ISHTAR'S JOURNEY TO HELL

THE legend of the journey of Ishtar to the lower world, in quest of her lover, the dying god of vegetation Tammuz, forms one of the most beautiful episodes in story and in verse in Babylonian literature.

The Museum has part of a Sumerian version of this story. Until recently the only known version has been that of the famous text of the Asurbanipal library from Nineveh possessed by the British Museum, redacted in pure Semitic. It has been justly regarded as one of the finest literary productions of antiquity. The Ninevite text was copied by the scribes of Asurbanipal in some Babylonian library, and has come down to us slightly damaged on the obverse. The Temple or Palace library at Assur, the ancient capitol of Assyria, recently excavated by the German Expedition, also possessed a copy of this poem; this copy is now published by Dr. Ebeling in the official publications of the Berlin Museum and restores nearly the entire text. The Semitic Babylonian version has not been recovered. It has been, however, commonly supposed that the poem originated in Babylonia and was first composed in Semitic. The two Assyrian texts contain about one hundred and forty lines.

The origin of the legend itself is known to have been Sumerian so far as Babylonian religion is concerned. It was originally similar to the Egyptian form of this myth in which Isis, the mother goddess, is the sister of Osiris, the dying god. Through Semitic influence the myth in Babylonia became composite, the Sumerian tradition being largely given up in favor of the Semitic view in which the earth goddess was the mother of Tammuz. The original Sumerian name of this unmarried earth goddess was Gestin, or goddess of the vine, but a name almost equally old was Innini, "heavenly queen." In the Sumerian myth she is usually referred to as Innini. The Semites identified her with their own goddess Ishtar and substituted her name for the Sumerian appellative in the Semitic poem.

The story told throughout antiquity of the descent of the weeping mother goddess into the "Land of Return" to search for her departed son and lover Tammuz (the western and Greek Adonis) certainly belongs to the original Sumerian tradition, as has been proven

by an interesting tablet of the Nippur collection in Constantinople. The myth has almost certainly an astronomical origin, being based upon the Sumerian identification of Innini with Sirius Major or the Dog Star. This star was invisible for about two months of the year

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FIG. 173.—Clay Statuette of Ishtar with her Infant Son Tammuz. In the Collection of the University Museum.

in the hot season when the god of vegetation was said to perish annually as a child cast adrift on the waters of the Euphrates. The ancients supposed that celestial bodies journeyed in darkness across the lower world during their periods of invisibility. Hence, with the disappearance of her star Sirius, they inferred that the goddess also took her

way into that land of the dead whose seven gates barred the entrance to all save the souls of those that died.

Fortunately this Museum possesses at least one tablet of a Sumerian poem on the same subject. The tablet consists of two fragments now joined (11088+11064).

The obverse is completely obliterated, but at the bottom the name of the goddess of the lower world Erish-ki(?)gal(?) can be read. The reverse carries twenty-three well-preserved lines and contains that part of the poem which describes the passage of the first four gates of Arallu, or the lower world. We are here in the midst of the legend where Innini commands the watchman of the seven gates to give her passage into the presence of the queen of Arallu, where she has secured the sleeping Tammuz. The passage is as follows.

To the command of his mistress he gave heed
He drew the bolts of the seven gates of earth
Of the great gate "gate of misery of the lower world"—its . . . he
To the holy Innini he spoke;
"O Innini enter
O Innini in thine entering
A measuring rod of lapis lazuli (take?)."
In causing her to enter by the first gate, the fillet and high crown of her head be removed.
"Why is this?" she said
"Pass on, O Innini, the decrees of the lower world (are thus ordained)
Innini, the laws of the lower world truly are thy command."
In causing her to enter the second gate, the . . . of her forehead the (watch) -man removed.
"Why is this?" she said
"Pass on, O Innini, the decrees of the lower world (are thus ordained).
Innini, the laws of the lower world truly are thy command."
In causing her to enter by the third gate, the double erimmati—jewels from her shoulders the (watch) -man removed.
"Why is this?" she said
"Pass on, O Innini, the decrees of the lower world (are thus ordained).
Innini, the laws of the lower world truly are thy command."
In causing her to enter the fourth gate.

Here the tablet writing ceases and the remainder of the reverse is left uninscribed. The text thus leaves us in medias res, so that we are compelled to infer the continuance of the poem on another tablet. The entire poem was probably written on three tablets, of which Ni 11088 is the first.

The Semitic poem is obviously based upon this Sumerian original. The extraordinary fact is that the Assyrian versions are not bilingual. We are bound to infer that the Semites expanded the original version to such extent that it became an independent product of the Semitic mind. Since they did not employ the poem in public religious ceremonies, the adherence to the bilingual form was no longer imperative. At any rate, the Nippur library contained a complete Sumerian poem based on the myth of the Descent of Innani or Ishtar. That constitutes one of the most important archæological discoveries yet made in the University Museum collection.

S. L.