

PROBLEMS OF THE BABYLONIAN AKĪTU FESTIVAL

Ichiro Nakata

Since 1955 when von Soden proposed a new interpretation of some of the most relevant texts,¹ our picture of the Babylonian akītu festival has been greatly modified. Yet, in some of the latest books on Mesopotamian history, the old viewpoints concerning this festival still appear.² It is our intention here to review some of the major features of the festival and to examine whether the akītu was, in fact, the New Year festival or not.

1. Features of the Babylonian akītu festival

From the hemerological texts dating to the Seleucid period we know that in the first millennium B.C.E. the festival was celebrated for eleven days beginning with the first day of Nisan.³ It is unfortunate that we lack detailed information about the latter half of the festival, the period in which the most dramatic events took place.

1. Von Soden, "Gibt es ein Zeugnis dafür, dass die Babylonier an die Wiederauferstehung Marduks geglaubt haben?" ZA 17 (1955). As for the nature of the text, von Soden, refuting the conventional view that the text VAT 9555 is a ritual commentary, considers the text as propaganda written during the time of Sennacherib to justify Sennacherib's conquest of Babylon and his destroying of Marduk's temple.

2. E.g. S. H. Hooke, Babylonian and Assyrian Religion, (Oxford:1962); Georges Roux, Ancient Iraq (Harmondsworth:1966).

3. DT 15 + DT 114 + DT 109 + MNB 1848; cf. H. Frankfort, Kingship and the Gods (Chicago:1948) p. 313 ff.; A. Sachs' translation in ANET, p. 331ff.; S. H. Hooke, op.cit., p. 103 ff.

A) Recitation of Enūma Eliš

According to the aforementioned hemerological texts, an urigallu-priest must recite the entire Enūma Eliš at the end of the fourth day of Nisan. There has been some doubt whether the recitation of Enūma Eliš here had anything to do with the akitu festival. In a recent article in the Journal of Semitic Studies, W. G. Lambert observes that Enūma Eliš was also recited in connection with a similar ritual on the fourth day of Kislim. According to Lambert, it is possible that Enūma Eliš was recited on the fourth day of every month, and that the day, rather than the month, was the conditioning factor.⁴ Although this is a possibility, the akitu festival, as Lambert himself thinks,⁵ presupposes a myth, and it is difficult to posit anything else as its myth other than Enūma Eliš, although Enūma Eliš may not have been written for this particular ritual. It should be noted also that the Enūma Eliš recited here is not necessarily the same as those versions that have come down to us.

B) Procession of the gods and goddesses

On the tenth day of Nisan, the entire congregation of gods and goddesses form a procession to the akitu-house outside Babylon. First they go in chariots preceded by their proper emblems, then they transferred to boats and proceed along a canal to the akitu-house.⁶ According to an Assyrian text dated by F. Köcher between 1250 and 1000 B.C.E.,⁷ the following is a description of part of the procession: The king (?) offers a votive offering at the gate of the Ištar temple. After this offering the šangû-priest approaches the gods who apparently form a procession. The king stands at the head of the procession, which goes to the parak šimāte where Marduk presides, while the rest of the gods gather together around him. After a few ceremonies are conducted in front of the parak šimāte, the priest again approaches Marduk. Then follows a procession which is led by the king to the ship which is to carry the gods to the bīt akīti. The appearance of Marduk gives us the impression that the text is closely linked to the

4. W. G. Lambert, "Myth and ritual as conceived by the Babylonians," JSS XIII (1968) p. 107 ff.

5. Ibid.

6. Thureau-Dangin, Rituel akkadiens, p. 99 ff.

7. F. Köcher, "Ein mittel assyrisches Ritualfragment zum Neujahrsfest" ZA 16 (1952) p. 192.

ceremony of the festival in Babylon, but the specifically Assyrian diction, according to Köcher, suggests that the ritual was well adapted to the situation in Aššur.

C) Ordeal of Marduk

Until the appearance of von Soden's aforementioned article in *ZA* (1955), Zimmern's view of the death and resurrection of Marduk in the liturgy of the Babylonian *akītu* festival⁸ was taken for granted by virtually all scholars including Frankfort, Gadd, Gaster, Hooke, Langdon, Pallis etc. The theory of Marduk's death or confinement in the Netherworld was based almost solely on the information in *VAT* 9555, apart from the dubious report of Strabo about the grave of Bēl (Bk. XVII:5).⁹ These misunderstandings in the liturgy of the *akītu* festival in Babylon were based on the following points.

1. Misrendering of *hursānu(m)* in lines [1], 6, 7, 23, 29 and 38.

Zimmern, Langdon and many others took the word *hursānu* for mountain (in the cosmic sense). But von Soden has refuted such renderings of the term because of the use of *hursānu* with the word *šaptu* in the phrase *ina muhhi šapte šá hursāni*. Since *šaptu* is never used with *hursānu/hursānu* "a mountain," *hursānu* here must be taken as "the place of ordeal (= river)."¹⁰

2. Misrendering of line 13.

Apparently influenced by line 43, Zimmern¹¹ rendered line 13 as follows: *a-ki ilāni e-si-ru-šú-ni iḫ-ti-liq ina lib-bi na[pšāte]* "das ist nachdem die Götter ihn eingeschlossen haben, ist er entschwunden aus dem Le[ben]." But it seems clear, as von Soden has pointed out, that the phrase *ina libbi napšāte* cannot be grammatically translated as if it modified *iḫtiliq*. Although there is a reference to "blood" in line 15, the passage does not warrant taking it as suggesting Marduk's death.¹²

8. Zimmern, *Zum babylonischen Neujahrsfest II*, (Leipzig:1918), p. 2 ff.

9. Von Soden, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

10. CAD has *hursānu/hursānu* A: "mountain (region)" and *hursānu* B: "place of the *hursānu*-ordeal, ordeal (by water)." AHw has also two different entries for these. *Hursānu* appears with the determinative *ÍD* in the Nuzi texts.

11. Zimmern reads line 43 as follows: *..da-mu ša šur-ri š(á tab-ku-un) [i.....]* "das Blut des Herzens, das vergossen ist,..."

12. It is interesting to note that the presupposition of death and resurrection led Zimmern to some other mistranslations. For instance, Zimmern translated *ma-a Bēl bul-li-[s]u* (line 10) as "Mach Bel (wieder) lebendig."

3. Presupposition of death and resurrection.

This presupposition was influenced by the death and resurrection of the Tammuz-cult.¹³ Thus Langdon says: "It was, therefore, natural that a myth concerning Marduk's descent into the lower world and resurrection should have arisen at Babylon. This myth, and the ritual to which it gave form, was probably inspired more or less by the ancient cult of Tammuz, the young god of vegetation, who died yearly, sojourned in the lower world, and returned to the upper world."¹⁴

But the Tammuz-cult itself is quite problematic and its understanding has changed notably. Present scholarship seems to suppose that Inanna, after her return from the Netherworld, causes Tammuz to be cast away into the Netherworld.¹⁵ This is quite a different picture of Tammuz compared to the older one in which Tammuz's descent to the Netherworld and return from it with the help of Inanna was taken for granted.¹⁶ Furthermore, nothing can be said with certainty about the relationship between the Tammuz-cult and the Babylonian akitu festival. From what we have examined so far, a negative conclusion against the theory of the death of Marduk seems to be inevitable. This, in turn, leads us to reject the other theory about the resurrection of Marduk, because there is no mention about such a happening in our texts and the idea of Marduk's resurrection has been based only on the supposed death of Marduk.

P. Jensen conjectured that the real meaning of the verb tebû was "aufstehen, sich erheben" and he was followed by Zimmern, Hehn and Langdon. If the conjecture is correct, such a passage as [a-na i-sinne á]-ki-ti ta-bi-e dEn-lil DIN-GIR MEŠ Marduk (Nerigl. IR 67, I:33-38) must be read as "at the (annual) festival of akitu, of the resurrection of the Enlil of the gods, Marduk." But, siding with Pallis,¹⁷ we rather doubt it. Furthermore, admitting the pattern of seasonal rituals, it does not necessarily require death and resurrection

But according to von Soden, bullutu can mean not only "to bring to life" but also "to keep....in life." Note Gilgamesh XI:26 napišta bulliṭ "save (thy) life!"

13. E.g. Zimmern, Zum babylonischen Neujahrsfest II (Leipzig:1918), p. 2; Langdon, The Babylon Epic of Creation (Oxford:1923) p.34 n.3; p.50:32-33.

14. Langdon, op. cit., p. 32-33.

15. M. Witzel, "Ishtar (Inanna) gegen Tammuz," Orientalia 21 (1952); Pritchard (ed.) ANET p.52 n.6 (S. N. Kramer); Th. Gaster (ed.), The New Golden Bough (N.Y.:1964) p. 465.

16. Langdon, Tammuz and Ishtar (Oxford:1914).

17. Pallis, The Babylonian Akitu Festival (København:1926) p.203ff.

of a deity; temporary disappearance will do.¹⁸

Thus, a more correct interpretation would be to regard the event simply as an ordeal of Marduk. Von Soden has found another reference to this ordeal in a fragmentary text published in ZA 15.¹⁹

D) What went on in the bīt akīti?

Since the important hemerological texts (DT 15 + DT 114 + DT 109 + MNB 1848) do not preserve any information about the ceremonies held after the 6th day, we must depend upon the scanty information from the royal inscriptions, pictures on the gates, etc.

It seems certain on the level of myth that on the arrival of the gods and the goddesses at the akītu-house, Marduk fights and successfully subdues Tiamat, as suggested by the reliefs in Sennacherib's gate in Aššur in which Aššur fights and wins the victory over Tiamat. Some texts have been collected by Lambert in Iraq 25 and Afo 18.²⁰ In Afo 18, one of the pertinent passages reads as follows: [aššu]m (MU) bēli ša ina ā-ki-ti ina qa-bal tam-tim aš-bu²¹ "for Bel who sits in the middle of Sea (=Tiamat) in the akītu-house." The first line from the section on the Topography of Babylon, which lists small cultic structures in the city, reads thus: "Sea (Tiamat) is the seat of Bel on which Bel sits."²²

No other occasion in the year is known when Marduk sat on Tiamat. According to Lambert, the implication is that Sea (Tiamat) was no doubt a small cultic structure (probably "dais") in the akītu-house, and that when the statue of Marduk was taken there, it was set on the dais to symbolize victory over Tiamat.

The inscription of Nebuchadnezar tells us that the statue of Marduk was placed on the high throne (paramahhu) and oxen, sheep, fish, birds, must, and "wine like water" were offered in the bīt-akīti.²³ Furthermore Nabonidus mentions: "In the month of Nisan, on the 10th day, on the day when the

18. E.g. the angry withdrawal of Telepinu in the Myth of Telepinu.

19. Von Soden, "Ein neues Bruchstück des assyrischen Kommentars zum Marduk-Ordal" ZA 15 (1957), p. 224 ff.

20. Lambert, "The great battle of the Mesopotamian religious year--the conflict in the Akitu House," Iraq XXV (1963), p. 189-90.

21. Lambert, "An address of Marduk to demons," Afo XVIII (1954-5) p. 315.

22. Lambert, op. cit., p. 190.

23. A. Falkenstein, "Akīti-Fest und akīti-Festhaus" in Festchrift Johannes Friedrich (Heidelberg:1959), p. 161; Pallis, op. cit., p. 160ff. The source is VAB IV 94, 8-15.

king of the gods, Marduk, and the gods of heaven and earth resides in é-siskur, the "house of prayer," I caused to be brought 6021 mina of silver, 307 mina of gold, together with the annual offerings which have come from allegiance-taxes, surplus of the land, produce of the mountain, the taxes of all the residents, surplus of the kings, the rich possession which Prince Marduk has entrusted to me. I also offered 2850 of war-captives... to Marduk, Nabû and Nergal, the gods who help me."²⁴

The akītu-house of Assur is also called "the festival house of the festival of banquet for Aššur" (temēn bit akīti isinni kirēti dAššur). It is quite likely that people participated in the banquet at the akītu-house. The following passage from Gilgamesh is very interesting in this connection.²⁵ When Utnapištim built an ark at the advice of Enki, he said, "bullocks I slaughtered for the people, and I killed sheep every day. Must, red wine, oil, and white wine I gave the workmen to drink, as though river water, that they might feast as on New Year's Day (i-sin-na ip-pu-šu ki-ma u₄-mi à-ki-tim-ma)."²⁶

A word must be said about the determination of the fates. Pallis notices there are two kinds of determining of fates with regard to the akītu-festival: one is agricultural and magical and the other is urban and sacerdotal. Our sources about the determination of the fates are too limited to allow us to reconstruct the entire ritual. Pallis seems to think that one determining of the fates took place in the akītu-house and another in the parak-šimāti. Lambert has a different view. He thinks that the determining of the destinies is "completely certain," and that it took place twice, on the 5th or 6th day of Nisan and again on the 11th. In the first occurrence Nabû, son of Marduk, had precedence; at the second Marduk had precedence.²⁷

E) Sacred Marriage

It is quite possible that a sacred marriage took place in the akītu-house, but, again this is not so certain. Our evidence about this is limited. The Gudea inscription from Lagaš has a phrase, É GIŠ.NA "the house of the bed" (ST. Obv. 31,34) which is thought to have been the chapel used for

24. VAB IV 282, IX 3-40; cf. Falkenstein, op. cit., p. 161.

25. Suggested by Falkenstein, op. cit., p. 164.

26. Pritchard, ANET, p. 93 (Speiser), XI:71-75.

27. Lambert, JSS XIII (1968), p. 107. Since he does not give any specific reasons in this article, we don't know why he thinks so.

such a wedding. We also know that such a wedding took place from VAT 663. Thus there seems to be enough evidence to show that such sacred marriages existed for quite a long time. The problem is whether Marduk participated in such a sacred marriage at the akitu-festival in Babylon. Lambert has doubts about this. He says, "The present writer has been unable to find any scrap of evidence that Marduk was involved in a sacred marriage in the course of the New Year festival."²⁸ We can find only two letters from Neo-Assyrian times which deal with this question. One letter reads ina ši-i-a-ri ūmu 4 kám a-na ba-a-di ^dNabû u ^dTaš-me-tum ina bīt GIŠ irši ir-ru-bu ūmu 5 kám ša-ku-su šá šarri ú-ša-ku-lu LÚ ha-za-nu uš-šab... ištu libbi ūmu 5 kám a-di ūmu 10 kám [ilāni] ina bīt GIŠ irši šu-nu "Tomorrow, (that is) on the 4th (of Iyyar) toward evening, Nabû and Tashmetum will enter the bed chamber. On the 5th, they shall be given of the king's food to eat, the (temple) overseer being present....From the 5th to the 10th (both) gods (will stay) in the bed chamber."²⁹

The other letter is almost the same.³⁰ Here what is referred to is a parallel festival in some other city (Borsippa?). The date is not Nisan but Iyyar—the month which follows. Further, the sacred marriage probably implied here is that of Nabû and Tashmetu. Thus we can only conjecture whether or not a sacred marriage of Marduk took place in the course of the akitu-festival.³¹

F) The Race (lismu)

Line 57 of VAT 9555 reads: (li-is-mu ša ina arah Kisl) imi (KAN₄ !) ina pān ^dBēl u ma-ḥa-za-a-ni (gab-bu i-la ab-bu-u-ni (von Soden) (li-is-mu šá ina arah Ni) sanni ... (Zimmern) "Der Schnellauf, den sie im Monat Kislim vor Bel und allen (Kult-)städten im Umlauf veranstalten" (von Soden), "Der Schnellauf, den im Monat Nisan".. (Zimmern).

Von Soden explains the mythological background of the race in the month of Kislim by saying that it is related to the running of the god Šakan to report the victory of Ninurta over Anzu. He also calls attention to the coincidence between this and the reported date of the conquest of Babylon (Babylon-

28. Ibid., p. 106.

29. Harper 366 (82-5-22, 96), R. H. Pfeiffer, State Letters of Assyria (New Haven:1935), #215.

30. Harper 113 (K.501), Pfeiffer #216.

31. Cf. iḫiṣ ana ḥadaššūti "(Marduk) rushed to the wedding festival"; CAD under ḥadaššūtu; Falkenstein, op. cit., p. 163.

ian Chronicle, III:22).³² Apart from the difference of traditions upon which von Soden and Zimmern base their respective reconstructions of the text, it seems that such a race was held during a spring festival and/or an autumn festival. One text has a phrase ^dNabû ša li-is-me (KAV 42 III:12). Weidner has a short comment on it.³³ Referring to the race during the spring festival in Hittite as well as to our line, he explains this Nabû in Assyria as a statue of Nabû which was probably used either as a goal or as a pole for the turning point of the race. The translation given by Weidner is "Nabû, der (Gott)des Schnellaufers." It seems to be fairly sure that such a race constituted an important element of a seasonal festival.³⁴

II. Is the akitu-festival a New Year festival?

We have been using the term New Year festival and the term akitu festival almost interchangeably without any definition. But the meaning of akitu is by no means clear.

The Sumerian á-ki-ti and the corresponding Akkadian akitu(m) mean a special festival (not a festival in general) as well as a house where an important part of the cult acts take place. The combined use of á-ki-ti and akitu(m) respectively with ezen and isinnu(m) might be considered as secondary to distinguish á-ki-ti/akitu(m) in the sense of a special festival from á-ki-ti/akitu(m) in the sense of a building.³⁵

Furthermore, it is known that since Sumerian times the akitu festival was celebrated at different times in different cities. In Ur it was celebrated twice a year, in the 6th month and in the 12th month. Sometimes the latter celebration took place in the first month. In Nippur, during the Ur III period, it was celebrated in the first and twelfth months. Although the word á-ki-ti is not used, itu-é-itu-VI (Month of the House, (i.e.) the Sixth month) of Umma and ezen-dba₆-ba₆ (Baba-Festival of Ningirsu-Baba, in the 8th month) are also considered equivalent festivals.³⁶ This difference of times of the observance of the akitu-festival could be observed in the first millennium B.C. although it was celebrated then mainly in Nisan; in Uruk the festival was celebrated twice -in Nisan and in Tisrit. In Nineveh it was celebrated in Tebet (10th month), while in Arbela it was celebrated in Ab (5th month).

32. Von Soden, ZA 17 (1955) pp. 151 and 163.

33. Weidner, "Nabu, der (Gott) des Schnellaufers" in AfO XVI (1952-3), p.66.

34. Cf. Th. Gaster, Thespis (1950, 1961 rev. ed.), p. 40ff.

35. A. Falkenstein, op. cit., p. 147ff. and p. 155.

36. Ibid., p. 160.

What concerns us here is whether or not the akitu festival was the New Year festival (zagmukku, the Akkadian transcription of the Sumerian ZAG.MU, namely Akkadian rēš šatti). There has not been a consensus of opinions among scholars about the relationship between both festivals. Pallis, for all practical purposes, identifies them together.³⁷ Snaith, however, thinks that the akitu-festival was not originally any festival, nor was it necessarily the New Year festival. It was, according to Snaith, originally the annual high festival of the local deity. In Mesopotamia the date of this high festival was fixed with reference to the heavenly bodies, e.g. the heliacal rising of a star or some unique position of the sun or the moon.³⁸ A. Falkenstein thinks that the festival originally had a cultic function to introduce the agricultural year. Later when the calendar year starting at the spring equinoctial point was established, the time of the akitu-festival moved accordingly to the spring equinoctial point.³⁹

We are inclined to think that an akitu-festival was originally closely related to the agricultural year of each locality with all its local peculiarities. It is also quite possible, as Snaith points out, that some astral elements were found in it. But for all practical purposes, we think, the akitu-festival of Babylon in the first millennium B.C.E. was the New Year festival. We do not know how far back we can trace the observance of the akitu-New Year festival in Babylon. The oldest text we have dates back only to the period of Tukulti-Ninurta I,⁴⁰ but it seems quite certain that the observance goes back to the First Dynasty of Babylon.

37. Pallis, op. cit., p. 43ff.

38. N. Snaith, The Jewish New Year Festival (London:1947), p. 215.

39. Falkenstein, op. cit., p. 165ff.

40. I.e. VAT 16435, cf. Köcher, op. cit., p. 192.