

# **The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria**

by

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## Chapter 1. Foreword

### Position, and Period.

The religion of the Babylonians and Assyrians was the polytheistic faith professed by the peoples inhabiting the Tigris and Euphrates valleys from what may be regarded as the dawn of history until the Christian era began, or, at least, until the inhabitants were brought under the influence of Christianity. The chronological period covered may be roughly estimated at about 5000 years. The belief of the people, at the end of that time, being Babylonian heathenism leavened with Judaism, the country was probably ripe for the reception of the new faith. Christianity, however, by no means replaced the earlier polytheism, as is evidenced by the fact, that the worship of Nebo and the gods associated with him continued until the fourth century of the Christian era.

### By whom followed.

It was the faith of two distinct peoples--the Sumero-Akkadians, and the Assyro-Babylonians. In what country it had its beginnings is unknown--it comes before us, even at the earliest period, as a faith already well-developed, and from that fact, as well as from the names of the numerous deities, it is clear that it began with the former race--the Sumero-Akkadians--who spoke a non-Semitic language largely affected by phonetic decay, and in which the grammatical forms had in certain cases become confused to such an extent that those who study it ask themselves whether the people who spoke it were able to understand each other without recourse to devices such as the "tones" to which the Chinese resort. With few exceptions, the names of the gods which the inscriptions reveal to us are all derived from this non-Semitic language, which furnishes us with satisfactory etymologies for such names as Merodach, Nergal, Sin, and the divinities mentioned in Berosus and Damascius, as well as those of hundreds of deities revealed to us by the tablets and slabs of Babylonia and Assyria.

### The documents.

Outside the inscriptions of Babylonia and Assyria, there is but little bearing upon the religion of those countries, the most important fragment being the extracts from Berosus and Damascius referred to above. Among the Babylonian and Assyrian remains, however, we have an extensive and valuable mass of material, dating from the fourth or fifth millennium before Christ until the disappearance of the Babylonian system of writing about the beginning of the Christian era. The earlier inscriptions are mostly of the nature of records, and give information about the deities and the religion of the people in the course of descriptions of the building and rebuilding of temples, the making of offerings, the performance of ceremonies, etc. Purely religious inscriptions are found near the end of the third millennium before Christ, and occur in considerable numbers, either in the original Sumerian text, or in translations, or both, until about the third century before Christ. Among the more recent inscriptions--those from the library of the Assyrian

king Assur-bani-apli and the later Babylonian temple archives,--there are many lists of deities, with numerous identifications with each other and with the heavenly bodies, and explanations of their natures. It is needless to say that all this material is of enormous value for the study of the religion of the Babylonians and Assyrians, and enables us to reconstruct at first hand their mythological system, and note the changes which took place in the course of their long national existence. Many interesting and entertaining legends illustrate and supplement the information given by the bilingual lists of gods, the bilingual incantations and hymns, and the references contained in the historical and other documents. A trilingual list of gods enables us also to recognise, in some cases, the dialectic forms of their names.

#### The importance of the subject.

Of equal antiquity with the religion of Egypt, that of Babylonia and Assyria possesses some marked differences as to its development. Beginning among the non-Semitic Sumero-Akkadian population, it maintained for a long time its uninterrupted development, affected mainly by influences from within, namely, the homogeneous local cults which acted and reacted upon each other. The religious systems of other nations did not greatly affect the development of the early non-Semitic religious system of Babylonia. A time at last came, however, when the influence of the Semitic inhabitants of Babylonia and Assyria was not to be gainsaid, and from that moment, the development of their religion took another turn. In all probably this augmentation of Semitic religious influence was due to the increased numbers of the Semitic population, and at the same period the Sumero-Akkadian language began to give way to the Semitic idiom which they spoke. When at last the Semitic Babylonian language came to be used for official documents, we find that, although the non-Semitic divine names are in the main preserved, a certain number of them have been displaced by the Semitic equivalent names, such as Samas for the sun-god, with Kittu and Mesaru ("justice and righteousness") his attendants; Nabu ("the teacher" = Nebo) with his consort Tasmetu ("the hearer"); Addu, Adad, or Dadu, and Rammanu, Ramimu, or Ragimu = Hadad or Rimmon ("the thunderer"); Bel and Beltu (Beltis = "the lord" and "the lady" /par excellence/), with some others of inferior rank. In place of the chief divinity of each state at the head of each separate pantheon, the tendency was to make Merodach, the god of the capital city Babylon, the head of the pantheon, and he seems to have been universally accepted in Babylonia, like Assur in Assyria, about 2000 B.C. or earlier.

#### The uniting of two pantheons.

We thus find two pantheons, the Sumero-Akkadian with its many gods, and the Semitic Babylonian with its comparatively few, united, and forming one apparently homogeneous whole. But the creed had taken a fresh tendency. It was no longer a series of small, and to a certain extent antagonistic, pantheons composed of the chief god, his consort, attendants, children, and servants, but a pantheon of considerable extent, containing all the elements of the primitive but smaller pantheons, with a number of great gods who had raised Merodach to be their king.

### In Assyria.

Whilst accepting the religion of Babylonia, Assyria nevertheless kept herself distinct from her southern neighbour by a very simple device, by placing at the head of the pantheon the god Assur, who became for her the chief of the gods, and at the same time the emblem of her distinct national aspirations--for Assyria had no intention whatever of casting in her lot with her southern neighbour. Nevertheless, Assyria possessed, along with the language of Babylonia, all the literature of that country--indeed, it is from the libraries of her kings that we obtain the best copies of the Babylonian religious texts, treasured and preserved by her with all the veneration of which her religious mind was capable,--and the religious fervour of the Oriental in most cases leaves that of the European, or at least of the ordinary Briton, far behind.

### The later period in Assyria.

Assyria went to her downfall at the end of the seventh century before Christ worshipping her national god Assur, whose cult did not cease with the destruction of her national independence. In fact, the city of Assur, the centre of that worship, continued to exist for a considerable period; but for the history of the religion of Assyria, as preserved there, we wait for the result of the excavations being carried on by the Germans, should they be fortunate enough to obtain texts belonging to the period following the fall of Nineveh.

### In Babylonia.

Babylonia, on the other hand, continued the even tenor of her way. More successful at the end of her independent political career than her northern rival had been, she retained her faith, and remained the unswerving worshipper of Merodach, the great god of Babylon, to whom her priests attributed yet greater powers, and with whom all the other gods were to all appearance identified. This tendency to monotheism, however, never reached the culminating point--never became absolute-- except, naturally, in the minds of those who, dissociating themselves, for philosophical reasons, from the superstitious teaching of the priests of Babylonia, decided for themselves that there was but one God, and worshipped Him. That orthodox Jews at that period may have found, in consequence of this monotheistic tendency, converts, is not by any means improbable--indeed, the names met with during the later period imply that converts to Judaism were made.

### The picture presented by the study.

Thus we see, from the various inscriptions, both Babylonian and Assyrian--the former of an extremely early period--the growth and development, with at least one branching off, of one of the most important religious systems of the ancient world. It is not so important for modern religion as the development of the beliefs of the Hebrews, but as the creed of the people from which the Hebrew nation sprang, and from which, therefore, it had its beginnings, both corporeal and spiritual, it is such as no student of modern religious systems can afford to neglect. Its legends, and therefore its teachings, as will be seen in these pages, ultimately permeated the Semitic West, and may in some cases even had

penetrated Europe, not only through heathen Greece, but also through the early Christians, who, being so many centuries nearer the time of the Assyro-Babylonians, and also nearer the territory which they anciently occupied, than we are, were far better acquainted than the people of the present day with the legends and ideas which they possessed.

## Chapter 2. The Religion Of The Babylonians And Assyrians

The Sumero-Akkadians and the Semites.

For the history of the development of the religion of the Babylonians and Assyrians much naturally depends upon the composition of the population of early Babylonia. There is hardly any doubt that the Sumero-Akkadians were non-Semites of a fairly pure race, but the country of their origin is still unknown, though a certain relationship with the Mongolian and Turkish nationalities, probably reaching back many centuries--perhaps thousands of years--before the earliest accepted date, may be regarded as equally likely. Equally uncertain is the date of the entry of the Semites, whose language ultimately displaced the non-Semitic Sumero-Akkadian idioms, and whose kings finally ruled over the land. During the third millennium before Christ Semites, bearing Semitic names, and called Amorites, appear, and probably formed the last considerable stratum of tribes of that race which entered the land. The name Martu, the Sumero-Akkadian equivalent of Amurru, "Amorite", is of frequent occurrence also before this period. The eastern Mediterranean coast district, including Palestine and the neighbouring tracts, was known by the Babylonians and Assyrians as the land of the Amorites, a term which stood for the West in general even when these regions no longer bore that name. The Babylonians maintained their claim to sovereignty over that part as long as they possessed the power to do so, and naturally exercised considerable influence there. The existence in Palestine, Syria, and the neighbouring states, of creeds containing the names of many Babylonian divinities is therefore not to be wondered at, and the presence of West Semitic divinities in the religion of the Babylonians need not cause us any surprise.

The Babylonian script and its evidence.

In consequence of the determinative prefix for a god or a goddess being, in the oldest form, a picture of an eight-rayed star, it has been assumed that Assyro-Babylonian mythology is, either wholly or partly, astral in origin. This, however, is by no means certain, the character for "star" in the inscriptions being a combination of three such pictures, and not a single sign. The probability therefore is, that the use of the single star to indicate the name of a divinity arises merely from the fact that the character in question stands for /ana/, "heaven." Deities were evidently thus distinguished by the Babylonians because they regarded them as inhabitants of the realms above--indeed, the heavens being the place where the stars are seen, a picture of a star was the only way of indicating heavenly things. That the gods of the Babylonians were in many cases identified with the stars and planets is certain, but these identifications seem to have taken place at a comparatively late date. An exception has naturally to be made in the case of the sun and moon, but the god Merodach, if he be, as seems certain, a deified Babylonian king, must have been identified with the stars which bear his name after his worshippers began to pay him divine honours as the supreme deity, and naturally what is true for him may also be so for the other gods whom they worshipped. The identification of some of the deities with stars or planets is, moreover, impossible, and if Ea, the god of the deep, and Anu,

the god of the heavens, have their representatives among the heavenly bodies, this is probably the result of later development.[\*]

[\*] If there be any historical foundation for the statement that Merodach arranged the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars, assigning to them their proper places and duties--a tradition which would make him the founder of the science of astronomy during his life upon earth--this, too, would tend to the probability that the origin of the gods of the Babylonians was not astral, as has been suggested, but that their identification with the heavenly bodies was introduced during the period of his reign.

Ancestor and hero-worship. The deification of kings.

Though there is no proof that ancestor-worship in general prevailed at any time in Babylonia, it would seem that the worship of heroes and prominent men was common, at least in early times. The tenth chapter of Genesis tells us of the story of Nimrod, who cannot be any other than the Merodach of the Assyro-Babylonian inscriptions; and other examples, occurring in semi-mythological times, are /En-we-dur-an-ki/, the Greek Edoreschos, and /Gilgames/, the Greek Gilgamos, though Aelian's story of the latter does not fit in with the account as given by the inscriptions. In later times, the divine prefix is found before the names of many a Babylonian ruler--Sargon of Agade,[\*] Dungi of Ur (about 2500 B.C.), Rim-Sin or Eri-Aku (Arioch of Ellasar, about 2100 B.C.), and others. It was doubtless a kind of flattery to deify and pay these rulers divine honours during their lifetime, and on account of this, it is very probable that their godhood was utterly forgotten, in the case of those who were strictly historical, after their death. The deification of the kings of Babylonia and Assyria is probably due to the fact, that they were regarded as the representatives of God upon earth, and being his chief priests as well as his offspring (the personal names show that it was a common thing to regard children as the gifts of the gods whom their father worshipped), the divine fatherhood thus attributed to them naturally could, in the case of those of royal rank, give them a real claim to divine birth and honours. An exception is the deification of the Babylonian Noah, Ut-napistim, who, as the legend of the Flood relates, was raised and made one of the gods by Aa or Ea, for his faithfulness after the great catastrophe, when he and his wife were translated to the "remote place at the mouth of the rivers." The hero Gilgames, on the other hand, was half divine by birth, though it is not exactly known through whom his divinity came.

[\*] According to Nabonidus's date 3800 B.C., though many Assyriologists regard this as being a millennium too early.

The earliest form of the Babylonian religion.

The state of development to which the religious system of the Babylonians had attained at the earliest period to which the inscriptions refer naturally precludes the possibility of a trustworthy history of its origin and early growth. There is no doubt, however, that it may be regarded as having reached the stage at which we find it in consequence of there being a number of states in ancient Babylonia (which was at that time like the Heptarchy in

England) each possessing its own divinity--who, in its district, was regarded as supreme--with a number of lesser gods forming his court. It was the adding together of all these small pantheons which ultimately made that of Babylonia as a whole so exceedingly extensive. Thus the chief divinity of Babylon, as has already been stated, as Merodach; at Sippar and Larsa the sun-god Samas was worshipped; at Ur the moon-god Sin or Nannar; at Erech and Der the god of the heavens, Anu; at Muru, Ennigi, and Kakru, the god of the atmosphere, Hadad or Rimmon; at Eridu, the god of the deep, Aa or Ea; at Niffur[\*] the god Bel; at Cuthah the god of war, Nergal; at Dailem the god Uras; at Kis the god of battle, Zagaga; Lugal-Amarda, the king of Marad, as the city so called; at Opis Zakar, one of the gods of dreams; at Agade, Nineveh, and Arbela, Istar, goddess of love and of war; Nina at the city Nina in Babylonia, etc. When the chief deities were masculine, they were naturally all identified with each other, just as the Greeks called the Babylonian Merodach by the name of Zeus; and as Zer-panitum, the consort of Merodach, was identified with Juno, so the consorts, divine attendants, and children of each chief divinity, as far as they possessed them, could also be regarded as the same, though possibly distinct in their different attributes.

[\*] Noufar at present, according to the latest explorers. Layard (1856) has Niffer, Loftus (1857) Niffar. The native spelling is Noufer, due to the French system of phonetics.

How the religion of the Babylonians developed.

The fact that the rise of Merodach to the position of king of the gods was due to the attainment, by the city of Babylon, of the position of capital of all Babylonia, leads one to suspect that the kingly rank of his father Ea, at an earlier period, was due to a somewhat similar cause, and if so, the still earlier kingship of Anu, the god of the heavens, may be in like manner explained. This leads to the question whether the first state to attain to supremacy was Der, Anu's seat, and whether Der was succeeded by Eridu, of which city Ea was the patron--concerning the importance of Babylon, Merodach's city, later on, there is no doubt whatever. The rise of Anu and Ea to divine overlordship, however, may not have been due to the political supremacy of the cities where they were worshipped--it may have come about simply on account of renown gained through religious enthusiasm due to wonders said to have been performed where they were worshipped, or to the reported discovery of new records concerning their temples, or to the influence of some renowned high-priest, like En-we-dur-an-ki of Sippar, whose devotion undoubtedly brought great renown to the city of his dominion.

Was Animism its original form?

But the question naturally arises, can we go back beyond the indications of the inscriptions? The Babylonians attributed life, in certain not very numerous cases, to such things as trees and plants, and naturally to the winds, and the heavenly bodies. Whether they regarded stones, rocks, mountains, storms, and rain in the same way, however, is doubtful, but it may be taken for granted, that the sea, with all its rivers and streams, was regarded as animated with the spirit of Ea and his children, whilst the great cities and temple-towers were pervaded with the spirit of the god whose abode they were.

Innumerable good and evil spirits were believed in, such as the spirit of the mountain, the sea, the plain, and the grave. These spirits were of various kinds, and bore names which do not always reveal their real character--such as the /edimmu/, /utukku/, /sedu/, /asakku/ (spirit of fevers), /namtaru/ (spirit of fate), /alu/ (regarded as the spirit of the south wind), /gallu/, /rabisu/, /labartu/, /labasu/, /ahhazu/ (the seizer), /lilu/ and /lilithu/ (male and female spirits of the mist), with their attendants.

All this points to animism as the pervading idea of the worship of the peoples of the Babylonian states in the prehistoric period--the attribution of life to every appearance of nature. The question is, however, Is the evidence of the inscriptions sufficient to make this absolutely certain? It is hard to believe that such intelligent people, as the primitive Babylonians naturally were, believed that such things as stones, rocks, mountains, storms, and rain were, in themselves, and apart from the divinity which they regarded as presiding over them, living things. A stone might be a /bit ili/ or bethel--a "house of god," and almost invested with the status of a living thing, but that does not prove that the Babylonians thought of every stone as being endowed with life, even in prehistoric times. Whilst, therefore, there are traces of a belief similar to that which an animistic creed might be regarded as possessing, it must be admitted that these seemingly animistic doctrines may have originated in another way, and be due to later developments. The power of the gods to create living things naturally makes possible the belief that they had also power to endow with a soul, and therefore with life and intelligence, any seemingly inanimate object. Such was probably the nature of Babylonian animism, if it may be so called. The legend of Tiawthu (Tiawath) may with great probability be regarded as the remains of a primitive animism which was the creed of the original and comparatively uncivilised Babylonians, who saw in the sea the producer and creator of all the monstrous shapes which are found therein; but any development of this idea in other directions was probably cut short by the priests, who must have realised, under the influence of the doctrine of the divine rise to perfection, that animism in general was altogether incompatible with the creed which they professed.

#### Image-worship and Sacred Stones.

Whether image-worship was original among the Babylonians and Assyrians is uncertain, and improbable; the tendency among the people in early times being to venerate sacred stones and other inanimate objects. As has been already pointed out, the {diopetres} of the Greeks was probably a meteorite, and stones marking the position of the Semitic bethels were probably, in their origin, the same. The boulders which were sometimes used for boundary-stones may have been the representations of these meteorites in later times, and it is noteworthy that the Sumerian group for "iron," /an-bar/, implies that the early Babylonians only knew of that metal from meteoric ironstone. The name of the god Nirig or Enu-restu (Ninip) is generally written with the same group, implying some kind of connection between the two --the god and the iron. In a well-known hymn to that deity certain stones are mentioned, one of them being described as the "poison-tooth"[\*] coming forth on the mountain, recalling the sacred rocks at Jerusalem and Mecca. Boundary-stones in Babylonia were not sacred objects except in so far as they were sculptured with the signs of the gods.[+] With regard to the Babylonian bethels, very

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