ASSYRIAN PROPHECIES, THE ASSYRIAN TREE, AND THE MESOPOTAMIAN ORIGINS OF JEWISH MONOTHEISM, GREEK PHILOSOPHY, CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY, GNOSTICISM, AND MUCH MORE

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Simo Parpola’s Assyrian Prophecies is the latest and longest presentation of the author’s theory that much of Judeo-Christian theology and Greek philosophy can already be found in first-millennium B.C. Assyrian sources. This review article, while concurring that some roots of these phenomena may indeed be found in ancient Mesopotamia, disagrees strongly with the author’s methodology and conclusions.

The appearance in 1993 of Simo Parpola’s “The Assyrian Tree of Life,” an article whose subtitle promised to trace “the origins of Jewish monotheism and Greek philosophy” back to the religious beliefs of ancient Assyria, generated considerable excitement in the scholarly community. In a series of articles since then, Parpola has spelled out and developed the consequences of his ideas for Assyrian governance, Mesopotamian astrology and astronomy, and Gilgamesh. The hundred-plus-page introduction to Assyrian Prophecies represents a restatement of Parpola’s radical interpretation of Assyrian religion in the context of a small corpus (edited, translated and annotated in less than fifty pages) of oracular prophecies from (mainly) the goddess Ishtar to or about the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon (680–669 B.C.) and Assurbanipal (668–627 B.C.). While still maintaining that the tree is “the central symbol of the cult” (p. xv), the new presentation focuses, naturally enough, on the role of Ishtar, “the Holy Spirit” (p. xxvi), and the messianic role of the Assyrian king as “God’s Son and Chosen One” (p. xxxvi).

Despite the excitement and surprise generated by Parpola’s original and subsequent articles, his ideas have not been directly confronted in print, although a panel was devoted to them at the 1996 American Oriental Society meeting in Philadelphia. In its rebuttal there, Parpola was unmoved by the largely critical contributions of the panelists. The present review article will recapitulate the criticisms of his theories that I made in Philadelphia, and evaluate the revised version presented in the introduction to Assyrian Prophecies.

Simo Parpola is a scholar with impeccable credentials, editor of the State Archives of Assyria series, and the foremost expert of his generation on Neo-Assyrian. If he could make the case for a Mesopotamian pedigree of the twin foundations of Western Civilization, “Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy,” it would radically alter our understanding of the formative influences of our civilization, and the field of Assyriology would be moved from the margins of the humanities to a position of central importance. However, a careful reading of Parpola’s articles and the introduction to Assyrian Prophecies reveals arguments that are often circular and flawed, in which, by virtue of an enthusiastic presentation, what remains to be proved is transformed into evidence for a construct that resembles doctrine more than theory.

THE ASSYRIAN TREE

Parpola’s insistence that the Assyrian Tree is a symbol of central importance is undeniable, at least regarding the palace decoration of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.) and Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.) and Assyrian seals, nor can there be any doubt that it influenced neighboring cultures. Where Parpola went wrong, at the outset of his initial article, was to assume that “the almost total lack of relevant textual evidence” concerning the Tree implies that the symbolism of the Tree was esoteric doctrine. First, attempts to interpret Mesopotamian iconography are all too often stymied by lack of textual evidence, as are attempts to find in iconography items

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2 Parpola 1993a: 165.
Fig. 3. Glyptic Variants of Assyrian Tree; Parpola 1993a: 200.
4. "Central" to "this doctrine was the concept of the heavenly perfect man sent for the redemption of mankind, materialized in the institution of kingship" and expressed in the myth by Tammuz. The king was "the earthly representative of God ... and an incarnation of the saviour god, Ninurta/Nabû."

5. "The idea of perfection embodied in the king implied total purity from sin, implicit in the soul's divine origin and personified in the figure of the goddess Mullissu . . . the Assyrian equivalent of the Holy Spirit. . . . The mother-child relationship between the Goddess and the king . . . is a constantly recurrent theme in the prophecies."

6. "The king's perfection . . . made him god in human form and guaranteed his resurrection after bodily death. . . . he was a Christ-like figure loaded with messianic expectations both as a saviour in this world and in the next."

7. "The central symbol of the cult was the cosmic tree connecting heaven and earth, which contained the secret key to the psychic structure of the perfect man and thus to eternal life." The tree and other symbols "served to give visual form to basic doctrines of the cult while at the same time hiding them from outsiders, and thus amounted to a secret code . . . encouraging meditation. . . ."

8. "Beside transcendental meditation, the worship of the Goddess involved extreme asceticism and mortification of flesh . . . and other ecstatic techniques" which "could result in altered states, visions and inspired prophecy."

9. "The cult of Istar, whose roots are in the Sumerian cult of Inanna, has close parallels in the Canaanite cult of Asherah, the Phrygian cult of Cybele and the Egyptian cult of Isis. . . . The similarities between Assyrian and biblical prophecy . . . can thus be explained as due to the conceptual and doctrinal similarities of the underlying religions, without having to resort to the implausible hypothesis of direct loans or influences one way or another."

10. "The affinities with later Hellenistic and Greco Roman religions and philosophies must be explained correspondingly. These systems of thought were . . . directly derived from earlier ANE traditions . . . all of them had been significantly influenced by Assyrian imperial doctrines."

Before elaborating on these points, Parpola adds a revealing explanation of his methodology in "reconstructing the religious and doctrinal background" of the proph-ecies. He compares it to "the piecing together of a giant jigsaw puzzle. The 'pieces' of the puzzle were the data found in the corpus, supplemented by those found in other Mesopotamian sources . . . The 'cover picture' used as an aid in analyzing, interpreting and piecing together these disconnected and fragmentary bits of evidence was the comparative evidence provided by related religious and philosophical systems, some of which survive to the present day . . . and can thus be better understood as coherent systems" (pp. xvi f.). Here we see the same flawed logic found in "The Assyrian Tree": if a "piece" of Assyrian data resembles a bit of the "cover picture," a bit of another religious or philosophical system, then the Assyrian "piece" is assumed to symbolize ideas similar to those in the other system. Parpola then adds a puzzling disclaimer which appears self-contradictory: "while the comparative evidence has certainly played an important role in the reconstruction process . . . it plays only a marginal role in the reconstruction itself, which in its essence is firmly based on Assyrian evidence" (p. xvii).

ASSYRIAN MONOTHEISM

An example of what Parpola actually does with "comparative evidence" can be found on the very next page. In one of the oracular prophecies (1.4), instead of the usual "I am Istar," the oracle speaks first as Bêl, then as Istar, and finally as Nabû. While unique in this corpus, it does not seem terribly problematic. Either the oracle is reporting messages from all three gods, or, perhaps, Istar, usually the sole deity invoked by the oracle, is speaking in the name of the other gods. But for Parpola, it means that the three gods are in fact one, and it follows that "one cannot help being reminded of the Holy Trinity of Christianity" (p. xviii); ten pages later Parpola refers to the "Assyrian trinity" of this same oracle. This trinity fits into Parpola's notion, already set forth in "The Assyrian Tree," that, as he puts it in Assyrian Prophecies, although "on the surface . . . Assyrian religion, with its multitude of gods . . . appears to us as polytheistic, on a deeper level it was monotheistic, all the diverse deities being conceived of as powers, aspects, qualities or attributes of Aššur, who is often simply referred to as '(the) god'" (p. xxi).

In Mesopotamian traditions, the divine assembly presided over by the chief deity (An, Enlil, or both, and later Marduk or Aššur) is ancient, and influenced or is part of the same cultural-religious complex as the Judeo-Christian image of God presiding over a heavenly court of celestial beings, but Parpola uses the formal similarity of a heavenly assembly as evidence that Assyrian religion was as monotheistic as Judaism and Christianity (pp. xxi f.). On the one hand, there is an argument to be made: human destiny and the fate of the world in ancient
Mesopotamia were decided by the gods with little or no conflict among them, despite the few notorious divine disagreements known from mythology. For a Mesopotamian, "the god" and "the gods" were essentially that same divine power that determined destinies. But, on the other hand, to lump this together with later monotheisms that make the oneness of God a cornerstone of their theology would render the notion of monotheism so general as to be virtually meaningless.

**IŠTAR: THE HOLY SPIRIT?**

Parpola’s interpretation of the trio Bel (the father)—Nabû (the son)—Istar in oracle 1.4 as the Assyrian trinity would seem to founder on the figure of Istar, a goddess of war and carnal love. But Parpola interprets her martial aspects as an aspect of her role as mother and protector of the king, and her sexuality as a metaphor for the degradation of the soul prior to its redemption (pp. xxxi f.); a hymn depicting Istar as sexually insatiable is understood as an argument for the futility of “fleshy pleasures” (p. xxvii). For Parpola, Istar is the Holy Spirit, thus completing the Assyrian trinity, which then, not unsurprisingly, is a perfect parallel to the Holy Trinity of Christianity.

Parpola makes much of the superficial similarity of the Descent of Istar with the gnostic myth of the Fall of Sophia, which portrays the descent and defilement of the soul and its later salvation. Again, the formal similarity of the descent and ascent of Istar and Sophia is seen as license to endow Istar with all the qualities of the Neoplatonic Cosmic Soul, and to interpret the Descent of Istar as addressing “the question of man’s salvation from the bondage of matter” (p. xxxi). A more cautious reader would explain the similarities in the myths as the persistence of old Near Eastern patterns of myth into the Hellenistic period, and the similarities Parpola aduces between the figures of Istar and Sophia can likewise be understood as the persistence of ancient aspects of the great goddess of the Orient. But there is no reason and certainly no textual basis for reading gnostic doctrine back into Assyrian and earlier Mesopotamian material.

**THE MESSIAH KING**

Both in the oracles and in the Assyrian royal inscriptions the king is sometimes portrayed as the son of the goddess and/or nursed and raised by goddesses, which Parpola connects to the more general notion of the king as having been formed by the gods in his mother’s womb and chosen there for kingship, which he understands to mean that the king was “a semi-divine being... an article of faith comparable to the Christian doctrine of the immaculate conception of Christ” (pp. xxxix f.). The notion of divine birth and/or a divine wetnurse and nanny for the king goes back to the middle of the third millennium in Mesopotamia. It began before the deification of kings, continued through the period of deified kings, and survived into the periods after 1800 B.C. when kings were no longer deified. One might argue that it was more than just a metaphor for the divine selection of the king, and this notion of divine selection was certainly an important component of Mesopotamian kingship, but to term it “an article of faith” and compare its importance to the virgin birth in Christianity is both anachronistic and overdrawn in the extreme.

According to Parpola, “the god-born god-chosen Assyrian king corresponds to the Egyptian pharaoh... and to the Jewish Messiah.” But suddenly, he backtracks: “not every king came to be viewed as, or had to play the role of a god-chosen Messiah” (p. xli). He then focuses on the particular circumstances of Esarhaddon’s accession, which he interprets as raising messianic expectations “comparable to the one preceding the appearance of Jesus 700 years later.” These specific circumstances, then, gave rise to “the massive prophetic movement in his support” which was “likely to have been unique” (p. xli). It is as if the exuberant system-builder suddenly gave way to the sober philologist, who realized that his corpus of prophetic oracles was limited to Esarhaddon and, to a lesser extent, his son, Assurbanipal, and could not himself imagine an entire line of Messiah-kings ranging from (at least) Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207 B.C.) to Assurbanipal. But there is nothing in the texts Parpola publishes to suggest a “massive prophetic movement”; there is only a small corpus of oracles and the mention of prophetic oracles in Esarhaddon’s royal inscriptions. What is “unique” is that these oracles were recorded. Since the presence of “prophets” in Assyria at the

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32 See Enannatum’s Stela of the Vultures [v] (Cooper 1986: 34). Assurbanipal’s insistence that he “knew no father or mother, and grew up in the lap of [his] goddessess” (Parpola 1997: xi) would have been familiar to Guznea of Lagash a millennium and a half earlier. For discussion and literature, see Fluckiger-Hawker 1999: 406.

33 The comparison with Jesus is pushed much further in the notes: “The numerous points which the descriptions of Jesus’ career in the gospels have in common with Assyrian royal ideology are too obvious and consistent to be dismissed as accidental... Jesus himself understood the figure of the Messiah in terms of Mesopotamian royal ideology and his own mission in terms of Michael/Ninurta’s fight against sin” (p. cii n. 211).
temple of Ištar at Kalhu is documented as early as the thirteenth century B.C. (p. xlvii), Assyrian prophecy must have been, as Parpola points out, "basically oral [in nature]" (p. xiv). That a small group of prophetical oracles for Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal was uniquely committed to writing is deserving of explanation, but to imagine them the product of messianic fervor seems to be barking up the wrong tree.

ASSYRIAN PROPHETS AND PROPHECIES

The term for the prophets who were the vehicles for the divine oracles was raggimú (fem. ragginúta) in Neo-Assyrian dialect, which replaced the standard Akkadian term, muḫḫu, attested already in the late third millennium, which occurs in Middle Assyrian sources and even in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions written in Standard Babylonian (pp. xlv f.). Whereas muḫḫu “ecstatic” refers to the altered state of the prophet when inspired and proclaiming the oracle, ragginú derives from ragámú “to make noise, shout,” which refers to the prophet’s delivery. It “immediately reminds” Parpola of

John the Baptist, “the shouting one,” and . . . Elijah, who epitomize the idealized picture of biblical prophets as ascetics living in the “wilderness.” Indeed, there is evidence that asceticism and seclusion from the world played a significant role in the life of Assyrian prophets. In oracle 9 the prophetess presents her concern for the life of the king as the exertions of Gilgamesh . . . where the hero roams the desert as an ascetic clad in animal skins, again recalling the biblical figures of Elijah and John the Baptist. (p. xlv)

Whether the word ragginú would “immediately” remind anyone who was not looking for him of John the Baptist is questionable, but even if the connection is granted between the Neo-Assyrian term and the style of delivery of John and even Elijah, the asceticism of the Baptist and the Hebrew prophet cannot as a consequence be retrojected back onto the Neo-Assyrian ragginú. The passage from oracle 9 that Parpola brings as evidence says nothing about the life of the prophetess, but rather tells of the goddess’ efforts in protecting the king:

I roam the desert desiring your life. I cross over rivers and oceans, I traverse mountains and mountain chains, I cross over all rivers. Droughts and showers consume me and affect my beautiful figure. I am worn out, my body is exhausted for your sake. (p. 41)

Finally, the comparison between Gilgamesh (not mentioned in the oracle, but the allusion is clear) mourning his friend Enkidu and seeking eternal life for himself,34 only to end up glorifying the achievements and pleasures of this world, and the Jewish and Christian figures, brings little to the understanding of any of them, other than that they all roamed the wilderness at one time or another. Parpola is desperately but unsuccessfully seeking evidence for asceticism among the prophets of Ištar because of his interpretation of Ištar as the Holy Spirit and her cult as one of remuneration rather than of excess.

The oracles themselves are edited and translated with the thoroughness and care characteristic of the SAA series. The special affection of the series’ editor-in-chief for these texts is evident: unlike the other volumes of the series, there is elaborate philological annotation (would that we had it in the other volumes!), and there are clear and legible photos of every tablet. The annotation itself is an exotic hybrid that combines the brilliant philology and historical insight for which Parpola is justly famous, with numerous biblical references, some apt and others seemingly gratuitous. To cite just one example, the goddess says in oracle 2.5, “I am your father and mother. I raised you between my wings; I will see your success.” In the notes, Parpola cites Isaiah 66:13: “As a mother comforts her son, so will I myself (Yahweh) comfort you.” Aside from the word “mother,” what do the two statements have in common? In the first, Ištar asserts that she is the unique parent of the king who has raised him. In the second, Yahweh compares his comforting to that of a mother, but does not at all claim to be one.

I will leave discussion of the edition to specialists in Neo-Assyrian dialect and first-millennium religion. Parpola is correct to insist on the literary quality of the oracles (p. lxi), as can be seen from the passage cited two paragraphs earlier, with its rhythm, parallelism, and imagery, as well as its allusion to the Gilgamesh Epic. He also rightly stresses the Mesopotamian roots of prophecy, which cannot be considered an “import from the west” (p. xiv), but despite certain expected parallels in language, the spare Assyrian oracles can’t begin to approach the loquacity or eloquence of the Hebrew prophets.35 The comparison, mentioned in the preceding paragraph, of oracle 2.5 with Isaiah 66:13 serves as illustration. In the Assyrian oracle, the image of the goddess as protecting parent extends for a few short lines and is dropped.

34 See George 1999 for the most recent and best translation of the Gilgamesh Epic.

35 The relationship between Assyrian and biblical prophecy is well put by Nissinen (1998: 172): “the Assyrian sources make it possible to observe the beginnings of a development similar to that, which in the case of the Hebrew Bible, has generated the biblical prophetic literature.”
In Isaiah 66, verse 13 is part of a long, elaborate image, beginning in verse 7, of Zion, with Yahweh’s assistance, giving birth to her people. And despite the obvious commonalities in the prophetic traditions of the two ancient Near Eastern cultures, the monotheism of the prophets cannot be read into Assyrian religion, nor is there any equivalence in the king-friendly (“fanatic emperor-centric zeal”; p. xiv) Assyrian oracles to the critical voice of the opposition that pervades so much of Hebrew prophecy.

**Rhetoric and Discourse**

Even those who have not read Parpola’s original exposition of his theories in “The Assyrian Tree” are, from the citations in the discussions above, by now aware of the breathless quality that pervades it, the excitement and zeal with which the argument is pursued, an enthusiasm that goes beyond that which we have normally come to expect in Assyriological scholarship. The author hailed a major discovery that is the key to Mesopotamian religion and Assyrian government, and that is the source of the most important ideas in Jewish, Christian, and Greek traditions:

Zoroastrianism, Pythagoreanism, Orphism, Platonism, Jewish monotheism. . . . the backbone of Assyrian and kabbalistic monotheism, the Tree diagram, was part and parcel of the Deuteronomic religion as well. As soon as it is realized that the Biblical image of God, epitomized in the diagram, is but a copy of an Assyrian model, there is nothing unique in Jewish monotheism to differentiate it from its Assyrian predecessor. . . . The same applies to Christianity with its doctrine of the Trinity, God the Father, the Holy Ghost, Unity of the Father with the Son, etc., all of which are derived from the Assyrian religion and philosophy.

Further on we are told that “the basic doctrines of the Tree had already spread to India by the early third millennium B.C. via Proto-Elamite intermediaries.”[39] The reader is left dizzy by sweep of Parpola’s claims, and is dazzled by the breadth and depth of the annotation. In subsequent publications, the initial enthusiasm has been somewhat muted (although there is still plenty of “striking,” “remarkable,” and “immediately reminded of”), but as the preceding discussion of Assyrian Prophecies has made clear, the scope of Parpola’s claims remains undiminished, and the copious annotation, reflecting the mastery of an enormous bibliography and from which one learns so much (if, nevertheless, remaining unconvinced by the argument the notes are intended to support), continues unabated.

In the end, we must conclude that Parpola is impelled by an agenda, conscious or not, that transcends Assyriology and has entered into a realm removed from the terrain of familiar scholarly discourse. That curious demos Zeitgeist might be up to some end-of-the-millennium mischief: Wilfred Lambert began this decade with a discussion of Marduk monotheism.[40] In 1992 Giorgio Buccellati suggested that pre-Sargonic Akkadian religion was ancestral to Hebrew monotheism;[41] and in 1993, the year that Parpola announced that the cult of Assur was the model for Yahwistic monotheism, J.-M. Durand wrote that Adad of Aleppo was the prototype for both Marduk and Yahweh, and A. Finet found Yahweh himself at Mari.[42] And all this from hard-core Assyriologists, not Old Testament scholars gleaning in Assyriological fields!

Or perhaps there is some kind of not-necessarily-Assyrian triumphalism at work here. Does the following passage from Parpola’s article on “Mesopotamian Astrology and Astronomy” betray the ultimate roots of Parpola’s Tree? Speaking of the bit rinku ritual, he writes: “Embedded in the cycle are beautiful hymns and prayers closely resembling Biblical psalms. In fact, some of them are so beautiful that in translation they could easily be mistaken for Biblical verses.”[43] Parpola’s preface to Assyrian Prophecies suggests a profound personal stake in the origin of “Christian beliefs,” and a reader might wonder if the author did not consider it providential that his decades of study of ancient Assyria eventually led him to unlock the mysteries of Judeo-Christian monotheism. Note, too, how very forced is the following statement from an excursus to “The Assyrian Tree”: “It should be stressed that just as Christ and the Father are one, so is triumphant Ninurta/Nabû one with his Father.”[44] This christological line is much more pervasive in Assyrian Prophecies, with its “Christ-like” Assyrian

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[36] However sublime it may be at times, poetic imagery in both Sumerian and Akkadian is characteristically brief. The genius of Hebrew and Greek poetry is in the exquisite development of the imagery, so that in comparisons between an Akkadian hymn and a biblical psalm, or Gilgamesh and Homer, the Akkadian always comes out looking the poorer.

[37] The only criticism of the king comes in oracle 3.5, where the goddess complains about the king’s ingratitude and demands larger offerings.

[38] Parpola 1993a: 190 n. 107.


[40] Lambert 1990.


and thirteen index entries for "Jesus" and sixteen for "Christ." Although at times Parpola explains certain perceived similarities between Assyrian religion and other later traditions as due to the influence of the Assyrian empire, at other times he refers to "the conceptual and doctrinal similarities of the underlying religions, without having to resort to the implausible hypothesis of direct loans or influences one way or another." But then how to explain such similarities, reaching back into the early second millennium at least and extending from Egypt and Greece to India, if not by providential revelation or partial revelations whose fullest expression is to be found in gnostic Christianity and kabbalistic Judaism?

It is characteristic of Parpola's "Assyrian Tree" that the sentence just quoted comparing Nabû and Marduk with Christ and the Father is followed by a very insightful remark on the relationship between the divine chariots of Marduk/Ninurta/Enlil and God's chariot throne in Ezekiel and later Merkabah mysticism. Parpola has done a splendid job in elucidating many facets of Assyrian mysticism and prophecy and their influence on later traditions. He gives full credit to those before him who have noted the Mesopotamian origin of various aspects of later religious traditions, and he has uncovered much that is new. I have always regarded Simo Parpola as one of the most brilliant of my own generation of Assyriologists, and nothing in this critique diminishes either the great respect and admiration I have for his scholarly achievements or the high personal regard in which I hold him. I fully believe with Parpola that "Mesopotamian religion and philosophy are not dead but still very much alive in Jewish, Christian, and Oriental mysticism and philosophies," but I do not for a moment accept that "The Tree diagram provides the key which makes it possible to bridge these different traditions and to start recovering the forgotten summa sapientia of our cultural ancestors," or that Tammuz died "for the redemption of all the fallen souls ... and his death can be regarded as a token of God's love for all mankind in the same sense as Christ's redemptory death." For this reader, it is too good to be true.

References


Articles

GEORGE KHAN, The Verbal System of the Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Arbel .................................................. 321

SALEH SAID AGBA, Abū Muslim's Conquest of Khurasan: Preliminaries and Strategy in a Confusing Passage
of the Akhbār al-dawlah al-Abbāsiyyah .................................................. 333

ROBERT H. GAŠMAN, Understanding Ancient Chinese Society: Approaches to rén 人 and min 民 ..................... 348

CAROL E. REED, Tattoo in Early China .................................................. 360

LAMOND WESTBROOK, Babylonian Diplomacy in the Amarna Letters .................................................. 377

Review Articles

WILLEM VELDUIJS, Sumerian Proverbs in their Curricular Context .................................................. 383

TIMOTHY C. WONG, Commentary and Xiao Shuo Fiction .................................................. 400

EDWIN GEROW, India as a Philosophical Problem: McKim Marriott and the Comparative Enterprise ............. 410

HEROLD COOPER, Assyrian Prophecies, the Assyrian Tree, and the Mesopotamian Origins of Jewish Monotheism,
Greek Philosophy, Christian Theology, Gnosticism, and Much More .................................................. 430

Brief Communication

M.G. PAPKOV, Zippalanda and Ankuwa Once More .................................................. 445

Reviews of Books .................................................. 449

Brief Reviews of Books .................................................. 491