



Religion of the Common People in Mesopotamia

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Abstract

The purpose of 'Religion of the common people in Mesopotamia' is to examine the religion of the ordinary people. Discovering this information has been difficult task as most written sources and archeological finds explain the official religion of kings, priest and priestesses, and wealthy individuals. This article has tried to trace personal religion for the common man from the development of the pantheon, the importance of myths, prayers, omens and the use of various forms of magic. This information helps us understand the ways in which the average man worshiped his gods, and, perhaps, entered the temples he helped build.

Introduction

Sources for Mesopotamian religion are diverse. In the excavations during the past 150 years, archeologists have unearthed the remains of temples, statues and religious artifacts. Since the war in Iraq, excavation has not been possible; new information derived from small artifacts, stationery objects and tablets could not be retrieved. Architects, artists and scribes who served in the temples and palaces explaining the official religion are our sources.

Myths helped ancient civilizations understand the world around them, how it came about, and the reason for it. Myths were often about the behavior of the gods and their relation to the creation of both heaven and earth. Akkadians did not use different words separating divine and human activity. The same words applied to both.

Religious beliefs were expressed in rituals, hymns, prayers, administrative documents and letters, sometimes written to the gods themselves. People were given names soon after birth, also expressing religious beliefs, e.g. 'Ishtar is my protective spirit' and 'In what way have I sinned[,] O god?'

The Pantheon

The development of religion in ancient Mesopotamia began with a belief in supernatural forces called *numina*, (Lat. sg. *numen*, pl. *numina*). Aspects of nature – sun, wind, fire, rivers, lakes, marshes, storms, mountains – were considered living beings (Jacobsen 1976, pp. 126–127). During the fourth

millennium BCE. Mesopotamians, needing a meaningful relation with these, began to anthropomorphize their gods (Saggs 1989, p. 272). Numinous powers were reflected in traditions throughout the ancient Near East. The strongest divine personalities appealed most to worshipers, absorbing the powers of minor gods. Statues of the god played a key role in ancient Mesopotamia. Their importance is evident in the wide distribution of cheap, clay replicas, as well as statues of minor gods. In fact, a son could inherit his father's 'gods' (Oates 1986, p. 174). Made to look like human beings, gods took part in the same activities such as making love, losing their tempers, eating, drinking, weeping and sleeping (Saggs 1984, p. 207).

Certain animals and fantastic beings, such as the goat fish and snake eagle, became symbols for specific gods. Their emblems, referred to as 'gods', 'standards', 'weapons', 'drawings', and 'seats', were often placed on the pedestals used for the gods themselves throughout the ancient Near East (Black & Green 1992, pp. 93–98, 113–114; Oppenheim 1977, pp. 286–287). Specific association between symbols and gods retained their meaning for more than three millennia.

There are five main groups in the Mesopotamian pantheon: (1) the older generation of gods, (2) the younger generation of gods, (3) national gods, (4) netherworld gods, and (5) personal gods. The following are some significant deities in each group (see Jacobsen 1980, pp. 162–169).

The Older Generation of Gods

From the third millennium BCE onward, *An* (Akkadian, *Anu*), meaning 'sky', was the head of the pantheon on heaven and earth. All things conformed to his will, because his command was 'the foundation of heaven and earth'. *An* was associated with the king, the source of all authority on earth.

Enlil, 'lord wind', was both the power of the gentle wind and the storm. Initially, he held the Tablets of Destiny, affecting both gods and mankind. His wife was the grain goddess *Ninlil*, 'lady wind'.

Ninkhursaga was third in the pantheon, after *An* and *Enlil*. Her name denotes 'Lady of the stony ground' or 'Lady of the foothills', pointing to her representing the numinous powers of rain on the mountains. She acted as midwife in the birth of many gods and goddesses.

Enki (Akkadian, *Ea*), 'productive manager of the soil', irrigated the land. He played a positive role in human affairs, helping man in his time of difficulty.

The Younger Generation of Gods

Nanna (Akkadian, *Sin*) was the god who represented the various phases of the moon, i.e. the full moon, the crescents, and the new moon.

Ninurta was both a warrior and farmer. He was depicted as a hybrid creature, a lion-headed eagle, with extended wings and thunder roaring from its mouth.

Utu (Akkadian, *Shamash*), whose name meant ‘sun’, dispensed justice to both gods and men. Utu was placed to guard the boundaries ‘for heaven and earth’. Through him, the universe was subject to one law and one judge – everything and everyone in existence could be brought to justice.

Inanna (Akkadian, *Ishtar*) assumed a complex set of roles and was called ‘Lady of a myriad offices’ (Jacobsen 1976, p. 141). By the second millennium BCE, Ishtar became the most widely worshiped Babylonian deity, and her Semiticized name, *ishtaru*, the name Ishtar came to be the generic word for ‘goddess’.

Inanna/Ishtar, was the goddess of love and sexuality. She absorbed the powers of a number of other goddesses, such as the divinity of the planet Venus.

As patron goddess of the prostitute and alehouse, Inanna was described in a hymn as a harlot beginning her work by picking up customers from among men returning from work in the fields:

O harlot, you set out for the alehouse,
O Inanna, you are bent on going into your (usual) window
(to solicit) a lover—

...

you, my lady, dress like one of no repute
in a single garment

...

It is you that hail men from the alehouse! (Jacobsen 1976, p. 140)

Inanna may have been depicted in her role as a prostitute, i.e. the face of a lady in the window, with four columns at its base. She wore an Egyptian hairdo and necklace. This motif has been found as ivory fittings on furniture from Mesopotamia, Syria, and ancient Israel (Curtis & Reade 1995, p. 129, no. 93; Nemet-Nejat 2002, p. 153).

National Gods

The second and first millennia BCE, both *Marduk*, patron god of Babylon, and *Ashur*, patron god of Assyria, became the heads of their respective pantheons, when their cities became the capitals of their nations and empires. *Nabu*, Marduk’s son, was the patron god of scribes. Probably the scribes themselves popularized Marduk and Ashur as the supreme deities in the mythology.

Netherworld Gods

The Netherworld was governed by *Nergal* and *Ereshkigal*, the king and the queen of the Netherworld. Among others, their administrative staffs included

Namtar (literally, 'fate'), *Utu* (the sun god) and *Gilgamesh* (the legendary king of Uruk).

Personal Gods

The Babylonian family had one god, the 'family god', to whom it made regular offerings and from whom its member made specific requests as food and health. For the ancient his good luck was attached to his personal god, as described by the phrase 'to acquire a god' (Jacobsen 1976, p. 155; Wiggerman *CANE*, 1483).

The ancient Mesopotamian addressed his or her personal god (or goddess) sometimes by name, asking him to intervene with more powerful gods. If a person had a cylinder seal, he could refer himself as 'servant' of a god in the inscription on the seal (Stol *CANE*, p. 488). Still, gods were not of minor importance in the pantheon. As to an unlucky person, the phrase often said was 'his gods have left him' (Wiggerman *CANE* 3, 1483).

Myths and the Common Man

The gods decreed the fates of the universe from the beginning of creation, when heaven and earth were separated. For the most part, the gods delegated their decisions to minor deities and, in some cases, mortals. Human existence depended on pleasing the gods, but the gods also relied on their human servants to do their work, since the gods did not want to labor, they also rescued human beings in several myths.

As members of a totalitarian state, its citizens expected unreasonable punishment. Men complained about the unfair treatment of the gods in their prayers throughout Mesopotamian history. Demons of death, called 'Fate' and 'Evil Day', took men and women to the netherworld. Demons of death called 'Evil Days' expressed the god's decision to end an empire – that is, collective death (Wiggerman *CANE*, pp. 1861, 1863). For the Babylonians the universal occurrence of death was one more injustice that concerned them; they did not seek rewards in the afterlife.

The Epic of Creation

Some of the well-known myths had more than one purpose, for example, the *Epic of Creation*, explained both the creation and organization of the universe. It was a political, religious and literary work which explained how Marduk became the god of Babylon or Ashur, the god of Assyria. The gods of political enemies became the embodiment of the enemies themselves and were treated cruelly. They were drawn into political conflict, with their statues and temples at the mercy of their conquerors. Politico-religious pamphlets were equally brutal. For example, one text was written to discredit the New Year Festival of Babylon in the eyes of the

Assyrians; ritual instructions were even included in order to stage a trial of the Babylonian god Marduk for his sins against Ashur, the Assyrian god (Jacobsen 1976, p. 233). Hittites and other peoples of the ancient Near East also had their myths of origin, but most were derived from Mesopotamia. The New Year's Festival was the most important festival and explained how the universe was created through Marduk's victory, thereby, providing assurance to the Babylonians was celebrated each year that the king was in Babylon.

The myth that the world as they knew it would continue unchanged. In Neo-Babylonian times (ca. 1000–539 BCE) the New Year's Festival took place during the month of the spring equinox. On the evening of the fourth day the whole of the *Epic of Creation* was recited in public, and, perhaps, even reenacted similar to a medieval mystery play. In other words, probably it was one of many myths and other literary works that were performance pieces (cf. Oppenheim 1977, p. 177). The fifth day included ritual purification. Then both the king and the statue of the god arrived to participate in the festival. The king was permitted to enter the inner sanctuary but only after the high priest had removed the royal insignia. The king was humiliated as he knelt before Marduk and assured the god that during the year he had neither committed any sins nor neglected the temple of Esagila at Babylon. After a speech by the priest the king's insignia were returned to him. In the evening the king participated in a ceremony in which a black bull was sacrificed and its hide was used to cover a copper kettledrum (Oppenheim 1977, pp. 122, 178–179). Later ceremonies included a parade in which the king 'took the hand of Marduk' and led him along the Processional Way and through the Ishtar Gate for all to see. The parade included statues of other gods who had come from many cities in order to confirm the king as high priest of Marduk. Enormous amount of food and booty probably accompanied the statues.

The role the private citizens played in these elaborate ceremonies remains uncertain. But, at least, the public could watch the great processions as the divine statue image was carried in a procession through the spacious yards of the temple compound or through certain streets of the city (Oppenheim 1977, pp. 139, 187; van der Mieroop 2003, pp. 269–273).

The king then took part in the so-called Sacred Marriage, when offerings associated with 'setting up the bed' took place (Jacobsen 1976, p. 126). The Sacred Marriage was a fertility ritual based on the myth, 'The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi', and was celebrated in different cities by different occupations. The date growers celebrated the Sacred Marriage as the power in the date palm to grow and bear fruit, and, the herders who depended on pasture and breeding, believed consummation resulted in fertility in nature (Jacobsen 1980, p. 169). In this rite either the priest or king represented the god. His sexual union with the goddess Inanna, played by a high priestess or perhaps even the queen, resulted in all of nature being fertilized.

The Flood Myths

The flood myths have their origin in Mesopotamia. The Sumerian *Flood Myth* may have referred to the flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Nonetheless, what is extant refers to the disapproval of man's deed by the gods. The land was flooded, and only Ziusudra (Life of Distant Days) survived in his ark, with animals and the 'seed of mankind'. When the waters of the flood receded, Ziusudra went ashore and was granted eternal life by the gods and then settled in a distant land. The Akkadian Flood Myth, *Atra-hasis* (Exceedingly Wise) began 'when the gods were (like) men', meaning that the gods originally had to do all the work such as digging out canals. Then, the gods went on strike! The goddess of creation was asked to create man to do the gods' work.

One of the themes found in Mesopotamian myths was the problem of 'noise'. In the myth of *Atra-hasis*, as the population grew, the gods were provoked by man's noise and ready to destroy him. The myth included the story of the flood and the search for eternal life. The flood myth was one of the most popular tales of ancient times. It was found in several ancient languages and reworked to suit different cultures. It was also embedded in the Gilgamesh Epic.

A Cow of Sin

To help a woman in labor, *A Cow of Sin* was recited. This myth was about the Moon god's spouse in the shape of a cow, who also had a difficult delivery until Anu, the head of the pantheon, anointed her with oil and 'waters of labor pangs' (i.e. amniotic fluid). The myth ended with the following incantation: 'Just as Maid-of-the-Moon-god gave birth normally, so may this girl in labor give birth (Veldhuis 1991, pp. 8, lines 33–35; 10, lines, 34–36 [broken]; 12, lines 62–64).

Similar to *A Cow of Sin*, the myth of *Atra-hasis* or, at least, part of *Atra-hasis* may have been recited as an incantation to ease a women's pains during childbirth as noted in the section in which the birth-goddess created mankind (Lambert & Millard 1969, p. 61, lines 253–256; lines 3–6). In this myth, once human beings were created, the rituals for childbirth concerned placing a 'brick' (see below) and beating a drum. Beating a drum probably simulates the heart beat of the baby.

University of Pennsylvania Museum archeologists found a colorfully adorned mudbrick from Egypt, the first ever found, was one of a pair used to support a woman's feet while she squatted during childbirth. In Egypt (similar to Mesopotamia?), a woman squatted on a pair of bricks when giving birth. This ancient brick, measuring 14 × 7 inches, was used by a noblewoman or princess named Renseneb (ca. 1850–1650 BCE). The top of the brick is decorated with painted scenes and figures of a mother holding her newborn baby and magical images of gods whose purpose was to protect

the mother and baby at the time of birth. The sides and bottom of the brick are crumbled (<http://www.useum.upenn.edu/news/fullrelease.php>, 2002).

Mesopotamian Religious Beliefs

The gods created man to serve them, a concept expressed in art, many hymns, prayers, historical texts, royal inscriptions, and numerous Sumerian and Akkadian myths. Transgression against gods was an important topic in Sumerian sources about religion. Numerous words for sin were differentiated by degrees of their gravity. For the ancient Mesopotamians, the words for 'sin' included violent crimes, moral offenses, errors and omissions in ritual performances and unintentional acts.

In the middle of the second millennium BCE, the problem of the righteous who suffered even though they had not committed sins against the god, was dealt with in two works, *The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* and *The Babylonian Theodicy*.

The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer began with the phrase 'Let me praise the lord of wisdom'. This philosophical work was an elaborate hymn to Marduk. It questioned why pious men suffer (Lambert 1960, p. 27). The lines of the work alternated between discussing the god's harshness and his clemency, expressing the unpredictable nature of the divine powers as described in the following verse:

What is good to oneself is a sin to the god.

What is despicable in one's heart is good for one's god.

(Ludlul II, lines 34–35 translated by the author from the transcription of Lambert 1960, p. 41)

The *Babylonian Theodicy* was the dialogue between a sufferer and his friend discussing again the questions such as to why the gods allow man to suffer. This may have been a performance piece because two speakers are involved. By giving examples, the sufferer showed that because was no connection between man's behavior and his fate. The friend responded with the conventional view that in the end the gods will reward the pious and punish the wicked. The idea in the poem developed in an elegant series of arguments and counterarguments in which the syllables gave the name of the author. Each section of each speech present both an argument and a counterargument (after Lambert 1960, pp. 74–75).

Sufferer: [giving instances of prosperity which was not the result of piety and of his own piety not rewarded by divine favor];

...

The rich man whose wealth has increased for him,
Did he dedicate precious gold for the goddess Mami?

Have I withheld cereal offerings? I have prayed to the god,

I have dedicated regular offerings to the goddess. (Sufferer V, lines 52–55)

...

Friend: [arguing that divine retribution will come in time]

The rich man who has piled up treasures,
 A king will burn him before his time.
 Do you wish to go the way these have gone?

Seek the lasting reward of (your) god. (Friend VI, lines 62, 65)

During the first millennium Mesopotamian empires came to an end through wars, floods and famine. Mythological themes of that period which reflected violence became popular, namely, death, demons in the netherworld, and divine wars. Death was graphically described such as An (the head of the pantheon) being flayed and his head cut off and Enlil's (lord wind) eyes were plucked out (Jacobsen 1976, p. 231).

Personal Prayers

The liturgical poems were addressed to a particular god, before whom the worshiper bowed and asked for mercy, sometimes through flattery. Ea, Shamash, and Marduk were frequently summoned in magical prayers and rituals, expressing the worshiper's feelings of personal guilt. Their functions were distinguished in a general way: Ea, as god of wisdom, supplied the spell; Marduk, Ea's son, executed it; and Shamash, god of justice, furnished powers of purification (Foster 1996, vol. 2, p. 540). The three gods were addressed:

O Ea, Shamash and Marduk, what is my guilt?
 An abomination has confronted me, evil has me in its power.
 (Foster 1996, vol. 2, p. 549)

Prayers concluded with rituals, which described the details of sacrifice and the precise time of the offering. The connections between the acts and offerings of the prayer were fixed. Prayers outside the standardized liturgy described individual emotions and requests.

With the passage of time, the common man understood less and less of their contents of prayers which were in obscure or antiquated languages. Nonetheless, they fulfilled their religious duties by being obedient subjects of the state and showing respect to the gods through offering token contributions during the gods' festival (Wiggerman *CANE*, p. 1866).

Institutions: Rituals and Temples

Ancient Mesopotamians believed that man was a servant to the gods. In temple rituals the god held audience, reviewed human servants, and received their token contributions of food and drink accompanied by brief formulaic greetings and words of praise. For these offerings the god, in turn, gave man life, health and protection against evil (Wiggerman *CANE*, p. 1863). If the god was not pleased with the behavior of his servants and rulers, he might decree hunger and death instead of prosperity. In the worst case scenario, the god abandoned his city and gave it to demons and enemies. Regularly

and when the situation demanded it, special rituals were carried out to propitiate the god (Wiggerman *CANE*, pp. 1863–1864).

The temple staff cared for the image of the god, clothed and fed him. Assyrian kings and top officials of the sanctuary at temple staff ate the 'leftovers' from the sacrificial meal in recognition of their royal status. The ruler acted on behalf of his subjects before the god(s) and performed public rituals in order to insure the survival of the state.

The temples were usually built in the center of the city. They were the largest, tallest buildings and the showpieces of the city. Many temples have been excavated.

Only the priests entered the temples. Ordinary people could not enter the temples. There were shrines in the street with votive objects which related to the gods in the temple as well as those gods who had no temples of their own. Temples were built from mudbricks made with mud from Mesopotamian marshes. Manual labor constituted the cheapest part of the construction of a temple (Roaf *CANE*, p. 424). Specialized craftsmen were involved in expensive in creating wall paintings, geometric mosaics, statues, etc.

Magic and Religion

In Mesopotamia exorcism, sorcery and divination were all activities associated with religion. They were not distinct systems outside the conventional religion. For every part in man's life there were spells and counterspells (releases). No boundaries separated 'magic' and 'religion'. Since texts were written by professional scribes, questions remained how much these beliefs represented the common people.

'Magic' referred to religious behavior which attempted to influence man's success, well-being, health, and wealth. There were two major forms of magic: white magic and black magic. White magic was used to ward off evil caused by demons, evil spirits, and human beings; sorcerers were summoned to cancel spells which afflicted the individual. Black magic was feared because it brought harm to people; sorcerers were also summoned for similar purposes. The ancients had a philosophy of life controlled by permanent fear of an unknown power lying in wait to harm them.

If sorcery was believed to be the cause of 'sin', several law codes referred to procedures to be followed in such cases. Because an accusation of sorcery was hard to prove, the accuser could be punished by death. For this reason, 'witchcraft trials' were avoided whenever possible. Only a fragment of a single letter reported that certain women were accused of witchcraft, but again, we hear nothing of witch trials (Von Soden 1994, p. 200). In cases in which evidence and testimony were not easily refutable, the standard procedure was to bring the case before the divine judges of the river. Immersion in the 'Divine River' brought a verdict of guilt (drowning) or innocence (survival):

If a man charges another man with practicing witchcraft but cannot bring proof against him, he who is charged with witchcraft shall go to the divine River Ordeal, he shall indeed submit to the divine River Ordeal; if, he drowns, his accuser shall take full legal possession of his estate; if he should survive, he who made the charge of witchcraft against him shall be killed; he who submitted to the divine River Ordeal shall take full legal possession of his accuser's estate.

(Roth 1995, 81, Laws of Hammurabi§2)

Omens

Omens (Latin, *warning*) were either unsolicited or solicited. Unsolicited omens were occurrences that were observed in nature, such as, augury (flight of birds), positive and negative days to undertake an event (menology), malformed births among animals (teratological omens), dream interpretation, oneiromancy (dream interpretation), and celestial omens, e.g. 'An eclipse during the morning watch is for the curing of illness' (Rochberg 2004, p. 68).

Solicited omens predicting disaster called for the speedy performance of a ritual, incantation, or spell to prevent a specific threat from becoming a reality, e.g. configurations of water dropped on oil (lecomancy), smoke from an incenser (libanomancy) to arrows being shot in the air (cledomancy). Hepatoscopy often called extispicy, involved reading the signs on the liver or entrails, by referring to clay models of livers and catalogues of technical terms, e.g. 'If a Weapon is placed in between the Presence and its Narrowing to the left: who is not the son of the king will seize the throne' (Jeyes 1989, pp. 144–45, l. 11). Hepatoscopy, the most ancient form of all Babylonian divination, survived into the Hellenistic Age. This form of divination was an expensive process because its clients had to be able to afford a whole lamb (Reiner 1995, pp. 12–13).

Omen collections were formulated by 'if-then clauses', e.g. 'If (in his dream) one gives him an unperforated seal: he will have a deaf son' (Oppenheim 1956, p. 276). When the common man saw an omen, he contacted a specialist such as a diviner, an exorcist, a scholar, or a priest.

Ritual instructions, providing a countermeasure for a specific situation, were usually inscribed on individual tablets or included at the end of an omen series.

This paper will deal with a few major forms of divination, i.e. magic and medicine and astral magic (astronomy and astrology).

Magic and Medicine

The ancient Mesopotamian lived in constant fear of supernatural forces that could harm him at any time. In order to counteract the effects of evil demons and physical illnesses, the *ashipu* (exorcist) and the *asu* (doctor) could be summoned. These two professions were known as early as the third millennium BCE in Sumer and later in Babylon, Assyria and the Hittite area.

Occasionally they worked together on a case, but sometimes one person held both positions. The boundary between the ashipu and the asu was not hard and fast (Farber *CANE*, pp. 1901–1902).

Medical texts were basically two kinds: descriptions of symptoms and lists of remedies. The majority of them were part of an omen series entitled, ‘When an exorcist goes to the house of sick person’, which the ashipu consulted for diagnosis. This section of the omen series was followed by a long list enumerating a variety of medical symptoms, from head to toe, without medical prescriptions or instructions. Rather, this series listed only the name or cause of the illness, followed by the prognoses: ‘he will get well’ or ‘he will die’.

In the early stages of the illness, the ashipu would be summoned to recite the list of sins which the patient may have committed. The ashipu would identify the sin(s) and recite incantations so that he would be able to exorcize the ‘the hand’ of demons. Foul substances and processes would be used to purify the body, e.g. enemas, induced vomiting, and fumigation (Farber *CANE*, p. 1902). The ashipu might also use an animal as a place for the demon to inhabit, or the demon might be bribed with gifts on his the journey away from the patient. Ashipus usually worked outside the temple and were paid by ordinary people suffering from illness or bad luck. The asu or doctor used medicines and substances of therapeutic importance (Saggs 1989, p. 294). Medical expertise was probably learned by training and observation, both not described in handbooks (Biggs *CANE*, pp. 1918–1919).

Little is known about Mesopotamian surgery. Mesopotamians did not know much about anatomy and physiology because religion forbade dissecting corpses. Any information was probably learned from dissecting sheep. The organs were regarded as the seat of various emotions or intelligence. Only one surgical instrument, a scalpel, is discussed in the Code of Hammurabi §215–220 in relation to eye surgery. If the case of an upper-class citizen, if the operation was unsuccessful, the punishment was severe. The surgeon’s hand was cut off. In the case of commoners and slaves, the unsuccessful surgeon paid a set fee. During approximately 2000, Mesopotamian medicine barely advanced.

Astral Magic

Astronomers and astrologists worked together or were experts in both fields, sometimes one person holding both positions (Farber *CANE*, p. 1907). Astral magic was used to predict future events, to avoid evil portents, and to find the best moment to undertake important activities, such as building a house, marrying, or offering prayers and sacrifices to the god or goddess.

Astral magic intervened between man and god, influencing man’s actions. The power of the stars was controlled by rituals and prayers. The moon also was important for the ancient Mesopotamian, because the calendar they used was based on lunar months in addition to solar years and dates.

Prayers to the heavenly bodies were just a few lines or words (Reiner 1995, p. 19). The reason for turning to the particular god or celestial body was not always clear. In dire situations, the gods' service was invoked by a litany text called 'may absolve', listing the names of stars, the gods' names, various rivers such as the Tigris and Euphrates, etc. (Reiner 1995, p. 19).

The famous 'Prayer to the Gods of the Night' was so named because the diviner examined the entrails of a sheep by the light provided by the stars and constellations of the night sky on the roof. Mesopotamians combined their belief in celestial omens with observational astronomy, and eventually (ca. 500 BCE to 61 CE) prediction of the movements of heavenly bodies (Britton & Walker 1996, pp. 50–67).

Astronomy and astrology began during the second millennium BCE and continued for 2000 years; however, these had little to do with the common person. In late fifth century BCE personal horoscopes and nativity omens appear. Many horoscopic texts forecast someone's life, but all introduced the date of birth of a child, i.e. 'Month *x*th previous month being (full/hollow), night of the *n*th, the child was born' (Walker and Britton 1996, p. 44).

Ghosts, Demons and Magical Protection

In Mesopotamia man believed he was surrounded by ghosts and demons, which could be rendered harmless by executing the correct magical procedures and receiving offerings. Angry ghosts were known to stalk sinners, attacking them in the street and frightening them in their dreams. Sorcerers and gods sometimes punished sinners by sending ghosts as their emissaries (Scurlock *CANE*, pp. 1890–1891).

The names of many demons were known, but few were described in detail with some notable exceptions. For example, the family of demons known as *lilu* (m.), *lilitu* (f.) and 'lilu's girl', stole their way into peoples homes through windows. These demons sought to find their unmarried victims to whom they could be the husbands and wives. They made men impotent and women sterile. If proper precautions were not taken, the victim would soon be carried off to an early death to form the next generation of *lilu* and *lilitu* demons (Green & Black 1992, pp. 147–148).

Lamashtu and Pazuzu were also exceptions among the world of demons. Lamashtu was the daughter of Anu, the head of the pantheon. Lamashtu had the head of a lion, the teeth of a donkey, naked breasts, a hairy body, hands stained (with blood), long fingers and fingernails, and the feet of a monstrous bird. She attacked pregnant women, young mothers and babies. Lamashtu appeared on many amulets to stop her by her seeing her own image, much like vampires. Pregnant women wore amulets of Pazuzu (usually only his head) to force Lamashtu back to the Underworld. Pazuzu was depicted as having the face of a dog with unusually bulging, eyes, the feet of a bird, a snake-headed penis, and often with wings (Green & Black 1992, p. 118).

Magical paraphernalia were found everywhere, from royal palaces to poor neighborhoods. These objects were placed to keep demons away from places they could enter – windows, doorways and drainpipes, etc.

During the first millennium, palaces and some private homes were protected by dogs buried beside the threshold. These dogs were mastiffs, that is, guard dogs. They came in different colors and have been found throughout Mesopotamia. Some of them had appropriate names as ‘Don’t stop to think, bite!’ and ‘Loud of bark’. Dogs were also found buried randomly under the floor of a house (Curtis & Reade 1995, p. 116).

In addition, a long list of various types of beads was prescribed to cure certain illnesses. These beads were strung in sets on cords of wool, tendons of a cow or sheep and other filaments. Beads were worn as charms around the neck, the right or left wrist, the right or left ankle, the waist, etc. For example, a small tablet prescribed ‘eleven stones for blurred vision, to string on red wool . . . while you recite a charm, and tie it on his left hand’. Images were engraved on beads of precious and semiprecious stone, metals, minerals, shells, and colored glass (Reiner 1995, pp. 125–127). In fact, according to an omen series, some cylinder seals may have been worn as amulets.

Conclusion

A study of religion of the common man is a difficult task, since most information available to us is related to gods and kings. Nonetheless, a certain amount of information can be found through careful examination of documents and archeological findings.

This article has traced personal religion for the common man from the development of the pantheon, the importance of myths, prayers, omens and the use of various forms of magic to release of counterspells against sins. All of this information helps us to try to understand the ways in which the average man worshiped his gods.

Short Biography

Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat was the first woman to receive PhD in Ancient Near Eastern Languages, History and Cultures (Distinction) at Columbia University. She is the author of *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, *Cuneiform Mathematical Texts as a Reflection of Everyday Life in Mesopotamia* and *Late Babylonian Texts in the British Museum*. She has held a Kohut Fellowship at Yale University, was part of an NEH Fellowship cataloguing mathematical tablets at Yale University, and received a grant from Max-Planck University and the Frei Universitat of Berlin for a seminar on the history of mathematics. She has taught at the Bosphorus University in Istanbul, Turkey, Yale University, and University of Connecticut. She has written numerous diverse articles, e.g. ‘1,2,3 – Numeracy and Ancient Mesopotamian Mathematics’,

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Currently, she is working on Yale Oriental Series 16, concerning three minor kings between Nebuchadnezzar II and Nabonidus and has a book forthcoming on School Texts in the Yale Babylonian Collection with Professor Miguel Civil.

Notes

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