

Ishtar: Mesopotamian Holy Harlot

Excerpt from the book "Sacred Sexuality" by A T Mann and Jane Lyle

I TURN THE MALE TO THE
FEMALE. I AM SHE WHO
ADORNETH THE MALE FOR THE
FEMALE; AM AM SHE WHO
ADORNETH THE FEMALE
FOR THE MALE.

The words of the goddess Ishtar.

A great and powerful civilization once flourished in Mesopotamia (Greek for 'between the rivers'). This area, now in modern Iraq, included the kingdoms of Sumeria, Akkadia, Assyria and Babylonia, although its culture and influence spread over a much wider area of the Middle East.

The earliest evidence from Sumeria reveals a culture which accorded women equal status with men, and which principally venerated the goddess Inanna/Ishtar, lunar goddess of life and love, named as the Whore of Babylon in the Bible. The Mesopotamians held daily religious rituals, offering food and drink to their deities in the temples - which were also centers for trade and acted as banks, extending loans. Monthly rites were held to honor the moon's phases: 'on the day of the disappearance of the moon, on the day of the sleeping of the moon'. The exact observance of the moon's phases was very important for it formed the calendar from which they calculated the precise dates and times of all their religious observances. The focus and centerpiece of their year was a sacred sexual rite of the utmost significance. Every New Year, the ruling king 'married' the goddess Inanna/Ishtar amidst great feasting and celebration. This rite took place annually for thousands of years, profoundly influencing later civilizations, both symbolically and through actual ritual.

IN PRAISE OF ISHTAR

Praise Ishtar, the most
awesome of the Goddesses,
revere the queen of women,
the greatest of the deities.
She is clothed with pleasure and love.
She is laden with vitality,
charm, and voluptuousness.
In lips she is sweet;
life is in her mouth.
At her appearance rejoicing
becomes full.

Ishtar's titles and names - like those of all ancient deities - were many and various. In Babylon, her name meant 'Star', the Light of the World. Semitic people gradually conquered the lands of Sumer, introducing changes to the earliest myths and adding further names

for the goddess. She was known as Ashtoreth, to whom King Solomon returns at the end of his days; she was also named -Har, or Hora - from which the words harlot and whore sprang. Inanna/Ishtar was served by powerful prostitute-priestesses who were 'the vehicles of her creative life in their sexual union with the men who came there to perform a sacred ritual'. This goddess exhibited a rich diversity of powers, for she also had a terrifying aspect as goddess of war and storms. Her primordial origins are suggested by images depicting her with the magical Tree of Life, the sacred serpent, and numerous birds - linking her with the earliest snake-bird goddesses known to us in many cultures.

Inanna/Ishtar enjoyed many lovers. Her title 'virgin' indicated her autonomous, unmarried state. Her chief consort was the son/brother/lover Dumuzi, or Tammuz, meaning 'faithful son'. This, and the corresponding goddess roles of mother/sister/lover, reflect the phases of the moon, underlining the importance of its monthly cycle to all ancient peoples. Dumuzi/Tammuz is referred to in poems and hymns as 'Lord of Life', 'the Green One', and 'Shepherd of the People' - often sacrificed in the form of a lamb. The other totemic creatures linked to the son/lover are the ram and the magnificent 'Bull of Heaven'.

But, like all early consorts, the grain god Dumuzi/Tammuz was fated to meet an untimely sacrificial end. His ritual death, accompanied by a month of mourning, took place in high summer, after the harvests. This coincided with the reappearance of the dog star, Sirius, rising with the sun in mid-July. At this time, the goddess's lover descended to the 'Land of No Return', the underworld, and life on earth became sterile, scorched and parched by the unforgiving rays of the high summer sun.

The goddess annually mourned the loss of her beloved with piteous laments, intoned by the people in the temples. Naturally, she would eventually retrieve him so that the eternal annual round could be acted out - life affirmed, and life restored. Some scholars suggest that, long ago, an actual human sacrifice took place every Great Year - that is, every eighth year. However, written records did not begin until much later, by which time the death and resurrection of the beloved was acted out symbolically. The god was ever a cyclical deity, while the goddess, like the earth itself, endured. But by the third millennium BC the Epic of Gilgamesh had challenged this received wisdom. In this poem Ishtar desires the hero: 'Glorious Ishtar raised an eye at the beauty of Gilgamesh: "Come, Gilgamesh, be thou my lover! Do but grant me of thy fruit."'

Gilgamesh, however, responds by reciting a long list of Ishtar's previous amours and the sad fate which befell them. He says, 'Which lover didst thou love forever? Which of thy shepherds pleased thee for all time?... For Tammuz, the lover of thy youth, Thou hast ordained wailing year after year... The hero ultimately rejects the goddess's sexual invitation, slays her divine bull and celebrates his bravura with his friend Enkidu, a savage enemy in another tale. This epic poem clearly reflects gradual changes which were taking place in society at that time, for a male figure not only rejects the great goddess, but triumphs over her furious attempts at revenge.

In other poems, however, the relationship between the goddess and her lover is rapturous, erotic, and bursting with images of fertility. Here is the Sumerian Inanna, praising her 'honey-man':

He has sprouted; he has burgeoned;
He is lettuce planted by the water.
He is the one my womb loves best.
My well-stocked garden of the plain,
My barley growing high in its furrow,
My apple tree which bears fruit up to its crown,
He is lettuce planted by the water.
My honey-man, my honey-man sweetens me always.
My lord, the honey-man of the gods,
He is the one my womb loves best.
His hand is honey, his foot is honey,
He sweetens me always.
My eager impetuous caresser of the navel,
My caresser of the soft thighs,
He is the one my womb loves best
He is lettuce planted by the water.

THE WHORES OF BABYLON

Ishtar's sacred harlots belonged to an organized hierarchy, painstakingly recorded by the Babylonians. Her top-ranking priestesses were called entu, and wore special clothing to distinguish them from the others. Their caps, jewelry and ceremonial staff were the same as those of the ruler, and their status equal to those of the male priests.

The Babylonian naditu, ranking next in importance to the entu, were drawn from the highest families in the land. In dedicating their lives to the goddess they were supposed to remain single and childless. However, the naditu cheerfully ignored this stricture, and led full and active lives. They were bright and canny, with considerable business acumen: 'They bought, sold and hired out; lent money and grain; invested, imported, exported, dealt in slaves, managed land and people, played for the cloisters an essential part in the economy of the country. Beneath these women came the qadishtu (sacred women) and the ishtaritu, many of whom specialized in the arts of dancing, music and singing.

From snippets of information in classical literature, and certain artefacts, it is possible to surmise that these women demonstrated their sexuality by dancing a version of the sensuous, undulating belly dance which is still extremely popular all over the Middle East today. As Wendy Buonaventura writes of the dance: '... everything indicates a connection between birth mime, early creation dance and that which was part of goddess rites in the prehistoric world'. The dance is characterized by 'snake-like and vigorous hip and pelvic movements, the manipulation of veils, a descent to the floor and the ritual wearing of a hip- belt or sash, which we can link with the girdle, Ishtar's symbolic emblem'. In the Middle East this alluring dance is still performed by women, at all-female gatherings from which men are banned.

In addition to the activities of the sacred temple whores, there were sacramental sexual initiations of a slightly different character. The Greek historian Herodotus (3 BC) tells us: 'Babylonian custom... compels every woman of the land once in her life to sit in the temple of love and have intercourse with some stranger... the men pass and make their choice. It matters not what be the sum of money; the woman will never refuse, for that were a sin, the money being by this act made sacred. After their intercourse she has made herself holy in the sight of the goddess and goes away to her home; and thereafter there is no bribe however great that will get her. So then the women that are tall and fair are soon free to depart, but the uncomely have long to wait because they cannot fulfil the law; for some of them remain for three years or four. There is a custom like this in some parts of Cyprus.

Many of these women returned home to marry and have children. Later Sumerian texts, however, advised against marrying a fully-fledged temple prostitute since she would be too independent, 'besides being accustomed to accepting other men, she would make an unsympathetic and intractable wife'.

Overall, the sacred whores were credited with transformative powers, as the myth of the wild, hairy Enkidu makes plain. The Epic of Gilgamesh tells how the semi-divine hero became so overweeningly arrogant that the other gods created Enkidu to steal some of his power. A hunter discovered this primitive being at a watering hole, drinking with the animals, and informed Gilgamesh of the trap. On hearing the news, Gilgamesh sent a 'child of pleasure' from the temple of love to lure Enkidu away. The woman disrobed 'laying bare her ripeness'. This had the desired effect and the animal man was ensnared:

. . . and [Enkidu] possessed her ripeness.
She was not bashful as she welcomed his ardour.
She laid aside her cloth and he rested upon her.
She treated him, the savage, to a woman's task,
And his love was drawn into her.

After six days and seven nights instructive lovemaking, Enkidu became an initiate - possessed of both 'wisdom' and 'broader understanding'. The harlot then led him to the gates of the city, where he took up a new, more civilized, existence - his animal nature having been transformed by his intensely passionate encounter and his new-found knowledge of the arts of love.

The semi-divine hero Gilgamesh with a lion from an Assyrian stone relief (8th century BC)

THE SACRED MARRIAGE

The goddess Inanna speaks to her lover:

Bridegroom, dear to my heart,
Goodly is your beauty, honeysweet.
Lion, dear to my heart,

Goodly is your beauty, honeysweet.
You have captivated me, let me stand tremblingly before you,
Bridegroom, I would be taken by you to the bedchamber.
You have captivated me, let me stand tremblingly before you,
Lion, I would be taken by you to the Bedchamber.
My precious caress is more savory than honey,
In the bedchamber, honey filled,
Let us enjoy your goodly beauty,
Lion, let me caress you.
My precious caress is more savory than honey.

The sacred marriage between priestess and king was the most solemn and numinous of all Mesopotamian religious rituals. Through this act, the fecundity and sheer life-force of the goddess was honored, released, and drawn down to vivify the land and its people. Her blessing was conferred on the earth itself and on the position of the ruling king. Without his wedding to the goddess, in the living form of her priestess, the king was not considered fit or able to rule the people. His temporal potency was inextricably linked with his physical prowess and attuned to his own instinctual sexual energies.

New Year, the 'day of rites', was the time set aside for these ecstatic, hedonistic celebrations. In Mesopotamia, New Year fell at the time of the spring equinox, when the earth was pulsing with fresh, new life. In a feast of collective pleasure lasting many days, the people venerated the divine nature of sexual joy. Everything was designed to stir the senses, and men and women bathed and anointed their oiled skin with herbs and essences. They darkened their eyelids, painted their faces and decorated themselves with jewelry. Scented lotions were used to set curls in their dark hair. Arrayed in all their finery they toasted the goddess and her bridegroom with wine, and performed serpentine, circling dances to the haunting music of lyres, flutes and drums. Sacrifices and libations were made and the perfumed air was thick with the heady scents of cinnamon, aloes and myrrh. In Babylon, a great pyre of incense smouldered atop the legendary, pyramid-like Tower of Babel. At the peak of this lavish carnival the king approached the temple, bearing offerings of oil, precious spices and tempting foods to lay before Inanna/ Ishtar. The crowds thronging the temple precincts chanted sacred erotic poems, creating a highly-charged atmosphere of sensual anticipation and mystical participation. In these poems the goddess, and by extension the priestess who embodied her, prepared for her nuptials with great care: When for the uwild bull, for the lord, I shall have bathed, When for the shepherd Dumuzi, I shall have bathed, . . . When with amber my mouth I shall have coated, When with kohl my eyes I shall have painted.

The sacred marriage took place in the heart of the temple, where the king waited for the goddess/priestess to approach and receive him. One poem describes how the profound religious significance of their union made 'the throne in the great sanctuary' as glorious as the daylight, and transformed the king, who became 'like the Sun-god', literally and symbolically enlightened. Inanna's passion is described in rapturous poetry. The hymns and sacred erotic poems of Mesopotamia celebrate sexuality in a way which reveres its power,

inspirational energies and transformative qualities. It is this indivisible fusion of the sexual and the spiritual that formed the core of their religion.

The following sensuous text describes the divine love-making of Inanna and Dumuzi - the consummation of the sacred marriage. It is a continuation of the lines quoted above, and was translated from the Gudea Cylinders (C 3000 BC) from ancient Sumer:

When the lord, lying by holy Inanna,
the shepherd Dumuzi,
With milk and cream the lap shall have smoothed...
When on my vulva his hands he shall have laid,
When like his black boat, he shall have... it,
When like his narrow boat, he shall have brought life to it,
When on the bed he shall have caressed me,
Then I shall caress my lord, a sweet fate I shall decree for him,
I shall caress Shulgi, the faithful shepherd,
A sweet fate I shall decree for him,
I shall caress his loins,
The shepherdship of all the lands, I shall decree as his fate.