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Ancient Mesopotamian Religion and Mythology  
Selected Essays by W.G. Lambert

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# Introduction

By A.R. George

In approaching ancient religion and mythology, W. G. Lambert espoused no theory; in fact, he deliberately ignored it. For him this was a badge of honour, for he owned up to it several times in print. He recognised only one methodology: to start with the text in front of him. The confrontation of the text, his intellect and his knowledge was the process that produced understanding. His approach privileged the primary sources over any previous scholarly commentary. He acknowledged the foundational statements of the pioneering generation, commenting in 1983 of books written by Jastrow in 1898 and Dhorme in 1910, “the older writers on religion are often of great value still” (p. 82 n. 7). But much secondary literature and analytical discussion were deemed superseded and did not enter the discussion.

This method, which one obituary described as Lambert’s “own brand of Assyriology”, was fully formed from very early in his research career. Already in 1960, in the introduction to his first book, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, he repudiated what he called the “strait jacket of twentieth-century thinking” and sought only to understand ancient sources on their own terms and in their ancient intellectual context: “only by immersing oneself in the literature is it possible to feel the spirit which moves the writer”. Accordingly, this selection of essays does not reveal the evolution of a mind in response to the intellectual currents of the late twentieth century. It records instead 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.

Lambert belonged to probably the last generation of European scholars who came to Assyriology through Bible studies. He had a very formative Christadelphian upbringing, in which, as he later wrote, “an interest in antiquity and the Bible went hand in hand”,<sup>1</sup> and remained a very active member of Christadelphian ecclesia all his life. Unsurprisingly, the Old Testament was a frame of reference that frequently arose in his response to ancient Mesopotamian texts and ideas. Many of the essays collected here make comparisons with the religious thought and mythology embedded in the Bible. Often these are negative. Lambert devoted all his intellectual energy to study of the Babylonians but this did not grant them exemption from his disapproval. He placed their religious thought in a historical narrative of human progress and, unsurprisingly for a committed Christadelphian, found it wanting.

The essays collected in this book are arranged not in order of date of publication but thematically. The anthology begins with two pieces that are written for a readership

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<sup>1</sup> Autobiographical memoir reproduced in Irving Finkel and Alasdair Livingstone’s obituary, “Professor Wilfred George Lambert (February 26, 1926–November 9, 2011)”, *Archiv für Orientforschung* 52 (2011), pp. 397–401.

whose interests extend beyond Assyriology. They give important historical, cultural and geographical context, as well as introducing two essential components of religion and mythology: the moral life and gods. The core of the book is eighteen essays, six each on the pantheon, on mythology, and on religion. The selection is rounded off by three essays that study ancient Mesopotamian religion and mythology in relation to the Hebrew Bible.

The first essay in the anthology is “Morals in ancient Mesopotamia” (1958). Lambert wrote this piece while he was completing *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. The generic term “wisdom literature” brings together those Babylonian literary compositions that, in Lambert’s own definition, “correspond in subject-matter with the Hebrew Wisdom books.”<sup>2</sup> What they held in common was not style, language or subject matter, but a concern with ethical and moral problems, and with how people might respond to the problems inherent in the human condition. The essay concentrates on the former, studying “moral exhortations” such as the Sumerian *Instructions of Shuruppak* and the Babylonian *Counsels of Wisdom*; law codes which exemplify moral behaviour; and proverbs and sayings as sources of popular wisdom. It sets them in a framework of political, ethnic and social history. Lambert makes a synchronic sociological distinction between ideal moral standards proclaimed by intellectuals and the morality of the common people, but also a diachronic ethnic distinction between the Sumerians and Babylonians that might be more nuanced were it expressed today. He makes a case for a “moral degeneration” in Babylonia as a consequence of the increased currency of the idea that suffering and misfortune were not the “haphazard work of evil demons”, as formerly understood, but a consequence of sin, identified or not. For Lambert the outcome was that “Babylonian thinkers found themselves compelled to deny any intuitive knowledge of good and evil”. He holds this in implicit contrast to what he identifies earlier in the essay as the “keener moral sense of the Hebrews”.

The second essay, on “Ancient Mesopotamian Gods” (1990), is placed up front because it presents the basic facts about the Babylonians’ gods and pantheon, set in useful contextualizing remarks on Babylonian ecology and economy. It summarizes Lambert’s ideas on the history of the pantheon, which had crystallized during the 1970s, when his research was mainly focused on the reconstruction of the Sumero-Babylonian god-lists and their explication. The essay also explores the nature of divinity in ancient Mesopotamia, which extended beyond the greater and lesser gods of the pantheon to features of the built and natural environment, such as temple fittings, and rivers and hills.

The organization and history of the Babylonians’ pantheon are more fully studied in an earlier essay, on “The Historical Development of the Mesopotamian Pantheon” (1975). One of the themes is the historical tendency of Babylonian theologians to move through syncretism and equation towards monotheism. Ultimately Lambert judges this a failure, both because the process never led to absolute monotheism (demons remaining outside) and because the project to exalt the god Marduk of Babylon over all other gods was not supported in all quarters.

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<sup>2</sup> *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, Oxford 1960, p. 2.

The phenomenon of monotheism is a case where Lambert could have engaged with a vast non-Assyriological literature but chose not to. He notes that it is a compromised concept, “since many Christian churches have strongly professed monotheism while believing in a supernatural personal devil” (p. 47), and “belief in a devil or demons has not been held to invalidate claims to monotheism on the part of major world religions of the Christian era” (p. 32). The cult of Marduk, the god most promoted by Babylonian theologians as the sole divine power in the universe, nevertheless allowed him a wife, Zarpanitu, and son, Nabû. A matching trinity, headed by Assur, was advocated by intellectuals in Assyria. Other scholars, notably Simo Parpola and the Helsinki school that he founded, have seen these theological developments as ancestral to the Christian monotheistic dogma of a trinity that is three divine personalities in one. This mystery is rejected by Christadelphians, for whom Jesus Christ is not God the Son but the Son of God. Perhaps for this reason Lambert did not make the same observation.

The rise of feminism in the 1970s led to greater attention to gender and women in the academy, and the *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* of 1986 duly concentrated on the topic *Woman in the Ancient Near East*. Lambert’s contribution, the fourth essay in this volume, was a response to an argument advanced ten years earlier by Samuel Noah Kramer. Kramer observed that in the third millennium BC some women and goddesses of Sumer could exercise greater power and influence than their Babylonian successors of later eras, and maintained that sexual discrimination was to blame. Lambert’s careful analysis of the evidence for the status of “Goddesses in the Pantheon” (1987) attributed the decline in importance of the goddesses of Sumer not to increasing discrimination but to a combination of the economic decline of their cult centres and a tendency to syncretize them all as manifestations of the second-ranking Ishtar. He does not argue, however, that Babylonian women were free from sexist oppression. Soon afterwards, in 1990, the Babylonians’ view of woman as the inferior sex was succinctly put in a newly discovered line of the poem *Enuma elish*. This poem forms the centre piece of Lambert’s posthumous book *Babylonian Creation Myths* (2013). The line of interest occurs when two young gods in turn, each having failed abjectly to subdue their ancestor, the goddess Tiamat, nevertheless reassure their leader (II 92 // 116): “no matter how great a woman’s strength, it is no match for a man”.

Two other collective studies of the gods of Mesopotamia consider regional or local pantheons that differ from the Sumero-Babylonian pattern. In “The Mesopotamian Background of the Hurrian Pantheon” (1978) Lambert responds to a study of the Hurrian pantheon by E. Laroche. Hurrian was a language spoken in north Mesopotamia and adjacent regions in the first part of the second millennium BC. Its mythology was particularly influential among the Hittites of Anatolia. Lambert’s essay compares the organization of Laroche’s pantheon, as known from Syria and Anatolia, with the Babylonian pantheon of the same period. He notes a contrast in the composition of the top rank: a single god in the Hurrian pantheon, but a group of three or four deities in Babylonia. Lambert finds other evidence for the single-god model in north Mesopotamia (Dagan) and Assyria (Assur), and, less securely, in mid-third-millennium Sumer (Enlil), and suggests that it is older and more widespread than was previously thought.

The gods of an early second-millennium city in north-west Mesopotamia are considered in “The Pantheon of Mari” (1985). Here Lambert uses accounts from the admin-

istration of temple cults to gauge the extent and membership of a local pantheon, and then makes a case-study of the god Itur-Mer and certain other deities associated with Mari, using evidence from all periods. Itur-Mer, a local form of the north Mesopotamian storm-god Wer, was the chief deity of Mari and the surrounding district, but subordinate in the regional pantheon headed by Dagan.

Two further essays make studies of individual deities. “The God Assur” (1983) develops Benno Landsberger’s idea, that Assur was the deified city of the same name, and suggests that he was originally the *numen loci* of the crag on which the settlement was located. “Ishtar of Nineveh” (2004) explores the goddess Ishtar in Assyria, and adds to the dossier of evidence in characteristic fashion, by presenting a previously unpublished text on the topic.

Two complementary and partly overlapping essays introduce the section on mythology. Both are much informed by the research Lambert had conducted in writing *Babylonian Creation Myths*, which was already in first draft in the early 1970s. In “Der Mythos im alten Mesopotamien” (1974) Lambert considers the development of Mesopotamian mythology over time and then examines the mythology of origins. Some of the same ground is covered in “The Cosmology of Sumer and Babylon” (1975), where he uses the mythology of origins and the ancestral deities to explore the ancient Mesopotamians’ various ideas on cosmogony and on the geography of the completed universe.<sup>3</sup> The question, “What was there first?”, was answered variously, according to different traditions: earth, water or time. Both essays make unfavourable comparisons with the ideas of pre-Socratic philosophers, on the one hand, and with Hebrew monotheism on the other. For Lambert religious thinking is a search after truth, and what he identified as the Babylonians’ errors in this field “served as a background against which others later drew closer to the truth”.

A category of god that does not coincide with more modern ideas is the “dead” god. Gods are, almost by definition, immortal. In the ancient Near East the notion of “dying and rising” gods was well entrenched, especially in the cults of Dumuzi, Tammuz and other deities of season. In Mesopotamian mythology the category of “dead” gods is well populated. Apart from Dumuzi, the category contains various ancestral deities who were slain by younger gods in myths of succession, and also gods who were sacrificed in order to create mankind. These dead gods dwelt in the Netherworld, alongside the shades of dead humans. In addition to explaining the mythology of death and dead gods, Lambert’s article on “The Theology of Death” (1980) makes a diachronic study of the divine rulers of the Netherworld and their court over time.

Two essays anticipate the content and argument of *Babylonian Creation Myths*. “Ninurta Mythology in the Babylonian Epic of Creation” (1986) studies the motif of monster-slaying in ancient Mesopotamian mythology. It shows how a mythological role originally played by Ninurta is central to the revisionist mythology of *Enuma elish*, whose composer deliberately adapted literary traditions about Ninurta to make the god Marduk the hero of all myth. In *Enuma elish* Marduk not only slays the monsters, but

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<sup>3</sup> The topic of cosmic geography was later more fully explored by one of Lambert’s research students: W. HOROWITZ, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, (Mesopotamian Civilizations 8), Winona Lake 1998, 2011.

also creates mankind. Study of the history of Mesopotamian ideas about the creation of mankind had already led Lambert to play a leading role in editing and publishing the classic Old Babylonian poem on this topic, *Atra-hasis*.<sup>4</sup> The creation mythology of *Atra-hasis* recurs in a Sumerian mythological narrative called *Enki and Ninmah*, as Lambert demonstrates in “The Relationship of Sumerian and Babylonian Myth as Seen in Accounts of Creation” (1992). The passage of *Enki and Ninmah* edited and explained in this essay, in a masterly exposition of philological method, offers a foretaste of the edition of the whole poem in *Babylonian Creation Myths*. The title of the essay is chosen in response to a commonly held view, that literary production in Sumerian and in Akkadian reflected the cultures of two different peoples. The historical development in which Akkadian replaced Sumerian as the vernacular language of southern Mesopotamia was long seen as the displacement of one people by another, an enduring legacy of Breasted’s *Ancient Times* (1916), and elsewhere Lambert is fond of contrasting Sumerians and Semites. It is now apparent that the linguistic and cultural history of ancient Mesopotamia cannot be interpreted simply in ethnic terms. Lambert’s conclusion, that myths elaborated in Sumerian and Akkadian narratives are “manifestations of a single culture”, is an early recognition of cultural continuity in early Mesopotamia.

Because the poem *Enuma elish* was recited to Marduk during the preparations for the New Year rituals at Babylon, it was often cited by T. H. Gaster and other adherents of the Myth and Ritual school to show how a myth might be used in a ritual. In “Myth and Ritual as Conceived by the Babylonians” (1968), Lambert brings evidence to refute any notion that *Enuma elish* was composed especially for the ritual, and sees its use in the cult as secondary. He then examines the use of myth in exorcism, for which there is much evidence in the form of explanatory texts which make equations between materials used in rituals of exorcism and mythological characters. These texts show the work of an ancient school of Myth and Ritual, but again the conclusion does not favour an integration of the two, finding that the mythology and the magic are related “in a highly artificial manner”. The explanatory texts have subsequently been studied in more detail,<sup>5</sup> but the use of myth in Sumero-Babylonian magic incantations, to provide an aetiology of evil, needs further investigation.

It is well known that *Enuma elish* is, as it were, a manifesto of a religious reform that sought to exalt Marduk, the god of Babylon, over all others. In researching the poem’s date for *Babylonian Creation Myths* Lambert early came to the view that the consensus of scholarly opinion was wrong: it was not a product of the Old Babylonian period, when Marduk was not yet king of the gods, but of a time when Marduk’s statue was retrieved from exile in Elam and reinstalled in Babylon amid great religious fervour. He sets out his argument in the essay on “The Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I: A Turning Point in the History of Ancient Mesopotamian Religion” (1964), which was immediately influential and is still one of his most cited papers. It is also an early example of one of his typical methods: to append to his essays an edition of a hitherto un-

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<sup>4</sup> W.G. LAMBERT and A.R. MILLARD, *Atra-ḫasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, Oxford 1969.

<sup>5</sup> By one of Lambert’s research students: A. LIVINGSTONE, *Mystical and Mythological Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, Oxford 1986.



published or badly edited cuneiform text that added substantially to the evidence and justified the authority of his argument.

The same method is deployed in the following essay, on “Syncretism and Religious Controversy in Babylonia” (1997). This is a very brief introduction to a very large topic, and reprises a theme already explored in “The Historical Development of the Mesopotamian Pantheon”. The essay is perhaps only a vehicle for making available the appended cuneiform text, but it gets to the heart of the issue with typical economy and clarity. Babylonian theologians thought syncretistically, leading in the most extreme form to the equation of all gods with Marduk, “so that something approaching monotheism resulted”. Standing in the way of this progress were the highly conservative temple cults, which had a vested interest in retaining the individual identities of the different deities. The text itself is a combination of ritual address and theological exegesis.

Lambert was fond of pointing out that the ancient Mesopotamians “made their gods in their own image”, so reversing the biblical idea, though he knew well enough the Babylonian antecedent of that idea, expressed in *Enki and Ninmah* when the god Enki creates man only by first “reflecting upon his own blood and body”. Babylonian gods resided like kings in palaces (“temples”), presided over a court of family, courtiers and servants, and needed food, drink and clothing. Lambert’s essay on “Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia” (1993) carefully distinguishes the Babylonians’ practice of feeding the gods from the sacramental sacrifice of the Old Testament, studies the Babylonian terms for cultic offerings, and cites the textual evidence (mainly *Atra-hasis* and *Enuma elish*) in support of the practice: according to mythology, the human race was created expressly to provide the gods with food, drink and clothing, and for no other purpose.

Babylonian temple ritual is also the topic of the next essay, on “The Cult of Ishtar of Babylon” (1975). This short paper focuses on the public rituals that were enacted in Babylon in celebration of the goddess Ishtar’s relationship with the city god, Marduk, and his wife, Zarpanitu. Nothing at all was known of these rituals until Lambert discovered fragments of them, and published them in two philological studies in 1959 and 1976. The ritual *agenda* were accompanied by distinctive, but exceedingly difficult, *dicenda*, which Lambert characterized as “Divine Love Lyrics”, a title that has stuck. The lyrics, full of amorousness, jealousy and crude language, reveal Marduk, Ishtar and Zarpanitu enmeshed in a divine ménage-à-trois. The essay republished here asks the question, “How was the ritual performed?” It remains unanswerable.

An ancient Mesopotamian ritual of very different sort was that prescribed for the asking of oracular questions in the commonest form of divination, extispicy. Extispicy was a technique of communicating with the gods, in which a highly trained diviner would ask a question on the subject of his client’s future well-being or prospects of success in business, war and other aspects of life where divine guidance was considered necessary. In the ritual the diviner prepared himself and a lamb, asked the question, slaughtered the lamb, disembowelled it and sought an answer to his question in the configuration of the carcase and internal organs, especially the liver and lungs. Lambert’s essay on “The Qualifications of Babylonian Diviners” (1998) is a study of the lore attached to the figure of the diviner. This lore includes the diviners’ myth of character, for the craft was held to be god-given, and the requirement of physical perfection,

similar to that prescribed for priests in other religions (Lambert compares Leviticus and ancient Egypt but does not mention the Pope). Though the Babylonian diviner was not a priest, he mediated between the worlds of gods and men, so purity and absence of defect were necessary in order not to compromise the quality of the message. Most of the lore is contained in a fascinating Babylonian text edited at the end of the article.

The last essay in the section on religion is a philological paper delivered to a conference on figurative language, “Devotion: The Languages of Religion and Love” (1987).<sup>6</sup> It explores the use of shared imagery in religious and love poetry. The most productive semantic fields centre on fruits, gardens and ploughing, and draw comparisons with the Hebrew Bible, especially the Song of Songs. Lambert observes a lack of self-abasement in Babylonian love poetry and contrasts the European tradition. Recently published Old Babylonian love poetry goes some way to making good the lack.<sup>7</sup>

The final section turns to the Bible. We have chosen not to include Lambert’s early essay on “A new look at the Babylonian background of Genesis”, which has already been twice reprinted.<sup>8</sup> Instead we conclude with three other essays in which he set out to study ancient Mesopotamian and Old Testament mythology and theology in comparative perspective. In “Old Testament Mythology in its Ancient Near Eastern Context” (1988), Lambert prefaces a history of ancient Near Eastern myth and surveys of early Levantine (Syro-Palestinian) mythology, as known from Ebla and Ugarit, and cultural history, to four case studies that illustrate how Ugaritic mythology can be illuminated from Mesopotamian sources, and how the mythology of Mesopotamia and Ugarit can help elucidate survivals of myth in the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup> The short essay on “Destiny and Divine Intervention in Babylon and Israel” (1972) finds that both civilizations shared a “Deuteronomic view of divine intervention in human affairs”, but contrasts the Hebrews’ belief in a national destiny directed progressively by their god with the Babylonians’ idea that human history was the struggle to maintain or reinstate a fixed and unchanging divinely ordained order.

The last essay in this anthology is the text of a paper given to a non-academic audience in Toronto in 1982 and published as “The Flood in Sumerian, Babylonian and Biblical Sources” (1983). From the style it is clear that the essay is a transcript of a recorded lecture given, as was Lambert’s usual practice, *extempore*. Had he written it up himself, the vocabulary would have been more select and the style more formal, but the contents would have been the same. It is republished here not just because the volume would otherwise lack any study of the Flood myth, to which Lambert made a signal contribution, but also to celebrate in these spoken words the unusual clarity and sim-

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<sup>6</sup> Corrected in the light of Lambert’s notes in *Nouvelles assyriologiques brèves et utiles* 1989, p. 14 no. 17.

<sup>7</sup> A.R. GEORGE, *Babylonian Literary Texts in the Schøyen Collection*, Bethesda 2009, no. 9 “I Shall Be a Slave to You”.

<sup>8</sup> *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 16 (1965), pp. 285–300; reprinted with postscript in H.-P. MÜLLER ed., *Babylonien und Israel: historische, religiöse und sprachliche Beziehungen*, Darmstadt 1991, pp. 94–113; with further postscript in R.S. HESS and D.T. TSUMURA eds., “I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood”: *Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11*, (Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 4), Winona Lake 1994, pp. 96–113.

<sup>9</sup> We have omitted the article’s technical appendices from the present reprinting.

plicity with which an extraordinary scholar was able to communicate, directly and compellingly, the results of his unmatched scholarship and learning.