

Nergal and Ereškigal

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Entry tags: Ancient Western Asia, Mesopotamian Religions, Divine functions, Divine powers, Semitic, Ancient Western Asia, Death conceptions, Religious Group, Cosmic domains, Text, East Semitic, Ancient Mesopotamian Text, Language, Afro-Asiatic, Akkadian

"Nergal and Ereškigal" is an Akadian literary composition focused on describing how Nergal became ruler of the Netherworld, the Mesopotamian cosmic domain of the dead, traditionally ruled by the goddess Ereškigal. Two main versions of this narrative are presently known: the earlier one was found in Amarna (Egypt), and though it was probably written down during the mid-15th century BCE, the copy exhumated is dated to the 14th century BCE (Pettinato 2000: 5, 47). As for the later version, which is considered the standard one, it is known through two copies, one from Sultantepe (Turkey) dated to the 8th-7th centuries BCE, and another from Uruk (Iraq), dated to circa 500 BCE. Throughout time, several specialists proposed the translation of these versions, such as Gurney (1960), Dalley (1989, revised 2000), Izre'el (1997), Pettinato (2000) or Ponchia and Luukko (2013). Though they differ in length, both versions describe how there was a divine banquet in heavens to which Ereškigal could not attend, as she could not leave her domain. She therefore sent her divine assistant, Namtar, who is received by all deities with the necessary protocolar respect. Yet, one god, Nergal, did not paid his respects, which was considered a great offense to Ereškigal. In the shorter Amarna version (circa 90 lines), the queen of the dead swears to kill him, to which Nergal, with the help of his father, the god of wisdom, Ea, responds by attacking that realm assisted by several daimōnes. He succeeds in taking Ereškigal from her throne, and as he was ready to kill her, she persuaded him to become her spouse and therefore to become lord of the Netherworld. The longest standard version (circa 350 lines) tells a different story, though the outcome is similar: sent by Anu to the Netherworld to apologize for his protocolar faux pas, Nergal is instructed by Ea to not engage in some acts while there, which included not having sex with Ereškigal. Yet, after resisting a first time when faced with her seductive naked figure, while she is getting ready to bathe, during a second sight, Nergal cannot control his desire, and the two passionately embrace. The couple shares the bed for 6 days and 6 nights, but when the seventh day arrives, Nergal leaves her, and returns to the heavenly domain. Angry, as she does not want to be separated from him, Ereškigal sends Namtar to get him back. After some trouble in identifying Nergal (as he was protected by Ea's action), Namtar finally finds him, bringing him back to the Netherworld. This time, Nergal violently bursts through the 7 gates of that domain, quickly arriving at Ereškigal's presence. He then grabs her by her hair and takes her to bed. Again, they spend 6 days and 6 nights together, and at the arrival of the seventh day, in a rather fragmentary passage, Anu seems to blesse their union/marriage, and as such, Nergal becomes ruler of the Netherworld. This narrative displays parallelisms with other Sumero-Akkadian compositions, such as "Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld", as some of the formulae used are practically the same, especially in what concerns the way the Netherworld is first described ("as a place of no return") as well as in the threat Ereškigal makes if Nergal does not return to her company (of "raising the dead"). Also, the instructions Ea gives Nergal, before he goes to the Netherworld, are quite similar to the ones this deity gives to the creatures he moulded to save Inanna's from the imprisonment (death!) on that cosmic domain, in "Inanna's Descent to the netherworld", as well as the instructions the famous Urukian hero gives Enkidu in Tablet XII of the "Gilgameš Epic" (Almeida 2023: 302-303). Also, as Abusch (1986:186) first noted, there are some parallels between the Amarna's version passage where Ereškigal persuades Nergal to become her husband, and the episode narrated in Tablet VI of the "Gilgames Epic", where Ištar proposes to the eponymous hero. Nevertheless, though evoking and using several (older) traditions, this composition seems to have been created circa mid-second millennium BCE to accommodate the change in the Netherworld throne, which until the Old Babylonian period seemed to belong solely to Ereškigal (Bottéro and Kramer 1989: 454; Katz 2003: 404-420; 2005:82-83).



Date Range: 1600 BCE - 500 BCE

Region: Mesopotamia2

Region tags: Middle East, Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia

Status of Readership:

✓ Elite ✓ Religious Specialists

Sources and Corpora

Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Ponchia, Simonetta, and Mikko Luukko. 2013. The standard Babylonian myth of Nergal and Ereškigal: introduction, cuneiform text and transliteration with a translation, glossary and commentary (SAAC) Helsinki : The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project
- Source 2: Pettinato, Giovanni. 2000. Nergal ed Ereškigal: il poema assiro-babilonese degli inferi. Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei
- Source 3: Dalley, Stephanie. 2000 (revised edition). Myths from Mesopotamia. Oxford University Press

Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <https://assyriologia.fi/natcp/saact/>
- Source 1 Description: State archives of Assyria cuneiform texts

Online Corpora

Relevant online Primary Textual Corpora (original languages and/or translations)

- Source 1 URL: <https://archive.org/details/the-amarna-scholarly-tablets/page/n9/mode/2up>
- Source 1 Description: The Amarna version, translated by Shlomo Izre'el (p. 51-59)

General Variables

Materiality

Methods of Composition

– Incised or Inscribed



Method of inscription

– Other [specify]: Stylus

Medium upon which the text is written/incised

– Clay

↳ Clay object
– Clay tablet

↳ Type of clay
– Type of clay: I don't know

Was the material modified before the writing or incising process?

– Physical preparation

Was the text modified before the writing or incising process?

– Physical preparation

Location

Is the text stored in a specific location?

[Note at which point in time, for reference, if known; select all that apply]

– Yes

Notes: The manuscripts and copies were probably part of several ancient archives/libraries' collections.

↳ Tomb
– I don't know

↳ Cemetery
– I don't know

↳ Temple
– I don't know

↳ Shrine
– I don't know

↳ Altar
– I don't know

- ↳ Devotional marker
 - I don't know
- ↳ Cenotaph
 - I don't know
- ↳ Church
 - No
- ↳ Mosque
 - No
- ↳ Synagogue
 - No
- ↳ Triumphal Arch
 - No
- ↳ Monument
 - No
- ↳ Mass Gathering Point
 - I don't know
- ↳ Cave(s)
 - I don't know
- ↳ Hilltops
 - I don't know
- ↳ Other natural sanctuaries
 - I don't know
- ↳ Boundary markers or lines
 - I don't know

↳ Domestic contexts
– I don't know

↳ Library/archive
– Yes

↳ Specify
– Specify: N/A

Is the location where the text stored accompanied by iconography or images?
– I don't know

Is the area where the text is stored accompanied by an-iconic images?
– I don't know

Production & Intended Audience

Production

Is the production of the text funded by the polity?
– Field doesn't know

Is the text considered official religious scripture?
– Field doesn't know

Notes: There are no data that allow us to speak of a definite religious canon ("official religious scripture") for the religious system of ancient Mesopotamia.

Written in distinctly religious/sacred language?
– No

Intended Audience

What is the estimated number of people considered to be the audience of the text
This should be the total number of people who would serve as the intended audience for the text.
– I don't know

Does the Religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members?
– No

Are there clear reformist movements?

(Reformism, as in not proselytizing to potential new conservative, but "conversion" - or rather, reform - to the "correct interpretation"?)

— No

Is the text in question employed in ritual practice?

— I don't know

Notes: As far as I know, it was not used in any specific ritual. However, religious ritual practices in ancient Mesopotamia were not always specified in written/iconographic data.

Is there material significance to the text?

— No

Context and Content of the Text (Beliefs and Practices)

Context

Is the text itself accompanied by art?

— I don't know

Are there multiple versions of the text?

— Field doesn't know

Is the text part of a collection of texts?

— Field doesn't know

Notes: There are other Sumero-Akkadian compositions that show intertextual traces and some inter-influences. However, it's not clear whether they were intended as a collection, in the modern sense of the term

If the text is not explicitly scripture, is it part of another important literary tradition?

— Yes

↳ Cultural with religious implications?

— Yes

Notes: On the conceptualization of cosmic domains; and on the conceptualization of death.

↳ Behavioral literature?

— Yes

Notes: The seduction of Nergal by Ereškigal and their sexual relationship can be seen as

seductive behavioral.



Other

—Other [specify]: No

Content

Is the text - or does the text include - a ritual list, manual, bibliography, index, or vocabulary?
(Select all that apply)

—Other [specify]: No

Are there lineages or a single lineage established by the text?

— No

Does the text express a formal legal code?

— No

Formulating a specifically religious calendar?

— No

Beliefs

Is a spirit-body distinction present in the text?

— I don't know

Is belief in an afterlife indicated in the text?

— Yes



Is the spatial location of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group?

— Yes



Afterlife in specified realm of space beyond this world?

— Yes

Notes: yes, clearly subterranean.



Afterlife in vaguely defined "above" space?

— No

↳ Afterlife in vaguely defined "below" space?

– No

Notes: It is clearly stated that is "below"

↳ Afterlife in "other" space?

– No

↳ Is the temporality of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group?

– Yes

Notes: It is states that the beings that inhabited that space have dust as food, which can allude to years passing by hence dust has settled.

↳ Is there debate in the interpretation of the language of the afterlife?

– No

Is belief in reincarnation in this world specified in the text?

– No

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses dicated in the text?

– No

Does the text indicate if co-sacrifices should be present in burials?

– No

Does the text specify grave goods for burial?

– No

Are formal burials present in the text?

– No

Are there practices that have funerary associations presented in the text?

– No

Are supernatural beings present in the text?

– Yes

↳ A supreme high-god is present

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god is anthropomorphic or described in anthropomorphic terms

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god is a sky deity

– Yes

Notes: Anu is the sky god

↳ The supreme high god is chthonic (of the underworld)

– No

↳ The supreme high god is fused with the monarch (king=high god)

– No

↳ The monarch is seen as a manifestation or emanation of the high god

– No

↳ The supreme high god is a kin relation to elites

– No

↳ The supreme high god has another type of loyalty-connection to elites

– No

↳ The supreme high god is unquestionably good

– I don't know

Notes: It seems in this composition. Yet, Mesopotamian deities are almost always depicted as both orderly and chaotic

↳ Other features of the supreme high god

–Specify: Attentive

↳ The supreme high god has knowledge of this world

– No

Notes: The narrative takes place only within the heavenly domains and the netherworld. Yet, Mesopotamian deities have knowledge of every aspect of the cosmos.

- ↳ Has deliberate causal efficacy in the world
 - No
 - Notes: The narrative takes place only within the heavenly domains and the netherworld. Yet, Mesopotamian deities have power over every aspect of the cosmos.
- ↳ Indirect causal efficacy in the world
 - Yes
 - Notes: The composition changes the rulership of the netherworld, which has implications on the human ritual sphere
- ↳ Exhibits positive emotion
 - Yes
- ↳ Exhibits negative emotion
 - Yes
- ↳ Possesses Hunger?
 - Yes
 - Notes: Anu is, with the rest of the divine assembly, in a banquet.
- ↳ Can be hurt?
 - No
 - Notes: Not in this composition
- ↳ Can be tricked?
 - No
 - Notes: Not in this composition
- ↳ Can be imprisoned?
 - No
- ↳ Is it permissible to worship supernatural being other than the high god?
 - Yes
- ↳ The supreme high god possesses/exhibits some other feature
 - Specify: Attentive; protector

↳ The supreme high god communicates with the living

– No

Notes: Not in this composition

↳ Does the text make communication with supreme high-god possible?

– No

Notes: The narrative takes place without referring human beings.

Previously human spirits are present

– No

Notes: Though, implicitly the immaterial/spectral component of the deceased are present, given that the Netherworld is the cosmic domain of the dead

Non-human supernatural beings are present

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings can be seen

– Yes

Notes: I am assuming all other deities, besides Anu

↳ Supernatural beings can be physically felt

– No

Notes: Not in this composition, but yes, if assuming all other deities, besides Anu

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge of this world

– No

Notes: Not in this composition, but yes, if assuming all other deities, besides Anu

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have deliberate causal efficacy in the world

– No

Notes: Not in this composition, but yes, if assuming all other deities, besides Anu

↳ Non-human supernatural beings communicate with the living according to the text?

– No

Notes: Not in this composition, but yes, if assuming all other deities, besides Anu

↳ These supernatural beings have indirect causal efficacy in the world

– Yes

Notes: Not in this composition, but yes, if assuming all other deities, besides Anu

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit positive emotion

– Yes

Notes: I am assuming all other deities, besides Anu

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit negative emotion

– Yes

Notes: I am assuming all other deities, besides Anu

↳ These supernatural beings possess hunger

– Yes

Notes: I am assuming all other deities, besides Anu. They all participate in the divine banquet.

↳ These supernatural beings possess/exhibit some other feature

– Specify: Ereškigal is angry, sad, has sexual pleasure, is in love for Nergal. Ea is wise, Nergal is violent, courageous, but also afraid of the netherworld. Namtar is loyal to his mistress, Ereškigal.

Does the text attest to a pantheon of supernatural beings?

– Yes

↳ Organized by kinship based on a family model?

– Yes

↳ Organized hierarchically?

– Yes

↳ Power of beings is domain specific?

– Yes

Notes: Sometimes, there are some overlaps and shared power over a specific domain. In fact, this composition is a clear example of this change/overlap.

↳ Other organization of pantheon?

– Specify: Yes. Yes. The pantheon was also organized by cosmic functions and roles of deities.

Are mixed human-divine beings present according to the text?

– I don't know

Notes: The daimones, in the amarna version, can be hybrid creatures

Is there a supernatural being that is physically present in the/as a result of the text?

– No

Are other categories of beings present?

– Other [specify]: Daimones in the Amarna version

Does the text guide divination practices?

– No

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present in the text?

– No

Notes: The narrative takes place in a context with no references to human beings.

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment in the text?

– No

Notes: The narrative takes place in a context with no references to human beings.

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards in the text?

– Yes

↳ Is the cause/purpose of supernatural rewards known?

– Yes

↳ Done only by high god

– Yes

Notes: In the standard version Anu seems to bless the union/marriage of Nergal and Ereškigal, and as such Nergal becomes lord of the nether world.

↳ Done by many supernatural beings

– Yes

Notes: In the Amarna's version, to save her own life, Ereškigal offers her throne and herself as wife of Nergal. He accepts and becomes lord of the nether world.

↳ Done through impersonal cause-effect principle

– Yes

↳ Done to enforce religious ritual-devotional adherence

– No

↳ Done to enforce group norms?

– No

↳ Done to inhibit selfishness?

– No

↳ Done randomly

– Yes

Notes: The gaffe that looks like it will be punished, leads to a series of events that ends up by a reward, as Nergal becomes lord of the nether world.

↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in the afterlife?

– No

Notes: The narrative takes place in a context with no references to human beings.

↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in this lifetime?

– No

Notes: The narrative takes place in a context with no references to human beings.

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present in the text?

– No

Is an eschatology present in the text?

– No

Norms & Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the text?

– Yes

Notes: Protocol behaviour when attending receptions (the divine banquet).

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious text?

– I don't know

Are there centrally important virtues advocated by the text?

– Yes

↳ Honesty/trustworthiness/integrity

– No

↳ Courage (in battle)

– No

↳ Courage (generic)

– Yes

Notes: Though Nergal is first depicted as scared to go to the Netherworld, he has the enough courage to go (even if with the assistance of his father, Ea)

↳ Compassion/empathy/kindness/benevolence

– No

↳ Mercy/forgiveness/tolerance

– No

↳ Generosity/charity

– No

↳ Selflessness/selfless giving

– No

↳ Righteousness/moral rectitude

– No

↳ Ritual purity/ritual adherence/abstention from sources of impurity

– Yes

Notes: Ea's instruction on Namtar's behaviour when in the Netherworld

↳ Respectfulness/courtesy

– Yes

Notes: When all but Nergal pay respect to Namtar

↳ Familial obedience/filial piety

– Yes

Notes: Namtar tries to obey Ea's instructions. Although he fails when he is seduced by Ereškigal, he first tries to resist, and fulfils the remaining

↳ Fidelity/loyalty

– Yes

Notes: Namtar towards Ereškigal

↳ Cooperation

– Yes

Notes: Ea and Nergal

↳ Independence/creativity/freedom

– No

↳ Moderation/frugality

– No

↳ Forbearance/fortitude/patience

– No

↳ Diligence/self-discipline/excellence

– No

↳ Assertiveness/decisiveness/confidence/initiative

– Yes

Notes: Ea's action in advising Nergal and in protecting him.

↳ Strength (physical)

– Yes

Notes: Nergal's action on both versions show strenght (when bursts into the Netherworld)

- ↳ Power/status/nobility
 - Yes
 - Notes: The respect before Ereškigal's messenger, Namtar.
- ↳ Humility/modesty
 - No
- ↳ Contentment/serenity/equanimity
 - No
- ↳ Joyfulness/enthusiasm/cheerfulness
 - No
- ↳ Optimism/hope
 - No
- ↳ Gratitude/thankfulness
 - No
- ↳ Reverence/awe/wonder
 - Yes
 - Notes: From Namtar, the divine assistant of Ereškigal, towards her
- ↳ Faith/belief/trust/devotion
 - No
- ↳ Wisdom/understanding
 - Yes
 - Notes: Ea's instructions.
- ↳ Discernment/intelligence
 - Yes
 - Notes: Ea's instructions
- ↳ Beauty/attractiveness
 - Yes
 - Notes: Ereškigal's beauty, when going to bathe

- ↳ Cleanliness (physical)/orderliness
 - Yes
 - Notes: Ereškigal is depicted as bathing

- ↳ Other important virtues
 - No

Advocacy of Practices

Does the text require celibacy (full sexual abstinence)?

– No

Does the text require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence)?

– Yes

- ↳ Monogamy (males)
 - No

- ↳ Monogamy (females)
 - No

- ↳ Other sexual constraints (males)
 - Yes
 - Notes: No sexual activity from Nergal, while in the Netherworld.

- ↳ Other sexual constraints (females)
 - No

Does the text require castration?

– No

Does the text require fasting?

– Yes

Notes: Nergal should not eat, while on the netherworld

Does the text require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods)?

– No

Does the text require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations?

– No

Does the text require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of adults?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of children?

– No

Does the text require self-sacrifice (suicide)?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of property/valuable items?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of time (e.g. attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.)?

– No

Does the text require physical risk taking?

– No

Does the text require accepting ethical precepts?

– No

Does the text require marginalization by out-group members?

– No

Does the text require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household)?

– No

Does the text require participation in large-scale rituals?

– No

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present as indicated in the text?

– I don't know

Does the text employ fictive kinship terminology?

– I don't know

Does the text include elements that are intended to be entertaining?

– Yes

↳ Drama?

– Yes

↳ Comedy?

– Yes

↳ Tragedy?

– No

↳ Epic entertainment?

– No

Does the text specify sacrifices, offerings, and maintenance of a sacred space?

– No

Institutions & Production Environment of Text

Society & Institutions

Society of religious group that produced the text is best characterized as:

– Other

Are there specific elements of society that have controlled the reproduction of the text?

– Other

Are there specific elements of society involved with the destruction of the text?

– Other

Welfare

Does the text specify institutionalized famine relief?

– No

Does the text specify institutionalized poverty relief?

– No

Does the text specify institutionalized care for elderly & infirm?

– No

Other forms of welfare?

– No

Education

Are there formal educational institutions available for teaching the text?

– Yes

Are there formal educational institutions specified according to the text?

– No

Does the text make provisions for non-religious education?

– No

Does the text restrict education to religious professionals?

– No

Does the text restrict education among religious professionals?

– No

Is education gendered according to the text?

– No

Is education gendered with respect to this text and larger textual tradition?

– I don't know

Does the text specify teaching relationships or ratios? (i.e.: 1:20; 1:1)

– No

Are there specific relationships to teachers that are advocated by the text?

– No

Are there worldly rewards/benefits to education according to the text specified by the text itself?

– No

Bureaucracy

Is bureaucracy regulated by this text?

– No

Public Works

Does the text detail interaction with public works?

– No

Taxation

Does the text specify forms of taxation?

– No

Warfare

Does the text mention warfare?

– No

Food Production

Does the text mentioned food production/disbursement?

– No

Bibliography

General References

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Reference: Nergal and Ereškigal, Almeida, Isabel Gomes de. "The Mesopotamian Domain of the Dead and Its Constraints to Divine Transcendental Power". In *Time and Space*, 301-7. London, UK: CRC Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003260554-44>.

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