Introduction

Now that we've talked about tradition in the Book of Water, and how a unified view of it is possible if you choose to see things that way, let's talk about reconciling that unified view with hard facts. Part One will talk about science, the speculative concepts involved in explaining the supernatural, and how our understanding of the Universe is finally starting to advance to the point that it tells us what was really happening in ancient times. Part Two will be on history of cultures, to give you an idea of the context that went along with the stories. Part Three will deal in mythology, what it is and how it evolves. With it, I hope you'll get a clearer view of why myths get told the way they do, and how things change over time. All mythology is unreliable, but most of it has a root in fact, and by understanding the process of its evolution, you'll have a better chance of finding that root.

Part One: Science

I: You're Not Thinking Fourth Dimensionally, Marty

Imagine you're a stick figure drawn on a piece of paper. You live in two dimensions. You can go up, down, and to both sides, but you can't come off the paper. Depth doesn't exist. You're fine without it, can't even imagine it. You live your little stick figure life with your stick figure friends, and life is just peachy.

Then, one day, someone outside the paper sticks a knife into it, and it skewers your stick figure neighbor, Bob, as he's telling you about the little stick flowers he's going to put in front of his house. While you're glad that conversation is over, you're somewhat horrified that Bob just got ripped to shreds right in front of you. Remember, you can't see anything but the two dimensions, you have no inkling of some three-dimensional knife-wielding god. You can see the effects though, and you start telling everyone about unseen forces that can just end everything, everywhere, and they don't even need a reason. Your stick figure friends and family are understanding and supportive at first, but gradually it's too much for them to handle. It means nothing to them that you're getting letters from other stick figures who've seen the same kind of unexplained phenomena, they just figure crazy loves company. They lock you away in a stick figure asylum because they're afraid you might be dangerous, you're probably the one who killed Bob after all, and you live the rest of your life there.

Just like those 2D people don't know about the 3D world, we can't imagine what the 4D, 5D, or 6D worlds look like, and interacting with them is somewhere between difficult and impossible. Marzod is a higher dimensional energy, which we know because we can't see it, even though Qi, Brahman, Mana, Prana, Kawsay, and more all tell us, independently of each other, that it's there. It's running a circuit of your body, hitting a network of key points, like an electrical circuit with a lot of light bulbs. The exact locations of those bulbs have some variance across systems, but the main thing is, all the molecules of your body stick out into the higher dimensions and interact with Marzod. Higher dimensions are trippy places, where time and space are intertwined. That's the basis of the interconnection of Marzod, that it WAS connected, and so always IS connected.

I'll go over that differently for you. Think of the timeline as a room. You've got the Roman Empire over in the corner, you've got the creation of the Universe over by the window, you've got Genghis Khan around here somewhere, maybe he's over by the coffee pot. Now, they can't interact with each other, they're limited, they have no choice but to take a predetermined path around the room. Not you, though, you God of Time, you. You can go anywhere you want, because time and space are the same thing, or close enough.

If time and space are the same thing, then it doesn't matter if space separates two things, just go to a time when they were together and there's still a connection. Here on this end table, you've got a bird. On the couch next to it, the bird lost a feather. Now, one of these limited little people picks up the feather and casts a spell on it. Somehow, they accessed energy that's just as free as you are, and when they cast that spell, it went for that feather in all its time of existence, including when it was attached to the bird. You're shocked beyond words. Reaching from the couch to the end table is nothing to you, but for one of them to do it should be impossible.

That's the higher dimensions for you. That's why there's so many common threads in myth and magic across cultures that had nothing to do with each other. They all used energy to affect Marzod, and from there touched the higher dimensions. Sympathetic magic, psychic imprints, telepathy, telekinesis, this was all stuff we could see at work, but we didn't really have a good line on how, so our results were spotty at best. We knew point A, we knew point B, but science hadn't evolved to a point yet where it could draw us a line between the two. Basic science spent millenia telling us all these things were lies, misunderstandings, and kind of dumb, and we bought it. Turns out, as in most things, you have to go beyond the basics.

II: Nuts and Bolts

Marzod is another word for Aether, an outdated word in today's scientific world, but what it means is a quantum field, the thing all matter and energy is made from. Depending on the type of field generated, you can take your pick of all 118 elements of the periodic table. String theory tells us what makes the fields different. Nutshell version, rather than each molecule being a speck, it's a string, the rest of the string sticking off in a higher dimension we can't see, we can only see the tiny section of the string that vibrates in a way we're equipped to perceive. Different vibrations, different quantum fields, different elements.

To make it clearer, let's talk about sound. I'm sure you know sound exists in a wide band, some of it we can hear, some we can't, like a dog whistle. Now, imagine you could only hear sound in a much, much narrower band than you already do. Let's say I've got a guitar, and I pluck the top string, the big E. It's vibrating all over the string, and the further you get from the bridge, the more it's waving around. You, with your limitation, can only hear the part of the string about an inch from the bridge, but that doesn't stop the rest of the string from being there, does it? Just means you can only perceive a tiny part.

That's string theory, that all matter isn't made up of particles, but strings, and you can only perceive the part that vibrates a certain way. Now, you can hear that big E about an inch from the bridge, but if I pluck the A string, it's thinner, it vibrates more, you have to move closer to the bridge for the part you can hear, say half an inch. For the D string, a quarter inch. G, B, and small E, you can't hear those at all. Expand this back to the Universe, you can only interact with the part of the string that vibrates the right way, the rest is invisible, intangible, you can't interact with it at all through your five basic senses.

Now, you can't expect all the strings in the Universe to carry the same tune forever. Within certain bounds, that's fine, it creates a new element maybe, or the laws of physics hiccup a little in a certain spot, but the Universe keeps playing its song. Sometimes, though, part of the orchestra starts playing the wrong tune, they're copying their neighbor rather than watching the conductor. When we're talking about Marzod, the building blocks of reality, that makes its own little section of a new reality totally different from ours, where our elements, our laws of physics, our understanding of everything, gets swept out and replaced. When that happens, we call it a black hole. There's no known upper limit on how far matter can be compressed, so there may be worlds in there smaller than quarks, with life forms that can't even begin to imagine the size and scope of their universe, only a black hole to us.

If that last thought made you feel big and powerful, hang on while I shrink you back down, Alice in Wonderland style. Our Universe, with its 118 elements, is very intricate, very complex. It's a long way from the original Universe of Marzod, which you might as well call the single cell organism all universes evolved from. That means that our Universe, in all its wonderful, intricate complexity, is most likely a black hole, within a black hole, within a black hole, hundreds or even thousands of times, each one just a little more complex than the last. Imagine our Universe, boundless to us, as a tiny percentage of space inside another universe which is itself just a tiny percentage of space inside another, repeated until you get to the original Marzod, the biggest universe of all. It must be the same way people felt when they figured out those tiny pricks of light in the sky were giant suns, each surrounded by planets, stretching out into infinity.

But these universes aren't permanent. Black holes put out Hawking Radiation, which is a fancy name for the fact that as a black hole ages, it loses its density. Things tend toward balance, and the black holes return to being more like the rest of our universe. Remember when you were a kid, and you looked at adults and thought of how you'd do everything different, you could never be like them, it's impossible? Look at you now. Time showed you why things are the way they are, smoothed out your rough edges, now you're one of those adults, with kids looking at you saying "that'll never be me." Universes are like that, it just takes hundreds of billions of years to see any change as they all evolve back to the original Marzod.

III: Life and Death of a Universe

When a new universe begins, it's only Marzod, Marzod that became so different from the rest of its universe that they couldn't exist together. Alternate laws of reality formed, and the new Marzod exists as a hole in reality within the old universe. To us, that's a black hole, to the ones inside, it's a boundless expanse, whose limits they can't fully imagine in a way that does it justice. This is called the Black Hole Cosmology Hypothesis, if you want to look into it more and see I didn't just make up something because it was cool. Moving from one universe to the other involves such huge shifts in reality itself that there's no chance a living being could survive it. Do you think you could live in a universe made of mashed potatoes, where your blood exists outside your body, three miles away, and termites who communicate in shades of the color blue are the dominant species? Probably not, and all the stuff I just described is stuff you recognize and have words to describe, so imagine how much worse it can get.

But Marzod doesn't just sit there, it starts to change. In a way, it's the first choice within that universe. Then other bits of Marzod change in response. Soon the whole batch of it is changing just as fast as it can, all parts in competition with each other, feeding on each other, going from gas to solid matter to planets, where life sparks and evolves, all fighting each other, everyone trying to get one over on the rest, from evolutionary arms races to more literal arms races, involving higher intelligence and even gods. The Hindi see this as Brahman manifesting Prakriti, matter, and Purusha, consciousness, and if you're wondering, they're locked in an eternal struggle too. No form of Marzod likes anything very different from itself, sees it as a threat, and it'll change to get a leg up on the competition. But conservation of energy is important at all levels, and it usually won't jump too high, just enough to get an edge, so maybe you get a prophet instead of a god, or something even tamer, like a new rock, just enough to advance a tiny bit.

This creates a system of cause and effect, and nothing can happen outside that loop, so in a way, everything was predetermined from the moment of the very first universe of the very first Marzod, because you can't have any effect without a cause. You've never really made a decision in your life, it was made for you, because some stimulus caused an expression of chemicals in your brain, a firing of electrons, so you couldn't help but think what you thought and do what you did. One thing reacts to another, and the outcome may have too many variables to be predictable, but it was always inevitable. Newton said if you knew the location and velocity of every particle in the Universe, you could predict everything, forever, but that was impossible because the more you know its location, the less you know its velocity, and that cuts both ways. LaPlace's Demon is pretty much the same thing, that if you knew all causes, you'd know all effects, but that's just not practical.

But that doesn't mean everything is written and you can stop trying to do anything. The struggle is written too, and nothing can happen without it, because there's still other forces trying to bring THEIR will forward. If you do nothing, that's written too, and probably means your failure is written shortly after. Remember there's no effect without cause, and most of the things you want are effects of your causes. Does it really matter that your causes are also effects? If you choose inaction, what do you think is written from there? You can see it in Greek myths, the Moirai, or Fates, had everything predetermined, but that didn't absolve the heroes of their responsibility to be heroic, because how is the path ever going to get there if nobody struggles to make it happen?

But the struggle has its limits, and at some point the disharmony gets too out of hand. It's too much for the universe to tolerate, the rules of reality get bent past their breaking point. One thing that can happen, we know already, is a black hole. But sometimes it's less dramatic, it's only an ice age or a meteor or the fall of a civilization. Ask the Norse, the Mayans, the Hindi, this is not the first world to ever exist, the slate has been wiped before, by Ragnarok, the Five Suns, Pralaya. The world is born, life happens, struggles, the planet gets wiped clean, and it starts over again. If you expand your mythological net there, look into previous types of human, failed drafts, so to speak, that got wiped off the board and everything reset, that myth has an echo in pretty much every culture.

Why is that? Why does every culture think the world keeps getting reset? Because it's happening, every time evolution, instead of giving some animal fangs or a stinger or camouflage, gives it time travel or antigravity or something else that can't exist. Sometimes a god can find a way to exist without breaking everything, even though he technically shouldn't, but if things go too far, the Marzodian reset gets hit, at least in a localized area. Marzod's need for balance kicks in, and with no response to this new thing, it's nope, sorry, that's out of bounds, everybody back to your starting positions. And if it's too big to wipe out with a cataclysm, it turns into a black hole instead, and the creation of a whole new Universe. Marzod says "as long as you're under my roof, young man, you'll live by my laws of reality," and the new Marzod packs up, punches a hole in reality, and starts a new universe where it can do whatever it wants.

Course, if it's a systemic issue rather than a localized one, that's when the entire Universe gets tanked. And that's bad news for just about everybody, including all the black holes, and all the black holes within them, and all the black holes within those. The collapse of one universe could easily mean the collapse of hundreds or even thousands of universes. So, you know, maybe it'd be a good idea if you did your part to promote balance and unity. Next time you have a choice between selfishness and generosity, or anger and forgiveness, consider that your choice might be the straw that breaks the Marzod's back. Next time someone cuts you off in traffic, remember thousands of universes might hang on whether you honk or let it go.

IV: Let's Do the Time Warp Again

Look, I won't lie to you, this is going to be a tough one. We're dealing with time and relativity, and that's never easy, we're just not designed to understand time in any way but forward at a certain rate. Still, I'll do my best to write it, and if you do your best to read it, I think we'll get there.

According to Hubble's Law, the Universe is constantly expanding, which probably isn't news to you. What may be news is Dark Energy, which is, against all known physics, making us pick up speed as we go. In my theory, the reason for that is a special particle I call Marzod, a particle that has negative mass. According to Einstein's Mass-Energy Equivalence, matter and energy are the same thing in different states, so if you plot the states of matter on a line, you've got Solid, Liquid, Gas, Plasma, and "Plasma" is usually divided by type of energy rather than mass, but it's division by mass that's important to my theory. See, you've got heavy energy, which is dark matter, that's energy that's so close to being matter it's got some of matter's most basic qualities, and at the other end of the scale, you've got photons, with no mass at all.

Now, according to String Theory, more vibration makes less mass, so the photons are vibrating a lot, while solids hardly at all. The big question is, what happens when you make a photon vibrate harder, channel more energy into it? You'd get a particle that responds opposite to everything, it goes through time backward, if you push it left it goes right, all kinds of weird stuff, because our Universe is built on positive mass, and negative mass would allow your mutated photon to go faster than light, it'd do everything wrong, according to theories involving tachyons or CPT symmetry. It would even have opposite gravity, responding the wrong way to Newton's Universal Gravitation, where mass attracts mass. That means, while we're drawn to it, it doesn't like us back, and it runs away while we chase, because we just can't take a hint. But it's kind of the Marzod's fault, because it's sending mixed signals. When it runs away in reverse time, it's running toward us in regular time.

So what happens when we meet? Really good question, it could be a massive explosion, it could be nothing, we don't know because there are a lot of precedents in conflict and we can't exactly stick Marzod under a microscope to find out. One thing that could happen is it acts like a magnet, and when we meet, the polarization either cancels out or flips. If it cancels out, Marzod keeps running to the center of the Universe because of momentum, and if it flips, it still does that, but faster because it's pushing off us, attracted to us in reverse time, so running away. We do know there'd be no physical interaction, because extremely high energy has no mass and no substance, so either way, we pass right through and continue our journey, us to the edge, Marzod to the center. It's not clear whether life on Earth would survive the meeting, but let's not bring more questions into this Jenga tower of a theory.

So we eventually will hit the edge of the Universe, what happens then? If the Black Hole Cosmology Hypothesis is correct and our universe is just a black hole inside another universe, we'd hit the event horizon of the black hole, get bombarded with Hawking Radiation, quantum fluctuations, and the upshot is all the matter gets supercharged, way past the plasma level, and suddenly we're Marzod particles instead of normal matter. All that momentum we had is suddenly pushing us the opposite way, because we respond wrong to force. We make a sharp U-turn and head for the center of the Universe. But what happened to the Marzod from before, where did it go? Glad you asked.

Marzod kept right on its road trip, going faster and gaining energy as it did, because it does everything in reverse. Finally, it all hit the center, and all that energy gathered up in one ultra-dense spot just exploded. A lot of the energy was spent, and the Marzod wasn't Marzod anymore, it didn't have the high energy required, it was just normal matter. That's the Big Bang, if you haven't guessed it yet, and this theory offers an explanation for why it exploded, given that matter only ever attracts matter, and where all the Universe's energy came from, because it can't be created out of nowhere. Energy condenses into matter, but how the hell does matter become energy, or explode? Particles that have such high energy they have negative mass and do everything opposite, that's how.

So where did the original Big Bang come from? Easy, that's Black Hole Cosmology Hypothesis again. The hole yanked a lot of matter and energy in from its original Universe, and once it had enough energy to supercharge the mass in the center, it exploded. As for the actual seed of the black hole, well, if you figure out what causes that you be sure and let CERN know, they're kind of dying to find out. It's a bit of the fabric of the Universe that's going through its rebellious teenage years, is about all we've got on that.

Look, I won't pretend this theory is perfect or beyond contradiction, but it's built out of mainstream scientific theories. All the physicists can vouch for the building blocks, if not the house I built, so I think this is about as solid as it gets unless we can find some eyewitness testimony from the creation of the Universe. And since God has left humanity on read for the last handful of centuries, I think this is the best we can do.

V: Marzod Cancrorum

We covered the matter last chapter, now let's talk souls. The Marzod flowing back sometimes gets snagged on higher-dimensional aspects of some types of matter, and that creates life. It's not heading back to the Bang, it's trapped in a circuit of a body, and this may not be the first time. The more times the loop repeats, the more of the Marzod flying back at the matter has been a soul at some point. Now, it wasn't always intelligent, it could have been a plant or an animal. In fact, there could be loops without intelligent life at all, or where there's no color red, or where it's all space jellyfish with laser eyes, because we've always had more matter flying in from our parent universe, causing little differences in the loop, little butterfly effects that didn't happen any of the previous times. This might be why some people are so good at being sentient, and some people really suck at it, the successful ones have been sentient more times, and their innate memories are giving just enough of a push to tell them what works and what doesn't.

Now, I hasten to add, if you want to try to spin that into your ignorant, bigoted worldview, you take that somewhere else, because there's no basis for that. All humans have the same hardware, the only notable difference is software, and if you're not on board with that, let me know and I'll send you a list of remedial biology classes in your area. And the hardware all being the same, why the hell would Marzod pick one race, gender, or caste over another? So, some people have more innate understanding of complex society than others, some have less, and it's random. Some Marzod snags on lifeforms that have high intelligence, some snags on a blade of grass instead. Don't brag to me because you think you won the lottery a bunch of times, because misunderstanding my point that badly will only prove to me that you didn't win it as many times as you think. My point isn't exclusion or establishing hierarchy, my point is harmony, just like it was five minutes ago, and every time before that.

While the dimmer bulbs take some time to absorb that, let's the rest of us talk about crabs. Did you know five different species have looked at their bodies and said "this sucks, wanna go be crabs?" It's true, all these species, independently of each other, evolved into crabs, because the crab isn't the most graceful, or the smartest, or the toughest, but it's the best, most resilient and capable body type for its environment, and all the other species are waiting on is the accidental mutation that turns them into crabs too. Evolution is a messy, chaotic process that weeds out inferior forms and converges toward the best, from all directions, because there's only one "best." In the ocean, that's the crab, and if you want to look into it more, it's called carcinization. Carcinisation if you prefer the British.

So, over the course of many universal loops, the number of souls who've been sentient grows, and they learn harmony is the best way. They may not recognize or remember it on a conscious level, but their innate memory helps prod them along. Even people who are evil and successful eventually end up there, because when did you ever meet someone who was a self-centered prick AND had a fulfilling personal life? They learn to do better. And it's this innate memory that sometimes leads to prophecy, because the soul sees how things are shaping up and recognizes familiar ground from past loops. Some are very similar to the current loop, others are so different they come through like a bad acid trip.

Eventually, everyone reaches perfection. There's only one "best," and we're all evolving that way, remember? Eventually there's a loop where everyone is doing the best possible thing in every situation, and everything is great. It's Heaven, to borrow from religion. Then our Universe ends.

Don't worry, everything keeps going. Our Universe ended because it's just a black hole inside another universe, and it finally hit the edge, got turned to Marzod, and is rocketing backward to THAT Big Bang. And now our perfection gets to influence that universe, cause it to evolve our way until it catches up to us. This keeps going, all the way up the chain, until we get back to the original universe, where Marzod Infanti first started evolving and experimenting, through its stages of Marzod Juvenilis, all the way to Marzod Cancrorum, the crab. It tried chaos, order, war, peace, created an infinite number of universes, and they all evolved to the crab. Perfection was inevitable, because imperfection is unstable.

VI: Qi

Everything sticks into the higher dimensions to some extent, just like everything has width, height, depth, but certain points in your body interact with Marzod more than others. It's hard to say why, since we can't see these dimensions. It's not immediately clear why one part of the body attracts Marzod more than others, but the Indians call these points Chakras, the Chinese call them Meridians, and basically what we're talking about is a place where Marzod is drawn in its circuit of the body. By changing these points and the paths between them, you change the flow. You affect the higher dimensions by affecting the flow of Marzod.

A neat concept, you're thinking, but so what? I'll tell you so what, while there's some disagreement on where these points are, depending on which system you pick, they all agree your brain is a big one. That's why focus, intent, and force of will play such a large role here. You're changing the bloodflow and bioelectrical activity in your brain, which changes how that node interacts with Marzod. You're changing the flow of higher dimensional energy just by thinking about it hard enough.

Now, where do those other nodes come in? Your body works as a unit, and your brain is the command center. Those other nodes are pitching in, taking orders from the brain, reporting back what happens. The practice of magic and spirituality is a full-body event, and the more you've got your body in line, the more effective you'll be. Any number of belief systems involve something like Marzod, as we've already touched on, and most of them agree good mental, emotional, and physical health is the biggest key to making that force do what it should. All over Asia, whether India, China, Japan, Tibet, they take an approach of direct stimulation of the nodes, whether it's acupuncture or pressure therapy. The focus of those is usually internal, personal health and such, but it stands to reason that machines produce the best results when all their parts work.

Now the interesting question is, once we've got the nodes operating at peak efficiency, what can we do to amplify the effect? Putting low voltage, heat, or vibration into a node is introducing more energy, giving Marzod something different. There's not a lot of info on this, so we're blazing a brand new trail there. People looking for external effects pretty much just use their brain nodes, the effect of the others is unexplored from that perspective. But there's nothing stopping you from trying. It'll take some work, figuring out where another node is, there's not such wide agreement on the location of others, but once you've found one, go nuts. Stimulate it any way you can think of and see what happens.

Meantime, for those of us who are less adventurous, it's all about focus. That, and making sure our bodies are a decent circuit for the energy. Exercise, don't eat garbage, and try to stay relaxed and positive. The better your internal mechanism is ticking, the more you can do with Marzod. I never saw a circuit yet that didn't see a power loss if the wires were screwed up. Your brain is the main thing, but it's not the only thing. If your wiring is bad, it doesn't really matter if your breaker box is in prime shape, the lights still won't come on.

VII: Kick Rocks, Casper

Let me first say, if you haven't read Of Ghosts and Gods in the Book of Water, you're going to have a hard time understanding this chapter. Nutshell version, spirits are higher dimensional energy, and they collect third dimensional energy to do stuff in our dimension. If you've got a spirit causing you trouble, the best thing to do about it is take away his energy, but before we get started, simmer down a little, because most unfriendly spirits are just frustrated. We've talked about how it's hard for them to communicate, they've been trying and you're not picking up what they're laying down. You moved into their house, you're all in their space, and you don't take notice when they ask you to back off, course they're a little cranky. Before you go on the warpath, communicate with them. Hire a pro if you need to. I'm sure you can work something out.

The flip side of that is, some people are just dicks. They were born dicks, they were dicks all through their lives, and they're dicks in death, and the only thing that'll make them behave is a swift boot to the ass. That's where this chapter gives you some help. Cultures through history, all over the world, have seen spirits driven off by all these things, and now that we understand Marzod and energy, we have a good idea why.

First, Iron. Iron is a ground, if you connect it to the Earth. Any energy that comes near gets sucked in, that's exactly how a lightning rod works. While a wire might just irritate a ghost, taking little sips of his energy supply, a big iron I-beam sunk in the ground is an energy vacuum. Silver is even better, it's got near 100% conductivity, but once it tarnishes that drops a lot.

Bodies of water are bad news for spirits too. You can't carry a lake in your pocket, or at least I never met anyone who did, but it's good to keep in mind that water is a conductor, and if it's touching the dirt it's a natural ground, which will suck the energy out of any ghost that comes near. If a ghost is chasing you and you're unarmed, I'd head for the nearest natural water and jump in. It'd be a hell of a powerful ghost who can keep chasing.

Crystals and mirrors have been shown across cultures and continents to repel ghosts, and my best guess is because of light refraction. Since spirits can only interact through energy, they see energy different from us. He'll see every beam of light, and all of a sudden you've sent beams all over the room. At the very least, it'd be confusing and overwhelming to navigate a room full of scattered light if that was the main thing you could see. Hard to zero in on a human's energy if the room is full of it. Salt does it better than anything else, each grain is a crystal, covered in irregular, reflective surfaces. You spill a salt shaker, the room's just full of interference.

Remember the part about how Marzod is a quantum field? High levels of energy will disrupt those. Ghosts feed on energy, but there's such a thing as too much of a good thing. Cultures all over the world have seen lots of energy, like a cannon or the sun or a blazing fire, drive spirits off. This will depend heavily on the spirit's strength and the strength of what noise, light, or heat you produce. This is not a good first choice, it can backfire in all the obvious ways, like fighting a pit bull with a bucket of fried chicken. Still, if you're in a bind, give it a shot. Worst that can happen is the ghost kills you quicker than it already was.

Last, air pollution, usually smoke in ancient times, makes it hard for ambient energy to focus, which really messes with a ghost's ability to do anything, plus string theory tells us all those particles are really filling up the higher dimensions. You can't hurt it with smoke, but you might keep it from hurting you. Word of warning, though, smoke is only an annoyance most of the time. Incense, using small amounts of thin smoke, is used all over Asia for spirit work, and gods all over the world ate sacrifices on altars billowing smoke every which way. It might chase off a weak ghost, or one who's not real motivated to stay, but it's not a weapon for a ghost hunter.

VIII: Drawing the Line

Remember when we talked about string theory? Well, in our dimension, that string vibrates and presents a certain way, but in another dimension, it's presenting in a totally different way. And because of the work of an obscure, mostly unknown German scientist of the 20th century, Albert Einstein, we know matter is only energy that's not moving around a lot, it's a spectrum, not a hard division. So a solid is matter on the far end of the spectrum, water is a bit closer to the middle, gas is even closer, then plasma is the other end of the scale, which is about as specific as naming all solids “rock,” but dark matter is an outlier you might know. It gets all covered up in layers of misunderstanding and pseudoscience by people trying to understand it as matter, but it's actually really simple, it's energy with mass. It's so close to the borderline that it's actually got the most basic quality that matter has, which is gravitational force. It'd be more accurate, and much clearer, to call it heavy energy, but I don't think we're going to get a name change at this point.

But the point is, the same substance can be matter in any of the three forms, or it can be energy, and it all depends on how it's vibrating. That means energy on our plane is matter in someone else's, because everything is relative, that's another theory from that Einstein guy. To us, fire isn't solid, because its particles are moving so much faster than ours. To some being made of extreme high energy, the flame on a candle would be like a lead brick. Any energy we can create would be a solid object, so when you chant, or the light is just right, or the temperature changes, you're creating solid objects in other dimensions, from the perspective of beings made of extremely high energy. It's hard to know exactly what that looks like to them, but that's where you lean on tradition, see how spirits usually respond to what you're doing.

That brings us to symbols, one of the oldest methods of changing the energy of an environment. Problem with traditional symbols is a lot of them come from looking pretty or fitting a metaphor rather than observed effects. And even the functional ones may get changed over time, ancient people not really understanding the importance of color, materials, or size here and their interaction with the light, heat, and EM spectrum. Looking at it as magic rather than science leads someone to think a complicated symbol made of copper, placed in the sun at noon is just as effective when scratched on a doorpost with charcoal. So, now that you see the challenge here, if you're still interested, here's how you can start to untie this knot.

If I drew up every symbol that exists, this book would be entirely too damn long. What I will do for you is give you my general rules of thumb on symbology. Across the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa, as far back as you care to trace it, there are certain shapes and colors in symbols that always mean the same thing. There's always outliers if your sample size is "all cultures ever," but these are the usual suspects. There'll always be frills and fluff stuck on by people who like decorating, but if your chosen symbol is supposed to do something and it has the right shape and color in it, I'd say it's legit.

Circle: Harmony

Square or rectangle: Solidity

Triangles or Chevrons

Down: Blessings

Up: Power

Right: Action

Left: Thought

Red: Vitality

Orange: Creativity

Yellow: Enlightenment

Blue: Peace

Green: Growth

Purple: Mystery

But if generalities in tradition don't do it for you, good news is, I know how you can do better. Bad news is, you could spend the rest of your life on this project.

First, research a bunch of symbols across cultures. Find the oldest version of them you can, so you can minimize the chance someone came along and changed it. You need to know all the conditions, the material, the size, how it's used, when it's used, all five thousand variables that go along with it. I'd keep this narrowed down to one single type of symbol, one single effect, for reasons that'll be clear to you in step five. Keep in mind ancient people rarely had pure materials to work with, so the effect may be less a function of their main material and more about the impurities.

Second, know the difference between a symbol that has power and a symbol that's asking for help. If it's a "set it and forget it" deal, it's probably doing its own work, but if it comes with a ritual, and most especially if it comes with a sacrifice, it's probably a signal flare. Either is fine, but know the difference.

Third, and this is the part that's going to be expensive, you make all these symbols. Make sure you don't screw them up, it'd be a real shame if you did all this for nothing.

Fourth, and this part is expensive too, you need to get all the equipment to measure energy that comes off these symbols. Light in both visible and invisible bands, EM field, temperature, sound resonance, anything you can think of. Take these readings many, many times, because at this point you've invested so much time and money that you really can't afford to half-ass it.

Fifth, compare the readings for similarities. Remember most of these symbols are garbage, so you're not looking for majority consensus, not even close. I'd say, if you've done 100 symbols, ten of them being in agreement is enough to say you've found the energy band that gets Marzod to do what you want.

Sixth step is optional, but at this point let's go all the way. Now you can look at artificially reproducing that energy. If a bunch of stone age people stumbled across this energy band by laying different stuff down in different patterns till something happened, surely you can do it better with modern technology.

As you can see, this can't be a single-person operation. You need a fairly large research team and quite a bit of money to invest if you're going to get enough symbols for an accurate sample size. Still, any breakthrough at all here would be a huge step forward in a criminally understudied field, scientifically speaking. For those of us who don't have a couple hundred grand to invest in this, though, it's better to just stick with tradition.

Part Two: History

I: Geographical Bottlenecks

About 70,000 years ago, man migrated out of Africa, and woman must have gone along with him, or that would have been a short, lonely story. We weren't the first species to leave, several went before us, and I guess our ancestors figured it must have worked out for them when they didn't come back, so they followed. They packed up their tools, their stories, and their gods, and they hit the road, and the thing about the migration is it never stopped. We'd settle somewhere a while, then food would get scarce or a new threat would show up, and we'd pick up and move, taking our ideas and technology with us. Now, you couldn't predict where we'd end up if we headed away from the center of the European, African, Asian landmass, but if we headed toward the center, it was the Middle East every time. An idea or innovation might spread across its continent without crossing the Fertile Crescent, but in the days before ships, you weren't crossing to another continent without passing through the bottleneck of the Red, Black, and Mediterranean Seas, creating a situation where any idea worth having on those three continents, given enough time, would inevitably hit that area.

You ever wonder why those people were the earliest ones to invent agriculture, writing, math, big cities, pretty much all the defining traits of civilization? It's because they got exposed to everyone's ideas, all the time, and the Mayan, Aztec, and Incan cultures got that same boost over in the Americas. Any culture farther to the edges might have their own interesting and unique spin on whatever ideas came from their own continent, but they'd be missing most of what came from other continents, and that's why the Inuit, Scandinavians, South and West Africans, East Asians, and Argentinans were all so late to the game, compared to Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica. They weren't stupid, they just didn't have as much foot traffic, outside ideas didn't get to them, they were on their own. Even after ships were around, cultures far inland still had the same problem. A culture advances based on how much contact it has with others, that's a basic fact. That, and its ability to grow a food surplus and support a large population, but it's mostly about how many people pass through, how many new ideas they get.

That's why, in researching cultures and history, I'll mostly just cover those two areas, Mesoamerica and Mesopotamia. Not to say other cultures have nothing to offer, but if your goal is syncretism of ideas, these two areas have been there, done that, and produced the best, most time-tested result. Cultures to the edges will only ever have a fraction of what the cultures in the center do, and while they may have a cool spin on the material, this book would be entirely too damn long if I included every single culture that ever existed. If your favorite part of the world wanted to be in this book, maybe it should have been more assertive during the tectonic shifts and grabbed a better spot, that's not my problem.

II: Mesopotamia

If we're talking about the Middle East, you know we're starting with Mesopotamia. It's the earliest known center of civilization, because it's located right at the bottleneck formed by the Red, Black, and Mediterranean Seas, you couldn't leave your continent back then without hitting Mesopotamia. It was the first melting pot, a filter that caught all the good ideas from three continents, and it's why the Mesopotamian Pantheon had a jaw-dropping three thousand gods in it. I thought it important I not write that number in digits, because you'd definitely have thought I accidentally put on an extra zero or two. Mesopotamia got started around 4000 BCE, and was mostly made up of Sumerians and Akkadians, with Elamites as neighbors to the east and Canaanites to the south, in the Middle Eastern deserts and hills.

But as I was saying, Mesopotamia had about 3,000 gods. Don't worry, I won't tell you about all of them, just the important ones. In my opinion, "important" means "ranks high enough to have a celestial body dedicated to them," but even there, it was variable by region. Mesopotamians all had different ideas on the Pantheon hierarchy, as you might expect with all those gods. Every city had their patron deity who they'd insist was chief of all the other gods, and they'd rank the other gods based on how friendly they were with the city the god came from. It was a real mess, but what I'm about to tell you here is what's generally accepted by the majority of scholars. If your favorite Mesopotamian god didn't make the cut, well, sorry, maybe he should have applied himself more and got himself a planet.

Anu of Uruk, associated with the Equatorial Sky and luludanitu stone. This was the creator god.

Enlil of Nippur, associated with the Northern Sky and lapis lazuli stone. God of wind, air, earth, and storms. He had the largest cult, and he's generally considered the benevolent and fatherly chief of gods.

Enki of Eridu, associated with the Southern Sky and jasper stone. God of the subterranean freshwater ocean, magic, wisdom, and crafts.

Marduk of Babylon, associated with Jupiter. He replaced Enlil as chief in 1900 BCE when Babylon rose to power under Hammurabi. His original role isn't well documented, but from his later roles, subtracting the ones he likely got as chief when he took over from Enlil, it was probably agriculture.

Nabu of Borsippa and Kalhu, associated with Mercury. God of writing, he grew extremely popular by the late first millennium BCE, with a wide reach across nearby areas.

Sin of Ur and Harran, god of the Moon.

Utu of Sippar and Larsa, associated with the Sun. God of truth, justice, and morality.

Ishtar of Uruk, associated with Venus, goddess of love, sex, and war. She was the most important and prominent female deity, and most myths involve her trying to usurp other gods.

Ninurta of Nippur, Girsu, and Lagash, associated with Saturn. God of war and agriculture.

Nergal of Kutha, associated with Mars. God of destruction, fire, war, and plague. Pretty much, if lots of people were dying, this was the guy doing it.

Ereshkigal of Kutha, associated with the Hydra constellation. Goddess of the Underworld and death.

Nanaya of Uruk and Kish, associated with the Corona Borealis. Goddess of love.

Ninshubur of Akkil, associated with the Orion constellation. Sukkal, or advisor, of Ishtar, which was definitely not an enviable job. Ishtar was always stirring up trouble, and Ninshubur had to go get her out of it.

These deities all had temples, most of them in several cities, and a statue of them in it. This statue would be seen as a kind of secondary body, or a conduit to the god itself. They'd be fed, clothed, worshipped, and they'd have their own carriage and boat on standby waiting to take them to battlefields or other places where you might want your god keeping an eye on things. The priests were also the rulers of the city, and it's not actually recorded anywhere, but you'd have to think the people got a little suspicious after a while that the gods always wanted whatever the King wanted. In Uruk, Cuneiform was invented, the very first writing system, which if you don't know is a really big deal for any organized civilization, but probably people were more excited about agriculture, the plow, the wheel, and irrigation, because those had some fairly tangible benefits in surplus food and trade, hallmarks of any advanced culture. Agriculture in particular is the reason big cities are even possible, why we don't run out of food.

Around 2300 BCE, the Akkadians got an upper hand and started collecting Sumerian cities like they were baseball cards, making the world's first empire under King Sargon, right on the north tip of the Persian Gulf. They replaced Sumerian culture with their own, to what extent they were able, and this was where the first standardized system of weights and measures came in. Up till then, each city had their own measurement system, and if a few cities did a lot of trade together they might agree on one, but generally it was a real mess trying to figure out how much of anything there was, and the Akkadians didn't like that. They realized there was a lot of stuff in the world, and they wanted to count it all. The empire lasted about 180 years, until it was knocked down by invasions from the Gutian tribes and internal revolts from people who didn't like this new "empire" invention. The Guti kept control of Sumer for a good long while after that.

The Sumerians did get back on top, though. Around 2100 BCE, under King Ur-Nammu, the Code of Ur-Nammu was written, which was pretty lucky since that title would have made no sense under any other king. It was the first known codified law, based on more than "if you piss me off, I'll beat you till you wish you hadn't." It had it all, property rights, penalties, heavy emphasis on justice and restitution to victims of crimes, it was actually pretty groundbreaking for its time. Sumer had a great time for a while, with lots of writing, temples being built left and right, and an efficient administration. It barely lasted a century, though, before the Elamites invaded and sacked the city of Ur, but don't feel too bad for the Sumerians, they started it. The Amorites moved in and took over, and the Sumerians never really got another minute in the spotlight.

Around 1900, the city of Babylon got in on this empire fad, and the Amorite King Hammurabi took just about all of Mesopotamia, writing the Code of Hammurabi, which was another striking coincidence in law code titling. This one was really heavy on different types of punishment for different crimes, and was the first one to establish the presumption of innocence. Marduk, patron god of Babylon, got his fifteen minutes of fame, going from D-list celebrity to Mesopotamia's headliner, taking over from Enlil as chief of the gods. Hammurabi's successors didn't do as well as he did, losing quite a bit of territory, and finally Babylon was sacked by Hittites around 1600 BCE. Babylonian culture was established, though, and was always the go-to in that region afterward.

Around 1400 BCE, the Assyrians developed a military based on heavy cavalry use, iron weapons and armor, and innovations in siege warfare that led them to absolutely dominate the battlefield and establish the Assyrian Empire. Like the Romans who came later, the Assyrians knew the importance of roads and armies, and were extremely good at both. They exiled troublesome tribes in their new empire, set up provincial governors, and built the Library at Ninevah, which was a library in one of the cities around there, maybe Babylon, and is where modern people found the Epic of Gilgamesh, the oldest known literary work. They had the longest run, lasting 750 years before the Babylonians and Medes took Ninevah, which pretty much crushed what was left of the empire by then. Babylon was back on top.

Nebuchadnezzar II rebuilt Babylon, probably with the help of at least a few other people, and built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which, it should be noted, didn't actually hang. The Greek word translated there usually means "overhanging," and has a broader meaning in Greek, so what we're really talking about here is a garden built on several different levels, which is a lot less impressive. Still, it must have been pretty cool to be one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Astronomy, math, and law were big in the new city, same as they'd always been. The military did a lot of raiding in the Levant to the south, and eventually tried taking on Egypt, which didn't work out at all, so they went back to the Levant and conquered Jerusalem instead, who'd been giving Babylon some trouble on the theory that Egypt would bail them out if it hit the fan, but that turned out not to be a solid bet at all. The King of Jerusalem was killed, his heir and a lot of other elites taken hostage, and the heir's uncle put on the throne.

In the end, the Babylonian Empire only lasted about a century before it fell to the Persians. Cyrus the Great really wasn't a fan of guests, so he made a big point of returning all displaced people to their homes. The Persians played the empire game about as well as anyone, with standardized coinage, roads, and, under the rulers who came after Cyrus, a military that went to war with Greece, a decision that famously did not work out for them one bit. It was back and forth for about 50 years, the Persians would take some Greek cities, put some harsh tyrant in charge to teach them a lesson about obedience, and the Greeks would, every single time, fail to learn this lesson and send their new ruler packing. This heavily informs the story of Alexander the Great, who headed east with his Macedonian army in 330 BCE, about a century later, and put an end to the Persian Empire. Now, Alexander was a great fighter, but not a very good King, and he mostly lost all his territory to revolt pretty much as soon as the dust had settled behind him on the road he left on. But Mesopotamia was an exception, being ruled by one of his generals after the conquest, and lasting a good century as the Seleucid Empire.

The Seleucid Empire was hugely successful for a while, taking all of Mesopotamia and a good chunk of the surrounding area, finally butting up against Egypt and India, neither of whom budged. Things were going so well, in fact, that around 200 BCE, King Antiochus decided it'd be a great idea to go conquer Greece and this upstart little republic they were allied with, some backwater punks who called themselves Rome. Of all the things that didn't work out for people in this history, this didn't work out the most. Antiochus got sent back home, short a useful portion of his military and owing a huge debt to Greece and Rome in return for being allowed to live. And while the Seleucids went on for some time after that, calling them an empire would be extremely generous. The Parthians knocked them down in pretty short order, and Persia was back in control.

In 63 BCE, Pompey the Great, no relation to Cyrus the Great, as far as I could find, conquered Syria for Rome. With Rome's control established in the Levant and the Parthians in Mesopotamia, the stage was set for 250 years of war between them. The wars after, with the rest of Persia, would last another 500 years, past the fall of the Western Roman Empire and into the Byzantine Empire. It ended inconclusively, as both powers were then attacked by the early Muslim Caliphates, and they both decided they'd rather get conquered by these new guys than keep fighting each other, so they called off their war. But those are things to talk about in histories of the Byzantine Empire or the Caliphates. This is where we'll leave off for Mesopotamia, an area that left a strong legacy as the most influential of three continents, and the birthplace of civilization.

III: The Levant

On the Mediterranean coastline of Mesopotamia is what's called the Levant region. This is where the Canaanites lived, and where we'd see the Israelites a little later. The Canaanites' roots go way back, being between Egypt and Mesopotamia, they saw a lot of trade going back and forth, and some of their oldest cities, like Jericho and Byblos, are as old as anything you'd find anywhere else. Being right between two powerful, advanced cultures, it got the chance to absorb both of them, and by 3000 BCE they very solidly had their own separate culture going. Go forward to 2000 BCE, you see Hazor, Megiddo, Ugarit, and Sidon in full swing, and Amorites migrating in from the north added their own flavor to the mix.

Like Mesopotamia, Canaan had an extremely long list of gods that really aren't worth going into unless you're a specialist in this area, and if you are, why are you reading my book to try to learn about it? I'm sure you can find a better source of information. This book being a high-altitude flyover, giving enough information to get on with but not much extra detail, the main Canaanite gods are:

Ba'al, not actually a god, just a title that means lord, so the god they're always fighting in the early Old Testament could be just about anybody, really

El, King of the Gods and god of creation

Asherah, queen of the gods, wife of El

Hadad, god of storms, sometimes King of the Gods instead of El, and probably the guy being referred to if someone says "Ba'al" without further context

Shapash, goddess or god of the Sun

Aglibol, god of the Moon

Attar, god of the morning star, whose role, name, and gender pretty much depended on who you asked

Arsu, god of the evening star and protector of caravans

Arsay, goddess of the Underworld

Ashima, goddess of fate

Yahweh, storm god most likely originating in the southern Levant

I bet you saw a familiar name on that list, right? That's right, it's the same guy. While Yahweh's origins aren't totally clear, it's known for sure that he was in the Canaanite Pantheon, and that the Israelites are a rogue sect of Canaanites. See, the thing is, the Israelites are genetically identical to the Canaanites, and lived in the same area, so if you're going to try to argue they're not from the same stock, you're going to have a hard time. I know they didn't cover this in Sunday School, but history is complicated and they only had you one day a week, they had to prioritize. The leading theory today, suggested by George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald, both of whom have resumes as long as your arm, says the Israelites were Canaanite peasants who rejected the hierarchy, as people at the bottom of a hierarchy often do, took the god of their ancestors, and hit the road, rejecting the gods of their oppressors. And nobody's saying they were wrong, so unbunch your panties there, for all I know the Israelites just saw a deeper truth than their neighbors, so don't let my repeating historical facts set you off.

Around 1200 BCE, right around the time the Israelites were fed up with the Canaanites' crap, Egyptian dominance was heavy in the area. Egypt was in its New Kingdom phase, and it really wanted more desert, because they didn't already have enough sand or something, so they took a lot of Canaan. The Amarna Letters come from this time, letters written between Pharaohs and rulers of Canaanite cities, where the people were slaves in service to the Egyptians. Now, scholars will say at this point that they weren't slaves, they were compulsory laborers. That's BS, and I'll tell you why.

Imagine tomorrow morning, I come by your house bright and early with a bullwhip, and I tell you you're going to come do some yard work for me or else. By afternoon, your hands will be bleeding and blistered, you'll be hurting in all your muscles and joints, parts of you you never even knew were there, because I've got a lot of work backed up and I'll sure be taking the opportunity not to have to do it myself. And I'll be standing over there with my whip, calling over "put your back into it, I don't have all day, I want to be done by suppertime!" You say "I can't take any more of this slave labor, you're going to kill me!" That's when I'll say "actually, this is just compulsory labor, I don't really own you." I bet you'd find the energy real quick to put your foot all the way up my ass, because who cares? That's not a distinction that needs to be made.

So, the Canaanites were Egyptian slaves, making bricks, as seen in both archaeological records and the Bible, book of Exodus, and you can bet the peasants, who'd soon become the Israelites, were doing the heavy lifting on that project. Now, Egyptian records don't tell us what happened next, but they wouldn't, because the god-king thing was very important to the Pharaohs, and they didn't record anything embarrassing. The book of Exodus tells us God sent plagues, those being turning the Nile to blood, an infestation of frogs, then flies, then mass death of the livestock, then boils, thunderstorm, locusts, three days of darkness, and wrapping it up with death of the firstborn. Now, I can't tell you Moses definitely went and talked to Pharaoh. I can't tell you God sent plagues. But I can tell you, with zero shred of doubt, something poisoned the Nile and wrecked everybody's week.

Why am I so sure? Because these plagues start with the Nile being bad, and while the rest of them are presented as separate events, they're exactly what would happen if the water got a heavy dose of something unpleasant. Frogs get the hell out of there, flies are everywhere, because suddenly there's a lot of extra dead bodies from the bad water, dead livestock, dead people. There's a certain algae bloom that's suggested pretty often here, that would turn the Nile red, like blood, and maybe a volcanic eruption nearby to cover the three days of darkness. I don't know about those, it could easily be those are just extra dramatic touches, but I will tell you absolutely, the Nile got a heavy dose of poison, and I believe it specifically because that's not the story the Bible's selling, but it fits like a glove. You can say God did it or not, and Moses was involved or he wasn't, but the part about the Nile definitely happened.

Now, I'm not saying that event and what followed are the reason the Israelites got cut loose. Truth is, Egypt had a lot going on. It was the end of the 19th Dynasty, Ramesses II had just died, there was a civil war, lots of Pharaohs coming and going, and it's entirely possible some less important projects, like brickmaking in Canaan, fell through the cracks. While we can't say for sure Exodus happened in this time, empires have to choose priorities pretty often, so you can pretty much pick any year you want, the Egyptians would have had a good reason not to be paying too much attention over there. Add to that, the major players in the Levant had just collapsed, those being the Hittites and Mycenaeans, primarily. So with authority a little nebulous, the main threats suddenly not so scary, and having just been forced to work a big construction project against their will, that would make the perfect time for the Israelites to say "you know what, it's been fun, but it's mostly been the opposite of that, bye," and split off from the Canaanites, heading off into the hills.

It's not too surprising the Israelites started off as an egalitarian culture. They'd just left a society with strict social hierarchy, they weren't looking to copy it, so when the Bible says they had no kings, well, I'm inclined to believe it. It didn't last very long, because there's always some prick who wants to be the top dog, egalitarianism just doesn't ever last, but I'm sure it was nice for a while. Biblically, the Israelites demanded a king, wouldn't be dissuaded, so God gave in, and Saul was so dead set against being crowned that he went and hid, but they found him and forced it on him. And my answer to that is yeah, that's what I'd say too if I schemed my way to the top of my tribe and didn't want future generations to know what a colossal prick I was.

Regardless, over the next few centuries, the Canaanite culture evolved, they became the Phoenicians, spreading all over the Mediterranean, becoming master sailors and spreading their alphabet, the root of the Greek and Latin characters, and the Philistines moved in toward the south, near Egypt. The Israelites, and later the Judahites, made their kingdoms in the highlands, and that's when we're to believe Joshua conquered Canaan. Now, I'm not here to tell you the Bible isn't true, but I'm definitely here to tell you Jericho had no wall at the time Joshua blew his trumpet, and hadn't for about 200 years, and that's if you take the word of tradition, that this happened around 1400 BCE. That wall was knocked down in 1600 BCE, probably by an earthquake, and modern scholars say the Israelites didn't even split from the Canaanites till 1200 BCE, so by that math, we're looking at around 500 years with no wall, so how would Joshua knock it down, either way? Could be an honest mistake, maybe he blew his trumpet before he really got a good look, and then when he saw there was no wall he figured it'd worked, but it is an archaeological fact that Jericho hadn't had a wall in centuries by the time this was supposedly happening, and Ai and Jericho were never conquered anywhere near the necessary timeframe. But, okay. I'll believe the Bible over archaeology, why not, Joshua 10:40 says he killed every last person in Canaan, which really seems unethical to me, but God was okay with it just this once.

But let's not harp on that, applying modern morality to ancient myth, because the truth is no mythology or history consistently holds up to morality as it shifts from one generation to the next. Let's talk instead about the theological shift that happened around 550 BCE, when Jerusalem was conquered by Babylon, and all the Jewish elites were shuttled off to be held hostage. It's only after the exile to Babylon that God becomes not the supreme god, but the only one. Check out Exodus 15:11, Exodus 20:3, Deuteronomy 5:7, Deuteronomy 6:14-15, Deuteronomy 32:8-9, Psalm 82:1, Psalm 86:8, Psalm 95:3, Psalm 97:7, Exodus 34:14, 1 Kings 8:23, Jeremiah 10:11, read all of them, with the knowledge that Yahweh in the Canaanite Pantheon is an unassailable historical fact, and tell me you really believe these verses mean to imply other gods straight up do not exist. These verses show competition with and intolerance of other gods, and you can try to twist it into being some metaphor if you really want to, but that's not going to change what the Bible actually says.

Course, there are some verses that say God is the only one who exists, and those are found after the royalty of Jerusalem were exposed to Zoroastrianism in Babylon. During and after Babylon, you start finding talk of a divine cosmic plan, Satan as the ultimate bad guy, reward and punishment based afterlife, angelology, and monotheism rather than henotheism, which we just talked about, the belief that other gods exist but are forbidden. You go on, find me any of that in the older books. This was the root of the split between the Pharisees and Saducees, the Saducees kept the old law and old beliefs, and the Pharisees, being made up of the royalty and elite, had plenty of time to talk about Zoroastrianism on their vacation in Babylon and decided it made a lot of sense. And now that they had Heaven and Hell to worry about, they decided, in their words, to build a fence around the Torah, making a bunch of extra rules so nobody could ever even come close to breaking a real commandment. Can't take chances with your eternal soul, can you?

But that's not to say the new beliefs are wrong. Maybe God didn't say lots of things in explicit terms, that doesn't mean it's not true. You can't expect him to tell you about every atom of the Universe, and even if something's important, he may have a very good reason to keep it from you. Adam and Eve had less knowledge in the Garden, but they were definitely happier than most of us today. Sometimes God keeps his people ignorant on purpose, then some Babylonian named Zoroaster or a snake in a tree comes along and screws the whole thing up. In the end, all I can do is throw you the facts, you're the only one who can decide what they mean to you.

Part Three: Mythology

I: Sitcoms in Sandals

In the poet Lawrence David's epic "Seinfeld," one of the great heroes of the piece, Kramer, enters a dining establishment specializing in soup and requests a bowl of soup. The owner, known for his strict demeanor, refuses, stating "no soup for you." Kramer leaves without obtaining soup.

Do you think Seinfeld would have gotten anywhere if it were written like that? Course not, I just stripped all the life out of it, everything that made it worthwhile. But we do it with mythology all the time, we take out everything that made people ever want to hear the story in the first place, and we pride ourselves on knowing which props were different in the cut from camera A to camera B, and God forbid anyone say the props from camera B are canon, A is the only one that matters, B is derivative trash. We argue about who REALLY wrote the scene, and whether it was inserted later. I won't lie, I fall into the same trap myself from time to time, but this is just not the way myths were meant to be seen. You know why there's continuity errors? Because like Larry David, Homer and Shakespeare and Virgil were just trying to tell a damn story, they didn't expect you to be here centuries later picking apart the set dressing for hidden meaning.

Would you think it was impressive if someone could list every X-Files monster in order of appearance, had strong opinions about whether Scully's cross necklace changed size, and insisted only episodes written by Chris Carter count? Course not, that's not scholarship, that's trivia night. So why do you think I'd be impressed you can do the same thing with Taoist myths? That's some real "forest for the trees" stuff there, if someone watched House of the Dragon and those kinds of details were their takeaway, you'd think they must have OCD on an epic scale. Modern study of ancient mythology is like reconstructing the apartment from Big Bang Theory down to the tiniest detail, then some guy comes out and reads you a summary of a scene in monotone, and everybody slaps each other on the back, "congratulations on being geniuses, guys, we did it!" To be totally fair, though, I don't think that would be any less funny than the average Big Bang Theory scene.

"But it's a window into the lives of the people of the time," the pedants wail, desperate to justify themselves. Sure, in the same way we can learn about the 90s through The Sopranos and the early 2000s from Breaking Bad, which is to say kind of, barely. But it also ignores a lot of facts, like how Tony Soprano would have been tried, convicted, and sentenced in season 1 for all the crimes he committed without bothering to put on some damn gloves or a mask. His fingerprints were all over multiple crime scenes, his face was clearly seen all the time, do you think this story really gives you insight into the world of the time? Same way with mythology. It's a story, not a documentary, and if you think the writers of centuries ago had a stricter dedication to realism than writers today, then you probably don't understand mythology as well as you think.

Don't get me wrong, I don't hate mythology, I love it, and there really are things to learn about history, storytelling, and cultural attitudes, but too often it gets bogged down in pseudointellectualism and pedantry. Arguing about the mythological canon is equal, intellectually, to arguing about whether Han or Greedo shot first, one of those arguments just has better PR. This isn't a call to leave mythology behind, it's a call to stop focusing on the wrong things as a signal to other people that you're really, really smart, because to people who really know mythology, you're signalling the opposite. If the original authors watched Clash of the Titans or American Gods, they'd applaud harder than anyone, because that's what the story is supposed to be, entertainment. The fact that you know the minute details of the exact version of the story that one single author wrote down doesn't mean you know the "right version," it means you know what Homer thought his audience would like. And while that tells you something about both Homer and Greece at that time, I ask you, does that elevate it to the level of holy scripture, and make those who change it heretics?

Look, I love mythology as much as anyone. At the time of this writing, I'm in the middle of a deep dive of the Torah, picking it apart to try to piece together the real history of the Israelites and lost Levantine mythology, so before you come at me in a nerd duel, just know I'm armed. I'm just saying get some perspective on the thing. If you think Iliad is better, objectively, than Deadwood, or Romeo and Juliet is better than Game of Thrones, you've missed the point of it. And if you think stripping a story down to its bare, lifeless facts makes it better, Shakespeare is spinning like a drill bit in his grave right now.

II: Mythological Evolution

One of the earliest gods was the Sun. Early man picked up pretty quick that moving around at night got his friends eaten and didn't result in finding food too often, so the Sun was most likely our first god, protecting us from predators and bringing us success in our hunting and gathering days. Every culture, everywhere worshipped the Sun at some point, it's the cultural touchstone we know we'll find anywhere we look. We can also find stories of beings not too different from us, some being big, mean brutes who'd beat us up if we looked at them sideways, and some being tricky little bastards who'd distract us and steal our stuff while we weren't looking. Those became giants, trolls, ogres, leprechauns, elves, all kinds of stuff in our stories, but were probably really just other primates in the original versions. If you think about it, that's what life in Africa must have been like for early humans, surrounded by things that kind of look like us, but are either much bigger or much smaller, and we didn't always play nice together.

But back to gods, after the Sun, they'd be animistic. They'd be animals, mountains, rivers, whatever, and these gods weren't that powerful. The Bear God, obviously, is fairly limited, but since you can't beat him up, you appease him with respect and offerings so he doesn't come eat your village. That's what a god was, early on, a thing you can't beat up, but whose favor or forbearance you needed, like large predators, rain, really any number of things. And as these people hit their geographical bottlenecks, they'd bring their gods along for the ride. The idea of these gods would mingle with the local gods, and several things might happen.

First possibility, the locals might think your god is a really good idea, and they'd bring some version of it into their Pantheon, with his position in the hierarchy being determined by how important your culture was to the local culture, and mostly by which culture could beat up the other. Or they might have a god who's just like yours, so you all agree it's just the same guy under a different name. Both ways were the root of extensive polytheism seen in ancient cultures, and the second possibility is where gods started to take a recognizable form. See, these similar gods weren't exact copies, so they might keep the same main power, but then they'd get a ton of lesser powers as footnotes, and that's what evolved Steve, God of Bears, into Steve, God of Justice, Divine Order, Balance, and Bears. That's why Ra became Amun-Ra, why Marduk took the roles of older Mesopotamian gods, why if you look up the Greco-Roman gods they come with the domains everyone knows, and then a list of footnotes as long as your arm. Once the ancient people started merging gods together based on each being a different facet of the whole, you can see why monotheism was the next step.

It's absolutely logical, if you think about it. The next step after lumping together gods with similar domains and powers was always going to be lumping together the ones who aren't similar at all, but are on the same team. Why shouldn't Mars, revered God of War, just be the aspect of Jupiter, God of Justice, when there's divine smiting to be done? Once you've introduced multiple facets to a god's domain, why not grab them all? The Olympian Gods can just be Olympus, one god with twelve facets. Now, that didn't actually happen, as far as I know, but it's the idea behind having a single god, like the Zoroastrians or the Jewish people and their descendant religions.

So what's the point here? Am I saying there are no gods, and it's all just the growth and evolution of the category "things we can't beat up?" Course not, I believe one hundred percent that ancient people were accidentally stumbling into contact with higher dimensions, and that's why magic, spirits, and gods have so much similarity across cultures, and why highly advanced scientific concepts have started backing these things up, and you'll never talk me out of it. I'm just saying don't be overly attached to the specific mythology behind your god, because I guarantee you one hundred percent that is not his original factory packaging. But do you really care? If your ritual to invoke Zeus connects you to a spirit who cares about justice, and the stories about Zeus let you understand better how to interact with this spirit and what to expect from it, do you really care if he never killed Cronos? Seems to me you'd be focusing on the wrong thing there.