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# The Mesopotamian God Image, From Womb to Tomb

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From the end of the third millennium B.C. onward, Mesopotamian gods were worshipped in their temples in corporeal manifestations as living, anthropomorphic cult statues. Given the centrality of these statues to the cult, it may be assumed that a ritual for assimilating the finite, physical image to the transcendent, intangible god and transforming the humanly manufactured icon into a living deity was one of the most significant practices in Mesopotamian religion. In fact, there were two such rituals that worked in tandem—one called “mouth-washing” (*mis pi*; lu ḥ . ka ; ka . lu ḥ . ù . da) and another designated “mouth-opening” (*pit pi*; ka . du ḥ . ù . da). “Mouth-opening,” done by application to the mouth (and nose?) of tasty and fragrant substances (honey, ghee, cedar and cypress [resin?]), had the purpose of enlivening and sensitizing the god, and enabling it to eat food and smell incense, while “mouth-washing,” done with water enhanced with numerous purifying agents and collected in a special vessel, was aimed at achieving total purity and permitting the god to assume his position in the company of the other gods.

The mouth-washing ritual has been known to Assyriologists for slightly over a century, ever since Heinrich Zimmern published parts of it in 1901 (*BBR* II 31–37, 38, 39). A separate mouth-opening ritual is rare, and since opening the mouth was usually performed along with mouth-washing as a complementary act, and is mentioned frequently throughout the incantations of the mouth-washing ritual, it may be assumed to have become subsumed in that ritual. In fact, it is hard to imagine that in the case of cult statues the rituals existed independently, as if one could be performed without the other.

Since the initial publication, numerous additional fragments or partially preserved manuscripts of the mouth-washing ritual and its incantations have been discovered, as well as references to the ceremonies’ performance in historical texts. The most important have been a complete tablet of the Babylonian version of the ritual published by Sidney Smith in 1925,<sup>1</sup> and the incantation tablets from Huzirīna (Sultantepe).

Nonetheless, the ceremonies have been given scant attention in Assyriological literature, and were practically unknown to biblical scholars for whom they should have been of utmost importance.<sup>2</sup> The major treatment of the Mesopotamian cult statue in general and the

This is a review article of *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mis pi Ritual*. By CHRISTOPHER WALKER and MICHAEL DICK. State Archives of Assyria Literary Texts, vol. 1. Helsinki: THE NEO-ASSYRIAN TEST CORPUS PROJECT, 2001. Pp. viii + 268, CD with tablet photos. \$75 (paper).

Parts of this article are based on research I conducted while on sabbatical leave in 1998–99 as a fellow at the Center for Judaic Studies of the University of Pennsylvania. I am grateful to the Center and its director Prof. David Ruderman for their generous financial support of my scholarship and the luxurious working conditions provided.

1. S. Smith, “The Babylonian Ritual for the Consecration and Induction of a Divine Statue,” *JRAS* (1925): 37–60.

2. A final corrective to this unusual situation may come about thanks to Dick’s recent popular article, “Worshipping Idols: What Isaiah Didn’t Know,” *Bible Review* 18.2 (2002): 30–37, in which he summarizes his more detailed study “Prophetic Parodies of Making the Cult Image,” in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth* (see below, n. 8), 1–53.

mouth-washing ritual in particular was for a time Thorkild Jacobsen's study that brought the mouth-washing ritual to bear on understanding the relationship between the god and his statue.<sup>3</sup> The neglect of this ritual is partly attributable to the fragmentary preservation of many of the textual witnesses and the sporadic nature of their publication. However, some of the blame may certainly be placed on Western civilization's aversion to cult statues, especially following the biblical prohibitions and scathing diatribes against any practice of idolatry.<sup>4</sup>

*The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia* is by the very nature of the texts edited a long-awaited, major contribution to Assyriology, comparative religion, and biblical studies. It brings to completion work begun by Christopher Walker in 1966 when, for his Bachelor of Philosophy thesis at Oxford he first compiled and edited all known material relating to the Mesopotamian mouth-washing ritual.<sup>5</sup> Although Walker, a perennial treasure of the British Museum, generously showed his thesis to other scholars (including this reviewer) and permitted its citation in Assyriological literature, it remained unpublished and unavailable to the public at large, pending ongoing discoveries of additional fragments in excavations and museums.

The most recently discovered piece included here is a brief incantation tablet from the Neo-Babylonian library at Sippar,<sup>6</sup> but even after the book was prepared Walker received new photographs of some of the manuscripts (cf. p. 157, no. 4). Walker's work has finally been brought to fruition thanks to a fruitful collaboration, extending over a decade, with Michael Dick. Even before this volume appeared, Dick had initiated, edited, and contributed to a collection of essays on idol-making in the biblical polemics, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and modern India, which included a preliminary, semi-popular edition of some of the mouth-washing texts.<sup>7</sup> In addition, two major studies have appeared as harbingers of this publication, presenting preliminary editions of the texts and thorough analyses. One is a dissertation by Peggy Jean Boden.<sup>8</sup> The other is a volume on the theology of the cult statue by Angelika Berlejung that originated as a dissertation in the Theology Faculty of the University of Heidelberg.<sup>9</sup>

3. Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick Müller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 15–32. The other text of special significance in Jacobsen's discussion of the relationship of the statue to the deity is *BBS* 36, the so-called "Sun Disk Tablet" of Nebobaladan, King of Babylon.

4. It is worthy of note that the *Fragstellung* in the study of idolatry seems invariably—nay, inevitably—drawn from biblical anti-idolatry polemics. This volume too, although it starts with a citation from an inscription of Esarhaddon, as an Assyriological work should, immediately turns to the attitudes of the Israelite prophets.

5. C. B. F. Walker, "Material for a Reconstruction of the *mis pi* Ritual," Lincoln College, 1966.

6. F. N. H. Al-Rawi and A. R. George, "Tablets from the Sippar Library V: An Incantation from *Mis Pi*," *Iraq* 57 (1995): 225–28.

7. See Walker and Dick, "The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian *mis pi* Ritual," in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East*, ed. M. B. Dick (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 55–121, and my review of this volume in *JAOS* 121 (2001): 485–86.

8. Peggy Jean Boden, "The Mesopotamian Washing of the Mouth (*Mis Pi*) Ritual: An Examination of Some of the Social and Communication Strategies Which Guided the Development and Performance of the Ritual Which Transferred the Essence of the Deity Into Its Temple Statue" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1998).

9. A. Berlejung, *Die Theologie der Bilder: Herstellung und Einweihung von Kultbildern in Mesopotamien und die alttestamentliche Bilderpolemik* (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1998), esp. 178–283, 422–73. Note also her "Washing the Mouth: The Consecration of Divine Images in Mesopotamia," in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. K. van der Toorn (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 45–72.

The volume at hand contains two parts. A concise but informative introduction discusses the relationship between the cult statue and the deity, the ancient titles of the ritual, the significance of mouth-opening and mouth-washing as found in this and other texts, the priest who performed the ritual, the history of the ritual as reconstructed from the manuscripts themselves as well as from references to performances of the ritual found in historical sources such as royal inscriptions, and the structure of the ritual. This valuable introduction cites or refers to all relevant textual material and incorporates the analyses of Boden and Berlejung mentioned above as necessary.

The main body of the book is the text edition itself. Presented first are the two recensions of the ritual, one from Nineveh (NR below) attested in numerous manuscripts, and the other from Babylon (BR below) known from a single copy. The ritual tablets are followed by the incantation tablets, up to eight in number (IT below). An appendix includes Assur Tablet A.418 (*TuL* 27), a text that is not part of the mouth-washing ritual per se, but which contains a ritual for repairing a divine statue and for burying one that is irreparably damaged. Mouth-washing is prescribed for a successfully repaired statue (ll. 21–22).

The Nineveh recension, attested in twenty-one manuscripts, is presented in a diplomatic score transliteration followed by a normalized, eclectic transcription with interlinear translation. In the transcription and translation the ritual has been divided into its major components as determined by Berlejung's analysis. The edition is annotated with a brief running commentary on textual, lexical, and topical matters. The Nineveh recension is incomplete and breaks off towards the end of the second day of the ritual.

The Babylon recension, known from only one tablet, is presented first in transliteration (no score necessary), then in transcription, and finally annotated (not interlinear) translation. This recension is fully preserved, taking the ceremony to its conclusion. The Babylonian recension is some two centuries younger than the Ninevite recension, and is somewhat abridged. The recensions are very similar but not identical, one of the main differences being in the stage of the ceremony when the *egubbû* vessel for the purifying water is prepared.

The incantation tablets, originating from various sites (Nineveh, Assur, Sippar, Uruk, Hama, Babylon, Nippur, Kalḫu, and Ḫuzirīna) and periods (eighth to second centuries B.C.), are presented in score form followed by translation. Since most of the incantations are in Sumerian, there is no normalized transcription. Not all incantations mentioned by incipit on the ritual tablets are extant in the incantation tablets, and some incantations found in the incantation tablets are not mentioned by incipit in the ritual instructions. There are also some differences in the order of the incantations given in the instructions and their appearance on the incantation tablets. Despite these inconsistencies, there are clear parallels between the ritual actions and the content of the incantations. The incantation tablets are crucial for understanding the ritual, and when put in proper sequence and coordinated as far as possible with the instructions, they serve as a sort of running commentary, revealing to a great extent the purpose of the prescribed ritual actions that they accompany. Despite variations in the recensions and the remaining problems, it is now possible to get a good sense of how the ritual worked and what it meant.

In what follows I will discuss the content and interpretation of the mouth-washing ritual, and several aspects in the life of the cult statue with which this ritual is concerned.

#### BIRTH OF THE CULT STATUE

The mouth-washing ritual prescribed in the texts published here may be summed up very briefly as a two-day event during which the cult statue is led by the *āšipu* (incantation priest)

from the workshop (*bīt mummi*) where it was produced to a specially erected reed hut in an orchard by the riverbank, where it is ritually purified, enlivened, and activated as a god,<sup>10</sup> and then escorted to its temple where it is installed in its cella and honored as a living god.

The overall plan of the ritual has been given different explanations. Jacobsen saw it as a reversal of the production process meant to detach the statue from its human origins, accompanied by a birthing process, while the actual washing of the mouth with water was seen as a way of enlivening it. This approach was adopted and expanded upon by Boden, who made the additional suggestion that the ritual was a *rite de passage*. Berlejung, in contrast, denies the birthing aspects of the ritual, and claims that there are only elements of *rites de passage* involved, although a coherent ritual of this type is difficult to uncover.

These disagreements as well as the different versions of the ritual and accompanying incantations notwithstanding, one can point to numerous incantational pronouncements and ritual actions indicating how the inert statue was thought to have become a god. These include its alleged autogenetic birth in heaven (IT 1/2, *STT* 199: 1–5); introducing the statue to Ea, its father (NR 61–63; BR 4); counting the statue among the gods, its brothers (NR 89, 165, 167; IT 3 C 6–10); the origin of its wood in a holy forest (IT 1/2, *STT* 199: 13–31); tree of origin considered a “Weltbaum” (IT 1/2, *STT* 199: 30–31);<sup>11</sup> manufacture of the statue by gods (IT 3 59ab–69ab, 87–90; IT 4 A 17ab–19ab); performance of all the ritual actions by gods (IT 1/2 C 15ff., *STT* 199: 34–39; IT 3 110–13); divine parentage and nurturing of the statue (IT 4 A 23ab–33ab, 58ab); Šamaš’ determining the statue’s ability to eat and hear (IT 3 36–37); denial of role of human artisans in fabrication process (NR 179–86); ritually cutting off the hands of the artisans (BR 52; IT 3 83ab–86ab); irradiation of the god by divine starlight (NR 102); inducing absolute purity in the statue by at least fourteen separate acts of mouth-washing (NR 58, 104, 108, etc.) and numerous declarations to this effect (NR 88, 91; IT 1/2 B 10–12; 22–24; 34–36; etc.).

The common denominator to all these characteristics of the mouth-washing ritual is the idea that the divine statue is a god created by gods and not by humans. It is as if the Mesopotamian idol makers were answering “no” to Jeremiah’s rhetorical question “Can a man make gods for himself? No gods are they” (Jer. 16:20, trans. NJPS). They too recognized the impossibility of a man creating a god.<sup>12</sup> However, rather than desisting from the attempt, they claimed that they were not making a god in the first place, but the gods themselves were.

A main point of contention among interpreters of *Mis pî* is whether it is a birthing ritual or not. Jacobsen, followed and expanded upon by Boden, held that it was, basing this interpretation on the mention of a brick of Dingirmaḥ (a birthing brick) in BR 23 and an interpretation of the *buginnu* vessel (BR 21, 22) as a model womb to be filled with holy water representing father Ea’s semen.<sup>13</sup> Berlejung, whose position has been adopted by Walker

10. I refrain from saying “turned into a god” because the statue is referred to as *ilu* and not *šalmu* throughout the ritual, with only a few exceptions. Moreover, as I have shown elsewhere, the materials used in the statue were already considered divine. See V. Hurowitz, “What Goes In Is What Comes Out—Materials for Creating Cult Statues,” in *Text and Artifact: Proceedings of the Colloquium of the Center for Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, April 27–29, 1998*, ed. G. Beckman and T. J. Lewis (forthcoming). Since a god existed as both a newly produced cult-statue and a natural phenomenon which preceded the manufacture of the statue, we should actually see the production of the statue and its activation as a process of assimilating the statue to the god, a process Dick aptly refers to as “synergism.”

11. This should be compared with the *mēsu* tree of which Marduk was manufactured in the Erra myth I 149–53. For a discussion of the use of cosmic trees in idol-making, see Hurowitz, “What Goes In Is What Comes Out.”

12. Note the Esarhaddon inscription (Borger, *Afo Beiheft* 8, §53, AsBBA rev. 2–38 cited below).

13. These same elements and others are found in *TuL* 27, but the exact nature of that text and its relationship to *Mis pî* are still unclear. See below.

and Dick, contends the opposite. It may be true that the ritual itself does not treat a birthing process. However, the notion that the god was born biologically and not fabricated mechanically is inherent to the ritual and finds clear expression in the incantations, as we will see below.<sup>14</sup>

Let it be noted first, however, that it is also found in royal inscriptions that refer to manufacture of the statue with the verb *walādu*, “to give birth,” “to beget.” Sargon II reports (Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargons II. aus Khorsabad* [Göttingen: Cuvillier, 1993], 51, ll. 14–21):

*šubāt Ea Sīn Šamaš Adad u Ninurta ina qeribšu addi  
bunnānē ilūtīšunu rabīte Niššiku bān mimma ūlidma irmū parakkī*

I established in its (Dūr-Šarrukīn’s) midst dwellings for Ea, Sīn, Šamaš, Adad and Ninurta. / Niššiku, creator of everything, beget images of their great divinities, and they took up their daises.

In this text, Ea, called Niššiku, is said to beget, or give birth (*ūlid*) to the divine images, recalling Ea’s role in the mouth-washing ritual as father of the statue. The king and the artisans are not mentioned.

In other texts (Fuchs, *Inschriften Sargons*, 82, Annals V:3,10–3:11; 236 Prunkinschriften 155–57) we find:

*Ea Sīn Šamaš Nabū Adad u Ninurta u ḥirātīšunu rabāti  
ša ina qereb Eḥursaggalkurkura šad aralli kīniš iʔaldū  
ešrēti namrāti sukkī naklūti ina qereb Dūr-Šarru-kīn īābiš irmū*

Ea, Sīn, Šamaš, Nabū, Adad, and Ninurta and their august spouses / who were truly born in the midst of Eḥursaggalkurkurra, the mountain of the underworld, / took up their radiant sanctuaries and artistically built daises for good in Dūr-Šarrukīn.

CAD A/II 292b s.v. *alādu* 1d) lists this passage under the meaning “to fashion (an object),” and translates accordingly “DN, the creator of everything, fashioned images of their divine majesties.” However, in other entries the dictionary renders similar passages with actual terms of birth.

The rendition of *walādu* as simply “creating” seems to be based on an inscription of Erišum that describes the manufacture of beer vats. Nonetheless, in our particular case, there is good reason to translate the word according to its primary meaning, “to bear,” or “beget” as indicating actual birth. This translation may be justified on several grounds.

First of all, an inscription of Esarhaddon states (Borger, *Asarhaddon*, 83, §3 AsBbA Rs 35):<sup>15</sup>

*Bēl Bēltija Bēlet-Bābili Ea Madānu ilū rabāti  
qereb Ešarra bīt zārisunu kēniš immaldūma išmuḥū gattu*

14. Cf. M. B. Dick, “The Relationship between the Cult Image and the Deity in Mesopotamia,” in *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East: Papers Presented at the 43rd Rencontre assyriologique internationale, Prague, July 1–5, 1996*, ed. Jiří Posecký (Prague: Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic Oriental Institute, 1998), 111–16.

15. See also Borger, *Asarhaddon*, 88, §57 AsBbE ll. 11–13: *Bēl u Bēltija ilāni murtame ki ḫēmēšunu ina qereb Aššur ibbanūma ina Eḥursaggalkurkurra kēniš immaldū. Bēlet-Bābili Ea Madānu ina qereb Aššur ašar nabūt il-āni imēpšūma ušaklila nabnišsu.* “Bel and Beltija, the beloved gods, according to their (own) command were made within Assur and in Eḥursaggalkurkurra were truly begotten. Belet-Babili, Ea, and Madanu within Assur, the place of the making of the gods, were made and I perfected their form.” In this passage, the manufacture and birth of the gods are mentioned in the passive, N-form. Although Esarhaddon claims to have “perfected” or “completed” (*ušaklila*) the statues, he does not claim to have directly produced them.

Again, *CAD* s.v. *alādu* translates here: “the statues of the great gods Bel, Beltija, Belet-Babili, Ea, and Madanu were properly created in their father’s house Ešarra, and grew beautiful in figure.” Nonetheless, we should certainly adopt the rendition recently proposed by Barbara Porter, who translated “were truly born.”<sup>16</sup> This sentence mentions not the *abu*, “father,” but the more corporeal *zārû*, “inseminator” (see *Enūma Eliš* I 3), as well as the birth and the physical growth as part of the maturation process. In the inscriptions of both Sargon and Esarhaddon the gods are conceived, born, and mature in the presence of their parents in the temple of Assur, and afterwards go off to live in their own homes, be they in Dur-Šarrukīn or the restored Babylon. Once again the idol is not the product of an artisan—not even of the divine craftsman Ea—but born of the loins of the gods and goddesses. In a word, the process of iconoplasty is biological and not technological.

An additional hint to the idea that making a divine image is considered a birthing process may be found in another document of Sennacherib. In a grant of personnel to the temple of Zababa and Babu (*SAA* 12, 108 no. 87: 1’–3’) Sennacherib states:

[*ina eli*] Zababa bīri abrēma Šamaš u Adad ašalma  
 umma Zababa mār Anšar šū  
 Šamaš u Adad ina bīri uddlīni  
 šalam Zababa u Babu kīma simatišu ēpušma

[Concerning] Zababa I performed divination, and asked Šamaš and Adad / saying: “Is Zababa the son of Anšar?” / Šamaš and Adad informed me by way of a divination, / and the statue of Zababa and Babu as befits him I made.

Interestingly, the production of the statue of Zababa is preceded here by a clarification of the pedigree of the god to be represented. Given the other texts discussed here, we may suggest that the true burden of Sennacherib’s inquiry is “Will the statue to be made of Zababa be the son of the god Anšar?” or “Will the act of making the statue be considered a true act of birthing the god?”

Returning to the mouth-washing ritual, *STT* 199 (IT 1/2) begins *an-na nī-bi-ta tu-ud-da-am . . . ki-a nī-bi-ta tu-ud-da-am*, “In heaven it (the god) is born of itself . . . On earth it (the god) is born of itself” (cf. NR 133; BR 3, 42; see also IT 4 23ab).<sup>17</sup> Not only is the god “born” (*tu-ud*), but Ea is referred to as his father (NR 61, 63; BR 4), and he is raised by goddesses just like an infant (IT 4 27ab, 29ab, 31ab, 58ab). In another incantation, the verb *kunnû* “to tend with care” is used (IT 4 30b), and this verb is often applied to the care given a child (note its appearance in *BBS* 36 iv 21 as well). Lastly, opening the mouth with ghee and honey may be related to an ancient child-rearing practice.<sup>18</sup>

16. B. N. Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics: Figurative Aspects of Esarhaddon’s Babylonian Policy* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1993), 124; cf. similar remarks in G. Frame, *Babylonia 689–627 B.C.: A Political History* (Istanbul, 1992), 56–57.

17. The Akkadian renders *šamû ina ramānišunu ibbani*, with *banû* rather than *walādu*, but *banû* is often used to mean engender (*AHW*, 103b s.v. *banû* IV 2a), and especially in *Enūma Eliš* I 11, 81, 83 (see below). In any case, this line has a totally different meaning: “The heavens are created by themselves,” referring to the self-creation of the heavens and earth and not the god.

18. H. M. Y. Gevaryahu has made an interesting comparison between this practice and Isa. 7:15: “He will eat ghee (חמאה) and honey (דב) when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.” Gevaryahu suggests that the statue is being trained to talk and his mental faculties are being conditioned. It is more likely, however, that the infant cult statue is being trained to taste different things and distinguish between various odors. Honey is sweet and ghee is sour, and one of the first things a child learns is to distinguish between them. See Gevaryahu, “Ghee and Honey He Will Eat (Isaiah 7),” in *Sepher Eliyahu Auerbach*, ed A. Biram (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 5715), 169–74 (Hebrew).

The interest in birth may, in fact, add an intertextual and mythological dimension to the ritual, in the form of parallels with the first tablet of *Enūma Eliš*. In that myth, the first gods are born of intercourse between Tiamat and Apsû. Tiamat is given the title *mummu Tiamat* (Mommy<sup>2</sup> Tiamat), and the gods are engendered (*ibbanû*) within her and Apsû (*qerebšun*). Birth of the first gods inside Mummu Tiamat certainly echoes cult statues being manufactured (or birthed) in the *bīt mummi* (Mommy's house).<sup>19</sup> Later on, when Apsû is slain, Ea builds his abode on top of his corpse, incorporating it into his own domain. Marduk is born in *Apsû* (Ee I 81–82). This parallels the stage in the *Mīs pî* ritual at the riverbank, which is the domain of Ea and where incantations relating to the *Apsû* are recited (BR 10, 14). Moreover, Marduk is raised and suckled by goddesses (Ee I 84, 85), as is the cult statue (IT 4 A 23ab–33ab, 58ab). In other words, in its own gestation and growth into a god the cult statue passes through the two stages of evolution of the divine species in general. With the statue following in the footsteps of its mythological forebears, divine ontogeny recapitulates divine phylogeny.

These parallels reflect an underlying belief that gods are born and develop in places called *mummu* and *Apsû* and are fathered, nurtured, and raised by divine beings. While the myth applies this belief to the mythological figures, the *Mīs pî* ritual applies it to the cult statue.

#### AUTOGENESIS OF THE CULT STATUE

Although the gods were born both in myth and in ritual, they also seem to have created themselves. According to the Sumerian version of IT 1/2, *STT* 119 ll. 1–4, the statue was born in heaven and made on earth of itself (nî-bi-ta tu-ud-da-àm).

The denial of the human role in creating the statue and the claim of autogenesis reach their height, perhaps, in two texts of Sennacherib. In a votive inscription concerning the production of a bronze drum we read (Luckenbill, *Sennacherib*, 149 V 1–2, 6–7, 11):

*ana Anšar šar kiššat ilāni bānû ramānišu*  
*ab ilāni ša ina apsî išmuḥu gattuš . . .*  
*Sin-aḥḥe-eriba šar Aššur ēpiš šalam Aššur . . . ušēpišma*

For Anšar, king of all the gods, creator of himself, / father of the gods, who became luxuriant of limb in the Apsû . . . / Sennacherib, king of Assur, maker of the image of Assur . . . / had this (drum) made.

In the introduction to a text concerning the dedication of personnel to the Akītu Temple we find (VAT 9656 = SAA 12, 104, 86: 7–12):

*inūšu*  
*ultu šalam Anšar šar kiššat ilāni rabūti bānû ramānišu*  
*abi ilāni rabūti ša ina Apsî išmuḥu gattuš . . .*  
*u šalam ilāni rabūti ēpušu . . .*

At the time, / after I had made the statue of Anšar, king of all the great gods, creator of himself, / father of the great gods, who had grown to physical maturity in Apsû . . . / and (after I had made the) statues of the great gods . . .

19. This relationship does not, of course, exclude other additional shades of meaning to the word *mummu* in this passage, such as those pointed out by P. Michalowski, "Presence at the Creation," in *Lingering Over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran*, ed. T. Abusch, J. Huehnergard, P. Steinkeller (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 381–96, esp. 385–87.



Anšar's title *bānû ramānīšu* is the equivalent of the Sumerian *ní-bi-ta tu-ud-da-àm* in the *Mīs pī* incantations. Both these passages are actually quite ironic. In both texts the king claims to have made the statue of Anšar (*ēpiš šalam Anšar*). Yet even while saying so, he reminds us that Anšar was actually self-created and had grown to maturity in Apsû. The juxtaposition of the two actions actually equates them. Manufacturing the statue by the king is in fact a rehearsal of the mythological moment when Anšar created himself and grew to physical maturity in Apsû. It should be pointed out that in these passages there are literary references to the theogeny at the beginning of *Enūma Eliš*, effectively turning the process of idol making into a recapitulation of divine origins, an idea we have explored above.

Mesopotamian insistence on the divine origin of cult statues in general and autogenesis in particular may shed light on a detail in the biblical story of manufacturing the Golden Calf. Although the narrator telling how Aaron made the calf states explicitly and unambiguously that he made a molten calf (עגל מסכה) (Exod. 31:4), when Aaron recounts the incident to Moses he reports surprisingly: ואמר להם למי זהב התפרקו ויתנו לי ואשלכהו באש ויצא העגל הזה "So I said to them, 'Whoever has any gold, break it off!' and they (broke it off and) gave it to me, and I cast it into the fire and this calf emerged" (Exod. 32:24). Perhaps better translated "And as soon as I said to them 'Who has any gold?' they (immediately) broke it off and gave it to me, and I cast it into the fire and out came this calf." Aaron's response seems an outright lie and the incredible event he claims to have occurred is quite incomprehensible.<sup>20</sup>

Some traditional Jewish exegetes, unhappy with Aaron being a liar, give credence to his words.<sup>21</sup> Rashi explains that Aaron said "I didn't know that this calf would come forth, but it came forth!" Here he is echoing various Midrashim and legends claiming that the calf was in fact the work of the devil and it did in fact come forth from the fire. One later legend even has it that the calf came forth alive (Pirquey de'Rabbi Eliezer 45). Another legend asserts that the calf came forth by itself, empowered by residual magic from an amulet made earlier by Moses himself for the purpose of raising Joseph's sunken coffin from the Nile, but left unused.<sup>22</sup> U. Cassuto and S. Loewenstamm, looking for a comparative explanation based on ancient Near Eastern sources, have compared this to the incident in the Baal epic according to which Baal's palace constructed itself from a fire into which gold, silver, and lapis lazuli had been thrown.<sup>23</sup> They also note Rabbinic statements that the Tabernacle and Temple rose miraculously.

These are interesting parallels, but they would seem to contradict the message and thrust of the story, which is certainly to discredit the Golden Calf (Loewenstamm's defense of the

20. R. C. Van Leeuwen, "A Technical Metallurgical Usage of יצא," *ZAW* 98 (1986): 112–13, suggests that in this passage יצא serves as a technical metallurgical term to describe the molten metal effluent which "comes out" of the smelting process as refined and thus ready to cast, as it does in Prov. 24:4, Isa. 54:16 and Job 23:10. He suggests also that it is the equivalent of Akkadian *elû* when used in the same technical sense.

21. See a detailed survey of these opinions in N. M. Waldman, "Interpretive Cover-Ups: Whitewashing the Images of Aaron and the Israelite People in the Incident of the Golden Calf," in *Freedom and Responsibility: Exploring the Challenges of Jewish Continuity*, ed. R. M. Geffen and M. B. Edelman (Hoboken, N.J., 1999), 51–64.

22. For synopsis and sources, see L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1911), 3: 122; 6: 51 n. 266; and M. M. Kasher, *Torah Sheleimah (Complete Torah) Talmudic-Midrashic Encyclopedia of the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1964), 21: 138 n. 304.

23. Cassuto, "Il palazzo di Ba'al nella tavola II AB di Ras Shamra," *Orientalia* n.s. 7 (1938): 265–90, esp. 274 n. 1, and 286 (= Cassuto, "The Palace of Baal in Tablet II AB of Ras Shamra," *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, tr. Israel Abrahams [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1975], 2: 113–39, esp. 136); Loewenstamm, "The Making and Destruction of the Golden Calf," *Biblica* 48 (1967): 481–90, esp. 486; idem, "The Making and Destruction of the Golden Calf: A Rejoinder," *Biblica* 56 (1975): 330–43, esp. 337–38.

Calf's meritorious, supernatural nature notwithstanding, it is difficult to imagine that the author of the Golden Calf story would find anything in it which could prove positive).<sup>24</sup> It seems preferable, however, to see Aaron's claim (as well as the Midrashim referred to) in light of an ancient belief, held in Mesopotamian and perhaps other religions, that it is the gods who make their own statues. Aaron is portrayed as denying his part in the calf's fabrication no less than the Mesopotamian idol makers denied their own role in crafting cult statues.

The narrator, by recounting first what really happened and then what Aaron says occurred is signaling to the reader the spuriousness of the belief in autogenesis of divine statues. The seemingly redundant words *על אשר עשו את העגל אשר עשה אהרן* (Exod. 32:35) "for having made the calf which Aaron had made," may add emphasis to the claim that the calf was indeed made by Aaron and not, as Aaron claimed, by itself. The background of this aspect of the Golden Calf story may be, of course, a claim by the priests of Bethel and Dan (denied by the priests of Jerusalem) that the golden calves in their respective temples had been divinely fabricated.

#### DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF THE CULT STATUE

If cult statues are born, it would be reasonable to assume they could also die and even be resurrected. This assumption is borne out by a tablet from Assur previously published as *TuL 27* and republished in an appendix to the present volume. This text, attested in five manuscripts, is presented as a score with an interlinear translation and no transcription. The diagrams on this tablet have been copied in the edition. This text is not *Mis pi*, but a pair of rituals, the first of which involves the repair of a damaged cult statue. The first ritual (ll. 1–29) prescribes mourning for the statue by a priest, the king, and the community, all the time it is being repaired. If the statue is restored successfully it is to have its mouth washed (l. 22). This sequence of activities (mourning followed by enlivening) implies that a damaged statue was considered a dead god (*dingiruggû<sup>d</sup>uggû<sup>2</sup>*),<sup>25</sup> and that its successful repair and mouth-washing were tantamount to resurrection.

Considering a damaged statue to be a dead god who must be mourned has a possible parallel in the Sumerian myth of Inanna's descent to the netherworld. In this composition we find the messenger Ninšubur begging Enlil (ll. 43–46; cf. 183–89; 195–203; 209–13):

O Father Enlil, let not your daughter be put to death in the Netherworld.

This plea is explained in the following lines:

Let not your good metal be covered with dust of the Netherworld,  
 Let not your good lapis lazuli be broken up in the stone of the stoneworker,  
 Let not your boxwood be cut up into the wood of the woodworker . . .

The juxtaposition of the death of the goddess with damage to what can only be her cult statue indicates that the two are one and the same. Giorgio Buccellati has suggested a

24. Chanan Brichto, "The Worship of the Golden Calf: Exemplar of Biblical Idolatry," in *Toward A Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 90, also views the event as a miracle performed by God. Aaron had hoped that by throwing the gold trinkets into the fire they would incinerate and provide the image-demanding instigators proof of their folly. However, God upstaged Aaron. "He suspended natural law, performed a miracle to demonstrate the dire consequences of faithlessness, to demonstrate that faithlessness to his will is unreasonable even when reason itself is called into question by the occurrence of a miracle."

25. See W. G. Lambert, "The Theology of Death," in *Death in Mesopotamia: XXVI<sup>e</sup> Rencontre assyriologique internationale*, ed. B. Alster (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), 53–66, esp. 65.

possible ritual *Sitz im Leben* for this mythic passage: “This may have been an annual renewal ceremony, which may have been a part of the regular, recurrent caring of the goddess, and might have originated in response to the breaking of a given statue, whether accidental or through enemy intervention.”<sup>26</sup> The ritual he proposes is not like the one in *TuL* 27, but the occasion is nonetheless the same, and both of them identify a broken statue as a dead goddess.

*TuL* 27 goes on to state that if the statue could not be repaired it was to be wrapped in a linen cloth together with some precious metals and other divine property and thrown into the river, returning it to Ea, its father (ll. 23–29). This ceremony should certainly be examined in the context of Mesopotamian beliefs about death, burial, grave goods, and after-life.<sup>27</sup> Specifically, casting the statue into the river may be associated with a Babylonian custom discussed recently by Paul-Alain Beaulieu of burying kings not in mausoleums, but in swamps, a favorite haunt of Ea (NABU 1988/53).

Some other texts indicate that these two options—either repairing the dead statue or disposing of it—were not the full treatment afforded damaged idols. In fact, it seems that some damaged statues were stored away out of use, pending repair and a more opportune time. A prayer to Ishtar from the time of Assurnasirpal I (von Soden, *AfO* 25 [1974–77]: 38–45, esp. 39, l. 31) states:

*ina pîka ūšâ udduš ilī nakmūti*

From your mouth issued (the command for) renewal of the (secretly) stored-away gods.

This text goes on to say that the gods were desecrated or damaged (*šulputūtu*, l. 33). These cult-statues seem to have been damaged, removed from use, and stored away in a type of genizah. Another example of storing away desecrated or damaged gods occurs in an inscription of Ninurta-kudurri-ušur of Sūḫu<sup>28</sup> where we read:

The people of Anat who live in the city Anat (itself) revolted against the land of Sūḫu. They joined hands with the Assyrian and brought the Assyrian up to the city Anat. (However,) he desecrated (*ušalpit*) the city of Anat and its gods. He desecrated (*ušalpitma*) the fine garment of (the goddess) Anat, the *šarīru*-gold, the precious stones, and all the (other) things befitting her godhead. Then he cached her (statue) by itself in a hidden place (*ušēšibšu ina puzru*).

I, Ninurta-kudurri-ušur, . . . brought Anat out from (that) hidden place (*puzru*) and [returned] (her) fine garment, [*šar*]iru gold, and . . . precious stones. [I] made her godhead complete (again) and caused her to reside in [. . .]. I (re-)established the regular [offerings (. . .) and] her [. . .] according to the wording of the commands of Ḥammu-rāpi, king of Babylon, a king who preceded me.

26. See Buccellati, “The Descent of Inanna as a Ritual Journey to Kutha?” *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4.3 (1982): 3–7.

27. Line 30 has the standard formula *lā mūdū lā immar*, etc., “The uninitiated should not see, etc.,” indicating the end of a ritual. A similar formula, *mūdū mūdū likallim*, etc., “the initiate will show it to the un-initiated,” etc. appears in rev. 38’ and there is a final colophon in rev. 56’–61’. These colophons indicate that there are two more independent rituals in addition to the one we have described in ll. 1–29. They are both carried out in the *būt mummi*, and this fact might connect them with *Mīs pî*. The first rite involves nine bricks, nine offering tables, and a brick of the mother goddess Bēlet-ilī. All this indicates a possible connection with a birth ritual. The connection between these rituals and the *Mīs pî* ritual should be examined.

28. G. Frame, *Rulers of Babylon from the Second Dynasty of Isin to the End of the Assyrian Domination* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1995), 318, ll. 15–32.

Although not mentioned specifically, it is not impossible and would come as no surprise if these stored-away gods were not only repaired, but were subjected to mouth-washing and mouth-opening prior to their reinstatement.

The volume concludes with a bibliography of references cited, and a tablet index. It is enhanced by several photographs of the tablets, and comes with a CD with black-and-white photographs of all the texts.<sup>29</sup>

Walker and Dick are to be congratulated by all students of ancient Near Eastern religions for this landmark publication that will put the study of cult statues on a new, sound footing based on the most important original texts.

29. Unfortunately, this volume is not free of some glitches, mostly of a technical nature. First of all, as outlined above, it is inconsistent in how texts are presented. Although the reasons for this inconsistency can be understood, it nonetheless causes some confusion. Most difficult to use is a translation which follows the original by several pages rather than facing it.

Unlike text volumes in the *SAA* and *SAAT* series, there is no word index. This may be attributed to the difficulty of producing indexes of Sumerian words.

Several publications mentioned in the text and footnotes have no corresponding entries in the references at the end of the volume. These include: Thompson 1976 (p. 13 para. 1); Graham 1998 (p. 27, no. 96); Moran 1980 (p. 28 no. 98); Dietrich 1967 (p. 28 no. 98); Lambert 1959–1960 (p. 29 no. 103); Weir 1958 (p. 78 no. 26).

On several pages (e.g., 53, 58, 93) the last footnote in the text is not given on the same page but on the following page.

On pp. 256–57 “ar-Rawi” should be “al-Rawi.”

These slight problems hardly detract from the importance and high quality of the volume.