

ASSYRIAN POEMS ON THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL.

BY THE EDITOR.

BELIEF in the immortality of the soul was an essential part of the Babylonian religion. The idea of the pit, called in Hebrew *Sheol*, in Assyrian *suala*, is decidedly dreary, but by the side of it we find a more optimistic view in the epic of Gilgamesh, where we read that the great and good among the dead live in the islands of the blest; and in "Ishtar's Descent to Hell" we become acquainted with a myth in which the Goddess of Life and Love, having heard of the death of Tammuz, follows the beloved one into the realm of Alatu, the Goddess of Death, and brings him to life again. We further learn of the death of Marduk, who is resurrected on the third day, opening the graves and bringing up with him the dead.* We must understand that in ancient Babylon and Assyria many million hearts found in these beliefs a genuine comfort and peace for their souls.

On a brick (published in the *Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, Vol. II., page 29) we read the following short prayer for the soul of the dying man:†

"Like a bird may the soul fly to a lofty place!
To the holy hands of its God may it ascend."

The following poem reflects the same lofty spirit:

"The man who is departing in *glory*
May his soul shine radiant as brass.

* Some striking similarities of the Christian belief in the Resurrection of Christ to the Babylonian story of the Resurrection of Marduk have been pointed out by Dr. Hugo Radau in his article "Bel, the Christ of Ancient Times," *The Monist*, Vol. XIV., No. 1, pages 113—119.

† Translated by Prof. H. E. Talbot and published by Professor Sayce in *Records of the Past* Vol. III., page 133 ff.

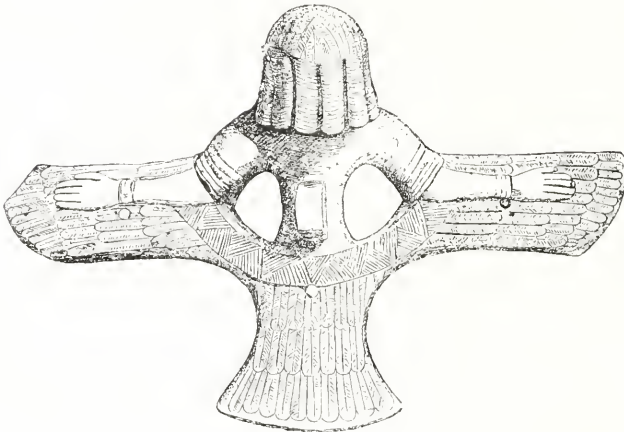
To that man
 May the Sun give life!
 And MARDUK, eldest son of heaven,
 Grant him an abode of happiness."

The Translator adds the following comment:

"The Assyrians seem to have imagined the soul like a bird with shining wings rising to the skies. It is curious that they



FRONT VIEW OF AN ASSYRIAN REPRESENTATION OF THE SOUL.
 Ancient bronze figure found at Van. (After Lenormant, *L'histoire de l'Orient*, Vol. IV, pp. 124 and 125.)



REAR VIEW OF THE SAME.

considered polished brass to be more beautiful than gold. A modern poet would have written differently."

As the Christians of to-day would see angels descend to comfort the faithful in the hour of death, so the main gods of the

Babylonians reappeared at the bedside of the good man and offered him the *khisibta*, a sacred cup used in religious service, which, judging from the context of our poem, must be not unlike the cup of the Christian Eucharist, and a drink called *sisbu* is poured into the *khisibta*. Then he is dressed in silver garments and the soul, white and radiant, ascends to heaven. The poem reads as follows:*

“Bind the sick man to heaven, for from the earth he is being torn
away!

Of the brave man, who was so strong, his strength has departed.
The righteous servant's strength does not return.

In his bodily frame he lies dangerously ill.

But ISHTAR, who in her dwelling is grieved concerning him
Descends from her mountain, unvisited of men.

To the door of the sick man she comes.

The sick man listens!

Who is there? Who comes?

It is ISHTAR, daughter of the Moon-god SIN :

It is the god (. . . .) son of BEL ;

It is MARDUK, son of the god (. . . .).

They approach the sick man.

(The next line. 14, is nearly destroyed.)

They bring a *khisibta* from the heavenly treasury.

They bring a *sisbu* from their lofty storehouse.

Into the righteous *khisibta* they pour bright liquor.

That righteous man, may he now rise on high!

May he shine like that *khisibta*!

May he be bright as that *sisbu*!

Like pure silver may his garment be shining white!

Like brass may he be radiant!

To the SUN, the greatest of the gods, may he ascend!

And may the SUN, greatest of the gods, receive his soul into
his holy hands!”

A prayer for an Assyrian king which wishes him length of days and all happiness in this life concludes with good wishes for his life after death in the following words:

“And after the life of these days

In the feasts of the silver mountain, the heavenly courts

The abode of blessedness,

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And in the light
Of the *Happy Fields*,
May he dwell a life
Eternal, holy,
In the presence
Of the gods
Who inhabit Assyria!"

These prayers for the bliss of the soul at the moment of death were written by pagan poets about two and a half millenniums ago, but they may be appreciated still to-day by us later born generations, even though we have ceased to believe in the Assyrian gods. The sentiments that pervade these lines are evidence of the faith that was then in the hearts of the people. Their religion has become a tale of history, but we feel that to them it was the truth. In spite of the mythological aberrations which were perhaps literally believed in by many, their religion was to them the truth, at least in so far as it afforded them in many great problems the right guidance in life and also an unspeakable comfort in the hour of death.