

W. G. Lambert

Ancient Mesopotamian Religion and Mythology: Selected Essays. Edited by A. R. George and T. M. Oshima (Orientalische Religionen in der Antike 15). Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016. xvi + 280 pp. ISBN 9783161536748 (hbk.)

W. G. Lambert was one of the most important Assyriologists of the latter part of the twentieth century. In a field which requires unusual stamina when it is practiced from the clay tablet itself (the most common format of ancient Mesopotamian cuneiform texts), and in a discipline which rallies a small international community of scholars, many of whom would readily admit the somewhat esoteric nature of their endeavor, Lambert's authority was highly esteemed, occasionally feared, and only rarely challenged. This recognition was based first of all on his intimate knowledge of thousands of tablets kept in the British Museum, where Lambert, who taught Assyriology at the University of Birmingham since 1964 and well beyond his retirement in 1993, could be met on Thursdays in the so-called Students' Room. To Assyriologists, reading, drawing, transcribing, and eventually editing a cuneiform document represent the hallmarks of the real scholar. Lambert had read thousands of tablets, drawn and published hundreds, and thus acquired a first-hand expertise virtually unmatched among his contemporaries. Most of his 300+ articles were editions of hitherto unpublished texts or fragmentary tablets which he had been able to combine and thus understand far better than before. He was also the author of a handful of books, all of them basically editions of thematically germane corpora of texts, and nevertheless classics, through which his work radiated far into neighboring disciplines, especially biblical studies. These books include *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (1960; reissued in 1996), with early reflective texts dubbed "Poem of the Righteous Sufferer," "Babylonian Theodicy," and "Dialogue of Pessimism"; *Enūma Eliš: The Babylonian Epic of Creation* (1974, with S. B. Parker); *Atra-hasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (1969, with A. R. Millard; reissued in 1999); *Babylonian Oracle Questions* (2007); and the posthumously published *Babylonian Creation Myths* (2013). Other projects, which he assigned to his most gifted research students, have resulted in equally significant publications of Mesopotamian epics, rituals, hymns, and divinatory as well as mythological explanatory works.

History of Religions as a discipline seems to have lain more than a stone's throw too far removed to allow close interaction. Lambert never published in *Numen*, and none of his books was ever reviewed in this journal.¹ That a piece

1 A few research articles refer to his work, especially on so-called "wisdom": see Colless 1970; Simoons-Vermeer 1974; Horton 1972; Denning-Bolle 1987; and Budin 2004.

entitled “Ancient Mesopotamian Gods: Superstition, Philosophy, Theology” (pp. 28–36 in the selection of articles here reviewed) had appeared in the French *Revue de l'histoire des religions* required his tongue-in-cheek apology (George 2015: 349 n. 30); an article on “Der Mythos im Alten Mesopotamien, sein Werden und Vergehen” (pp. 95–107) published in the German *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*² was another exception. One may regret that there should have been so little exchange between a man whom Assyriologists and biblical scholars regard as one of the foremost historians of Mesopotamian religion of the latter twentieth century and History of Religions, the discipline represented by this journal. Yet it does not come as a surprise, once you consider disciplinary arrangements and taxonomies of knowledge in twentieth-century European academia.³ For those who care for both ends, the collection of articles here reviewed provides interesting reading as (1) a legacy of an outstanding scholar, (2) a testimony to his particular understanding of Mesopotamian religion and mythology, and (3) a witness for what Andrew George, one of the book’s editors and a student of Lambert, calls “probably the last generation of European scholars who came to Assyriology through Bible studies” (p. 1). While I am not sure about this qualification, it points to an interesting theoretical problem: The way generations of Assyriologists have dealt with religion has been (and for many individuals continues to be) determined by a somewhat ambiguous relationship between Christian (in Lambert’s case, Christadelphian) or Jewish upbringings on the one hand, and the world of Mesopotamian texts on the other. The latter have offered (and continue to offer) these scholars material for searching analogues, antecedents, or even origins of this or that cultural pattern known from the Bible; but they also provide the scholar an arena to experience all kinds of intellectual estrangements.

Lambert, who despised (or simply ignored) theory and systems, was certainly not a parallelomaniac. His genuine passion went to the ancient Babylonian and Assyrian scholars’ highly sophisticated worldview. Yet his understanding of ancient Mesopotamian religion — and this may even be accentuated by the present collection of essays — focuses to a large extent on an agenda set and defined by Jewish and Christian religious traditions in their relation to classical Greek and Roman culture and religion: a strong link between belief

2 The latter journal’s title is consistently misspelled in the book here reviewed (pp. x, 95, 253).

3 One should hope that at a time of global institutional pressure on philology-cum-history-based disciplines and an increasing demand for interdisciplinary projects, Assyriology and History of Religions move closer together (think of younger colleagues as different as Amar Annus, Laura Feldt, Margaret Jaques, or Alan Lenzi, to name a few), but the problems are obviously much larger than the two disciplines’ share of the academic cake.

and ethos, theology and moral philosophy; a major concern for gods and/or God and for how to appropriately deal with them (or “Him”); a number of key issues concerning the world — its beginnings (creation), early crisis (flood), historical evolution, and end (apocalypticism) — and questions that the experience of suffering and death may pose to human meaning-making. When turning from the editorial *arcanae* to interpretation, Lambert understood the texts he studied basically in terms of their worldview, philosophy, or theology. And despite his having virtually become (in Pauline terms) “a Babylonian to the Babylonians,” the concepts he used to interpret ancient Mesopotamian religion were by and large those current among his fellow classicists, biblical scholars, and theologians: “superstition” and “syncretism,” “polytheism” versus “monotheism,” cosmology, mythology, theology and “destiny.” To be sure, then, there is theory haunting these pages everywhere, but it is not recognized as such and generally remains implicit. This will become clear from the following list of titles of the twenty-three articles published here, which the editors of the volume have not arranged chronologically (publication dates range from 1958 to 2004, with the 1970s and 1980s best represented) but according to five larger thematic rubrics:

I: Introductory Considerations

“Morals in Mesopotamia” (pp. 11–27)

“Ancient Mesopotamian Gods: Superstition, Philosophy, Theology”
(pp. 28–36)

II: The Gods of Ancient Mesopotamia

“The Historical Development of the Mesopotamian Pantheon: A Study in Sophisticated Polytheism” (pp. 39–48)

“Goddesses in the Pantheon: A Reflection of Women in Society?”
(pp. 49–55)

“The Mesopotamian Background of the Hurrian Pantheon” (pp. 56–61)

“The Pantheon of Mari” (pp. 62–80)

“The God Assur” (pp. 81–85)

“Ishtar of Nineveh” (pp. 86–91)

III: The Mythology of Ancient Mesopotamia

“Der Mythos im Alten Mesopotamien, sein Werden und Vergehen”
(pp. 95–107)

“The Cosmology of Sumer and Babylon” (pp. 108–121)

“The Theology of Death” (pp. 122–133)

“The Relationship of Sumerian and Babylonian Myth as Seen in Accounts of Creation” (pp. 134–142)

“Ninurta Mythology in the Babylonian Epic of Creation” (pp. 143–147)

“Myth and Ritual as Conceived by the Babylonians” (pp. 148–154)

IV: The Religions of Ancient Mesopotamia

“The Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I: A Turning Point in the History of Ancient Mesopotamian Religion” (pp. 157–165)

“Syncretism and Religious Controversy in Babylonia” (pp. 166–170)

“Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia” (pp. 171–179)

“The Cult of Ishtar of Babylon” (pp. 180–182)

“The Qualifications of Babylonian Diviners” (pp. 183–199)

“Devotion: The Languages of Religion and Love” (pp. 200–212)

V: Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel

“Old Testament Mythology in its Ancient Near Eastern Context” (pp. 215–228)

“Destiny and Divine Intervention in Babylon and Israel” (pp. 229–234)

“The Flood in Sumerian, Babylonian, and Biblical Sources” (pp. 235–244)

The editors deserve our gratitude for having brought together this fine selection of Lambert’s studies. George’s introduction (pp. 1–8) provides a succinct portrait of his teacher before aptly summarizing the main arguments made in the articles. Takayoshi Oshima did much of the more technical work on the collection. The editors corrected occasional typos, updated Lambert’s references to his own work in progress where it materialized in published studies, and occasionally added a reference to more recent primary editions of Mesopotamian texts. As often with this genre, many a reader might have liked to see yet another piece — or several — to figure in the volume, depending on his or her particular interests. I rather regret that the editors did not include either a more substantial biographical account of Lambert’s career (see Finkel and Livingstone 2011 for an obituary including a long memoir by Lambert himself and the very informative appreciation by George 2015) or a full bibliography (see Walker 2011), both of which would have helped readers to put the selected articles into context and perspective.

According to George, *Ancient Mesopotamian Religion and Mythology* should record “how a unique intellect deployed exceptional skills in the reading and interpretation of ancient sources and wrote up the results with

unmatched clarity and economy of expression" (p. 1). That end is certainly well achieved. There is much to be found here for the historian of religions, ancient Mesopotamian and beyond. This stated, I would advise historians of religion not to mistake this book as simply a companion to "Mesopotamian religion(s)" (which it is not meant to be!), since in terms of concepts and theory, it reflects a somehow old-fashioned model of how to approach that field.

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