

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_jbl-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php)

## THE WORSHIP OF TAMMUZ

JOHN P. PETERS

New York City

What little, if anything, I have to contribute to this rather well bewritten field is drawn from a consideration of Babylonian climatic conditions, and the practises and uses resulting therefrom. Babylonia depends for its fertilization in part upon the river floods, but it has also a rainy season. During the six months November–April rain is liable to fall, often in torrential abundance, and accompanied at times with violent gales, and with thunder and lightning. It is especially, however, the months of January and February in which the storms are most frequent, violent and destructive, constituting at times very calamities, the rain washing down sections of the adobe buildings, and beating thru the flimsy huts of reeds and mats, which latter are sometimes completely torn to pieces by the violent gales.

At Nippur, about the middle of March, 1889, our camp was almost wrecked by the most violent gale I ever experienced. Tents were blown down, ridge poles snapped, while the air was fairly full of mats and fragments of the reed huts that constituted a large part of our encampment, and housed especially our workmen and equipment. One could scarcely stand against the blast, a burning sirocco, and the air was dense and dark with sand and dirt. Suddenly there came one apparently lightningless loud thunderclap, a veritable קול יהוה , the wind stopped instantly, and the rain fell in a deluge.

The apprehension caused by these storms was strange to witness. The following year we had one very violent storm of thunder and lightning, which terrified our people greatly. Our Turkish commissioner betook himself to his tent and read aloud from the Koran to charm away the evil spirits of the air. After the storm itself had passed there was a vivid and beautiful display of cloud lightning immediately above and beyond the ziggurat of Bel. The people thought that the spirits were

wroth, and indeed it was easy to fancy that old En-lil was manifesting himself from his ancient temple.

The abject fear aroused by these storms is well illustrated by an experience I had about the middle of December on the march between Hit and Baghdad. There was for over twelve hours a rapid succession of violent windstorms, accompanied with deluges of rain and lightningless thunder, the barometer the while rising and falling suddenly. Our Arabs were hopelessly demoralized, lying huddled like dead men on the ground, or praying to Allah for succor, or at especially fierce gusts and torrents and uproar of storm crying and shouting in fear and despair that 'The end has come.' They are really more afraid of the fury of the elements than of the dangers of war, and are absolutely helpless and useless in the face of such a storm.

The cold storms of December, January and February are especially trying. For days the people are continually drenched, their huts are wet and dripping, even if they resist the storm; they can light no fires to cook by, and the whole aspect of the human life of the region is one of utter misery. Between these storms, of course, there are long stretches of bright and glorious days. Toward the end of February or beginning of March the weather becomes warm and all nature bursts into abundant verdure; but there is an immense amount of work required to repair the damage done by the winter storms.

It is these winter storms, with their attendant suffering, fear and destruction, which are the ground and motive of a number of old Sumerian penitential psalms and hymns to En-lil, the great god of the storm spirits, at Nippur; and some of these Nippurian psalms are, I fancy, liturgies of what we might call the vernal house cleaning, the repairing and setting in order of the mud-built temples year by year after the winter storms were past. Langdon has brought together a number of these liturgies, primarily Nippurian, in his "Sumerian and Babylonian Psalms," which for convenience of reference I will make the basis of my comments. In these liturgies, and especially in those which Langdon calls the Er-šem-ma Psalms, the *word* or *spirit* (to follow Langdon's translation) of En-lil is the cause of the disaster which is the motive of the psalm. Temples and houses are damaged or destroyed, not by some outside foe, as Langdon supposes, but,

show, by the rain, the thunder, the lightning and the hail, which work the havoc. It is En-lil, the lord of the storm demons, whose word and whose spirit (better wind) cause devastation thru the celestial torrents of the rainy season, washing down mud walls and bringing disaster on the temples and towns, or who releases the Anunnaki and other similar powers to work havoc in the storms, the hostile agencies mistaken by Langdon and others in some cases, I think, for the Elamites or other fleshly foes. So in Tablet I of the liturgy whose name, according to Langdon's translation, is "Like the spirit itself immutable," we have this vivid picture of the destruction wrought by En-lil's word—wind and thunder:

"The word which stilleth the heavens on high.

"The word which causeth the earth beneath to shudder.

"The word which bringeth woe to the Anunnaki.

"His word is an onrushing storm, which none can oppose.

"His word stilleth the heavens and causeth the earth to retire.

"Mother and daughter like a cane mat it rends asunder."

Another liturgy, entitled "The crying storm," is an incarnation of the spirit of the storm, which comes from the wrath of the deity and does mischief in the lands of (names to be inserted as required), which storm spirit inhabits the very temple itself.

Another series of Psalms "Like the spirit it is immutable" (IV) is a lament of the storm which is the word of Anu and En-lil, or various other gods (Ea, Marduk, Nebo, Shamash, etc.), which overflows and destroys and brings all manner of woe. At times the treatment of this *word* of the deity, "a word of majesty," reminds one of the treatment of the *voice* of *Yahaweh* in Psalm 29. The second tablet of this series is a woe of or to various temples.

Properly these liturgies belong to one place and primarily to En-lil, but they are adapted for use elsewhere by the addition of other towns and temples, or addresses to other gods. In the Nippurian services, even those bearing a copy date as late as the first century, B. C., En-lil tends to be the one all pervading spirit thru whom all things are done, and his *word*, which tends to be destructive and is finally identified with Nana, the active agent of the destruction. So in a Psalm described as

“On the flute to Ramman,” full of descriptions of the thunder storm and epithets of Ramman, whose thunder shakes En-lil’s temple and makes Nin-lil, his lady, tremble, En-lil addresses Ramman, who hearkens to him and is appeased. It is a liturgy for the thunder storm, to control Ramman by the name and power of En-lil.

There are also individual hymns to Ninib and Nergal, but, glorious as these gods are represented to be, in all cases they derive their power from En-lil.

A number of these liturgies represent the woe and misery of the goddess and goddesses, givers of life, who suffer in and with their temples and their worshippers, and with nature beaten with storms, and who are the intercessors for their worshippers to En-lil. So in a series of six tablets (XI), much redacted at many periods down to the Seleucidan, the goddess (and goddesses) wail with sorrow for the destruction wrought by En-lil’s storms. He is appealed to with many honorific names, but his heart is estranged, and his neck stiff. Then again follow laments of the various goddesses over their respective cities (apparently, the application or adaptation of one liturgy or litany to different places), processions to the temple with supplications to En-lil (and other gods according to the place named), with great detail of titles and attributes, for restoration of the temples, etc.; and finally the cry of the goddess for her temples destroyed, and prayer to En-lil that his heart be stilled.

It is the goddess, the life giver, for vegetable and animal nature alike, who suffers in and for the violence done to nature in the storms of winter, as also, as will be observed later, in the burning of summer. So in another psalm Ishtar complains for Erech, which has been brought to destruction thru the word of En-lil, and repeated mention is made of the rain, the wind, the thunder and the lightning. Langdon supposes the destruction to have been wrought by the Elamites, but there is in fact no mention of them, but only of the devastation wrought by the violence of storms. And thruout these hymns, while it is possible that a few may have been liturgies fit for destruction or injuries wrought by invaders, in general the theme is the destruction of the storm, and so continually we hear of the “whistling wind,” the beating rain, the hail and thunder and lightning.

Occasionally the destruction wrought

storm. So in the hymn quoted above from Langdon of "Like the spirit itself immutable" (I), following the verse "mother and daughter like a cane mat it rends asunder," he reads:

"The word of the Lord prostrates the marsh in full verdure.

"The word of Marduk overflows the harvest in its season.

"The word of the Lord is an onrushing deluge

\* \* \* \* \*

"The word of Marduk is a flood which turns away the dykes.\*

"His word rends asunder the hugh *Mesu* trees.

"The spirit [wind or storm?] reduces all things to tribute."

So again in a tablet from the series "Arise like the sun" (XXI), where there is mention of destruction of or harm to the brick walls of Ekur at Nippur, the river flows and the storm beats. The rivers do in fact begin to rise in March, before the rainy season is altogether over, and a premature rise may involve destruction of the unready dykes, and damage of crops and buildings. Later on also an excessive rise of the waters may have the same results; and I well remember a night in May when the whole Affech tribe was working at the dykes and dams to save their crops and villages from destruction from the flooding canals.

If, as I suppose, these psalms were liturgies connected with the winter storms and the repair of their destruction, they might be well connected particularly with a festival approximately of the vernal equinox, not primarily reckoned, however, by the turning of the sun, but by the turning of the season, and therefore originally occurring about the beginning of March.

While En-lil with his winter storms is an agent of destruction to the homes and dwellings of man, and causes lamentation to the goddess of life giving and bearing, he is also an agent of fertility to the soil, and is at times referred to as the god of the earth and harvests (so XIII, perhaps the finest of all the hymns in Langdon's volume). The dry ground of autumn, in which the grain has been sown, is softened and fertilized by his storms, and already in February the earth may begin to yield her increase. In March the palm trees flower, to fruit

\* I suspect that these verses in which Marduk takes the place of En-lil belong to some of the redactions of the original psalm.

from June until September, according to variety and locality. In May the grain is harvested. In the meantime the rivers have begun to rise, and by the end of May the Euphrates, and by the end of June the Tigris, is in full flood, just at the month of Tammuz.<sup>1</sup> These floods bring with them a huge load of rich mud. As the waters recede the flooded lands are planted, at the present day as presumably always, with quick growing vegetables, which speedily fruit and wither. By the beginning of September the floods have altogether receded, and during the autumn canals are dry, the earth is parched, the climate is torrid and sickly, the land desolate and barren; but at this time are planted the crops in the land enriched by the flood deposits, just when life is at its deadest, before the first of the former rains.

The summer season was the time of the Tammuz worship, and particularly, apparently, midsummer, as indicated by the name Tammuz given to the midsummer month. We have numerous and very ancient Sumerian liturgies for this cult, which was both ancient and popular. To use first some of these liturgies contained in Langdon's volume above referred to: in his No. I Ishtar laments for her spouse, Tammuz, *Alas*, etc., with various titles, and he is described as various plants. But in the summer floods not only does plant life, but also animal life suffer. So No. II commences with a plaint for the suffering and slaughter of flocks and herds, and an *alas* for Tammuz, who has gone into the bosom of the earth, to the land of the dead. Then follows another *alas*, much as before, for Tammuz, the seed buried in the ground. III begins with the *alas*, and contained apparently a descent of Ishtar in search of Tammuz. IV is a lament on the flute, the accompaniment regularly assigned to this ritual, consisting of an address by Ishtar in which she tells of the disappearance of Tammuz, his descent to the underworld, and her mourning for him. V is an *alas*, a lament for Tammuz and the death of verdure. VI, "She that sits in humiliation" (in 8 parts) is dramatic in character and is a ritual for women. It concludes with a suggestion of the resurrection element in the Tammuz cult: "My peace may he bring."

<sup>1</sup>There is considerable variation in calendars, but in Nippur the 4th month seems always to have been the month of

In general it appears from these texts that Tammuz is the crops, which are buried or sown or planted to rise later from death unto life. This burial or planting is accompanied with much wailing and lamentation :

“The hero, your lord, has suffered destruction.

“The god of grain, the child, your lord has suffered destruction.”

The fertilization of the ground is extended also to cover the fertilization of flocks and herds, so that the ritual includes finally all life giving, vegetable and animal alike; besides crops, trees, human beings, flocks and herds, even bees and their honey are included in the laments and exultations of these liturgies :

“When Tammuz slumbers, sheep and lambs slumber,  
she goats and kids slumber.

“The lord, the exalted one, into the nether world has  
taken his place.

“Into the abodes of the abyss set my thoughts.”

Certain phrases in these liturgies represent his burial as a submergence by the floods, as :

“In his infancy in a sunken boat he lay.

“In his manhood in the submerged grain he lay.”

He is repeatedly called a child, but is also a shepherd and a brother, the liturgies varying between the thought of him as an infant or a full-grown man, and indeed in the same psalm he may be represented as both. Similarly he is indifferently child, or brother or spouse of Ishtar.

Besides these hymns we have many others representing him as the green corn or the grain in the field, which has not yet drunk the water, as “Lord of the shepherd’s cot,” etc.; but always and everywhere he is connected with Ishtar.

In the Gilgamesh epic Tammuz is mentioned as the bridegroom of Ishtar’s youth, to whom she clings with weeping year after year. This occurs in the sixth tablet of that epic, and apparently the sixth month was sacred to Ishtar, as was also the fifth month, Ab, the month of the “mission of Ishtar.” That

mission was connected with the Tammuz cult, as is shown by a liturgy in Semitic translation, preserved almost complete in the Ashurbanipal library, the descent of Ishtar into the underworld, whither she does to seek for dead Tammuz, with the result that nature, robbed of the element of sexual love in plant and animal life, comes to a standstill, and the gods are compelled to come to the rescue and bring about a resurrection. The Tammuz and Ishtar cults and rituals seem to overlap, run into one another and finally coalesce, and in some way to cover with their observances the three summer months of Tammuz, Ab and Elul, which, be it observed, are in Babylonia the time from full flood and commencement of recession of the rivers to the complete abatement of flood.

In the winter months the goddess was a sufferer from the storms of En-lil, with the people, and their intercessor for deliverance from the violence of the same. In the summer floods she, the mother of life, was still more intimately concerned, lamenting the death of her short-lived child or lover, herself going down into the underworld. She was womankind, the womb of nature seeking fertilization. Hence this cult was the cult of women, and connected with the lamentation of dead Tammuz were those sacrifices of female virtue, testified to for Babylonia by Herodotus and Strabo, for Phoenicia by Lucian.

And now to return to the Tammuz cult. This cult belongs to the oldest Sumerian stratum. The ritual apparently from the outset contained first a series of lamentations for dead Tammuz, and then joy songs for his resurrection.

Tammuz was Dumu-uzi, the true son, or more fully Dumu-uzi-abzu, true son of the great deep. He was a son of Ea. He was at the root of the great earth stalk which grew in Eridu, in the central place of the earth. But again, with Nin-gishzida, in the Adapa myth, he appears to be stationed at the gate of Anu's abode. Elsewhere he appears to be identified with Ningishzida, to whom the fifth month belongs. But we have already seen how his cult coalesces with the cult of the mother goddesses covering both the fifth and sixth months. Properly speaking, the Tammuz cult, the original Sumerian Tammuz cult, belonged, I should suppose, to the month Tammuz, the fourth month. When the rivers had embraced and covered the lands and were fertilizing it, then was the month true

son of the great deep. But he was thought of first, not as vegetation being born, but being buried. He was the one placed in a box beneath the water, the grain buried beneath the ground, dead and to be lamented:

“Alas! my hero Damu!

“Alas! Child, true lord!

\* \* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \* \*

“His mother wails—she begins the wailing for him.

“Wailing and sighing—she begins the wailing for him.

“She rises—bitterly she wails!

“She sits—she puts her hand on her heart.

“She breaks out in wailing—bitter is her wailing.

“She breaks out in lament—bitter is her lament.”

“He is gone, he is gone to the bosom of the earth,

“And the dead are numerous in the land.”

The “How longs” of his psalms were how long until the return of vegetation.

“How long will the springing up of verdure be withheld?

“How long will vegetation be withheld?”

The people of Babylonia of the present day, as already pointed out, plant their gardens of vegetables in the mud left behind as the waters recede. With such soil, and abundant water and a torrid sun, they grow with amazing rapidity, bear their fruit and are gone, to perish as the mud after a little is baked dry by the burning sun. This became part of the Tammuz ritual, but in itself considered this was something which might have been done any time while the waters were falling, i. e. thru the three months Tammuz, Ab and Elul, from June to September.

Apparently the Tammuz who was lamented as dead was likewise rejoiced for as one who should rise again. But this is not so clear, nor whether the rejoicing followed immediately on the lamentation, or after what interval? It is indicated in some of the Tammuz liturgies, but that is about all that we can say.

Tammuz at the outset was associated with Ea, and his cult with the rise and fall of the rivers. But the turn of the rivers



“Alas for Us.” It is first clearly mentioned, I believe, by Plato, but as something ancient, well known in his time.

The references to it in the Bible are fairly early, beginning with the eighth century B. C. Various writers have seen evidence of the cult and references to its ritual or practises in Gen. 35 : 8 ; Jud. 11 : 40 ; 21 : 18 ff. ; Hos. 4 : 13, and I Kings 13 : 30 ; but the first really definite indubitable mention of a practice peculiar to and distinctive of the rites connected with the worship of Tammuz is contained in Is. 17 : 10-11 :

“For thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation,  
 “And the rock of thy refuge thou hast not remembered ;  
 “Therefore thou plantest Adonis gardens,  
 “And the cutting of an alien god thou sowest ;  
 “In the day of thy planting thou forestest it,  
 “And on the morrow thou makest grow thy seed ;  
 “Withered the harvest  
 “In the day of sickness and cureless pain.”

Whatever difficulties the passage presents in minor details the allusion is unmistakable to the forced gardens of Adonis fostered with joy for an eight days, to wither and perish in sad lamentations. It is noteworthy that the passage occurs in a prophecy against Ephraim following and connected with a prophecy against Damascus in the period of the alliance between the two countries, 736-732 B. C. The implication of the passage is that the Adonis cult in Ephraim was borrowed from Damascus.

The name Tammuz is mentioned only in Ez. 8 : 14 :

“And he brought me to the opening of the gate of the house of Yahaweh, which is toward the north, and behold there women sitting bewailing Tammuz.”

Here Ezekiel, writing in Babylonia, uses the old Sumerian-Babylonian name Tammuz. The vision is dated in the sixth year of the sixth month, or of the fifth month according to the LXII. If this is to be accepted as the time of the wailing, as seems probable, it would indicate that coalescence of the Tammuz cult with Ishtar worship, a ritual of women, to which I have already referred as having apparently taken place in Babylonia. The passage appears to describe a Babylonian cult practised at that time by some women in Jerusalem, as presumably by some Jewish women in Babylonia.

Jer. 22:18 is also frequently cited as an allusion to the Adonis lamentation. In this passage Jeremiah says that Jehoiakim shall not be lamented with the

“Alas my brother and alas my sister;”

“Alas lord (Adon) and alas his glory.”

Doubtless these laments were used in the Adonis ritual, but I think that they were not adopted from that ritual for the ordinary lamentation for the dead, but the reverse; and that hence there is here no necessary reference to or even knowledge of the Adonis-Tammuz cult.

There are also allusions to gardens in Is. 1:29; 65:3, and 66:17, but the context in none of these cases suggests, as it seems to me, anything resembling the Adonis gardens.

Apparently, therefore, we have in the Old Testament only two certain references to Adonis-Tammuz worship, once in Ephraim, and once in Judah, in both cases as a foreign cult, and never widespread or well established among Israelites or Jews.