

Notes upon the Beliefs of the Babylonians and the Assyrians.

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THE earliest beliefs of the Babylonians are generally regarded as having been animistic—the attribution of a soul to the various powers of nature. Traces of this creed, in fact, are met with in the statements of their beliefs which have come down to us. Thus the first creative power was the sea (Tiamat or Tiawath), teeming, as it does, with so many and such wonderful forms of life; and next to the sea, the rivers and streams, represented by the god Ea or Enki, with his daughter Nin-aḥa-kuddu. The god of the air, and of thunder, wind, and rain (Rammānu or Rimmon, also known as Addu, Adad, or Hadad), is another example; and the god of pestilence (Nergal) may also be regarded as being of a similar origin, and perhaps identical with Ugga, the god of death. In addition to these, the moon (Sin, Nanner, or Iriḥu), the sun (Šamaš), and the planets in general; stones (especially those of a precious nature); certain trees and plants, and, in later times, cities, temple-towers, and temples, were also regarded as being animated with the spirit of the deity who presided over them.

Such was the earliest religion—if religion it may be called, of the Babylonians, and probably of the Assyrians as well. But this belief did not fail to develop, in course of time, into something more definite, namely, the Babylonian mythological creed, in which the nature-powers and heavenly bodies mentioned above lost their merely spirit-endowed nature, and became gods, each having a domain of his own. Something more of the origin of the various states of Babylonia and Assyria must be ascertained before it can be decided how far the people, at the earliest period, all held the same creed, but the history of its later development would seem to have been somewhat as follows:—

After the period when the sea (Tiawath) seems to have been for the Babylonians the great creative spirit, there came the period of Anu, the god of the heavens, followed, in turn, by those of Enlil and Éa, the god of the earth and of the

ocean.¹ The worship of Merodach was the last important form of the religion of Babylonia. As to Assyria, the changes seem to have been fewer or non-existent—from first to last the people remained faithful to their national god Aššur.

Notwithstanding the homogeneity of the Babylonian religious system, there were many differences of belief in the various states of that country, each of which—and, indeed, every important city—worshipped its own special divinity, with his consort and attendants. The list of these is naturally very long, but as examples may be mentioned Anu and Ištar at Erech; Enlil and later on Ninip² at Nippur; Enki or Éa at Eridu; Merodach and Zēr-panitum at Babylon; the moon-god Sin or Nannar at Ur; Šamaš at Sippar and Larsa; Nebo at Borsippa; Muru (Hadad or Rimmon) at Ennigi, Muru, and Kakra; Dagon at Mera and Tutul; Zagaga, a god of war, at Kis, etc.

Between Nergal, Cuthah's god of death and plague, and Babylon's merciful and gracious Merodach there is considerable difference of character, the intermediate stages, if one may so call them, being represented by the other deities enumerated, and many in addition. All these were objects of worship in different parts of the country, and represented, each in his district, so many different creeds. This, indeed, seems to have been recognized by the Babylonians themselves, for in the lists which they compiled, they are often designated as 'lords' of the cities where they were worshipped.

Concerning these various creeds there is, naturally, much to be learned, and it is certain that we shall obtain no really satisfactory conception of the religion of Babylonia as a whole until

¹ In the Babylonian story of the Flood there is an indication of antagonism between these two deities, and Enlil is represented as being hostile to the sparing of Ut-napištim, who was a worshipper of Éa.

² This is the usual provisional reading. The Sumerian pronunciation of the name was possibly Nirig, and the Semitic En-usāti (so Radan).

texts are found dealing with the attributes of each deity, including the myths connected with them. Of all the legends concerning the gods and goddesses of Babylonia which have fallen into our hands, that of Merodach, the great divinity of Babylon, is not only the most perfect, but also the best known. This is due to the rise of Babylon to the position of capital among the cities of Babylonia, causing his creed, with all its attractive power, to reach the hearts, and also the affections, of a large circle of the population. Its chief points may be outlined here: At the beginning the universe was created by Tiawath and Apsû (the sea and the deep), with whom were associated their son Mummu (Moûimis¹) and a number of divine beings. Among their creations, however, were the deities Laḥmu and Laḥamu, who brought forth Anšar and Kišar, representing the heavens and the earth. These were apparently more perfect than the beings who had brought them into existence, and they went on perfecting themselves in their offspring, until Anu and Anatu, the male and female manifestations of the heavens, came into existence, representing, apparently, the first stage in the history of creation. On the other side, the deities representing the earth (Enlil and Ninlil) and the sea (Ēa and Dawkina) progressed in the same way, until the highest perfection was reached in the god Merodach. The ways of these evolved and perfected descendants of Tiawath and Apsû, however, were as unacceptable to her and her consort as the ways of the latter were to those perfected descendants, and it was decided that the heavenly powers should be overthrown. Ēa or Ae, having learned of the plot of Tiawath and her followers, communicated it to Anšar, his father, and Anšar deputed Anu, the god of the heavens, to try to appease Tiawath's rage, but on seeing her snarling face, fear seized him, and he returned. Nudimmud (Ēa as the creator), the god's second champion, was equally unsuccessful, and another volunteer had to be found.

The third champion of the gods was Merodach, the patron-deity of Babylon, and to ensure the fulness of his triumph, the gods of the heavens, in solemn assembly, made him their king, and conferred upon him every supernatural power calculated to lead to his success. In the fight

¹ Damascius, *Doubts and Solutions of the First Principles*.

which followed, Tiawath and her horde were defeated, and their dragonlike leader, having been divided into two parts, became the waters above and the waters beneath the firmament respectively. The ordering of the heavens and the earth by Merodach, and the creation of all living things, including man, are next related; and the rebellious followers of Tiawath, shut up in prison, were kept in bonds until the time should come for their release, and their redemption, seemingly, by mankind, who were brought into existence in order that the gods should enjoy that worship in which they delighted. The release of the captive gods, which Merodach seems to have duly effected,² was commemorated at Babylon every New Year's festival, when the gods escorted their kingly son (Merodach) to the Chamber of Fate, where he fixed, at the New Year's festival on the 8th and 11th of Nisan, the lot of the gods and of men.³

Seemingly all the states and cities of Babylonia accepted the creed of Merodach as outlined above, though probably not until a somewhat late date, as the version of the legend as found on the tablets must have taken a considerable time to develop. It is doubtful whether, when the states accepted the Babylonian creed concerning Merodach, they did so without reservation or change, especially as there were other versions—as exemplified by the bilingual story of the creation—current. To many this bilingual version must have seemed the more reasonable of the two. It gives all the glory of creation to Merodach and his spouse Aruru (another name of Zēr-panitum); and as there is no personification of the sea, Tiawath as the first creatress, and the theory of evolution among the gods themselves, find no place in it.⁴

The legends concerning the other gods of the Babylonian pantheon—patrons of the great cities of ancient Babylonia—are far from being so perfect, and also, as far as they are known, so full of religious teaching as that concerning Merodach. The legend of Nergal, which was probably the creed of Cuthah and Maškan-šabri, tells how that

² *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, February 1908, p. 60.

³ *Ibid.* March 11th, 1908, p. 78. It may, however, have been the occasion of the sacrifices made to Ner(i)gal.

⁴ For a translation of this, see the art. 'Creed (Babylonia),' in the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*.

god became king of the underworld and espoused the queen of that region by threatening to kill her, after he had shown disrespect to her messenger in the presence of the gods—a most strange prelude to a divine courtship.¹ The legend of Istar, 'daughter of Sin,' though an excellent testimony to the respect of the Babylonians for conjugal fidelity, contains some undesirable details due to the nature of Istar's worship, which was that of the Babylonian goddess of generation. The bilingual text dealing with her expulsion from her house and her city by 'the enemy,' however, is very beautiful, and full of teaching.² She was worshipped at Babylon, but her principal seats were Erech, where she shared divine honours with Anu, generally described as her father, and Sippar-Agadé, the great seat of Babylonian sun-worship.

An exceedingly interesting creed was that of the renowned city of Niffer, which, if it be the Calneh of Gn 10¹⁰, was founded by Nimrod, or, according to the bilingual story of the creation, by Merodach, thus identifying these two personages. In this text, which seems to have been written for the glorification of Merodach, it is spoken of as one of the cities built (=founded) by him. It is doubtful, however, whether the ancient inhabitants of the city accepted this, as it probably clashed with other legends which they possessed—indeed, the name of the city, being written ideographically with the same characters as are used for the name of 'the older Bel,' *Enlil*, it would seem that he may have been regarded as the founder, Merodach only assuming that position by virtue of his identification with Enlil. In this case it is clear that the adoption of monotheism³ overcame a difficulty in harmonizing the various faiths of the country. Later, the favourite god of Niffer was apparently Ninip—to whom, be it noted by the way, there was a temple near Jerusalem, in a city called Beth-Ninip. This deity was the son of Bel-Enlil, and is of special interest as the god of stones and plants. Several poetical compositions relating to him are known, one of them containing many parallels with the story of Merodach. Both deities

¹ Another name of Nergal is *Mešlamta-éa*, 'he who came forth from the *mesu*-fruit,' or the like, suggesting another legend concerning him.

² 'The Lament of the Daughter of Sin,' *P.S.B.A.* . . . Feb. 1895, pp. 65 ff., revised in 'The Goddess Istar,' etc., *ibid.* 1909, p. 35.

³ See below.

are represented as having been greater than their father Enlil; like Merodach, Ninip overthrew his enemy, and after the victory, sat upon the throne in a royal chamber, took part in a festival instituted for him, contested successfully with Anu and Ea, and was appointed a decider of fate.⁴ These and other parallels make the story of this god one of the most interesting in the mythological literature of Babylonia and Assyria, and show how easy identification with Merodach was in his case. Whether they are due to chance, or are deliberate imitations, may be left to the judgment of the reader. If, however, the latter explanation be the true one, the question of date comes in; but upon that point there will, perhaps, be but one opinion, namely, that the legend of the apparently older god, Ninip, is the more ancient of the two. In that case, the creed of Merodach may well have been adapted to that of Ninip so as to facilitate the identification of the two gods in the minds of the people who worshipped them.

The monotheism of the Babylonians, whether it came into existence for political or for philosophical reasons, probably had its birth soon after the rise of Babylon to the position of chief city of the newly-united kingdom some time before the twentieth century B.C. This monotheism, from the political motives which underlay it, may have been very superficial, but at the same time it was very real, as it must have appealed strongly to an exceedingly intelligent section of the population.

The following is a corrected translation of the text in which the principal gods of the Babylonian pantheon are identified with Merodach, and thus put forward as his manifestations:

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|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Uraš ⁵ | is Merodach of planting; |
| Lugal-akiata ⁶ | is Merodach of the canal; |
| Ninip | is Merodach of agriculture (?); |
| Nergal | is Merodach of strife; |
| Zagaga | is Merodach of battle; |

⁴ See 'The Babylonian Gods of War,' *P.S.B.A.*, Dec. 1906, p. 283, referring to the text on p. 281.

⁵ Not read by me in my first publication of the text, *Journal of the Victoria Institute*, 1906, pp. 8 ff., but a recent examination of the tablet shows that the character here is IP, i.e. *Uraš*. King has TU (GIN). There seems to be some connexion between *Uraš* and *érisu*, 'planting.' It is noteworthy that Merodach has the title, 'bestower of planting,' in the seventh tablet of the Creation series, line 1.

⁶ Such seems to be the completion, judging from the traces remaining. The meaning would be 'King of the water in the earth.'

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| Enlil | is Merodach of lordship and dominion ¹ ; |
| Nabium | is Merodach of commerce; |
| Sin | is Merodach the illuminator of the night; |
| Šamaš | is Merodach of righteousness ² ; |
| Addu | is Merodach of rain; |
| Tišpak | is Merodach of the people ³ ; |
| Gal | is Merodach of the enclosure of life (?); |
| Šuqamuna | is Merodach of the irrigation-channel; |
| | is Merodach of . . . - <i>nin(?)</i> - <i>ti</i> . |

Here the text of the obverse breaks off, and at least a third part is wanting. It becomes legible again about half-way down the reverse, where the latter portion of a list of eight or nine images of the gods is preserved, and a reference to the gate of Babylon (? the first line of the next tablet) occurs. The wording suggests that the original of this inscription was set up in a not very prominent place—'behind the gate,' but notwithstanding this it was probably not really inaccessible; and the fact that a copy of it has been preserved, taken from an 'old tablet,' and apparently written out for Kudurru, son of Maštukku,⁴ probably some time during the sixth century B.C., shows that it was by no means unknown. From the text we see that three of the divine images showed the gods in certain characters—Da'anu, 'the Judge,' being represented, for example, as the *mubarrā*, 'announcer,' or the like—and it is probable that they were all similarly represented. This is due to the belief that the gods were the protectors of certain offices, professions, and handicrafts. Unfortunately the positions of these statues in Babylon are not given.

The creed of the Assyrians was practically the same as that of the Babylonians, but soon developed noteworthy differences. The great god of the country was Aššur, so called, apparently, from the name of the older capital, Aššur of Ašur. The Assyrians were an exceedingly warlike people—more so than the Babylonians, and the god Aššur ultimately, and at an early date, became their great warrior-deity, as well as the patron of the whole country. He it was who, they believed, led their armies on to victory, and is represented in the form of a figure within a winged circle, preceding their armies in the field. No legends concerning him have come down to us, but the many references to the national god of the Assyrians leave no doubt

as to the light in which they regarded him. The mythological text K. 100 makes Aššur to be the spouse of Ninlil, thus identifying him with Enlil, 'the older Bel.' He was 'king of the gods of heaven and earth . . . the father creator of the gods, the chief of the first (?).' This text, which gives a list of the principal gods believed in by the Assyrians, had been inscribed on a stone where a spring gushed forth. Practically it is a statement of the creed of the king who performed this beneficent work, and the invocation of their names as an introduction to the record was naturally thought to call down their blessings upon it.

As in Babylonia, so also in Assyria, all the cities had their patron-deities. At Nineveh it was the goddess Ištar, another of whose names seems to have been Nina. Nergal, the god of plague and war, was the patron-deity of Tarbiši (now Sherif-Khan); Nebo was the principal god, or one of the principal gods, of Calah; and Ištar, in addition to Nineveh, was also patron-goddess of Arbela. Being the Assyrian goddess of war, as well as she who corresponded with Venus, she was a very favourite object of worship in Assyria.

It is noteworthy that, from exceedingly early times, the use of the word *dingir* (Sumerian) and *ilu* (Assyr.-Babylonian), 'god,' is common in personal names; and the question naturally arises, whether these words are to be understood generally or specially—whether, for instance, *Lu-dingira* and its equivalent *Awel-ili* mean 'Man of God,' the creator of the universe, or 'Man of the god,' meaning the deity whom the bearer of the name (and the family to which he belonged) worshipped. Upon this point we have no information, but it may be regarded as probable, that if the latter idea had to be expressed, the name would not be *Lu-dingira* or *Awel-ili*, but *Lu-dingirābi* and *Awel-ilt-šu*, 'Man of his god,' or something similar. Fried. Delitzsch quotes some exceedingly interesting names bearing upon this point, and tending to support the former of the two renderings, which, if it should be substantiated, would show that there must have been, from Sumerian times onwards, a section of the population which believed that the various deities worshipped in the land were simply manifestations of one supreme God, and nothing more. The testimony of the list of gods identified with

¹ Cf. the seventh tablet of the Creation series, line 25.

² Cf. *ibid.*, lines 39, 40. ³ Cf. *ibid.*, line 15.

⁴ Or *Mašdukku* (? for *Mardukku*, another form of *Marduku*, 'worshipper of Merodach').

Merodach, translated above, seems therefore to be fully confirmed.

This compromise between a polytheistic and a monotheistic creed continued, apparently, for a considerable time—probably until the Persian conquest (517 B.C.), when the ideas of the people doubtless underwent modification, though there was still a considerable number who kept to the old faith. Noteworthy, in this connexion, are the words of Nabonidus, who, when referring to the siege of Haran by the Medes, speaks of Cyrus, 'king of Anšan,' as being the 'young servant' of Merodach. The full meaning of this statement can only be realized when we take into consideration the tendency to monotheism which Merodach's creed contained, and⁶ which apparently caused Nabonidus to look upon Cyrus as holding the same belief as himself.

There is also the possibility that the Jewish captivity made some slight modification in the creed of the more intelligent of the Babylonians in the great cities. This is indicated by certain names ending, like those of the Jews dwelling there, in *-yâwa*, i.e. Jah or Jahwah.¹ That this indicates a modification of belief rather than a borrowing of names on the part of the Babylonians is confirmed by a noteworthy borrowing on the other side, namely, the well-known name of Mordecai (better Mardecai, from Mardukâ = Mardukaa = Mardukaya), still used by the Jews, mostly under the form of Marcus or Mark.

Some of the Babylonians, then, would seem to have gone over to the creed of their Persian conquerors, whilst others—probably a much smaller number—sympathized with, if they did not actually adopt, that of their Jewish captives. Even in heathen Babylonia, people strove after better things; for many must have realized the short-comings of the creed to which they had

¹ *Małaki-yâwa*, father of *Nergal-êtir*; *Yâšê-yâwa*, father of the woman *Tâbat-Iškar*; *Nêri-yâwa*, son of *Bêl-zêr-ibni*, 'Bêl has given seed' (Strassmaier, *Darius*, 310. 4). Bêl here stands for Merodach, probably = Yahwah.

been brought up, and such would naturally break away from it at the earliest opportunity.

But there were also many—probably the majority of the population—who believed in the old faith unfeignedly, without a doubt in their minds as to the truth of what their priests taught. In addition to this, there was the attraction of the old sacred fanes, with their millenniums of reputation and renown—fanes and sacred places where, as their old creed taught them, the gods had, through the ages, performed signs and wonders, and where such things might, therefore, happen again. These kept to the worship of Merodach, though in course of time his influence must have much weakened, as his votaries came to realize how he had failed his people in the time of their distress, whereby the sceptre had passed from his city Babylon, and from the land, never to return. Was it on account of this that the deity of the old omen-tablets, Ana-Ellila,² came into favour? We do not know, but it seems to be not improbable. But, though the deities changed somewhat, the faith remained much the same as of old, and had sufficient vitality to endure, seemingly, well into the Christian era, one of its last strongholds being the great temple-tower dedicated to Nebo at Borsippa. That there were people who professed that faith in other places is not improbable, and it may be that Damascius, the last of the neo-Platonic philosophers, obtained his exceedingly correct statement of the cosmological beliefs of the ancient Babylonians when he went to Persia in 529 A.D., after Justinian had closed the heathen schools of philosophy at Athens. Whether excavations in Babylonia will ever result in the discovery of tablets of such a late date as this is doubtful, but as cuneiform inscriptions written during the early years of the Christian era exist, further contributions to our knowledge of the period preceding that of Damascius may be hoped for.

² Cf. *The Babylonian and Oriental Record*, vol. iv. (1890), No. 6, p. 131 ff.; *The O. T. in the Light*, etc., p. 482.