Ancient Mesopotamian Religion

Overview   The timespan of ancient Mesopotamian religion is awe inspiring, 3500 B.C.E.--400 C.E., and any general statement about it will be subject to exceptions. There are, though, general traits: a pervasive belief in the close relation of the gods, who created mortals, to those mortals; a conviction that mortals must work together with the gods, to preserve harmony in the universe; a fear and anxiety toward the gods, who are critical and punitive toward misbehaving mortals.

The god system   By one account there were more than 2000 gods in the Mesopotamian pantheon. By the accounts of such texts as the *Enuma Elish* (1100 B.C.E.), which record the genealogy and population of the gods, there was a fairly fixed narrative of the genealogy of the gods, leading down to the current reign of the supreme deity, Marduk. It all begins with a conflict between a male principle, Apsu (the force of fresh water), and a female principle Tiamat (the force of salt water). These two 'forces' generate the gods, who immediately rebel against their progenitors. Ea put Apsu to sleep, then killed him, and from his corpse built the world. Then Ea fought with mother Tiamat, and from the ruins of their struggle rose the god Marduk, who created mortals, and decreed that they should work with him to carry out the work of the world. Marduk, and his associate gods, promised no heavenly reward for virtuous lives, for everybody went to the same underworld after death; virtue lay in supporting the co-operation of gods and mortals during life.

The presence of the gods   Each city had its own god or gods, who were worshipped In one or several central temples. These temples were built on high walled mounds called *ziggurats*, and contained, among other rooms, a holy room in which stood the statue of the city's god or gods. (There were also adjacent rooms, in which the relatives of the god could rest, eat, and stay.) The image of the god was presumed to be real, the living presence of the deity, and as such was bathed, dressed, and fed at regular intervals, by the priests of the temple. Prayers were constantly offered to the god, for the salvation of the city, and care was taken to make life agreeable for the god; for instance, the god Marduk was regularly taken out into a charming spot in the country so that he could have fresh air and a change of scene; as the god passed through the streets, his worshippers chanted praise and prayer. The ziggurat itself was understood as a kind of stairway to the heavens, so that the god could directly access the places of worship devoted to them. In most temples a single deity predominated--one traditionally associated with the region--while a number of other associated deities were being worshipped in the same holy site.

Life in relation to the gods   The man or woman on the streets lived in more or less constant fear of the gods; he was, therefore, prey to superstition, and ways of warding off evil; addicted to divinations--for fortune telling, astrology, and rogue seers were all rife in the culture; and prone to hallucinations--if that is what we want to call the regular seeing of the gods as bathed in brilliant light. No corner of life was not infused with the concern for placating the gods, and calling on their add for help in sickness, debt, and fear.

Reading

Bottero, Jean, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Chicago, 2001.

Schneider, Tammi, *An Introduction to Ancient Mesopotamian Religion*, Grand Rapids, 2001.

Discussion questions

How did specific Mesopotamian deities become associated with this or that city? What kind of tradition was behind the association of a city with a particular deity?

What light does the epic of *Gilgamesh* (2500 B.C.E.) shed on Mesopotamian religion? How does it speak to the questions of the search for immortaliy, or the duality of nature and man--as in the hero's friendship with Enkidu?

Do you think the *genealogy* of the gods, as recorded in the *Enuma Elish*, was present and important in the worship life of the 'man on the street' in Sumer?