

THE GOD AŠŠUR

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Considerable mystery surrounds the state god of Assyria, Aššur.¹ Though this country was a little removed from the centres of Sumero-Babylonian culture and had distinctive traits of its own, compared with Syria and Elam it was definitely within the cultural milieu of Mesopotamia. This applies to religion also, where Adad and Ištar, for example, as worshipped in Assyria, are clearly the counterparts of the Adad and Ištar known from southern Mesopotamia. But the state god Aššur is different. He was peculiarly an Assyrian god without other cult centres, except when Assyrians established them, and he is not fully a *deus persona*. One seeks in vain for his identity. First, he lacks the family connections which are characteristic of all the major gods and goddesses of the Babylonians and Sumerians, uniting them in one big clan. Who was his wife? He sometimes is named with Ištar as though they were husband and wife, but this is not expressly stated, and one may wonder if the pre-eminence of Ištar in Nineveh does not explain this.² They were the chief deities of the two main Assyrian cities. After a while Ninlil begins to appear as his wife,³ but this merely reflects his identification with the old Sumerian chief god—he is called “Assyrian Enlil”—and this use of Enlil’s wife Ninlil merely underlines the lack of any native Assyrian wife of his. The same applies to the rare mentions of Ninurta and Zababa as his sons:⁴ they were long before sons of the Sumero-Babylonian Enlil. The only relative not clearly borrowed from southern Mesopotamia is Šeru’a, who, despite a little confusion, is not the same as Eru’a, a title of Zarpānītum, Marduk’s wife.⁵ Yet even in Neo-Assyrian theological texts it is openly disputed whether she is Aššur’s wife or daughter!⁶

Secondly, Aššur lacks the stock epithets which go with all the major and many of the minor deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon, and generally he is not related to powers and aspects of nature like the other gods around.⁷ In early royal Assyrian inscriptions the rulers address him only as *bēli* “my lord”,⁸ and in early Assyrian

¹ The biggest collection of data is still to be found in K. Tallqvist, *Der assyrische Gott* (SO IV/3, 1932); cf. the same author’s *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (SO VII, 1938, 265 ff.), but further information is now available from many new sources. See especially G. Van Driel, *The Cult of Aššur*, and B. Menzel, *Assyrische Tempel*. “Tallqvist” here refers to his monograph on this god.

² Tallqvist, p. 21.

³ Tallqvist, p. 22.

⁴ Tallqvist, p. 23. The one passage for Zababa, KAV 39 obv. (!) 1–2, is correctly rendered by E. Ebeling, *SVAS*, p. 11, incorrectly by A. L. Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 354. It is: *bi-ri ab-re-e-ma ašā-maš u adad aš-al-ma um-ma za-ba₄-ba₄ mār an.šár šu-ú* “I performed an extispicy and asked Šamaš and Adad, ‘Is Zababa son of Aššur?’”

The asking of the question implies that a positive answer was conceivable to the inquirer.

⁵ Tallqvist, p. 23. The only evidence for equating Eru(‘a) and Šeru’a is the writing EDIN(-u-a) for Šeru’a in personal names, e.g. *Muballīfat-^uše-ru-ú-a/EDIN-u-a* (A. K. Grayson, *ABC*, 159 9, 171 5), which is not strong evidence.

⁶ G. Van Driel, *op. cit.*, 102 53–7; B. Menzel, *op. cit.*, II, T 68.

⁷ Cf. P. Dhorme, *La Religion Assyro-babylonienne* (1910), 101: “Nous aimerions mieux trouver dans les textes quelque attribut caractéristique qui nous permit de déterminer la nature du dieu.” Also note M. Jastrow, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria* (1898), p. 193: “He was never worshipped, so far as can be ascertained, as a manifestation of any of the great powers of nature . . .”. (The older writers on religion are often of very great value still.)

⁸ More commonly, due to the third-person formulation of the inscriptions, *bēlišu* “his lord” occurs. See *passim* the inscriptions of Irišum, Ikunum and Puzur-Sin.

personal names (see below) it appears that *ilum/ilī* “the god/my god” means Aššur. This stands in contrast with other gods from whose stock epithets and other descriptive material in royal inscriptions and personal names a whole theology can be reconstructed.

The very name is peculiar in that the old, original Assyrian city, Aššur, commonly written Assur in the modern world, is exactly the same name as that of the city god. (No serious attempt at etymology of the name has ever come up, so the form of the name is unrevealing.) Further, in the Old Assyrian documents from the trading colonies in Anatolia there is occasionally a lack of distinction between city and god when the name Aššur is used.⁹ The determinative for gods can interchange with that for places, though in general these scribes do not use determinatives haphazardly. Also the term “the City” (*ālum*) is used in oaths along with the ruler,¹⁰ where in southern Mesopotamia it was customary to swear by the god of the city and the ruler.

All this evidence points to one obvious conclusion: that the god Aššur is the deified city. This idea is not new. In 1950, in *Bulleten* 14, p. 231, B. Landsberger raised the issue in the following paragraph:

(Drückt sich in der Tatsache, dass der Gott A. in Z. 35 nicht “König der Stadt A.”, sondern nur “König” genannt wird; in dem oben erwähnten Schwanken zwischen Stadt und Gott Aššur; in dem Schwur *niš alim* u₃ *rubā'im* der Gedanke aus, dass der Gott Aššur quasi “die vergöttlichte Stadt Aššur” sei, bzw. ein — ursprüngliches oder theologisches — Ineinsetzen von Gott und Stadt?)

Note first that the whole paragraph is in parentheses. Secondly, the suggestion is formulated as a question. Thirdly, even so, “quasi” is used to introduce the kernel of the idea. While scholarly caution can be a great virtue, one feels that it is a little overdone here. We shall tackle the problem more boldly.

Landsberger’s suggestion has been echoed in the more recent literature by H. Hirsch,¹¹ P. Garelli,¹² and M. T. Larsen,¹³ without any investigation or further elaboration of possible evidence. First, we shall look for parallels in southern Mesopotamia.

There praise of gods may be complemented by praise of their temples and cities. Temple hymns are a well-known Sumerian genre, less well attested in Babylonian literature. Hymns in praise of cities also occur, though less commonly. Similarly in personal names, where a theophoric element should occur, a temple or city name may appear.¹⁴ However, there is never confusion between god and temple or god and city, and the impression is received that as far as numinous quality attaches to temple or city, it is simply the reflected glory of the divine occupant. And sometimes it is hardly more than a circumlocution. For example, the Old Babylonian personal name Urum-šemi “Ur hears” may mean simply that Šin, the patron god of Ur, hears his worshipper’s petitions. And Ebabbar-tukulti “Ebabbar is my help”

⁹ M. T. Larsen, *The Old Assyrian City-State and its Colonies*, 115 ff. *Religion* (1961), 7²⁸ and 78.

¹² P. Garelli, *RA* 56 (1962), 201.

¹⁰ M. T. Larsen, *op. cit.*, 127 ff.

¹³ M. T. Larsen, *op. cit.*, 116.

¹¹ H. Hirsch, *Untersuchungen zur altassyrischen*

¹⁴ J. J. Stamm, *Die akkadische Namengebung*, 84 ff.

hardly expresses confidence in the bricks of the temple named, but rather in the divine occupant of that structure, Šamaš. It is, then, very doubtful whether this material is a true parallel to the concept of Aššur as the deified city, a *numen loci* glorified by its inhabitants. There seems to be no certain case of a city in southern Mesopotamia bearing the name of the local god. The one possible exception is Muru. This is attested as a name of Adad, and there was a city of the same name.¹⁵ But the ancient sources do not make Adad patron of this city, so the identity of name may be a coincidence.

Thus the centres of Sumero-Babylonian culture do not seem to provide any explanation of the Assyrian phenomenon, but northern Mesopotamian parallels can be found. The numinous character of geographical features there is commonly attested, especially in personal names. The Jebel Hamrin—Ebeḥ—occurs as a theophorous element in personal names from late Early Dynastic to Old Babylonian times, especially in Semitic names from the Diyala region and what was later Nuzi, e.g. *ir-e-^dEN.TI* and *puzur₄-e-bi-iḥ*.¹⁶ The mountain known from texts as Dipar or Dapar, identified by M. Stol as Abdul Aziz,¹⁷ occurs in the Old Akkadian personal name *šu-ti-bar*, and in Old Assyrian as *šu-ti-bar*.¹⁸ Similarly with rivers, the Baliḥ occurs in Old Akkadian personal names,¹⁹ the Ḥabur in Old Assyrian,²⁰ the Durul (Diyala) in Old Akkadian,²¹ the T/Daban in the same,²² and the Tigris in Old Babylonian-period names from Mari and elsewhere.²³

In all these cases there is no patron god of the mountain or river who can be distinguished from the geographical feature. In some sense the mountain or river is the god. This kind of deity is distinct from those of the traditional Sumero-Babylonian pantheon probably in ideology (though we know too little to be sure), but almost certainly in cult. No temples of these deities are known to have existed. One is reminded of numinous mountains to the west: Šaphon, Sinai and Olympus, but they were the seats of gods, at least in historical times, and not gods themselves. But perhaps the passage of time made the difference. Personal names of the type we have cited seem to die out over the second millennium. The latest noted are the Middle Assyrian Urad-Idigla, Ebeḥ-nāšir and Ebeḥ-nīrāri.²⁴ The only cult in the fullest sense of the term occurs at late Early Dynastic Ebla, where *^aba-li-ḥa* receives an individual offering among the other gods of the local pantheon worshipped by the court.²⁵ An incantation from the same archives names *^aba-li-ḥa-a*.²⁶ In the Assyrian Tākultu texts, edited by R. Frankena, *Tākultu*, with index of gods on pp. 77 ff., of which a revised text is given by B. Menzel, *Assyrische*

¹⁵ The name of Adad (with various endings or none) is documented by H. Schlobies, *MAOG* 1/3, 1–14; for the place Muru see *RG* I–III, *sub voce* IM.

¹⁶ *RG* I–II, *sub voce* Ebiḥ; III, *sub voce* Abiḥ; also *puzur₄-e-bi-iḥ* (*RA* 74, 74 49). In the documentation of this and the other divine geographical features in personal names not every single example may be quoted.

¹⁷ M. Stol, *On Trees, Mountains, and Millstones*, 25 ff.

¹⁸ H. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 34.

¹⁹ J. J. A. Roberts, *The Earliest Semitic Pantheon*, 17.

²⁰ H. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, 32 f.

²¹ *RG* I, p. 210; II, p. 259.

²² *RG* III, p. 312; also, probably early Old Babylonian, *šu-^aDA-ba-an* (*RA* 74, 74 55).

²³ *ARM* XVI/1, 263; *RG* III, p. 287; and *puzur₄-^aiḥ-idiglat* (*RA* 74, 74 62).

²⁴ The first in C. Saporetti, *Onomastica Medio-Assira* I, 497; the last two in H. Freydank and C. Saporetti, *Nuove Attestazioni dell'Onomastica Medio-Assira*, 51. The divine names are written: ^a(iḏ)IDIGNA^{lū} and ^aEN.TI.

²⁵ G. Pettinato, *OA* 18, 150 v 25.

²⁶ G. Pettinato, *OA* 18, 344 i 4; also in the forthcoming work of M. Krebernik.

Tempel II T 113 ff., Ebeḫ, Dipar and also Ulaya, presumably the river in Elam, appear among the scores of other lesser deities in the divine court of Aššur. Though known from Late Assyrian copies, these were traditional Assyrian texts and probably go back in essentially their present form to at least Middle Assyrian times. Nothing known suggests that these mountain and river gods were of any consequence. They look like survivals.

In southern Mesopotamia a similar impression is gained. Ebeḫ got into an Old Babylonian god list from Nippur as the very last entry.²⁷ Baliḫ appears in an unpublished part of the last tablet of An = Anum, in a lexical extract better known as *Ea I*, 279–82.²⁸ In magic texts of sundry types where gods are listed, the members of the pantheon are followed by miscellaneous parts and aspects of the physical universe conceived as having divine power. An Old Babylonian example is provided by a *zi . . . ḫé.pà* “Be exorcised by . . .” list, *PBS I/2 112*. It goes through named members of the pantheon systematically and then continues:

zi im.imin.bi zi an.{ki}.ub.da.limmu.ba ḫé.pà
 zi gi.g.a.si.si.ga ud.da.zal.a ḫé.
 zi zag.gar zag.gu.la kur.kur ki.šu.bé.eš ḫur.sag a.ab.ba id.gal.gal.la
 ḫé.

Be exorcised by the seven winds, by the four quarters.

Be exorcised by silent night and bright day,

Be exorcised by shrines, sanctuaries, lands, cities, mountains, seas and the great rivers.

lines 76–81 (collated)

Many other examples could be quoted, but the ideas are always the same. The items here are clearly divine and to that extent are on a level with the preceding gods. But their position at the end, and the general lack of cult like that for the preceding gods, distinguish the two groups.

There is also much Hittite and Hurrian material about divine mountains or mountain gods,²⁹ but the problem with that material is its relatively late date. One may reasonably deduce from it that there was a long tradition of divine mountains in the areas concerned, but the precise concepts in which it is expressed do not necessarily go back to the period when one may suspect that Aššur was a *numen loci* simply. The citizens of Aššur were making their god into much more when the Hittite and Hurrian sources were being written.

Against this background a hypothesis may be formulated about the god Aššur. The site of the town Aššur is a natural hill, in fact a spur of Jebel Makhul, which continues the Jebel Hamrin range on the west side of the Tigris. The river washes its edges on one side, and but for its rocky substance would presumably have washed it all away by now. Merely as a natural feature it stands above the nearby hills on its west side, and from the river side it is quite impressive. We suggest that it was a holy spot in prehistoric times. It was probably settled because of its strategic

²⁷ *SLT 122 rev. vii 17*. The whole section is lacking from the duplicates *SLT 123* and *124*.

²⁸ *MSL XIV*, 190 f., where a parallel passage in

Diri is cited.

²⁹ See the recent work of V. Haas, *Hethitische Berggötter und hurritische Steindämonen*.

site, and the inhabitants, we suggest, exploited the holiness of their place by converting the "mountain"³⁰ into a city, both practically by building and ideologically, and by changing the *numen loci* into a *deus persona*. In the latter endeavour they had limited success in the theological aspects, but practically Aššur served them very well because, lacking any basic attributes, he readily assumed the role most suited to the character of his citizens. When they became military imperialists, he became a god of war.

The theological attempt at making him a *deus persona* had three phases. The earliest is reflected in the common use of *ilum* with reference to him in Old Assyrian personal names, as discovered by Garelli.³¹ Also, early Assyrian royal inscriptions couple Aššur and Adad without explanation.³² In these phenomena there is surely a reflection of a pantheon later known from Syria, headed by El and Baal/Hadad. The occurrence of a form of the later Syrian El in Old Akkadian religion, though not in the city gods of Sumer, has long been known. The second attempt to give Aššur theological identity seems to have begun in the second millennium, and modelled him on Enlil. The third and last attempt was Sennacherib's. He developed a hatred for Marduk, city god of Babylon, who had replaced Enlil as head of the pantheon some 500 years earlier. This hatred expressed itself in the attempt to put an end to the cult of Marduk and to set up Aššur in his place. Ironically this often meant making Aššur more like Marduk than he had been previously.

The above hypothesis cannot be tested by any external criterion. It is highly improbable that any direct ancient confirmation will ever be found. Systematic religious history was not an ancient genre. However, any hypothesis which brings all the evidence together in a consistent whole bears the hallmark of truth. In that sense the present hypothesis is advanced for discussion.

³⁰ In this connection it is important to note, first, that ancient languages often do not distinguish between "hill" and "mountain"; secondly, that we should not be influenced by modern geographical knowledge with its specification of heights of mountains in feet or metres above sea level. The ancients were influenced by what struck their senses.

"Mount" Zion is a hill by our standards, but that did not prevent its being religiously very important.

³¹ P. Garelli, *RA* 56, 191 ff.

³² From Puzur-Aššur III to Enlil-nirari Assyrian royal inscriptions promise that Aššur and Adad will hear (i.e. and grant) the prayers of a pious ruler. This implies power to put the prayers into effect.