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Review: Assyrian Prophecies, the Assyrian Tree, and the Mesopotamian Origins of Jewish Monotheism, Greek Philosophy, Christian Theology, Gnosticism, and Much More

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# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 Ištar 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 Ištar, "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 his 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 Phila-

delphia, 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.<sup>2</sup> 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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This is a review article of: *Assyrian Prophecies*. By SIMO PARPOLA. State Archives of Assyria, vol. 9. Helsinki: HELSINKI UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997. Pp. cxxi + 84, illustrations, 13 plates.

<sup>1</sup> Parpola 1993b, 1995, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Parpola 1993a: 165.

commonly mentioned in texts. Artists and intellectuals did not necessarily share the same conceptual vocabulary, and texts often neglect to mention the most obvious or most trivial, what could be assumed without being said.<sup>3</sup> Second, as Parpola himself noted, Mesopotamian esoteric knowledge *was* written down; we have it, even if we do not always understand why certain texts were classified “secret” (*niširtu, pirištu*) by the ancients.<sup>4</sup> And we have in written form the Assyrian rituals and prayers for those moments of greatest danger to king and country; we even have the texts that unlock the mystic significance of the names of god.<sup>5</sup> There is absolutely no indication that the ancients were reluctant to write down anything, no matter how sacred or how secret.

The assumption that something of seeming importance unmentioned in the textual record was necessarily top secret is unjustified, and this kind of faulty reasoning is found elsewhere in “The Assyrian Tree.” For example, Tablet XII of the Akkadian Gilgamesh Epic is a translation of the second half of a Sumerian composition; that composition’s first half tells of Inana and her *huluppu*-tree, out of which Gilgamesh made his ball and stick.<sup>6</sup> The second half, which is translated into Akkadian as Tablet XII, tells how Enkidu descends into the netherworld to retrieve Gilgamesh’s ball and stick which have fallen there. According to Parpola, “the conspicuous omission of the *huluppu*-tree theme from Tablet XII . . . is certainly also meant to direct the reader’s attention to the Tree.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in “The Assyrian Cabinet,” Parpola insists that the complete lack of textual evidence for cabinet meetings is because they were secret, a secrecy he claims “is perpetuated in the Vatican *secret consistory* convened by the pope for the appointment of new cardinals.”<sup>8</sup> But even if we were to grant such a continuity from Assyria to the Vatican, there is a difference between meetings like the consistory, whose proceedings are kept secret but whose occurrence is public knowledge, and presumed secret meetings—like those of Parpola’s Assyrian cabinet—whose existence is never mentioned.

Having established the Assyrian Tree’s importance, and assuming that the lack of textual evidence for the Tree shows just how important and esoteric it was, Parpola next introduced the medieval Jewish kabbalistic

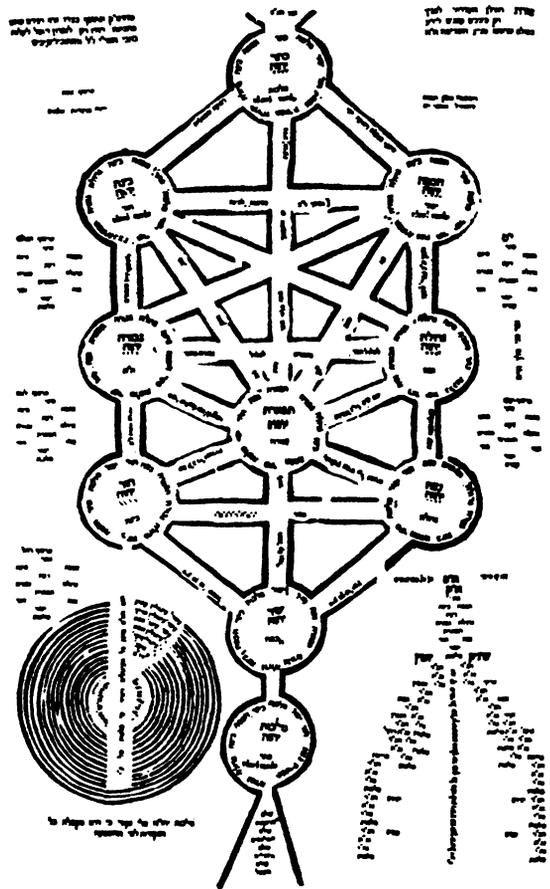


FIG. 1. 1708 Sefirotic Tree; Scholem 1978: 146.

Sefirotic Tree, “a form which strikingly resembles the Assyrian Tree.”<sup>9</sup> Does it? The resemblance of the tree in fig. 1 to the trees of Assurnasirpal and Shalmaneser (e.g., fig. 2)<sup>10</sup> is neither “striking” nor “remarkable” to me; nor is the resemblance particularly increased by substituting any of the more schematic glyptic variants of the Assyrian Tree (fig. 3); nor do variant forms of the Sefirotic Tree set beside “similar” Assyrian trees bring the resemblance home for this viewer (fig. 4). I. J. Gelb long ago warned us against being seduced by the formal resemblance of

<sup>3</sup> Cooper 1990: 45f.; Civil 1980.

<sup>4</sup> To the references in Parpola 1993a: 169 n. 39, add Limet 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Bottéro 1977.

<sup>6</sup> See Cooper Forthcoming a.

<sup>7</sup> Parpola 1993a: 194 n. 128.

<sup>8</sup> Parpola 1995: 383f. and 392f. with n. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Parpola 1993a: 171.

<sup>10</sup> In the palace reliefs of Assurnasirpal II the winged disk and the two figures of the king in the scene below the tree in fig. 2 here are often above and flanking the tree respectively (Parpola 1993a: 166 fig. 3); winged genies often flank the tree instead of the king (Parpola 1993a: 166 fig. 4).

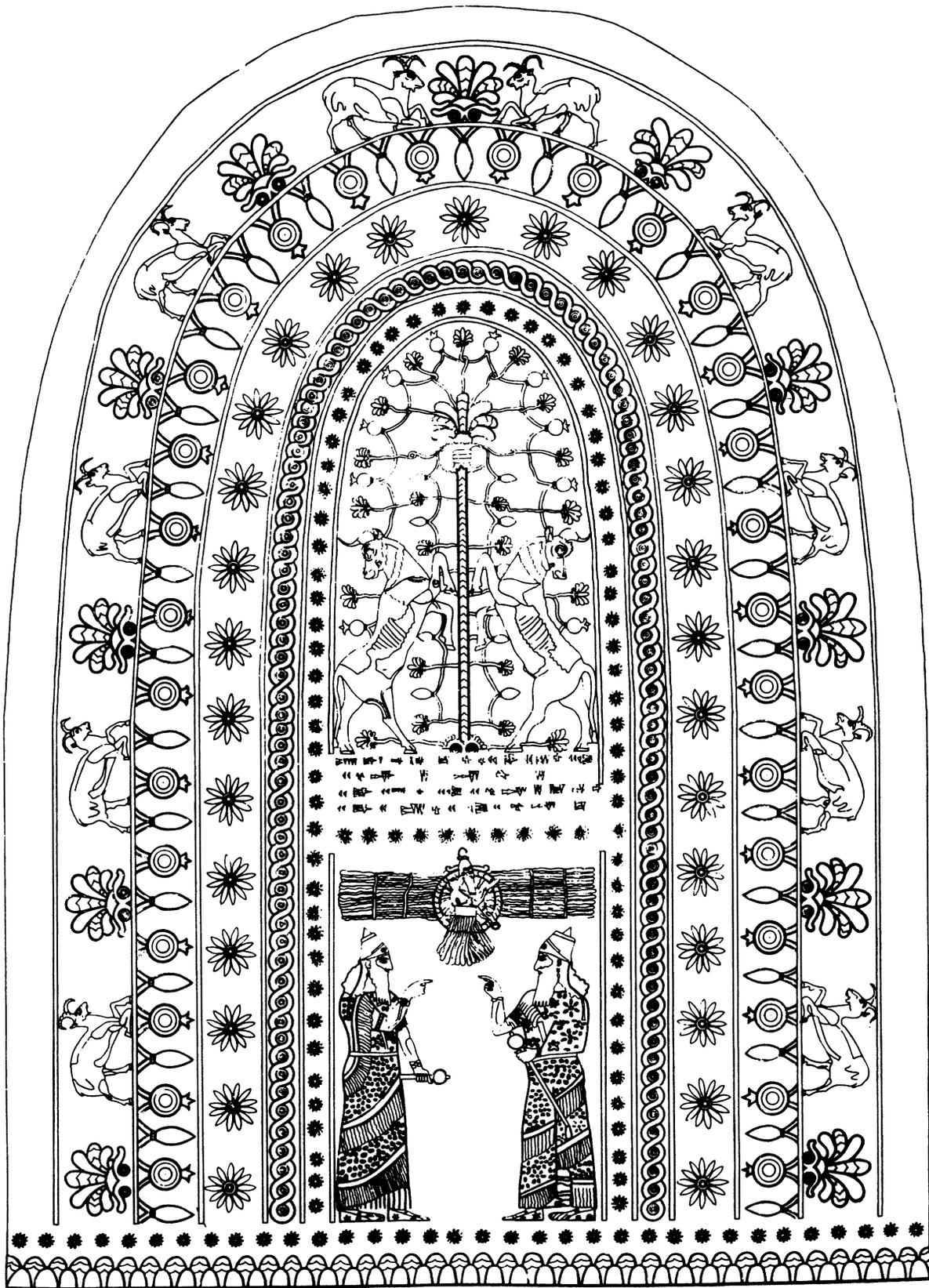


FIG. 2. Glazed Brick Assyrian Tree, Fort Shalmaneser; Reade 1963: pl. IX.

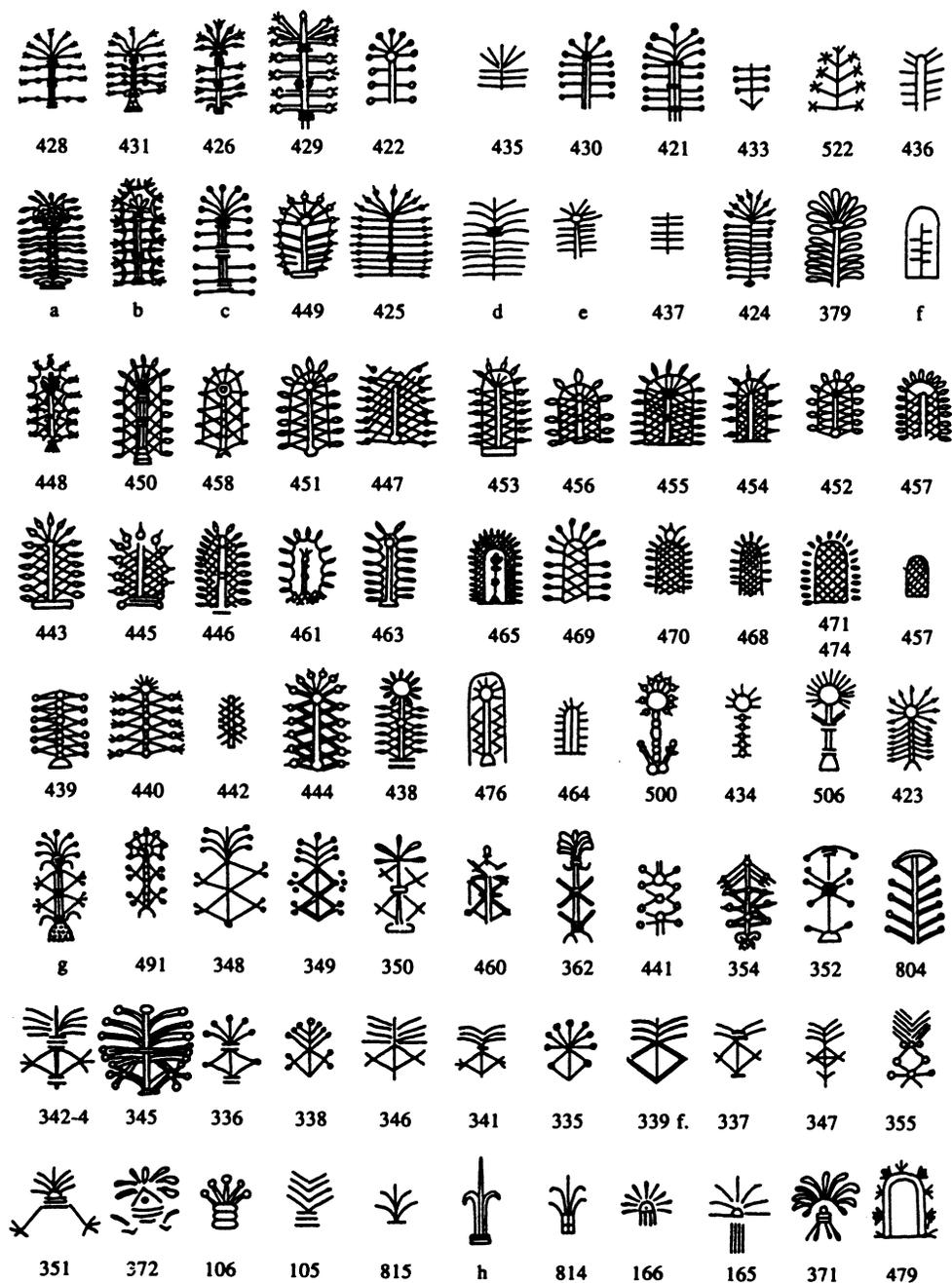


FIG. 3. Glyptic Variants of Assyrian Tree; Parpola 1993a: 200.

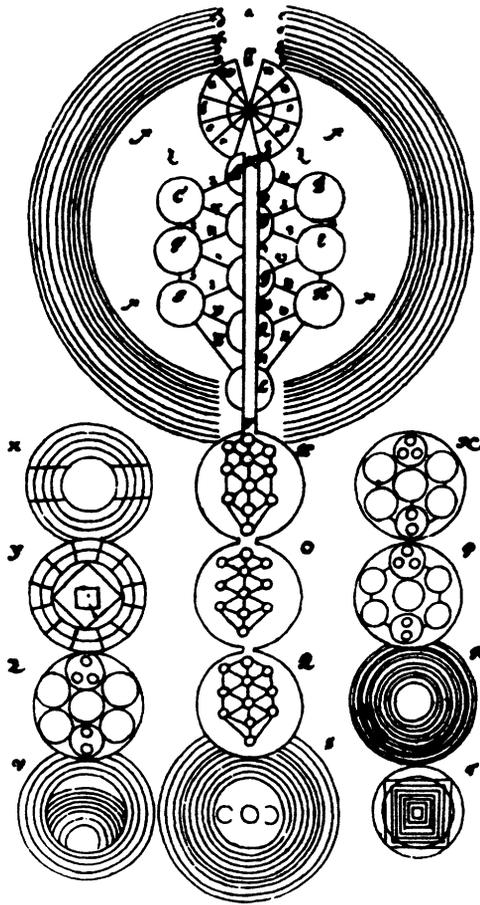


FIG. 4. Knorr's Variants on Sefirotic Tree; Scholem 1978: 418.

symbols.<sup>11</sup> Given the strong resemblance between Mesopotamian ziggurats and Mesoamerican step pyramids, how would Parpola interpret the truly striking similarity of the Maya sacred tree from Palenque flanked by kings and surmounted by a winged figure (fig. 5), to its similarly accoutered Assyrian counterpart?<sup>12</sup> A reliance on authorial assertions of "striking similarity" is found elsewhere in the "The Assyrian Tree." In fig. 6 there is an almost gratuitous juxtaposition of forms and symbols from vastly different cultural contexts (and what are we sup-

<sup>11</sup> Gelb 1963: 144ff.

<sup>12</sup> For the Assyrian Tree flanked by the king and surmounted by a winged disk, see, e.g., Parpola 1993a: 166 fig. 3 and 183 fig. 8.

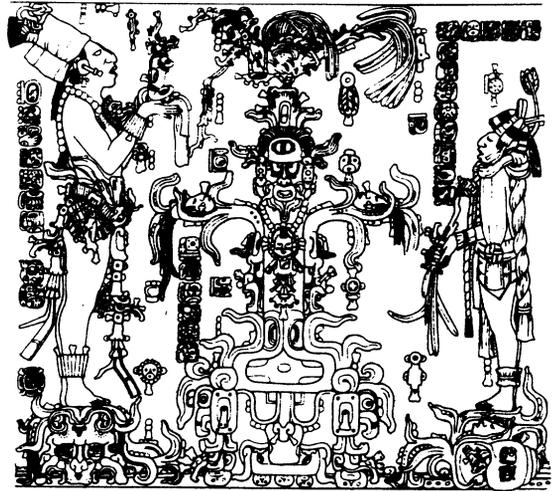


FIG. 5. Maya Tablet of the Foliated Cross from Palenque; Freidel et al. 1993: fig. 6:21.

posed to make of that kabbalistic yogi in lotus position with *sefirot* transformed into chakras?). Stranger still is the completely invented and unlikely redrawing of the god Ashur's name (fig. 7), a figure claimed as "closely resembling" the kabbalistic Tetragrammaton Man, a resemblance that completely escapes me, except for the gross verticality of both images.<sup>13</sup>

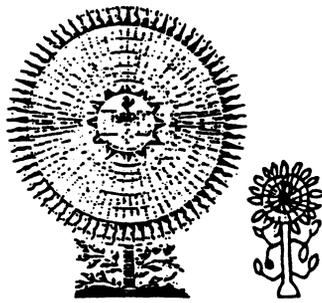
If we reject, or at least question, any stunning formal similarity between the Assyrian and Sefirotic Trees, we might still accept the symbolic similarity upon which Parpola built the rest of his argument. The individual *sefirot* are the emanations of god; Parpola first asserted a similar function for the Assyrian Tree:

Two fundamentally important points have nevertheless been established concerning the function of the Tree in the throneroom of Ashurnasirpal's palace in Calah. Firstly, Irene Winter has convincingly demonstrated that the famous relief showing the king flanking the Tree under the winged disk corresponds to the epithet "vice-regent of Aššur" in the accompanying inscription. Clearly, the Tree here represents the divine world order maintained by the king as the representative of the god Aššur, embodied in the winged disk hovering above the Tree.<sup>14</sup>

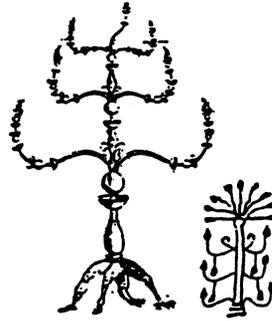
Now reading that, you might assume that he was relying on Winter's authority that the Tree represents the "divine

<sup>13</sup> Parpola 1993a: 207.

<sup>14</sup> Parpola 1993a: 167.



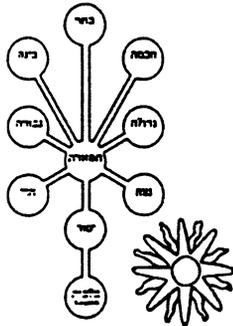
a. The Tree as Sunflower, with the 72 names of God inscribed on its petals. From Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegypticus* (Rome, 1652; Poncé, *Kabbalah*, 177).



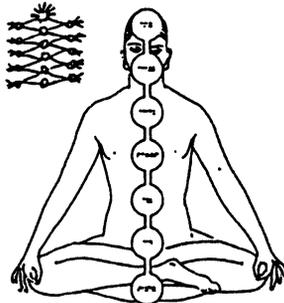
b. Tree in the form of a Menorah. From *Or Nerot ha-Menorah* (Venice, 1548; Halevi, *Kabbalah*, 78).



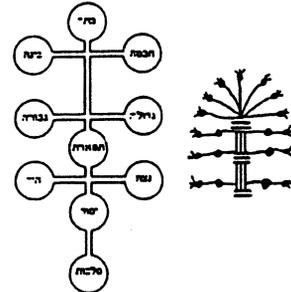
c. The Inverted Tree. From Robert Fludd, *Philosophia Sacra* (1627; Cook, *Tree of Life*, pl. 38).



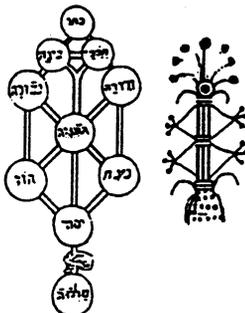
d. Beauty as the Bearer of All the Powers (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, 104).



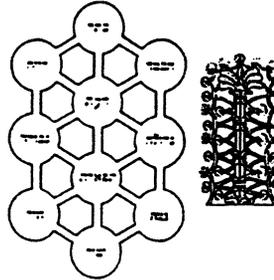
e. Tree of Meditation, using the central column alone (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, 153).



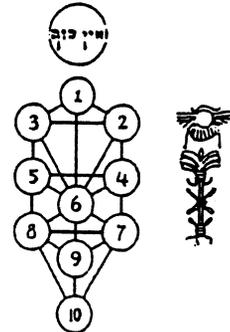
f. Tree of Eternal Life (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, 105 and 148).



g. The Sefirotic Tree of Paulus Ricius, *Porta Lucis* (Augsburg, 1516; Poncé, *Kabbalah*, 110).



h. The expansion of the Shekhinah, the Tree of Perfection (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, 152).



i. The Sefirotic Tree with En Sof hovering over it (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, 152).

FIG. 6. Sefirotic and Assyrian Tree Variants; Parpola 1993a: 175, fig. 6.

world order,” but in fact, in her article Winter said rather that the Tree represents fertility, and that the “divine principles” are represented by Ashur in the winged disk.<sup>15</sup> So the symbolic or functional similarity of the Assyrian and Sefirotic Trees rests solely on Parpola’s assertions.

After asserting the formal and functional similarities of the two Trees, Parpola pointed to the roots of Kabbala in the Babylonian Jewish community and the consequent likelihood that the Sefirotic Tree goes back to an ancient Mesopotamian model, that is, the Assyrian Tree. It is at this point that Parpola made a false assumption that led to more serious errors: “Given the lack of directly relevant textual evidence,” he “had for years considered the identity of the Assyrian and Sefirotic Trees an attractive but probably unprovable hypothesis.”<sup>16</sup> To get around the stumbling block of unprovability, he reasoned that “if the Sefirotic Tree really is but an adaptation of a Mesopotamian model, the adaptation process should be *reversible*, that is, it should be possible to reconstruct the original model without difficulty.”<sup>17</sup> This reconstructed original, he continued, would then be proof of the derivation of the Sefirotic Tree from the Assyrian. But *why* this theoretical reversibility should prove the proposition was nowhere explained.

Rather, the flawed logic was simply repeated throughout: if a Mesopotamian phenomenon can be interpreted kabbalistically, then the kabbalistic ideas used to interpret it must have been part of and derived from Mesopotamian theology. I will cite only one example, his rephrasing of *Enuma Elish* I 1–15:

When the primordial state of undifferentiated unity (Apsu = Mummu + Tiamat, “±0”), in which nothing existed, came to an end, nothingness was replaced by the binary system of oppositions (Laḥmu and Laḥamu) and the infinite universe (Anšar = Aššur) with its negative counterpart (Kišar). Aššur emanated Heaven (Anu) as his primary manifestation, to mirror his existence to the world. [Parpola comments:] Thus rephrased, the passage comes very close to kabbalistic and Neoplatonic metaphysics.<sup>18</sup>

For Parpola, the kabbalistic *sefirot* “strongly recall the attributes and symbols of Mesopotamian gods, and their

<sup>15</sup> Winter 1983: 16.

<sup>16</sup> Parpola 1993a: 176.

<sup>17</sup> Parpola 1993a: 176.

<sup>18</sup> Parpola 1993a: 191. Note the (Leo) Straussian overtones in n. 109 there: “It is clear that this allegory is strongly implicit in *Enūma eliš*, too, but the phrasing of the text is kept intentionally vague to allow other interpretations as well, including misinterpretations.”

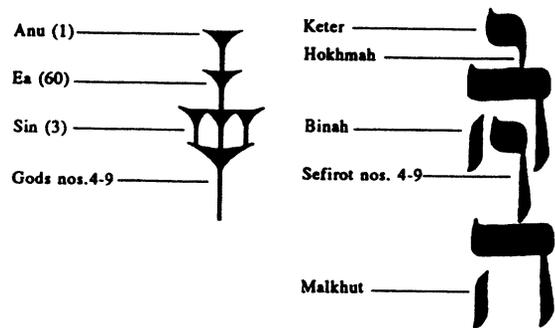


FIG. 7. Ashur and the Tetragrammaton Man; Parpola 1993a: 207, fig. 11.

prominent association with numbers calls to mind the mystic numbers of the Mesopotamian gods. . . . Accordingly, in the hypothetical Mesopotamian model they would have been gods, with functions and attributes coinciding with those of the Sefirot.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the *sefirot* do recall attributes of Mesopotamian gods, since most of the names of *sefirot* derive directly from ancient Near Eastern epithets or attributes of the God of the Hebrew Bible. But they do not necessarily recall *separate* gods; if I were trying to reconstruct a Mesopotamian Sefirotic Tree, I would envisage it as containing the attributes of a single great god, such as Marduk or Aššur, and this, too, could probably be done without difficulty. Parpola chose to assign a different god or gods to each attribute (fig. 8), and, as everyone who has studied Mesopotamian religious texts knows, while some of the assignments are simple: Ea = Wisdom, Šamaš = Justice, others are quite problematic. Marduk and Enlil can be merciful to be sure, but who would ever imagine either as emblematic of Mercy in the same way Šamaš is emblematic of Justice? And the moon god Sin epitomizing Understanding? Certainly, as Parpola tells us, Sin is characterized as *muštālu* “thoughtful, deliberative,” but so, according to Tallqvist, are Aššur, Enlil, Gilgamesh, Marduk, Nusku, Šamaš, Ninšubur and Gula!<sup>20</sup> And although we might imagine that a slightly different set of attributes would be important to the Assyrians than was important to the Kabbalists (since cultural borrowing and the passage of time rarely leave borrowed objects unchanged), Parpola seeks one-to-one equivalence with the *sefirot*, with only one exception.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Parpola 1993a: 177.

<sup>20</sup> Parpola 1993a: 177f. n. 70; Tallqvist 1938.

<sup>21</sup> “I have excluded this Sefirah [*malkhut*] from the reconstructed model because it breaks the compositional harmony of

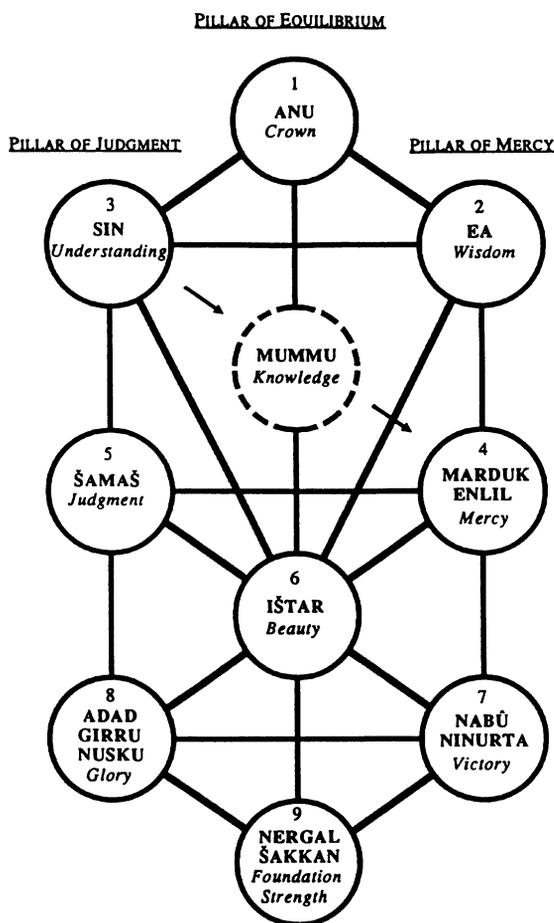


FIG. 8. Parpola's Reconstructed Tree; Parpola 1993a: 179, fig. 7.

The final step in Parpola's reconstruction of the Assyrian prototype of the Jewish Sefirotic Tree was to assign "mystic numbers" to each node corresponding to the numbers that symbolize the node's divinity in Mesopotamian tradition. This can be problematic, since there are often several numbers attested for a given Mesopotamian god, and certain gods may share numbers. Having chosen those numbers that he deemed proper (fig. 9), the reconstruction was complete: "The ease with which the

the Tree and because the king, though impersonating the Tree, clearly does not form part of it in Assyrian art" (Parpola 1993a: 181). In his 1995 article on the Assyrian cabinet, Parpola maps the highest officers of the Assyrian realm onto the reconstructed Tree diagram, based on a perceived relationship between the officers' functions and the individual gods and *sefirot* on the diagram.

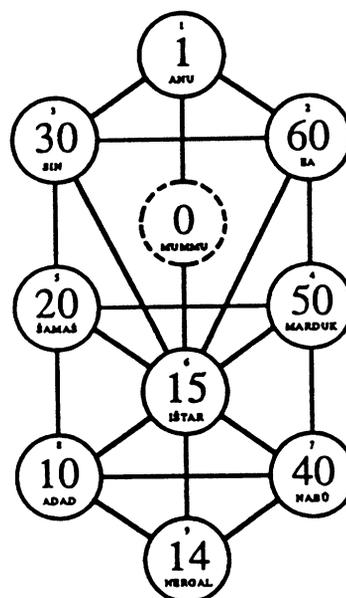


FIG. 9. Mystic Numbers; Parpola 1993a: 183, fig. 9.

gods and their numbers fitted into the diagram was almost too good to be true . . . I felt on the verge of a major discovery."<sup>22</sup> Parpola continues: "practically all the great gods of the Assyro-Babylonian pantheon figure in" the diagram, except Aššur. "This strongly suggests that this important god has to be identified with the winged disk over the Assyrian Tree . . . and, accordingly, is identical with the transcendent God of the Kabbala, En Sof."<sup>23</sup> But all the great gods are there because *he put them there*—he might have picked lesser deities for some of the slots<sup>24</sup>—and Aššur is missing because *he did not put him there*. There are certainly several slots where Aššur might have gone. Parpola was not the first to assert that Aššur is the winged disk, as he himself tells us, but there are better reasons to think so than his absence from the

<sup>22</sup> Parpola 1993a: 184. This "ease" satisfies the only constraint on the reversibility hypothesis, that the Assyrian model be reconstructed "without difficulty" (see above).

<sup>23</sup> Parpola 1993a: 184f.

<sup>24</sup> Šakkan, hardly a "great" god, appears on the tree sharing the lowest node with Nergal. The reason for this doubling up only becomes clear when Parpola uses his tree diagram to explain the Gilgamesh Epic. The lowest node of the tree diagram represents Tablet I of the epic, "dominated by animal passions," in which Enkidu is associated with Šakkan, god of domestic animals (Parpola 1993a: 192f. with n. 121).

reconstructed Tree.<sup>25</sup> Parpola's "strongly suggests" just doesn't follow; and what follows—that Aššur equals the transcendent deity of Kabbala—doesn't follow, either. That is what remains to be proved.

There is more. The relationship of the mystic numbers in this tree "amounts to *mathematical proof* of the correctness of the reconstruction."<sup>26</sup> How so? The sum of the central trunk is 30; if we accept that as in Kabbala, the left side is negative, and we subtract the left member of each branch from the right member, the sum for each branch is 30 also. If we add the sums of the branches and the trunk we get 120 ( $4 \times 30$ ), and if we add this to the sum of all of the nodes, *this time counting the left-hand numbers as positive rather than negative*, we get 360 ( $120 + 240$ ). Mathematical, yes, but proof? Mathematics was appealed to again in a discussion of the Gilgamesh Epic, where we are told that Enkidu, who associates with Šakkan's flocks, has intercourse with the prostitute for 6 days and 7 nights, ending "only barely before it would have completed the number of Nergal (14)."<sup>27</sup> If the numbers add up, the case is proved; if they just almost add up, that's pretty remarkable, too.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to rejecting the logic of Parpola's argument, we may object to Parpola's reconstructed Tree diagram because it is so very un-Mesopotamian. We have Mesopotamian diagrams, after all, even diagrams on esoteric tablets (fig. 10). None of the Mesopotamian diagrams that I have seen suggest that his tree-based scheme would be at home in a Mesopotamian context. We also have texts where different deities are equated with the aspects and functions of a single deity; those texts teach us that the tightly constructed doctrine proposed by Parpola didn't exist. The moon god, Sin, for example is associated with Marduk's divinity in one text, his luminosity in another, and is an eyelid of Ninurta in a third.<sup>29</sup> There are points of agreement between the texts too, but if in fact there

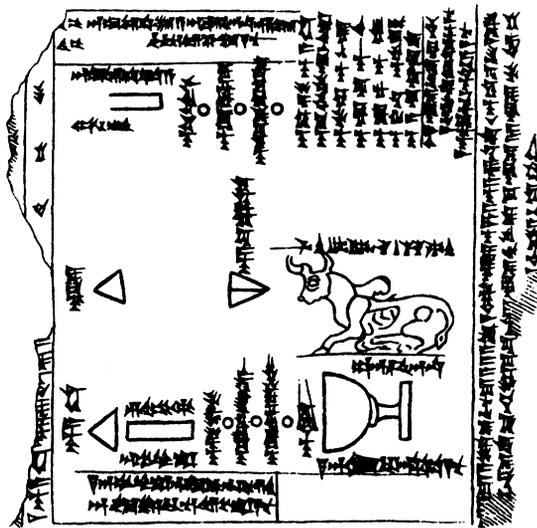


FIG. 10. Diagram of Kettledrum Ritual; Thureau-Dangin 1922: no. 47 (cf. Livingstone 1986: 187–96).

was any systematic association of gods and attributes, it was loosely constructed.<sup>30</sup>

#### THE REVISED MODEL

In the introduction to *Assyrian Prophecies*, Parpola presents a ten-point summary of his "new interpretive model" of Assyrian religion, organized around the prophecies themselves; the goddess Ištar, who inspired the prophecies; and the figure of the king, the subject of the prophecies (pp. xv ff.; abbreviated in the following summary):

1. The prophecies are "parts and products of . . . the ecstatic cult of Ištar . . . an esoteric mystery cult promising its devotees transcendental salvation and eternal life."
2. "Like Shakta Tantrism . . . the cult had a sophisticated cosmogony, theosophy, soteriology and theory of the soul . . . explained only to the initiates, who were bound to secrecy by oath."
3. "The cornerstone of the cult's doctrine of salvation was the myth of Ištar's descent to the netherworld . . . the Goddess plays the role of the Neoplatonic Cosmic Soul" which "outlines the soul's

<sup>25</sup> Parpola 1993a: 185 n. 93.

<sup>26</sup> Parpola 1993a: 189.

<sup>27</sup> Parpola 1993a: 193 n. 121. Remember that Parpola had put Šakkan together with Nergal in the bottom slot of his Tree diagram.

<sup>28</sup> Parpola's explication of Gilgamesh as a mystic journey (Parpola 1993a: 192–95) actually has much to recommend it, but it gains absolutely nothing from its association with the gods of the reconstructed tree, and the suggestion that the lapis tablet referred to at the epic's beginning is really the Tree diagram is unreasonably obsessive. In a recently published article, Parpola "decodes" the logographic writings of the name of Gilgamesh to show that Gilgamesh was "an embodiment of the sacred tree" (1998: 324).

<sup>29</sup> KAR 25 ii (Foster 1996: II 598f.); CT 24 50 obv (Parpola 1995: 398–401); KAR 102 (Foster 1996: II 619f.).

<sup>30</sup> Livingstone (1986: 184) compares the symbolic equation of gods with ritual materials in two texts: "Out of the seven items for which divine equivalences are recorded in both works there is a reasonable agreement in two only."

- divine origin and fall” and its “salvation through repentance, baptism and gradual ascent toward its original perfection.”
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 Ištar, 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 Ištar,” the oracle speaks first as Bēl, then as Ištar, 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, Ištar, 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 Bēl (the father)–Nabû (the son)–Ištar in oracle 1.4 as the Assyrian trinity would seem to founder on the figure of Ištar, 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 Ištar as sexually insatiable is understood as an argument for the futility of “fleshly pleasures” (p. xcvi). For Parpola, Ištar 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 Ištar* 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 Ištar and Sophia is seen as license to endow Ištar with all the qualities of the Neoplatonic Cosmic Soul, and to interpret the *Descent of Ištar* 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 adduces between the figures of Ištar 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.<sup>31</sup>

#### 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.<sup>32</sup> 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. xlii). 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.”<sup>33</sup> These specific circumstances, then, gave rise to “the massive prophetic movement in his support” which was “likely to have been unique” (p. xlii). 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

<sup>32</sup> See Eanatum’s Stela of the Vultures iv (Cooper 1986: 34). Assurbanipal’s insistence that he “knew no father or mother, and grew up in the lap of [his] goddesses” (Parpola 1997: xl) would have been familiar to Gudea of Lagash a millennium and a half earlier. For discussion and literature, see Flückiger-Hawker 1999: 46f.

<sup>33</sup> 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).

<sup>31</sup> For the meaning in Mesopotamian context of Inana’s and Ištar’s descent, see Cooper Forthcoming b.

temple of Ištar in Kalḫu is documented as early as the thirteenth century B.C. (p. xlvi), Assyrian prophecy must have been, as Parpola points out, “basically oral [in] nature” (p. xiv). That a small group of prophetic 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 *raggimu* (fem. *raggintu*) in Neo-Assyrian dialect, which replaced the standard Akkadian term, *maḥḥū*, 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 *maḥḥū* “ecstatic” refers to the altered state of the prophet when inspired and proclaiming the oracle, *raggimu* derives from *ragāmu* “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 *raggimu* 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 *raggimu*. 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,<sup>34</sup> 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 renunciation 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. lxvii), 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.<sup>35</sup> 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.

<sup>34</sup> See George 1999 for the most recent and best translation of the Gilgamesh Epic.

<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

#### 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 Deuteronomistic 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.<sup>38</sup>

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."<sup>39</sup> The reader is left dizzy by sweep of Parpola's claims, and is

<sup>36</sup> 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.

<sup>37</sup> The only criticism of the king comes in oracle 3.5, where the goddess complains about the king's ingratitude and demands larger offerings.

<sup>38</sup> Parpola 1993a: 190 n. 107.

<sup>39</sup> Parpola 1993a: 191 n. 109.

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 demon *Zeitgeist* might be up to some end-of-the-millennium mischief: Wilfred Lambert began this decade with a discussion of Marduk monotheism.<sup>40</sup> In 1992 Giorgio Buccellati suggested that pre-Sargonic Akkadian religion was ancestral to Hebrew monotheism;<sup>41</sup> and in 1993, the year that Parpola announced that the cult of Aššur 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.<sup>42</sup> And all this from hard-core Assyriologists, not Old Testament scholars gleaming 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 rimki* 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."<sup>43</sup> 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."<sup>44</sup> This christological line is much more pervasive in *Assyrian Prophecies*, with its "Christ-like" Assyrian

<sup>40</sup> Lambert 1990.

<sup>41</sup> Buccellati 1992.

<sup>42</sup> Durand 1993: 60f.; Finet 1993.

<sup>43</sup> Parpola 1993b: 54.

<sup>44</sup> Parpola 1993a: 205.

king<sup>45</sup> 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.”<sup>46</sup> 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,”<sup>47</sup> 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.”<sup>48</sup> For this reader, it is too good to be true.

<sup>45</sup> Parpola 1997: xv.

<sup>46</sup> Parpola 1997: xvi.

<sup>47</sup> Parpola 1993a: 199.

<sup>48</sup> Parpola 1997: xciii.

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