

Monotheism in Ancient Assyria

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The religion of ancient Assyria is generally viewed as a classic example of a polytheistic religion with a pantheon, mythology and cult teeming with different gods.

1 This view can be easily defended and it is not my intention here to challenge it. Instead, I shall make an effort to show that it is a mistake to regard Assyrian religion as exclusively, or even primarily, polytheistic. On the contrary, belief in the existence of a single omnipotent God dominated the Assyrian state religion, royal ideology, philosophy and mystery cults to the extent that Assyrian religion in its imperial elaboration, with all its polytheistic garb, must be regarded as essentially monotheistic.

As will be shown below, the basic equation underlying the Assyrian concept of god was "God" = "(all) the gods." This formula implies a distinction between a transcendent universal God – the supreme god of the empire and the only true God – and his powers and attributes, hypostatized as different "gods." While admitting, and in fact, even promoting the idea of diverse divine beings (the "great gods") ruling the physical universe, such a concept of god cannot be labeled as essentially polytheistic with only elements of "incipient monotheism" or "monotheistic tendencies" in it, as has been done hitherto.

2 The nature of the "great gods" as mere powers and attributes of God is repeatedly stressed in Assyrian texts, and their fundamental unity, expressed in a network of interlocking doctrines and visual symbols, was a structural feature of the whole religious system. By no means can it be claimed either that belief in one universal God in Assyria was limited to a small elite group only for a short period of time and not shared by the bulk of the population. 3 On the contrary, as we shall see, it formed the very backbone of Assyrian imperial ideology and was systematically propagated, by all possible means and over extended periods of time, to all segments of Assyrian population as well as to neighboring nations. The essentially monotheistic nature of the Assyrian concept of god is strongly implicit in the credo imposed on vassal rulers in the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon: "In the future and forever Aššur shall be your god, and Assurbanipal shall be your lord."⁴ Compare the Islamic credo, "There is no god except Allah, and Muhammad is his envoy."

Several considerations, not least the biblical designation of Jahweh as Elohîm, literally, "the gods,"⁴ strongly suggest that impulses received from Assyria played an important role in the emergence and development of Jahwistic monotheism. This likelihood is strengthened by a closer look at the Assyrian doctrines and imagery relating to the unity of the divine powers, many of which (most importantly the symbolism of the menorah/Tree of Life) occupy a central position in post-exilic Judaism and Jewish mysticism. What is more, it can be shown that many centrally important Assyrian doctrines resurface in Gnosticism, Neoplatonism and Christianity, indicating the persistence of Assyrian ideas in the doctrinal structure of Christianity as well (see below, pp. 13-15).

In order to understand the monotheistic dimension of Assyrian religion and the complex doctrinal system set up to reduce its many gods into just one, we must have a clear idea of the nature of its most important gods. We shall accordingly begin with a presentation and discussion of the supreme god of Assyria and his powers, the "great gods," which will be considered both individually and as a group.

The Almighty God

Aššur is unequivocally marked as the supreme god of Assyria by his position in relation to other gods mentioned in Assyrian texts. If not mentioned alone, he always precedes any god or gods mentioned beside him.⁵ In Assyrian royal inscriptions, letters and rituals, treaties, and other state documents; he often heads a long list of gods displaying considerable standardization in its composition and in the order of the individual gods. Passages such as “Aššur and the great gods,” “Aššur and the gods,” or “Aššur, Ištar and the (great) gods,” where Aššur is followed by a group of gods rather than individual gods,⁶ are “abbreviations” for such enumerations of gods, see the chapter below on the “great gods.” In such lists, Assyrian gods always precede foreign gods.

The transcendental nature of Aššur is firmly established by the logographic spelling of his name as AN.ŠÁR, attested since the fourteenth century BCE, which implies his equation with the god Anšar (written AN.ŠÁR) of En?ma eliš, the Babylonian epic of creation which had canonical status in Assyria since the late second millennium. In the theogony of En?ma eliš, AN.ŠÁR (literally, “the universe of heaven”) with his spouse KI.ŠÁR (literally, “the universe of earth”) precedes the birth of Anu, the god of heaven, as well as all other gods included among the “great gods.”⁷ Born from the union of “the universe of heaven” with “the universe of earth,” the latter must be understood as entities materialized in the physical universe, “the universe of earth.” AN.ŠÁR, by contrast, who emerges from nil through the pair Lahmu and Lahamu denoting binary oppositions,⁸ has nothing to do with the limited physical universe, KI.ŠÁR, a realm of darkness, evil, imperfection, ignorance and death; he is its binary opposite, the infinite metaphysical universe of light, goodness, perfection, wisdom and eternal life.⁹ As such, he was an abstract metaphysical entity, a transcendent “God beyond gods,” who could not be known directly.

His transcendence was not absolute, however. Whereas in Vedic Hinduism and in ancient Egyptian religion the single transcendent source of the multiplicity of gods was defined in negative terms as “non-existence,” Aššur’s definition as the “universe of heaven” made him an intermediate entity between existence and non-existence, the source of all manifest divine powers worshiped in the world, and thus an omnipresent, almighty God.

In Assyrian imperial propaganda, Aššur is presented not as a remote god located outside this world, but as the maker and sovereign lord of the entire universe. He is “the lord of all lands, the king over the totality of heaven and earth”;¹⁰ “the creator of himself, the father of the gods, who grew up in the Abyss (Apsû); the king of heaven and earth, the lord of all the gods, who emanated (lit., ‘poured out,’ š?pik) the supernal and infernal gods and fashioned the vaults of heaven and earth, the maker of all the regions, who lives in the [pur]e starlit heave[ns].”¹¹ He is present through his winged icon in the campaigns of the Assyrian king, and is praised as “the exceedingly great one, prince of the gods, the omniscient, venerable, surpassing, the Enlil of the gods, he who decrees the fates... whose pronouncement is feared, whose command is far-reaching [and], like the writing on the celestial firmament, does not miss its appointed time.”¹² At the same time, he is hidden to the degree that “even a god does not comprehend [the ... of his] majesty, the meaning of [his majestic designs] is not understood.”¹³

This combination of transcendence and immanence was possible because Aššur was present in the world through his “emanations,” gods, while the identities of all the gods of the world converged in him. His winged icon (Fig. 1) is a composite symbol reflecting both aspects of him. The winged disk, a symbol of the sun, symbolized him as the infinite ocean of light engulfing the visible world and radiating its brightness into it. The divine ruler figure within the disk, which displays the attributes of all the “great gods,” symbolizes him as the divine father and king – the almighty God from whom all the manifest divine powers emanate and in whom they converge, the “sum total” of all the gods.¹⁴ At the same time, the icon also symbolizes the trinity of the divine king, the volute on its top standing for his

two other principal hypostases, the divine son exalted to the right side of the father, and the mother, his “Spirit,” enthroned on his left (see below, p. 14).

The doctrine of Aššur as the “sum total of all the gods” is unequivocally attested since the mid-eighth century BCE in the personal name Gabbu-ilani-Aššur, “Aššur is all the gods.”¹⁵ Other similar names show that the doctrine was widespread in Assyria throughout the imperial period. In several personal names dating between the thirteenth and seventh centuries BCE, the compound Gabbu-il?ni “all the gods” and its abbreviation Il?ni “the gods,” like Hebrew Elohîm “God” (lit. “the gods”), function as a singular proper name alternating with Aššur and Ilu “God” in identical contexts.¹⁶ Names like Ilani-aha-iddina “God (lit. “the gods) gave (sg.) a brother” (13th cent.), to be compared with the well-known royal name Aššur-aha-iddina (Esarhaddon), imply that the multiplicity of gods venerated in Assyria was conceived as a single deity already in the early imperial period.

The etymology and original meaning of Aššur are unknown, but it can be taken as certain that the name was in scholarly circles interpreted as “the only God.” The cuneiform sign AŠ used in the most common spelling of the name, daš-šur, did not normally have the phonetic value /aš/ in Assyrian script; its most common logographic readings were “one” and “single, only”; in scholarly texts, it could also mean “mystery.” By taking the divine determinative (d) preceding the name in its logographic meaning (“god”), the spelling, which was frequently abbreviated to daš, could thus be analyzed not only as “The Only God” but also as “God is One” and “The Hidden God.” Another common spelling of the name, da-šur, could be correspondingly analyzed as “Flashing Water,” a reference to the god as “the ocean of light.”¹⁷

The “Great Gods”

The polytheistic notion of Assyrian religion basically resides in the “great gods” appearing in Assyrian texts both as a group accompanying Aššur and individually as seemingly independent gods. It will be shown below that this notion of independence is largely illusory. The “great gods” formed an organized system of hypostatized divine powers comparable to the gnostic pleroma and the Sefirot of Jewish mysticism. Like the names of Allah, each of them represented an aspect or “limb” of the invisible God; together, they constituted his manifest “body.”

The individualized groups of “great gods” appearing beside Aššur display considerable variation both as regards the number of gods enumerated and their identity and order of enumeration. Some lists are very long, consisting of up to 20 gods, others are much shorter, 2 to 5 gods only; some end with Ištar and other goddesses, in others these are inserted in the middle of other gods.¹⁸ Nevertheless, all the lists display a stable nucleus of deities present in most if not all enumerations, as well as a definite divine hierarchy reflecting the second-millennium BCE god list An = Anum, which presents the entire Mesopotamian pantheon as an extended royal family starting with the divine king, Anu. All variations in the order of the gods can be explained as different “paths” through the “genealogical tree” (see below, p. 7).

An Assyrian prophetic oracle refers to “sixty great gods” attending to the king at his birth.¹⁹ This passage has to be understood in the light of the mystic number of Anu (see pp. 4 and 7), which as “One and Sixty” comprised all the “great gods,” making them “one” while at the same time retaining their plurality. “Sixty” as the number of the “great gods” will have been reached easily, for each god had several alternative names; conversely, many divine names were just alternative designations of the same god. All female deities were identified with Ištar as names of her different aspects; Marduk had fifty names (including other “great gods”); there were “seven Nergals,” “seven Ninurtas,” and so on.²⁰

The Individual Gods

Nine “great gods” figure in Assyrian texts as seemingly independent entities generally not identified with one another. Most of them, especially Anu, Sîn, Ištar, Marduk and Ninurta/Nabû, are, however, occasionally represented as including all the others or fusing with other gods. On the basis of their attributes and descriptions found in sundry religious texts (myths, prayers, esoteric commentaries, etc.), their “personal profiles” can be briefly sketched as follows:²¹

1. Anu: the god of heaven, “the first one, the heavenly father, the greatest one in heaven and earth, the one who contains the entire universe, the king of the gods, the father/progenitor of the (great) gods, creator of everything.” He was the “reflection” of his father Anšar (= Aššur), with whom he was identified. A personification of the immutable heaven, his word in the “assembly of gods” was final. The symbol of his authority was the crown, which he had conferred upon the Assyrian king, just as he had ceded the divine kingship to his grandson, Marduk, the establisher and maintainer of the present world order. Through his mystic number 1 (= 60), he was associated not only with the crescent but also with the full moon: “15 times 4 is 60 (= 1); 1 is Anu; he called the ‘fruit’ [i.e., the full moon].”²²

2. Ea: “the lord of wisdom/secrets, the sage/king of wisdom, the sage of the gods/of the universe, surpassingly/exceedingly wise, omniscient, knower of ingenious things; the father of the (great) gods, the creator of everything/all mankind/created things; the lord/king of the subterranean waters, the king/prince of Apsû (= the ocean of gnosis),²³ the great light of Apsû, the lord of the waters of life.” Ea had two numbers, 40 and 60, derived from the 2 : 3 ratio between the length of day and night at the winter solstice.²⁴ The latter made him the “mirror image” of his father Anu and the personification of the night sky, the former merged him with his grandson Ninurta (see below).

3. Sîn: the moon god, “fruit (enbu) giving birth to itself, birth-giving father, father of the great gods, procreator of all; maker of decision(s), judge of the universe; judicious, thoughtful, circumspect, prudent; Anu of the sky whose counsel nobody perceives, whose profound heart no god can fathom, whose mind no god knows; wise, knower of secrets, sage of the gods; the pure god, light of the gods, light of the upper and lower worlds.” Sîn was, like Ea, the son of Anu; by virtue of Anu’s identification with Enlil as the supreme authority, he was also called the son of Enlil.

4. Šamaš: the sun god, the divine judge par excellence, the “lord of judgment, king/lord of justice/righteousness, the lord of justice and right, the great judge of the great gods, the judge of the heaven and earth/upper and lower worlds.” Conceived of as “destroyer/slayer of the wicked and the enemy,” his standard epithets were “strong man” (e?lu) and “hero” (qur?du). He was the son of Sîn and the brother of Ištar; his number was 20, which in the first millennium also served as a logogram for the king as the “sun of the people.”

5. Marduk: the son of Ea, exalted to the kingship of gods as the slayer of the forces of chaos and the establisher of cosmic order: “the lord of lords; the exalted lord of gods, lord of the gods of heaven and earth, king of the gods; the organizer of the regions, the organizer of all the gods, the organizer/founder of the assembly of the gods; the leader of the gods/mankind.” Marduk was the brother of Ištar, but the polar opposite of her other brother, Šamaš: “merciful and forgiving, the merciful god/father/lord, the merciful one with forgiving heart, merciful to mankind, he who forgave the gods.” His standard epithet was “the great lord”; his number was 50, inherited from Enlil, the head of the Sumerian pantheon.

6. Ištar: “the lady/goddess of beauty and love; the lady of love, the loving one, the one who loves all mankind.” She was the daughter of Anu, Ea, and Sîn (moon), and the sister of Šamaš and Marduk, “beautiful to a superlative degree.” Her standing epithets were “pure/holy” and “virgin.” In Assyrian

iconography, her most common symbolic representation was the eight-pointed star; she is often depicted as a female figure surrounded by intense radiance.

Ištar embodied in herself all Mesopotamian goddesses and had an extremely complex mythological figure, which has been characterized as a “paradox and a coincidence of opposites.” On the one hand, she was “the queen/mistress of heaven (and earth/and the stars), the queen of queens, the lady of ladies, the goddess of the gods, who holds all the powers; the creatress of the gods/all mankind, the mother of men, mother of those who give birth, midwife; the merciful goddess/mother; the veiled bride, wise, knowledgeable.” On the other hand, she also was “the prostitute, the whore, the raging deluge, the lady/goddess of battle/strife and war.”

7. Ninurta/Nabû, “the mighty son” of Enlil/Marduk, the heavenly crown prince and exalted savior: “the killer of Anzû (the personification of sin), the warrior who achieved victory for Enlil, the victor who threshes the foe but makes the righteous stand, whose strength is exalted.” In a Neo-Assyrian prayer, both Nabû and Ninurta are presented as powers of Marduk, the former as his “victory”, the latter as his “prowess.” The standard epithet of Ninurta is “lord,” a title which he shares with his father; he is also called “the arrow” and “the weapon.”

After his triumph over Anzû, he becomes “the lord of the stylus, the keeper of the (life-giving) writing-board, the holder of the stylus of fates,” who presents the “tablet of sins” to Marduk “on the day of the settling of accounts;” his looks are changed; his eyes flame like fire, his [garments] glow like snow; casting numinous splendor and silence over god and man, he returns in his triumphal chariot to his father, who rejoices in him, blesses him, and magnifies his kingship. He now merges with his father: in a Neo-Assyrian hymn glorifying Ninurta, his body is described as encompassing the whole universe, with different gods, including his fathers Marduk and Enlil, presented as his limbs, his face being the sun, etc.²⁵ His number was 40, but in line with his magnification, his name could occasionally be spelled with the vertical wedge, “One and Sixty”, the number of Anu.

8. Adad, the god of thunder: “glorious, splendid, proud, mighty; the lord/king of oracles/decisions, august judge.” As “the voice of [Aššur’s] majesty,” he was the oracle god, divine herald and punisher in the same person, announcing, by his roar, divine judgments and decisions to mankind and hitting by his lightning the obstinate and the wicked. His number was 10, which he shared with Girru “Fire,” Madanu “Verdict,” and Nusku, the god of awakening and vigilance. Through his equation with Girru and the association of heaven with fire, he was the son of Anu.

9. Nergal, “the lord/king of the earth,” to whom “Enlil [his] father entrusted the mankind, all living creatures, the cattle of Šakkan, and the herds of wild animals,” a personification of sexual potency and man’s animal instincts: “the power of the earth, the strongest/most potent/powerful of gods, the lord of power and strength”; a beautiful, “good-looking” tempter, “fox, king of tricks, cunning in tricks”. He was the son of the mother goddess Belet-ili and Anu. His number was 14, symbolizing the ascent and descent through the seven gates of the netherworld.

The Gods as Officials

Though individually quite different, the “great gods,” when considered together, display a number of common features and similarities which link them tightly together as a well-organized, homogeneous group.

Each of them had a definite function or office/offices (par?u) in the divine world associated with specific abstract qualities or powers: Anu = authority; Ea = wisdom and knowledge; Šin = purity and

prudence; Marduk = creativity and mercy; Šamaš = justice and righteousness; Ištar = love and beauty; Nergal = destructive/sexual power, etc. They share many epithets and attributes, and their functions were interconnected and, to some extent, overlapping: Sîn, Šamaš and Adad, often listed together in this order, were all judges representing different aspects and degrees of jurisprudence and jurisdiction (d?nu and purussû); Ea, Marduk and Nabû, also often listed in this sequence, were all kings (or kings-to-be) embodying different aspects of wisdom and creativity. Their basic functions were, however, unique to each god: Ea, and nobody else, was the god of wisdom; Ištar, and nobody else, was the goddess of love, etc.

The Gods as a Council

All in all, the functions of the “great gods” remarkably parallel those of the royal “magnates” (rabûti, lit., “great men”), who, along with the king, formed the Assyrian royal council.²⁶ This overlap is not accidental, for the “great gods” constituted the divine council (pu?ur il?ni [rabûti], lit., “the assembly of the [great] gods”) ruling and directing the universe. Just as the Assyrian king was the representative of Aššur upon earth, so was the Assyrian royal council the earthly counterpart of the divine assembly, each of its members being the image of a particular “great god.” The earthly government thus was, as it were, a mirror image of the heavenly one. As rulers of the universe, the “great gods” were similar in role and function to the gnostic archons (lit., “rulers”), who were in turn essentially equivalents of the Jewish and Christian “archangels” (see just below).

Seven of the “great gods” were associated with the seven classical planets: Sîn and Šamaš with the moon and the sun, Marduk with Jupiter, Ištar with Venus, Nabû with Mercury, Adad with Saturn, and Nergal with Mars. The remaining two (Anu and Ea) were respectively associated with heaven and the Abyss (Apsû), the transcendental “ocean of wisdom/knowledge.” The seven planetary gods are in many ways equivalent to the seven archangels of Jewish and Christian traditions; they play an active role in mythology and had important martial and/or punitive functions comparable to those of the dreaded Pleiades (Sebeti), “the heroic Heptad.” Anu, and Ea, by contrast, were majestic powers hidden in the depths of their cosmic abodes; they formed a pair, Ea being the “likeness” of Anu, the head of the assembly.

All this mirrors the distribution of roles within the Assyrian royal council. The minister closest to the king, the “scholar,” an “image” of the god of wisdom, appears beside the king in king lists but never partook in military operations, while the other seven ministers had extensive military and/or punitive responsibilities as commanders of imperial “rapid deployment” cavalry units. In Assyrian ideological parlance, the actions of the ministers often totally merge with those of the “great gods.” In royal annals, punitive actions against perjured vassals are explicitly ascribed to the “great gods,” while in letters and treaties, the ministers are collectively referred to as the “iron sword of Aššur.” In this role they are strikingly reminiscent of the seven punitive angels described in the apocalypse of John.

The Gods as a Family

All the “great gods” were related by birth. They all descended from Anu, the “father of the great gods,” who himself was a son of Aššur by “reflection.” The genealogical relationships of the gods reveal a three-tiered generation hierarchy oriented around the goddess Ištar, who was known as “the convener of the assembly” and was (under different names) “married” to all the “great gods.” Three of the gods – Anu, Ea and Sîn – were her fathers, two – Šamaš and Marduk – her brothers, and three – Nabû, Adad and Nergal – were her sons. The two functionally related groups of male gods (Ea, Marduk and Nabû; Sîn, Šamaš and Adad) were both direct father-son lineages starting with Ea and Sîn respectively: Ea was the father of Marduk who was the father of Nabû, while Sîn was the father of Šamaš who was the father of Adad.²⁷ Since Anu, on the other hand, was the father of both Ea and Sîn, the first generation included two sub-grades, with Anu, the father and king of all the gods, alone occupying the first rank.

The genealogical tree of the “great gods” can accordingly be plotted as follows (Ea appears on the right side as Anu’s eldest son; Nergal appears under Ištar as the fruit of her union with Anu, and below Adad and Nabû as the youngest of the “great gods”):

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Anu
Generation 1 Sîn | Ea
\ | /
\ | /
Generation 2 Šamaš—Ištar—Marduk
/ | \
/ | \
Generation 3 Adad | Nabû
Nergal

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The Gods as Numbers

From the thirteenth century on, every “great god” was identified with a number or numbers. Some of these were traditional and can be easily explained: the number of Sîn, the moon god (30), for example, already occurs in third millennium texts and is clearly derived from the ideal length of the lunar month (30 days). Others, like the numbers of Ištar (15) and Adad (10), are not attested before the 13th century and their origin is not readily apparent. From about 1300 through 600 BCE they were (with or without the divine determinative) commonly used for writing the names of the “great gods” in Assyrian theophoric personal names. The relevant numbers are: Anu = 1, Ea = 60, Marduk = 50, Nabû = 40, Sîn = 30, Šamaš = 20, Adad = 10, Ištar = 15, and Nergal = 14.

The divine numbers add a new dimension to the nature of the “great gods.” As numbers, they can no longer be regarded merely as anthropomorphic members of a humanly organized celestial government; rather, they now emerge as purely abstract entities (cf. p. 3 above) derived from a single origin, the sexagesimal base number 1. Such a notion of gods seems to underlie the well-known theogony of En?ma eliš, where we are told that Aššur “reflected” (umaššil) Anu as his son, who in turn generated Ea as his own “likeness” (tamš?lu). The peculiar phrasing of the passage is explained by the fact the numbers of Anu (1) and Ea (60) were both written with the same cuneiform sign, the vertical wedge DIŠ, meaning “one” (depending on the context, also “sixty”), while Aššur was written with the horizontal wedge AŠ, meaning “single, only” (depending on the context, also “one”).²⁸ The “Pythagorean” understanding of the gods as numbers (and vice versa) surfaces particularly clearly in late second and early first millennium esoteric and scholarly texts, e.g. in the cosmo-theological treatise I.NAM GIŠ.HUR AN.KI.A, where all the “great gods” are explained as aspects of the moon by associating their numbers, through mathematical operations, with different days of the lunar month.²⁹ Substituting the names of gods in the “genealogical tree” with the corresponding divine numbers results in the following configuration:

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1
30 60
20 15 50
10 40
14

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Remarkably, the resulting distribution of numbers clearly is not at all haphazard but makes up a meaningful pattern closely mirroring the genealogical hierarchy and functional interrelationships of the gods. The right and left hand columns, which correspond to the two male lines of gods, contain only full tens, neatly arranged in a descending “age” order. The numbers of Anu and Nergal at the top and bottom of the middle column, when added up, yield the number of Ištar in the middle. The likelihood that such a distribution could result by accident is virtually nil. It accordingly seems that the fully

developed system of divine numbers emerged from a desire to express the genealogical relationships of the “great gods” numerically, building on the theogony of En?ma eliš. The system was built up using the available traditional numbers, but new numbers (like those of Šamaš, Ištar, Adad and Nergal) were added in order to obtain the desired numerical patterns.

A closer study of the “numerical tree” reveals that considerations of harmony and balance also played a role in its planning. The numbers of the middle column, when added up, yield 30, the median number of the sexagesimal system, which beautifully agrees with the position of the column between the two rows of symmetrically decreasing tens to the right and left. At first sight, the left and right columns seem to upset the numerical balance of the “tree,” the numbers on the left being consistently smaller than those on the right. However, taking the left-hand numbers as negative, each pair of opposite tens yields the same “number of balance” (30) as the middle column: $60 - 30 = 30$, $50 - 20 = 30$, $40 - 10 = 30$! The right and left “branches” of the “tree” thus balance out each other. The sum of the “branches” and the “trunk” ($4 \times 30 = 120$) added to the total of the individual numbers ($1 + 10 + 14 + 15 + 20 + 30 + 40 + 50 + 60 = 240$) yields 360, a significant number in Assyrian royal ideology.³⁰

The Gods as a Body

In sum, we see that while each of the “great gods” had a definite identity expressed in terms of particular functions, family relationships and numerical values, this identity had a meaning only with reference to a larger structure of which the gods formed a part, be it the celestial council, the divine family, or the “numerical tree.” All these interrelated structures share the same three-graded hierarchical pattern, which served as a basis for determining the individual functions, relationships and number values of the gods. In other words, the “great gods” had no independent existence on their own; like parts of the human body, they represented mutually complementary, interdependent parts of a larger whole, the divine council, which in its actions and resolutions functioned like a single body.

As a matter of fact, in its three-graded symmetrical structure, the hierarchy of the “great gods” displays a definite affinity to the human body. Bearing in mind that Anu’s basic symbol was crown, and that “wisdom” (= Ea) and “understanding” (= Sîn) were in Mesopotamia synonymous with “ear” (uznu/?as?su), the topmost triad of gods can be visualized as a head with a crown on top and two symmetrical ears to the right and left. Similarly, the middle and lowermost triads of gods can be associated with the middle and lower parts of the body, the heart and the two arms corresponding to Ištar (love), Marduk (creation/mercy) and Šamaš (judgment) and the two feet and the penis to Nabû, Adad and Nergal respectively. By the same token, the divine hierarchy can be said to reflect the structure of the human soul, Anu, Ea and Sîn representing man’s intellectual powers, Ištar, Marduk and Šamaš his moral and ethical powers, and Adad, Nabû and Nergal the basic instincts of man.³¹

The Gods as a Tree

The three-tiered symmetrical hierarchy of the “great gods” finds a graphic counterpart in a central motif of Assyrian imperial art, the so-called “sacred tree,” which in its distinctively Assyrian form makes its appearance at about the same time (early thirteenth century BCE) as the fully developed system of divine numbers (Fig. 2).³² In its simplest form, the motif consists of a stylized palm tree standing on a mountain and surrounded by a mesh of lines and a garland of palmettes, pomegranates or pine-cones. In more elaborate renditions, the tree has nodes in the top, middle and base of the trunk, and two symmetrical series of small circles to the right and left of the nodes, recalling the two series of tens to the right and left side of the “numerical tree.” Even the most schematic examples are executed with the same meticulous attention to harmony and axial balance that characterizes the “numerical tree.”

The mountain base of the tree corresponds to the position of Nergal (the netherworld god) in the “genealogical tree” and accords with the netherworld connotations of the Mesopotamian words for

“mountain” (kur/šadû, hursag/?urš?nu). The palmette crown, which in some variants is replaced by a stylized rainbow or a “sunflower,”³³ corresponds to Anu, the god of heaven, and can be taken as a rendition of Anu’s basic symbol, the crown.³⁴ The node in the middle of the trunk corresponds to the central position of Ištar in the divine hierarchy and symbolizes her role as the “convener of the assembly” (see above, p. 6). The series of circles to the right and left of the trunk correspond to the two male lines of the “great gods.”³⁵ The pomegranates and pine-cones surrounding the tree (with their many seeds) symbolize the ultimate unity of the gods,³⁶ while the lines connecting them can be taken to symbolize their interdependence and organic interaction.

The Anthropomorphic Tree

The “sacred tree” can thus be viewed as a graphic representation of the divine council intended to emphasize its nature as an organic whole, a “single body.” This interpretation is supported by a unique relief from the temple of Aššur in Assur (Fig. 3) showing the tree as a frontally depicted crowned man, with prominent symmetrical ears, hands symmetrically crossed over the heart, and the lower body merging with a mountain (cf. above).³⁷ Keeping in mind the identification of the individual “great gods” with planets, heaven and the Abyss (p. 6 above), this tree-man turns out to be a metaphysical structure encompassing within itself the entire universe – a gigantic “cosmic man.”

The idea of the “cosmic man” certainly played an important role in Assyrian religion and imperial ideology. From the earliest times on Mesopotamian kings had been portrayed as living personifications of the cosmic tree. An early third-millennium precursor of the Assyrian anthropomorphic tree depicts a ruler of Uruk as an embodiment of the tree;³⁸ early dynastic Sumerian kings bore names identifying them as trees;³⁹ Šulgi and other kings of the Ur III dynasty were referred to as “trees planted at abundant waters.”⁴⁰ In the Neo-Assyrian empire the association of the king with the sacred tree is implicit in the sculptures of the palace of Ashurnasirpal II, where the king occasionally takes the place of the tree between the winged “genies” in the so-called “fertilization” scene; in the famous throneroom relief, the king seated on the throne in front of the relief actually physically merges with the tree.⁴¹ Equation with the tree was a sign of perfection: Gilgamesh, the “perfect king,” was a man who – according to the Assyrian spelling of his name – “equalled the tree of balance.”⁴²

The King as a Tree

The equation of the king with the tree had important doctrinal consequences. In the first place, it identified him with the “cosmic man” and thus implied that he was the human incarnation of the almighty God, Aššur. As a personification of the tree he was, like Paul’s Christ, “the image of the invisible God ... The whole universe has been created for him and through him. And he exists before everything, and all things are held together in him” (Col. 1:15-17). As I will argue below, the similarity between the Assyrian ideal king and Paul’s Christ is not fortuitous, since there is a strong likelihood that early Christian thought was influenced at many points by Assyrian theological conceptions long familiar in what later became centers of Christian worship in Syria and Palestine, areas that had been part of the Assyrian empire and its successors for centuries. The cosmic dimension of the king is reflected in his ceremonial dress studded all over with golden stars and embroidered with representations of the sacred tree.⁴³

Secondly, the structure of the tree turned the entire royal council, including the king himself, into a corporate body of the metaphysical “perfect king.” Just as the individual “great gods” were limbs and parts of the manifest body of God (the “cosmic man”), so the individual ministers, as images of the “great gods,” became limbs and organs of the king, who united all the divine powers in his metaphysical structure. Thus, from the ideological point of view, the actions of the individual ministers became indistinguishable from those of the king: everything they did as “limbs” and “powers” of the king was in the last analysis done by the king.⁴⁴ The king himself participated in the council as its

“head.” It is important to keep in mind, however, that like Anu (the king of gods and the head of the divine council), he also included the entire council within himself. He thus was, like God, at the same time both one and many.

Thirdly, and most importantly, by virtue of his metaphysical constitution, the identities of all the “great gods” converged in the person of the king. He was all of them in one person, acting, as it were, the role of any of them whenever appropriate. Viewed from this perspective, the individual “great gods” cease to exist as independent divine entities and emerge as mere aspects of the king in his role as the “perfect man.”⁴⁵

The king’s “consubstantiality” with God, implicit in his identification with the tree, constituted an article of faith of central importance to Assyrian religion and imperial ideology. As a “perfect man,” the king was not only God in human form,⁴⁶ whose government represented the “kingdom of heaven” upon earth;⁴⁷ he was the very cornerstone of man’s salvation. As we shall see, he was presented in Assyrian ideology as a child of God – in this case represented by the goddess Ištar, the mother aspect of Aššur, rather than Aššur himself – and his appointed role was that of the “good shepherd” leading humans to the right path as servants of God. This role of the king, which bears a striking resemblance to the Christian conception of Christ as Son of God sent for the redemption of mankind, was elaborated in a system of interlocking myths, visual symbols and mental images, and propagated throughout the empire by all possible means. The relevant imagery and the underlying complex doctrinal system, which involved a sophisticated theory of the soul, are fundamental to the understanding of Assyrian religion and must therefore be considered here in detail.

The Holy Spirit

In Assyrian royal inscriptions and prophetic oracles, the king is presented as the son of the goddess Mullissu/Ištar. Born of a human mother but created by the goddess, he was a semi-divine being partly man, partly god. In an oracle the goddess declares: “I am your father and mother; I raised you between my wings.” The mother-child relationship between the goddess and the king is elaborated in the oracles by portraying the king as a baby suckled, comforted, tended, carried, reared and protected by the goddess, who now appears as his mother, now as his midwife, wet nurse, or nurse, and tenderly calls him “my calf” or “my king,” while she fiercely attacks his enemies.⁴⁸

This imagery is also encountered in biblical prophecy, where it serves to describe God’s love for Israel, his “chosen one.” It has an important visual counterpart in a ubiquitous motif of the Ancient Near Eastern arts, the so-called “cow and calf” motif showing a cow licking its suckling calf, often in association with the sacred tree (Fig. 4). The interpretation of the motif is put beyond doubt by Egyptian textual evidence, which confirms that the calf-suckling cow represents Hathor (the mother of Horus and the wet nurse of pharaoh), the Egyptian counterpart of Mullissu; its ideological significance is confirmed by its prominence among the royal ivories of Nimrud and Samaria.⁴⁹ The motif still survives in Christianity in its two variants, “ewe and lamb” and “mother and child,” both symbolizing Christ as God’s beloved son, cf. the ubiquitous “madonna and child” motif as well as the “Lamb of God” of John 1:37, etc.⁵⁰

Mullissu, the divine mother of the king, was an aspect of Ištar, the goddess of love. In Assyria, she denoted Ištar specifically as the queen of heaven: she was the consort of Aššur, the creatress of the gods and of the universe, whose holiness and luminosity are constantly stressed in the texts: “She is glorious, most glorious, the purest of the goddesses! ... Like Aššur, she wears a beard and is clothed with brilliance. The crown on her head gleams like the stars; the sun disks on her breasts shine like the sun.”⁵¹ In Assyrian royal inscriptions she bears the epithet “wild cow,” which not only connects her with Ninsun the “Wild Cow,” the mother of Gilgamesh, the perfect king, and with the calf-licking cow of

contemporary visual arts,⁵² but also associates her (through the horns of the cow) with the moon, and thus identifies her with the supernal aspect of Ištar, the “Daughter of the moon” or “Ištar of Wisdom” (see p. 5). Her most prominent role in real life was that of an oracular deity: she was the voice speaking through the prophets, the words emanating from their mouths.⁵³

These characteristics of Mullissu show that she corresponds in all essential respects to the gnostic Holy Spirit, who is defined, among other things, as the female aspect and “consort” of the Father, the “Mother of the Universe, whom some call Love,” the “androgynous Mother-Father, a male Virgin by virtue of a hidden Intellect,” and “the ineffable Word, a Voice, who gradually put forth the All.”⁵⁴ In the Nag Hammadi treatise Trimorphic Protennoia, the Spirit, introducing herself as the primordial “thought of the Father,” becomes flesh and reveals herself in the world as the Christ, the “Perfect Son,” thus playing the role of the Logos of John 1.⁵⁵ The gnostic Holy Spirit, and hence, indirectly, Mullissu, is thus without any question the “prototype” of the Christian Holy Spirit, whose role in the immaculate conception of Christ parallels the role of Mullissu in the miraculous transformation of the Assyrian king into the son of God in his mother’s womb.⁵⁶

Recognizing in Mullissu the precursor of the Holy Spirit provides a key to the manifold and seemingly contradictory figure of the goddess Ištar, which combines the image of the madonna with that of the prostitute: she is the “spirit” of God which pervades the entire universe and is at the same time present in both god and man.⁵⁷ Her representation as a node in the middle of the trunk of the sacred tree (the heart of the “cosmic man”) symbolizes her as a power connecting heaven and earth and bridging the gulf between god and man. Her number (15), the sum of the numbers of Anu/heaven (1) and Nergal/netherworld (14), corresponds to her nature as a “two-faced” entity participating in two opposite worlds, reflected in her paradoxical mythological figure.

In the myth of Ishtar’s Descent to the Netherworld, the penetration of the goddess into the material world is presented allegorically by means of a stripping metaphor resembling the Neoplatonic doctrine of the gradual weakening of the cosmic soul, the farther it gets from its transcendent origin, the One.⁵⁸ Up in heaven, before her descent, Ištar is the queen of heaven, the pure, chaste and prudent “daughter of the moon,” dressed in her regal attire. At each of the seven gates of the netherworld, she loses one piece of her clothing and jewelry, until she finally arrives in the netherworld completely naked, stripped of all her virtues and powers, falls sick and dies. Revived and rescued by the grace of her heavenly father, she is the penitent soul whose return to heaven mirrors her defilement: at each gate of the netherworld she gets back one piece of her clothing in reverse order of its removal.

The full moon with its immaculate, shining disk symbolized Ištar as the queen of heaven, as indicated by her number, 15, coinciding with the ideal full moon day, the darkening of the lunar disk being interpreted in terms of pollution and sin. Accordingly, the progressive loss of “purity” of the waning moon symbolized the gradual defilement, or “descent,” of the goddess; its total disappearance, spiritual “death”; and the gradual increase of “purity” after the conjunction, ascent and return to the original state of perfection.⁵⁹

The Gods as Garments Of Ištar

The order in which Ištar is stripped of her garments reflects the structure of the sacred tree. At Gate I, she loses her crown; at Gate II, her earrings; at Gate III, her necklace; at Gate IV, her pectorals; at Gate V, her girdle; at Gate VI, her bangles; and at Gate VII, her loincloth. Note the progression from top to bottom and the alternation of single and paired pieces of clothing. The crown corresponds to the palmette crown of the tree, the necklace, girdle and loincloth to the three nodes of its trunk, and the earrings, pectorals and bangles to the circles surrounding the trunk. Accordingly, the various garments and ornaments can be identified with the divine powers (“great gods”) constituting the tree; in the Sumerian version of the myth, they are, in fact, explicitly called “powers” (me).⁶⁰

The “great gods” are thus in the Descent of Ištar reduced into mere “garments” and “ornaments” of Ištar – abstract psychic powers, whose presence or absence in the soul determines its salvation or perdition. In terms of the functions of the “great gods,” these powers can be defined as dignity (Gate I: Anu), wisdom and prudence (Gate II: Ea and Sîn), reason (Gate III: Mammu), judgment and mercy (Gate IV: Šamaš and Marduk), love (Gate V: Ištar), honor and pride (Gate VI: Adad and Nabû), and shame (Gate VII: Nergal). The sacred tree can thus be seen as a symbolic representation of the perfect, undefiled soul in its heavenly glory, vested in all its divine powers, “garments” and “ornaments” – in other words, an image of Mullissu, the heavenly Ištar.⁶¹ This agrees with Mullissu’s identification with the date palm (the trunk and crown of the sacred tree), making her “consubstantial” with her son, the “perfect man.”⁶²

The eight-pointed star of the goddess can similarly be interpreted to symbolize Ištar as the “bearer of all the powers,”⁶³ the eight points of the star standing for the eight male gods surrounding Ištar in the “genealogical tree” (see p. 7 above).

The Gods as Colors

Another symbol of Ištar was the “ziggurat” (the Mesopotamian temple tower), whose seven stages and mountain shape associated it with the seven-staged descent and ascent of the goddess.⁶⁴ Remains of coloring on the ziggurat of the Assyrian capital city Dur-Šarruken show that each of its stages was painted in a different color, the sequence of colors corresponding to the coloring of the seven concentric walls of Ecbatana in Herodotus I 98 (white, black, purple, blue, orange, gold, silver), probably symbolizing the seven planetary spheres (Venus, Saturn, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Sun, and Moon).

Descent from its silver-colored top (the moon!) through the seven stages (= the seven gates of the netherworld) would have symbolized undressing, while ascending it would have symbolized donning the colored garments. The image of a multicolored seven-staged ziggurat associated with the planetary spheres probably lies behind the Mithraic ascent of the soul described in Origen’s *Contra Celsum*, where the initiate climbs “a ladder with seven gates,” the first (of lead) associated with Saturn, the second (of tin) with Venus, the third (of bronze) with Jupiter, the fourth (of iron) with Mercury, the fifth (of electrum) with Mars, the sixth (of silver) with the Moon, and the seventh (of gold) with the Sun.⁶⁵ In this image, the “great gods” are again reduced to mere qualities of the soul, “colors,” the full sequence of which symbolized the heavenly glory of the soul.

The Rainbow

Through her association with the colors of the ziggurat, Ištar was also associated with the rainbow, another important symbol relating to the ascent of the soul. The convergence of the full spectrum of colors in the rainbow symbolized Ištar’s heavenly origin – she was the “daughter” of Anu, in whom the identities of all the gods converged –, while its bow shape symbolized her as God’s weapon against sin and death.

In *En?ma eliš*, Marduk fashions a bow, designates it as his weapon, and defeats Tiamat with it; later Anu lifts it up, kisses it, calls it “my daughter,” and fixes it as a constellation in the sky. The constellation in question, “Bow Star,” our *Canis Maior*, rose in Ab (August), a month with prominent netherworld connotations, and its equation with Ištar (both as “daughter of Anu” and “daughter of the moon”) is well attested in Assyrian texts. Consequently, the weapon by which Marduk defeats Tiamat actually is Ištar.

Elsewhere in *En?ma eliš*, this weapon is called “Deluge,” reflecting Ištar’s well-known role in bringing about the Deluge in *Gilgamesh XI*. The “deluge bow,” which already occurs in Sumerian mythology as

the weapon of Ninurta, is of course nothing but the rainbow, which is given as a name of Ištar in god lists; in addition, both “Bow Star” and “Rainbow Star” occur as names of Venus and are equated with Virgo in astrological texts. Broken into its components, the logogram for “rainbow,” dTIR.AN.NA, signifies “bow of Anu” or “bow of heaven.”⁶⁶

With his “deluge bow,” God destroys the wicked but saves the just. In the Descent of Ištar, the ascent of the soul is made conditional upon the relinquishment of Tammuz as the substitute for the goddess in the netherworld. This is an allegory for the institution of divine kingship upon earth and an etiology for the “redemptory” death of the king. In materializing the idea of the “perfect man” in the human king, God gave mankind an example to follow and a shepherd to guide it to the path of salvation. Tammuz, the shepherd king, is the king as a “tree planted by Ištar,” the son of God who had to come to the world, take human form, and die and rise again in order to provide mankind with a living example of the perfection required for salvation.⁶⁷

The dying and resurrected Tammuz thus has to be understood as one of the king’s most central roles, the savior sacrificed for man’s sake. Whereas Ninurta is the king as victorious hero who vanquishes death and disease, returns to his father in triumph and is exalted to glory in heaven, Tammuz is the shepherd dying for his flock, the felled tree, whose death is wailed bitterly. By making Ištar responsible for the death of Tammuz, the myth presents his sacrifice as an act of divine love comparable to 1 John 4:9, “For God is love; and his love was disclosed to us in this, that he sent his only Son into the world to bring us life.” This idea may lie behind the motif of the “arrow-shooting god” (Fig. 5), a familiar but enigmatic image in Assyrian imperial art, which can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of “God the father sending his son into the world,” the god sending the arrow to its target representing Enlil/Marduk, the divine king; the “arrow” representing his son, Ninurta/Nabû; the “bow,” Mullissu/Ištar; and the “monster” hit by the arrow, the world as a place of sin, darkness and death.⁶⁸ Note that both Aššur and Ištar share the epithet “lover of (all) mankind.”⁶⁹

The Trinity

We thus have in the Assyrian king the perfect doctrinal counterpart of the Christian savior: a word of God become flesh,⁷⁰ a lamb of God sacrificed for the sake of man. What is more, his relationship to God is defined exactly in terms of the Trinitarian doctrine (“one substance – three persons”) in its Augustinian elaboration, where the Holy Spirit is “the mutual love of Father and Son, the consubstantial bond that unites them.” The king’s consubstantiality – homoousia – with God was encoded in the sacred tree, simultaneously representing the psychic structure of the “cosmic man,” the heavenly Ištar, and the king.

In the Sumerian myth Angimdimma, available in several copies in the royal libraries of Nineveh, the heavenly crown prince and savior, Ninurta, “Created like Anu,” having vanquished the forces of darkness threatening his father’s kingdom, triumphantly returns to his celestial home and, praised and blessed by his father and mother, is exalted beside them “on a holy dais in the throne room.”⁷¹ This scene, explained to refer to the king in Assyrian cultic commentaries,⁷² finds a graphic representation in the triad of gods occasionally riding on the winged disk of Aššur in Assyrian imperial glyptics (Fig. 6). The central figure, raising its hand in a gesture of blessing, can be identified as Enlil/Marduk; the figure on the right wing, receiving the blessing, as Ninurta/Nabû, and the figure on the left wing, likewise raising its hand in blessing, as his mother, Mullissu/Ištar.⁷³

In some representations, the right and left hand figures are reduced to mere circles or volutes emerging from the central figure; often a single volute stands for all three figures.⁷⁴ This implies not only that the accompanying figures were conceived as essentially one with the central figure, but that all three together constituted an indivisible, homogeneous whole. Hence the configuration Enlil–Mullissu–Ninurta does not just represent a triad of gods but a true “trinity-in-unity” in the Christian and Neoplatonic sense of the concept. The winged disk being the primary symbol of Aššur, and the volute

or the triad of gods being found in virtually all representations of it, one is forced to conclude that a doctrine similar to the Trinitarian doctrine was an essential component of the Assyrian concept of god.

The Assyrian version of the Trinity – Father, Mother, Son – has a perfect parallel in the gnostic antecedent of the Christian Trinity. According to the treatise Trimorphic Protennoia, “the Voice that originated from the Thought [of the Logos] exists as three permanences: the Father, the Mother, the Son”;⁷⁵ the treatise On the Origin of the World faithfully echoes the exaltation of Ninurta, presenting the holy spirit as a virgin seated upon a throne at the left of Sabaoth and glorifying “Jesus Christ, who resembles the savior above in the eighth heaven and who sits at his right upon a revered throne.”⁷⁶

In a vision described in The Apocryphon of John, “there was a [likeness] with multiple forms in the light, and the [likenesses] appeared through each other, [and] the [likeness] had tree forms,” who said: “John, John ... do not [be] timid! – I am the one who is [with you] always. I [am the Father], I am the Mother, I am the Son.”⁷⁷ This passage has a striking parallel in an Assyrian oracle where the Spirit first speaks as Marduk (the Father), then as Ištar (the Mother), and finally as Nabû (the Son), as if she were repeatedly putting on new masks to suit the changing themes of the prophecy.⁷⁸

Conclusion/The Birth Of Assyrian Monotheism

In summary, it may be stated that a monotheistic concept of god was an essential structural feature of Assyrian religion, philosophy and royal ideology, and was firmly rooted in a complex but coherent doctrinal system underlying the entire imperial culture from mythology to royal rituals and visual arts. The fact that this doctrinal system was elaborated and propagated by means of visual symbols, metaphors and even riddles rather than in terms of Aristotelian logic does not make it non-existent nor detract from the power of its impact upon contemporary and later religious and philosophical thought.⁷⁹

The Assyrian concept of god was rooted in political and conceptual structures inherited from earlier Mesopotamian empires, and essential elements of it like the doctrine of the “perfect man” probably existed already in the early third millennium.⁸⁰ It can be assumed that while the system as a whole undoubtedly underwent modifications in the course of time, its basic features remained essentially unchanged over the millennia. Nevertheless, the heavily monotheistic “bent” of Assyrian religion appears to have been a genuinely Assyrian development. The system of divine numbers which formalized the doctrine of the unity of the divine powers, the sacred tree in its triadic elaboration, as well as the equation “God” = “(all) the gods” appear only with the emergence of the Middle Assyrian empire in the 14th century BCE.⁸¹ This historical event, then, and especially the concomitant “Byzantinization” of the emperor cult, appears to have been the crucial catalyst to the birth of Assyrian monotheism.

In the course of the following 700 years, and especially under the Neo-Assyrian empire (ca. 900-600 BCE), the fundamentals of Assyrian religion and royal ideology – the concept of one almighty God, and the emperor’s status as his “son” sent for the salvation of mankind – were systematically propagated to the ruling elite and the masses by means of highly symbolic visual arts, court ceremony, religious festivals and mythology, so as to finally become a factor permanently dominating the religious ideas and attitudes of the entire Near East. Numerous centers of higher learning specializing in the relevant doctrines existed in palaces and temples throughout the empire. In addition, the esoteric doctrines of the emperor cult were transmitted all over the empire and beyond it by communities of devotees of Ištar striving for salvation and eternal life in the footsteps of the goddess. Extreme asceticism, self-mortification and even self-castration were conspicuous features of these communities, whose ideal was the androgynous saint transcending all passions of the flesh and whose goal was union with God already in this life.⁸²

The doctrinal and structural similarities of Assyrian religion with Christianity, Gnosticism, and Jewish mysticism are such that they call for a radical reconsideration of the role of Assyria/Syria in the genesis of Jewish and Christian monotheism. Far from being a sea of polytheistic beliefs and practices surrounding (pre-) exilic Judaism and early Christianity, Assyria/Syria has finally to be recognized as an area with deep-rooted monotheistic traditions antedating by centuries the emergence of Deuteronomistic monotheism. The existence of these traditions, which as a result of long-term imperial propaganda were permanently rooted in the area, accounts for the prominent role of Syria in the history of early Christianity and for the peculiar doctrinal and ascetic bent of Syriac Christianity.⁸³ No wonder Syria and the previous areas of Assyria were so easily converted to Christianity; in the words of Patricia Crone and Michael Cook paraphrasing the Syriac *Acta Martyrum*, "the Assyrians were monotheists before Christ and Christians after him, and the past therefore led on to the present without a break.