



Sumerian Liturgies and Psalms

Stephen Langdon

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EXCERPT:

With the publication of the texts included in this the last part of volume X, Sumerian Liturgical and Epical Texts, the writer arrives at a definite stage in the interpretation of the religious material in the Nippur collection. Having been privileged to examine the collection in Philadelphia as well as that in Constantinople, I write with a sense of responsibility in giving to the public a brief statement concerning what the temple library of ancient Nippur really contained. Omitting the branches pertaining to history, law, grammar and mathematics, the following résumé is limited to those tablets which, because of their bearing upon the history of religion, especially upon the origins of Hebrew religion, have attracted the attention of the public on two continents to the collections of the University Museum.

Undoubtedly the group of texts which have the most human interest and greatest literary value is the epical group, designated in Sumerian by the rubric zag-sal.¹ This literary term was employed by the Sumerian scribes to designate a composition as didactic and theological. Religious texts of such kind are generally composed in an easy and graceful style and, although somewhat influenced by liturgical mannerisms, may be readily distinguished from the hymns and psalms sung in the temples to musical accompaniment. The zagsal compositions² are mythological and theological treatises concerning the deeds and characters of the great gods. The most important didactic hymns of the Nippur collection and in fact the most important religious texts in early Sumerian literature are two six column tablets, one (very incomplete) on the Creation and the Flood published by Dr. Poebel, and one (all but complete) on Paradise and the Fall of Man. Next in importance is a large six column tablet containing a mythological and didactic hymn on the characteristics of the virgin mother goddess.³ A long mythological hymn in four columns⁴ on the cohabitation of the earth god Enlil and the mother goddess Ninlil and an equally long but more literary hymn to the virgin goddess Innini⁵ are good examples of this group of tablets in the Nippur collection.⁶ One of the most interesting examples of didactic composition is a hymn to the deified king Dungi of Ur. By accident both the Philadelphia and the Constantinople collections possess copies of this remarkable poem and the entire text has been reconstructed by the writer in a previous publication.⁷ I have already signaled the unique importance of this extraordinary hymn to the god-man Dungi in which he is described as the divinely born king who was sent by the gods to restore the lost paradise.⁸ The poem mentions the flood which, according to the Epic of Paradise, terminated by divine punishment the Utopian age. The same mythological belief underlies the hymn to Dungi. Paradise had been lost and this god-man was sent to restore the golden age. There is a direct connection between this messianic hymn to Dungi and the remarkable Epic of Paradise. All other known hymns to deified kings are liturgical compositions and have the rubrics which characterize them as songs sung in public services. But the didactic hymn to Dungi has the rubric [dDungi] zag-sal, "O praise Dungi." It would be difficult to claim more conclusive evidence than this for the correctness of our interpretation of the group of zagsal literature and of the entire mythological and theological exegesis propounded in the edition of the Epic of Paradise, edited in part one of this volume.

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