

Being, Kabbalah, and the Assyrian Sacred Tree

Stylised trees were part of the iconography of religion in ancient Mesopotamia, as far back as the fourth millennium. By the second millennium B.C.E., the image of the tree 'is found everywhere within the orbit of the ancient Near Eastern oikumene, including Egypt, Greece, and the Indus civilisation'. While its precise religious significance has been unclear, Simo Parpola suggests that 'its overall composition strikingly recalls the Tree of Life of later Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist art.' The implication being that there is some kind of cultural continuity behind the progress of this symbol. [i](#)

The symbol, as it interests us here, dates from around the middle of the second millennium B.C.E. At about that time there is a new development of the symbol of the tree. The Late Assyrian form of the Tree appeared during the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I, of the thirteenth century B.C.E. The rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the first millennium spread the symbol throughout the Near East, and it survived until the end of the millennium. This form of the tree is the one most familiar to students of Assyriology and those who have visited the Assyrian galleries in the British Museum, with its garland of cones, pomegranates, or palmates surrounding either the crown of the tree, or its trunk. The importance of this symbol is made clear by the fact that it appears on royal garments, jewelry, official seals, as well as the royal wall paintings and sculptures found in the royal palaces. Indeed in the famous throne-room of Ashurnasirpal II (now in the British Museum), it is the central motif, standing directly behind the throne. [ii](#) There are literally hundreds of examples of the Late Assyrian Tree motif, and they exhibit a wide degree of variation. [iii](#) However Parpola argues that 'its characteristic features stand out even in the crudest examples and make it generally easy to distinguish it from its predecessors'. He describes it as follows:

Essentially it consists of a trunk with a palmette crown standing on the stone base and surrounded by a network of horizontal or intersecting lines fringed with palmettes, pinecones, or pomegranates. In more elaborate renditions, the trunk regularly has joints or nodes at its top, middle, and base and a corresponding number of small circles to the right and left of the trunk. Antithetically posed animal, human, or supernatural figures usually flank the tree, while a winged disk hovers over the whole.

Until the publication of Parpola's paper, despite painstaking analyses of this symbol, very little was found to explain its meaning and function, largely due to the fact that there is an almost total lack of textual evidence concerning the tree. Some work by the Assyriologist Irene Winter however has shown that the Tree represents the divine world order, and that the Assyrian king maintained this order on earth as the vice-regent of the god Aššur. [iv](#) Parpola points out that the observation was made some time ago that the king may take the place of the Tree between the winged genies, and that 'whatever the precise implications of this fact, it is evident that in such scenes the king is portrayed as the human personification of the Tree. [v](#) As personification of the Tree, then the king represented the 'realization of that order in man... a true image of God, and the 'Perfect Man'. [vi](#)

Parpola argues that the Tree symbol in Assyria had a dual function in Assyrian Imperial art. As well as symbolizing the divine world order which the Assyrian king maintained, it could also relate to the king, resulting in his portrayal as the Perfect Man. This would account for the prominence of the Tree as an imperial symbol, providing legitimation for the rule of Assyria, and justification of the king as absolute ruler. [vii](#)

Since there are no references to such an important symbol in contemporary written sources, this 'can only mean that the doctrines relating to the Tree were never committed to writing by the scholarly elite who forged the imperial ideology but were circulated orally.' [viii](#) Parpola also suggests this implies a stratification of knowledge in Assyria, and that 'only the basic symbolism of the Tree was common knowledge, while the more sophisticated details of its interpretation were accessible to a few select initiates only. [ix](#)

Parpola argues that 'the strictly esoteric nature of Kabbalah and the fact that its secret doctrines were for centuries, and still are, transmitted almost exclusively orally are the principal reasons why next to nothing was known about it until the late

Middle Ages. The esotericism of Kabbalah and its fundamentally oral nature are stressed in every Kabbalistic work, ancient and modern'. He suggests that beyond the parallel of an esoteric and oral aspect to both Mesopotamian and Kabbalistic lore, there is also a strong parallel between the Assyrian Tree and the Sefirotic

Tree. [x](#) He also suggests that the entire doctrinal structure of Kabbalah revolves around the diagram of the Sefirotic Tree, which 'strikingly resembles the Assyrian

Tree'. [xi](#)

As we shall see, it is probable that they are two products of the same body of ideas, the first traceable to the 13th century B.C.E., and the latter with a less clear early history, resurfacing in the Middle Ages of our own era.

The Sefirotic Tree is so-called on account of the elements known as Sefirot (countings or numbers) which are represented in the diagram by circles, numbered from one to ten.' They are defined as divine powers or attributes through which the transcendent God, not shown in the diagram, manifests himself.' [xii](#) Parpola describes the tree thus:

The Tree has a central trunk and horizontal branches spreading to the right and left on which the Sefirot are arranged in the symmetrical fashion: three to the left, four on the trunk, and three to the right. The vertical alignments of the Sefirot on the right and left represent the polar opposites of masculine and feminine, positive and negative, active and passive, dark and light, etc. The balance of the Tree is maintained by the trunk, also called the Pillar of Equilibrium.

The other two pillars are known as the Pillar of Judgement, and the Pillar of Mercy.

Parpola suggests that the Sefirotic Tree has a dual function, like the Assyrian Tree.

It is both a picture of the macrocosm, giving an account of the creation of the world, accompanied in three successive stages by the Sefirot emanating from the transcendent God. It also charts the cosmic harmony of the universe upheld by the Sefirot under the constraining influence of the polar system of opposites. In short, it is a model of the divine world order, and in manifesting the invisible God through His attributes, it is also, in a way, an image of God. Its other function is to refer to man as a microcosm, the ideal man created in the image of God.

Interpreted in this way, it becomes a way of salvation for the mystic seeking deliverance from the bonds of flesh through the soul's union with God. The arrangement of the Sefirot from the bottom to the top of the diagram marks the path which he has to follow in order to attain the ultimate goal, the crown of heaven represented by the Sefirah number one, Keter.

So, given the striking resemblance between the Assyrian Tree and the Sefirotic

Tree, both in terms of appearance and its symbolic content, is there in fact a lineal connection? Parpola argues that this is likely. The Kabbalah seems to have originated on Babylonian soil in renowned rabbinical schools, and these were later 'the major centres from which the Kabbalistic doctrines spread to Europe during the high Middle Ages.' [xiii](#) He points to known Jewish borrowings from Mesopotamia during and after the Exile to Babylon, including the fact that the Jewish calendar remained based on the Neo-Babylonian system of intercalation. [xiv](#) Further evidence points to the 'foundation stone' of Kabbalism, the Sefer Yezirah, having been composed sometime between the third and sixth centuries, and the emergence of the Kabbalah as a doctrinal structure can now be traced 'fairly reliably' to the first century A.D. [xv](#) Some Kabbalistic doctrines, such as the location of the Throne of God in the Middle Heaven, 'are explicitly attested in Mesopotamian esoteric texts.' [xvi](#)

The connections of Kabbalah with Jewish apocalyptic esotericism and mysticism of the post-exilic period have never been questioned, and its affinities with Platonism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and Sufism were noted long ago and stressed by many scholars; the crucial question of the evolution of Kabbalistic doctrines, specifically their dependence on external influence(s), however, has remained a matter of controversy. While Kabbalists themselves have consistently stressed the antiquity of their tradition and vehemently denied the existence of any kind of historical development in Kabbalah... modern scholarship has tended to see the emergence of historical Kabbalah as a gradual process heavily influenced by Neoplatonic and especially Gnostic thought.

However this is no longer the case: Parpola notes that this picture has been changed significantly by recent research, and that it is now 'generally recognized that there is considerable Jewish influence on the emerging Gnostic literature, not the other way around,' and that 'several doctrinal features of

Kabbalah previously attributed to Gnosticism in fact belong to a genuine Jewish tradition reaching... down to the first century A.D., if not earlier. [xvii](#)

Nevertheless, none of this constitutes proof of the existence of the hypothetical

Assyrian precursor, as Parpola concedes. In the absence of direct textual evidence, he admits that 'it is possible that the observed similarities are simply coincidental and due to a common cultural heritage rather than to a direct borrowing.' [xviii](#)

Turning to the Assyrian Tree diagram, Parpola tells us that he had for years considered the identity of the Assyrian and Sefirotic Trees an attractive but probably unprovable hypothesis,

until it finally occurred to me that there is a way of proving or rejecting it. For 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.

This probably counts as an insight of genius. Parpola continues his account of how he demonstrated the identity of the Assyrian and Sefirotic Trees, by noting that the names and definitions of the Sefirot 'strongly recall the attributes and symbols of Mesopotamian gods, and their prominent association with numbers calls to mind the mystic numbers of the Mesopotamian gods.' The Sefirot are in fact 'represented as angelic beings in some Sefirotic schemes, which is consistent with their definition as divine powers.' [xix](#) In the Mesopotamian scheme of course, the divine powers would have been gods, 'with functions and attributes coinciding with those of the Sefirot.'

Consequently, I replaced the Sefirot with Mesopotamian gods sharing their functions and /or attributes. Most gods fell into their place immediately and unequivocally. Assyriologists will need no justification for associating Ea with Wisdom, Sin with Understanding, Marduk with Mercy, Šamaš with Judgement, Ištar with Beauty, and Nabu and Ninurta with Victory (Nezah). Crown (Keter) was the emblem of both Anu and Enlil, but since in the first millennium Enlil was commonly equated with Marduk (just as his son Ninurta was equated with Nabu), the topmost Sefirah most naturally corresponds to Anu, the god of Heaven. [xx](#)

Yesod, or 'Foundation,' Parpola identifies with Nergal, lord of the underworld, on account of the fact that Nergal's chief characteristic is strength, and in Akkadian is homonymous with a word connoting foundation, dunnu. In connection with this characteristic, Parpola refers to Ashurbanipal's famous coronation hymn, where Anu, king of heaven, is associated with the king's crown, and Enlil with his throne. [xxi](#)

In Kabbalah, Keter signifies the 'Ancient of Ancients, the Primordial Point or Monad', the first expression of God's primal will, which contains the plan of the entire universe and the power of all

opposites in unity; it is the Alpha and the Omega, 'all that was, is and will be, the place of first emanation and ultimate return'. Parpola suggests that this corresponds to epithets of Anu, 'the first', 'the heavenly father', 'the greatest one in heaven and earth', 'the one who contains the entire universe', 'the father/progenitor of the (great) gods, creator of everything'. The word *dunnu*, as well as occurring in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions as a common epithet of Nergal (as in *bēl abāri u dunni*, 'lord of power and strength'), also occurs as a synonym of *uššu*, meaning 'foundation', and also as a designation of the netherworld (*dunni qaqqari*, 'bedrock, terra firma').

Gods remaining to be placed on the tree with epithets which fit the Sefirah Hod (Splendour or Majesty) are Adad and Girru, who share the same sacred number. Adad is the storm god, and Girru is the firegod. Parpola notes that in the Bible the word *hod* refers to Jahweh as a thundering and flashing storm. Adad had a major role as an oracular god, 'announcing by his roar, divine judgements and decisions to mankind', and was known as King of decisions, august judge', etc.

The remaining Sefirah to be associated with a Mesopotamian divinity is Malkhut, or 'Kingdom'. In the Kabbalah this Sefirah is defined as 'the receptive potency which distributes the Divine stream to the lower worlds.' Parpola argues that in the context of Mesopotamia this 'can only apply to the king as the link between God and Man,' and points out that the king as distributor of the Divine stream is a motif which is often found on Assyrian seals. The king is often shown holding a streamer emanating from the winged disk above the sacred tree. [xxii](#) Parpola regards this sefirah as secondary, and has excluded it from the reconstructed model because it breaks the compositional harmony of the Tree, and 'because the king, though impersonating the Tree, clearly does not form part of it in Assyrian art'.

This act of reconstruction took Parpola 'no longer than half an hour'. The corresponding divine numbers were then filled in, using as a guide the article on 'Gotterzahlen' in the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, which was for the most part 'a purely mechanical operation', since in general the Mesopotamians associated only one number with a god, and only one god per number. Gods with the same number were understood to occupy the same place on the Tree and to be equivalent. In the course of his JNES article, where there is scholarly dispute about the divine numbers associated with the Mesopotamian gods, Parpola provides evidence for his choice of number for the Sefirot of the reconstructed Tree. Each of these numbers is as they were used in the spelling of divine names in the Middle and Neo-Assyrian standard orthography, and all are securely attested. These numbers are 1 (Anu), 30 (Sin), 60 (Ea), 20 (Samas), 50 (Marduk), 15 (Istar), 40 (Nabu), 10 (Adad), and 14 (Nergal). Mummu, situated between Anu and Istar, has the value of 0.

The reconstructed Tree contains nearly all the major gods of the Assyro-Babylonian pantheon. Only one major god is missing: Aššur. No divine number for Aššur is attested in the literature. Parpola suggests that Aššur is to be identified with the winged disk which hovers over the Assyrian Tree, the source of the Divine streams, and accordingly is to be understood as equivalent to the transcendent God of Kabbalah, the En Sof. In support of this, Parpola tells us that in fact the various spellings of the name of Aššur can be interpreted as expressing the idea of the 'One, Only, or Universal God, as well as the various qualities of En Sof.' [xxiii](#)

We should pause here and consider where this argument has taken us. Jewish mysticism of the Middle Ages has never been more than an interesting problem for historians of philosophy, for the simple reason that formerly it seemed to appear out of nowhere, as a superstitious religious doctrine built on late rabbinical discussion of biblical texts, dating certainly from after the meeting of Greek and Jewish thought in Alexandria. It was always seen as a byway in Jewish mystical thought, as something strange and arcane with no direct origin in biblical materials, and the thought found in the Old Testament. Yet here Parpola is joining together the thought of Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages, with an ontology dating to the late 2nd millennium B.C.E.

In Kabbalistic theosophy, the En Sof (literally ‘the limitless’) is defined as ‘total unity beyond comprehension.’ This of course is an explicitly philosophical concept: an idea abstracted from any particular instance. If Parpola is right in making a connection between the Assyrian Tree and the Sefirotic Tree, and can identify the chief God of Assyria Aššur as having had a philosophical character [xxiv](#) to the adherents of the cult of the Assyrian king, once again, the supposed primacy of Greece in the development of abstract and philosophical thought comes into question.

The same source Parpola uses for the definition of En Sof, also says that the phrase En Sof Or, ‘The Endless Light’, stands for the Will of the divine to manifest himself, which lies behind all existence, and is envisioned as a boundless ocean of light engulfing and pervading the physical world. [xxv](#) Representations of the god Aššur covered by a garment of water he argues is a metaphor identifying him as ‘the ocean of divine light, to whom all returns.’ Dressed in water, which is associated with the Apsu or Abyss, he is said to have ‘come into being before heaven and earth existed.’ [xxvi](#) Another interesting connection between the En Sof and Aššur is that the solar disk in Aššur’s icon is sometimes replaced by two concentric circles with a point in the centre, which is identical ‘with the Kabbalistic diagram illustrating the manifestation of En Sof as the Universal Monad’. [xxvii](#)

In Assyrian cultic texts Aššur is commonly referred to as ‘the God’. [xxviii](#) Aššur is called ‘king of the totality of gods, creator of himself; father of the gods, who grew up in the Abyss; king of heaven and earth, lord of all gods, who emanated the supernal and infernal gods and fashioned the vaults of heaven and earth.’ [xxix](#)

The King, by emulating the divine Aššur, puts himself in the natural place of Aššur, which is the Abyss, the place which existed before heaven and earth. The whole life of the king, as we know from the extensive records which survive, particularly from the time of the later Sargonid Kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, was understood (within court circles) to be shaped by the need to achieve the emulation of the characteristics and nature of Aššur, and to be once more in that place which has the potency to create heaven and earth, and to give rise to the supernal and infernal gods, and the boundless ocean of divine light. A place which contains (in the Kabbalistic model) ‘all that was, is and will be, the place of first emanation and ultimate return’. The place of foundation, and the totality of gods.

A cult which understands its divinity in terms of Being is likely to revolve around both an ontology and a theory of knowledge, particularly if there is some notion of participation in the divine. [xxx](#) In the case of Assyria, its theology is identifiable as an ontology in that it contains an underlying notion of the nature of reality, and its characteristics. This ontology is very sophisticated, in that it is not simply an enlargement or extrapolation of an existing power, such as human kingship. The characteristics of the foundation of reality are spoken of in terms which make it clear that the nature of this foundation transcends the capacity of ordinary mortals to understand or to describe it: a place which comprehends the whole of understanding, which embraces all physical reality, and had existence before heaven and earth were created.

This idea of the ultimate reality behind physical appearance clearly has been

arrived at through inference; is framed as something which has no direct earthly counterpart, and which is spoken of in terms of myth and image. This ontology also contains the parameters of a theory of knowledge, in that, if the nature of the ultimate reality is by definition beyond the capacity of human understanding, then one aspect of the necessary return to the place of the foundation of the world is the development of a capacity to comprehend sufficient to allow participation in the divine.

Reality is the result of the divine will and understanding, and acquisition of an understanding of the divine requires both the will and the capacity to comprehend the divine. [xxxi](#) This is achieved principally through scholarship, since scholarship was understood to promote right judgement and wisdom. [xxxii](#) Thus in Sargonid Assyria, the great gods (who are aspects of the true divine) have understanding, and this understanding gives them the right to create the gods and the heavens and the earth. Man as unperfected man does not have this right.

Human beings are 'deaf and blind' and 'ignorant of themselves ... throughout their lives'. The passage in the same text which, referring to Esarhaddon as:

the beloved of the great gods, with the great intelligence and vast understanding, which the great Nudimmud, the wise man of the gods, bestowed on me, with the wisdom which Aššur and Marduk entrusted to me when they made me aware of the renewal of (the statue of) the great gods...

yokes together the idea of knowledge with kingship, and also with divinity, since the gods Aššur and Marduk made him aware of the need for the renewal of the great gods. [xxxiii](#) He has the 'great intelligence and vast understanding' of 'the great Nudimmud', who is in fact the god Ea, often identified with Enki the trickster god, but also the god of craftsmen. 'Nu.dím.mud' is one of Ea's epithets, meaning 'fashioner of images'. [xxxiv](#)

It is a royal task, communicated to Esarhaddon by divine command, and naturally within this royal ontology, not easy to perform. Hence the skill and wide understanding (comprehension) which is required is stressed: "This task of refurbishing (the statues), is difficult!"

We are looking at a cult which understood the life of the king to be a moral quest for perfection, and which understood the physical world of objects and events to relate in some degree to the king's struggle. It is essentially a teleological universe, in which fact and value interpenetrate. Nothing happens which is without meaning, if there is a relation to the role and life of the king, and all things may have significance, if only it is possible to read the signs. The divine is the telos of existence, as well as the totality of what was, what is, and what will be.

The Sacred Tree, representing the Divine Order, also represents this teleological extremity of reality, and the place of creation. It is the telos of reality, in that it is both the place from which the creation emanates, and the place to which the king seeks to effect a return by means of moral exercise and judgement. [xxxv](#)

The significance of the tree as an indicator of the uttermost part of the world is suggested by the appearance of the pine cones or pomegranates at the limits and crossing points in royal buildings, such as the palaces. A number of entrances feature large slabs decorated with carpet-like designs, and an unwound version of the cones or pomegranates, linked by volutes, often appears around the edge. This design can also be used to mark off the extent of one thing from another – there is a slab in the British Museum which shows a winged eagle-headed genie with a pine cone in one hand and a sacred bucket in the other (these elements are often found in the context of the Sacred Tree) which is separated from another image by an unwound line of cones/pomegranates. The winged genie in its original context was facing one of the winged-bull guardians which stood either side of a palace gate. [xxxvi](#) The representation of the bull brings together four qualities associated with kingship, since it is made up of the characteristics of man, bull, eagle and sheep. The figure therefore symbolically represents the totality of kingly qualities, and represents them at the threshold of the limits of the king's palace.

The intellectual world in which the king and his courtiers lived, now very remote for us, was one in which the nature of a transcendent reality was of crucial importance, not only in terms of the potency and judgement conferred by the co-terminousness of the king with Being itself, but also in terms of the fact that the whole life of the king was shaped by the need to achieve that status and the constant striving to maintain that connection with it. The king was a bridge between the world of the divine and the great gods, and the world of man. Part of that constant striving was intellectual, as well as moral, in that the definition of the divine involved 'wide understanding'. [xxxvii](#) Thus the role of learning, wisdom and scholarship plays an important part in the life of the court.

The concept of totality is a recurring feature of Assyrian theology, and a logical corollary of the idea of perfection through completed and excellent action. It was understood that these characteristics of the divine could be emulated through representation within the limitations imposed by the nature of earthly reality. This makes effective moral action possible, both on the part of the king and other men.

The Assyrian universe is framed in terms of knowledge and its absence; the divine possesses the greatest degree of knowledge. The universe is thus structured according to degrees of participation in the ultimate completion, the realm of the divine at the apex of reality, with ordinary men living in ignorance with little or no commerce with the divine. The king is at the top of the worldly hierarchy, the earthly image of the divine, and the perfect man.

Within this model, the ultimate completion which the divine represents – the sum, the totality of completions – is the necessarily transcendent telos, with which we can have no commerce except via certain special individuals in auspicious circumstances and significant locations. It is, as we have seen, impossible for mortal men to grasp its full nature, by virtue of its definition as the place of all knowledge. It can be (and was) understood symbolically as a heaping up in one place of all possible completions and excellences in the world. Hence we find the king training with his elite, with the archers and the scholars and the diviners, in order to master all important skills and crafts, and later we find that he is engaged in conquest and empire building, attempting to take hold of the known universe and to subject it to his lordship, an emulation on earth of the lordship of the divine. [xxxviii](#)

The teleological perspective finds expression in many places in ancient literature before the classical period, and it is not confined to east or west. In the modern world however, the archaic sense of the telos is not well understood, even among historians of philosophy. The association of the concept with the notions 'purpose' and 'design' has, over the past two centuries, caused teleological argument to be viewed with suspicion as an explanatory mechanism: usually it is summarily dismissed altogether, since it appears to beg those questions which it presumes to answer – what is the cause of existence? What is the goal of existence? From our point of view, in which we rely on the efficient cause for the explanation of relationships between one thing and another, this is a perfectly reasonable outlook. But in dealing with both Mesopotamian and Greek thought, we are dealing with a complex universe explained with a rich palette of causes.

The term, "king of the totality" (*šar kiššati*), was used as far back as the Agade period, but it is generally held that Shamshi-Adad I used it as a newly coined term. Its use has been understood to reflect situations where political control is total. In fact it is a term which references the philosophical and theological context of the Mesopotamian idea of kingship, which depended on an ontological model. The abstraction of totality is the potency indicated, not what the instance of totality is, over which the king presides.

Since much of the thought in Assyria concerning the divine was secret owing both to its proximity to the royal cult, and also because the Assyrian ontological model defined truth and participation in reality as something necessarily only for the select few, we have little information about how they came to frame the properties of the divine which we can determine from the evidence. It is clear however that the nature of the divine understood by the Assyrian court during the Neo-Assyrian period was established by means of argument about ontology – about the nature of reality itself. That is to say that the divine was understood in terms which were the outcome of what we would understand as philosophical discussions initiated no later than the suggested date given by Parpola, which is the 13th century B.C.E.

The intense ritual involvement of the king (as representative of Aššur) in the life of the state makes clear that the Assyrians employed the concept that the divine has the power to intervene at every moment of existence in order to maintain the fabric of the world and its proper order. This is the corollary of the idea that it is possible for mankind to participate in the divine through moral and ritual action, and to climb towards divine understanding through scholarship.

The sense in which 'philosophical' is used here is the archaic one, which both Plato and Parmenides understood, in which the relationship of the world and its parts to the 'one thing' is the principal question, informing all other subjects of discussion.

One of the reasons for the current convention that philosophy began in Greece is a purely formal one, in that historians of western thought have taken the view that we have no direct evidence of the discussion of philosophical matters from any other cultural context (other than the Greek oikumene) before the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. This state of affairs is more apparent than real however. The dialogue format was well established from the days of Sumer onwards, and these usually consist of discussion of the relative merits of excellent things. [xxxix](#) Those dialogues which survive however are highly formalised, and do not explore the abstractions considered in classical Greece. We have no accounts of the kind of abstract discussion which clearly underpins the concept of the king as the perfect man and the embodiment of the divine order. But clearly these discussions took place.

The family resemblances now apparent between aspects of Assyrian, Hebrew and Greek thought open up huge new avenues for research. Each of these cultures possesses a tradition of understanding its divinities in terms of an esoteric abstract ontological model, and it is now possible to begin to understand how these traditions stand in relation to one another. There is of course much which remains to be understood, but, questions concerning the metaphysics of representation, of creation, of the nature of Being, and the author of the world, are co-existent with the phenomenal aspects of the ancient religions which have come down to us. It must now be hard for us to look at philosophy as something which is to be understood simply as successor to religious accounts of the world, emerging into history at a time when religion and mythology were found wanting as explanatory mechanisms.

i Parpola acknowledges that the question of the existence of the concept of the Tree of Life in Mesopotamia has been disputed, resulting in the use of the 'more neutral term' 'sacred tree' when referring to the Mesopotamian symbol. 'The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy', in JNES 52/3 (1993) p 161 n.4.

ii Details of instances of the appearance of the sacred tree are given by Parpola in footnotes 9-13, p163, JNES 52/3 (1993)

iii Parpola has included a typological appendix to his paper Appendix A, p200-01, JNES 52/3 (1993) , illustrating the range of variation in the depiction of the tree.

iv Winter published on this subject in *Program* n. 13, pp. 26ff.

v The King is representative of the god Aššur, who is indicated by the winged disk which hovers above the Tree.

vi JNES 52/3 (1993) p 167-8, & n. 34, where Parpola tells us that 'Perfect Man' is well attested as an Assyrian Royal epithet eṭlu gitmālu . Similar phrases are known, such as 'perfect king' šarru gitmālu , and the phrase 'what the king said is as perfect as the word of god' in the text LAS 144 r. 4f. (Letters of Assyrian Scholars) . Parpola points out that the concept of the 'perfect king' goes back to the early second millennium. In n. 33 it is noted that the king was often referred to as the image (šalmu) of God. Phrases such as: 'the father of the king my lord was the very image of Bel, and the king my lord is likewise the very image of Bel,' LAS 125: 18f., and 'You, O king of the world, are an image of Marduk.' RMA 170=SAA 8 n333 r.2 . Also: LAS 145: 'The king, my lord, is the chosen of the great gods; the shadow of the king, my lord, is beneficial to all.... The king, my lord, is the perfect likeness of the god.'

vii JNES 52/3 (1993) p 168.

viii JNES 52/3 (1993) p 168.

ix Parpola indicates that the evidence for 'an extensive esoteric lore in first and second-millennium Mesopotamia is amply documented', and the 'few extant written specimens of such lore prove that mystical exegesis of religious symbolism played a prominent part in it.' JNES 52/3 (1993) p 169.

x JNES 52/3 (1993) p 169. See also n. 41.

xi JNES 52/3 (1993) p 171, n45. 'The first step in Kabbalah is to become familiar with the Sefirotic Tree. Without this key, little can be comprehended' – Halevi, Z: *Tradition of Hidden Knowledge*. London, 1979.

xii JNES 52/3 (1993) p 171-2

xiii JNES 52/3 (1993) p 174

xiv JNES 52/3 (1993) p 174, note 64. Parker, R and Dubberstein, W. *Babylonian Chronology* 625 B.C.-A.D. 75, Providence, 1956.

xv The earliest Kabbalistic manuscripts date from the 10th century C.E., and were found in the famous Cairo Genizah, a repository for ancient Jewish manuscripts worn out with age and use. These manuscripts date from 955-56. The earliest manuscript of the Sefer Yezirah dates from no earlier than the eleventh century. JNES 52/3(1993) p 173-4, n59

xvi JNES 52/3 (1993) p 176, n 66. Parpola also notes the 'prominent use of interpretive techniques such as gematria (use of the numerical value of the letters of a word) and notarikon (taking certain words as abbreviations for complete phrases or letters or syllables as abbreviations for words) in both Kabbalah and Mesopotamian scholarly texts, citing Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 168 ff., and Lieberman

'A Mesopotamian Background,' pp. 157-225; and Tigay, 'Early Technique' pp. 176-81, (all in the same volume), which 'adduces numerous examples of the two techniques from the Babylonian Talmud'.

xvii JNES 52/3 (1993) p 174, n 61. Parpola cites here Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp30ff, for details of the impact of Kabbalah on Gnosticism. He also mentions an 'unmistakeable reference' to the Tree of Life diagram found in Hekhalot Rabbati, dating possibly from as early as the third century C.E., referencing Dan, Joseph., *The Revelation of the Secret of the World: The Beginning of Jewish Mysticism in Late Antiquity*, Brown University Program in Judaic Studies, Occasional Papers, no 2 (Providence 1992), pp. 30ff.

xviii JNES 52/3 (1993) p 176

xix JNES 52/3 (1993) p 177. Citing Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 74, where Sefirah 1 appears as Metatron, 2 as Raziel, 3 as Zaphkiel, 4 as Zadkiel, 5 as Samael, 6 as Michael, 7 as Hamiel, 8 as Raphael, and 9 as Gabriel.

xx JNES 52/3 (1993) p 177-80

xxi See SAA 3. no. 11 r.5

xxii JNES 52/3 (1993) p 181.

xxiii JNES 52/3 (1993) p 187.

xxiv That is, actually being 'the limitless', as opposed to something which is merely rhetorically 'without limit'.

xxv JNES 52/3 (1993) p 185, n 94 - Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p.5.

xxvi JNES 52/3 (1993) p 185, n 94 see SAA 3 no 34:53 ff. and 35:44 ff.

xxvii This symbol can also be found on more abstract representations of the Tree on cylinder seals, where the cones are replaced by these double circles with central points.

xxviii JNES 52/3 (1993) p 185, n 94, citing KAR 215 r. ii 9; van Driel, *Cult of Assur*, pp88:36 and 136:16 ff.

xxix JNES 52/3 (1993) p 185, n 94, from Craig, ABRT I, 83. Parpola suggests (private communication 4 January 2006) that 'the verb in question (*šapāku*) basically means "to pour out" (e.g., grain) but could also mean "to create" (see the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* = CAD, vol. 12/1 Š/1, p. 414)'.

xxx Plato's account of the world of visible and material reality also contains an ontology which is braided together with a theory of knowledge. The Good gives rise to the plurality of forms which underpin material reality and the world of opinion. The contemplation of the Good is achieved by attention to the forms, which lead the attention of the philosopher back to the Good. Both the world of forms and the opinions of men are in flux.

xxxi The world was viewed as an outpouring of a transcendent reality. We can have through examination of the world and its parts only a partial understanding of the totality of the divine. Thus real understanding of the world comes through contact with the divine and the acquisition of divine knowledge.

xxxii Parpola comments that 'this mode of thinking is clearly reflected in the myth of Ištar's descent to the netherworld, where (as also in Gnosis) reunion with god and salvation is achieved only through gradual 'reacquisition' of lost divine powers' (personal communication of 4th January 2006).

xxxiii Much of the evidence for the close association between the ideas of knowledge and kingship in Assyria comes from King Ashurbanipal's own account of his training for kingship under the Adapa discipline, and also from the Adapa myth, a version of which was found in Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh. The texts of the Annals were first published in *ARAB*, vol. II, s.985ff, Luckenbill. A new translation can be found in the appendices.

xxxiv See C.B.F. Walker and Michael B. Dick's *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, SAALT1, 2001. p25, n80. Sumerian 'Nu' or 'alam' signify 'image', and the Akkadian (Assyrian) term is 'salmu'. Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, tell us p59 that 'salmu' can refer to any piece of representative art, whether figurative or not. By 'image' might be meant a representation or something representative of something, without being a likeness of that thing, which implies a symbolic sense. It is used to refer to statues, stelae and figurines, and can also indicate 'constellation'. The image of the king is denoted by the word 'salmu-sarri'. Herodotus' strange use of the Greek term 'zōon' to indicate both animate and inanimate form, is the result of its primary sense being 'image'.

xxxv In Assyria 'going forwards' meant a return to the beginning. This can, in the absence of an understanding of the Assyrian perception of the ontology of the world, easily be misinterpreted as an indicator of cultural conservatism. In fact this perception of orientation is the result of the most desirable state of existence being understood to be located at the beginning of the world.

xxxvi There is an illustration of the original location of this slab (the entrance to the shrine of Ninurta at Nimrud) in Julian Reade's *Assyrian Sculpture*, p8, fig. 3, British Museum Press, 1983.

xxxvii Aristotle sees virtue as achieved through action, and in two branches, intellectual and moral. Virtuous moral action is a matter of habit or custom, whereas intellectual virtue is a matter of judgement and decision. Both forms of virtuous action are clearly understood in Mesopotamia. For Aristotle, the intellectual virtues are of superior importance for the individual, but the moral virtues are important for the well-being of the polis. Obviously only those who have intellectual virtue can determine the nature of virtuous action, since only they can make right judgement.

xxxviii Sumerian šár, according to the Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary, has the following meanings: totality, world (Akk. Kiššatu); (to be) numerous; to be perfect; (Akk. gitmālu); to mix; to slaughter, etc. 'The esoteric association of šarru 'king' with Sumerian 'šár' is discussed in the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* (CAD) Š/2 p76a, and in B. N. Porter's *One God or Many?* p 191, n. 44, Transactions of the Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, 2000. Totality is a representation of the telos, and of the divine order. Kingship of totality (šar kiššati) therefore is a formal expression which represents an intensification of the proximity of the king to the divine. The king, striving toward perfection, stands at the limit of existence, and also at the outer limit of the reality beyond. The king is emblematic (at the least) of the divine perfection. Following the drift of Assyrian royal ideology to its logical conclusion, containing within himself all the excellences of mankind, the king is the earthly representation of the telos.

xxxix 'Formal debates were a popular entertainment at the court of the kings of the Third Dynasty of Urim. Records survive indicating that payments were made to the performers who took part. Typically, the contest is between two natural phenomena, animals, or materials that are significant in human life: Winter and Summer, Bird and Fish, Sheep and Grain, Tree and Reed, Date Palm and Tamarisk, Hoe and Plough, Silver and Copper'. See Black, Cunningham, Robson and Zólyomi, *The Literature of Ancient Sumer*, p225, OUP, 2004.