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## "Monotheism in Neo-Assyrian Religion?: An Appraisal"

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### Introduction

Nearly two decades ago, renowned Assyriologist Simo Parpola advocated that Jewish monotheism and Christian trinitarianism had their roots in Neo-Assyrian religion (Parpola 1993; Parpola 1997; Parpola 2000; Parpola 1995). The notion of monotheism in Mesopotamian religion is not new. During his famous lectures, *Babel and Bible*, Franz Delitzsch echoed thoughts similar to his contemporary, Theophilus Pinches, that Babylonian religion approached monotheism in certain god-lists that equated Marduk with other major deities (Delitzsch 1903, 65). Combining this text with a "hand-raising" incantation prayer to Marduk, Lambert has also supported Delitzsch's view (1975, 198).<sup>1</sup> Albright (1957, 217-18) granted "practical monotheism" to Mesopotamian religion based on yet another text that equates various gods with different parts of Ninurta's body, a text described by Saggs (1984, 203-04, 1989, 289) as "incipient monotheism." But no proposal has been as sweeping as that of Simo Parpola. While his view has been rejected by Assyriologists, it raises important questions about how we conceptualize the one God and defend the monotheism of ancient Israel.

### Summary of Parpola's "Monotheism in Ancient Israel" (Parpola 2000)

Parpola does not challenge the view that polytheism was practiced in ancient Assyria, rather he makes "an effort to show that it is a mistake to regard Assyrian religion as *exclusively*, or even primarily, polytheistic. On the contrary, belief in the existence of a single omnipotent God dominated the Assyrian state religion, royal ideology, philosophy and mystery cults to the extent that Assyrian religion in its imperial elaboration, with its polytheistic garb, must be regarded as *essentially monotheistic*

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1. Personal notes taken at a lecture, to my knowledge still unpublished, by W. Lambert at the annual meeting of the Society for Old Testament Studies held in Nottingham, January 2001. The text cited by Theophilus Pinches (Victoria Institute, 1895) and on which Delitzsch depended for support, taken up also by Lambert is:

Urash is Marduk of planting  
Lugalidda is Marduk of the abyss  
Ninurta is Marduk of the pickaxe  
Nergal is Marduk of battle  
Zababa is Marduk of warfare  
Enlil is Marduk of lordship and consultations  
Nabu is Marduk of accounting  
Sin is Marduk who lights up the night  
Shamash is Marduk of justice  
Adad is Marduk of rain  
Tishpak is Marduk of troops  
Great Anu is Marduk of . . .  
Shuqamuna is Marduk of the container  
[ . . . is] Marduk of everything  
(CT 24 50, BM 47406, obverse; [Lambert 1975, 197-98])

The support text cited is:

Sin is your divinity, Anu your sovereignty,  
Dagan is your lordship, Enlil your kingship,  
Adad is your might, wise Ea your perception,  
Nabu, holder of the tablet stylus, is your skill.  
Your leadership (in battle) is Ninurta, your might Nergal,  
Your counsel is Nus[ku], your superb [minister],  
Your judgship is radiant Shamash, who arouses no dispute,  
Your eminent name is Marduk, sage of the gods. (Foster *Before the Muses*, 692)

(Parpola 2000, 165, italics his). The powers and attributes of the one god are “hypostatized” as different “gods.” Therefore, the terms “monotheistic tendencies” or “incipient monotheism” are inadequate descriptions (cf. Parpola 2000, 166 n. 2). He writes, “The nature of the ‘great gods’ as mere powers and attributes of God is repeatedly stressed in Assyrian texts, and their fundamental unity, expressed in a network of interlocking doctrines and visual symbols, was a structural feature of the whole religious system” (Parpola 2000, 166). This concept extended beyond a small group of elites during a brief time span to characterize the bulk of the population, so he maintains that eventually this was part of popular religion as well as state ideology.

### Textual Support

(1) The deity AN.ŠĀR in *Enuma Elish* is viewed as Aššur in late Neo-Assyrian religion, and this sets him apart ontologically from the other gods, the former being independent of the physical universe and the latter dependent on it for their existence:

When on high no name was given to heaven,  
 Nor below was the netherworld called by name,  
 Primeval Apsu was their progenitor,  
 And matrix-Tiamat was she who bore them all,  
 They were mingling their waters together,  
 No canebrake was intertwined nor thicket matted close.  
 When no gods at all had been brought forth,  
 Nor called by names, none destinies ordained,  
 Then were the gods formed within the(se two).  
 Lahmu and Lahamu were brought forth, were called by name.  
 When they had waxed great, had grown up tall,  
 Anshar and Kishar were formed, greater than they,  
 They grew lengthy of days, added years to years.  
 Anu their firstborn was like his forebears,  
 Anshar made Anu, his offspring, (his) equal. (Foster, *Before the Muses*, 439)

This tradition is echoed in the Marduk Ordeal:

Is is said in *Enuma Eliš*: When heaven and earth were not created, Aššur came i[nto being]. (SAA 3 34:54)

AN.ŠĀR in ↑ text

(2) The Aššur hymn in SAA 3 1:26-29 is an expression of the belief that Aššur alone was regarded as god.

(Even) a god does not comprehend [the...of] your [majesty], O Aššur;  
 the meaning of your *ma[jestic designs]* is not understood.  
 (Even) a god does not comprehend [...] your [...], O Aššur;  
 the meaning of your [...] is not understood. (SAA 3 1:26-29)

(3) Further support is derived from personal names. The name “Gabbu-ilāni-Aššur,” which Parpola translates “Aššur is all the gods” suggests that the sum total of all the gods is found in the one god Aššur. The personal name Ilāni-aha-iddina (“the gods [pl.] gave [sg.] a brother”) implies that the multiplicity of the gods were conceived as a single deity.

assim- nun

Parpola's arguments cont.

(4) The cuneiform sign AŠ in <sup>d</sup>aš-šur is not normally the phonetic value [aš] in Assyrian script, rather it most commonly meant "one," "single," "only" in scholarly texts—even "mystery." Hence the abbreviation <sup>d</sup>aš could mean "The Only God," "God is One."

(5) The polytheistic term "great gods" might be reconciled with a single deity in the same way angelic beings are reconciled with monotheism in the Bible.

species list.

(6) Parpola refers to the monotheistic ideas behind the gods lists, such as the Fifty Names of Marduk.

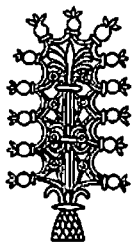
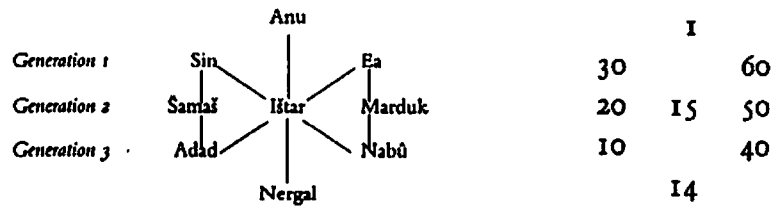
Compound names  
1 about 2

**Gods as Body and Sacred Tree**

Regarding the heavenly council, its functions, family relationships, and numerical values, all take on meaning only in the larger structure of which the gods formed a part. Parpola writes, "All these interrelated structures share the same three-tiered hierarchical pattern, which served as a basis for determining the individual functions, relationships and numerical values. In other words, the 'great gods' had no independent existence of their own; like parts of the human body, they represented mutually complementary, interdependent parts of a larger whole, the divine council, which in its actions and resolutions functioned like a single body" (Parpola 2000, 184-85; italics his). Parpola draws an analogy to the gnostic *pleroma* or *sefirot* of Jewish mysticism (Parpola 2000, 173). The three-tiered structure finds graphic counterpart in the "sacred tree" of imperial art. This iconographic image appeared at roughly the same time as the numbering system to represent the deities appeared in texts (early 13th century). (Parpola 2000, 185-88).

(cf. Et is the council)

in ARK. deities had # assigned to them. - date?



Parpola 2000, 183-83, 186

**The Anthropomorphic Tree and the King**

Parpola writes, "The 'sacred tree' can thus be viewed as a graphic representation of the divine council intended to emphasize its nature as an organic whole, a 'single body'" (p. 188). This representation is supported by the "cosmic man" image on a relief from the Aššur temple in Assur in which the Assyrian king is the living personification of the cosmic tree. The equation of the king with the tree means he was, in Parpola's words, the "human incarnation of the almighty God Aššur" (Parpola 2000, 190). Even as the actions of individual ministers under the king were indistinguishable from the king, and by virtue of his metaphysical constitution, the "great gods" also merged into his person so they ceased to exist as independent entities, i.e., the king is "consubstantial" with God, and as the "perfect man" the king is the "cornerstone of man's salvation" (Parpola 2000, 192). The king, equivalent to Tammuz, suffers innocently, like the "lamb of God" (Parpola 2000, 194 n. 51).

any connection to astronomy?

Parpola relies on Kabbalah + Gnosticism



Parpola 2000, 189

— Wisdan?

**The Holy Spirit**

As son of Ištar/Mullissu, the king was born of a human woman but also created by the goddess, a semi-divine being. The characteristics of Mullissu shows that she “corresponds in all essential respects to the gnostic Holy Spirit” (Parpola 2000, 195).

**The Gods as Garments of Ištar**

The order in which Ištar strips off her garments at the seven gates during her descent to the netherworld reflects the structure of the sacred tree, hence they are mere psychic powers of the goddess (equivalent to the gnostic myth of the fall of Sophia). This loss of psychic powers and recovery of the same symbolizes the resurrection of the soul.

**The Gods as Colors**

The ziggurat, also symbolizing Ištar, was painted a different color at each level. These colors align with the planetary spheres which appear in Mithraic religion.

**The Rainbow**

The rainbow symbolizes Ištar and corresponds to the myth of her descent and redemptive work stemming out of her sacrificial love (i.e., an act of divine love).

**The Trinity**

Parpola writes, “We thus have in the Assyrian king the perfect doctrinal counterpart of the Christian savior: a word of God become flesh, a lamb of God sacrificed for the sake of man. What is more, his relationship to God is defined exactly in terms of the Trinitarian doctrine (‘one substance—three persons’) in its Augustinian elaboration, where the Holy Spirit is ‘mutual love of Father and Son, the consubstantial bond that unites them!’” (Parpola 2000, 202). In SAA 9 1.4, the deity speaks through the prophet in three different names: Bel, Ištar, and Nabû.

~ Manduh

Father

Fear not, Esarhaddon!  
 I am Bel. (Even as) I speak to you, I watch over the beams of your heart.  
 When your mother gave birth to you, sixty great gods stood with me and protected you.  
 Sin was at your right side, Šamaš at your left;  
 sixty great gods were standing around you and girded your loins.

H-S

Do not trust in man. Lift up your eyes, look at me!  
 I am Ištar of Arbela; I reconciled Aššur with you.  
 When you were small, I took you to me. Do not fear; praise me!  
 What enemy has attacked you while I remained silent? The future shall be like the past.

Son

I am Nabû, lord of the stylus. Praise me! (SAA 9 1.4)

~

Parpola

Parpola states, "It is as if in this short oracle the deity were repeatedly putting on new masks to suit the changing themes of the discourse, and one cannot help being reminded of the Holy Trinity of Christianity, where the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are explained as different hypostases of one indivisible Divine Being" (Parpola 1997, xviii).

## Evaluation

### General Method

Most of Parpola's interpretations and correlations are based on such superficial comparisons between religions that the best commentary is to allow the reader to muse over them him/herself. Cooper offers a concise illustration of the circularity in Parpola's methodology: "... if a Mesopotamian phenomenon can be interpreted kabbalistically [an esoteric philosophical method and system of Jewish mysticism], then the kabbalistic ideas used to interpret it must have been part of and derived from Mesopotamian theology" (Cooper 2000, 436). This is easily observed in the connection Parpola sees between the sacred tree and the Jewish Sefirotic Tree. Another illustration is the etymological leap Parpola takes from the Assyrian word for prophets (*raggimu/intu-ragāmu*, "to shout"), which he states "immediately reminds one of John the Baptist" who shouted in the wilderness (Parpola 1997, xlv).

### Critique of Textual Evidence

Parpola's strongest arguments are textual, and so they merit some response:

(1) The god AN.ŠĀR in *Enuma Elish* (equated with Aššur in the Assyrian version and in SAA 3 34 and 35) hardly fills the role of a supreme creator deity who exists eternal. In *Enuma Elish*, AN.ŠĀR emerges from the cosmic soup, and Ea his grandson is greater than he, since Ea in turn begets Aššur! The ideological point of the Assyrian redaction of *Enuma Elish* is the supremacy of Aššur over Marduk, not an assertion of Aššur's ontological distinction from other gods. The mystical Marduk Ordeal is very opaque, but it hardly indicates the independent existence of Aššur as the Creator-God.

(2) The superlative language used to praise Aššur in SAA 3 1 can be understood as henotheistic language in view of the praise of other deities:

I praise your name, Marduk, the most powerful of the gods,  
the canal inspector of heaven and earth [.....],  
who is well engendered and alone is most high [.....]!  
You bear Anuship, Illilship, Ninšikuship, lordship [.....]!  
You gather all wisdom, total strength [.....]! ...  
the foremost of the foremost, the highest god ...  
You are the greatest among all the gods (Acrostic Hymn to Marduk; SAA 3 2:1-4, 41, r.2)

Exalt and glorify the Lady of Nineveh, magnify and praise the Lady of Arbela  
who have no equal among the great gods!  
Their names are most precious among the goddesses!  
Their cult centres have no equal among all the shrines! (Hymn the Ištar; SAA 3 3:1-5)

[Nanaya] The foremost of the gods (Nanaya Hymn of Sargon; SAA 3 4:5a)

[Nanaya] who is revered and feared by the [great] gods [.....] (Nanaya Hymn of Assurbanipal; SAA 3

language of meanness used  
of almost any great deity  
cannot be used as ~~proof~~  
proof of monotheism (?)

ex.

Marduk is in primordial sea. Assyria's  
not trying  
to present  
consistent  
system;  
political

modelistic

circular  
thinking/  
anachronism

5:2)

(3) Regarding personal names, Weippert (2002, 6, 10) argues that only one personal name, "Gabbu-ilāni-Aššur," offers any support in the whole of Parpola's case for Assyrian monotheism. But he notes that Parpola's conclusion is consistent with Parpola's monotheistic model but the text does not necessitate it.

(4) Parpola's interpretative etymology of the AŠ sign is similarly based on Parpola's speculation on what esoteric secrets the scribes might have had in mind (Weippert 2002@6). Cooper (2000, 431) observes that the scribes were not adverse to recording their "secrets," even the mystic significance of divine names, yet nothing of the ideas of Parpola are preserved.

(5) Parpola's harmonization between the divine council and monotheism is really a concession to skeptics and not really Parpola's view of the divine council, since Parpola does not view the many gods as lesser, independent divine beings in the way that angels and demons are understood in Jewish, Christian, or Islamic thought. Even in early Israelite religion, no biblical text suggests that the other divine beings in the council of the gods are in the same category as Yahweh (see Heiser 2008). They certainly are not "emanations" of his being.

*very helpful critique*

(6) Porter (2000, 240-54) offers a different nuance to the view of scholars such as Lambert and Saggs, who see Mesopotamian religion as an approach to monotheism. The notion of *ilu* (person of deity OR any aspect of its portfolio) lends itself to fluid ascription of powers of one deity to another (not unlike in Egypt). Thus, the god lists are examples of radical syncretism or metaphorical praise but not monotheism. It is a part of the henotheistic praise prevalent in Mesopotamian religion, and monotheistic interpretations are incompatible with the otherwise dominant evidence of polytheism.

*gods have shared portfolios. They are not "one" (B of Israel shares no portfolio)*

#### Counter Texts

(1) Cultic tākultu Texts: Porter (2000, 230-39) notes carefully the pattern of paired names of deities in one of these two cultic texts. A critical observation in her study is the fact that when two divine names are combined, the second deity contributes an attribute to the first deity in the compound name (e.g., Aššur-Ninurta or Aššur-Ištar). Only 19 of the 100+ names (in K. 252) incorporate this compound technique, and Aššur is listed first except in four of the cases. One lists Ištar compounded with another deity (Zū), but in three cases Aššur is named second (Dagan-Aššur; Ninurta-Aššur; Ningal-Aššur). In other words, these deities are viewed as embodying in themselves some "fundamental function or quality" of Aššur (Porter 2000, 239). In any of these cases, there is no "absorption" of the second deity by the first, since all these names appear elsewhere in the list as independent deities. So the name Aššur-Adad, for example, would mean the god Aššur "in the form in which he resembles Adad (Porter 2000, 237).

Of great importance is the link between text and ritual. Other deities receive homage independent of Aššur in the royal cult, even within the same temple, the very institution which Parpola elevates as the example of Assyrian monotheism.

(2) SAA 9 3.4 contains a prophetic oracle in which Ištar invites other gods and goddesses to partake of a covenant ritual and anticipates their forgetting the covenant; hardly a compatible ritual with monotheistic tendencies.

*royal ideology texts*

(3) SAA 9 2.3 Ištar intercedes on behalf of other deities whose hunger causes them to languish in the steppe.

(4) SAA 9 1.4 Ištar reconciles Aššur with king Esarhaddon; SAA 9 2.5 Ištar reconciles the angry gods (pl.) with Esarhaddon; SAA 13 139 Bel makes peace with and forgives the goddess Mullissu; SAA 3 33 the gods of Babylon are reconciled with Esarhaddon's gods assuring the peace of Assyria. These texts reveal royal theology that is incompatible with monotheism.

(5) SAA 9 1.4 Bel, Ištar, and Nabû speak in succession. While Parpola cites this as an example of the Trinity, Van der Toorn observes that this is not Aššur putting on different masks, but the prophetic speaks on behalf of alternating deities (cf. Mari text ARM 26 192).

(6) SAA 9 9 Ištar intercedes on behalf of Assurbanipal in the assembly of the gods.

### The Dominant Paradigm

Perhaps it is not a question of whether or not Parpola's interpretation of Mesopotamian religion is conceivable. Rather, what interpretation makes the most sense of all the available evidence? The predominant picture of Assyrian religion, even the royal cult, is one of polytheism. The evidence cited by Parpola (as well as Lambert and Saggs) can be understood within this dominant framework, but the larger picture contains evidence that cannot be made to fit within a monotheistic model—even in the later period of the Assyrian empire, as Porter has shown. I am aware of one text that might point to monolatry: "Whoever you are, after [me], trust in the god Nabû! Do not trust in another god!" (RIMA 3 A.0.104.2002: 12b), but this statement might be expected from the governor of Calah where Nabû was a patron god. Could it be that individual elites experimented with ideas approaching monotheism? This is possible, but would their speculations become part of state-sponsored iconography and textual archives? Jean Bottéro characterizes Mesopotamian religion as one with strong henotheistic tendencies (Bottéro 2001, 41-43, 57-58), the conclusion of Porter as well). This is a fair assessment and accounts for all of the available evidence.

### Relevance for Understanding Israelite Religion

This survey of texts relevant to Parpola's proposal highlights a number of methodological and definitional issues that are helpful in thinking about Israelite religion.

(1) Polytheism versus Monotheism: Assyrian religion illustrates the spectrum between normative polytheism / henotheism / monolatry on the one hand, and the ontological distinctions that constitute monotheism. Parpola rightly identifies the key ingredient in monotheism, a deity independent and outside the created order. This claim is never demonstrated for Aššur, but it is the consistent witness of the OT regarding Yahweh (cf. Walton 2006, 332-33; Oswalt 2009, 81).

(2) Syncretism: A common view is that Israelite religion developed as the portfolios of Canaanite gods were absorbed into Yahweh's powers and identity. This could be seen as parallel to the god lists and the theology regarding Aššur. Mesopotamian religion does illustrate how religions simplify their pantheons or evidence henotheism. Some may wish to call this a monotheistic tendency; however it differs from the Old Testament portrait of Yahweh in several respects. First, Yahweh's name is never compounded with that of another deity, Yahweh may steal Baal's thunder, but he never assumes Baal's personal identity. Only the title El could be confused with the proper name of a foreign god (the chief of

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ ?

Source?

polytheism

if this text is separate from creation

→

the Canaanite pantheon); however its generic denotation neutralizes this as evidence of syncretism.

(3) **Incomparability:** Mesopotamian hymns, even associated with the same king, alternatively extol different deities as the most supreme. From this vantage point, the incomparability theme in the OT does nothing to differentiate Yahweh. However, I have never encountered a polemic in a Mesopotamian text uttered against another deity (only incantations against lowly demons). Yet, polemics against other deities are common in context with the theme Yahweh's incomparability in the OT.

(4) **Divine Council:** Parpola's efforts to subsume the divine council within Aššur forces us to articulate important ontological distinctions within Israel's divine council. As Heiser has so clearly demonstrated, Yahweh is "species unique," that is, he exists in a class of his own that is ontologically independent of the other gods (Heiser 2008). This differs from Parpola's system, and even Akhenaten's quasi-monotheism for that matter, in that Yahweh is not enmeshed with beings in a pantheistic fashion nor distinguished only in a modalistic manner.

(5) **Text and Practice:** Porter's critique of Parpola offers an important methodological reminder, that texts function in physical contexts that are semiotically relevant to the meaning of the text. Ritual is most often clarified by texts, but as in the case of the Assyrian cult, the ritual renders some interpretations of the text unlikely.

Prophetic Yahwism was radically unique for the ancient Near East, as was orthodox Trinitarianism when it emerged in late antiquity. The criterion of dissimilarity forces people to make a choice regarding the God of the Bible, is he the true God revealing himself to us (Yahweh in the OT and Jesus the God-man in the New) or can we explain him away as the intellectual development of another religion?

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