

Who was Tammuz?

The false god Tammuz is mentioned in the book of Ezekiel. The prophet describes a vision he had, saying the Lord “brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the LORD, and I saw women sitting there, mourning the god Tammuz” (Ezekiel 8:14). God calls the idolatrous practice of weeping for Tammuz a “detestable” thing, made even worse in that it was happening at the temple in Jerusalem.

Tammuz the demigod apparently began as a Sumerian shepherd named Dumu-zid or Dumuzi. His father was the ancient Mesopotamian god Enki [also known as the Akkadian/Babylonian Ea, who saved the family of Utnapishtim (Noah) from the flood in the “Epic of Gilgamesh”], and his mother was the sheep goddess Duttur. In the earlier Sumerian culture, Dumuzid/Tammuz was the god of sheep, lambs, and sheep’s milk—a pastoral deity. In the later Akkadian mythos, he was the god of agriculture.

Tammuz was known as “the good, young one,” and his beauty caught the attention of Inanna (known to the Akkadians as Ishtar), who took him for her consort. At some point, they had a falling out. The most common story is that Ishtar travelled to the netherworld to take the throne of her sister, Ereshkigal. For her hubris, Ishtar was condemned by the Anunnaki (judges of the underworld) and sentenced to be killed and her corpse hung from a nail or hook. While Inanna/Ishtar was dead, sexual relations ceased over the entire universe. Enki/Ea allowed her to be resurrected, but she had to find another soul to take her place. She scoured the world, looking for someone who wasn’t mourning her death. Eventually she found her husband, Dumuzid/Tammuz, dressed in rich clothing and sitting on her throne.

In retaliation for his lack of devotion, Inanna/Ishtar set her demons on Tammuz. He hid

in the home of his sister, Geshtinana, but the demons eventually caught up to him and dragged him to the underworld. Eventually, Inanna/Ishtar regretted her extreme measures, and the gods compromised by having Dumuzid/Tammuz and his sister alternate time in the underworld.

Another version says Inanna/Ishtar went to the underworld to rescue Dumuzid/Tammuz after he was killed by underworld raiders.

The story of Inanna and Dumuzid spread beyond the Sumerian and Akkadian Empires to other cultures. In Egypt, Tammuz relates to Osiris. Osiris, married to the faithful Isis, was killed by his brother Set for his throne. Accounts vary, but somehow Isis brought Osiris back to life in time to sire Horus before he was killed again. In appreciation for Isis' devotion, the gods made Osiris the leader of the underworld, the Nile (whose tides ebb and flow, bringing life and death), and agriculture (with its cycle of dormancy and restoration).

In Greece, Ishtar and Tammuz seem to have inspired the story of Aphrodite and Adonis. Aphrodite gave the infant Adonis to her sister Persephone to protect in the underworld. Persephone fell for the beautiful child, as well, and the sisters fought. Zeus finally intervened, declaring Adonis had to stay four months with Persephone, four months with Aphrodite, and four months wherever he pleased. Sometime later, Adonis was killed by a boar. Zeus honored Aphrodite's mourning by allowing him to remain above ground half the year.

Whether we're talking about Dumuzid, Tammuz, Osiris, or Adonis, the theme of death and resurrection runs through the mythology. Because of this and his early identification as

a shepherd, Tammuz in all his forms is known as the god of fertility and agriculture. During the Sumerian Festival of Tammuz, the king took on Tammuz's identity and mated with a priestess; this act was said to ensure the fertility of crops and animals for the year. Tammuz's retreat to the underworld, generally said to occur at the summer solstice when the weather turns hot and dry, brought the end of fertility of plants, animals, and humans. His return marked the restoration of plenty.

Later observance of the Tammuz/Adonis rituals was somewhat unique in that they were performed primarily by women, and, while worship may have included celebrations for Tammuz's return, the mourning of his death was emphasized more. The women's tears recalled the supposed tears of Ishtar that brought Tammuz back. This is what the women in the gate of the temple were doing in Ezekiel 8. It is easy to see why the Lord referred to this pagan observance as an abomination; a vile fertility god was being honored in the very place the One True God had sanctified for Himself.

Less well-documented legends further muddy the identity of Tammuz. The Sumerian King List mentions two kings named Tammuz. The first is the fifth king before the Flood, a shepherd who reigned for 36,000 years; the second king on the list is a fisherman who reigned for 100 years circa 2700 BC, immediately before Gilgamesh. Other legends say that Tammuz was the son of Nimrod (founder of both Babel and Nineveh, Genesis 10:8-12), but since Nimrod is thought to be Gilgamesh's alter-ego, it's impossible to say which was the origin of the legend.

Some critics claim that the legend of Dumuzid/Tammuz/Osiris/Adonis served as the inspiration for the "legend" of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The differences are too many to take this claim seriously:

Tammuz/Adonis/Osiris was rescued from the underworld by a faithful lover.

Jesus was raised from the dead by Himself in conjunction with God.

“The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again”

(John 10:17)

“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it” (Acts 2:32)

Tammuz/Adonis died once a year.

Jesus died only once.

“The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God”

(Romans 6:10)

Osiris died once forever.

Jesus rose once forever.

“You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, / nor will you let your faithful one

see decay” (Psalm 16:10)

Tammuz/Osiris’s death and rebirth brought life to agriculture.

Jesus’ death and resurrection brings life to our souls.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in

him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16)

The cult of Tammuz promised rich provision in the form of grain and sheep, but it is only Jesus who gives life and gives it to the full (John 10:10). It is said that Tammuz was a shepherd. But only Christ, the Good Shepherd, willingly laid down His life for His sheep (John 10:11, 18). Whatever modern-day idols we chase in the desire to have plenty,

it is only God who can provide what we need (James 1:17).