

Have Horn, Will Travel: The Journeys of Mesopotamian Deities

For most of us, as members of modern Western culture, the topic ‘Travel and Religion’ probably readily evokes the notion of travelling humans, whether it be as pilgrims, missionaries, or in some other capacity in the service of or in connection with a religious cult. This is of course natural, since we tend to think of ‘travel’ as involving displacement from one place to another in the physical realm, which does not port easily to our conception of the divine, mythological references aside.¹ In the Mesopotamian worldview, however, deities were believed to travel not only in tales, but also in the day-to-day world, and in a much more real sense than we might be inclined to suppose, given our cultural formation with regards to the divine. This will become more clear once we examine the Mesopotamian conception of deity a little more closely.

The Mesopotamian conception of deity

The deities who from time to time or place to place² comprised the Mesopotamian pantheon represented at their root, as is no doubt true of many polytheistic cultures, in the first place concretisations of the Mesopotamian experience of the environment, whose activities and interrelationships were then described for the most part mythologically in anthropomorphic terms.³ Thus, An/Anu⁴ represented the heavens, Enlil the power of the air, Iškur/Adad⁵ the storm, Utu/Šamaš the sun, Nanna/Sîn in like manner the moon, and so on. Over the course of time, these deities also became associated with abstract metaphysical concepts beyond the immediately environmental: Enlil, for example, whose influence was most critical in Mesopotamian life became associated with destiny and fate, while Utu/Šamaš, by virtue of being able to bring light to darkness and see all became responsible for divine justice.⁶

¹ I am thinking here of instances such as for example אֱלֹהִים יְהוָה walking about in the primæval garden (Gen. 3:8). Note that similar considerations apply to the various other entities one might consider to bridge the gap between the divine and human realms, such as angels, demons, or jinn. On the ambiguity of distinction between deity and divine in this regard see for example Barbara N. Porter, ‘One God or Many? A Brief Introduction to a Complex Problem,’ *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World* (Casco Bay: The Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, 2000), pp. 1–8.

² ‘Mesopotamia’ is a complex from both the topographical and the cultural point of view. The environment varied widely from north to south, and the area defined very roughly as the locus between Euphrates in the west and Tigris in the east was home to a number of different cultures. Whereas one can perceive a certain degree of continuity in perspective between these cultures over time, it would be a mistake to think of the pantheon as some sort of artefact with a relatively static quality.

³ In my view, the anthropomorphism of the divine has to do, in its origin at least, with the simple expedient of accommodation: human beings have a certain experience and conception of their relationships with each other, and it becomes a matter of convenience to let the language describing this become a metaphor for the divine world. On the other hand, the relationship between language and thought is not strictly unidirectional; since language also shapes thought, this originally simple expedient would in turn entail a certain influence on theological reflection.

⁴ Mesopotamian deities frequently have Sumerian as well as Akkadian (i.e. east Semitic) names; where this is the case, I have consistently given the Sumerian name first followed by a virgule (‘/’) and then the Akkadian name.

⁵ Equivalent to west Semitic Hadad.

⁶ For an inventory and description of some of the main deities and other spiritual beings of Mesopotamian thought, see Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992). On the development of the pantheon, see Wilfred G. Lambert, ‘The Historical Development of the Mesopotamian

Quite naturally, given the origin of their development, the gods and goddesses of Mesopotamia were cosmologically located. On the other hand, anthropomorphism invites physical representation, so that the deities were represented by cult images, which were then made resident in ‘houses’⁷ of their own: what we would call temples. Although any given deity might have been worshipped in a variety of locales, in practice each one tended to have one major cult centre and associated temple where the deity was considered to be ‘at home’ (see Table 1 for a few deities’ cities of residence and temple names).⁸ A map of Babylonia is provided for reference in Figure 1.

Pantheon: A Study in Sophisticated Polytheism,’ *Unity and Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature, and Religion of the Ancient Near East* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1975), pp. 191–200.

⁷ In Sumerian ‘e,’ in Akkadian ‘bītu.’

⁸ This should not, however, be understood in an absolute sense. There were certainly local expressions of deities which were ‘at home’ elsewhere; compare in this regard the modern tendency in Roman Catholicism to speak of Mary-of-X and Mary-of-Y, where X and Y are differing geographical places, and Mary is in both cases the same Virgin Mary.

Table 1 Some major deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon, home cult centres, and temples⁹

| Deity | Home City | Temple Name | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| | | Sumerian ¹⁰ | English |
| An/Anu | Uruk | Eanna ¹¹ | House of Heaven |
| Enlil | Nippur | Ekur ¹² | House, Mountain |
| Enki/Ea | Eridu | Eabzu ¹³ | <i>Apsû</i> -house ¹⁴ |
| Nanna–Suen ¹⁵ /Sîn | Ur | Ekišnugal ¹⁶ | Alabaster House ¹⁷ |
| Utu/Šamaš | Larsa, Sippar ¹⁸ | Ebabbar | Shining House |
| Asarluḫi/Marduk ¹⁹ | Babylon | Esagil | House whose Top is High ²⁰ |
| Nabû ²¹ | Borsippa | Ezida ²² | True House |

⁹ Interpretations of temple names and other details are taken from Andrew R. George, *House Most High: the Temples of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1993).

¹⁰ Babylonian temples were, with few exceptions, generally called by Sumerian names only; see Adam Falkenstein, *Topographie von Uruk*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1941), p. 4.

¹¹ An/Anu shared this temple with Inanna/Ištar, goddess of love and war. Five other temples by this name are known, two of which are temples of Inanna at Lagaš and Girsu respectively.

¹² There is a temple of Enlil by this name in the neighbourhood of Babylon also, as well as a chapel to Enlil in the Nippur temple of Nininimma. In later days, the Assyrians, whose national god Aššur supplanted Enlil, used the name ‘Ekur’ as an epithet for his temple in Aššur.

¹³ There is also a sanctuary of Enki by this name at Pasirra.

¹⁴ The *apsû* was the subterranean sweet-water, sometimes (perhaps unfortunately) rendered in English as ‘abyss.’

¹⁵ This deity is sometimes known as Nanna, sometimes as Suen (Akkadianized at a later date as Sîn), and sometimes as both.

¹⁶ Nanna/Sîn also had temples by this name at Babylon and Bīt–Suenna, near Nippur.

¹⁷ This translation is not found in George.

¹⁸ Utu/Šamaš had two main temples instead of one main temple and lesser ones in other locations.

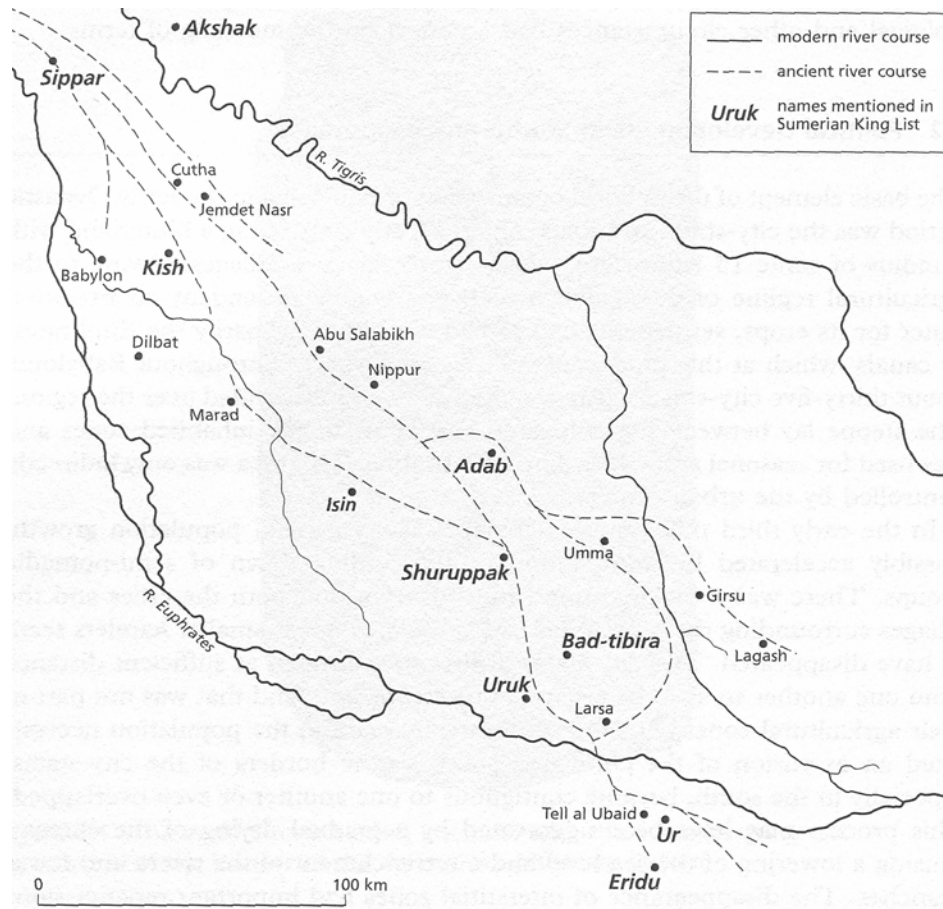
¹⁹ Marduk was primarily an Akkadian deity, who was syncretically identified with a Sumerian deity by name of Asarluḫi.

²⁰ Recall here the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel.

²¹ Nabû (in earlier times, Nabium) was an Akkadian deity of the later period, and so not really associated with a Sumerian predecessor.

²² Originally, this was a temple of Marduk (under the name Tutu). There are two other temples to Nabû by this name, one in Nineveh, and one in Kalaḫ. Nabû also had a cella by this name in the temple of Marduk in Babylon.

Figure 1 Map of Babylonia²³



When attempting to discern the Mesopotamian attitude towards cult images, we must distance ourselves from two points of view which might potentially arise in light of our cultural formation alluded to above.

First, we should avoid making the assumption that images were used in a similar way to the icons of saints and the like familiar to us from certain Christian traditions. The natural response on the part of members of such traditions to iconoclasts who would bring a charge of idolatry on the basis of, for example, Lev. 26:1,²⁴ is presumably that these images are representative or symbolic, and thus not to be confused with ‘idols,’ which are thought to be or have been objects of worship in and of themselves. As we shall see shortly, there is much more behind the Mesopotamian use of images than symbolism or mere representation.

This brings us to the second problem, that is, the charge found in Jer. 10:3–15, Hab. 2:18, or Rev. 9:20²⁵ that idols are mere artificial things which cannot see, hear, speak or walk.²⁶ This is the perspective

²³ After Joan Oates, *Babylon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), p. 13. [MAP TO BE ADAPTED TO INCLUDE OTHER IMPORTANT SITES E.G. BORSIPPA]; [INCLUDE CLOSE-UP OF BABYLON]

²⁴ See also Ex. 10:4, 23, 34:17; Lev. 19:4; Deut. 4:15ff, 27:15.

²⁵ For other passages from the prophets bearing on this issue, see Is. 40:18–20, 41:6–7, 44:9–22; Ho. 8:4, 14:4

of the outsider, and certainly, from such a person's theological standpoint, quite legitimate, but it is seriously at variance with the Mesopotamian perspective.

This becomes evident when we consider the following selection of omens purporting to relate to the behaviour of (the cult image of) Marduk on given occasions:

- 1 Should Marduk be turned away when he seats himself in Esagil,
 Enlil will deliver the lands over to evil.
- 14 Should Marduk's mouth be open when he leaves Esagil at New Year's,
 Enlil will scream angrily over the land.
- 15 Should Marduk leave quickly,
 Enlil will raise the head of this land.
- 16 Should Marduk not leave quickly,
 the gods will neglect this land.²⁷

In other lines, we find that 'Marduk' turns this way or that, that his face may be veiled, or one of a number of colours, that his eyes may be open or angled a certain way, and so on.

The 'mechanics' involved are unclear to the modern audience. Was the cult image designed with moveable parts, and if so, what caused their movement? Or were the effects which were observed interpretations of some kind of external phenomena which might affect the appearance of the image? What is clear, however, is that for the Mesopotamian, the god (in this case, Marduk) was in a very real sense present in the cult image, and was thought to communicate with the worshipping community.

One should stress in this connection, however, that the foregoing does not necessarily apply to each and every image, simply because it was crafted and said to represent a given deity. Officially, at least, the association of deity with cult image took place only in light of the *mīs pī*, or 'washing of the mouth' (sometimes also called *pit pī*, 'opening of the mouth'),²⁸ a formal and exceedingly complex ceremony. The distinction between 'mere image' and 'cult image in which the deity is present' was very clearly identified: 'This statue cannot smell incense, drink water, or eat food without the Opening of the Mouth!'²⁹

²⁶ For a discussion of the evolution of Biblical aniconism see Michael B. Dick, 'Prophetic Parodies of Making the Cult Image,' *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 1–53.

²⁷ Beate Pongratz–Leisten, *Ina Šulmi Īrub: Die kulttopographische und ideologische Programmatik der akītu-Prozession in Babylonien und Assyrien im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, appendix III, no. 18 (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1994), lines 1, 14–16. Pongratz–Leisten has given the heavily logographic Akkadian and a German translation; the English translations offered here are my own.

²⁸ For a discussion of this ritual, including an edition and translation of one instance of the ritual, see Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, 'The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: the Mesopotamian *mīs pī* Ritual,' *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth*, pp. 55–121.

²⁹ Oliver R. Gurney and J.J. Finkelstein, *The Sultantepe Tablets* no. 200:43, cited in Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, p. 114.

Thus, a material substance (in this case, a wooden image overlaid with gold and precious stones) became a locus of a divine presence (of one or the other deity), one might say ‘in, with, and under’ it³⁰ in consequence of a formal religious ritual. According to a Mesopotamian text, ‘The statue is the creation of (both) god and human!’³¹ Seen from this vantage point—a material substance infused in some fashion with divine presence through a legitimately performed religious ritual—an obvious parallel comes to mind in the Eucharistic celebration of certain liturgical Christian denominations. The Mesopotamian notion of deity resident among humans may not seem so foreign after all.

Instances of divine travel in Sumerian times

The divine-and-human status of Mesopotamian cult images, their locus as ‘in residence’ in major cult centres, and the on-going mythological development of their interrelationship gave rise to an interaction between the deities in the material world which was expressed through the cult images. That is, Mesopotamian deities were given to travel, not only in mythological literature, but also ‘in the flesh.’

Leaving aside once again the mythological literature (having to do with travel back and forth to metaphysical places such as Heaven or the Netherworld), there is a small corpus of Sumerian literature which deals with the travels of various Mesopotamian deities to visit one another, the termini of the voyages at either end being their cult centres in the physical world.³²

Several texts deal with journeys whose purpose seems to be the renewal of fecundity in the natural world. Illustrative of this is ‘Nanna–Suen’s Journey to Nippur’³³ to visit his father Enlil. In this instance, the trip takes place by means of a boat built specifically for the purpose, each of its components being brought from afar: reeds from Tummal, pitch from the *apsû*,³⁴ rushes from Duašaga, special types of wood (cypress, cedar, fir) from various forests, and so on. The boat is loaded with various animals (bulls, goats, long-tailed bush-rats, porcupines, carp, to name only a few), and begins its journey, passing by Enegir, Larsa, Uruk, Šuruppak, and Tummal, to arrive at the quay of Nippur, where its cargo is delivered to the house of Enlil as a gift. In response to the offerings, Enlil has sweet cakes and the finest beer made available to Nanna–Suen. After thanking Enlil for the meal, we come to the purpose of Nanna–Suen’s journey: he asks for certain blessings for his city-state, Ur: abundant carp in the river, speckled barley in the fields, other types of carp for the ponds, a variety of other things, finally ending with ‘long life in the palace,’ that is, a blessing on the temporal ruler. Enlil grants the request and Nanna–Suen returns home.

A number of characteristics of divine travel arise from a consideration of this text:

- the divine journey had an out of the ordinary character, as shown by the extraordinary preparations made for it (a new boat, of the finest materials, each from its appropriate source, is crafted for the occasion);

³⁰ But not ‘identical’ with it. Given the multiple temples, there might be multiple cult images for a deity, and destruction of the cult image did not result in destruction of the deity with which it was associated.

³¹ Oliver R. Gurney and J.J. Finkelstein, line 19, again cited in Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, p. 99.

³² See Å.W. Sjöberg, ‘Götterreisen,’ *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* vol. 3 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1957), pp. 480–483.

³³ See the on-line Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature at <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.5.1#> (accessed 28 April 2006) for Sumerian and English editions of this story.

³⁴ Presumably a location in the vicinity of Eridu.

- a lesser god (Nanna–Suen) visited a greater god (Enlil, who during the Sumerian period was the effective ruler of the gods³⁵), bringing magnificent gifts as an offering (the numerous animals of differing species, some seemingly quite exotic);
- a festive meal of hospitality was involved (Enlil provided sweet cakes which Nanna–Suen loved, and the finest of beer);
- the journey culminated in blessings for the domain of the traveller, including an affirmation of long life for the temporal ruler whose god had embarked upon the journey.

The journey, then, can in some sense be seen to share the dual nature of the cult image: there is a natural aspect to it (the physical trip and the physical gifts and meal) and a divine aspect (the blessings) as well.

The *akītu* Festivals

The journey described above and similar journeys sharing similar characteristics by Ninisina to Nippur and Ninurta to Eridu are thought to have been undertaken on a yearly basis as a rite of renewal of inter-cult relations,³⁶ perhaps in parallel with the renewal seen to take place in the natural realm. Some journeys, however, may have served a specific one-time purpose, and therefore not been cyclical in occurrence.³⁷

On the other hand, certain divine journeys were not only cyclical but tied to named festivals. The most well documented of these is the *akītu*³⁸ festival which was celebrated in one form or another in one or more cult centres throughout Mesopotamian history from the mid-third millennium BCE.³⁹

As far as we can tell, this festival originated in Ur as part of the cult of the moon god, Nanna–Suen. *Akītu* was celebrated twice a year, apparently in association with the equinox but adjusted as to timing to correspond to the first and seventh⁴⁰ months of the lunar cycle, rather than set to coincide with the astronomical realities of the solar cycle which technically defined them, for the obvious reason that the cult of Nanna–Suen was lunar. Mark Cohen has suggested that these festivals demarcated for all intents and purposes a system of alternating ‘equinox-years’ of six months each rather than an annual year of twelve (or thirteen) months.⁴¹ The celebration associated with the seventh month (‘Seeding’

³⁵ Technically, An was the father of the gods, but he was for the most part very remote in the Mesopotamian conception. Enlil, as a more immediate deity whose element (the turbulent air) mediates the activities of the other deities, was seen as supreme.

³⁶ Å.W. Sjöberg, p. 480. D.R. Frayne has suggested to me that in his view the trips were likely not in fact annual, though they were repeated (private communication, 28 April 2006).

³⁷ E.g. ‘Inanna’s journey to Eridu’ and Enki’s Journey to Nippur’; see Å.W. Sjöberg, p. 480.

³⁸ The etymology of the word *akītu* is uncertain and remains a matter of debate; for various points of view, see Juley Bidmead, *The Akītu Festival: Religious Continuity and Royal Legitimation in Mesopotamia* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2002), p. 42, n. 9; Mark E. Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1993), p. 405, Wolfram von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1985), p. 29, and *The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* A/1 (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1964), pp. 267–272.

³⁹ Cohen, p. 401.

⁴⁰ The numeration of months is commonly by reference to the later ‘universal’ standard calendar whose first month began on or about the vernal equinox. As will become clear shortly, the system local to Ur had the first and seventh months in reverse.

⁴¹ Cohen, pp. 6, 400. For Biblical parallels to this, see Ex. 34:22 and 2 Sam. 11:1.

month—also referred to as ‘*akītu*’ month) was seen as the more significant of the two—perhaps because this began the period when the moon evidenced the greater visible presence in comparison with the sun⁴²—and lasted eleven days, whereas that of the first month (‘Harvesting’ month) lasted only five days.⁴³ The underlying pattern was the same in either case, however:

- the cult image left its home temple⁴⁴ and processed to the temporary residence established at a building known as the the ‘*akītu* house’;
- it received the appropriate offerings and devotion while there;
- it returned to its home temple in an equally festive, if not more festive, procession;
- there were blessings in the form of re-establishing the administration and pronouncing the fate of the city (one would think, generally favourable) for the coming year.⁴⁵

Curiously, ancient sources are relatively silent concerning the *akītu* house. This has suggested to Mark Cohen that its purpose was quite simple: it served to provide a starting point for the cult image to process in grand fashion into the city, as a celebration of the deity’s first taking up residence there in the mythological beginning-of-time. Thus, for him, this second procession was the central core of the festival, overshadowing all other elements, important though they were in their own right.⁴⁶ He cites in support of his view—which seems logical enough, if one accepts his thesis, perhaps somewhat speculative, that the main point was to re-enter the city—material relating to the seventh month derivative festival at Uruk which makes little comment regarding An’s leaving the city, but elaborates in detail concerning his return⁴⁷ and material he considers related to the Aššur and Nineveh derivative celebrations, which speaks of a captivity and trial of Marduk⁴⁸ With regards to the Uruk festival, it should be noted that the outgoing procession received more emphasis in the first month instance, forcing Cohen to admit that the emphasis might well have been different in the two instances.⁴⁹

Certain details of the Ur festival are interesting in light of ‘Nanna–Suen’s Journey to Nippur,’ cited above. Given the crescent shape of the moon at certain times, Nanna had become associated with a boat shape, and offerings were made to the ‘Boat of Nanna’ on the third day of the first month *akītu* festival in the early times of its celebration (and at a later date in Old Babylonian times in the seventh month celebration as well);⁵⁰ but even more interestingly, the travelling back and forth to the *akītu* house

⁴² Cohen, p. 402.

⁴³ Or perhaps seven days; Cohen, pp. 408, 411.

⁴⁴ At Uruk, in the later period, the procession began and ended at the *rēš* (‘Head’) temple, which had come to replace Eanna (George, p. 137).

⁴⁵ Cohen, p. 406.

⁴⁶ Cohen, p. 404. This view seems to have gained general acceptance; see, for example, Marc van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BC* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 168.

⁴⁷ Cohen, p. 405.

⁴⁸ Cohen, pp. 405–406. Bidmead, however, disputes that the latter is truly related to the actual *akītu* celebration (pp. 87–88).

⁴⁹ Cohen 433–434.

⁵⁰ Cohen, p. 402.

was done by special barge,⁵¹ as it was later at Aššur in the Middle Assyrian period and at Babylon in the Neo-Babylonian period also.⁵² Thus we have a departure from home, travel by barge to an alternate location, food offerings,⁵³ and a return trip greeted with great celebration and resulting in blessings for the city and confirmation of temporal rule.

As already intimated above, over the course of time, the *akītu* festival spread from Ur to other Mesopotamian cities⁵⁴ where it was adapted to celebrate the appropriate local chief deity rather than Nanna–Suen. Thus, at Nippur,⁵⁵ it became a celebration of Enlil, and continued to be celebrated in the ‘Seeding’ and ‘Harvesting’ months, which, however, were the names applied to the fourth and twelfth months by the local calendar;⁵⁶ at Uruk, it became a celebration of An,⁵⁷ in Babylon, of Marduk, and so on.⁵⁸ Making allowance for the necessary adaptations to the local cult,⁵⁹ the pattern remained very similar: following certain preparations, the cult image of the deity emerged from its temple and travelled in procession (usually accompanied by a variety of lesser deities as retinue⁶⁰) to an *akītu* house—

⁵¹ Cohen, p. 404, 408.

⁵² Cohen, p. 403, 405; Julye Bidmead, p. 94.

⁵³ Special animals were used for offerings at some point during the festival (Cohen, p. 412), which is reminiscent of the special animals chosen by Nanna for his journey to Nippur; unfortunately, it is not clear at which point these were used here.

⁵⁴ And eventually, to other cultures. For one such, see Lucinda Dirven, ‘The Exaltation of Nabû: A Revision of the Relief Depicting the Battle against Tiamat from the Temple of Bêl in Palmyra,’ *Welt des Orients* 28 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1997), pp. 96–116, Stephanie Dalley, ‘Bel at Palmyra and Elsewhere in the Parthian Period,’ *Aram* 7 (Oxford: ARAM Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies, 1995), pp. 137–151, Jürgen Tubach, ‘Das Akītu-fest in Palmyra,’ *Aram* 7 (Oxford: ARAM Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies, 1995), pp. 121–135, and H.J.W. Drijvers, *The Religion of Palmyra* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), pp. 9ff.

⁵⁵ The scribes at Nippur seem to have recognised the origin in Ur, since they used the expression ‘the [*akītu*] of Ur in Nippur’ (Cohen, p. 413).

⁵⁶ Cohen, p. 403, 414. In the earliest times, calendars were local to city states. The standardized Mesopotamian calendar—originally that of Nippur, presumably selected due to the eventual supremacy of Enlil over the other deities, did not come into effect until much later, perhaps around the time of Samsuiluna of Babylon, ca. 1749–1712 BCE (according to the ‘Middle’ Chronology); see Cohen, p. 297.

⁵⁷ For information regarding the *akītu* house and procession route in Uruk during the Seleucid period, see Falkenstein, pp. 42–49.

⁵⁸ For text editions and translations of the rituals pertaining to *akītu* rituals as celebrated at Uruk and the *akītu* ritual of the first month as celebrated at Babylon (in its capacity of New Year’s festival), see François Thureau–Dangin, *Rituel accadiens* (Osnabrück: Otto Zeller Verlag, 1975).

⁵⁹ Sometimes including a merger with pre-existing local festivals.

⁶⁰ Cohen, p. 405. In some cases, ‘lesser’ is to be taken as contextual to the particular instance of the ritual. Thus, for example, the visiting deities paying homage to Nanna at Ur included Enlil and consort Ninlil, and Inanna, among others (Cohen, p. 412).

generally located some distance outside the city walls,⁶¹ where it resided briefly and received offerings⁶² before returning in procession once again to the main temple to culminate in festivities.

It would be pointless to attempt to survey these various instantiations of the festival, partly because of the repetitive pattern and partly because in most cases, our information is of a heavily functional nature (how many offerings of what type, etc.) and would not offer much in the way of interpretive material with regards to divine travel. In one case, however, sufficient information is in fact available to offer additional insight into this issue.

We know that the *akītu* festival was celebrated in Babylon from at least the reign of Samsuiluna (1749–1712 BCE), Hammurapi’s successor, since he alludes to it in the name of his twenty-seventh year.⁶³ As elsewhere, *akītu* was celebrated bi-annually, in this case in the first and seventh months, as in Ur.⁶⁴ Eventually, the first month celebration was merged with the *zgmukku*, or ‘New Year’s festival,’ and by the first millennium, it had become, particularly in the heyday of the Neo-Babylonian empire, the Mesopotamian New Year’s festival par excellence.⁶⁵

As with the other instances of *akītu* celebrations, this one has been reconstructed thanks to information from numerous disparate sources over an extended time, so that our understanding of it, which is in places scanty, is perforce approximate. Nevertheless, as a rough approximation, we can outline this celebration over its eleven day span (from days 1 through 11 of the first month) as follows:⁶⁶

1. The high priest⁶⁷ rises at dawn, proceeds to the Exalted Gate, and performs some sort of ritual with a wooden key and water. A *mubannu* (perhaps a temple cook) makes preparations involving water and possibly food.
2. The high priest rises two hours before sunrise, bathes in river water, and recites a hymn of praise to Marduk (addressing him by the epithet Bēl, ‘lord’). A few lines from this hymn which are of interest to us here follow:

...

16 Bēl, Babylon is your dwelling, Borsippa is your crown

18 The wide heavens are the whole of your liver⁶⁸

⁶¹ In the case of Ur, this location was known as Gaeš; at Babylon, the *akītu* house is known to have been outside the city, though its exact location has never been identified; and in the case of Aššur, it was located in the steppe surrounding the city. Nineveh may or may not present the exception whose *akītu* house may have been within city limits.

⁶² Cohen, p. 406.

⁶³ Cohen, p. 416.

⁶⁴ Cohen, p. 437.

⁶⁵ Bidmead, p. 43.

⁶⁶ The outline which follows has been condensed and adapted from the treatment in Bidmead, pp. 46–94.

⁶⁷ Akkadian *šešgallu*, a loan word from Sumerian which literally means ‘great brother.’

⁶⁸ Thureau-Dangin, p. 129. The lines given here belong to the Akkadian text. Certain portions of the hymn, among them line 17, are Sumerian equivalents.

- 19 Bēl, with your eyes you see all
 20 With your omens, you verify your omens
 21 With your glance, you give the decrees
 ...
 29 Lord of the lands, who dwell in the Eudul,⁶⁹ who grasp the hands of the fallen—
 30 To the city of Babylon, grant mercy
 31 To Esagil, your temple, turn your face
 32 For the people of Babylon, your subjects, establish the *ṣāb kidinni*⁷⁰

...

The high priest opens the gates of the temple, and various other cult officials, including lamentation and cultic musicians, perform their offices.

3. The day begins similarly to the previous day. About three hours after sunrise, a metalworker, a woodworker, and a goldsmith fashion two small anthropomorphic cult images, each seven fingers high, one of tamarisk, one of cedar; one will carry a serpent in its left hand, the other a scorpion, and both will raise their right hands in supplication to Nabû.⁷¹ Once completed, the images are stored in the temple of Madānu, patron god of judges, where they partake of the bran offerings to Madānu, until the sixth day. As we can imagine, this was a costly process.
4. This is the actual first day of the New Year, marked by the heliacal rising of Pegasus shortly before dawn. The high priest rises about two hours before dawn, bathes in river water, and recites prayers to Bēl and then to his consort; the latter contains elements similar to the lines extracted above. Various other ritual acts take place, following which the high priest recites the *Enūma eliš* ('When above,' otherwise known as the 'Epic of Creation')⁷² before the cult image of Marduk, while divine symbols of Anu and Enlil (a tiara and dais, respectively), representing their powers, are veiled.

⁶⁹ 'House of the herdsman' (George, p. 152).

⁷⁰ '*kidinnu* people.' *Kidinnu* was a special privilege granted to a certain section of the population in designated cities, involving freedom from taxation and conscription and the like. Babylon was one of those cities from ancient times. For a detailed treatment of *kidinnu*, see Bidmead, pp. 50–54 and Wilhelmus F. Leemans, '*Kidinnu*, un symbole de droit divin babylonien,' *Symbolae ad ius et historiam antiquitatis pertinentes julio christiano van oven dedicatae* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1946), pp. 36–62.

⁷¹ This prefigures the role of Nabû later on in the festival. On the relationship between Nabû and Marduk, see Barbara Nevling Porter, 'What the Assyrians Thought the Babylonians Thought about the Relative Status of Nabû and Marduk in the Late Assyrian Period,' *Assyrian 1995* (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), pp. 253–260.

⁷² For recent editions of this text, see Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), pp. 436–486, or Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 228–277.

The king, meanwhile, enters Nabû's temple in Babylon to be given the sceptre of kingship, and then begins a journey to Borsippa to meet Nabû himself.

5. The high priest rises four hours before dawn and begins the day as usual, with ritual bathing, followed by prayers to Bēl and his consort. Two hours after sunrise an exorcist purifies Marduk's cella, then Nabû's. Another official slaughters a sheep, which is used by the exorcist in additional purification, after which the exorcist and slaughterer are banished to the steppe for the duration of the festival. The high priest oversees additional preparations in Nabû's shrine. Nabû arrives from Borsippa and processes (presumably in grand fashion) to his shrine, accompanied by the king.

The king undergoes a ritual humiliation in Nabû's shrine, whereby the high priest strips him of sceptre, circlet, and mace, the symbols of his office, which are placed before Marduk's statue in his shrine. The high priest returns and strikes the king on the cheek, and drags him by the ear before Marduk, where he is forced to kneel and testify that

- he did not neglect Marduk or his cult;
- he did not destroy Babylon, directly or indirectly;
- he did not strike the cheek of any member of the *kidinnu*.

He is then assured that Marduk (Bēl) has heard his prayer and exalted his kingship, and is encouraged to continue to uphold the *kidinnu* that he might remain blessed, whereupon his symbols of office are returned to him. He is then struck once again as an omen: if tears flow, Bēl will be favourably disposed; if not, Bēl will be displeased. Day 5 concludes with a ritual sacrifice performed by high priest and king, the only time during the festival that these two officials act jointly.

6. The deities from neighbouring cities arrive by barge to join in the festivities. Nabû enters Eḫursagtilla,⁷³ the temple of Ninurta,⁷⁴ where the two small images are brought from the temple of Madānu, struck in his presence, and purified before him by burning.
7. The details of what transpired on this day are unknown. It is possible, by analogy to the festival of the seventh month, whose details for this day are known, that the cult images were bathed and dressed in new clothes in preparation for the procession to the *akītu* house.
8. Marduk goes to Nabû's shrine, where the other gods have previously gathered, where he is proclaimed almighty and supreme as Lugaldimmerankia,⁷⁵ 'Ruler of the gods of the universe.' There are seven seats for the seven gods who determine destinies: Anu, Enlil, Ea, Šamaš, Ninurta, Nabû, and Marduk. The details of this determination, and its purpose, are unknown.

⁷³ 'House which exterminates the mountains' (George, p. 102).

⁷⁴ Ninurta is a god of war.

⁷⁵ This is one of his many names from *Enūma eliš*.

9. The procession to the *akītu* house takes place on this day.⁷⁶ The king heads up the procession, followed by Marduk and his consort, then Ishtar and Nabû's consort Tašmētu. There are musicians, dancers, and singers, and incense and various aromatics are employed, and the *kidinnu* members take part; prisoners and spoils of war are paraded before the people. At the bank of the river, they embark in a barge to land at a cedar-lined walkway leading to the *akītu* house.

It is worth noting in this connection that lines 14ff of the omen text cited above refer to Marduk's attitude as he left Esagil, a reminder that this is not a 'mere' cult image, but one endowed with divinity and all that this entails.

10. Upon reaching the *akītu* house, the deities assemble inside;⁷⁷ we do not know the details of what transpired there, apart from prayers of various kinds.⁷⁸
11. The deities hold a feast at the *akītu* house, after which Marduk and the other deities return to the 'Dais of Destinies' to pronounce fates a second time. Whether or not one subscribes to Cohen's thesis that the original core of the festival was the grand re-entry into the city, one can nevertheless assume with him, despite the lack of known details, that the return procession was similar in character to the procession out of the city. Nabû returns to his shrine, and eventually to Borsippa (presumably the other non-local deities do similarly).
12. Conclusion of the festival.

Many of the details of the festival are unknown to us, and the interpretation of not a few is unclear. I will touch on only one item here, as it relates to the relationship of deities and may have some bearing on this discussion.

Cohen has noted that considering that Marduk is god of Babylon, 'there is an unusually high visibility role for a god from another city, Marduk's son from Borsippa[,] and suggests that this may indicate a merging of two *akītu* festivals (one for Marduk, one for Nabû), into one.'⁷⁹ As Bidmead has observed,⁸⁰ we have no evidence for this, and I would like to suggest that Nabû's participation and role in Marduk's *akītu* is quite natural, when one considers that he is Marduk's son: one generally likes to have one's family involved in one's celebrations, and in that regard, Nabû can be seen as an agent of Marduk. I would also like to point to line 16 of the prayer to Bēl, mentioned above, in which he is addressed as follows:

Bēl, your seat/dwelling is Babylon, your crown Borsippa

⁷⁶ Certain scholars believe that the procession took place late on the eighth day (see e.g. Karel van der Toorn, 'The Babylonian New Year Festival,' *Congress Volume Leuven 198* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), p. 336. However, a fragment of a ritual text cited by Bidmead (p. 93), which relates to the ninth day, reads in part 'Go forth, Bēl! O king, go forth!' which would seem to refer to the beginning of the journey from Esagil to the *akītu* house.

⁷⁷ The reconstruction of days 10 through 12 follows Cohen, pp. 439–440, as Bidmead does not offer as detailed a breakdown.

⁷⁸ It has been suggested that the *Enūma eliš* was cultically re-enacted there, or that there was a sacred marriage, but this is purely hypothetical.

⁷⁹ Cohen, pp. 440–441.

⁸⁰ Bidmead, p. 28.

Given that Borsippa is Nabû's home, one could see in this an inference that Nabû is an extension of Marduk, an idea not foreign to the Biblical notion that sons are somehow contained in the loins of their fathers. From this point of view, Nabû's role in the festival appears quite natural.

Returning to our main agenda, it is clear from the outline above that the first millennium *akītu*/New Year's celebration featured several major journeys: (1) over days 4 and 5, the king travels to Borsippa to fetch Nabû and bring him back to Babylon; (2) connected with the previous, Nabû travels to Babylon on day 5 to return again on day 11—he is escorted by the king of Babylon on his way there, but presumably not on the way back; (3) deities who reside near to Babylon travel there on day 6 and return home (probably) on day 11; (4) the great procession to the *akītu* house takes place on days 9 (to) and 11 (return).

The first journey is not a divine journey, but is in service to the the second, which is. It is interesting, however, that the king purposefully receives the marks of kingship in Nabû's Babylon shrine, before making the trip to Borsippa to meet Nabû, for two reasons: (1) it underscores the fact that close contact with deity on the part of non-priests was reserved for royalty—the common people of Mesopotamia did not have access to their deities while resident at the temple, but only tangentially in public festivals such as the one under discussion; (2) the marks of kingship are received in Nabû's shrine, not in Marduk's, which underscores the role of Nabû as representative of Marduk. It is noteworthy that upon his return to Babylon, the king is then stripped of the emblems of kingship *in the same place that he had received them*—the shrine of Nabû—and is further humiliated by being dragged in before Marduk, where he must ritually profess his subservience to Marduk and past obedience regarding the latter's expectations. It is only after this that his emblems are returned to him, indicating that whereas he received the tokens of kingship from Nabû, this was in a sense only probationary, and had to be confirmed by his father Marduk. And lest he become haughty due to this confirmation, he is struck yet again, presumably as a reminder of the fact that he holds his office at Marduk's pleasure. We note that with this journey, once again, the lesser (the king) travels to meet the greater (Nabû).

The second journey follows this pattern as well, since here, Nabû, the son, travels to meet his father Marduk. There is plenty of feasting over the course of his stay in Babylon, but in addition, Nabû receives a certain kind of homage when the two small statues are struck in his presence and then purified by fire. One cannot help but be struck oneself by the analogy to the king's being struck before Marduk. Interestingly, a kind of reversal appears to take place, since Marduk comes to Nabû's shrine to be proclaimed almighty; on the other hand, given that the other deities have also congregated there—perhaps it is inappropriate for them to enter the shrine of their lord, master of the universe—one is put in mind of an important figure coming out of his or her apartments to appear before the people on a balcony, so no real reversal takes place here. Note that Nabû, in earlier times a relatively insignificant deity as the divine scribe is assigned a seat in the determination of destinies. Nabû of course takes part in the fourth and final journey to and from the *akītu* house, concerning with more will be said later.

Our third journey of note involves the deities from surrounding cult centres coming to Babylon on day 6, to return home on day 11. Here again, we have the lesser travelling—by barge—to meet the greater, which in this case might well mean both Marduk and Nabû, as the heir of Marduk, given that their assembly for the purpose of determining destinies takes place in Nabû's shrine. They, too, participate in the fourth journey, and the feasting, before returning home.

Finally, we come to the greatest journey of them all: the journey of Marduk to the *akītu* house to be followed by his triumphal re-entry into Babylon. The recital of *Enūma eliš* on day 4, which tells the story of how Marduk rose to the supreme position, that is, as king of the divine realm, parallels the

king's receiving the emblems of kingship before setting out for Borsippa, since both events take place at the beginning of the journey. If in fact the 'trial' of Marduk thought by some to represent a real feature of this festival, while Marduk resides in the *akîtu* house—as opposed to Assyrian propaganda, as Bidmead sees it—then we would have another parallel in his humiliation to the humiliation of the king, a reminder perhaps to Marduk that even the greatest is not immune from peril. But this point requires further study. The final pronouncement of destinies on day 11 corresponds well with the divine pronouncements by Enlil seen in Nanna–Suen's journey to Nippur.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis suggests that the first millennium *akîtu*/New Year's celebration is not, as appears at first glance, a ritual about one journey, that of Marduk, but in fact a daisy chain of several divine journeys and one human's journey which parallels Marduk's in some interesting ways. The celebration is in some sense a combination of dual nature, divine and human, as the cult image partook of a dual nature, divine and human-made. One is put in mind of the alchemists' saying: 'It is true, without falsehood, and most certain: what is below is like unto that which is above; and what is above is like unto that which is below, to accomplish the mystery of the One Thing.'⁸¹

⁸¹ These are the opening lines of the Emerald Tablet, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.

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