

WAR AND RELIGION IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA.

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IN the Louvre, Paris, are the remains of the oldest war memorial known to us. It is named the *Stèle des Vautours*,¹ because of the representations of vultures on the upper portion of the stela. They belong to the scene, for wherever the carcasses lay there did the vultures gather. This early war memorial commemorates not the glorious dead of the victors but their victory and the sorry fate of the vanquished who are shown on the stela lying piled one upon the other under the hurrying feet of the conquerors.

The war was fought for the restoration of frontiers : then as now ! The texts are explicit on this point. "The god Enlil, king of the lands, father of the gods, by his irrevocable word, marked out a boundary for the god Ningirsu and the god Shara " (Ningirsu was the god of Lagash and Shara was the god of Umma ; each god standing for the territory over which he ruled). "Mesilim, the king of Kish, commanded by his goddess Kadi, set up a stone in that place for the protection of that territory," thus acting as a third-party between these two neighbouring towns. "But Ush, the *ishag* of Umma, was vainglorious. He smashed that monument and marched into the plain of Lagash. Ningirsu, the warrior of Enlil, according to his just word, made war with Umma. On the command of Enlil his large overwhelming net enveloped them. On that spot in the plain he heaped upon them mounds of earth which buried them." We can see it all even to-day on the fragments of the stela which have been preserved : the god, his net, and his heavy club with

¹ A full description of the stela, with illustrations, is given in Chapter V of *A History of Sumer and Akkad*, by L. W. King.

which he strikes the enemy soldiers who struggle to free themselves from his net. And over all, the vultures !

That was in 2800 B.C. or thereabouts. Rulers and soldiers fought and died in battle. But to the local god the glory. The boundaries between the two city states are once more determined. But that which Eannatum did, his son Entemena had to do again. He ends the story of the Lagash-Umma problem as he left it, with this prayer : " If the men of Umma cross the canal boundary of Nina, to do evil, to annex the territory, to pass beyond it, whether they are men of Umma or men of the hill country, may Enlil destroy them ; may Ningirsu with his large spreading net enclose them ; may he set his mighty hand and mighty feet upon them from above ; may the people of his city rage against them ; may he destroy them in the midst of his city ".

The record¹ from which the above passages are taken, was written in Sumerian by Sumerians. But the sentiments therein expressed are of all time until now. They recur again and again in Sumerian and Akkadian literature of north and south Mesopotamia during the more than two thousand years of history from the date of the Stela of Vultures. Utuhegal, king of Erech, was raised up by Enlil to wipe out the very name of Gutium, " the stinging-serpent of the hills, the enemy of the gods," and to win back independence for Sumer. He prays to Ishtar-Inanna, his lady, the " lioness of battle ", for aid, and goes out crying, " My lady Inanna is my helper ; the god Tammuz the . . . of heaven has declared my destiny ; he has given me the divine Gilgamesh as a defence ". Heartened by his cry and the support of these heavenly allies " his city like one man " rally to his cause, until at last " Utuhegal sat down. At his feet lay Tirigan (the Gutean king)," his neck a footstool for Utuhegal who thus freed his country from the yoke of the last king of the Gutu (c. 2400 B.C.).² Enlil, the father of the gods, " gave " to Lugalzaggisi, lord of Erech, the land of Sumer for his kingdom and " the lands unto his foot " from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof.³

¹ *Die Sumerischen und Akkadischen Königsinschriften*, S. 36-40.

² *Revue d'Assyriologie*, vol. ix, p. 111 f. ; x, 99 f.

³ SAK, S. 153-157.

But, alas for Lugalzaggisi, Ilbaba, the god of war at Kish, gave his "weapon" to Sargon of Akkad, who used it to overthrow Erech and to take its king captive. And the god Dagan gave to Sargon, the Semite, much land from the Euphrates far away to the Mediterranean coast. And even Enlil "gave no rival" to Sargon, the victor in thirty-four battles. The Semite kings of later days write in the same strain. Hammurabi, one of the most renowned of them all, overthrew a usurper (?) by the aid of the sun-god Shamash.¹ He conquered Rim Sin of Larsa thanks to "the gods Anu, and Enlil who went before his troops".² By the great might of Marduk, lord of Babylon, he overthrew armies in battle.³ And his son, Samsuiluna, says of Nergal the god of the underworld, "he brings to pass the defeat of my enemy".⁴ It was a fashion which did not, perhaps has not, passed out of the language of nations and peoples who have known wars, in every part of the world in every period of history down to our own.

If we pass now from the third millennium B.C. to the first millennium B.C. and to Assyria, it is because this latter period and kingdom more than any other provide us with documented material for our purpose. The history of the ancient Near East in that time is a history of great political change. The mosaic of kingdoms large and small is destroyed piece by piece. The map is constantly being redrawn. So much so that the student of that time is in some degree in the position of the schoolboy in a recent French cartoon, who complained that study of the map of Central Europe was made very difficult owing to a certain Hitler who was constantly changing it. In the first half of the first millennium B.C. the changes in the map were due mainly to one power: Assyria. It was she who removed one by one the larger unities of the mosaic of the kingdoms: Babylon, Susa, Carchemish, Damascus, Samaria. For four hundred years, say from 1150 to 750 B.C., Assyrian efforts met with varying and unenduring success on the various points of the wide front which was the world of the ancient Near East. But from the time of

¹ Oxford Edition of Cuneiform Texts, vol. i, p. 24.

² OECT, vol. ii, p. 32 (year date 31). ³ *Ib.*, p. 34 (year date 37).

⁴ L. W. King, *Letters and Inscriptions of Hammurabi*, vol. II, p. 207 f.

Tiglath-Pileser III, say 740 B.C., the change gathers speed, and in a hundred years is complete. In that short time Assyria had overthrown Damascus, Samaria, Babylon, Susa in Elam and, temporarily, even Memphis in Egypt.

As has been said already the political changes just outlined were effected chiefly by the power of Assyria. But the interstate politics of other "powers" of that day contributed to the general political change. Babylonians, Elamites, Aramæans, Israelites, Judæans, Edomites, Moabites, and Egyptians frequently sought to extend their boundaries or were forced to protect themselves against their neighbours great and small. The good-neighbour policy, if it existed, was not practised for long. Contemporary evidence gives the impression that neighbours existed to be destroyed or, at least, impoverished; to be reduced to vassalage and/or poverty. Every neighbour was either a potential source of hostility or a potential source of revenue, to be exploited or spoliated, and sometimes as a necessary means to these ends, to be exterminated.

The instrument of policy, above all others, employed by all the nations great and small of that time was force; armed force or the threat of it; war or the threat of it. As far as we can see, peaceful methods were rarely employed. It is true, treaties were made. But those treaties had merely such force as arms gave them. The normal procedure was recourse to arms, to aggression, which was met sometimes by armed defence and sometimes, especially on the part of the smaller kingdoms, by abject capitulation at the approach or rumour of approach of the aggressor.

Warfare then, as now, was often promoted by needs which may be called economic; e.g. raw materials such as wood, metals; or by malice, greed, covetousness. The Assyrians mention as the most frequent cause of their campaigns the infidelity of neighbours to their pledged word to Ashur the god of the Assyrians, or their instigation of hostility against Assyria, or their alliance with Assyrian enemies or rivals. All such explanations, excuses or self-justification may be classed under the heading self-preservation, and the wars might be called wars in self-defence. Such assertion of the will to exist and to resist on

the part of the Assyrians, or, for that matter, of any other group of people in the ancient Near East, would be described in our time as a manifestation of local patriotism.

If we use the word "patriotism" of the temper of the Assyrians of the first millennium B.C. and "patriotic" of its people, we do not use the words to express all that the words connote amongst the nations of the second millennium A.D. We do not imply, for example, that they were conscious of institutions, ideas, ideals proper to themselves, which they were prepared to defend with their lives. In the days of Assyrian hegemony, the various human groups of the ancient Near East, known as Semitic, did not differ from each other in institutions, ideas, and ideals. But the word patriotism, as applied to these groups, does connote a sense of nation, i.e. of community with other members within a given area, sharing a common leader, common traditions of religion, literature, and law, and, in the main, a common language. By these common things a particular human group was marked off from its neighbours.

We may ask whether there was any one factor or element more than another which made them one. We have mentioned language, law, literature. But these, though important, were not primary factors in the creation of the sense of community. The common country, that is, the area called the homeland, with its traditional boundaries is something external and changeable. Someone has said somewhere that if a common country were the most important factor in nationality then it is odd that Europe and other continents are as divided as they are. Hence the territorial factor would seem not to explain community. What then?

At first sight kingship might appear to explain community in any one of the ancient Semitic groups. All the peoples within a given area looked upon one man as their chief. He was their "shepherd," they said. They were his flock whom he "fed". They called him the father, the nourisher of his people. He was their defender against enemies whether personal as armies are, or impersonal—though not in their philosophy which made personal all forces of nature and its ills—such as floods. But however high and central the position of the king or chief, he was not the apex of the nation's social pyramid. Above him

was the national god. The king was but a tenant-farmer of the land whose owner and lord was the god of the city or kingdom. The king was the visible head of the national people and "church". But he was not the ultimate authority. Over all the land and above all the persons thereof whether human or divine was the god of the land. Such as was Yahweh in Israel, Hadad in Aram, Chemosh in Moab, Marduk in Babylonia, such was Ashur in Assyria. He alone was permanent ; permanent as the land itself. Kings came and passed away but the deity remained appointing others to reign in place of those of yesterday. He alone was common to each and to all persons, in each and all parts of the kingdom. It was therefore he, the source and soul and end of the body politic whatever its forms, extent or personnel, who was the principle of community. He established unity. Accordingly we might substitute for the land of Israel the term Yahweh-land ; for the land of Moab, Chemosh-land ; for the land of Amon, Amon-land ; for the land of Babylonia, Marduk-land ; for the land of Assyria Ashur-land. Such terms express the essence of the matter.

It is not possible to prove that the populations in the different kingdoms of the ancient Near East were conscious of the fact that it was the national deity who made them one. And yet that they were conscious of the fact seems beyond all reasonable doubt. It is suggested by scores of official records. It is implied in the circumstance that treaties between "powers" were described as treaties between the chief gods of the powers. To break a treaty was an act of rebellion not so much against the city or kingdom with which the treaty was made, as against the god of that city or kingdom. A city or kingdom which was conquered by an Assyrian king was said to have submitted to the god Ashur and counted amongst his subjects. On the other hand, an enemy of an Assyrian king is described as an enemy of the Assyrian god Ashur. The annual recitation of myths and the regular performance of ritual in which the national god and his exploits were realistically staged in the presence of the inhabitants of the city and pilgrims from other parts of the kingdom, must have deepened the consciousness of the central, dominant place and function of the national god in the national life. But perhaps

the seers did more than any other class in the nation to focus attention on the divine lord of the land. By their agency the will of the gods was made known to king and commoner. No public work of any kind could be undertaken until the signs had been read by them. The seer was a most dangerous official, clearly, and, in some respects, the real master of national affairs. These and other, if minor circumstances of national life, economy and religion played their part in making that community which we call Assyria. Contemporary evidence from Israel, Aram, Elam, and other neighbours of Assyria is far less abundant than that from Assyria and Babylonia. But there is every reason to suppose that similar conditions obtained and produced similar effects. We may say of them all that none of them had any individualism or particularism, apart from their national god. His existence and presence amongst them was a *conditio sine qua non* of their national life. We recall the distress of the Israelites at the loss of the ark in which their god abode. Also, how the Assyrians and Babylonians took away or even destroyed images of local deities from lands which they invaded. As though the absence by theft or by destruction of the image, by taking away the *genius loci*, took away the heart of a people and their land. It is not surprising that the Assyrians, in this belief, often deported whole populations, thereby separating them from their native deities and breaking the original and strongest bond of local unity and patriotism, whilst allowing those peoples to live in lands far away from their homes, under Assyrian protection but for Assyria's benefit.

But not only was the god of the nation, in the general conception, inseparable from the nation itself. The works also of the nation were in a true sense the works of the national god. They were performed at his instigation and advice, and according to his wishes and purposes. Of all such works none was more frequent and regularised than the work of the army and its campaigns. Something has been said already of the relations between the wars and the gods in the third millennium B.C. Much more may now be said, and with more detailed evidence, of those relations in that part of the first millennium B.C. when Assyria attained hegemony in the ancient Near East.

A national god was part of national economy. More, he was part of the war machine. It is a dread thought. Kings and their armies equipped with spears and arrows and chariots are merely instruments. The supreme slaughterer is the national god, and his divine relations. No wonder that the armies who marched against his enemies behaved with a cruelty almost indescribably fierce, in his name and for his glory. The servants took their clue from their divine lord.

It was the same everywhere in the ancient Near East. Amongst the non-Semitic Hittites the king's wars were the god's wars. He and the king shared the spoils of war, the god receiving the greater portion. After the war the king reported to the god as might a chief of staff to his king. The war had gone well, thanks to the gods and the spirits of the dead kings who had accompanied the army in battle.¹ The Hittite god of war was Teshub, the equivalent of the Aramæan Hadad or Ramman the lord of storms and of violence. Amongst the people revealed to us by the Ras Shamra tablets, the war god was Mot, the divine son of the god El, celebrated in a myth of battle between Mot and Ba'al.² In Israel Yahweh is the generalissimo of the national forces: Yahweh-šebhā'ōth, Yahweh of the armies, celebrated in the Canticle of Moses (Exodus xv, 3-9); Yahweh is a man of war. He is in this respect like to Hadad. The two met later when Israel fought with Aram. "Arise Yahweh and let thy enemies be dispersed." Interpretations of these words in a sense consonant with modern theistic philosophy are anachronisms. The words belong to an age when metaphysical gods were unknown, and to a world of societies characterised by divinely sanctioned brutality. There were no exceptions, at least amongst the Semitic groups. Professor Garstang³ thinks better of the Philistines. But where so little is known this opinion cannot be either proved or disproved.

It is clear therefore that war was not in itself repugnant to the character of the deities of the peoples of the ancient Near

¹ Furlani, *La Religione degli Hittiti*, p. 114.

² Dussaud in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*; tome cxvi, 1937, p. 122 f., and tome cxi, 1935, p. 5 f.

³ *The Heritage of Solomon*, p. 313.

East. But before a war was begun divine sanction was sought for the enterprise. In Israel,¹ enquiry was made of Yahweh sometimes before the ark, sometimes before a priest wearing the ephod with Urim and Thummim, or in dreams or through familiar spirits. There is abundant evidence of similar enquiry of the gods amongst Hittites² and Assyrians. Professor Meissner³ summarises the Assyrian material admirably thus : "Schon vor dem Feldzuge wurden die Götter, speziell der Sonnengott im Anschluss an Opfer nach dem Ausgange der Dinge befragt, aber auch im Kriege selbst 'zieht der Wahrsagepriester vor den Truppen her'. Er blickt wie der römische haruspex nach Leber- und Ölschau in die Zukunft, deutet dem Könige und dem Heere die Träume oder schaut selbst Visionen, z. B. wie die Ishtar von Arbela rechts und links mit Köchern behangen, den Bogen und das gezüchte Schwert haltend vor Assurbanipal steht und ihm Mut einflösst, und unterstützt den Herrscher auch wohl bei seinen heissen Gebeten an die Götter. Bei Opfern auf dem Marsche und im fremden Lande sind auch immer die nötigen Priester zur Hand." We may remark in passing that as early as the end of the third millennium there existed at Mari⁴ on the Euphrates a guide to various formations of the liver of sheep and the events which such formations foreshadowed ; e.g. such and such a formation of the liver foretold that the army would in terror make a *volte-face* ; that such and such formation meant that the enemy would devour the land ; that such and such a formation meant that the enemy intended to attack the land and had given the word to do so ; and that such and such a formation meant that the king would annex enemy territory. The priest in an Assyrian army was able to draw on a long tradition abundantly documented, of which the Mari liver-models with their inscriptions are amongst the earliest evidence.

¹ For an excellent summary of the evidence see *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. iv, p. 895 ; and Garstang, *loc. cit.*, p. 313.

² See Delaporte, *Les Hittites*, p. 210. It is interesting to note that before declaring war the Hittites made a *démarche* by messenger to the enemy.

³ *Babylonien und Assyrien*, i, S. 101.

⁴ *Revue d'Assyriologie*, vol. xxxv, 1938, p. 36 f.

A letter from the time of Ashurbanipal in the seventh century B.C. contains a presage of victory for Assyria in Egypt. The text¹ is as follows: "Ashur in a dream said 'O wise one' to the grandfather of the king my lord. You the king, the lord of kings, are the grandson of the wise one. . . . When the father of the king my lord went to Egypt . . . he saw, in the region of Harran, a temple of cedar-wood; in it Sin was leaning upon a staff, with two crowns upon his head, and Nusku was standing before him. The father of the king my lord went in. . . . He placed (a crown) upon his (the king's) head, saying 'You will go to countries which you will conquer'. He departed and conquered Egypt. The remaining countries not subjected to Ashur and Sin, the king, the lord of kings, will conquer."

Another² written to Esarhaddon (681-668 B.C.) states: "I have taken note of the portents, whether they come from the sky, from the earth, or from the underworld (?), as many as there were. I had them recited in order before Shamash. . . . The royal image of Akkad brought up visions before me. . . . It made enquiry . . . Concerning the rebellion in the land it said: 'Take the walled cities one after the other. That accursed one will not be able to stand before the Gardener'."

We know that documents were classed in series, one of which was called the "Battle" series. We have a letter³ in which Ashurbanipal asks that this series and others should be sent to him.

A passage⁴ from the historical texts of the reign of Esarhaddon, describing that king's action against his brothers who have plotted evil against him, will serve to illustrate the religious aspect of *civil* war in the land: The brothers "forsook the gods and turned to deeds of violence, plotting evil . . . contrary to the will of god. . . . To gain the kingship they slew their father Sennacherib. Ashur, Sin, Shamash, Marduk, and Nabu, Ishtar of Nineveh, Ishtar of Arbela, looked with disfavour upon the deed of the villains which was committed in defiance of the will

¹ *State Letters of Assyria*, by R. H. Pfeiffer, letter 248, p. 173.

² *Ib.*, letter 249, p. 174.

³ *Ib.*, letter 256, p. 179.

⁴ The texts from which this and following examples are taken may be consulted in the volumes *Ancient Records: Assyria and Babylonia*, by Luckenbill.

of the gods and did not help them. But they brought their forces to utter confusion and made them submit to me. The people of Assyria who had taken oath by the great gods . . . went to their aid. Me, Esarhaddon, who trusted in the great gods, they opposed. . . . My anger was aroused. I raised my hands to Ashur, Sin, Shamash, Bel, Nabu, and Nergal, to Ishtar of Nineveh and Ishtar of Arbella, that I be allowed to assume the kingship belonging to my father's house and to exercise my function as a priest. They showed their firm approval by favouring me with a reliable oracle : ' Go, do not give up. We shall go by thy side ; we shall slay thy enemies.' I did not delay. . . . The terror of the great gods, my lords, overwhelmed them. . . . Ishtar, queen of war and battle, lover of my priesthood, stood at my side, broke their bows, smashed their line of battle. . . . The people of Assyria . . . kissed my feet. The instigators of the revolt, the villains . . . fled to parts unknown. . . . In the month of Adar, . . . I entered into Nineveh. . . . There favourable signs, heavenly and earthly, awaited me ; a message from the seers and news from the gods and the goddesses."

Such was the progress and religious character of a great civil war. Wars against foreign foes were no less religious in character. The inscriptions of the great king and conqueror, Ashur-naṣir-pal (ninth century B.C.), may appear more vainglorious than those of others before and after him. But he, too, gave to god the final glory. What he did was done, he says, by the use of the merciless weapon which the god Ashur entrusted to him. How merciless that weapon was is well known. One passage will suffice by way of illustration : " I built a pillar over against his city gate and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted. I covered the pillar with their skins. Some I immured within the pillar ; some I impaled on stakes on the pillar ; others I fastened to stakes around the pillar. Many I flayed within the border of my own land. Their skins I spread on the walls of the city. The limbs of the officers who had rebelled, even the royal officers, I cut off. Ahiababa (the king) I took to Nineveh. I flayed him. His skin I spread upon the wall of Nineveh." All this by the "merciless weapon of Ashur" !

One more extract from Assyrian records will illustrate the

importance of the priest seer, a sort of chaplain to the general-in-chief. The king of Elam had had assembled his armies for battle against Ashurbanipal. The latter in great distress prays to Ishtar who very kindly promises her help in return for his confidence in her. "During that same night in which I approached her a seer lay down and had a dream. When he awoke, Ishtar showed him a vision of (what he had dreamt in the) night. This is what he told me : ' Ishtar who dwells in Arbela, came in, quivers right and left of her, a bow in her hand, and a sharp sword unsheathed ready for battle. Standing before her, thou. She talked with thee just for all the world like thy mother who bore thee. Thus did Ishtar speak to thee : "Thou seest a vision of war. Wherever thy face shall be turned thither will I go." And thou didst say to her : "Whither thou goest thither will I go, dearest of ladies ". To which she : "Thou shalt stay here where Nabu abides. Eat food, drink wine, have music, and honour my divinity whilst I am away doing this job and bringing thee the desire of thy heart. Thy face shall not grow pale, nor thy feet grow weary, nor thy strength give out in the midst of battle." Her loving embrace enfolded all thy body protectingly. . . . Against Teumman king of Elam in anger did she set her face."

After victory, it remains to return thanks to the gods. The Assyrian kings showed their gratitude in various ways, but chiefly in these three : first, as Shalmaneser IV did, they might set up a great image of themselves in a foreign land, inscribed with details of the glory of the god Ashur and the power of the king himself ; secondly, they might, as Sennacherib did, impose on a defeated people an obligation to make presents "for all time" to the gods of Assyria, including oxen, sheep, wine, dates ; thirdly, they might, as Esarhaddon did, erect temples to the gods who had aided and protected the Assyrian armies, and decorate them with gold and silver and make them "shine like the day". The same king on his return from his campaigns in Elam, offers to his gods the "first fruits" of the spoil which they had ordered him to bring back. The spoil is described as "folk and booty of Elam" ! During the months which pass between one spring campaign and the next, armies consume the spoil which the gods

have given them and the gods consume the spoil which the armies have brought home. And betweenwhiles there might be on view a king chained up like a dog in a kennel at the city gate, and heads and skins on stakes to remind them how great things their god had done by his fearful and merciless weapons in answer to their prayers.

Up to this point we have stated on unassailable evidence that the chief human groups known to us in the ancient Near East were differentiated mainly by reason of religion : each group had its own chief god ; that each national god was a god of war ; that every war was first sanctioned by the national god, carried on in his name and with his help, according to "revealed" orders, and, if won, won by the terror of his majesty and his fearful weapons ; that political conditions following on successful war were described in religious terms : oaths taken by the vanquished to the god of the victors, peoples and spoil made to serve the god of the victors, and territory added to the possessions of the god of the victors. Consequently, it is right to say that from start to finish wars were waged in an atmosphere of religion, as though the battlefields were temples where gods and men met in religious self-neighbourhood.

But besides such divine sanction and support given to the army in time of war there was also what may be described as divine example taught to the people in times of peace. Here is an aspect of the educative power of myths, especially when dramatised, and it is here suggested that they predisposed the population for war by reason of their content and realism.

The myths of Assyria and Babylonia are sacred stories. They purport to explain the world, life, birth, and death. But they do so by means of descriptions of moments in the lives of the beings and powers which surpass men. For example, the myth of Ishtar's descent into Hades, which is concerned with the deity only ; the cosmogonies which concern both gods and men ; the Epic of Gilgamesh which is the story of a hero who did not want to die.

It is important to remember that these stories were believed. The people of the time accepted the details as historical facts, and the *dramatis personæ* as real beings. What Professor

Malinowski has said of myth¹ as it exists in a savage community is true also of myth in the more civilised communities in the ancient Near East: the myth "is not merely a story told but a reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction such as we read to-day in a novel but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. This myth is . . . what to a fully believing Christian is the Biblical story of Creation, of the Fall of Man, and of the Redemption by Christ's sacrifice on the Cross."

The "facts" narrated in the sacred stories and believed by the population were re-enacted by king, priests, and people at stated seasons of the year. It is clear that such acting of alleged events in the life of the gods must have been a potent factor in the social education of the community. The history of Jewish and of Christian communities contains many examples of the same kind of thing and of its influence on the outlook and conduct of the believers. Hence, for our enquiry, the importance of the content of the myths, that is, of the deeds, motives, and results of the things related of the gods whom the community worshipped.

For our purpose, namely the relation between war and religion in Mesopotamia, we may examine one of the chief myths of Babylonia and Assyria. It is known as the Creation Myth *Enuma Elish*.² This myth is in great part a description of wars in heaven, as a means to an end, the exaltation of the supreme national god. It will be recalled that after the community of gods had been established, they troubled "Apsu, the oldest of beings, their progenitor". He and his steward Mummu agree to destroy them. But they are themselves destroyed by Ea who slew Apsu and smashed the skull of Mummu by a process of sympathetic magic. Time and success do not improve the conduct of the gods and at last Tiamat decides "to do battle with the gods her children". For her purposes she "spawned huge serpents . . . filled their bodies with venom instead of blood" and collected a most formidable army led by Kingu. Ea reports

¹ *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926), p. 98.

² Given most conveniently in Mr. C. J. Gadd's British Museum publication, *The Babylonian Legends of the Creation*; with comment and illustrations.

the matter to his father Anshar. Anshar sends his son Anu to talk Tiamat out of her fury. He turns back in fear, and there is distress and lamentation in heaven. Anshar, after reflection, decides that Marduk shall avenge the gods. The rest of the story is of Marduk's acceptance of the task, at a price ; of his meeting with Tiamat in close conflict and of his victory and reward. Even in translation the account of the battle is exciting.

This Epic was common to both Assyria and Babylonia. But where the Babylonian version names Marduk, the head of the Babylonian pantheon, the Assyrian version names Ashur, the head of the Assyrian pantheon. We know that the Epic was sung twice by singers during the religious ceremonies which took place during the first twelve days of Nisan (March-April). But not only were the mighty deeds of Marduk sung. They were re-enacted.¹ And though our evidence of the ceremonies and ritual acts during the New Year feast comes from Babylon, we are no doubt right in supposing that what was commemorated at Babylon was commemorated in the Assyrian capital Nineveh, whence have come most of the tablets containing the Epic of Creation.

The festival occurred, as has been said, in the spring of the year. The spring was the time when armies went to war ! It is not suggested that the festival was intended to arouse the national will for battle. No doubt the theme of the Creation Epic was recited and enacted to obtain divine assistance against other enemies than foreigners, such as the powers which threatened the land's fertility. But it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that such recitals of the prowess of battling Marduk/Ashur would predispose the population for war. There had been wars amongst the gods in heaven, and by those wars the national god attained pre-eminence in heaven. It does not seem reasonable to suppose that such divine example was without effect on the nation that believed and dramatised it. The likelihood is all the other way.

Other peoples in the ancient Near East doubtless had their New Year festivals but we are not able to reconstruct them

¹ A study by Professor S. H. Hooke, of the Babylonian New Year festival is to hand for English readers in the *Journal of The Manchester and Egyptian Oriental Society*, vol. xiii, p. 29 f.

owing to lack of detail. But we know of other practices which obtained amongst them. In Syria during the spring festivities, first fruits were sacrificed. And the first born. The latter sacrifice suggests that there was a common belief that the gods had an appetite for blood. In this appetite all gods of war are one, whether amongst uncivilised or civilised peoples.

Thus it was in times long past, in a world culturally and politically far different from our own. But it may be that, whilst reading what has been written above, some will have been reminded of words and deeds which have attended the declaration, the conduct and the victory-celebrations of recent wars in our modern world. The comparison is not without interest both in itself and in its implications. But these are not the matter of this article.¹

¹ Readers interested in Assyrian armies and war tactics are referred to Professor E. Robertson's article, "Assyrian Warfare," in *Journal of the Manchester University Egyptian and Oriental Society*, 1937, pp. 25-36.