

MYTHS OF BABYLONIA  
& ASSYRIA  
*By* Donald A. Mackenzie



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AND ASSYRIA.

*MYTH AND LEGEND IN  
LITERATURE AND ART*

CLASSIC MYTH AND LEGEND

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MYTHS OF PRE-COLUMBIAN AMERICA

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THE GRESHAM PUBLISHING COMPANY LTD.



THE TEMPTATION OF EA-BANI

*From the Painting by E. Wallcousins*

# MYTHS OF BABYLONIA AND ASSYRIA

*By*  
DONALD A. MACKENZIE



*With Historical Narrative  
& Comparative Notes.  
Illustrations in Colour  
& Monochrome.*

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## PREFACE

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This volume deals with the myths and legends of Babylonia and Assyria, and as these reflect the civilization in which they developed, a historical narrative has been provided, beginning with the early Sumerian Age and concluding with the periods of the Persian and Grecian Empires. Over thirty centuries of human progress are thus passed under review.

During this vast interval of time the cultural influences emanating from the Tigris-Euphrates valley reached far-distant shores along the intersecting avenues of trade, and in consequence of the periodic and widespread migrations of peoples who had acquired directly or indirectly the leavening elements of Mesopotamian civilization. Even at the present day traces survive in Europe of the early cultural impress of the East; our "Signs of the Zodiac", for instance, as well as the system of measuring time and space by using 60 as a basic numeral for calculation, are inheritances from ancient Babylonia.

As in the Nile Valley, however, it is impossible to trace in Mesopotamia the initiatory stages of prehistoric culture based on the agricultural mode of life. What is generally called the "Dawn of History" is really the beginning of a later age of progress; it is necessary to account for the degree of civilization attained at the earliest period of which we have knowledge by postulating

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a remoter age of culture of much longer duration than that which separates the "Dawn" from the age in which we now live. Although Sumerian (early Babylonian) civilization presents distinctively local features which justify the application of the term "indigenous" in the broad sense, it is found, like that of Egypt, to be possessed of certain elements which suggest exceedingly remote influences and connections at present obscure. Of special interest in this regard is Professor Budge's mature and well-deliberated conclusion that "both the Sumerians and early Egyptians derived their primeval gods from some common but exceedingly ancient source". The prehistoric burial customs of these separate peoples are also remarkably similar and they resemble closely in turn those of the Neolithic Europeans. The cumulative effect of such evidence forces us to regard as not wholly satisfactory and conclusive the hypothesis of cultural influence. A remote racial connection is possible, and is certainly worthy of consideration when so high an authority as Professor Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*, is found prepared to admit that the widespread "homogeneity of beliefs" may have been due to "homogeneity of race". It is shown (Chapter I) that certain ethnologists have accumulated data which establish a racial kinship between the Neolithic Europeans, the proto-Egyptians, the Sumerians, the southern Persians, and the Aryo-Indians.

Throughout this volume comparative notes have been compiled in dealing with Mesopotamian beliefs with purpose to assist the reader towards the study of linking myths and legends. Interesting parallels have been gleaned from various religious literatures in Europe, Egypt, India, and elsewhere. It will be found that certain relics of Babylonian intellectual life, which have a distinctive geographical significance, were shared by

peoples in other cultural areas where they were similarly overlaid with local colour. Modes of thought were the products of modes of life and were influenced in their development by human experiences. The influence of environment on the growth of culture has long been recognized, but consideration must also be given to the choice of environment by peoples who had adopted distinctive habits of life. Racial units migrated from cultural areas to districts suitable for colonization and carried with them a heritage of immemorial beliefs and customs which were regarded as being quite as indispensable for their welfare as their implements and domesticated animals.

When consideration is given in this connection to the conservative element in primitive religion, it is not surprising to find that the growth of religious myths was not so spontaneous in early civilizations of the highest order as has hitherto been assumed. It seems clear that in each great local mythology we have to deal, in the first place, not with symbolized ideas so much as symbolized folk beliefs of remote antiquity and, to a certain degree, of common inheritance. It may not be found possible to arrive at a conclusive solution of the most widespread, and therefore the most ancient folk myths, such as, for instance, the Dragon Myth, or the myth of the culture hero. Nor, perhaps, is it necessary that we should concern ourselves greatly regarding the origin of the idea of the dragon, which in one country symbolized fiery drought and in another overwhelming river floods.

The student will find footing on surer ground by following the process which exalts the dragon of the folk tale into the symbol of evil and primordial chaos. The Babylonian Creation Myth, for instance, can be shown to be a localized and glorified legend in which the hero and



his tribe are displaced by the war god and his fellow deities whose welfare depends on his prowess. Merodach kills the dragon, Tiamat, as the heroes of Eur-Asian folk stories kill grisly hags, by casting his weapon down her throat.

He severed her inward parts, he pierced her heart,  
 He overcame her and cut off her life;  
 He cast down her body and stood upon it . . .  
 And with merciless club he smashed her skull.  
 He cut through the channels of her blood,  
 And he made the north wind to bear it away into secret places.

#### Afterwards

He divided the flesh of the *Ku-pu* and devised a cunning plan.

Mr. L. W. King, from whose scholarly *Seven Tablets of Creation* these lines are quoted, notes that "Ku-pu" is a word of uncertain meaning. Jensen suggests "trunk, body". Apparently Merodach obtained special knowledge after dividing, and perhaps eating, the "Ku-pu". His "cunning plan" is set forth in detail: he cut up the dragon's body:

He split her up like a flat fish into two halves.

He formed the heavens with one half and the earth with the other, and then set the universe in order. His power and wisdom as the Demiurge were derived from the fierce and powerful Great Mother, Tiamat.

In other dragon stories the heroes devise their plans after eating the dragon's heart. According to Philostratus,<sup>1</sup> Apollonius of Tyana was worthy of being remembered for two things—his bravery in travelling among fierce robber tribes, not then subject to Rome, and his

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, i, 20.

wisdom in learning the language of birds and other animals as the Arabs do. This accomplishment the Arabs acquired, Philostratus explains, by eating the hearts of dragons. The "animals" who utter magic words are, of course, the Fates. Siegfried of the *Nibelungenlied*, after slaying the Regin dragon, makes himself invulnerable by bathing in its blood. He obtains wisdom by eating the heart: as soon as he tastes it he can understand the language of birds, and the birds reveal to him that Mimer is waiting to slay him. Sigurd similarly makes his plans after eating the heart of the Fafner dragon. In Scottish legend Finn-mac-Coul obtains the power to divine secrets by partaking of a small portion of the seventh salmon associated with the "well dragon", and Michael Scott and other folk heroes become great physicians after tasting the juices of the middle part of the body of the white snake. The hero of an Egyptian folk tale slays a "deathless snake" by cutting it in two parts and putting sand between the parts. He then obtains from the box, of which it is the guardian, the book of spells; when he reads a page of the spells he knows what the birds of the sky, the fish of the deep, and the beasts of the hill say; the book gives him power to enchant "the heaven and the earth, the abyss, the mountains and the sea".<sup>1</sup>

Magic and religion were never separated in Babylonia; not only the priests but also the gods performed magical ceremonies. Ea, Merodach's father, overcame Apsu, the husband of the dragon Tiamat, by means of spells: he was "the great magician of the gods". Merodach's division of the "Ku-pu" was evidently an act of contagious magic; by eating or otherwise disposing of the vital part of the fierce and wise mother dragon, he became endowed with her attributes, and was able to proceed

<sup>1</sup> *Egyptian Tales* (Second Series), W. M. Flinders Petrie, pp. 98 et seq.

with the work of creation. Primitive peoples in our own day, like the Abipones of Paraguay, eat the flesh of fierce and cunning animals so that their strength, courage, and wisdom may be increased.

The direct influence exercised by cultural contact, on the other hand, may be traced when myths with an alien geographical setting are found among peoples whose experiences could never have given them origin. In India, where the dragon symbolizes drought and the western river deities are female, the *Manu* fish and flood legend resembles closely the Babylonian, and seems to throw light upon it. Indeed, the *Manu* myth appears to have been derived from the lost flood story in which *Ea* figured prominently in fish form as the Preserver. The Babylonian *Ea* cult and the Indian *Varuna* cult had apparently much in common, as is shown.

✓ Throughout this volume special attention has been paid to the various peoples who were in immediate contact with, and were influenced by, Mesopotamian civilization. The histories are traced in outline of the Kingdoms of Elam, Urartu (Ancient Armenia), Mitanni, and the Hittites, while the story of the rise and decline of the Hebrew civilization, as narrated in the Bible and referred to in Mesopotamian inscriptions, is related from the earliest times until the captivity in the Neo-Babylonian period and the restoration during the age of the Persian Empire. The struggles waged between the great Powers for the control of trade routes, and the periodic migrations of pastoral warrior folks who determined the fate of empires, are also dealt with, so that light may be thrown on the various processes and influences associated with the developments of local religions and mythologies. Special chapters, with comparative notes, are devoted to the *Ishtar-Tammuz* myths, the *Semiramis* legends, *Ashur*

and his symbols, and the origin and growth of astrology and astronomy.

The ethnic disturbances which occurred at various well-defined periods in the Tigro-Euphrates valley were not always favourable to the advancement of knowledge and the growth of culture. The invaders who absorbed Sumerian civilization may have secured more settled conditions by welding together political units, but seem to have exercised a retrogressive influence on the growth of local culture. "Babylonian religion", writes Dr. Langdon, "appears to have reached its highest level in the Sumerian period, or at least not later than 2000 B.C. From that period onward to the first century B.C. popular religion maintained with great difficulty the sacred standards of the past." Although it has been customary to characterize Mesopotamian civilization as Semitic, modern research tends to show that the indigenous inhabitants, who were non-Semitic, were its originators. Like the proto-Egyptians, the early Cretans, and the Pelasgians in southern Europe and Asia Minor, they invariably achieved the intellectual conquest of their conquerors, as in the earliest times they had won victories over the antagonistic forces of nature. If the modern view is accepted that these ancient agriculturists of the goddess cult were of common racial origin, it is to the most representative communities of the widespread Mediterranean race that the credit belongs of laying the foundations of the brilliant civilizations of the ancient world in southern Europe, and Egypt, and the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates.

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