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It cannot be sufficiently stressed that the Sumerian cosmogonic concepts, early as they are, are by no means primitive. They reflect the mature thought and reason of the thinking Sumerian as he contemplated the forces of nature and the character of his own existence. When these concepts are analyzed; when the theological cloak and polytheistic trappings are removed,...the Sumerian creation concepts indicate a keenly observing mentality as well as an ability to draw and formulate pertinent conclusions from the data observed.

Samuel Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*

A myth, therefore, is true because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information. If, however, it does not give us new insight into the deeper meaning of life, it has failed. If it *works*, that is, if it forces us to change our minds and hearts, gives us new hope, and compels us to live more fully, it is a valid myth. Mythology will only transform us if we follow its directives. A myth is essentially a guide; it tells us what we must do in order to live more richly. If we do not apply it to our own situation and make the myth a reality in our own lives, it will remain as incomprehensible and remote as the rules of a board game, which often seem confusing and boring until we start to play.


Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*

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To state the case in brief, water symbolizes the whole of potentiality...Principle of what is formless and potential, basis of every cosmic manifestation, container of all seeds, water symbolizes the primal substance from which all forms come...it precedes all forms and upholds all creation...

Because it incorporates in itself all potentiality, water becomes a symbol of life ("living water")

Immersion in water symbolizes a return to the pre-formal, a total regeneration, a new birth, for immersion means a dissolution of forms, a reintegration into the formlessness of pre-existence; and emerging from the water is a repetition of the act of creation in which form was first expressed.

Rich in seeds, it fertilizes earth, animals and women. It contains in itself all possibilities, it is supremely fluid, it sustains the development of all things, and is therefore either compared or even directly assimilated with the moon. Its rhythms are fitted to the same pattern as the moon's; they govern the periodic appearance and disappearance of all forms, they give a cyclic form to the development of things everywhere. Then, too, since prehistoric times, water, moon and woman were seen as forming the orbit of fertility both for man and for the universe. Water used to be represented, on Neolithic vases by the sign  Which is also the oldest Egyptian hieroglyph for flowing water. Even in paleolithic

times, the spiral was a symbol of water and lunar fertility; when inscribed on a feminine idol, it united all these centres of life and fertility.

In any analysis, there is always a danger of breaking apart or reducing to separate elements what was a single unity, a cosmos, in the minds that produced it. The same symbol may indicate or evoke a whole series of realities, which only profane experience would see as separate and autonomous. The many different symbolic values given to a single emblem or word in primitive languages continually show us that, to the mind that conceived it, the world appeared as an organic whole.

In Sumerian, *a* means “water”, but also means “sperm, conception, generation”. In Mesopotamian carvings, for instance, the symbolic fish and water are emblems of fertility.

There are a great number of cults and rites connected with various springs, stream and rivers throughout history to correspond to these many different values given to water. All these cults are primarily based on the sacredness of water as such, as an element in the creation of the universe, but also on the local epiphany, on the manifestation of a sacred presence in some particular watercourse or spring. Such local epiphanies are independent of religious structure imposed on them. Water flows, it is “living”, it moves; it inspires, it heals, it prophesies. By their very nature, spring and river display power, life, perpetual renewal; they *are* and they are *alive*. Thus they have a certain autonomy, and their worship persists in spite of other epiphanies and other religious revolutions.

Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*