Le dieu Assur / La déesse Ishtar

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These two lectures will provide an in-depth analysis of two important but little understood ancient gods: Assur, the supreme god of the Assyrian Empire (c. 1350-600 BC), and Ishtar, the Assyrian goddess of love. Both are often described primarily as gods of war, Ishtar additionally as a patron goddess of sexuality and cultic prostitution. It will be shown that such descriptions totally miss the true essence of these two gods.

The first lecture, on the god Assur, will first outline the development of Assur from a local numen into a universal, transcendent God. Three main stages in this development are distinguished. First, the last centuries of the third millennium BC, when the Assyrians, as subjects of Akkadian and Sumerian empires, absorbed and internalized the central tenets of Sumero-Akkadian religion and royal ideology. Second, the reign of Šamši-Adad I (about 1800 BC), when Assur was equated with Enlil, the Sumerian king of gods, and became an imperial god. And third, the rise of the Assyrian Empire in the late 14th century BC, when Assur was equated with the god Anšar of the Babylonian Epic of Creation and became a transcendent God of gods revealing himself and ruling the universe through his creations, the manifest gods.

The relationship between Assur, the manifest gods and the Assyrian king will then be examined in detail. It will be shown that the manifest gods were essentially conceived of as ministers and powers of the supreme God, comparable to the Christian, Jewish and Islamic angels and archangels, while the Assyrian king was regarded as an incarnation of Ninurta, the Assyrian equivalent of the resurrected Christ.

The second lecture, on the goddess Ishtar, will first review the puzzling and seemingly contradictory picture of the goddess presented by Mesopotamian mythology and religious iconography. This will then be contrasted and compared with the role that the goddess plays in Assyrian prophecy, which can be reduced into two main elements: the mother and protector of the Assyrian king, and the spirit of God speaking through the prophets. It will be shown that these seemingly different roles are interconnected and open a way to understand the essence of the goddess and her multifaceted mythology and imagery. Essentially, she was the life-giving breath of God ensouling the universe. As such, she was not only the mother of all living beings, visualized as the queen of heaven, but also a hypostasis of the human soul, whose heavenly origin provided the basis for a sophisticate theory of the soul and belief in resurrection from the dead. The existence of such a belief in Assyria will be demonstrated through an analysis of the myth of Ishtar’s Descent into the Netherworld and the cult of the goddess, as well as the associated imagery. Finally, the relationship of the goddess to Assur and the Assyrian king...
will be considered. It will be argued that in her heavenly aspect she corresponds to the Gnostic and Christian Holy Spirit, and was considered in Assyria the feminine aspect of the supreme God.

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Proofs – are they objective?

The concept of proof may be given a first approximate explanation by saying that a proof is a chain of valid inferences from known truths such that at each inference step the conclusion is seen to follow from the premisses. A natural reaction to this explanation is to say that whether something “is seen to follow” may depend on a subject, and to ask whether this does not make proofs subjective in character.

We cannot simply skip the phrase “is seen to” in this explanation, if the validity of an inference is understood in the customary way in terms of necessary truth preservation or consequence. Doing so would give an explanation according to which every theorem of an axiomatic theory has a one-step proof, consisting of an inference that simply takes sufficiently many of the axioms as premisses and the theorem as conclusion. Unless the theorem is a trivial consequence of the axioms, this is not what we mean by a proof.

The concept of proof is epistemic and can obviously not be reduced to a non-epistemic concept of valid inference. The question I am raising in this lecture is if we can account for this epistemic nature of the concept in a less metaphoric way than saying “is seen to” and if proofs can then come out as something objective. The distinction between an inference being evidently valid and being merely valid was made already at the birth of logic when Aristotle distinguished between what he called perfect and imperfect syllogisms, but he did not explain the distinction any further. Nor does our modern idea of formal proof contribute to such an explanation.

The more general concept of ground as used in epistemology and philosophy of language is closely connected with the concept of proof. A speaker is expected to have some grounds for what she asserts, and an assertion is evaluated as justified or warranted when the speaker has a sufficiently strong ground for the assertion. Here I restrict myself to the strongest possible grounds, what we call conclusive grounds, which should not be confused with infallible procedures for arriving at knowledge. We conceive of deductive proofs as one way in which we can obtain conclusive grounds; in the sequel I drop the attributes “deductive” and “conclusive”, but always mean deductive proof and conclusive ground when I say just proof and ground.