

SPECIAL STUDY TWO

THE BABYLONIAN PRIESTHOOD

In ancient Babylon the king served as both High Priest and civil ruler. He performed sacrifices and determined the religious life of his subjects. Since the king could not personally officiate in each of the temples in his realm, he appointed substitute priests to perform the routine priestly labors. Each temple would have a high priest, appointed by the king, and a number of lesser priests, known as *shangu*, who were also responsible to the king. The temple affairs were administered by these men who were chosen because of their fitness for the work.

There were other priestly functions of a specialized nature which presupposed specific training. The task of divination, the interpreting of dreams, and otherwise determining the will of the gods, was entrusted to the *buru* priests. The interpretation of oracles and dreams was on the basis of a long tradition of divination which the *buru* priests was expected to master. Hepatoscopy, or divination by the liver, was an ancient method of divination used by Hittites and Etruscans as well as by the Babylonians. The liver was regarded as the seat of the mental life. At the time of sacrifice, a god was thought to take hold of the victim, and the god's thoughts were presumed to enter the animal's liver. After a kid or sheep was slaughtered sacrificially, the victim's body was opened and preliminary conclusions drawn. Then the liver was removed and subjected to careful examination. Actual livers were compared with terra-cotta models and abnormalities were noted. We do not know how various configurations were interpreted but we know that ancient kings and their officers had a high regard for divination by the liver.¹

Hittites and Etruscans, in common with Babylonians, also studied the flight patterns of birds as a means of divination. We do not know exactly what they looked for, but diviners skilled in this type of divination regularly accompanied the armies of Babylon.

1. Divination by liver was one means used by Nebuchadnezzar in determining whether to attack Jerusalem or Rabbath Ammon (Ezek. 21:18-23).

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Babylon was noted for its astrology, but this differed in important particulars from the astrology which developed in medieval times, based on Greek antecedents. Babylonian astrologers noted the direction of the winds, the color of the stars, and the occultation of planets and eclipses. The information provided by Babylonian astrologers was used in agriculture as well as in matters of national policy.

The Babylonian priests were constantly on the lookout for the abnormal. Any unusual circumstance attending a birth, human or animal, would be considered a sign which needed interpretation. If an exorcist were called to the home of an invalid, everything which he encountered along the way would be considered significant. If water were spilled on the road, its pattern might contain a message. The shape of oil which had formed on the surface of water would be duly noted. If an animal or plant were encountered, its significance would require interpretation.

To the Babylonian with his world of gods and demons it was particularly important to have means of frustrating the forces of evil. A class of priests known as *ashipu* specialized in counteracting the work of demons. A formula used in one of their spells runs:

Thou art not to come near to my body,
Thou art not to go before me,
Thou art not to follow after me,
Where I stop thou art not to stop,
Where I am thou art not to sit,
My house thou art not to enter,
My roof thou art not to haunt,
Thou art not to put thy foot in my foot's imprint,
Where I go thou art not to go,
Where I enter thou art not to enter.

The purpose of the *ashipu* was always benevolent. He sought to help the sufferer who was physically ill, and in this sense his work anticipates the physician. All sickness was associated with sin in Babylonian thought, so the *ashipu* sought to discover what sin had been committed by his "patient." A list of possible sins would be read with the thought that one of them might have been committed unconsciously. Only when the proper sin had been identified could the *ashipu* overcome the demon that had controlled the individual.

Sometimes demons were induced to leave their victims on the basis of a promise that the *ashipu* would give. A substitute habitation (such as a pig) was sometimes offered. At other times the demon might be bribed with a list of gifts that would be his as a reward for leaving his victim.

Another technique was to drive the demon from his victim. This might be done by preparing medicines of nauseous and putrid substances which the victim was required to eat. Presumably, if they were vile enough, the demon himself would not wish to remain. Eventually, by the process of trial and error, some substances were employed which had genuine medicinal value. Thus medicine, although mixed with magic, became a genuine science.

Sometimes demons could be fooled. One recognized means of doing this was by placing an animal on top of a sick man. By following a prescribed ritual, the demon might be persuaded to enter the animal instead of the human. One such prescription reads:

Take a suckling-pig and set it level with the head of the sick man. Take out its heart and put it over the sick man's heart. Sprinkle the sides of the bed with its blood. Dismember the suckling-pig and lay the parts in the sick man's members. Then purify this man with pure water . . . Offer the suckling-pig in his place. Let its flesh be as the flesh of the sick man, his blood as the blood of the sick man.

The *ashipu* priest was clothed in red when performing his functions. Red was deemed particularly potent in warding off evil spirits. He might also be dressed in a fish-like skin to emphasize his relationship to the wise god, Ea. Traditional formulae were uttered verbatim. The priest would call upon the demon by name, demanding that he cease tormenting his victim and depart. Calling upon the good gods to aid the sufferer, the *ashipu* priest would exorcise the demon.

Another specialized function was the chanter who, by his songs, was supposed to "soften the heart of the gods." Prayers were intoned by the chanters, who were accompanied by large drums or lyres. The lyre was usually decorated with a bull's head, and the tone itself was likened to the bellow of a bull. Of the ancient Babylonian chants which we possess, fifty-seven require the accompaniment of

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a drum, forty require a flute, and forty-seven involve the "lifting of hands" in the attitude of prayer.

The Book of Daniel gives us a Biblical picture of the Babylonian priests and wise men at work. Diviners claimed to have existed as a separate order from remote antiquity, and it was required that they be physically sound. Daniel and his companions are described as "children in whom was no blemish" (Dan. 1:4). The Babylonian texts insist: "the diviner whose father is impure and who himself has any imperfection of limb or countenance, whose eyes are not sound, who has any teeth missing, who has lost a finger, whose countenance has a sickly look or who is pimpled, cannot be the keeper of the decrees of Shamash and Adad."

Those who purpose to be Babylonian diviners were required to take a long course of study before they could serve at the Babylonian court. The Hebrew captives were subjected to a three year training program in "the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans" (Dan. 1:4-5) after which they were given court appointments. It is evident that Babylonians were receiving the same schooling, for we are told that Daniel and his friends were "ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers" (Dan. 1:20). When the wise men of Babylon were unable to interpret the dream of Nebuchadnezzar we are told that Daniel did so, after which the king placed him "over all the wise men of Babylon" (Dan. 2:48).

The Book of Daniel makes it clear that diviners were expected to be able to interpret anything, and that they formed an important element in the king's court. The godly Daniel, however, humbly trusting his God, showed Nebuchadnezzar that the magic and sorcery of Babylon could not be trusted to meet the basic problems of men or nations.