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Ištar's Journey: Above and Below

Julye Bidmead and Marilyn Love

Abstract Astral information appears in a wide variety of cuneiform texts: astronomical manuals, omen series, reports written by celestial diviners to the kings, letters, prayers, and myths. This paper examines one of these myths, *Inanna/Ištar's Descent into the Netherworld*, to trace the parallels between Inanna/Ištar's journey in the netherworld and the planet Venus. The Mesopotamian goddess Inanna/Ištar is represented in her astral aspect as Venus, who is both the evening star, visible after sunset, and the morning star, visible before sunrise. In the myth, she travels from the 'great heavens above' into the netherworld, the 'great below', where she passes through seven gates. At each gate, she is symbolically stripped of her divine radiance (*mêlammū*) by the removal of her clothing and adornments. She is held prisoner by the queen of the netherworld, her older sister, Ereškigal. During the goddess' captivity, procreation and fertility of the land cease. She is eventually rescued and released in exchange for her lover, Dumuzi/Tammuz, who must reside half of the year in the netherworld in her place. Though the myth is traditionally understood as a seasonal aetiology, with its familiar ancient Mediterranean dying-rising god motif, and as the Mesopotamians' conception of afterlife, using iconographic representations and linguistic comparisons with the astral omen texts, another interpretation explaining the movements and periodic disappearance of Venus is noticeable.

Inanna/Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld is the story of the death and resurrection of the goddess Inanna/Ištar. The two most complete versions of this myth are written in Sumerian (*Inanna's Descent*) and Akkadian (*Ištar's Descent*).¹—While each translation follows a similar pattern of the

¹ The myth is known in two versions. The Sumerian version, *Inanna's Descent*, composed of 410 lines, dates to approximately 1900-1600 B.C.E. This longer myth may have been the source for the later, and much shorter, Neo-Assyrian Akkadian version, *Ištar's Descent*. Copies of the Akkadian version are from the late Bronze Age. However, as there are a few lines preserved from a Middle Assyrian version, some cuneiform material can possibly date to as early as the end of the second millennium B.C.E. For the English translation of *Inanna's Descent*, see Diane Wolkstein, and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna: Queen of*

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goddess Inanna/Ištar descending to the netherworld, being held prisoner by her sister, Ereškigal, and then being resurrected, there are nuanced differences between these two myths. The earlier Sumerian version is longer and provides more detail as Inanna is going to the land of no return to mourn the death of her sister's husband, Gugalanna, the Bull of Heaven.² Inanna/Ištar must pass through seven gates in order to enter the netherworld, relinquishing an article of clothing at each gate. We are given a bleak description of the netherworld in the Akkadian version:

To the house whose entrants are bereft of light,
Where dust is their sustenance, and clay their food.
They see no light and dwell in darkness,
They are clothed like birds in wings for garments,
and dust has gathered on the door and the bolt.³

In both versions, Ereškigal is livid that her sister has come to her dwelling place, the netherworld. In the Sumerian version, she hangs Ištar's corpse on the wall, and it is so dried up that it resembles a waterskin. In the Akkadian version, she curses Ištar with sixty bodily diseases and Ištar dies. While Ištar is dead, fertility and sexual reproduction on Earth ceases:

After the lady Ištar went down into the netherworld,

Heaven and Earth, (New York: Harper & Row, 1983). For transliteration and translation, see Jeremy A. Black, et al., *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature. Oxford 1998), <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/JETCSL>. For English translation of *Ištar's Descent* see Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh and Others*, Revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 154-162; Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 2nd ed (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1996), pp. 403-409; Benjamin Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1995), pp.78-84; Erica Reiner, *Your Thwarts in Pieces, Your Mooring Rope Cut: Poetry from Babylonia and Assyria* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1985). Full treatment of the cuneiform texts is found in Pirjo Lapinkivi, *The Neo-Assyrian Myth of Ištar's Descent and Resurrection: Introduction, Cuneiform Text, and Transliteration with a Translation, Glossary, and Extensive Commentary* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2010).

² *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, lines 78-89; trans., Black, et al.

³ *Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld*, lines 7-11; trans. Foster, *Before the Muses*.

the bull would not mount the cow, [the ass would not impregnate
the jenny],
the young man [would not impregnate] the girl in the thoroughfare.
The young [man] slept [in his bedroom],
the g[irl] sl[ept by herself].⁴

The gods are made aware of Inanna/Ištar's – and thus humanity's – plight by their vizier, Papsukkal (*Ištar's Descent*) or by Inanna's servant, Ninšubur (*Inanna's Descent*). In the Akkadian versions, Ea/Enki creates a good-looking playboy, Ašûsunamir to seduce Ereškigal and trick her into returning Inanna/Ištar's corpse. In the Sumerian story, from dirt on his fingernails, Enki fashions two creatures 'who are neither male or female' for this task. In both versions, the goddess is eventually resurrected; however, in order for her to remain on Earth, she must designate a substitute. Inanna/Ištar ascends to Earth through the seven gates, her garments being returned to her at each gate. The Sumerian version details that Inanna is accompanied by *gallu* demons from the netherworld to ensure her replacement. Noticing that her lover, Dumuzi/Tammuz, has not observed the proper mourning rituals, she gives him the 'look of death' and commands the demons to take him to the netherworld. 'You for half the year and your sister for half the year: when you are demanded, on that day you will stay, when your sister is demanded, on that day you will be released. Thus holy Inanna gave Dumuzi as a substitute'⁵

In the celestial sphere, each Mesopotamian god was represented by a heavenly body, planet, or constellation. These gods controlled meteorological and astronomical occurrences as well as human destinies. Natural and cosmic phenomena explained in terms of the gods and metaphors reflect a cosmology understood in the context of the divine. The heavens and sky were controlled by the elder chief god, An/Anu, whose name is the Sumerian word for 'heavens'.⁶ Influential in early Mesopotamian cosmology, Anu was considered the ultimate source of authority, but eventually became a passive figure as the next generation of gods took over. In addition to Anu, the Mesopotamians recognized seven stars (planets), corresponding with seven gods. Utu/Šamaš, the Sun god, was the god of divination and justice. Nanna/Sîn, the Moon god, was related to fertility, since the Moon renews itself monthly with its waxing

⁴ *Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld*, line 7680; trans., Foster, *Before the Muses*.

⁵ *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, lines 405-410; trans., Black, et al.

⁶ Mesopotamian gods had both Sumerian and Akkadian names.

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and waning. The god of communication, Nabû, was associated with the planet Mercury. Nergal, the god of fire and plagues, was related to Mars. Marduk, who was the chief god of the Babylonians and architect of the entire world in the creation epic *Enūma Eliš*, was identified as Jupiter. Ninurta, a god of victory, war, and farming, became associated with Saturn. Lastly, among this celestial pantheon, is Inanna/Ištar. It is not difficult to notice that the cosmic geography of the Mesopotamian sky was maledominated. Yet, among this masculine group, Inanna/Ištar, representing Venus as the morning and evening star, stands alone as the only female deity who is associated with a planet, stressing her prominence and high rank.

Šamaš, Sîn and Ištar formed a celestial triad, each god represented in iconography which included their astral emblems – a lunar crescent (*uskāru*) for Sîn, an eight-pointed star for Ištar, and a solar disk (*šamšatu*) for Šamaš. These representations, found on almost every form of material culture, from cylinder seals, plaques, monuments, stelas, and boundary stones (*kudūru*) remained consistent throughout Mesopotamian history.⁷ The placement of the astral symbols on the *kudūru* was commonplace, as the gods whom they represented acted as guardians of the provisions sworn to in the treaties or deeds recorded.⁸ Kings and rulers also used celestial symbols on their stelas for protection and blessings. A relief from King Assurnasirpal II's palace in Nimrud (860 B.C.E.) shows him wearing a necklace with the symbols of Sîn, Šamaš, Aššur or Adad, and Ištar. And the last king of the Neo-Babylonian empire, Nabonidus, (556-539 B.C.E.), is seen on his relief praying to the astral triad of the Moon, Sun and Venus.⁹ As Rochberg wrote,

An aspect of the conception of the divine that is significant for understanding the relation between deity and star is the idea of awesome divine radiance, expressed in both Sumerian and Akkadian religious discourse with the term ME.LÁM/*melemmu*. In

⁷ For analysis of the astral symbolism on *kudūrrus*, see Stanislaw Iwaniszewski, 'Archaeoastronomical Analysis of Assyrian and Babylonian Monuments: Methodological Issues', *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, Vol. 34 (2003): pp. 79-93.

⁸ Erica Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia* (Philadelphia: Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1995), p.8.

⁹ See the Stela of Nabonidus, British Museum # 90837.

Sumerian liturgy, for example, the radiance of the goddess Inanna is a principal element in her description as the planet Venus.¹⁰

Celestial phenomena in the cuneiform texts are described in figurative language with the planets possessing anthropomorphic attributes. The sky and heavens are shouting when it rains; planets approach and confront each other when they are in conjunction, or they see each other when they are in opposition. Their bodies are adorned with crowns and clothing which indicate phenomena such as planetary halos and degrees of luminosity. Again, according to Rochberg,

The descriptions of phenomena in the celestial divination corpus that make metaphorical references to deities suggest, however, that the heavenly bodies also had identities within the divine realm. Metaphors referring to Šîn, Šamaš, or Ištar to describe the appearance of the Moon, Sun, and Venus, respectively, evidence a view of the heavenly bodies as physical manifestations of gods, but evidence outside of the divination corpus attests to the fact that the conception of these Babylonians gods was not limited to those astral manifestations alone.¹¹

Noting that the planets move around changing their positions in relation to the fixed stars, the Mesopotamian word for planet (Sumerian: UDU.IDIM, Akkadian: *bibbū*) means wanderer. It was related to the word for wild sheep, mostly the mountain variety, because like sheep in the fields, the heavenly bodies wandered through the sky. One of the most commonly noted movements of the astronomical bodies was when they rose or first appeared in the sky. Their rising coincided with entering the heavens through celestial gates or doors. Conversely, as they set or disappear, they leave the heavens through these gates. In a prayer to Šîn he opens the door of heaven when he appears in the sky.¹² Another example is found in this bilingual prayer likely recited at sunset. Here, Šamaš is portrayed as person returning home after a long day at work.

¹⁰ Francesca Rochberg, *In the Path of the Moon. Babylonian Celestial Divination and Its Legacy*; (Leiden, Brill, 2010), p. 325.

¹¹ Francesca Rochberg, 'Personifications and Metaphors in Babylonian Celestial Omens', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 116, no. 3 (1996): p. 482.

¹² Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*; (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998), p. 266.

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O Šamaš, when you enter innermost heaven,
May the pure bolt (gate) of heaven greet you,
May the door of heaven salute you.
May Justice, your beloved vizier, bring you straight in.
Show your splendor to the Ebabbar, your lordly dwelling.
May Aya, your beloved wife, meet you happily,
May she make you relax,
May your godly meal be set before you.
O youthful warrior Šamaš, let them ever praise you.
O lord of Ebabbar, go straight on your path,
Make straight your way, go the true course to your dwelling.
O Šamaš, you are judge of the land,
administrator of its verdicts.¹³

Inanna/Ištar was the chief goddess of the Mesopotamian pantheon.¹⁴ Strictly, Inanna and Ištar were identified but they were very different deities: for example, Inanna did not have Ishtar's warlike side. The syncretisms of the over-3000-year long period of Mesopotamian history are complex and hard to trace. In the early period of Mesopotamian history during which she was known, the Sumerian goddess Inanna was the patron deity of the city of Uruk (ca. 3300-2900 B.C.E.). Several other cities in Mesopotamia, such as Adab, Babylon, Badtibira, Girsu, Isin, Kazallu, Kiš, Larsa, Nippur, Sippar, Šuruppak, Umma, and Ur, also worshipped Inanna, each adapting their own local traditions. Because Inanna had a lengthy and geographically widespread tenure as a goddess, her genealogy and astral symbolism varied slightly. For example, during the Ur III period (ca. 2112-2004 B.C.E.) she was associated with the Moon rather than with Venus. In the Isin tradition, she was Venus, but was considered the daughter of Anu, even though, most commonly, she

¹³ Foster, *Before the Muses*, p. 660.

¹⁴ For information about Inanna/Ištar see Tzvi Abusch, 'Ishtar', in Karel van der Toom, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 847-55; Joan Goldnick Westenholz, 'Inanna and Ishtar in the Babylonian World', in Gwendolyn Leick, (ed.) *The Babylonian World* (London: Routledge 2007), pp. 332-347; Rivkah Harris, 'Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites', *History of Religions*, Vol. 30, no.3 (1991): pp. 261-78; Giovanni Pettinato, 'Inanna', in Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: MacMillan Reference USA, 2005), pp. 4402-4406.

was the daughter of Sîn and granddaughter of Anu – this can be what is meant when she is described as Anu’s child. According to other traditions she was Anu’s spouse. In the myth *Enki and Inanna*, she is the daughter of Enki. One of the earliest temples in Mesopotamia was Inanna’s massive cult centre, the Eanna (House of Heaven) in Uruk. Ritual offering texts confirm she was worshipped here in four aspects: as Inanna of the netherworld (INANNA.KUR), Inanna of the morning (INANNA.HUD₂), Inanna of the evening (INANNA.SIG), and simply Inanna.¹⁵ Therefore, the identity of Venus as the evening and morning star is known in early Mesopotamian astronomy.¹⁶ Though they had distinct characteristics, by the first millennium B.C.E. Inanna had syncretized with the Semitic goddess, Ištar, assimilating characteristics from other Mesopotamian deities along the way. As Ištar, she was again revered as *sarrat šamê* (Queen of Heaven) or *bēlet šamê* (Lady of Heaven). Her unique standing as both the morning star and the evening star warranted her the grand epithet of *Ištar kakkabi* (Ištar of the stars) and numerous star names, especially in the mythopoeic literature. She was renowned as the planet Venus and was also known as *Ištar-kakkabum* (Ištar-the-Star). *Ninsi’anna* (Lady Light of Heaven) is listed as one of the names of Venus in *Venus Tablet of Ammišaduqa*. In the Akkadian pantheon, Ištar was the daughter of Sîn. Ištar’s siblings were Utu/Šamaš and Ereškigal, the queen of the netherworld. Possessing a multiplicity of seemingly contradictory characteristics, Ištar was simultaneously the goddess of life, fertility, and love, but was also associated with war and death. Cuneiform royal inscriptions boast of her military prowess as she led numerous kings to victory in battles. Cylinder seals display Ištar armed with a quiver and bow. Yet most love charms and fertility incantations are addressed to Ištar as the patroness of love. Perhaps this duality stems from her position as both the evening and morning star. The same duality is noted in her bi-gendered nature. In some texts she is male, and in iconographic

¹⁵ K Szarzynska, ‘Cult of the Goddess Inana in Archaic Uruk’, *NIN* Vol.1 (2000): pp. 63-74.

¹⁶ For treatment of Venus, see Enn Kasak, and Raul Veede, ‘Understanding Planets in Ancient Mesopotamia’, *Folklore*, Vol. 16 (2001): pp.1-33. Also see Gnady E. Kurtik ‘The Identification of Inanna with the Planet Venus: A Criterion for the Time Determination of the Recognition of Constellations in Ancient Mesopotamia’, *Astronomical and Astrophysical Transactions* Vol. 17 (1999): pp. 501-13. He suggests that identification of Inanna with the planet Venus occurred later than most scholars claim, placing identification some time in the mid-3rd millennium.

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representations Ištar can be bearded. One omen reads, 'If Venus rises in the East, she is female, favorable; if she is seen in the West he is male, unfavorable'.¹⁷

The duality inherent in the goddess also illustrates the mythological and cyclic features of an agrarian society, where survival depended upon the fecundity of the land. Inanna is the consort of Dumuzi, the Sumerian god of shepherds and their flocks, who later became Akkadian Tammuz, and the Semitic lunar month of July-August. The couple's relationship is complicated. As lovers, they were an integral participant in the *hieros gamos*, a sacred marriage ritual performed by the king and a priestess of Inanna/Ištar to ensure successful crops at the beginning of the agricultural new year. When Inanna was held captive in the netherworld and needed a substitute to take her place, she condemned Dumuzi to death by sending him instead. Dumuzi/Tammuz, who is identified with the constellation 'The Hired Man', also has astral characteristics. In one Sumerian hymn it states, 'Inanna, whose constellation precedes his, lifts him after her over the (KUR.GAL) great mountain', and 'Dumuzi finally shines forth over the eastern horizon'.¹⁸

The planet Venus is the third brightest object in the sky after the Sun and the Moon. Her periods of visibility and swift movements make her, like Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn, detectable to the naked eye. All known cultures throughout the ancient Near East possessed some sort of a Venus deity.¹⁹ As Venus, an inferior planet, was always in close proximity to the Sun, Ištar was often associated with her brother, Šamaš, especially at sunrise; at sunset she was associated with Ninurta, who is associated with Saturn, which in turn was the night Sun. Like the Sun, she moved routinely through the heavens: 'The planet Venus shines in the lower western sky at dusk, and the lower eastern sky at dawn'.²⁰

¹⁷ Erica Reiner and David Pingree, *Babylonian Planetary Omens I: Enūma Anu Enlil Tablet 63. The Venus Tablet of Ammišaduqa* (Malibu, CA: Bibliotheca Mesopotamia Udena, 1975), p. 241.

¹⁸ For the astral interpretation of Dumuzi, see Daniel A. Foxvog, 'Astral Dumuzi', *Tablet and The Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo* (Bethesda, Md: CDL Press, 1993), pp. 103-108. Citing MUL.APIN 42-43:10 *kakkabu ša arki Ikli izzazzu Anunitu kakkabu ša arkilu izzazzu Agru Dumuzi* 'The star which stands behind the Field: Anunitu. The star which stands behind it: the Hired Man, Dumuzi'.

¹⁹ Wolfgang Heimpel, 'A Catalogue of Near Eastern Venus Deities', *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies*, Vol. 7, no. 24 (1982): p. 59.

²⁰ Horowitz, *Cosmic Geography*, pp. 235-236.

Venus is visible when it rises in the east before sunrise, or when it sets in the west after sunset. After disappearing then for three nights, Venus appears in the eastern sky. The 584-day synodic period of Venus included periods of visibility in the east and in the west. It also has two periods of invisibility, one at the superior conjunction and the other at the inferior conjunction. At the superior conjunction, between heliacal setting in the east and heliacal rising in the west, Venus has a 60-day period of invisibility.

Innumerable prayers and hymns praise Ištar as the planet Venus in all her celestial glory. She is ‘the great lady of the horizon and zenith of the heavens’ and ‘the radiant star, Venus, the great light which fills the holy heavens’. In *The Exaltation of Ištar*, a Middle Babylonian hymn, Anu invites the goddess to share his throne in heaven. He endows her with all the MEs²¹ and exalts her in the sky as Ištar the Star of Heaven, equalling Šamaš and Sîn: ‘To there, oh Ištar, to kingship, all of them exalt you! Ištar, you shall be the most brilliant of them, and let them call you “Ištar, the Star of Heaven”! Triumphantly, may your elevated position alternate next to them’.²² The word *nabīssunūma*, ‘most brilliant one of them’, from the Akkadian verb *nebû*, ‘to be bright, brilliant’, is used frequently to describe the astral aspect of Ištar.²³ Another celestial metaphor portrays the goddess as a ‘shining torch’, *dipāru*. ‘When she radiantly ascends at evening, when she fills the heaven like a *dipāru*, when she stands in the heavens like the Moon-god and the Sun-god, she is known by all lands from South to North.’²⁴

In a prayer entitled *The Greatness of Ištar*, she becomes the torch of both heaven and earth:

You are the luminary of heaven and earth

²¹ In Mesopotamian religion, ME-s (Akkadian: *paršu*) are decrees of divine authority, characteristics, or offices which the gods possess dominion over. Sometimes referred to as the holy laws of heaven and earth, the great gods distributed these powers to the lesser gods.

²² Jeffrey L. Cooley, *Poetic Astronomy in the Ancient Near East: The Reflexes of Celestial Science in Ancient Mesopotamian, Ugaritic, and Israelite Narrative History*, Archaeology, and Culture of the Levant 5, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), p.136.

²³ For extensive discussion of the celestial elements of the prayer see Cooley, *Poetic Astronomy in the Ancient Near East*, pp. 130-140.

²⁴ Philip Jones, ‘Embracing Inanna: Legitimation and Mediation in the Ancient Mesopotamian Sacred Marriage Hymn Iddin-Dagan A’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 123, no. 2 (2003): p. 295.

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You rise up, bring yourself down,
great is your valor, O valiant Ištar,
Shining torch (*dipāru*) of heaven and earth,
brilliance of all inhabited lands.²⁵

In the hymns, it is obvious that Ištar as Venus lights up the sky. Several myths also allude either directly or indirectly to her astral significance. Jeffrey Cooley in *Poetic Astronomy in the Ancient Near East* convincingly argues that the Sumerian myth *Inanna and Šukaletuda* depicts the goddess Inanna in her astral manifestation. He asserts that her movements reflect the synodic activity of the planet Venus.²⁶ 'In the context of the story, the wondrous corresponding event within Venus's synodic cycle is the planet's eight-month period of visibility in the west.'²⁷

Inanna and Šukaletuda has several parallels to *Inanna's Descent*. In both myths, the goddess abandons heaven and earth. 'Inanna left heaven, left the earth and climbed up/descended into the KUR to detect falsehood and justice, to inspect the Land closely, to identify the criminal against the just, she went up into the mountains.'²⁸ Here the Sumerian verb ÈD can be used for both descending and ascending. KUR also has variant meanings, as either mountain, earth, or netherworld. Inanna can be understood as either entering the netherworld or the earth; in either reading, Inanna leaves the sky, rendering her somewhere where she is no longer visible. Inanna falls asleep under a tree where a mortal gardener, Šukaletuda, removes her divine garments (i.e., her seven MEs). He then has intercourse with her while she is still sleeping (lines 117-25). Obviously enraged at this violation, Inanna searches for him to seek her revenge. Unable to locate him, she dispatches three plagues to affect humankind and therefore force him out of hiding. 'Šukaletuda thinks he sees a GIDIM, a ghost.' But it is Inanna, 'who, with her eerie, ghost-like

²⁵ Foster, *Before the Muses*, p. 504.

²⁶ Cooley, *Poetic Astronomy in the Ancient Near East*, pp. 161-66. Also see Jeffrey Cooley, 'Inanna and Sukaletuda: A Sumerian Astral Myth,' *Kaskal* Vol. 5 (2008): pp. 161-72.

²⁷ Cooley, *Poetic Astronomy in the Ancient Near East*, p. 172.

²⁸ *Inanna and Šukaletuda*, lines 4-8, Jeremy A. Black, et al., eds., *Inanna and Šukaletuda*, Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature. Oxford 1998), <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/JETCSL>. Cf. *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, lines 4-5.

form seems to be returning from the underworld'.²⁹ If the goddess is returning from the underworld or the horizon, as the planet Venus she must also be in the process of rising or setting.

While she is searching for Šukaletuda she stretches herself out in order to see the entire world at one time. 'With that holy Inanna went out from the Apsû of Eridug. She stretched herself like a rainbow across the sky and reached thereby as far as the earth. She let the south wind pass across, she let the north wind pass across.'³⁰ This action is not astronomically possible for the planet Venus, but the imagery is reminiscent of the Egyptian cosmogonic sky goddess, Nut (even though there is no way to know if it is cogent — there are no depictions similar to Nut from Mesopotamia). Nut, whose body is depicted as stretching over the canopy of the earth, swallows the Sun god Ra in the evening and gives birth to him again each morning. As Nut is also associated with the dead and the netherworld, the comparison with Ištar (and Ereškigal) is warranted, especially as the Mesopotamian conception of the world follows the same cosmic structure observed in Egypt and the other ancient Near Eastern civilizations. A three-tiered system divided the known world into the heavens, the earth, and the netherworld. In Mesopotamia, the heavens were further subdivided into another tripartite structure. At the top was the Upper Heaven where Anu and 300 Igigi (great) gods resided. Below was the Middle Heaven with the Lower Heaven encompassing the sky closest to the earth. On the surface of the Lower Heaven, the stars formed the constellations, which later become the basis for the constellations and the modern zodiac. Included in this geographical region were three great bands of sky, known as Paths of Enlil, Anu, and Ea. The seven ancient planets (the Moon, Sun, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) danced through these paths. As Rochberg wrote, 'In literary texts, the celestial realm of the planetary deities was sometimes denoted by the term "base of heaven", but taken to mean "firmament", as in they installed Sîn, Šamaš, and Ištar to keep the firmament in order'.³¹

Some cuneiform texts also demarcate the earth into three areas. Beneath the earth was the Apsû, a subterranean body of water ruled by Ea/Enki. In the depths of the Lower Earth, under the Apsû, sat the

²⁹ Cooley, *Poetic Astronomy in the Ancient Near East*, p. 168.

³⁰ *Inanna and Šukaletuda*, line 252.

³¹ Francesca Rochberg, 'Mesopotamian Cosmology', in Daniel Snell (ed.), *Blackwell's Companion to the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 324.

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Netherworld. The Babylonians envisioned a flat earth, covered by a dome and surrounded by cosmic waters. Borders of their world were delineated by the path of Šamaš as he progressed through the sky 'from sunrise to sunset'. In the centre of the world, Marduk's temple, the Esagila in Babylon, comprised an *axis mundi* for the ancient Mesopotamian society. Like other temples, it was known as DUR.AN.KI, the 'bond of heaven and earth/netherworld', as it connected the highest level of the heavens to the lowest level of the netherworld.³² The Mesopotamian netherworld is well-known from detailed descriptions in several mythic texts.³³ Numerous terms describe the netherworld. The Akkadian literary term *erkalla* and phrase *eršetu la târi* (land of no return) and the Sumerian words, KUR.NUG.I GANZER, KIR₅, URUGAL/ERIGAL are among the most familiar.³⁴ Accounts of the netherworld reveal a desolate environment where existence is a shadowy version of life on earth.

In *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*, Ereškigal receives dominion over the netherworld as a gift. Her name actually means Queen of the Great Earth, though she resided only over the chthonic realm. As a goddess, Ereškigal 'does not share in the repulsive or fearsome characteristics of other underworld denizens.'³⁵ She reflects the same duality as her sister. At times she is depicted as an impetuous goddess who makes threats when things do not go her way. When angered, her

³² At various points in history under different empires, this centre changed location but was always focused on temples within major cultic cities such as Nippur, Assur, and Isin.

³³ In addition to the Inanna/Ištar descent myths, descriptions of the netherworld are also found in the Mesopotamian texts: *Gilgamesh* Tablet 12, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*, *The Death of Bilgamesh, Nergal and Ereškigal*, *The Death of Ur-Nammu, Ningishzida's Journey to the Netherworld*, and *netherworld Vision of an Assyrian Crown Prince*. For interpretations and description of the Mesopotamian afterlife, see Jo Ann Scurlock, 'Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought', in Jack Sasson (ed.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 3, (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1995), pp. 1883-1893; Jerrold S. Cooper, 'The Fate of Mankind: Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia', in Hiroshi Obayashi, (ed.), *Death and the Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992): pp.19-33; Dina Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2003).

³⁴ Lapinkivi, *The Neo-Assyrian Myth of Ištar's Descent*, pp. 36-37.

³⁵ Neal Walls, 'Desire in Death's Realm: Sex, Power and Violence in Nergal and Ereškigal', in Neal Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death: Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Myth* (Atlanta, ASOR publications, 2001), p. 134.

face grows livid and her lips grow black. ‘She who lies there, she who lies there, Ninazu’s mother (Ereškigal) who lies there – her pure shoulders are not covered with a garment, and no linen is spread over her pure breast. She has fingers like a pickaxe, she plucks her hair out like leeks.’³⁶ In *Nergal and Ereškigal*, lamenting over the loss of her lover, her words echo Ištar’s, ‘I shall raise up the dead, and they will eat the living. I shall make the dead outnumber the living!’³⁷ But she seems a more sympathetic, almost motherly, character when she recounts how she weeps for the dead souls who had to abandon their loved ones too early to now dwell in her netherworld. Little iconographic representation of Ereškigal exists except for perhaps the image on the Burney/Queen of the Night relief displayed at the British Museum. The identity of the nude goddess with wings and talons on this terracotta baked clay plaque is disputed but some suggest that it depicts Ereškigal, rather than her younger sister, Ištar.³⁸

In the *Enūma Eliš*, the Mesopotamian cosmos was created as an orderly and hierarchical structure. Though the netherworld was the cosmic opposite of the heavens, it paralleled the orderly but reversed structure, adhering to the same social organization of those living on earth.³⁹ Corresponding to the functioning of temples on earth, the proper rituals and offerings to the deities were also carried out in the netherworld. Joined by her consort Nergal, Ereškigal’s courtly staff included a female scribe, Bēlet-šēri (mistress of the steppe), her vizier, Namtar (fate), chief porters, cultic functionaries, and gate-keepers. The subterranean netherworld was located below the Apsū at the lowest level of the cosmos. Some texts indicate crossing a river, Hubur, or other waters at the edge of the world in order to reach the netherworld.⁴⁰ This river is perhaps the ‘stream of the great earth’ in the *Address of Marduk to the Demons* which appears to be within the underworld gates.⁴¹ Other sources, however, refer to the river’s lack of water. ‘The river of the

³⁶ *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, lines 199-204.

³⁷ *Ištar’s Descent to the Netherworld*, lines 15-18; *Nergal and Ereškigal*, lines v 9’-12.’

³⁸ Burney Relief, British Museum, #2003,0718.1. See discussion of the artefact in Dominique Collon, *The Queen of the Night* (London: British Museum Press, 2005).

³⁹ Lapinkivi, *The Neo-Assyrian Myth of Ištar’s Descent*, p. 42.

⁴⁰ Horowitz, *Cosmic Geography*, pp. 355-358; Also see *Gilgamesh and Ningizida’s Journey to the Nether World*.

⁴¹ Horowitz, *Cosmic Geography*, pp. 356-357.

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netherworld produces no water, no water is drunk from it. The fields of the netherworld produce no grain, no flour is eaten from it. The sheep of the netherworld produce no wool, no cloth is woven from it.'⁴²

At the far end of each horizon, mountains called the 'guards of Heaven and the netherworld' barricaded the entrances. Fearsome scorpion-men 'whose terror was dread and glance was death' guarded the gates of these twin mountains.⁴³ An incantation text recalls other demons at mountains: 'They are seven (demons) who were born in the Dark Mountains (The Mountain of Sunset). They are seven demons who were raised in the Bright Mountains (Mountain of Sunrise)'.⁴⁴ Demonic beings also resided in the netherworld. Fifteen demonic hybrid human-animal monsters are encountered inside the netherworld in *The Netherworld Vision of an Assyrian Crown Prince*.

Though travel was one-way for humankind, demons and gods could descend and return to earth. Ghosts too had means of leaving the 'land of no return'. One of the alternative routes available to the gods was through the 'Stairway of Heaven', which led directly from the gates of heaven to the gates of the underworld.⁴⁵ Several astral deities visited the netherworld. For example, Šamaš, in his role of divine judge, descends daily beyond the western horizon into the netherworld. He then ascends the mountain of sunrise in the morning. The Moon god Sin also rested there at the end of the month.⁴⁶ That is, the Sun and the Moon are in conference in the netherworld during the invisibility of the Moon at the end of the month. The identity of the night sky with the netherworld stems from an understanding that the celestial sphere steadily rotated from east to west, bringing the stars and other heavenly bodies from the netherworld into the Upperworld.⁴⁷

In *Gilgamesh*, tablet 12, lines 83-87, Gilgamesh opens a hole directly from the city of Uruk into the netherworld to bring up the ghost of his friend, Enkidu. To reach Ereškigal's palace Egalginga (the

⁴² *Ningishzida's Journey to the Netherworld*, lines 29-31.

⁴³ *Gilgamesh*, tablet 9, lines 37-45.

⁴⁴ Horowitz, *Cosmic Geography*, p. 332.

⁴⁵ *Nergal and Ereškigal*, line 14.

⁴⁶ Wolfgang Heimpel, 'The Sun at Night and the Doors of Heaven in Babylonian Texts', *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* Vol. 38, (1986): p.146.

⁴⁷ Christopher Woods, 'At the Edge of the World: Cosmological Conceptions of the Eastern Horizon in Mesopotamia', *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions*, Vol. 9, no. 2 (2009): p 209.

everlasting palace) one must pass through seven gates.⁴⁸ ‘Let the bolts of the gate of the underworld, the seven of them, be set down. Let the doors of the underworld palace be opened individually. In this passage, all seven gates are located in É.GAL.GANZER [the palace *ganzer*], demonstrating that these gates belong to a single gate complex [a gatehouse with 7 gates] rather than seven separate gate complexes in seven concentric walls, or seven gates spread out along the circumference of the underworld.’⁴⁹ Beyond the gates are twelve double doors which presumably lead into Ereškigal’s palace. In *Inanna’s Descent* (lines 73-76), the goddess arrives at the Palace of Ganzer which was at the entrance of the netherworld.⁵⁰ ‘The presence of palaces, a house/temple, a courtyard, and perhaps even a temple-tower in the underworld demonstrates that the region was conceived as a great temple complex.’⁵¹ At each gate, an adornment or article of clothing must be removed, perhaps as an offering to Ereškigal.⁵²

In ancient Mesopotamia there was no distinction between astrology and astronomy. Scholars, scribes, and diviners looked to the skies as they observed, recorded, collated, and predicted astral phenomena.⁵³ Almost every planetary situation, such as occurrences of planetary movement, rising and setting times, first and last visibility, stationary and retrograde points, was documented. With such a large corpus of cuneiform material, scholars have ample evidence to understand the Babylonian conceptions of the heavens and the cosmos.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ *Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld* and *Nergal and Ereškigal* list the names of each gate: Nedu, (En)kishar, Endashurimma, (E)nuralla, Endukuga/Nerubanda, Endushuba/Eundukuga, and Ennugigi.

⁴⁹ Horowitz, *Cosmic Geography*, p. 358

⁵⁰ Niek Veldhuis, ‘Entering the Netherworld’, *Cuneiform Digital Library Bulletin*, Vol. 6 (2003):1-4. The word GANZER is used in other texts to describe the entire netherworld

⁵¹ Horowitz, *Cosmic Geography*, p. 351.

⁵² See *The Death of Ur Nammu*, lines 76-87 where Ur Nammu presents gifts to seven chief porters of the netherworld.

⁵³ For relationship and difference between astrology and astronomy in ancient Mesopotamia, see Simo Parpola, ‘Mesopotamian Astrology and Astronomy as Domains of the Mesopotamian Wisdom’ in Hannes D. Galter (ed.), *Der Rolle der Astronomie in den Kulturen Mesopotamiens* (Graz, 1993), pp. 47-59.

⁵⁴ See Ulla Koch, *Divination Texts: Conversations with the Gods. Sources from the First Millennium BCE* (Winona Lake, Eisenbraunns, 2015) for a survey of astronomical texts.

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One of the most famous collections of celestial omens is the *Enūma Anu Enlil*. The series contains some seven thousand celestial omens recorded on seventy tablets. The most complete collection was unearthed among the extensive library of Assyrian King Aššurbanipal at Nineveh (7th century B.C.E.). The *Enūma Anu Enlil* became standard reference work on Mesopotamian astral omens throughout Babylonian history. Like other Mesopotamian literature, the *Enūma Anu Enlil* derives its name from the opening words of the mythological introduction: 'When Anu, Enlil, and Ea, the great gods, established by their true decision, the designs of heaven and earth, the increase of the day, the renewal of the month, and the appearances (of celestial bodies), (then) humankind saw the Sun going out from his gate and (the celestial bodies) regularly appear in the midst of heaven and earth.'⁵⁵

The *Enūma Anu Enlil* is systematically divided into four categories, corresponding to four gods: Sîn, Šamaš, Adad and Ištar. In the section of lunar phenomena (Sîn), eclipses, lunar visibility, halos, and conjunctions with fixed stars and planets were recorded. The Šamaš section listed solar phenomena of a similar nature. Adad is concerned with weather and meteorological phenomena. The last section, Ištar, deals with fixed stars, the five lesser planets, meteors and comets. It also inventories optical observations of the planets, including Venus, such as its brightness, dimness, or colours. This section of the series contains the largest group of Venus omens (Tablets 59-63) – of special concern for movements of Ištar as Venus is the 'Venus Tablet of Ammišaduqa' (*Enūma Anu Enlil* Tablet 63). The tablet chronicles eight-year cycles of the planet Venus observed during twenty-one years of the reign of the Old Babylonian King Ammišaduqa. It should be noted, however, that while the tablets refer to celestial events in Ammišaduqa's reign, our only surviving texts are copies dating from the much later Assyrian era (ca. 720-704 B.C.E.).

Tablet 63, in which Venus is deemed 'the most exalted or brightest of all the stars (*nabât kakkabāni*), lists observational records of approximate dates for four phenomena: the heliacal risings and settings of Venus, recording the first visibilities and invisibilities of Venus in the east and west.⁵⁶ The Venus cycle includes six events. Venus' first visibility in the east, first stationary point in the east, then last visibility in

⁵⁵ Francesca Rochberg, *In the Path of the Moon. Babylonian Celestial Divination and Its Legacy* (Leiden, Brill, 2010), p. 219.

⁵⁶ See David Pingree, 'Venus Phenomena in Enuma Anu Enlil', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 104, no. 3, (2014): pp.73-87.

the east. This pattern repeats with the west: first visibility in the west, stationary point in the west, and last visibility in the west. Tablet 63 describes one synodic period of Venus as approximately 584 days. 'Venus changes its KI.GUB for nine months in the East, for nine months in the West.'⁵⁷ Recording the last visibility in the east until first visibility in the west, the texts state that Venus was invisible for a little over two months, and first visible in the west until last visibility in the east was eight months. It remained invisible in the summer for as little as three days, and there was an eight-month period of visibility in the west.

Though the tablets have been criticized as unreliable for usage in determining absolute Babylonian chronology as its astronomical observation of Venus is problematic for several reasons, this exact precision does not matter for mythical comparisons – Venus still sets, is invisible for a period, and rises regularly.⁵⁸ Some of the omens are simple, while others are more complicated. For instance, under the heading: 'Venus set in the west', we find omens such as: 'If Venus keeps a stable position: the days of the ruler will be long; there will be truth in the land. If Venus moves in the path of Ea and stands: the gods will have peace for the Westland'.⁵⁹

The descent myths have been interpreted widely. One of the earliest interpretations was the dying-rising god motif. Inspired by the work of James G. Frazer, the study of ritual patterns became popular among ancient Near Eastern and biblical scholars.⁶⁰ Using comparative studies of religion, folklore, and anthropology, these scholars attempted to find similarities in the cultural patterns of the ancient Near East. The Myth-and-Ritualists contended that a homogenous myth-ritual pattern was originally developed in Mesopotamia and spread through the rest of the ancient Near East and the ancient Mediterranean. They argued that

⁵⁷ Pingree, 'Venus Phenomena', p. 82. KI.GUB, meaning station or position, is a technical term for the position of the star when it is first visible.

⁵⁸ Vahe G. Gurzadyan, 'The Venus Tablet and Refraction', *Akkadica*, Vol. 124 (2003): pp. 13-17.

⁵⁹ Hermann Hunger, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1992), no. 5, line 8.

⁶⁰ James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1911). For myth and ritual in the Ancient Near East, see Samuel H. Hooke, *Myth and Ritual: Essays on the Myth and Ritual of the Hebrews in Relation to the Cultural Pattern of the Ancient East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933); Samuel H. Hooke, *The Origins of Early Semitic Ritual* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 10-22; Edwin O. James, *Myth and Ritual in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1958).

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myth and ritual were inseparable in early civilizations with ritual representing the dramatization or symbolic enactment of the myth. Myths are recited at festivals to explain and validate an accompanying ritual; (i.e., ritual is the action and myths are the spoken part of the ritual). In the case of *Inanna's Descent*, the god Dumuzi/Tammuz died, was lamented by Inanna/Ištar, and semi-annually resurrects. Theodore Gaster later argued that the dying and rising god myth fits a larger seasonal pattern.⁶¹ Among Near Eastern and classical myths, advocates of the dying-rising god theory have found parallels in the Greco-Syrian Adonis, the Egyptian Osiris, the Ugaritic Baal-Mot, and Greek Persephone.⁶² Other scholars have suggested an archaeological interpretation. For example, Ištar's jewellery and other adornments removed at each gate are related to funerary offerings and gifts to enter the netherworld. Grave goods in early Mesopotamian burials were intended for use in the netherworld.⁶³ Symbolic meanings of the artefacts unearthed in burial sites such as nude female figurines, stamp seals, and with star iconography may represent Inanna/Ištar, and relate to rites of passage and funerary rituals performed in the tombs.⁶⁴ Giorgio Buccellati, claiming that the myth is geographical in nature, argues that the story represents the ritual journey of Inanna's cult statue through her cities.⁶⁵ The most common interpretation, however, is that the myths represent an aetiology of death, burial, and afterlife, revealing that the netherworld, like death, corresponds to a place with no return.

Some scholars have suggested that the Inanna/Ištar descent myths reflect the periodic disappearance and reappearance in the evening sky of Venus. For example, Cooley states, 'I have little doubt that that Venus's setting and rising – or, more accurately, the time between these two phenomena – inspired the Sumerian story and its later Akkadian

⁶¹ Theodore Herzl Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

⁶² See Trygvve Mettenger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: Dying and Rising Gods in the Ancient Near East* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2001), pp.185-215.

⁶³ Caitlín E. Barrett, 'Was Dust their Food and Clay their Bread? Grave Goods, the Mesopotamian Afterlife, and the Liminal Role of Inana/Ishtar', *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): pp. 7-65.

⁶⁴ Nicola Laneri, 'The Discovery of a Funerary Ritual: Inanna/Ishtar and Her Descent to the Nether World in Titriş Höyük, Turkey', *East and West* Vol. 9 (2002): pp. 9-51.

⁶⁵ Giorgio Buccellati, 'The Descent of Inanna as a Ritual Journey to Kutha?', *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies*, Vol. 4, no. 3, (1982): pp. 3-7.

version.⁶⁶ Most agree that specific timed movements in the myth cannot be correlated with identical movements of the planet nor tied to any precise astronomical event. Similarly, we are not asserting any exact correlation, only that the astral significance is more prominent than previously realized.

The existence of astral symbolism is demonstrated throughout the myth by examining the language and words describing the goddess' movements and actions.⁶⁷

1. *ana kurnugi qaqqari lā târi*
2. *ištar mārat sîn uzunša [iškun]*
3. *iškunma mārat sîn uzu[nša]*
4. *ana bīti eṭē šubat irkalla*
5. *ana bīti ša ēribūšu lā ašû*
6. *ana harrāni ša alaktaša lā tayyārat*
7. *ana bīti ša āšibūšu zummû nū[ra]*
8. *ēt eklētu kakkabu ul uša*

1. To the mountains on the horizon, place of no return
2. Venus, daughter of Sîn (the Moon) set her mind
3. the daughter of Sîn did set [her] mind
4. to the dark house (i.e., night sky), the seat of Irkalla,
5. to the house, where (stars) set and do not rise
6. on the path where movement is in one direction
7. to the house where those who dwell are deprived of light
8. to the dark house where no star comes out.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Cooley, *Poetic Astronomy in the Ancient Near East* p. 162, note 235; also Katz, *Image of the Netherworld*, pp. 95-96. Katz notes, 'We can attribute to Inanna a descent to the netherworld in her astral image as the planet Venus. Venus disappears twice during a cycle of 19 months and thus, it can explain the first part of *Inanna's Descent*', p. 274; Horowitz, *Cosmic Geography*, p. 353; Heimpel, 'Near Eastern Venus Deities'; Kurtik, 'The Identification of Inanna'; Sołtysiak, Arkadiusz, 'Betrayed Lovers of Ištar: A Possible Trace of the 8-Year Venus Cycle in Gilgameš VI:i-iii', in M. Blomberg and G. Henriksson (eds), *Calendars, Symbols, and Orientations: Legacies of Astronomy in Culture. Proceedings of the 9th Annual Meeting of the European Society for Astronomy in Culture (SEAC)* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2003), pp. 101-106.

⁶⁷ The following analysis is primarily from the Akkadian version.

⁶⁸ This line is only found in the Middle Assyrian Version. See Lapinkivi, *The Neo-Assyrian Myth of Ištar's Descent*, p. 23.

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In the opening verses of the Akkadian version, the noun *kurnugi* (line 1) can refer to either the netherworld or to the mountains on the horizon of the earth, therefore Ištar can be seen as Venus moving towards the horizon, and to a 'dark house' where stars cannot rise (lines 4, 5, and 8). The common Akkadian verb, *erebūm*, meaning 'to enter' is also used to describe planets when they enter constellations and paths. It is used to refer to the setting of the Sun who does enter and exit the Netherworld.⁶⁹ Similarly the verb *ašū*, 'to come out, emerge' when used with planets or stars means 'to rise'. For example, 'people bow down at your rising, Šamaš' and 'whenever the Sun rises'.⁷⁰ In line 6, Ištar's destination is on a path where movement is in one direction. In line 12 the goddess arrives at the gate of the netherworld, *ištar ana bāb kurnugi ina kašādīša*. The verb *kašādum*, while meaning 'to arrive', is used in measurements of arrival in astronomical texts, as in the phrase 'the planet Venus will reach Virgo'.⁷¹ For our myth, Venus has now reached the gate of the horizon. Here she meets the gatekeeper and demands to be allowed to enter, threatening to smash down the doors and rise the dead to devour the living, if her wish is not granted. In the Sumerian version, she identifies herself in a celestial manner, saying 'I am Inanna of the place where the Sun rises. I am Inanna going to the east'.⁷² 'She refers to herself as the planet Venus on the way from the western evening sky to the eastern morning sky. In modern terminology, this journey is known as inferior conjunction. It is a time when the planet is invisible for about one week.'⁷³ The gatekeeper then tells Ereškigal that her sister Ištar is at the gate. (Line 26: *annītu mē ahātaki ištar [izzaz ina bābi]*) When used in reference to celestial bodies, the word, *uzzuzum* implies that the planet has stopped moving and stands in a stationary position. For example, 'Mercury stood still in Leo', and 'Mars became stationary and stopped'.⁷⁴ Reading line 26 in an astral sense, Venus is standing stationary in the sky.

One of the most difficult phrases to translate is *keppē rabūti* (great rope/jumping rope) in line 27, *mukiltu ša keppē rabūti dālihat apsī mahar*

⁶⁹ 'erebu', in Ignace J. Gelb, et al, (eds.), *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago = CAD*, 21 vols., (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956-2010), p. 269.

⁷⁰ 'ašū', *CAD* A2, p. 367

⁷¹ 'kašādu', *CAD* K, pp. 274-275.

⁷² Line 78: KI^dUTU.ED₂

⁷³ Heimpel, 'Venus', p. 10.

⁷⁴ 'uzzuzu,' *CAD* U, pp. 376-378.

ea šarri. Benjamin Foster translates it as ‘she who holds the great play-ropes, who roils up the deep before Ea the king’,⁷⁵ while Stephanie Dalley contends that it is some sort of whipping top, ‘Who holds the great *keppê*-toy, Stirs up the Apsu in Ea’s presence [. . .]?’.⁷⁶ Pirjo Lapinkivi also refers to it as a whipping top; ‘the holder of the great whipping tops, the one who roils the Apsu in front of Ea, her father’.⁷⁷ He notes that the verb *dalahu*, ‘to roll, stir up (in water)’ implies that the goddess is moving in some sort of whirling or fluctuating manner, revealing her irritation and her destructive behaviour.⁷⁸ Rather than indicating Ištar’s destructive behaviour, perhaps the description signifies the inconsistent behaviour of the planet Venus. To the ancient Mesopotamians, Venus’ behaviour may have seemed erratic or inconsistent. Moving more swiftly through the sky as an inner planet, she is behind the Sun from three to ninety days at a time and then reappears again on the other horizon. If she moves erratically in the skies, she would do the same in the Apsû.⁷⁹

Gates play a prominent role in the netherworld and in the Heavens. ‘Celestial gates were essential to the proper functioning of the cosmos, not only for Šamaš but also for Sîn and for the five planetary deities, Venus-Ištar, Jupiter-Marduk, Mercury-Nabû, Saturn-Ningirsu and Mars-Nergal, who were seen to enter and leave the sky at regular intervals’.⁸⁰ Gatekeepers regularly opened and closed these gates for the deities. ‘Just before sunrise, the gatekeepers thrust open the gates to the heavens in anticipation of the Šamaš’s ascent’.⁸¹ A similar picture is envisioned in the myth. Line 39 reads *illik atû iptâšši bābšu*, ‘Off went the gatekeeper and opened [his] gate for her’. In the netherworld, Ištar must relinquish an article of her clothing to the gatekeeper at each of the seven gates. The removal of her adornments symbolizes the loss of her divine power and radiance (*mêlammu*). This is more clearly envisioned in the Sumerian descent myth: ‘She took the seven divine powers. She collected the divine powers and grasped them in her hand. With the good divine

⁷⁵ Foster, *Before The Muses*, p. 403.

⁷⁶ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 155. note. 6.

⁷⁷ Lapinkivi, *The Neo-Assyrian Myth of Ištar's Descent*, p. 29.

⁷⁸ Lapinkivi, *The Neo-Assyrian Myth of Ištar's Descent*, pp. 49-54.

⁷⁹ Some texts confuse the Apsu with the netherworld. For example, in *Erra and Ishum* the Anunnaki reside in in Apsu instead of the underworld. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, pp. 293.

⁸⁰ Huxley, ‘The Gates and Guardians in Sennacherib’, p. 113.

⁸¹ Woods, ‘At the Edge of the World’, p. 21.

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powers, she went on her way'.⁸² As Ištar moves through each gate, the Mesopotamians may have thought that Venus gradually loses its brilliance as the planet prepares to become invisible. This imagery is seen in an early Sumerian hymn where Ištar's body is clothed in astral symbolism as she receives her divine decrees:

Enlil gave me the heavens and he gave me the earth.
I am Inana! He gave me lordship, and he gave me queenship.
He gave me battles and he gave me fighting.
He gave me the storm wind and he gave me the dust cloud.
He placed the heavens on my head as a crown.
He put the earth at my feet as sandals.
He wrapped the holy garment around my body.
He put the holy sceptre in my hand.⁸³

At the first gate, the gatekeeper removes her *agâ rabâ*, great crown (line 43, *ištēn bāba ušēribši-ma umtašši ittabal agâ rabâ ša qaqqadīša*). The word *agû*, when used in reference to astral bodies, describes the halo the planets wear, their appearance at first visibility, or a particular celestial phenomenon wherein the light from a bright star or planet is refracted in the atmosphere.⁸⁴ In astronomical texts the verb *tabālu*, to remove or carry away, commonly refers to a star entering a period of invisibility or disappearing.⁸⁵ For example, *innamirma ša kunnu mâte [ša] sulum ilāniša niršitu ikšudamma itbal*. 'In order to appease the gods, she (Venus) reached the hypsoma and (then) disappeared.'⁸⁶ Bringing her through this first gate, he removes the 'halo' from her head and prepares her to enter a period of invisibility. At the next six gates, Ištar surrenders her earrings, beaded necklace, toggle pins, bracelets, girdle of birthstones, and finally her clothing. Though no exact astral parallel is apparent, her necklace of lapis lazuli beads recalls the image of a rainbow in the sky. In the myth of *Gilgamesh*, after the flood, Ištar removes her lapis lazuli

⁸² *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, lines 14-16.

⁸³ *Inanna Hymn F*, lines 4-13, Black, *Inanna Hymn F*, Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature. Oxford 1998), <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/ETCSL>.

⁸⁴ See Cooley, 'I Want to Dim the Brilliance of Shulpae!', p. 182.

⁸⁵ 'tabālum', *CAD T*, p. 20.

⁸⁶ *Esarhaddon 57* (I 9'-ii 5) translated by Rochberg, *In the Path of the Moon. Babylonian Celestial Divination and Its Legacy*, p. 149.

necklace, and possibly places it in the sky as a reminder never to forget.⁸⁷ The multi-coloured beads and the oval necklace form a colourful band in the sky. With the goddess dead in the netherworld, her vizier dresses in mourning clothes and weeps before the gods, Sîn and Ea. This weeping and mourning corresponds to several Venus omens. ‘If Venus disappears in the east in Nisan (March-April) from the 1st to the 30th day: there will be wailings in the land.’ “Wailings” are weepings. This is bad for Elam’.⁸⁸

In order to rescue Istar from Ereškigal, Ea creates Aşûšunamir. Aşûšunamir, whose name means ‘his appearance or rising is brilliant’ refers to the rising of a celestial body.⁸⁹ Istar’s body is revived and she is allowed to leave the netherworld. The gatekeeper brings her out of each gate in reversal order as her entry and returns her divine belongings. Lines 119-125 repeat the phrase, *bāba ušēšišima utterši...* (he brought her through the gate and returned to her...). As mentioned earlier, the verb *aşû* can indicate a celestial rising, and though the verb *tāru*, to return, is used here to designate her items, *tāru* also has the sense of putting something back in a previous position or to reinstate.⁹⁰ The gatekeeper is assisting her to rise while restoring her to her previous station as the morning star.

As we have illustrated, numerous astral interpretations and symbolism appear in the descent myths, particularly in the Akkadian version of *The Descent of Istar to the Netherworld*. The myth, which retells the journey of the goddess as she descends under the horizon into the netherworld and then reappears in the heavens some time later, loosely parallels the movements of the planet Venus. The long history of this remarkable story from its early Sumerian renditions in its multiple versions, with a focus on the seasonal aspects of Inanna and Dumuzi, to the more concise Akkadian myth, shows a significant number of celestial parallels. Perhaps the first millennium Akkadian myth demonstrates greater celestial language because by this time in Mesopotamian history,

⁸⁷ *Gilgamesh* Tablet 11, lines 162-169. A parallel passage occurs in *Atrahasis*, ‘Then she [Nintu] approached the big flies which Anu had made and was carrying... Let these flies be the lapis lazuli around my neck; That I may remember it every day and forever’. *Atrahasis* Tablet 3, lines, v. 4.6-6.4.

⁸⁸ Hunger, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings*, no. 145, line 5. Also no. 56, lines 1-3, ‘If Venus disappears in the east in Nisan from the 1st to the 30th day: there will be wailings in the land’.

⁸⁹ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p.161.

⁹⁰ ‘*tāru*’, *CAD T*, pp. 250-279.

28 Ištar's Journey: Above and Below'

while extispicy was still known, astronomy/astrology had become the preferred divination method. While Venus disappearing in the east was a bad omen, her rising called for joy. 'If Venus at her rising ... [...] the land will become hap[py].'⁹¹ Similarly, Inanna/Ištar's disappearance in the east (the netherworld) results in infertility and destitution on Earth. It is only when she rises again that prosperity is restored. Adding an astral perspective to the traditional seasonal or afterworld interpretations helps us to understand the not only the Babylonians' worship of their deities but also the worship of the stars.

⁹¹ Hunger, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings*, no. 403, r., lines 1-2.