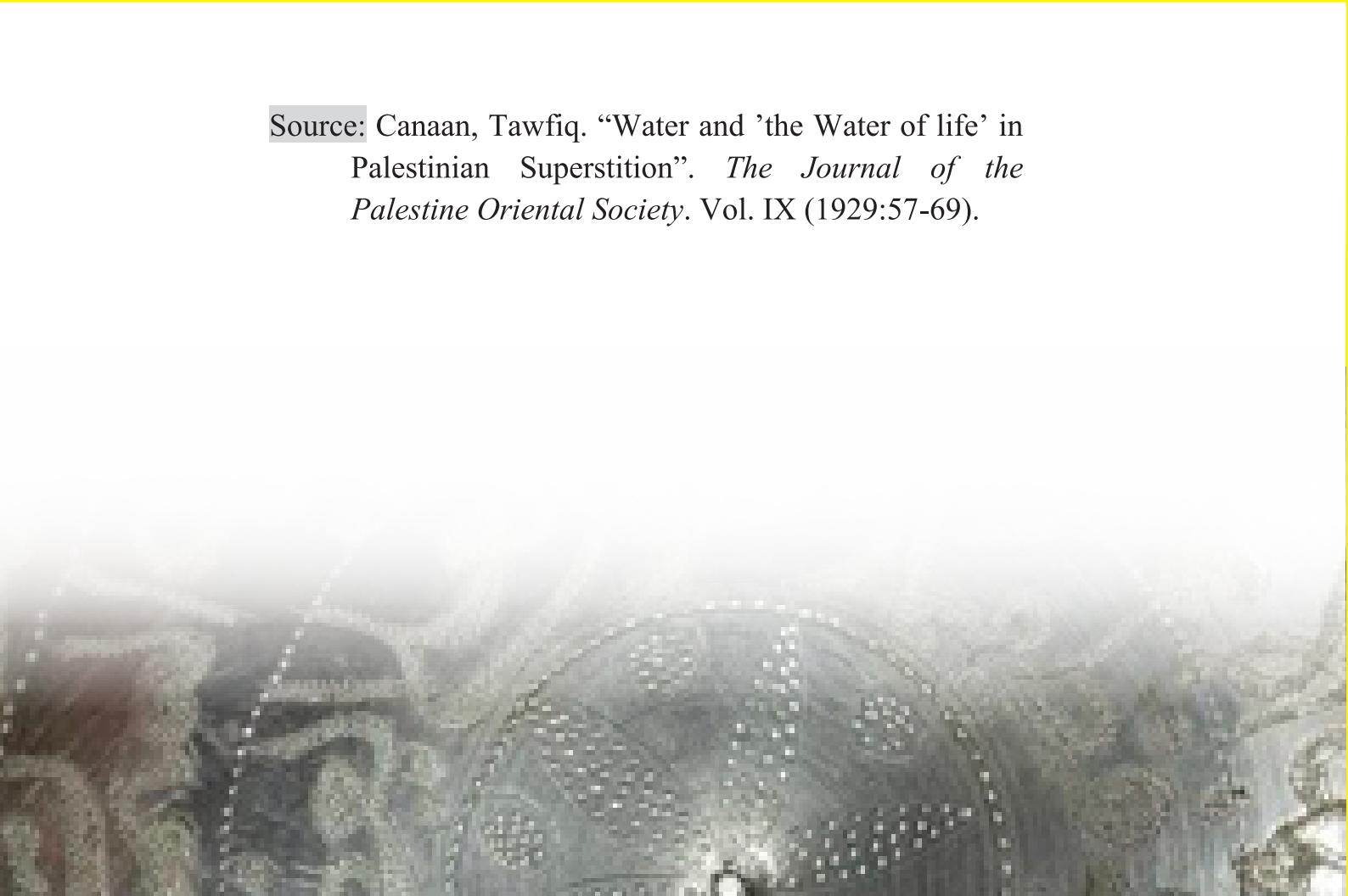


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WATER AND "THE WATER OF LIFE"
IN PALESTINIAN SUPERSTITION

DR. T. CANAAN

(JERUSALEM)

Water has counted and still counts for more in the life of the Palestinian than in that of the European. This is due to the nature of the country in which water is scarce and, since it is much needed, highly esteemed. Thus we meet with the use of water in religious procedures, magic ceremonies, popular medicine and superstition. Ideas and customs arising from the sacredness of water, known and practised in ancient times, have left so deep a mark that thousands of years with all their political changes have failed wholly to remove its trace. In the daily life of the present inhabitants of Palestine we still meet remnants of such ideas which are here collected and examined.

Water was anciently reckoned the most important of the "four elements" since on it the life of all creatures depended. It was the most perfect, since "the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (Gen. 1^o) or, as the Qoran says, "His throne was above the waters" (Sûrah XI, 7); it thus derived certain supernatural powers from the Almighty. Similar powers are thought to have been imparted to water through the baptism of Christ. But even at Creation water was the divinely chosen element, for from it God made man (Sûrah XXV, 54), every animal (XXIV, 45) and every living thing (XXI, 30).

"Springs which appear suddenly in the dry country and continue to pour out their running waters for the benefit of human beings and of vegetation, were and are still in their origin and in their

continuous flow a mystery to the oriental mind. This was the first reason for assigning to them some supernatural power—a numen which was finally depotentized, becoming a spirit or a demon."¹ This primitive explanation has only been modified sufficiently to adapt it to the present beliefs and customs of the Palestinian: the belief in the supernatural power of water continues.

Water served also as the medium of purification by which impurities, which separate a man from God and bring him nearer to death, are washed away. The many ceremonial rules affecting the ritual use of water in the Jewish and Mohammedan religions are too familiar to need repetition. Also in Christian ceremonies several beliefs survive based on similar ideas.

The following are examples of beliefs and customs, still known and practiced in Palestine, which illustrate this belief in the sacredness of water.

Any household utensil rendered ritually unclean by the use of unclean objects, such as alcohol or pork, must be washed seven times with water (*yitsabbū*).

The Eastern Churches have a special ceremony for purifying any cistern, object, or article of food that has been rendered unclean by means of an unclean animal or some unclean object. This rite includes prayers and the burning of incense; but the essential part of the rite is the sprinkling of water sanctified at the Feast of Epiphany.²

Every woman must take a bath after her impurity. The cleansing water makes it permissible for her to enter holy places, the abodes of God or saints, and thus to appear in the holy presence.

Men and women must wash themselves after intercourse in order to remove any consequent impurity.

Maiyeh, water, in colloquial Arabic is used also as the name of male semen, the life medium. In the Qoran it is also called *mā'* with the addition of an adjective (*dāfiq* in Sūrah LXXXVI, 6, and *mubīn*, in LXXVII, 20).³

Water if poured out at night has the power of driving away lurking demons. A like result may be attained by pouring water

¹ CANAAN, *Haunted Springs and Water Demons in Palestine*, JPOS, I, 154.

² Adjiāzmātārī Kabīr, ed. 1884, p. 488 ff.

³ A well known Arabic verse calls the male seed "the water of life":

over fire, the abode of the demons; but to prevent them from committing harm at the moment of their departure they must first be asked to leave the place, or the name of God must be invoked.

A pitcher full of water is thrown and broken when an enemy leaves the house, for he is regarded as an evil demon.¹

Ritually clean water drunk from the *ṭāsīt er-radjfeh*² counteracts the evil effects of fright. This result is due partly to the inherent character of the water and partly to the action of the *ṭāsīt er-radjfeh*.

Certain springs have a special curative action in the suppression of urine. Such springs are not, as a rule, connected with any *welt*.

An Arabic proverb says: *el-maiy biṭṭahhir el-ḥaiy ul-mait*, water purifies the living and the dead.

Water placed out of doors during the night is believed to acquire beside its intrinsic power a still greater curative action through the action of the stars.³

Water is not only essential for the living but also for the dead. As in ancient days so also now the Palestinian is accustomed to place for the dead a jar containing water; the only difference is that we often find on the tombs a shallow or deep cup-like cavity. Some believe that the soul of the dead visits the tomb and expects to find water to quench its thirst; therefore they that visit the tombs of their dead fill these cups with water.⁴

It is also believed that the souls of the dead are set free on Fridays and that they carry their water-skins to the springs to fill them with water for the ensuing week. By these two means the souls of the dead (which being freed from the body in many ways resemble supernatural powers) share the water with the living.

In many places the rain is called *rahmeh*, "blessing"—an abbreviation of *rahmet allah*.

Water is believed to possess life, and its spirit is supposed to

واحفظ منيك ما استطعت فإنه ماء الحياة يراق في الأرحام

¹ In some regions the house is swept after an enemy leaves it, in order to remove any trace he may have left.

² CANAAN, JPOS, III, 122 ff.

³ CANAAN, *Aberglaube und Volksmedizin*, 96, 126.

⁴ For other explanations see CANAAN, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine*, 28.

sleep in the night. Therefore a passer-by should not disturb the slumbering water without saying *yá maiy má wírdik illa l-‘ašán*, “O water (do not be frightened); it is only the thirsty that has come to drink.”¹

Water inhabited by the spirits of certain saints may manifest supernatural signs. Such generally appear at the feast of the saint. Thus the stone enclosure of the opening of Bír ‘Oná has been seen dyed red on the Feast of the Virgin Mary.

Whosoever defiles a water course by making water in it is punished by the spirits (good or bad) who haunt it.

When a newly married bride is brought to the bridegroom’s house she carries on her head a pitcher full of water. In certain districts someone carries the pitcher before the bridal procession. In other districts water is poured before her when she enters the house. In this custom the water symbolizes abundant blessing and good fortune.

In the Eastern Churches water used for baptism is thereby rendered holy and so may not be thrown away, but must be drawn off into a specially provided cistern under or beside the church.

On the Feast of Epiphany the priests of the Eastern Churches (especially the Holy Orthodox Church) visit the homes of their congregation and sprinkle them with holy water in the form of a cross. The sprinkling is done with a bunch of flowers fastened to a stick.

The prophet *el-Ḥaḍr*, who is said to drink only from the water of life, once poured the rest of the water in his goblet over a tree growing near by. It happened to be a prickly pear, and, ever since, this plant has remained green and indestructible.²

Water is used more frequently than the other elements in magical rites. It is normally used in *mandal*, the act by which gifted persons can explain mysteries by gazing into certain substances.

At Epiphany the Russian pilgrims, dressed in white shrouds, immerse themselves in the Jordan during a special ceremony. The shroud, thus sanctified, is carefully treasured, and at his death the pilgrim is buried in it.

On the occasion of a death the priest sprinkles water (over

¹ Other examples are given in JPOS, I, 164; VIII, 158

² JPOS, VIII, 3.

which certain prayers have been said) in the house of the mourners in order to drive away the evil spirits which may have gathered in the room. Every corpse is unclean and renders unclean the place in which it is found; and since the demons prefer such conditions they hasten thither.

If a mother has lost all of her children during their childhood or infancy, she should bring the next one that is born to the well of *mâr Eliâs*, which is near the sanctuary cave on Mount Carmel. The child is immersed for few moments in the cistern. Since the cistern contains "living water" the child will surely live.

It is believed that the prophet Elijah, who is said to be still living, drank of this water.

Water in a cistern whose sole opening is into a dark room has specially strong magical power.¹

At the *fiâtir*, the fast of *Ramađân*, many Mohammedans break their fast by drinking a cup of water.

A bewitched person escapes from the bonds of the evil spirits which possess him if he is sprinkled with holy water by a priest.

Qisret el-Hamis derives some of its prophylactic and curative action from the holy water in which it is soaked. This is the water used by the Greek Patriarch to wash the feet of the twelve bishops on Maundy Thursday.

Even in dreams water, springs and rivers are said (so long as the water is pure and clean) to be a good omen.² They indicate prosperity, blessing, riches and many children. On the other hand salty water and the sea are considered a bad omen.³

Very interesting is the Mohammedan belief that while God's throne is above the waters⁴ that of Satan is above the sea.⁵ I think that by "the waters" sweet waters are meant. The nearness of the habitation of God to that of *Iblis* is a very old idea and is still known among all eastern people. Reference may be made to the springs inhabited by good and bad spirits at the same time.⁶ They

¹ JPOS, I, 155.

² 'Abd el-Ghanî en-Nâbulstî, *Ta'âtir el-'anâm*, I, 25, 174; II, 64, 159.

³ Moĥammad bin Sirîn, *Ta'âtir er-ru'id*.

⁴ Sûrah, XI, 7.

⁵ Al-isti'âdah bil-lâh min es-seiřân er-radjtn, 102.

⁶ See CANAAN *Mohammedan Saints*, 67.

are continually fighting each other.

Mention may here be made of certain Palestinian customs pertaining to the sea¹ and indicating a belief in its supernatural powers. A bewitched person can be cured by bathing in the sea. On *arba' et Aiyâh* many inhabitants of sea-coast towns and villages who suffer from skin trouble take a bath in the sea with the belief that they will be cured. Even animals suffering from scabies are bathed in the sea in this day.

A common belief compares each person's daily income with a spring of water. For a person with a large income the spring flows abundantly, while for the poor person it only drips. The following story, heard in Hebron and probably known all over Palestine,² well illustrates this idea. A poor, hard-working *fellâh* used to complain every evening that in spite of his faithfulness, his hard work and the large family which he had to support, God gave him but a few piastres.³ One night Allah sent down the angel Mikâyl who ordered the peasant to follow him. He led the *fellâh* out of the village into the wilderness. They came to a lonely valley of which the two sides were gigantic perpendicular rocks. Countless springs, one beside the other, came out from both sides. Some flowed strongly, others flowed in a trickle as thin as a thread, and still others dripped one drop at a time. "What is this?" asked the frightened man. "That is the *rizq* (daily income) of every human being; the Almighty in his wisdom has ordered every man's future according to his own knowledge." The peasant asked, "Where is my spring?" He was shown a tiny opening in the rock from which a drop of water came out every few seconds. Hoping to be able to enlarge the opening and thus increase the flow of water of his spring he picked up a dry piece of wood and set to work. But lo, the stick broke off and completely stopped the flow. He sank on his knees and wept. The angel who had left him alone for a few

¹ According to Christian belief (the prayer of Gabriâus *es-shahîd* and *adjîâzmâ-târi*) inhabited.

² The story is given in another version by SCHMIDT and KAHLE, *Volks Erzählungen aus Palästina*, 241. The Arabic transcription is full of mistakes. These authors have mentioned some stories which were already given in my *Aberglaube* without acknowledgment.

³ An Arabic proverb says *er-rizq min ('alâ) allah*.

minutes came back and seeing his pitiful plight asked of him the reason. Explaining his misdeed the *fellâh* begged the angel for mercy and for help in removing the piece of wood. He promised for the future to be grateful for any gift from the Lord.

The customs so far described show that the present Palestinian believes that water possesses special peculiarities and powers. These belong to any water, but they may be lost if the water is polluted. Fresh water has greater power than salt water. By prayers, by relation with some holy man, or by magical rites this power may be increased. Some of these rites and beliefs point directly to the idea that water has life-preserving and life-producing powers by reason of which devils are banished, or the sick cured, or barren women made fruitful, or life prolonged.

Since earliest days water has been regarded as the favoured habitation of supernatural beings, good or bad.¹ The good spirits impart some of their power to the water. This is one of the main reasons why water is so often used for cures. It is the natural conclusion that water must possess life-preserving powers since if disease is the beginning of death, water by curing disease prevents death.

Of all the water in the world that of Mecca and Jerusalem is accounted the most holy. According to Abû Hureirah² both cities are of the cities of Paradise. While Mecca is sacred only to the Mohammedans Jerusalem is holy to the followers of all the three faiths. For the Mohammedans Jerusalem was for a time the most sacred place. The belief is that every prophet turned his face during prayer towards the Sacred Rock. Even the Prophet Mohammed used to do so until he received the divine command to turn towards Mecca. From Jerusalem he was taken in that wonderful night to see heaven. From here Christ also ascended into heaven. The final judgement will also take place here.

¹ It is a very old belief that demons live in the interior of the earth, whence they at times emerge. We meet them generally in places which have a direct connexion with the lower regions: trees, cracks, caves, springs and wells. Many *djinn* were regarded, as time passed, as good spirits and thus we find that the present Palestinian knows of good and bad demons inhabiting water courses (*Aberglaube*, JPOS, I, 154)

² Mudjir ed-Din, I, 200.

The holiest site in Jerusalem is the Temple Area, Mount Moriah. East of it is the "Valley of Condemnation," called *wādi djahannam* (the valley of Gehenna). Its continuation is still known as *wādi en-nār* ("The Valley of Fire"). It is held that on the Day of Judgement it will open directly into hell. West of this valley are "the doors of repentance and mercy" which open directly into the Temple Area. On the Day of Judgement the Almighty will stretch out a rope from this sanctuary, the Temple, to the Mount of Olives. Every soul must walk from the one place to the other over this rope. Sinners who have deserved God's punishment will fall down into the Valley of Condemnation and so into eternal fire.

It is an interesting illustration of the nearness of heaven to hell. For we have seen that the Palestinians cherish the belief that Paradise lies under or near the Sacred Rock, while the adjacent Kidron valley is supposed to open directly into hell.

The most holy place in the Temple Area is the Sacred Rock, supposed to be the centre of the world. According to Ibn 'Abbās its origin is from Paradise, and from it the angel of the Lord will proclaim the Day of Judgement.

*
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Although the people of the Holy Land never use the term *šad-jarat el-ḥaiāh*¹ (the Tree of Life) they know and use the term *maiyet el-ḥaiāh* (the Water of Life).²

The following are some current ideas concerning the Water of Life. The belief is widespread that below the Dome of the Rock in the Sacred Area flow four rivers each to a separate point of the compass. Some of the water from them percolates to the surface. Thus we find to the east the spring of Siloam, to the north *'en el-Qaşleh* and *birket Hadjdjeh*, to the south *Ḥammām es-Šifā*, and to the west *Ḥammām es-Sulṭān*.³

An old belief which still survives is that *bir el-Waraqah* inside the *Aqṣā* is directly connected with Paradise. Therefore it is main-

¹ The Tree of Life has been fully discussed by the author in JPOS, VIII, 152 ff.

² A physician treating a patient with a chronic incurable disease may be heard saying *md f333 'indi maiyet el-ḥaiāh*—I do not possess the Water of Life.

³ Cf. CANAAN, *Haunted Springs*, 15.

tained that the water of this cistern never fails and that it has a sweet taste. The story on which the belief is based is as follows: A man once came to this well to fetch water for his friends. The bucket fell into the cistern, and when he went down to recover it he found that the well ended in a large subterranean garden in which all the trees were laden with fruit. As a relic and as proof of his discovery he cut off a leaf and brought it up.¹ This leaf never faded. Mudjir ed-Din tells us that the caliph Omar in explaining this incident averred that it was the fulfilment of the Prophet Mohammed's prophecy that a living man of his followers would enter Paradise walking on his feet.²

In the Aqşâ one is shown *mibrâb* Mariam. It is still believed that angels used to bring her from Paradise the fruits of the winter season in summer and those of the summer season in winter. The nearest way to Paradise was the well Bir el-Waraqah.

The Mohammedans assure us that the water of Zamzam and that of Jerusalem, namely *Ḥammâm es-Şifâ* and ' *ên Siluân*, are mingled on the tenth of *Moharram*. Some even allege that on this day all the other waters of the Mohammedan world mingle with these two springs and so derive their blessing. To prove the first belief they tell how an Indian pilgrim lost his water cup in Zamzam. A year later he chanced to be in Jerusalem and on the day of ' *Asûrah* when he was taking a bath in *Ḥammâm es-Şifâ*, the bath-keeper drawing water fished out a cup. This was recognized at once by the Indian as his own cup which fell into Zamzam when he was at Mecca.

Although many other springs in Palestine are used for curative purposes, the few springs and perennial wells in and around Jerusalem are the objects of the greatest reverence. Despite their insignificance compared with springs elsewhere we find that several prophets are connected with them: Job with *Ḥammâm es-Şifâ* and *Bir Aiyûb*, St. Mary and Balqîs³ with *Ḥammâm Sitti Mariam*,⁴ the angel with Bethesda, Christ with Siloam and ' *ên el-Lôzeh*, and *el-Ḥaḍr*

¹ The story is told in a somewhat modified version by Mudjir ed-Din, II, 368f.

² According to Bakr abî Mariam

³ The supposed queen of Sheba.

⁴ Flowers, candles and oil are sometimes offered here in honour of the Virgin.

with *Ḥammām es-Šifā*. This explains why they are such popular resorts for the sick: thus barren women take a bath in *Ḥammām sittī Mariam* where the Virgin is supposed to have taken a bath;¹ they that suffer from fever go to 'ēn Imm ed-Daradj (Siloam); inflamed eyes are washed with water from 'ēn Imm el-Lōzeh; they that suffer from skin eruptions try *Ḥammām es-Šifā*, since it is believed that Job was cured here from his skin disease; children inflicted with the evil results of *el-baḏḏah* are taken to the basin (*el-Kās*) situated between *el-Aqsā* and the Dome of the Rock. Some have assured me that they have heard the rushing of running water in the cave below the Sacred Rock.

The Qoran thus describes the four rivers of Paradise. Each stream has its own characteristics: "rivers of incorruptible water; and rivers of milk, the taste thereof changeth not; and rivers of wine pleasant unto those that drink, and rivers of clarified honey."² The explanations of this as given by the various commentators are of interest. We shall see shortly how they resemble past and present ideas. According to 'Abd el-Rahīm bin Aḥmad el-Qāḏī³ the four rivers issue from a dome made of precious stones.

According to well known traditions the four rivers of Paradise are *Sihūn*, *Djihūn*, the Nile and the Euphrates. They have their source in a dome of precious stones. This dome is in the garden of Eden. The Nile passes, after leaving this dome, through the "sea of darknesses" below the "mountains of the moon" and afterwards emerges in Egypt. The three others sink into the interior of the earth and afterwards reappear at their various sources.⁴ The taste and odour of the water of these four rivers have kept their heavenly quality, and each of them has marked curative powers.

A *ḥadīṭ* transmitted by Abū Hureirah says that these four rivers have their source under the Sacred Rock, which rock will show its true nature in the Day of Judgement by turning to white coral.⁵

¹ *Balqīs*, the daughter of king *Šarahil* of *Ja'rib*, got rid of the hairs growing on her legs and thighs by taking a bath in this place (*Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries*, 60, footnote 1).

² *Sūrah XLVII*, 15, 16.

³ *Daqā'iq el-aḥbār fi ḏikr ahl ed-djannah ua-n-nār*.

⁴ *Ḥarīdatu l-'adja'ib*, 154, 157.

⁵ *Mudjir ed-Dīn*, I, 209.

This description corresponds so closely with the dome already referred to, from which issue the four rivers of Paradise, that we may conclude that both traditions have a like origin.

An examination of further beliefs leads to a more definite conclusion :

Uns ibn Málík taught that Jerusalem is a part of Paradise.¹ This idea is well known and widely spread.

The Prophet is reported as saying (according to *Ibn es-Şámit*) that God placed the Holy Rock on a palm tree which grows on one of the rivers of the Garden of Eden.²

All fresh waters have their origin in one of the rivers running from under *es-Şábrab*.³ Hence all who drink in the night-time from any running water should say "O water! the water of Jerusalem salutes thee!"⁴

The springs of Siloam⁵ and Zamzam are supplied directly from the rivers of Paradise.

In reviewing these beliefs we see that the Mohammedan world believes that the four rivers of Paradise issue from the most holy place, from under the Sacred Rock, and that the spot is a part of Paradise.

Turning to the Old and New Testaments we find that this idea, the direct connexion of Paradise and the Water of Life with the most holy sanctuary, was also held in those times. "A river of water of life, bright as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God" (Rev. 22¹). But the likeness is still more striking if we compare Zech. 14⁸, Joel 3¹⁸ and Ezek. 47¹, where we learn that the river of life proceeds from the House of the Lord at the side of the altar, in the four directions. On the side of the river grows the Tree of Life, as well as many trees whose leaves shall not wither.⁶ In Gen. 2^{10,14} we find that three names of the four rivers that

¹ Mudjir ed-Din I, 211.

² Ibid. I, 202, 371.

³ Ibid. I, 209.

⁴ This custom also illustrates the belief that water has a spirit which sleeps in the night and therefore must be awakened gently.

⁵ On the other hand it is believed that this spring was once inhabited "by a bad spirit appearing in the form of a camel. He used to drink a lot of water from time to time, thus stopping the flow for a short period." This camel died. Its place was taken by a hen and her chicken (JPOS, I. 165).

⁶ Rev. 22¹; Ez. 47¹². In Joel 3¹⁸ we read in connexion with the stream of

watered the four regions and issued from the river which "went out of Eden," correspond with the names of three rivers that issue from under the Sacred Rock.

Going back still further to the beliefs of the ancient east we find the same idea. "Both Egyptians and Babylonians (at least in germ) evolved the theory of four rivers flowing from a common source to water the four quarters."¹ The Hindus and Iranians cherished the same belief. The mighty river whence all streams spring, was called "river creatress of everything" (also "river of fertility").²

The idea of snakes and dragons emitting water from their mouth is common in old mythology. The serpent, the wisest of animals (Gen. 3¹), was looked upon as the symbol of life and many deities were represented in the form of a snake.³ To the present day a Palestinian mother whose children die hangs around the neck of her next child the head of a snake, since a *haiyeh* (serpent) gives *haiâh* (life). Thus we see an association of ideas: water, issuing from the mouth of an animal representing life, acquires life.

The present day Palestinian considers a *haiyeh*, as opposed to a 'arbid, the habitation of good natured saints who desire the prosperity of the human race. Many springs, houses and treasures are guarded by serpents.

In conclusion we may thus summarize the belief of the present

Palestinian about the water of life:

- 1 Four rivers issue from under the Sacred Rock.
- 2 These rivers come from Paradise.
- 3 Jerusalem is a part of the garden of Eden. The most holy place of the city being the Temple of which the most holy spot is the Sacred Rock.
- 4 Some of the water of these four streams percolates to the surface in four directions.
- 5 The water of these four rivers imparts life to every one who

life, "the mountains shall drop down new wine and the hills shall flow with milk and the brooks, etc." It here mentions three things (water, wine and milk) which flow in three of the four rivers of the Qoran.

¹ ALBRIGHT, *The Mouth of the Rivers*, AJSLL, vol. 35, p. 188.

² ALBRIGHT, *l.c.*

³ ALBRIGHT, *The Goddess of Wisdom and Life*, AJSLL, vol. 36, p. 274 ff.

drinks it.

These ideas can be traced back to the beginnings of Moham-
medan history, to biblical times and to ancient eastern mytho-
logy.