

## PROFESSOR TIELE ON BABYLONIAN MYTHS.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE cuneiform texts of the Babylonian creation-story, the Deluge-legend, and other myths which reappear in rationalised versions in the Old Testament, are the product of a late phase in the religious development of Mesopotamia. To be sure, they are much older than the Biblical versions of the same tales, but they no longer bear traces of a mythological religion; they exhibit traces of advanced thought, of philosophical reflexion, of a literary art which is conscious of the mythological nature of the material. At the time they were written, the thinkers and poets of Babylonia had become monotheists, who utilised their national myths for the sake of teaching their hearers a lesson in the same way that the sages of Greece, Socrates and Plato, did.

We quote Professor Tiele's opinion of the Babylonian myths which we hope will be helpful:<sup>1</sup>

"The well-known story of Istar's descent to hell is quite unmistakably a nature-myth, most vividly describing her journey to the underworld in search of the fountain of the waters of life. Having been detained there, taken prisoner and afflicted with all manner of diseases by Allat, the goddess of death and queen of the realm of shades, the generative and creative powers of the world forthwith ceased, so that the gods took counsel with one another and resolved to demand her release. Ea now created a miraculous being, a sort of priest, called "his light lighteth," who is commissioned to seek for the fountain of life and whom Allat with all her vituperations and maledictions cannot withstand. The goddess is set free, returns to the upper world, and calls back to life her dead lover, Dumuzi (Tammuz) by sprinkling him with the water of immortality.

"Though this myth did not undergo either a cosmogonic or an ethical transformation, it has been converted into a story of a purely anthropomorphic character, containing episodes and points of detail of which the original physical significance is often very much obscured, evidently for the purpose of strengthening the belief in immortality. Also, the story of the flood, which we possess in different versions, and which is itself composed of quite heterogeneous materials, distinctly

<sup>1</sup> Translated from C. P. Tiele, *Babyl. Assyr. Geschichte*, pp. 535-538.

betrays its polytheistic authorship, and its origin from a nature-myth, notably when compared with the closely related Biblical variant. But the mythological stage was far removed from the author's time. There is a fund of ingenuous humor in the manner in which the gods are made to play their parts; their actions are stamped with jollity and good nature—think but of the wailings of Istar that she had begotten men forsooth but fishes never; of the crafty subterfuges by which Ea justifies toward Bel his conduct in having wrested his favorite from the doom which the latter had ordained for him; hear but the reprimands which the wise Ea showers upon the head of Bel for his foolish wrath, and the proclamation of the great Istar that he has forfeited his share of the sacrifice; and afterwards observe how he tacitly admits his wrong by leading out, along with his own kin, the man at whose rescue he had been so incensed, and by raising him to rank among the gods. From all this, it is plainly manifest that the narrator used the mythical material which he had at hand solely for the purpose of depicting the destruction of a sinning humanity, and of delivering the warning that the gods still had at their disposal, in famine, pestilence, and the wild beasts of the field, this means to punish wrongdoers.

"In Berosus's version, the myth is still more obscured. The god that caused the flood, Kronos, that is Bel, is also the same that rescued Xisuthros; but the chief object here is to tell the story of the rescue of the sacred books. So far as we can judge from the fragments that have been recovered, ancient nature-myths are always at the bottom of the so-called Epic, of which the story of the flood is an episode. The hero, who has not without reason been compared with Nimrod, the great hunter, and who shows considerable resemblance to Samson and the Western Hercules, was at the start certainly a god, and not a king. His battle with the Elamite King Humbaba, whom he vanquished with the assistance of Eabani, a half-human being, his battle with Istar, whose hand he had scorned, and who appears here as the queen of Uruk, and several other episodes, are not legendary history, but myths localised in legends. The twelve tablets certainly appear to correspond to the twelve months; but the manner in which the gods and demi-gods here act and converse, the irreverence of address, for example, to which the great goddess Istar is forced to submit, shows that the time of the origin of the myths which the poet treated lay far behind him in the past.

"The Babylonian priests and scholars did not reject myths, but used them for the purpose of inculcating their doctrines. The story of the sources is not yet advanced far enough to justify us in speaking at this day of a Babylonian dogmatology. Unquestionably traces of a theology of some sort are not wanting there. It is clear from numerous examples that the Babylonian and Assyrian religion was dominated by the theocratic dogma of the Semites, who believed in the unbounded supremacy and omnipotence of God, softened only by their confidence in His justice, mercy, and compassion. This dogma dominates all the deeds of the kings, who looked upon themselves as the executors of his divine will; they cherished an unwavering belief in a just and providential government of the world, and particularly in a moral world order, although this world order was conceived with all their national limitations, as is scarcely otherwise conceivable in antiquity.

"There is also no doubt that the Babylonians believed in a personal immortality, of which there is ample evidence in the epithets which were applied to certain of their gods, their mythical conception of the underworld where the fountain of life was situated, various passages from their sacred hymns, and finally their solicitous care of their dead."