

The Assyrian Prophecies - Dr. Simo Parpola

The Neo-Assyrian prophecy corpus is an extant on two kinds of clay tablets, which differ from each other in size and in shape. Texts 1-4 are relatively large, vertical tablets containing several oracles in two or three columns. Nos. 5-8 are smaller, horizontal in shape and contain only one oracle each. By its format, no. 9 belongs with nos. 1-4, although it contains one oracle only; nos. 10-11 are fragmented tablets. The 28 oracles can be assigned on the basis of the extant authorship indications to (13) different prophets, (4) of whom are male and (9) female. The comparatively high number of women is paralleled by the prominence of prophetesses and female ecstasies in Mari and OT prophecy, as well as in Gnosticism and early Christianity. (8) of the prophets come from Arbela, (2) from Ashur, (1) from Calah (Nimrod), possibly (1) from Nineveh, and (1) from a town "in the mountains".

The original text of the Assyrian prophecies which was published by George Smith in 1875 under 'Addresses of encouragement to the Assyrian king Esarhaddon' did not in the beginning attract any attention. The first to recognize its significance was Alphonso Delattre who published it in 1888 in an article entitled 'The Oracles given in favor of Esarhaddon.' Later Pinches, in 1891, published another article about the same subject labeled 'The Oracle of Ishtar of Arbela'. It was virtually still unknown to biblical scholars hundred years after its discovery even though it provides a much closer parallel to Old Testament prophecy than the early 2nd millennium prophetic texts of Mari, now well known to every serious biblical scholar. Many attribute this to the misleading terminology. Assyriologists have applied the labels 'oracle' and 'prophecy' to other texts unrelated to inspired prophecy, hence when this collection came out it was neglected too. Some tried to argue that since these prophecies appeared during the reign of Esarhaddon, then it was related to the deportations from Israel under Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II, and thus an 'import from the West'. But this is untenable and has to be rejected since the prophecies have a tight link to the cult of Ishtar and Assyrian royal ideology, mythology and iconography, hence a genuinely an Assyrian phenomenon.

Dr. Parpola writes, "For all their similarities, Assyrian and Biblical prophecies have one conspicuous difference, and it appears to be fundamental. While the biblical prophets proclaim the word of Yahweh, the god of Israel presented as the only true God, the Assyrian prophets do not proclaim the word of their national god, Ashur. In most cases the oracular deity is Ishtar, the goddess of love, but other deities, both male and female, also appear in this capacity in the texts. Ashur speaks only once in the corpus. As far as I can see, he says, nobody seems to have ever been bothered by this state of affairs. On the contrary, it seems to have been taken as the most natural thing in the world, a simple reflection of the contrast between the monotheistic religion of Israel on the one hand, and the 'pagan' polytheistic religion of Assyria on the other." However, Dr. Parpola writes; "a closer acquaintance with the texts reveals a number of difficulties with this view. Leaving aside the fact that the content of the prophecies has absolutely nothing to do with 'fertility' or 'vegetation cults,' the multiplicity of oracular deities appearing in them is largely illusory."

In oracle 1.4, the deity first speaks as Bel, then as Ishtar of Arbela, and finally as Nabu, the son of Bel and the keeper of celestial records. It is as if in this short oracle the deity were repeatedly putting on new masks to suit the changing themes of the discourse, and one cannot help being

reminded of the Holy Trinity of Christianity, where the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are explained as different hypostases of one indivisible Divine Being. Similar shifts in the identity of the oracular deity are also observable in other oracles of the corpus as well as in other contemporary texts.

Most important, in no. 3, a collection of oracles referred to in the text as "the covenant tablet of Ashur," the identities of Ashur and Ishtar blend in an unexpected and absolutely baffling way.. Oracle 3.3, in accordance with its central position in the text, constituted the essence of the "covenant tablet of Ashur". However, in the very next oracle 3.4, it is not Ashur but Ishtar of Arbela who actually concludes the covenant. In a scene reminiscent of the Last Supper, the Goddess invites "the gods, her fathers and brothers" to a covenant meal, in the course of which she addresses them as follows: "You will go to your cities and districts, eat bread and forget this covenant. (But when) you drink from this water, you will remember me and keep this covenant which I have made on behalf of Esarhaddon." the formulation of the passage makes it clear that Ishtar is not acting as a mere mediator here. The covenant in question is between her and the other gods -- it is her covenant with "the gods, her fathers and brothers." Accordingly, the phrasing of oracle 3.4, considered with 3.3, unquestionably implies that, in a way or another, Ashur and Ishtar were considered identical by the author of the text. On the other hand, in no. 3.2 and other oracles of the corpus, the Goddess refers to Ashur in the third person and thus evidently as a distinct divine entity. This creates a theological problem that seems serious indeed: How can two gods at the same time appear as identical yet distinct entities in one and the same text? The solution to the problem lays in the Assyrian concept of God, which defined Ashur-- "the only, universal God"-- as "the totality of gods." Ashur himself was beyond human comprehension. Man could know him only through his powers pervading and ruling the universe, which, though emanating from a single source, appeared to man as separate and were accordingly hypostatized as different gods. On the surface, then, Assyrian religion, with its multitude of gods worshiped under different names, appears to us as polytheistic; on a deeper level, however, it was monotheistic, all the divine deities being conceived of as powers, aspects, qualities, or attributes of Ashur, who is often simply referred to as "(the) God." On the human level, the underlying doctrine of God's "unity in multiplicity" mirrored the structure of the Assyrian empire — a heterogenous multi-national power directed by a superhuman, autocratic king, who was conceived of as the representative of God on earth. The idea of God as "the sum total of gods" is attested in various parts of the ancient Near East already in the 6th century BC, and later in several Hellenistic and Oriental philosophies and religions (e.g., Platonism, Orphism, Neoplatonism, Hinduism, Tantrism). It certainly also was part and parcel of first-millennium BC Jewish monotheism, as shown by the biblical designation of "God," *elōhîm*, which literally means "gods." What is more, the idea of a divine council is well attested in the Bible and unquestionably formed an essential component of the imagery of Jewish prophets from the earliest times through the end of biblical prophecy. Consider, for example, the following passage, quoting words of the mid-ninth-century prophet Micaiah: Now listen to the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD seated on his throne, with all the host of heaven in attendance on his right and on his left. The LORD said, "Who will entice Ahab to attack and fall on Ramoth-gilead?" One said one thing and one said another; then a high spirit came forward and stood before the LORD and said, "I will entice him." "How?" said the LORD. "I will go out," he said, "and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." "You shall entice him," said the LORD, "and you shall succeed; go and do it." You see, then, how the LORD has put a lying spirit

in the mouth of all these prophets of yours, because he has decreed disaster for you. The key elements of this vision — God, seated on his throne, presiding over and conversing with a heavenly council or court — not only recur in most major biblical prophets and Job, but in later Jewish and Christian traditions as well, from post-exilic times down to medieval Kabbalah. Several further elements of biblical imagery (e.g., a furnace or lamp burning at the throne of God, a succession of heavens and heavenly palaces, ladders leading to them, heavenly gates and gatekeepers, and a heavenly city and kingdom) likewise continue as integral elements of later Jewish and Christian traditions, and what is particularly important in this context, they also figure prominently in the Assyrian prophecy corpus and Mesopotamian cosmic geography at large.

The various celestial beings or spiritual entities populating the heavens in Christianity and Judaism are explained partly as creations, partly as hypostases of God. In Christian dogma, angels and saints belong to the former category; God the Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit to the latter. In early Jewish mysticism, by contrast, angels are conceived as powers of God, and they are actually invoked as (quasi) independent gods in Jewish magical texts of the early first millennium AD. The fundamental unity of all divine powers is, however, basic to Judaism, and is encoded in its central symbol, the menorah, now well established as derived from the Ancient Near Eastern sacred tree or "Tree of Life." Though the Tree itself is well known from the Bible and has a prehistory reaching long back into pre-exilic times, its precise symbolism was long kept secret from the masses and therefore surfaces only in medieval Jewish mysticism Kabbalah. The Tree of Life of Kabbalah is a multi-layered symbol in which the metaphysic structure of the universe (macrocosm) and the model of the perfect man (microcosm) converge as the "image" of God. It is composed of ten divine powers called sefirot ("[primordial] numbers," lit., "counting"), defined as aspects or attributes of God and systematically associated with parts of his "body," so as to constitute an anthropomorphic whole. It thus effectively depicts God as the "sum total" of his divine powers, "gods".

From the viewpoint of Assyrian prophecy, it is of crucial importance that the tree with its entire associated doctrinal apparatus can be based on a Mesopotamian model perfected in Assyria in the 2nd millennium BC. That this model could be made an integral part of Jewish religious thought underlines the basic similarity of the Assyrian and biblical concepts of God. The Assyrian sacred tree, which occasionally takes an anthropomorphic form, can be analyzed as consisting of the "great gods" of the Assyrian pantheon and taken as a schematic representation of the "divine assembly," with Ishtar occupying the "heart" of this divine "body." Like the sefirot, the "great gods" making up the tree were prominently associated with numbers. This fact gives the tree an important mystical dimension. Equipped with this information, we can now return to the problem of the identity of Ashur and Ishtar left pending above. On the surface level, we have a scene in oracle 3.4 in which the prophet, personifying Ishtar, administers a ritual meal to gods summoned from various cities and districts of Assyria to participate (along with the respective governors and vassal kings) in a divine covenant in favor of Esarhaddon. On the allegorical level, this corresponds to a meeting of the divine council, convened to terminate a period of divine wrath with Assyria and to initiate a new era under the rule of a savior king, Esarhaddon. On a deeper, mystical level, the passage describes a process taking place within Ashur himself, with Ishtar, the "heart" of his cosmic body, playing a key role in the process. The same pattern of thought is reflected in Tablet XI of the Gilgamesh Epic, which tells that the heart

of the convened great gods induced them to cause the Flood, and later specifies that it was Ishtar who commanded it. Thus, while Ishtar in the oracle appears as the primus motor of the covenant, it was the council in its entirety, that is, Ashur himself, who concluded it. All things considered, the conceptual framework of Assyrian prophecy emerges as largely identical with that of ancient Israelite prophecy. Both shared the same basic concept of God as "the sum total of gods" and the same religious concepts and imagery.