Between Gods and Humans: Angels, demons and others

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The interdisciplinary symposium “Between Gods and Humans: Angels, Demons and Others” was held on 19 and 20 May 2014, within the framework of the Chair of the Hebrew Bible and its Contexts’ seminar.
This symposium was an opportunity once again to bring together Biblicists, Assyriologists, Egyptologists, Hellenists, an Iranologist, and a Medievalist, who were invited by Prof. Römmer to examine the question of the intermediaries that inhabit the spaces between gods and human beings. In many religions and philosophical systems, the question of humans’ place and their relationship with gods or higher powers plays an important role. Many myths and other texts reflect on what distinguishes humans from gods. But at the same time, there is also the idea that between gods and humans there exists a host of intermediary or hybrid beings, which shows that the boundaries between them are not impermeable. Such beings can also play roles that believers are loathe to attribute to their gods, or act as mediators with gods that are too occupied or distant to have a direct relationship with humans.

**Human or divine?**

The “in-between world” is populated with figures in Mesopotamian, Judeo-Christian, Greek and many other cultures. Some are human, others are “supernatural”, and yet others replace gods. These figures are not always intermediaries to begin with, but subsequently become so without always remaining that way. Historically, certain figures acquire this status and then lose it. Thus at the time of the monarchy in Israel (the Iron Age), deceased ancestors were likely invoked as spirits, which could be attested to by the presence of naked feminine figures in tombs, who were perhaps in some instances the sign of an appeal for healing sterility. This conception of the intermediate ancestor would subsequently have disappeared, with the rise of the conception of a more neutral sheol, where the dead no longer played this intermediary part. Such fluctuation is also found across cultures distinguished by the role
intermediaries play in them. The hero, for instance, is clearly considered to be a demigod in *The Iliad*, while his Hebrew counterpart seems more earthly. In the ancient Mazdaism of the Avesta, the situation is again different, since there are multiple subordinate gods who are however not really intermediaries between a deity and humans.

**A reflection of the earthly king’s court**

The intermediary being is often highly ambiguous. Several papers of the symposium addressed the question as to the nature of the intermediary beings that inhabit the Assyrian world. Are they genii or agents of evil? The Assyrian nomenclature is ambiguous and the “demon” (*udug=utukku*) should be defined as a neutral entity rather than understood through our categories of “good” or “bad”. Generally speaking, this symposium has therefore shown the extent to which the boundaries between “demons” and “angels” are permeable. We need to remember that even in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the devil originally belonged to the divine council (Job 1-2; Zacharia 3), before becoming an entity opposed to God. It is highly likely that the figure of the devil was inspired by the messengers and accusers who worked in the Persian court for their king (sixth to fifth centuries BCE). The human origin of the king’s court that motivated the description of the divine world’s “angels” and “demons” is equally found in the Judeo-Christian and Mesopotamian worlds. Thus, the intercession formulas used for Mesopotamian kings (Royal Archives of Mari 10 156: 4-33) or their wives became copies of the intercession formulas used in religions to address the “supernatural” world.

**A reflection of history**

But where do these intermediary beings come from? Often, the demons come from the outside, as in the case of Lamaštu, and convey a historical concern. Lamaštu is described as an Amorite woman in ancient Babylonian texts (tablet of the Yale Babylonian Collection 9846, 1-4), when the Amorites posed problems for Babylonian kings, between the third and second centuries BCE. Yet in spite of this rhetoric, other texts show that Lamaštu was very well integrated into the Mesopotamian pantheon and beliefs. It is interesting to see that the latter converge with biblical material, since these figures can easily be imagined living on steppes, in the desert or in ruins, in any case on the fringes of the prevailing culture. The description of the ruins in the Bible (Isaiah 13, 19-22; 34, 9-17; etc.) converges with this concern for imagining the margins of the surrounding world and its dangers. The more its borders are known, the more the demons’ language will change. It is interesting to see that the Greek translators of these passages in the Septuagint made mythological animals (sirens, demons, onocentaurs, etc.) coexist with natural animals, as the Hellenist cultural horizon was expanding its borders. There was more and more real knowledge of the peripheries, and they attracted new interest. In the Greek language current at the time, the adjective *daimonios* even eventually became a simple synonym of “prodigious”, “marvellous” or “amazing”. Later, the Islam of the Mamluks left even less room for an “in-between world” filled with supernatural entities, as only *rassul* and the last of the prophets were credited with a real intermediary function.
Finally, the question of the management of this threatening or reassuring “in-between world” was addressed. How were these beings warded off or appealed to? The scapegoat appears to be one of the ways of managing this liminal world, as he is sent to the desert (Leviticus 16). Since the “in-between world” serves to explain certain events in history (Lamaštu) while also trying to influence them (intercessions), this place is forever intriguing for humans. Even today, these intermediaries have returned in “popular culture” as spiritual beings of all sorts, as the recent success of books and films on vampires attests.

- Videos of the symposium are available at www.college-de-france.fr, on the professor’s page
- Prof. Thomas Römer is the laureate of the History of Religions Prize from the Fondation des Amis de Pierre-Antoine Bernheim for his book L’invention de Dieu (Éditions du Seuil, 2014).

Programme

Introduction
Thomas Römer, Collège de France

Protective Genii and Agents of Evil in Art and Texts (Late III - Early II Millenium BCE)
Michaël Guichard, Collège de France, UMR 7192

Angels or Demons? Divine Beings Seen through the Eyes of Assyrian Wise Men
Lionel Marti, Collège de France, UMR 7192

Living with Ancestral Spirits in the Iron Age and the Persian Period
Diana Edelman, Trinity College, Dublin

Comparative Imaginary of the Demoniac in Ancient Israelite Traditions. The Dwellers in the Ruins in the Book of Isaiah
Christophe Nihan, University of Lausanne, UMR 7192

Comparative Imaginary of the Demoniac in Ancient Israelite Traditions. The Bestiary of Isaiah in the Septuagint
Anna Angelini, University of Lausanne

Was There an Early Israelite Pandemonium?
Brian Schmidt, University of Michigan

Intercession in Mesopotamian Society
Dominique Charpin, Collège de France, UMR 7192
An Interface with the Deity, a Representative of the People (Exodus 18,19): Moses’ Positions between Yhwh and Israel
Daniele Garrone, Waldensian Faculty of Rome

The Hero: An Intermediate Figure? Comparative Study of Greek Epic and Old Testament Data
Matthieu Pellet, University of Lausanne

The Angels of Heaven and Elements of the Universe
Marc Philonenko, Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres

The Multiple Identities of Metatron in Ancient Judaism: Man, Angel, and God
David Hamidovic, University of Lausanne

Why Bother with the Figure of the Revealing Angel?
Christoph Uehlinger, University of Zurich

The Personal God of the Amorite King and His Subjects’ Success
Jean-Marie Durand, Collège de France, UMR 7192

The King - a Key Figure between God / the Gods and Man
Hans-Peter Mathys, University of Basel

The Figure of the Prophet’s Man-Guide in Ezekiel 40-48
Dany Nocquet, Protestant Institute of Theology, Montpellier

Mesopotamian Demons - Alien and yet Native Powers?
Nils Heessel, Heidelberg University

Infernal Bes Gods
Youri Volokhine, University of Geneva

Paul’s Pantheon - an Embarrassment of Riches in the Spirit World
Valérie Nicolet-Anderson, Protestant Institute of Theology, Paris

The Scapegoat - Notes on a Demonic Figure from the Old Testament
Bernd Janowski, University of Tübingen

Figures of Divine Subordination in Mazdaism
Jean Kellens, Collège de France

Divine Messages and Intermediaries in a Selection of Mamluk Historical Chronicles
Bernadette Martel-Thoumian, Université de Grenoble, UMR 7192

The Need for the Devil
Thomas Römer, Collège de France, UMR 7192