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A Note on the River Ordeal in the Literary Text « Nebuchadnezzar King of Justice » – The Neo-Babylonian literary composition CT 46 : 45 (= BM 45690), which was named « Nebuchadnezzar King of Justice » by W.G. Lambert, who provided the first (and still only) complete edition of it (*Iraq* 27 [1965] 1-11), contains one of the most elaborate descriptions of the judicial river ordeal to have come down to us from ancient Mesopotamia. The text was written in praise of an anonymous Neo-Babylonian ruler whom Lambert has identified as Nebuchadnezzar II, which seems highly probable since the text contains several coincidences of wording with the inscriptions of that monarch.¹ After several disconnected sections which recall the disorder prevailing in the country and then the legal reforms undertaken by the king to restore order and prosperity, the text goes on to describe a judgment by the river ordeal which allegedly took place during his reign. The ordeal does not unfold as expected, however, and after the guilty party (a false accuser) sinks in the river, his body does not come up to the surface. The king, consumed with anger, orders his troops to search for the corpse, which is seen again only several hours later when finally released by the river :

CT 46 : 45, col. IV

17. *ina an.izi ina ka-šá-du šá-lam-tu-uš ul-tu íd i-lam-ma*

18. *šìg-iš sag.du iš-tu ka geštug.min u nap-pa-šú i-red-di úš*

19. *u muh-hí gim ši-kin izi-im-ma ha-mi-iṭ*

20. *su-šú ma-li bu-bu-tu*

21. *i-mu-ra-a un.meš i-ta-ma-a pu-ul-ha-a-tú*

22. *kur.kur.meš ka-li-ši-na ra-šub-bat za-a-na*

23. *a-a-bi lem-nu u za-ma-nu pu-uz-rat i-ta-haz*

17. When noontime arrived his corpse came back up from the river.

18. The head was smashed. Blood flowed from the mouth, ears and nostrils,

19. and the skull was burning like something consumed by fire.

20. His body was covered with sores.

21. The people saw and spoke fearfully,

22. all the lands were covered with awe.
23. The enemy, the evil-doer, and the foe went into hiding.

The description of the corpse does not correspond to the normal consequences of a death by drowning, and subsequent commentators have insisted on the seemingly miraculous character of the event, as well as on the character of the entire report as an edifying tale (J. Bottéro, « L'ordalie en Mésopotamie ancienne, » in *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Classe di Lettere e Filosofia*, Serie III, vol. XI/4 [1981] p. 1051 ; T. Frymer-Kensky, *The Judicial Ordeal*, p. 468). Particularly remarkable is the depiction of the smashed skull of the wrong-doer as « something consumed by fire » [*muhhi kīma šikin išātimma hamīṭ*, Bottéro : « (son) crâne était brûlant, comme exposé au feu » (« quelque-chose-de-mis-au-feu ») ; Lambert : « and the skull was hot like burning coals » ; Frymer-Kensky : « and his pate was burning like coals of fire »]. The expression *šikin išāti* refers to things exposed to fire (*AHW* s.v. *šiknu* A/2 « Legen ins Feuer »), which seems contradictory for a corpse which has just spent half a day underwater. Yet, the anonymous author of our text may not have been so fanciful as we might think, since the idea of a subaquatic fire consuming the guilty party sinking in the river of judgment recurs, albeit not in fully explicit terms, in a Neo-Babylonian incantation to the Divine River (British Museum number S.I, 704) published long ago by L.W. King (*The seven Tablets of Creation* I, p. 201). The first seven lines read as follows :

1. éⁿ at-ti íd dù-at ka-l[a-mu]
2. e-nu-ma ih-ru-ki dingir.meš gal.meš ina a-hi-ki [iš-ku-nu]
3. dum-qa ina šà-ki ^dé-a lugal ap-si-i ib-na-[a šu-bat-su]
4. a-bu-ub la ma-har ka-a-ši iš-ruk-[kim-ma]
5. i-šá-tu₄ uz-za na-mur-ra-ti pu-luh-t[i]
6. ^dé-a u ^dasal-lú-hi iš-ru-ku-nik-[†]kim-ma[†]
7. [†]dil-ni te-né-še-ti ta-din-ni [†]at[†]-ti

1. Incantation : You, River, creatrix of every[thing],
2. when the Great Gods dug you, on your banks [they established]
3. goodness. In your midst Ea, king of the Apsû, built [his residence].

4. He gave you an irresistible flood.
5. Fire, anger, radiance, awesomeness,
6. did Ea and Asaluhi give to you
7. so that you might deliver judgment over mankind.

This incantation is known from numerous sources and appears quite often with incantations to Šamaš in *namburbi* rituals. All duplicates differ, sometimes considerably, from each other, and it is clear that the original piece was adapted and expanded by different editors (so Lambert, RA 53 [1959] 138, text no.72). The only complete edition and discussion of the incantation, including a list of all sources, is found in M.J. Seux, *Hymnes et prières aux dieux de Babylonie et d'Assyrie* (Paris, 1976) 366-68. It should be stressed that the only version mentioning the gift of fire (*išātu*) to the divine River is the one published by King and quoted above, while many others still mention the gift of *uzzu*, *namurratu* and *puluhtu*, but omit *išātu* altogether (see Caplice, OrNs 34 [1965] 130-31, and 36 [1967] 286-94 ; as well as Nougayrol, RA 65 [1971] 162-66). It is the latter version which is quoted by Bottéro in his discussion of the river ordeal (op. cit., pp. 1056-57), and this prevented him from establishing the connection between the mention of fire in the incantation as an attribute of the river of judgment, and the description, in « Nebuchadnezzar King of Justice », of the skull of the wrongdoer as consumed by flames.

The obvious parallel between the two compositions, which to my knowledge has never been pointed out, reveals to us an essential component of the Mesopotamian system of belief concerning the river ordeal. It should be borne in mind that the outcome of the ordeal described here contains both the judgment (the ordeal as *Entscheidungsmittel*) and the punishment, whereas in most cases the sinking party was probably rescued just in time before drowning, and then received his or her punishment through the human agency. But the author evidently intended this to be an exemplary story extolling the power of the divine River, and thanks to his literary endeavor we learn that the river ordeal procedure comprised two stages once the patient had plunged in water. One was the divine judgment, whereby the river god sank the guilty party and floated the innocent, and the other was the divine retribution which befell the culprit after sinking in the river (if not rescued). But this divine punishment was not so much death by

drowning as the encounter of the wrongdoer with a subaquatic fire which literally burnt his body, which came back up to the surface with the skull glowing like a red-hot coal. In Babylonian theological thought this avenging fire was apparently generated by the radiance of the river god, the *namurratu* and *puluhtu*, which attributes are mentioned in the incantation alongside *išātu*. This radiance, generated by all deities, was an essential manifestation of their numinous power, and several sources indicate that the divine River was endowed with an especially powerful form of it (see E. Cassin, *La splendeur divine*, Paris/La Haye, 1968, pp. 80-82, where the incantation published by King is quoted). The guilty party appears to have experienced, at the bottom of the river, a face to face encounter with the deity, whose unsustainable aura literally set his body to fire. The people attending the ordeal would also undergo an experience of the divine aura, but to a degree which did not endanger them physically (the people saw and « spoke fearfully » *i-ta-ma-a pu-ul-ha-a-tú*), and the entire country would witness the glow of divine radiance (the lands were « covered with awe » *ra-šub-bat za-a-na*).

The belief that the water of the ordeal would turn into something akin to fire to unmask or punish the guilty party is also found in early medieval Europe. Henry Charles Lea (*The Ordeal*, rev. ed., University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973, pp. 39-40) reports the following incident :

« D'Achery quotes from contemporary MS. life of the holy Pons, Abbot of Andaone near Avignon, a miracle which relates that one morning after mass, as he was about to cross the Rhône, he met two men quarrelling over a ploughshare, which, after being lost for several days, had been found buried in the ground, and which each accused the other of having purloined and hidden. As the question was impenetrable to human wisdom, Pons intervened and told them to place the ploughshare in the water of the river, within easy reach. Then, making over it the sign of the cross, he ordered the disputant who was most suspected to lift it out of the river. The man accordingly plunged his arm into the stream only to withdraw it, exclaiming that the water was boiling, and showed his hand fearfully scalded, thus affording the most satisfactory evidence of his guilt. »

In another case mentioned by Lea, a woman suspected of adultery was asked, in order to prove her innocence, to pick up a hair lying at the bottom of a pool. As she withdrew her hand from the water, however, it was horribly

scalded, the skin and flesh hanging in strips from her fingerends. It should be noted that these and other similar occurrences are consistently reported as miracles, and one perceives the same outlook in « Nebuchadnezzar King of Justice », where the narrative on the ordeal is indeed introduced with a statement stressing the miraculous character of the event : something « which had not been seen since time immemorial » (IV. 3. *šá ul-tu ul-lu ina [KUR la IGI-mir]*), something which « had never been heard before » (IV. 4 *la iš-ši-ma-a*).

In most cultures where it is attested the ordeal is usually administered by fire (physical contact with flames or red-hot metal) or water (river ordeal). In Medieval Europe the ordeal by boiling water, whereby the suspect had to plunge the hand in a cauldron of boiling water and find a small object cast at the bottom, was particularly favored by ecclesiastical authorities because, as explained by Hincmar, archbishop of Rheims in the 9th century : « it combines the elements of water and fire ; the one representing the deluge – the judgment inflicted on the wicked of old ; the other authorized by the fiery doom of the future – the day of judgment, in both of which we see the righteous escape and the wicked suffer » (H.C. Lea, op. cit., p. 32). The preference for water and fire, and more particularly for the combination of the two elements, can partly be explained by the fact that the ordeal is always associated with rituals of exorcism and purification (Bottéro has also pointed to the exorcistic character of the Mesopotamian river ordeal), whereas fire and water are universally acknowledged as primary substances for purification. The belief that the body of the innocent will remain unscathed by the fire or the water of the ordeal is arguably related to the assumption that, not needing purification, his flesh cannot be altered by these two primary elements when they are employed for that purpose.

The idea of fire as an attribute of the river of judgment might be a late Babylonian reinterpretation of the procedure, since the only duplicate of the incantation which mentions it is Neo-Babylonian (almost all the other copies are Neo-Assyrian), which is also the period when « Nebuchadnezzar King of Justice » was composed. The fact that the two texts are contemporaneous and isolated in their particular outlook raises of course the question of literary influence. In this instance, as in many others, we must assume that the canonical text (the incantation) influenced the literary composition, whose account of the ordeal appears to be a creative elaboration of ideas which are only rudimentarily expressed in the incantation.

1. For a possible identification of the king as Nabonidus see T. Frymer-Kensky, *The Judicial Ordeal in the Ancient Near East*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1977, p. 462 ; and W. von Soden, « Kyros und Nabonid. Propaganda und Gegenpropaganda », *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, Ergänzungsband 10 (1983) 63.

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