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Ks. Leszek Rasztawicki

PAPIESKI WYDZIAŁ TEOLOGICZNY W WARSZAWIE

COLLEGIUM JOANNEUM

ORCID: 0000-0002-5140-0819

„THE PEOPLE OF CUTH MADE NERGAL” (2 KINGS 17:30). THE HISTORICITY AND CULT OF NERGAL IN THE ANCIENT MIDDLE EAST.

The deity Nergal of Cuth appears only once in the Hebrew Bible (2 Kings 17:30). He is mentioned among a list of some Assyrian gods, which new repopulated settlers in Samaria “made” for themselves after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. In this brief paper, we would like to investigate the historicity of Nergal of Cuth in the context of Mesopotamian literature and religion.

REPOPULATION OF SAMARIA

The Assyrians after conquering a new territory relocated people from other regions of the empire to newly subjugated provinces (2 Kings 17:24). The people of

Samaria were carried away into exile (2 Kings 17:6, 18:11). The repopulation policy of the Assyrians is well documented from their own records¹. Sargon II (722-705 BC) took credit in Assyrian royal inscriptions for deporting 27,290 inhabitants of Samaria (Sargon II prism IV:31)²: ... *he defeated and conquered Samaria, and carried away as slaves 27290 inhabitants ... he rebuilt the city better than before and settled in it people of other countries ...* (ANET 284, cf. 2 Kings 17:23-24).

The new transplanted inhabitants brought their own gods with them and continued the worship as they had practised in their previous homeland (2 Kings 17:30). The list of deities worshipped by the new settlers is confusing because of our lack of detailed information on them. Since many of them are localized gods, they do not find their way into the stories of the gods of the Ancient Near East Texts and are thus obscure (HOBBS, 2002, p. 238).

“MAKING OF IDOLS” IN 2 KINGS 17:29-30

The Bible gives very limited information about the cult of these gods³. In 2 Kings 17:29 it is written: *but each nation made its own gods*. The same is said about Nergal of Cuth: *the people of Cuth made Nergal* (2 Kings 17:30). The idea “making of idols” is expressed by hf[(to do / make) followed by the personal names of various deities. This usage is very rare but attested in Judges 18:24, 31. The sense may convey to us that the new settlers manufactured gods for themselves. The root hv[is found twice in 2 Kings 17:32: *They also worshipped the LORD and appointed from among themselves all sorts of people as priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places*. In addition to that, the usage of the root has two distinctive meanings: “to appoint” and “to officiate / sacrifice”. Such intentional usage seems to suggest that the verb hv[had a wider range of meaning than attested in standard Biblical Hebrew. We can find some parallel examples in Akkadian. The root *epēšu*, (to do) in conjunction with *dullu* (task, service) means “to worship”. This idiom could have influenced the choice of the verb hv[by the

1 Sargon II display inscription: 23-25, Sargon II inscription on the palace doors IV:31-32, Sargon II display inscription from room XIV: 15, Sargon II prism IV: 25-41.

2 This cuneiform tablet now is preserved in the Louvre Museum in Paris.

3 The Assyrians were tolerant of other religions and religious practices. They did not attempt to impose the worship of Ashur or any other Assyrian deity upon the people they conquered. They did, however, carry off divine symbols of conquered peoples which they held as hostages in order to insure the loyalty of these suppressed populations. These symbols were returned once the Assyrians were assured that the people would be loyal. Indeed, far from suppressing foreign cults of conquered peoples, the Assyrian king sometimes presented offerings to them and sponsored building works on their temples.

late seven-century scribes in Judah, who were multilingual, acquainted with both Aramaic and Akkadian terminology. M. COGAN and H. TADMOR (2008, p. 210) suggest if this is the case, then the present section by playing with words stands against the cult of the foreign settlers in Samaria. It could be perceived that the newcomers do not *perform service* (*dullu epēšu*) to their gods, but they ironically “make” gods. M. JASTROW (1893, p. 33) also underlines that the Hebrew narrator of 2 Kings 17:24-35 tells us in an interesting manner the foreign worship which these people brought to the land: *each division brought the gods of their place with them and made statues of them.*

THE CITY OF CUTH

The text of 2 Kings 17:30 - *the people of Cuth made Nergal* - declares that Cuth was holy to Nergal (HAUSSIG, 1965, p. 109). In Akkadian sources, it is Cuthu (HOBBS, 2002, p. 236. In the Assyrian inscriptions Cuth occurs on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III⁴. On lines 82-83 we read that the king made sacrifices of thanksgiving to the great gods. It is very interesting that Cuth is mentioned along with Babylon. Such a connection may suggest the great importance of Cuth:

[82] *I went. Sacrifices in Babylon, Borsippa, (and) Cuth I made.*

[83] *Thanksgivings to the great gods I offered up.*

There are a few dates concerning the city in the activities of some Mesopotamian kings. Shulgi/Dungi, a king of Ur III (ca. 2029-1982 BC), built the temple of Nergal at Cuth: [10] *Year the Ehursag, (the palace) of the king, was built (in Cuth)* (RIA 2 137, 27). Sumu-la-El, a king of the 1st Babylonian Dynasty (ca. 1817-1781 BC), rebuilt the city walls of Cuth: [27] *Year the city walls of Cuth and Anzagar-urgi were built* (RIA 2 165, 41). The city was later defeated by Hammurabi (ca. 1792-1750 BC) in the 39th year of his reign: [39a] *Year in which Hammu-rabi the king with the great power given to him by An and Enlil smote the totality of Cuth and the land of Subartu* (RIA 2 181, 141).

4 The famous Neo-Assyrian “Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III” originates from Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), in northern Iraq, commemorating the deeds of King Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC). It was erected as a public monument in 825 BC at a time of civil war. It was discovered by archaeologist Sir Austen Henry Layard in 1846 and is now in the British Museum. The obelisk has a height of 197.85 cm and a width of 45.08 cm. It features twenty reliefs, five on each side. They depict five different subdued kings, bringing tribute and prostrating before the Assyrian king. On the top and the bottom of the reliefs there is a long cuneiform inscription recording the annals of Shalmaneser III. It lists the military campaigns during years of his reign.

The exact location of Cuth is not completely certain. JOSEPHUS FLAVIUS (*Antiquities of the Jews* IX.14) places Cuth in Persia, which for him is the name of a river and a district⁵. It is identified by many with Tel Ibrahim, some 32 kilometres (20 miles) northeast of Babylon. The first archaeologist to examine the site was George Rawlinson (1812-1902) who noted a brick of King Nebuchadnezzar II, mentioning the city of Cuth. The site of Cuth consists of a ¾ mile long crescent shaped main mound with a smaller mound to the west. The two mounds, as is typical in the region, are separated by the dry bed of an ancient canal, the Shatt en-Nil. The site was also visited by George Smith (1840-1876) and by Edgar James Banks (1866-1945) (BANKS, 1903, p. 61-64). The mounds were excavated by Hormuzd Rassam in 1881. Little was discovered, mainly some inscribed bowls and a few tablets (READE, 1986, p. 105-116).

We cannot indicate the exact location of the city. On the other hand, we have some historical evidence of its existence. The city joined Merodach-Baladan⁶, king of Babylon, in rebellion against Assyria and was punished by Sennacherib II (LUCKENBILL, 1926–27, p. 257–59). Since Cuth is nowhere mentioned in the inscriptions of Sargon II, it is unlikely that the deportation of its inhabitants was conducted by this king. A conquest of Cuth accompanied by deportations is known from the reign of Sennacherib (703 BC), which would imply a relatively late date for the repopulation of the Samarian area by the Cuthaeans (BECKING, 1992, p. 97). From the scarce infor-

5 *When Shalmaneser, the king of Assyria, had it told him, that [Hoshea] the king of Israel had sent privately to So, the king of Egypt, desiring his assistance against him, he was very angry, and made an expedition against Samaria, in the seventh year of the reign of Hoshea; but when he was not admitted [into the city] by the king, he besieged Samaria three years, and took it by force in the ninth year of the reign of Hoshea, and in the seventh year of Hezekiah, king of Jerusalem, and quite demolished the government of the Israelites, and transplanted all the people into Media and Persia among whom he took king Hoshea alive; and when he had removed these people out of this their land he transplanted other nations out of Cuth, a place so called, (for there is [still] a river of that name in Persia,) into Samaria, and into the country of the Israelites. So the ten tribes of the Israelites were removed out of Judea nine hundred and forty-seven years after their forefathers were come out of the land of Egypt, and possessed themselves of the country, but eight hundred years after Joshua had been their leader, and, as I have already observed, two hundred and forty years, seven months, and seven days after they had revolted from Rehoboam, the grandson of David, and had given the kingdom to Jeroboam. And such a conclusion overtook the Israelites, when they had transgressed the laws, and would not hearken to the prophets, who foretold that this calamity would come upon them, if they would not leave off their evil doings. What gave birth to these evil doings, was that sedition which they raised against Rehoboam, the grandson of David, when they set up Jeroboam his servant to be their king, when, by sinning against God, and bringing them to imitate his bad example, made God to be their enemy, while Jeroboam underwent that punishment which he justly deserved.*

6 Isa 39:1 also names the historical person of Merodach-Baladan, the Babylonian king who successfully rebelled against Assyria in 722 BC and became the king of Babylon in 721 BC. Merodach-Baladan is known in extra biblical texts such as Sennacherib's Prism also known as Taylor's prism (the hexagonal baked clay prism, containing six paragraphs of cuneiform written in the Akkadian language). The prism was discovered in 1830 by Colonel Taylor in the ruins of Sennacherib's palace and was purchased by the British Museum.

mation of 2 Kings 17:30, it can be inferred that the settlers from Cuth erected an image of Nergal implying that they were allowed to continue their traditional religion. The particular relevance of Nergal in this context is to be explained by the fact that inhabitants of Cuth had been settled in Samaria while Samaritans had been deported to Assyria (BECKING, 1992, p. 25-31). Such mixing of both populations would have fitted in well with the Assyrians' policy (COGAN, TADMOR, 2008, p. 210).

DEITY NERGAL AND HIS CITY OF CUTH

The fortunes of Mesopotamian deities were closely attached to their cities. The Hebrew prophets recognized this fact when they exhibited polemical criticism with their people against foreign gods, such as Babylonian Bel, Nebo and Merodak (cf. Isa 46:1; Jer 50:2). Assyrian cities had many temples in it devoted to these various gods and goddesses, and larger temples contained several shrines for different deities⁷. In the ancient world, gods possessed territories (NELSON, 2008, p. 633). When Assyria took Samaria, it was understood that Asshur, the chief god of Assyria, was in control of a new part of the empire. Since the whole land of Israel still technically belonged to Yahweh, in the consideration of the Assyrians, Yahweh was now a lesser deity in their vast pantheon, which would be in service to Asshur like other subjected gods. On the other side, the Assyrians wanted to be on good terms with deities who owned the lands which Asshur and the Assyrians armies had conquered. It seems, therefore, to be an important act to acknowledge Yahweh as God of Israel (2 Kings 17:25-28).

An early attestation of Nergal and Cuth we can find on the Bāsetki Statue inscription of Narām-Sîn (HASSELBACH, 2005, p. 14)⁸. It was first published by AL-FOUADI (1976, p. 63-77). The text talks about the Mesopotamian king Narām-Sîn (ca. 2254-

7 Assyrian religion recognized thousands of gods, with only a couple important ones in practice. Generally, we may divide their system of believing into three parts:

1. The old gods. Anu, Enil and Ea were cosmic gods, patron deities of the oldest Sumerian cities. After the rise of the Babylonian Empire, Marduk joined the cosmic deities. Anu of Uruk (Biblical Erech in Gen 10:10) was a god of the heavens, Enil of Nippur was god of the earth. Ea of Eridu was lord of the subterranean waters and craftsmen.
2. Astral deities. These are gods associated with heavenly bodies (the sun-god Shamash, the moon-god Sin was patron of Ur and Haran, associated with Abraham's origin in Gen 11:3; the morning and evening star goddess Ishtar, the Greek Aphrodite, the Roman Venus, patroness of Nineveh, Canaanite Astarte/Ashtaroth, Judg 10:6, 1 Sam 7:3-4, 1 Kings 11:5, was very popular as the "Queen of Heaven" (Jer 7:18; 44:17-19, 25).
3. Younger gods. They were usually associated with newly founded or conquered cities. In Assyrian culture, there were multitude minor deities, all with their own temples and shrines

8 The huge copper statute was found in Bāsetki between Zakho and Mosul (some 40 miles northwest of Mosul). The statue was already broken, when it was found. The preserved part of the statue is the pedestal and the lower part of the body is made of copper. The inscription found on the pedestal preserves 72 lines in three columns.

2218 BC) who deified himself. The event is connected to his nine battles in one year during the great rebellion:

Narām-Sîn, the mighty one, the king of Akkad. When the four regions (of the world) revolted against him as one, by the love which Ishtar showed him, he was victorious in nine battles in one year and captured those kings who had risen up (against him). Because he fortified the foundations of the city, which was in the line of danger, (the residents of) his city asked of Ishtar in the Eanna, of Enlil in Nippur, of Dagan in Tuttul, of Ninhursag in Kish, of Enki in Eridu, of Sin in Ur, of Shamash in Sippar, of Nergal in Cuth, that he be the god of their city, Akkad, and they built his temple within Akkad. Whoever removes this inscription, may Shamash and Ishtar and Nergal, the bailiff of the gods - all of these gods - uproot his foundations and obliterate his progeny (STUDEVENT, MORGAN, 2006, p. 20-21).

According to M. JASTROW (1893, p. 33), the first mention of Nergal's famous temple at Cuth is found in an inscription of Shlugi/Dungi, who belongs to the second dynasty of Ur (ca 2700 BC). He claims that the temple originates from an earlier period. The fame of the temple is known as *E-shid-lam*. Furthermore, there is a closeness of the connection between Nergal and his favourite seat in Cuth, that the deity himself became known as *E-shid-lam-ta-ud-du-a (the god that rises up from E-shid-lam)*. By this epithet, he describes in one of Dungi's inscriptions (HASTINGS, 2004, p. 225).

Sin-Gamil, the King of Uruk (ca 2750 BC), likewise testifies to his devotion to Nergal by busying himself with improvements and additions to his temple at Cuth (LEICHTY, 1986, p. 211)⁹. Three extant building inscriptions refer to temple building (LEICK, 1999, p. 156). His worship, therefore, was not confined to those who happened to reside at Cuth. BURNS (1993, p. 6) identifies Nergal in regard to his rise along with his cult in the city of Cuth in the Old Babylonian period (ca 2000 - 1600 BC).

Down to the latest period of Assyro-Babylonian history, Nergal remains identified with Cuth, being recognized as the god of Cuth. Sargon, the king of Assyria, upon his conquest of the kingdom of Israel (ca 722 BC) brought people from Cuth, across to the lands of the Jordan to take the place of the deported Israelites (JASTROW, 1893, p. 33).

9 In the British Museum there is the marble inscription, written in Sumerian, recording the dedication of the temple of Nergal of Usarpara for Sin-gamil.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF NERGAL'S NAME

Nergal (Hebrew *nērgal*) is generally understood as a god of the underworld in Mesopotamia (RINGGREN, 1973, p. 63). The name both in Sumerian *en-eri-gal* and in Akkadian *ne-uru-gal* literary means *lord of the great/big city*, which was understood by ancient scribes as *Lord of the netherworld* (PHELPS, 2000, p. 959). DYNELEY PRINCE (1907, p. 169) suggests, that the writing of the name Nergal in the form *Ner-unu-gal* (*lord of the lower world*), literally *great place (unu)*, may have been a later amplification of the shorter form *Ner-gal*. PHELPS (2000, p. 959) claims that the name is a transliteration of Sumerian *en-eri-gal*. This is shown clearly by the Emesal¹⁰ *umun.urugal*, which demonstrates that this opinion existed in ancient times, irrespective of the actual origin or etymology.

The Narām-Sîn inscription refers to building operations for Erra (Nergal) with his spouse Lāz in his temple Emeslam in Cuth (LAMBERT, 1973, p. 355–363). In the Ur III period, Nergal's name or aspects included *Meslamtaea*, a name he bore in direct relation to his temple of Emeslam in Cuth, the name meaning “*the one who comes out of Emeslam*”.

THE NAME OF NERGAL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

It was said that the deity Nergal of Cuth appears only once in the Hebrew Bible. The root also occurs three times as a theophoric element in the personal name rca-rf lgrnE (Jer 39:3 [2x], 13). The Hebrew Nērgal *šar-eser* comes from Akkadian Nergal-*šar-usur*, meaning *may [the god] Nergal protect the king* (BEWER, 1925/26, p. 130). This Babylonian officer Nergalsharezer is likely to be identical with the one of that name (also rendered Neriglissar) who ruled Babylon in 560 - 556 BC (HOLLADAY, 1989, p. 290-1). The name Nergal-*šar-ušur*, the man of Sin-magir is found in the Babylonian prism, which contains lists of the names of Nebuchadrezzar's officials (the text was published by UNGER, 1925, columns 481–486)¹¹. The element in the personal name is also found in extra-biblical texts, namely a witness Nergal-*šar-usur* is mentioned also in a Neo-Assyrian contract for the selling of a parcel of land excavated at Gezer, dated at 649 BC (BECKING, 1992, p. 117-8). From these few pieces of evidence, we may conclude that the name of Nergal was pretty known in the Neo-Babylonian period.

¹⁰ Sumerian apparently was divided into two dialects known as Emegir and Emesal; the language as a whole, they referred to as Emeku, meaning, “the people's language”. Emesal was “the women's language” while Emegir was “the men's language”.

¹¹ The prism is in Istanbul Museum No. 7834. Cf. ANET 307b–308a (the phrase appears in column 4, line 22).

NERGAL IN ASSYRIAN ROYAL INSCRIPTIONS

Nergal is mentioned many times in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia (GRAYSON, FRAYNE, FRAME). First of all, he is glorified by Assyrian kings as *the perfect one, king of battle*¹². They invoke him to provide protection and successful battles for them:¹³ *Let the god Nergal march before you, let the god Girra [come behind].* They plead him for destruction and overpowering over enemies: *May the god Nergal, the mightiest of the gods, most overpowering of the gods (and) valiant male, not spare his life in plague or bloody battle! May he take away his descendant(s) (and) his name, and decree that his life (last) not one day (more)!¹⁴*. They asked him to bring plagues and cursing over enemies: *May the god Nergal not spare his life from malaria, plague, or slaughter!¹⁵* Nergal was usually invoked with another god of war, namely Ninruta: *The gods Ninurta and [Nergal, who love my priesthood, gave to me the wild beasts and commanded me to hunt¹⁶.*

On the one hand, Nergal is invoked to bring misfortune for enemies, but on the other hand to provide good fortune for Assyrian kings¹⁷: *In the future, in days to come, when this gate becomes old and dilapidated, may a later prince restore its weakened (parts) (and) return my inscription to its place. (Then) the deities Assur, Adad, Sin and Samas, Istar and Nergal, the great gods, will listen to his prayers.*

We may assume that Assyrian kings had a great devotion to Nergal: *Esarhaddon, great king, mighty king, king of the world, king of Assyria, king of the four quarters (of the world), viceroy of Babylon, king of the land of Sumer and Akkad, selected by the steadfast heart of the god Enlil; who from his childhood trusted in the gods Assur, Enlil, Sin, Samas, Adad, Marduk, Nabu, Nergal, and the (other) great gods, his lords, (who) allowed him to attain his desire¹⁸.* They offered sacrifices to him: *All the kings of Chaldaeia became my vassals (and) I imposed upon them in perpetuity tax (and) tribute. At Babylon, Borsippa, (and) Cuth they delivered up the remnant offerings of the gods Bel, Nabfi, (and) Nergal. [I made] pure sacrific-*

12 Adad-narar II A.0.99.2; Tukultr-Ninurta II A.0.100.1; Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.17, A.0.101.20; Shalmaneser III A.0.102.11, A.0.102.14.

13 Shalmaneser III A.0.102.17.

14 Samas-suma-ukln B.6.33.2001.

15 Assur-etel-inini B.6.35.5.

16 Tiglath-pileser I A.0.87.1, A.0.87.4, A.0.87.5, A.0.87.8, A.0.87.11; Assur-bel-kala A.0.89.1, A.0.89.2, A.0.89.7; Assur-dan II A.0.98.1, A.0.99.2; Tukultr-Ninurta II A.0.100.1, A.0.100.3, A.0.100.5; Ashurnasirpal II A.0.101.2; Shalmaneser III A.0.102.6, A.0.102.14, A.0.102.16.

17 Shalmaneser III A.0.102.46.

18 Esarhaddon B.6.31.11, B.6.31.15.

es¹⁹. In Babylon, Borsippa, and Cuth, he extended in the presence of the gods Bel, Nabo, and Nergal²⁰.

There are large numbers of inscription indicating dedication to Nergal on some city gates and buildings. He is also known as a city patron, not only of Cuth. A brick found in the ziqqurat at Dilr-Kurigalzu and several from Esabula tells about the temple of the god Nergal at Sirara (Me-Turran)²¹. A large number of bricks found in a temple dedicated to the god Nergal, *lord of Sirara* at Tell Iaddad (ancient Me-Turranl Me-Turnat) bear an Akkadian inscription of Ashurbanipal which describes how the king enlarged the courtyard of the temple Esabula (House of the Happy Heart): *For the god Nergal, mightiest of the gods, most overpowering of the gods, the supreme, perfect, (and) noble sovereign of his brother(s), the one who dwells in (the temple) Esabula, the lord of Sirara, his lord*²².

There are a few inscriptions originated from Tabira. On an engraved stone mace head found at the Tabira Gate in Assur, the note at the end indicates the dedication to Nergal, the patron deity of this gate (A.0.10.27). The inscription also tells us about Shelmanesser booty captured from Marduk-mudammiq, king of Namri, in the sixteenth regnal year (843 BC): *To the god Nergal, his lord, Shalmaneser, appointee of the god Enlil, vice-regent of Assur, son of Ashurnasirpal (II), vice-regent of Assur, son of Tukulti-Ninurta (II), (who was) also vice regent of Assur, has dedicated (this) for his life, the wellbeing of his seed, (and) the well-being of his land. Booty from Marduk-mudammiq, king of the land Namri. At the Tabira Gate in Inner City (Assur)*²³.

There are also other dedicatory texts to Nergal from Tabira. On a stone mace head, we can read: *To the god Nergal, who dwells in the city Tarbi.u, his lord: Shalmaneser, great king, strong king, king of the universe, king of Assyria*²⁴. The dedication engraved on a stone vase mentions Nergal as a city patron deity: *[To the god] Nergal of exalted might, resplendent leader, ..., [possessed of] strength, perfect one, replete with [...], resident of the city Tarbiu, great lord, [my] lord.*

19 Adad-narar III A.0.104.8.

20 Nabo-suma-iskun B.6.14.1.

21 Ashurbanipal B.6.32.

22 Ashurbanipal B.6.32.22.

23 Shalmaneser III A.0.102.94.

24 Shalmaneser III A.0.102.95.

NERGAL AND ERRA

BURNS (1993, p. 6) suggests, that the identification of the Sumerian Nergal with Akkadian Erra is established from Sargonic times (ca 2400-2200 BC). In this way, the Sumerian name became popular in the Akkadian texts displacing the Semitic Erra. LABAT (1970, p. 114) says that Erra is nothing but a personification of Nergal, the god of the underworld and the plague²⁵. They played both the role as gods of warfare, famine and pestilence. They have many features in common. The fundamentally hostile and fearsome nature of the two gods is well attested. They both share the same temple - Emeslam, herald-counsellor - Išum, wife - Mama and were accompanied with seven or even fourteen demons (ROBERTS 1972, p. 22-9, 41-4, 107, 150).

The Akkadians identified Nergal with their underworld deity Erra, and by the first millennium, the two were synonymous (PHELPS, 2000, p. 959). The much later *Poem of Erra* also indicates the interchangeability of the names Erra and Nergal. In addition to other evidence to be inferred from the Epic, there is the fact that the two names occur in apposition (verses 39–41). The etymology of the name Erra is dubious. ROBERTS (1972, p. 11-16) suggests “parched earth”. It confirms that a Semitic deity has been merged with a Sumerian deity with broadly similar characteristics. He was associated with plague, drought, famine, fire, pestilence, war and sudden death. He was the god of the scorching, destructive afternoon and summer sun, of the hunt and of war. Thus, he was called upon by Assyrian and Babylonian kings to aid in their foreign campaigns (PHELPS, 2000, p. 959).

The *Poem of Erra* uncovered the cruel character of Nergal, his liking for malicious devastation that creates terror for his victims on earth. He is attended by seven demons, Sibitti, the personification of his destructive acts, who march before him evoking terror. Nergal is also supported on his visit to the netherworld by fourteen demons of storms and disease that he stations at its gates. Thus, he enters and leaves his underground kingdom with a terrifying demonic entourage (CAGNI, 1969, p. 60-3, lines 23-44). In the *Poem of Erra*, we find a detailed series of elements which we encounter on Egyptian soil, where a warrior goddess, frequently a lion-headed one, such as Sekhmet, had seven animal-headed warrior emissaries. These demons were the weapons of the awful goddess and were able to bring destruction and death into a house or a town.

25 “Erra n’est autre qu’une personification de Nergal, le dieu des Enfers et de la Peste”.

NERGAL AND EREŠKIGAL

In later mythological text Nergal married Ereškigal. This myth has survived to our time on two pieces discovered in 1887 at Tell El-Amarna, which probably served as a Babylonian school text. Both texts belong to the same tablet and originate from the 14th century B.C. (HEIDEL, 1963, p. 129). The fragment No. 1 is in the British Museum (the text was published by BEZOLD, WALLIS BUDGE, 1892, No. 82), while No. 2 is in the Berlin Museum (the text was published by Schroeder, 1915, No. 195).

The poem *Nergal and Ereškigal* relates how Nergal (or Erra) with the help of fourteen plague demons overpowered Ereškigal (HEIDEL, 1963, p. 129-132). He dragged her from her throne making decapitated her. She capitulated, agreed to marry him, promising him dominion over the netherworld *šar-ru-ta i-na er-še-e-ti ra-pa-aš-ti (lordship over the broad land*, BURNS, 1993, p. 6). His physical mastery over her shows his rise in the hierarchy of the world.

Nergal probably took precedence over Ereškigal as the ruler of the underworld by the first millennium. The earliest god of the underworld was the Sumerian Ninazu of Enegi. He is ambiguous described as the son or husband of Ereškigal who, by the Third Dynasty of Ur (ca 2100 - 2000 BC) was firmly known as the queen of the dead *nin.ki.utu šu (lady of the land of the sun darkening*, BURNS, 1993, p. 6). A Babylonian etiological myth found among the diplomatic archives of Amarna and Sultantepe (GURNEY, 1960, p. 105) recounts his marriage to Ereškigal (*lady of the great land*) who already was the lady of the underworld. The tablet²⁶ explains his accession to power in the underworld (ANET 103-4, 507-512).

According to a recent interpretation of the Mesopotamian myth of *Nergal and Ereškigal*, Erra was Nergal's twin (MASTROCINQUE, 2007, p. 204). Nergal was also a god of the sky, and his alter ego Erra went to the underground palaces of Ereškigal, the queen of the dead (CHIODI, 1998, 3-20). Also, the seven warlike demons of Erra corresponded to the seven Annunanki of Nergal, which are seven great infernal divinities which were thought to be the judges in the afterlife (BOTTÉRO, 1987, 72). Probably Erra was cognate with the Hittite plague god Irra (FARAONE, 1992, p. 61), an archer whose features are similar to those of Apollo and the West Semitic Reshep (FARAONE, 1992, 125-127). Also, the Egyptian religion knew the seven demons of the plague goddess. The Egyptian compound sphinx Tithoes was the leader of a group of emissaries of Sekhmet, Bastet, Nekhbet and Neith, by means of whom they could send plagues, diseases or death as if the demons were their arrows (SAUNERON, 1960, 282-283).

26 The tablet is one of the largest in the collection. It contains three columns on each face and, when complete, must have contained some 440 lines, but unfortunately is badly damaged.

In the wider context of Sumerian mythology, Nergal was regarded as the son of Enlil of Nippur. In this respect he took on the epithet *avenger of his father, Enlil*, an epithet which he shares with Ninurta, a deity which could along with Zababa, was already identified with Nergal in the Old Babylonian period.

Nergal along with Ereškigal is mentioned in the seven-century Assyrian tablet *A Vision of the Nether World* (the text was published by SODEN, 1936, p. 1-31). The story tells an Assyrian prince Kummaya's vision of the underworld (HEIDEL, 1963, p. 132-136). He desires to see the underworld. In order to obtain his goal, he offers sacrifices and says prayers to Ereškigal and offers. In spite of this, Nergal plays the main role and is in the centre of the action. Ereškigal is subordinated to Nergal, as her stronger partner and protector (WEIHER, 1971, p. 53-4). Nergal is described as a terrifying ruler. The underworld was full of terror before him. Nergal seized by the forelock, put him in his presence and intended to kill him, but his advisor Ishum instead advised him to spare Kummaya (verses 16-17). Then Nergal accused Kummaya of taking advantage of Ereškigal to enter the underworld (verses 18-19): *Why have you molested my beloved wife, the queen of the underworld? [At] her exalted, unalterable command, Biblu, the butcher of the underworld, shall deliver thee to the gatekeeper Lugalsula, that he may lead you out the gate of Ishtar and Aya* (HEIDEL, p. 134).

In the text quoted above, there is an important mention that Ereškigal is Nergal's wife. The statement is put in Nergal's mouth, who even calls her *my beloved wife, the queen of the underworld*.

THE CULT OF NERGAL

Religion is a complex issue in any civilization. We could assume that Assyrian religion had two main features: the first is polytheism and the second is the cult²⁷. The polytheistic nature of Assyria is comparable with countries of the Middle East region, mostly to Sumer or Babylonia. The chief gods in Assyria were Asshur, who was the king of the gods, followed by the goddess Ishtar and the gods Ninurta, Shamash, Adad, and Sin. Around each god there was centred a cult which included

27 An important consideration is the distinguished between the official religion and popular belief. In other words, the belief of people and what they practice in their religious observances must be carefully analysed, while on the other hand what is recorded as official religious doctrine. Both of these issues may be quite different matters. In dealing with an ancient society, our knowledge is limited to and conditioned by the written records. In regards to the Hebrews and the Assyrians, in the case of the Hebrews we have the Bible and with the Assyrians we are equipped with the cuneiform concerning rituals, hymns, etc. Thus, it must be underlined that what can be said about the Assyrian religion concerns mostly the so-called state religion. Very little is known about practices of the common people.

a large temple complex and a ziggurat as well as priests and supporting staff. This cult involved the performance of regular religious rituals and the presentation of offerings (GRAYSON, 1992, 753-754).

In the Old Babylonian period, the cult of Nergal is widely attested, like in Dilbat, Isin, Larsa, Nippur, Sippar, Ur, Uruk. An aspect of Nergal as the god of war appears in Old Babylonian texts in which the deity is asked to break the weapons of the enemy. Already at this time the cult of Nergal had spread to Mari and Elam. Nergal and the theology of his cult were taken up and expounded in the learned works of the Babylonian scribes (LIVINGSTONE, 1999, p. 621).

As we underlined above, the first mention of his famous temple at Cuth is probably found in an inscription of Dungi, who belongs to the second dynasty of Ur (ca. 2700 BC). Its origin, however, belongs to a still earlier period. Such was the fame of the temple known as *E-shid-lam*, and the closeness of the connection between the deity and his favourite seat, that Nergal himself became known as *E-shid-lam-ta-ud-du-a - the god that rises up from E-shid-lam* (JASTROW, 1893, p. 33).

Sennacherib speaks of one at Tarbisu (the north of Nineveh). Nebuchadnezzar II (606-586 BC), the great temple-builder of the neo-Babylonian monarchy, alludes to his operations at Meslam in Cuth.

The poem *A Vision of the Nether World* (The text was published by SODEN, 1936, p. 1-31), quoted above gives some clues about Nergal's cult (verses 14-16):

[When I] looked at him, my legs trembled, his terrifying splendour overpowered me. I kissed the feet of his [great] divinity and prostrated myself. When I stood up, he looked at me and shook hi[s he]ad [at me]. He shouted mightily at me and roared furiously at me, like a ho[wli]ng storm. His sceptre, such as befits hid divinity, and which is full of terror, like a viper. He dragged [toward] me to kill [me] (HEIDEL, 1963, p. 134).

The vision culminates in a theophany of Nergal, the king of the underworld, who sits on a throne. Kummaya quivers in terror at his splendour and falls to his knees before him. Nergal seizes him by the forelock and roars, intending to kill him, but his advisor Ishum instead advises him to spare Kummaya, that he may return penitent to the upper world to begin the glorification of Nergal (SANDERS, 2009, p. 159).

The glorification of Nergal is already shown in the vision and the theophany of the terrifying Nergal on his throne. This throne – the theophany is known from other otherworldly journeys in Mesopotamian literature. Etana's epic eagle has a dream of an enthroned goddess and her terrifying lion guardians in heaven,

Ishtar/Inanna encounters an enraged Ereškigal in her descent to the underworld, and Nergal himself kneels before Ereškigal's throne (SANDERS, 2009, p. 162).

We know a lot of hymns dedicated to Nergal (BÖLLENRÜCHER, 1904), such a hymn to Nergal (Nergal A), a hymn to Nergal (Nergal B), a *tigi* to Nergal (Nergal C), an *adab* to Nergal (Nergal E), a prayer to Nergal-Erra (Nergal F). All these hymns express a vivid cult to Nergal in which he is praised as the son of Enlil:

Hero, majestic, awe-inspiring son of Enlil, battering like a storm and roaring against the rebel lands! (Nergal B verses 1-2, cuneiform sources in AO 5391 TCL 15 26, printed sources in VAN DIJK, 1960, p. 35-56).

“Hero, after your father begot you, your father Enlil bestowed on you the mountain of the earth and all of the people. He definitively handed the deciding of destinies to you. Hero, Nergal, you are their king!” (Nergal C verses 11-15, cuneiform sources in AO 5388 TCL 15 23, printed sources in VAN DIJK, 1960, 7-34).

DYNELEY PRINCE (1907, p. 168-182) reconstructed and published another hymn, very distinguished from the quoted ones above. The original text is now in the British Museum (*British Museum Texts*, vol. XV, plate 14). The Sumerian Hymn describes Nergal as being *lord of the decree of Uruk* (obverse 9). It is supported by the ancient king of Uruk = Erech (modern Warka), Sin-gâmil (ca. 2750 BC) who was a devoted worshiper of Nergal's cult. He made also various additions and improvements to the temple of Nergal at Cuth. It gives us a clue, therefore, that Nergal's cult was not confined to those who happened to reside at Cuth (JASTROW, 1893, p. 33). “The Hymn to Nergal” specifically states that Nergal has set the protecting net about his city Uruk (obverse 10, 11). For this very reason, DYNELEY PRINCE (p. 68-9) proposes the dating of this hymn from the period of the Uruk dynasty, perhaps from the time of Sin-gâmil (ca. 2750 BC). In this way, the hymn has particular historical importance as a proof of survival of Nergal's cult, which was probably not indigenous. At Uruk such a cult of Nergal was probably merged with the local god Lugal - Banda.

PETERSON (2008, p. 173) translated and commented on a brief and fragmentary recently reconstructed Sumerian literary passage contains a hymnal passage centred on Nergal. He noticed that it contains in line 6 a rare reference to *seven auras (ni imin)*, which is attested elsewhere only in conjunction with Huwawa²⁸.

28 In Akkadian mythology Humbaba (Assyrian spelling) or Huwawa (Sumerian spelling).

Huwawa is a terrible monstrous giant of immemorial age raised by Utu - the Sun (Gilgamesh and Huwawa, version A, verses 163-166). His face is that of a lion: *When he looks at someone, it is the look of death* (Gilgamesh and Huwawa, version A, verse 123). *Humbaba's roar is a flood, his mouth is death and his breath is fire!* (Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet II). In various examples, his face is described in a single coiling line like that of the coiled entrails of men and beasts, from which omens might be read (SMITH, 1926, p. 440-442).

Nergal receives proper honour and worship from Assyrian kings. He is the personification of some of the evils that bring death to mankind, particularly pestilence and war. The death that follows in his path is a violent one, and his destructive force is one that acts upon large masses rather than upon the individual. Hence, one of the most common ideographs used to express his name is that which signifies *sword*. War and pestilence are intimately associated in the mind of the Babylonians. Among other nations, the sword is, similarly, the symbol of the deity, as the plague-bringer as well as the warrior. Nergal symbolizes more particularly destruction which accompanies war, and not the strong champion who aids his subjects in the fight. Nergal is essentially a destroyer, and the various epithets applied to him in religious texts show that he was viewed in this light (JASTROW, 1893, p. 33-4). So he is symbolized by a lion, the animal which expresses a violent and destructive character of the god (JASTROW, 1893, p. 43).

Nergal is the perfect king of battle, who marches before the monarch together with Ashur, and he is pictured as carrying the mighty weapons which Ashur has presented to the king. Assyrian rulers were fond of him, invoking him during battles and wars to bring destruction under the enemy. In this context, RASSAM made an important discovery from an archaeological and historical point of view (STRECK, HOUTSMA, 1993, p. 616). In 1878, in the mounds of Tell Balāwat²⁹ he discovered bronze gates belonging to a palace of the Assyrian king Salmanassar II (859-824), which has been in the British Museum since 1879³⁰. In an inscription of Shalmaneser II (Balāwat, col. v. ll. 4, 5) there is an interesting reference to the city sacred to Nergal, namely Cuth. The king, who in the course of his campaign against Babylonia reaches Cuth, brings sacrifices to Nergal, whom he speaks of as *the hero of the gods, the supreme raging sun* (JASTROW, 1893, p. 102-3).

29 Balāwat is a village, 16 miles south-east of Mosul 10 miles north-east of the ruins of Nimrud (Assyrian Kalhu).

30 It consisted of the two wings of a door, made of bronze bands, which had been riveted on cedar wood. The doors are covered with figures, which are arranged in two rows. It shows scenes of war and peace, partially accompanied by an inscription. It illustrates the history of the king Salmanassar II in 1/3 part and the culture of the ninth century BC in general. The importance of the latter cuneiform inscription lies in its detailed description of the great Babylonian campaign of Salmanassar II.

A later king, Sargon, also honours the god by giving a fortress in the distant land of Nairi, to the northeast of Assyria, the name of Kar-Nergal. It would seem as though, through the influence of Sargon, a revival of the Nergal cult took place. His successor, Sennacherib, erects a temple in honour of the god at Tarbisu, a suburb to the north of Nineveh proper, and Ashurbanabal, who dwells at Tarbisu for a while, is engaged in adding to the beauty of the edifice, an indication of the honour in which the god continued to be held (JASTROW, 1893, p. 103).

The character of the deity can be summarized from the point of view of the syncretistic Babylonian theology of the later period³¹. The Mesopotamian creation epic, the *Enuma Elish* ends with a *Hymn to Marduk*. The chief god is called by fifty names. The gods who are subordinated to Marduk become his names, aspects of his all-encompassing essence (ASSMANN, 2008, p. 60). Nergal is explained as the *might* of Marduk (EBELING, MEISSNER, EDZARD, 1923-, p. 2003-2005, KAR 25, II 3–10.). In the hymn, there is another syncretistic list of major deities, identifying them with Marduk's various role, where *Nergal is Marduk of the battle* (Coffin Text 24, 50b obverse 4).

In another prayer one reads: *Ninurta is your being the first, Nergal your magnificent power* (ASSMANN, 2008, p. 60). The worship of Nergal was an important part of the official Assyrian cult in Neo-Assyrian times.

The cult of Nergal was not only presented in the Mesopotamian region. He was worshipped elsewhere as well. In Tarsus, he is presented on several fifth centuries BC coins, shown as an archer who holds a spear and is accompanied by the inscription *NRGL*. There is a very unique silver coin, which shows on the reverse side, the archer god Nergal who bears a spare and stands on a lion. Another contemporary coin from Tarsus shows on the obverse the winged corpus of a horned lion with an inscription on the reverse *LeNeRGal (to Nergal)* (MILDENBERG, Bern 1973, p. 78-80. JENKINS, 1973, p. 30-34)³². The lion with the goat's horns is an Oriental monster, represented on the reliefs of the city wall at Susa (LLOYD, 1961, fig. 205)³³. Mesopotamian traditions were evidently present at Tarsus, a town which was conquered and founded again in 698 BC by Sennacherib.

31 Assyrian culture was greatly influenced by Babylonian culture, with no exception in religion of course. Three distinctive Babylonian deities—Enlil, Marduk, and Nabû—became popular in Assyria at different periods. Enlil as the first appeared in Assyria during the reign of Shamshi-Adad I (19th/18th century BC). He was eventually identified with the god Asshur. The cult of Marduk appeared in Assyria by the 14th century BC, and Marduk also became popular, but Sennacherib (7th century BC) tried to reduce the Babylonian cult. Nabû, the son of Marduk, became popular in Assyria in the 9th century BC when great temples were built at Assyrian cities in his honour.

32 The coins are preserved in the British Museum of London.

33 The figurine is preserved in the Louvre Museum.

In a later period, Nergal is attested in third century BC, Phoenician-Greek bilingual like Piraeus, Palmyra, Hatra in inscriptions dating from the first and second centuries (DONNER, RÖLLIG, 2002). At Hatra, Heracles is identified with Nergal (MASTROCINQUE, 210-11). There is a relief from the temple of Nergal that shows a naked god with a dog and an eagle over his head, on another statue shows the feet and the top of Heracles' club, but the inscription is dedicated to Nergal (AL-SALIHI, 1971, p. 113-115). There is also another Hatran relief of the middle-imperial period showing Nergal with Cerberus. He holds an axe and a sword, hanging from his belt. An eagle spreads its wings over his head and the goddess sits near him, flanked by two lions (SOMMER, 2003, p. 79, fig. 114). Therefore, Nergal is much more identified with Heracles rather than with Hades. The identification of Heracles with Nergal is quite widespread in the Hellenistic Near East, like Palmyra, Dura, etc. The West Semitic peoples later identified Nergal with Resheph, the Semitic god of plague, who has some connection with Heracles (BRESCIANI, 1962, p. 215-17)³⁴.

BRIEF SUMMARY

- The deity Nergal of Cuth appears only once in the Hebrew Bible, but in Ancient Near East literature it is very popular and widespread.
- Transplantation of new inhabitants to Samaria, after its fall, is well-attested in Assyrian sources. It possible that dwellers introduced some new practices in Israel, such as the cult of Nergal.
- Connection of Nergal with the city of Cuth is proved in Mesopotamian inscriptions.
- Although the city of Cuth has not been exactly located, it is mentioned in many historical sources.
- Nergal played a crucial role in the ancient Near East world, even in the context of such chief gods like Ashur and Marduk.
- Nergal was praised and worshipped by Assyrian kings as a god of war and battle.
- He is mainly perceived as a god of war and pestilence and his name can be explained "*the lord of the netherworld*".
- His cult is mentioned in a prosaic way in the Hebrew Bible. On the other hand, there are many hymns and written texts, praising his glory and might, which support the existing cult of Nergal. His cult is further attested in Greek and Roman cultures.

34 Published fragment of an Egyptian statue of Heracles, on which an Aramaic inscription identifies the god with Resheph, whose cult was merged with Heracles at Kition (Cyprus) and in Egyptian Heracleopolis.

ABBREVIATIONS

- ABD - Anchor Bible Dictionary.
AJSLL - American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature.
AKB - Antike Kunst Beiheft.
ANE - The Ancient Near East. Historical Sources in Translation.
ANET - Ancient Near Eastern Text.
AS - Anatolian Studies.
AYB - The Anchor Yale Bible.
BO - Bibliotheca Orientalis.
DB - The Dictionary of the Bible.
DDD - Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible.
EDB - Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible.
EI - Encyclopaedia of Islam. Brill's First Encyclopaedia of Islam.
HERMENEIA - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible.
IBK - Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft.
JANER - Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions.
JAOS - Journal of the American Oriental Society.
JRAS - Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society.
OA - Oriens Antiquus.
RIM - The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia.
RIA - Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie.
RN - Revue Numismatique.
RSF - Rivista di Studi Fenici.
TL - Theologische Literaturzeitung.
VSKMB - Vorderasiatische Schriftdenkmäler Königlichen Museen zu Berlin.
VT - Vetus Testamentum.
WB - The Biblical World.
WBC - Word Biblical Commentary.
WVDOG - Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft.
ZA - Zeitschrift für Assyriologie.

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“THE PEOPLE OF CUTH MADE NERGAL” (2 KINGS 17:30). THE HISTORICITY AND CULT OF NERGAL IN THE ANCIENT MIDDLE EAST.

SUMMARY

In this paper we would like to investigate the historicity of Nergal of Cuth in the context of Mesopotamian literature and religion. The deity Nergal of Cuth appears only once in the Hebrew Bible (2 Kings 17:30). He is mentioned among a list of some Assyrian gods, which new repopulated settlers in Samaria “made” for themselves after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. He is mainly perceived as a god of war and pestilence and his name can be explained “*the lord of the netherworld*”. His cult is mentioned in a prosaic way in the Hebrew Bible. On the other hand, there are many hymns and written texts, praising his glory and might, which support the existing cult of Nergal. His cult is further attested in Greek and Roman cultures.

„THE PEOPLE OF CUTH MADE NERGAL” (2 KINGS 17:30)