

A reply to Bishop Odisho Oraham

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A video recording of a presentation titled, “Who is our God Who we worship and what is His name” by Bishop Odisho Oraham of the Assyrian Church of the East, Europe Diocese, was recently posted on You Tube and Social Media.¹ In his presentation, Mar Odisho stated that the ancient Assyrians were pagans, and that modern Assyrians should not follow the myths of the ancient fathers. He ridiculed the Assyrians who say “God Ashur.” he asserted that there is one God, the God of the Bible, the God of David and there is no other God. The bishop said this God of David helped the Israelites. For that reason the Gentiles envied the Israelites. But the bishop said that God loved everyone and that is why he sent Jonah to Nineveh to help the Assyrians repent and end their idol worshiping. The Assyrians repented, but later returned to worshiping the idols and we see later in 612 BC that Assyria collapsed (ended). He continued: we cannot create idols of Jesus or images of Mary and try to communicate with them, because idols do not respond to you, but our Christian God in heaven will listen to you if you speak with him, and if you ask from him he will provide. We Assyrians have one God that we worship through Jesus Christ, he added. The bishop continued: the name of God is in the spirit, he is one, but has three persons (**qnoomeh**), father, son, and holy spirit. God is also known by many names such as Elohim, YHWH, Eil, Adonai, etc. but the most accurate and perhaps is YHWH.



Sadly, he said, some Assyrians are denying this name of God and are inventing a new name. Nowhere in the Towrah is god Ashur mentioned. Yes, there is mention of Ashur, the land or a person. Ashur was a King, we do not deny it. How could our God that is beyond time and place take after a city or a king? How can our eternal God, the creator of everything, take the name of Ashur? We must not live in

¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCTghA9nWbM>

legends and myths like the Sumerians, Babylonians, and our forefathers the Assyrians. The bishop continued to say: we survived for 2000 years because of our Christian faith and we must not return to the paganism of our ancient fathers. We are Christians and we will live in this 2000 year old faith. There is one God and no other. We cannot call ourselves Ashur and Gilgamesh. These were kings, we will not denounce them. We will not return to the pre-Christian times and what our forefathers did. Can I make a piece of wood and worship it? Can Ashur, Mardokh, Gigamesh, or Tiamat save me when I am in trouble? No, but Jesus can. He concluded: I am sad to say that today even Facebook has become like god. We are on Facebook more than we read the Bible.

I listened in shock. Why would any Assyrian in his/her right mind ridicule, belittle, and detest his ancestors' theology? Where from do such individuals get their motivation and courage? It is stated that most of our false impressions of the ancient Assyrian theology (and of the whole Near East religions) come from the Bible. It has always been the Israelite prophets who led the way in misrepresenting the Assyrians' way of life. Therefore, we must understand that what has been said by the Israelite prophets on this topic is prejudiced and deliberately misleading.

The Bishop claims that ancient Assyrians were pagans and worshiped many gods. This claim is false. The oneness or aloneness of the Assyrian god may be learned from a proclamation about the god Enlil in a Sumerian dedication inscription: "*Enlil is the Lord of heaven and earth, he is king alone*". The Sumerian word translated above as "alone" (*aš.ni*) literally means "his oneness." That concept was later passed on to the Babylonians and Assyrians. Also, some deities were ranked numerically by ancient Mesopotamian scholars, in that they wrote numerical substitutions instead of spelling the gods' names. In this approach, Anu was given the highest number, 60, as most important and exalted; Enlil 50, Enki 40, Sin 30, Shamash 20, Ishtar 15, Girra 10, and Adad 6, though variations did occur. In this sexigesimal system, 60 represented 1. Thus, the head of the pantheon, was described as One. Among the Sumerians, this honor went to Anu, the god of the heavens. For the Assyrians, their national god, Ashur was One just as YHWH is One, i.e., the top god. The gods of most of Assyria's conquered provinces were treated as weaker than or subservient to Ashur. This seems to have been the case with regard to Judah's god, YHWH as we see in the biblical depiction of Sennacherib's campaign against Judah (701 B.C.), during which his official delivered a message to King Hezekiah: "*Tell this to King Hezekiah of Judah: Do not let your God, on whom you are relying, mislead you into thinking that Jerusalem will not be delivered into the hands of the king of Assyria. You yourself have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the lands, how they have annihilated them; and can you escape? Were the nations that my predecessors destroyed — Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the Beth-Edenites in Telassar — saved by their gods? ...*" (2 Kings 19:10). In this speech, the officials make their point clear: even if Hezekiah's god promised to save them from the Assyrians, He cannot. Although it is indeed true that Sennacherib never took Jerusalem, history played out differently than described in the Bible. Hezekiah capitulated after Sennacherib destroyed every city in Judah other than Jerusalem, paying his new Assyrian overlord a massive ransom (2 Kings 18:14). For the rest of Hezekiah's reign, and on through the long reign of his son Manasseh, until almost the very end of the Assyrian Empire, Jerusalem remained an Assyrian vassal.

So the question to the bishop is: Assyrians were pagans according to whom? According to the new religion created by the Israelites? The bishop misunderstands the ancient Assyrian concept of God, which defined Ashur – "*the only, universal God*" – as "*the totality of gods*". Ashur was beyond comprehension. Ashur may have been a subject ruler who was deified and became the god of the city of Ashur, which probably gave its name to Assyria. But man could know him only through his powers pervading and ruling the universe, which, though emanating from a single source, appeared to man as separate and were accordingly hypostatized as different gods. On the surface, then, Assyrian religion,

with its multitude of gods worshiped under different names, appears to us as polytheistic; on a deeper level, however, it was monotheistic, all the diverse deities being conceived of as powers, aspects, qualities, or attributes of Ashur, who is often simply referred to as “The God”. Ashur has a special status as he is represented as a winged disk hovering over the “Tree of Life” and more clearly by his seal, where he is said to “hold a cosmic bond binding together the great heavens and the Igigi and Anunnaki gods”. Ancient Assyrians were not pagans, they did not have idols to worship, they rather had symbols. What does the cross, the same cross shown on top of the bishop in the picture, mean to the Christians? It is a symbol. What would the bishop call the Christians who worship and pray to statues, images, and pictures of Jesus and Mother Mary?

We know that alaha (god) Ashur was revered in Assyria some 4,500 years ago. The God of the Bible that we revere today became known some 2,000 years ago through the writings of the Israelite prophets and some writers who came much later in time and put the Bible together. Few of the Biblical fathers lived in Mesopotamia. We also know that Abraham, the Jewish father, originated from Sumer (Ur). Abraham carried with him the Mesopotamian myths and theology to Canaan, his new homeland, after making the Assyrian city of Harran a stopover home for a while. The Bible copied many aspects known to Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians, such as the story of the Deluge (Noah and the story of the flood), the myth “Enlil and Ninhursag” (regarding paradise), The Epic of Gilgamesh (Death and the Afterlife), the story of Moses and King Sargon I, the great Epic of Enuma Elish (which presents quite a number of analogies to the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis), etc. etc. The Sumerians had great influence on the Hebrews and the parallels between the Sumerian and Biblical literary motifs is undeniable. This impact came of course via the Canaanites, who preceded the Hebrews.

In the recent publications of the Assyrian prophecy corpus, goddess Ishtar invites the gods, her fathers and brothers to a covenant meal, a scene reminiscent of the Last Supper. Ishtar says, *“You will go to your cities and districts, eat bread and forget this covenant. But when you drink from this water, you will remember me and keep this covenant which I have made on behalf of Esarhaddon”*. The story of the creation was not born in the Bible by the Israelites prophets. We read: *“In the beginning the whole universe was a sea. Heaven on high had not been named, nor the earth beneath. Their begetter was Apsu, the father of the primordial Deep, and their mother was Tiamat, the spirit of Chaos. No plain was yet formed, no marsh could be seen; the gods had no existence, nor had their fates been determined. Then there was a movement in the waters, and the deities issued forth. The first who had being were the god Lachmu and the goddess Lachamu. Long ages went past. Then were created the god Anshar and the goddess Kishar. When the days of these deities had increased and extended, they were followed by Anu, god of the sky, whose consort was Anatu; and Ea, most wise and all-powerful, who was without an equal. Now Ea, god of the deep, was also Enki, "lord of earth", and his eternal spouse, Damkina, was Gashan-ki, "lady of earth". The son of Ea and Damkina was Bel, the lord, who in time created mankind.”*

Ancient Assyrians were profoundly influenced by the belief in the existence of genies and spirits, both good and bad, just as we do today by having God and Satan (Good and bad). Ashur was not born from a city, he was not an idol, rather an image and surely more. The divine image of the ancient Assyrian was no more the essence of his god than the Ark was the essence of Yahweh, or than a crucifix, to the Catholic who reveres it, is Christ. One text of Marduk (god Ashur absorbed many features both of the old Sumerian god Enlil and of Marduk, god of Babylon) who was revered in Assyria says: *“The underworld is your washbasin, the highest heaven your censer bowl”*. He was a god of cosmic vastness who could not just be confined in an image.

It has been argued that ancient mythological system was strongly influenced by city politics. To hold a community in sway, it was necessary to recognize officially the various gods worshiped by different sections, so as to secure the constant allegiance of all classes to their rulers. Today's Pope holds great power over billions of people, and the same is true with the three Mufti's of Mecca, Cairo, and Qom. Christianity and Islam gave the Pope and the Mufti that power to sway, and for all practical reasons, rule people.

Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians are our ancestors, part of our past. If we want to understand how life developed since they ruled the ancient world 5000 years ago, explore their way of life, learn the fundamental part of our heritage, be familiar with the enlightening explanations of how we got here, we have to dig in what our ancestors provided for us on the 30,000 tablets that were discovered in King Ashurbanipal library and the many excavation sites throughout Mesopotamia. Sometimes we must pass beyond the words of individuals to get to the whole truth. The material out there is enormous - study it to get to the facts. We must not allow anyone to denigrate our glorious past, including its theology. We must respect it since it was the most important aspect of our ancestors' lives.

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