

Descent of the Goddess Ishtar into the Lower World

(From The Civilization of Babylonia and Assyria, M. Jastrow, 1915)

The Sumerian poem, The Descent of Ishtar (c. 1900-1600 BCE) chronicles the great goddess and Queen of Heaven Inanna's journey from heaven, to earth, to the underworld to visit her recently widowed sister Ereshkigal, Queen of the Dead.

To the land of no return, the land of darkness,
Ishtar, the daughter of Sin directed her thought,
Directed her thought, Ishtar, the daughter of Sin,
To the house of shadows, the dwelling, of Irkalla,
To the house without exit for him who enters therein,
To the road, whence there is no turning,
To the house without light for him who enters therein,
The place where dust is their nourishment, clay their food.
They have no light, in darkness they dwell.
Clothed like birds, with wings as garments,
Over door and bolt, dust has gathered.
Ishtar on arriving at the gate of the land of no return,
To the gatekeeper thus addressed herself:

"Gatekeeper, ho, open thy gate!
Open thy gate that I may enter!
If thou openest not the gate to let me enter,
I will break the door, I will wrench the lock,
I will smash the door-posts, I will force the doors.
I will bring up the dead to eat the living.
And the dead will outnumber the living."
The gatekeeper opened his mouth and spoke,
Spoke to the lady Ishtar:
"Desist, O lady, do not destroy it.
I will go and announce thy name to my queen Ereshkigal."
The gatekeeper entered and spoke to Ereshkigal:
"Ho! here is thy sister, Ishtar ...
Hostility of the great powers ...
When Ereshkigal heard this,
As when one hews down a tamarisk she trembled,
As when one cuts a reed, she shook:
"What has moved her heart [seat of the intellect] what has stirred her liver [seat of the emotions]?
Ho there, does this one wish to dwell with me?
To eat clay as food, to drink dust as wine?
I weep for the men who have left their wives.
I weep for the wives torn from the embrace of their husbands;
For the little ones cut off before their time.
Go, gatekeeper, open thy gate for her,
Deal with her according to the ancient decree."
The gatekeeper went and opened his gate to her:
Enter, O lady, let Cuthah greet thee.

Let the palace of the land of no return rejoice at thy presence!

He bade her enter the first gate, which he opened wide, and took the large crown off her head:

“Why, O gatekeeper, dost thou remove the large crown off my head?”

“Enter, O lady, such are the decrees of Ereshkigal.”

The second gate he bade her enter, opening it wide, and removed her earrings:

“Why, O gatekeeper, dost thou remove my earrings?”

“Enter, O lady, for such are the decrees of Ereshkigal.”

The third gate he bade her enter, opened it wide, and removed her necklace:

“Why, O gatekeeper, dost thou remove my necklace? “

“Enter, O lady, for such are the decrees of Ereshkigal.”

The fourth gate he bade her enter, opened it wide, and removed the ornaments of her breast:

“Why, O gatekeeper, dost thou remove the ornaments of my breast? “

“Enter, O lady, for such are the decrees of Ereshkigal.”

The fifth gate he bade her enter, opened it wide, and removed the girdle of her body studded with birthstones.

“Why, O gatekeeper, dost thou remove the girdle of my body, studded with birth-stones?”

“Enter, O lady, for such are the decrees of Ereshkigal.”

The sixth gate, he bade her enter, opened it wide, and removed the spangles off her hands and feet.

“Why, O gatekeeper, dost thou remove the spangles off my hands and feet?”

“Enter, O lady, for thus are the decrees of Ereshkigal.”

The seventh gate he bade her enter, opened it wide, and removed her loin-cloth.

“Why, O gatekeeper, dost thou remove my loin-cloth ?”

“Enter, O lady, for such are the decrees of Ereshkigal.”

Now when Ishtar had gone down into the land of no return,

Ereshkigal saw her and was angered at her presence.

Ishtar, without reflection, threw herself at her [in a rage].

Ereshkigal opened her mouth and spoke,

To Namtar, her messenger, she addressed herself:

“Go Namtar, imprison her in my palace.

Send against her sixty disease, to punish Ishtar.

Eye-disease against her eyes,

Disease of the side against her side,

Foot-disease against her foot,

Heart-disease against her heart,

Head-disease against her head,

Against her whole being, against her entire body.”

After the lady Ishtar had gone down into the land of no return,

The bull did not mount the cow, the ass approached not the she-ass,

To the maid in the street, no man drew near

The man slept in his apartment,

The maid slept by herself.

[The second half of the poem, the reverse of the tablet, continues as follows:]

The countenance of Papsukal, the messenger of the great gods, fell, his face was troubled.

In mourning garb he was clothed, in soiled garments clad.

Shamash [the sun-god] went to Sin [the moon-god], his father, weeping,

In the presence of Ea, the King, he went with flowing tears.

“Ishtar has descended into the earth and has not come up. The bull does not mount the cow, the ass does not approach the she-ass. The man does not approach the maid in the street, The man sleeps in his apartment, The maid sleeps by herself.”

Ea, in the wisdom of his heart, formed a being, He formed Asu-shu-namir the eunuch. Go, Asu-shu-namir, to the land of no return direct thy face! The seven gates of the land without return be opened before thee, May Eresbkigal at sight of thee rejoice! After her heart has been assuaged, her liver quieted, Invoke against her the name of the great gods, Raise thy head direct thy attention to the khalziku skin. “Come, lady, let them give me the khalziku skin, that I may drink water out of it.”

When Ereshkigal heard this, she struck her side, bit her finger, Thou hast expressed a wish that can not be granted. Go, Asu-sbu-iaamir, I curse thee with a great curse, The sweepings of the gutters of the city be thy food, The drains of the city be thy drink, The shadow of the wall be thy abode, The thresholds be thy dwelling-place; Drunkard and sot strike thy cheek!”

Ereshkigal opened her mouth and spoke, To Namtar, her messenger, she addressed herself. “Go, Namtar, knock at the strong palace, Strike the threshold of precious stones, Bring out the Anunnaki, seat them on golden thrones. Sprinkle Ishtar with the waters of life and take her out of my presence. Namtar went, knocked at the strong palace, Tapped on the threshold of precious stones. He brought out the Anunnaki and placed them on golden thrones, He sprinkled Ishtar with the waters of life and took hold of her. Through the first gate he led her out and returned to her her loin-cloth. Through the second gate he led her out and returned to her the spangles of her hands and feet Through the third gate he led her out and returned to her the girdle of her body, studded with birth-stones. Through the fourth gate he led her out and returned to her the ornaments of her breast. Through the fifth gate he led her out and returned to her her necklace. Through the sixth gate he led her out and returned her earrings. Through the seventh gate he led her out and returned to her the large crown for her head.

[The following lines are in the form of an address -apparently to some one who has sought release for a dear one from the portals of the lower world.]

“If she (Ishtar) will not grant thee her release,
To Tammuz, the lover of her youth,
Pour out pure waters, pour out fine oil;
With a festival garment deck him that he may play on the flute of lapis lazuli,
That the votaries may cheer his liver. [his spirit]
Belili [sister of Tammuz] had gathered the treasure,
With precious stones filled her bosom.
When Belili heard the lament of her brother, she dropped her treasure,
She scattered the precious stones before her,
“Oh, my only brother, do not let me perish!
On the day when Tammuz plays for me on the flute of lapis lazuli, playing it for me with the porphyry
ring.
Together with him, play ye for me, ye weepers and lamenting women!
That the dead may rise up and inhale the incense.”