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REVIEWS

Bidmead, J

**THE *AKĪTU* FESTIVAL. RELIGIOUS CONTINUITY AND ROYAL
LEGITIMATION IN MESOPOTAMIA. Ed. Gorgias Press. New Jersey. 2002.**

Published just recently, the book by Julye Bidmead presents us a new and interesting update on the religious and political background of the Babylonian New Year Festival, the *akītu*. Bidmead carries out an in-depth and careful revision of the respective theories on the subject by previous scholarship, in which authors such as Frankfort, Van der Toom, Zimmern and Pallis are included. This results in new perspectives and aspects to take into account in analysing the *akītu* as a consequence of a historical, social, political and religious reality.

The book does not present just one criterion for this analysis, on the contrary, it combines different sources that have improved our knowledge of the Babylonian New Year Festival. Among these sources we undoubtedly consider the corpus of texts concerning the *akītu* belonging to different periods and cultural areas, as well as the valuable indirect information gained from the comparison between the Babylonian festival and the New Year celebrations of some other cultures, such as the Arabian, the Hebrew, the Egyptian or the Roman culture.

Nevertheless, Julye Bidmead focuses her study on the Neo-Babylonian period, but this does not mean that other later and previous evolving phases of the New Year festival have not been considered. However, the main target of this study is simply to point out the true sense and meaning of the *akītu* in the Neo-Babylonian period, and in fact, the historical commentary of this time is also considered and included in this book, helping us understand and contextualise this manifestation of religious nature and political background which is the Babylonian New Year festival.

In its mainly monographical approach, the book presents a structure that reflects the development of complete and methodical research on the subject. Despite including numerous and interesting anthropological, political and religious reflections about the nature and other implications of the festival, the contents of this book, which are clear and well organised, are not only accessible for scholars, but also for beginners when assessing ideological and religious considerations of Mesopotamian antiquity.

Although the aim of the book is not only to conduct a historical analysis, it includes historical comments arising from the exegesis of the textual sources that depict the accomplishment of the New Year celebration, which are various and rarely close in time. With all these elements, and also with the author's own cultivated reflections, this study tries to get over some doubts or gaps in our understanding of crucial aspects in connection with the symbolism and nature of the *akītu*, as well as to discuss several arguments that have been held to defend theories such as the duplicity of festivals in honour of Marduk and Nabû.

Furthermore, the detailed description of the different steps followed in the celebration of the festival during its attested twelve days is as interesting as the sociological and anthropological approaches previously mentioned. Moreover, J. Bidmead sums up in a simple way how the Babylonian calendar works, and the specific location of the days marked because of the celebration of the *akītu* in the month of Nisannu.

In such a way, thanks to contemporary and later documentation, we can follow the different stages in the accomplishment of the ritual in Babylon, and so, stress the

crucial role played by the clergy and the Babylonian ruler, and at the same time, the importance attributed to the gods and goddesses in this nationally relevant festival.

Yet, the author not only reproduces what the sources tell us, she also analyses the symbolism of crucial ritualistic elements in the celebration of the *akītu*, such as the recitation of the *Enuma Eliš*, the parade to the *bīt akīti*, the *hieros gamos* and, finally, the taking of the hand of the god, expressed by means of the Akkadian formula *qāt Bēl Sabātum*. This last element is treated with special interest by the author, including a linguistic and ideological study on this documented ritual, which proves to clarify various aspects and so lead to better understanding of the ritual symbolism and the meanings inherent in such formula.

Apart from the ideological, political and religious analysis and the remarks made about the previous work of other scholars on the same subject, we also find room in this book for questions of great interest, that obviously are linked to the celebration of the *akītu*, such as the function and the role played by the Babylonian temples during the festival, which are the *Esagila* and the *bīt akīti*, whose main role is clear in the New Year festival, but is a little hazier during the remainder of the year.

As we have already mentioned, the author adds to the analysis of the texts and the sociological and anthropological studies, the comparative analysis of the celebration of several New Year festivals that seem to share certain similarities but also present important differences connected with the nature and idiosyncratic features of their cultures. As well as the Seleucid Sacaea and the roman Saturnalia, the links of similarity and divergence between the Hebrew New Year festival, depicted in the Old Testament, and the Babylonian *akītu* are treated in further depth to reveal the truth about some of the topics that have encouraged some specialists to relate both festivals closely, limiting this connection to an exclusively agrarian basis.

To sum up, we can conclude that *The Akītu Festival* by Julye Bidmead is a publication which should be consulted by all those interested in the Babylonian New Year festival because of its anthropological and ideological approach. This approach, added to the analysis of the varied information obtained from the textual sources, offers an interesting viewpoint of the *akītu* as a religious celebration of remote tradition which is also yet another instrument for royal legitimation. The same tradition is a clear manifestation of the propaganda and language of power used by the leading groups in society in antiquity, that were to survive even to the last days of the Mesopotamian Babylon.

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