

A TABLET ON THE MYSTERIES OF BABYLONIAN SYMBOLISM*

WHEN I was examining a certain tablet of the Nippur collection in the Museum for the purpose of entering its number and contents in the catalogue, the library note of the Babylonian scribe arrested my attention. "Let the knowing instruct the knowing, and let him that does not know not read. Ninurtanasir, son of Iluikiša the priest of mysteries, has written it according to its original. It is the property of the temple Shumera." The first sentence of this colophon recalled at once the identical phrase which occurs at the end of a few tablets in the great library of Asurbanipal of Nineveh, discovered by Layard, Rassam and others, and now in the British Museum. It is the warning phrase which sealed the mystic books to the untaught and uninitiated. Each temple possessed its sacred library, books on rituals of all kinds, liturgies, astrology, medicine, law and other important subjects. Some of these books, especially those which taught the rules for divining the future by the stars or by the livers of sheep, those which revealed the mystic meanings of animals, plants, metals and of cult utensils, carry this forbidding phrase. A tablet from the late period discovered in Babylonia and brought to the British Museum contains the hidden meanings of the stars. It teaches how each star is the manifestation of the power of one of the gods. Regulus is the dwelling place of Marduk. Sirius is the stellar symbol of Ishtar, goddess of love and battle. The constellation of Scorpio symbolises Išhara, deity of water animals. A few of the star names are explained and their significance commented upon. That was essentially a hidden book. It belonged to the temple of Nebo, god of wisdom, at Barsippa and has the following library note.

"Let him that knows instruct the knowing. According to its original it has been written and collated. Long clay tablet; property of the temple Ezida. Nabunadinaḥi, son of Arkatilānidamiḫti the priest of mysteries, for his peace wrote it and placed it in Ezida."

An astrological tablet from the library of Asurbanipal explains the hidden names of Jupiter in each of the twelve months, together

* Dr. Langdon, who is now in the British Army, has had no opportunity of reading the proofs of this article or of the one which follows. It is due to him also to state that references made by him in footnotes to authorities to whom he had occasion to refer, have been deleted from both articles in the course of the editorial work to avoid encumbering the pages with uninteresting details.—EDITOR.

with other similar information. The scribe's note reads as follows: "Let the knowing instruct the knowing and let him that does not know not read: that is an abomination unto Anu and Enlil." (Heaven and earth gods.) A tablet of the same collection explains the prophetic signification of signs on a sheep's liver and carries a similar passport to the initiated: "It is the secret of the diviners. Let the knowing teach the knowing and he that does not know shall not read, for that is an abomination unto Nebo and Lugal."

The legend on the tablet in the University Museum showed that the contents belonged to the secret teaching of the priests of Nippur. Further study revealed the interesting fact that we have here the most extensive information hitherto recovered from the mystagogues of the Assyro-Babylonian religion. The obverse explains the divine powers which are controlled and symbolised by the various substances and utensils employed in the rituals and also the only information we have yet recovered concerning the mystic meanings of metals. More about the latter point will be given in the following discussion.

Before this tablet came to light Assyriologists possessed two short lists of cult symbols and their divine import. One from Babylon in the year 138 B. C. explains the cryptic significance of eleven objects employed in a ritual of atonement. It says that gypsum and pitch are smeared on the door of a house; gypsum signifies the war god Ninurta and pitch the demon of sickness Asakhu. The war god tramples upon the devil, or gypsum conquers the pitch. The priest lays a thin string of bran-mash about the bed of the sick; this string of bran signifies two warlike gods of the lower world who stand on guard against all evil. A copper gong is beaten in the ceremony of driving out the devils. This gong is the voice of Enlil, great earth god whose voice is like that of a bull terrifying the evil ones. The scapegoat, to which is given the sins of the patient, represents the satyr of flocks, the good spirit Ninamashazagga, who kindly sends a goat to take away the burden of uncleanness. The torch which is lighted as part of the ceremony signifies the intervention of the fire god, him that burns away all impurity. In another text from the library of Asurbanipal published some years ago the meanings of sixteen cult objects were given, a few of them being identical with those on the late Babylonian tablet.

The tablet No. 6060 of the Museum collection is nearly complete and is the Babylonian original of the Asurbanipal text. It is from the Cassite period and may be assigned to the sixteenth century

B. C. I signal here only a few of the more interesting identifications. In Babylonian rituals of purification one of the most important cult objects was the jar of holy water (*Agubbû*) which is the first symbol explained on the tablet. It signifies the presence of Nin-habursildu, queen of incantations, goddess of the pure waters of the fountains, who walks the wide streets of the lower world. The tamarisk, often employed in these magic rites, signifies the heaven god, and the head of the date palm is emblematic of Tammuz, the young shepherd who yearly dies with vegetation. Cypress signifies the aid of Adad, god of rain, thunder and oracles. The censer invokes the god of the spring sun Urasha, but according to the late Babylonian tablet Aragsud, god of fire and all lustration. Bitumen invokes the aid of the great river goddess, and the scapegoat the wicked demon Kushu who comes and takes the sin-bearing animal away.

These selections will illustrate the contents of this interesting and unique tablet. Symbolism is the spiritual music of religion and all great cultural religions develop mystic explanations for their cult objects. The seven candle-sticks of the Hebrew candelabrum become for Philo significant of the seven Pleiades. Every part of the high priest's garments became indicative of spiritual powers or ethical virtues in later times of mystic speculation. In the Christian Church sacred symbolism, which invaded its theology in the third century, rapidly attained a degree and an extent of mysticism hardly surpassed by that of Babylonia, the home of such speculation. Since the cryptic implication of symbols arrives only in the later stages of a religion, not much can be gained by an effort to trace them from one religion to another. All rituals employ lights, torches and candles. In Babylonia the torch signifies the purifying power of the fire-god. In the early Christian Church the newly baptised were led to the church, preceded by candles signifying the pillar of fire which preceded the Hebrew fugitives of the Exodus. Each body mystic doctrine must be interpreted by the beliefs and myths of its own environment. Certain underlying principles are universally true. Water and fire ever invoke the powers of lustration. The eagle is universally the symbol of light and the triumph of day over night, the power of the sun against the clouds.

Before taking leave of this subject, the scapegoat should receive special mention. The Hebrew ritual of the scapegoat is described in Leviticus 16, 20-28. Here the high priest atones for the entire

nation by consigning their sins to a goat which is driven away into the wilderness. According to an ancient belief recorded in verses 8 and 10 of this same chapter the scapegoat belonged to the demon Azâzel.

According to the Cassite tablet the scapegoat of Babylonia belonged to the evil demon Kushu. Although the rituals of the Hebrews and Babylonians differ, the religious objects and beliefs are identical and reveal similar cult methods. In both the sins of man are communicated to a goat which is taken or driven away to the desert. In both, the animal which bears away the guilt of man belongs to a hostile and evil spirit.

In the first column of the Cassite tablet we have the only known reference to the mystic meanings of metals. Byzantine writers preserve the list of metals attributed in Graeco-Roman religion to the seven planets and the Sabæans of Mesopotamia are said to have held a mystic connection between certain metals and the planets. Since this Aramaic pagan sect at Harran in Mesopotamia borrowed a considerable portion of their religious beliefs from Babylonia, we may assume that the entire doctrine of the association of metals with the planets came from Babylonia. The only known lists are Byzantine and these late Greek writers do not always agree. The following list is the one most commonly found in those sources. Saturn—lead, Jupiter—silver, Mars—iron, Sun—gold, Venus—tin, Mercury—bronze, Moon—crystal. With the aid of Dr. Fotheringham, Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, I have been able to ascertain that these identifications were made on the basis of colour. The subject of the colour of stars has intensively engaged the attention of modern astronomy so that accurate tables on this point now exist. Most unfortunately, the Museum tablet, while preserving the names of planets and fixed stars, is broken away on the side which contained their corresponding metals. This lacunæ is lamentable, for here we would have evidence for the approximate colour of stars 2000 years before the Byzantine period and 3500 years before our own. Have the colours of the stars changed? Are they gradually becoming dimmer, or changing in the colour scale from red to white? These are important questions which only ancient Babylonian astronomy can answer, for they alone, of ancient peoples before the Greeks, made observations of this kind.

The mystery of the metals begins with four identifications. Silver is the heaven god; gold is the earth god; copper is the god

of the sea; lead is the great mother goddess. Some subtle teaching based upon myth or speculation exists here. The term of comparison cannot be colour. None of my learned colleagues have been able either to discover parallels in other religions of the world or to suggest a meaning. We know that Zeus Dolichaïos or Jupiter Dolichenus of Greece and Rome was a sky god and associated with silver. He was Asiatic by origin, hailing from Doliche in Kom-magene. But here also no explanation is forthcoming. Zeus, it is true, was identified with the planet Jupiter whose metal was silver. But in Doliche, his native land, he was a sky god and not identified with the planet. Babylonia, Anu, the heaven god, is symbolised by silver, although he had not the slightest connection with the planets.

At this point several stars, or rather the deities identified with them, are given; the god Mash, deity of Betelgeuse in astrology, the goddess Dilbat, always the planet Venus; the deities of Mars, Saturn and Jupiter occur. But the metals which correspond to these stellar deities are, as stated above, broken away. My article is confined to a discussion of the obverse only. The reverse also contains curious cryptic connections between fruits employed in rituals and various parts of the human body. Mystic acts performed with wine affects the eyes; the fig has some mysterious power over the loins; mead over the legs. The obscurities of this section will forever remain unexplained and the mystagogue offers no explanation. Another section explains how certain deities have power over certain parts of nature, houses and cities, and finally the scribe adds a philological commentary on difficult cult words. The tablet affords an unexpected look into the precious secrets of the priests who retained these secrets as their peculiar possession. It gives us also a feeling of attachment for the ministers of religion and the devout believers of that remote age, whose worship depended so much upon symbolism, even as does our own.

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