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THE RELATION OF MARDUK, ASHUR, AND OSIRIS

By SIDNEY SMITH, M.A.

THE question of the relation of the civilisations of Egypt and Babylonia, often discussed has most frequently been considered from the material aspect; and there is slowly accumulating archaeological evidence to show that the two ancient states had many things in common that trade intercourse alone cannot be held to account for. On this strictly archaeological argument various authorities are likely to base varying interpretations; but it is to be hoped that in the discussion of the point some regard may also be had to another aspect of the question,—the religious. During the war a quantity of most important religious texts has been published by Dr Ebeling¹, and from those texts certain facts have come to light which necessitate an entirely new view of the two great gods of the Euphrates and Tigris valleys, Marduk and Ashur; and it will be seen that certain inferences are possible which have a most important bearing on the question of the origins of civilisation.

The texts that have supplied new information about the mythology dealing with Marduk and Ashur are of two kinds.

(1) Fragments of the Creation Epic, restoring much of the missing portion of the First Tablet, and almost the whole of the Sixth Tablet, previously represented by a few lines. These have been translated provisionally by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge in *The Babylonian Legends of the Creation* (British Museum, 1921)².

(2) Texts connected with the rites of the New Year Festival, called *Zagmukku*, at Babylon and the city of Ashur. These have been translated by Professor Heinrich Zimmern in his *Zweiter Beitrag zum Babylonischen Neujahrsfest* (B. G. Teubner, Leipzig, 1918), a book which serves to explain much that had already appeared in the first pamphlet, *Zum Babylonischen Neujahrsfest* (B. G. Teubner, Leipzig, 1906). Professor Zimmern has, in the later work, given an ingenious comparison between the myth of Bel-Marduk and the New Testament account of the Christ which is likely to distract attention from certain points in which his interpretation of the texts is undoubtedly correct. For that reason it will be well to state the results of his work on the texts as clearly as possible.

Certain texts from Nineveh and from the city of Ashur describe cult ceremonial performed at the New Year Festival³. These cult acts are explained as representing mythical events connected with the story of Marduk. The king himself played the part of Marduk in this mimetic ritual⁴, the priest that of Nabu, while the worshippers themselves seem to have taken part in the ceremony⁵. From these texts the story of Marduk can be partially filled out: some assistance can also be obtained from the ritual of this festival, which lasted during the first twelve days of Nisan, from the hemerologies for the second to fifth days still extant⁶. The Creation Epic was recited during the fourth day (also

¹ *Texte aus Assur Religiösen Inhalts*, Hefte I-VI (Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen Orient-Gesellschafts).

² See also EBELING, *Das babylonische Welterschöpfungsglied*, B. Meissner, Breslau, 1921.

³ *Erster Beitrag*, 127-136.

⁴ *Erster Beitrag*, 132, Anm. 5.

⁵ Cf. *Zweiter Beitrag*, 14, l. 9.

⁶ THUREAU-DANGIN, *Rituels Accadiens*, Paris, 1921, 127-155.

with mimetic representations) from beginning to end¹, as summarizing the early part of Marduk's career as follows:

Marduk was begotten by Ea within the chambers into which Apsu, the abyss of waters, was divided. His form was peculiar, for he had four ears and four eyes, which probably means he was two-headed². He joined with all the gods in the great rebellion against Tiamat. Other gods having refused to undertake the task of facing Tiamat and her champion Kingu³, Marduk, on the promise that his supreme position should be acknowledged, went forth to battle, paralysed Kingu by his eye⁴, and killed Tiamat in battle, ripping her up to make heaven and earth. Marduk then fixed the stations of the moon and the stars, and announced his intention to Ea of making the ways of the gods two-fold, *i.e.* one celestial, one terrestrial. Ea suggested that one god be sacrificed that all might be established. Marduk held a council of the gods and asked who was the cause of strife. They replied "Kingu," and Kingu was punished, Ea fashioning⁵ mankind from the blood: man was made for the service of the gods. The gods then asked Marduk what gift they could make him, and he decided on the building of Babylon. The Anunnaki themselves built the temple of Babylon named Esagila, and when this was completed a council of the gods was held which bestowed on Marduk the Fifty Names which announced his supremacy.

So closes the Creation Epic; and before the ritual texts enable us to learn more of the story there is a long gap, and somewhere in this gap must come the group of events once recounted in the so-called "Legend of Zu⁶." From this we learn that the god Zu stole from Marduk the *dup šimati*, generally translated the "tablet of destinies," but better called a "tablet of ordinances." This was an essential to the ruler of the Universe: it had originally belonged to Tiamat, who gave it to Kingu, from whom it was captured by Marduk. It may be that the loss of that tablet led to the fall of Marduk: for the ritual text⁷ opens with Bel imprisoned in the "Mountain," that is the grave, or Sheol, the underworld⁸. A message was sent out, asking for some one to bring Marduk out. Nabu came from Borsippa to save his father. A goddess (almost certainly Beltis, the spouse of Marduk) appealed to Sin and Shamash to bring Bel to life, then went to the gate of the grave seeking him where he was guarded by twin watchmen in a prison without sun or light: the goddess descended into the grave to save him. While Marduk was thus imprisoned, apparently with the actual evildoer, confusion fell upon Babylon. Further details of the ritual are not easy to work into a story, but it is clear that Nabu and Beltis were both active in their endeavours to aid Marduk. Finally Anshar sent Enurta⁹ out to capture Zu, and he captured him; and then the gods bored through the door of the prison and brought Marduk out. It should be noted that the colophon of the tablet shows that it was intended only for the eyes of those initiated into these religious mysteries.

Such is the brief outline of the myth of Marduk as it is now known. Several authorities,

¹ *Zweiter Beitrag*, 39, Anm. 1.

² The two headed divinity, then, on cylinder seals is Marduk. I believe these scenes to be illustrations of the incantation "Go, my son Marduk."

³ The reading of this name is far from certain.

⁴ Fourth Tablet, l. 67.

⁵ *I.e.* Like a potter, as the word used implies. Ea's symbol was a ram-headed crook. Note that in the paintings of Egyptian temples it is Khnum, a ram-headed god who moulds the figures of the king and his double, also at the command of the sun-god (NAVILLE, *Deir el-Bahari*, II, Pl. XLVIII).

⁶ The text is given in KING, *First Steps in Assyrian*. I deduce the fact that this story belongs here from *Erster Beitrag*, 132, l. 14, and *Zweiter Beitrag*, 18, ll. 58-60.

⁷ *Zweiter Beitrag*, 14.

⁸ *Zweiter Beitrag*, 3, Anm. 2.

⁹ This is the god's name that used to be read "Ninib."

especially Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, have pointed out close similarities between the Creation Epic and the Myth of Apep¹. Even the few facts outlined above will suggest a comparison of the later events in Marduk's career with the myth of Osiris. The descent into the grave is of course the central feature; it is unfortunate that in the Marduk myth the immediate cause of that descent is uncertain. The comparison of Beltis with Isis is obvious; and the victory of Enurta, whose symbol is a bird of prey², over Zu affords at any rate an interesting parallel to that of Horus over Set³. Nabu is very similar in his characteristics to the Egyptian Thoth, who also played a part in the Osiris myth. Comparative mythology is notoriously unsafe ground for speculation, and yet it seems difficult to believe that no connection exists between the Babylonian and Egyptian myths.

That there is a possibility of such a connection is, I believe, strengthened by certain other considerations. These considerations are indeed themselves but guesses, but they afford the best explanation of a series of problems which Assyriologists have long been unable to answer.

Zimmern long ago⁴ pointed out that the god Ashur in Assyria was the hero of the fight with Tiamat, as Marduk was in Babylon: a fact confirmed by the texts from *Kalçah Sharkât*, in which Ashur becomes the central figure of the Creation Epic⁵. There can be little need to doubt that Ashur and Marduk are essentially one and the same god, differentiated by different epithets, otherwise the literary appropriation of the Creation Epic, undoubtedly composed originally in Babylon about the period of the First Dynasty, to the Assyrian god could never have won approval. Ashur, then, also was a god who descended into the grave, and the facts known about Bel-Marduk are also true of [Bel]-Ashur. It is indeed significant that in the ritual form Ashur the god is always called Bel. Now in this equation of Marduk and Ashur may be found the explanation of the name *Asari*—always used of Marduk as an epithet only, as in the tablet of the Fifty Names. *Asari* has generally been considered a Sumerian word⁶: but I venture to suggest that it is quite possibly a Semitic, or, more properly, Akkadian adjective applied to the great god: an epithet which, with the Assyrians, became the name of the god himself.

Now there is a very important feature of the god Ashur which has not been very generally remarked. The slabs from the palace of Ashur-naşir-pal at Nimrûd, now in the British Museum, have frequent representations of the god sitting in a winged disk⁷. In scenes which are probably illustrations of the Assyrian New Year Festival, the god in the winged disk is always seen hovering over a tree: and similar scenes are frequent on Assyrian cylinder seals. It is safe to infer that the tree and the god are closely connected. The tree is a most peculiar object, being apparently bound at certain parts of the trunk by metal bands, and then hung with intertwining boughs, the whole being surmounted by an arbour of twigs. Professor Tylor⁸ saw in the whole scene, in which certain figures are

¹ A number of detailed parallels are pointed out in *The Babylonian Legends of Creation*; and cf. *Gods of the Egyptians*, I, 324 ff.

² See KING in *P.S.B.A.*, Feb. 1913, 66 ff.

³ Another incident in Zu's career which is similar to the story of Set is illustrated on some cylinder seals which show a birdman dragged before the judgment seat of Ea in heaven by a double headed god, i.e. Marduk. The other god who is apparently accusing Zu may be Nabu carrying a mace. See WEBER, *Orientalische Ziegelbilder*, II, Abb. 396-400.

⁴ *Erster Beitrag*, 144.

⁵ See BUDGE, *Creation Legends*, 5.

⁶ For the complete artificiality of the scribes' interpretations of *Asari* as a Sumerian expression, see UNGNAD in *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, XXXI, 153.

⁷ This winged disk must surely be closely connected in significance with the winged disk in Egyptian art: cf. EBERS in *Z. Ass.* x, 101.

⁸ *P.S.B.A.* XII, 383.

depicted, a ceremony derived from the fertilization of the date palm, but M. Heuzey¹ has given good reasons for doubting this. The habit of putting ornamental metal bands round cedar trees in temple-precincts is attested by inscriptions of New Babylonian rulers². This fact alone inclines me to believe that the tree of Ashur is a cedar tree³. I am the less willing to think the tree is a date palm because that tree does not grow in the latitude of Nimrūd. However this may be, Ashur was closely associated with a tree round which metal bands were placed, possibly a cedar.

Now Sir E. A. Wallis Budge has kindly pointed out to me a curious feature of the symbols of Osiris called *t e t* or *ded*. Below the outspreading top which, according to Prof. Newberry, may represent the spreading, sweeping branches of a conifer, are generally four bands. What do these bands represent⁴? It is very tempting to see in them the same metal bands that are round the tree with which Ashur is connected. Perhaps it was this very feature that the Osiris myth attempted to explain by the story of a tree growing round the chest which held the body of Osiris. Should this comparison be accepted, it seems impossible to the present writer not to believe that Ashur and Osiris, whose cult objects are similar, as well as their myths, have a common origin.

For that common origin the name also speaks. Prof. Sayce has pointed out the possibility that Asari is philologically equal to Osiris: it is no less possible that Ashur = Asari = Osiris. Incidentally, one small peculiarity about the name of Ashur may itself perhaps be explained by what has already been said. Why did the name written Ashir or Ashur in early times come to be pronounced Ashshur, as it invariably is from about 1400 B.C.? Is it possibly because Ashur was identified with the tree named אֲשֵׁר, the *sherbîn*, a particular form of cedar? The speculation is nothing more than speculation, but it fits the evidence very well.

Now if the Osiris myth in Egypt and the Marduk and Ashur myth in the eastern river valleys have a common origin, where did the myth originate? Certainly not in Babylonia; for the god who descended into the grave had quite a different story originally in Babylonia—he was Tammuz, and connected with the Ishtar cycle. The worshippers of Marduk, the Babylonians of the First Dynasty, are now universally acknowledged to have come from Amurru, or roughly speaking, Syria. The Assyrians must also have come into the Euphrates and Tigris valleys from without, for Sumerian remains have been found on the site of Kałcah Sharġât. The earliest Assyrian names are found on the tablets from Cappadocia, which belong to the time of the Dynasty of Ur, about 2250—2150 B.C.; this also points to a Western origin. When it is remembered that the city of Byblos played an important part in the Osiris myth, there seems some ground for the supposition that Syria was the true original home of Ashur-Marduk-Osiris.

¹ In POTIER, *Les Antiquités Assyriennes du Louvre* (1917), 49 ff.

² Cf. LANGDON, *Neubabylonische Königsinschriften*, Nebuchadnezzar Nr. 17, Col. III, ll. 27–29, et freq.

³ The main features of the tree as represented in the sculptures are that the trunk is straight and the branches form a clump head. Of the *Cedrus Libani* it is said, "In the young tree the pole is straight and upright....As the tree increases in size the upper branches become mingled together and the tree is then clump-headed." *Encycl. Britt.* s.v. The cones in the hands of the divine figures may well be cedar cones, the resin from which was used for anointing.

⁴ According to a translation of an Arabic text recently published (see BUDGE, *Queen of Sheba*, pp. xxxix–xliv) the early Arabs were in the habit of placing rings made of precious metal on logs or trunks of trees which in some way had become sacred. In the instance quoted the log of wood had a mysterious origin and performed miracles, and Solomon determined to preserve it. The King and the Queen of Sheba each placed one silver collar on the log, after the miraculous transformation of the Queen's animal foot, and their example was followed by their successors, so that at the coming of Christ there were 30 rings on the log. The custom of hanging various objects on sacred trees was well-known in pre-Islamic Arabia.