

BOOK REVIEWS

Charles Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994. xii + 278 pp. ISBN 0-415-08371-0 (hbk); 0-415-15706-4 (pbk).

The book under review is a daring effort at analyzing and explaining many intriguing similarities between Greek and Mesopotamian mythologies. These correspondences should be approached with extreme caution, since, in the words of W. G. Lambert, such "connections ... are a fascinating but difficult field of study, where the borders between the highly plausible, the possible, and the improbable are not clearly defined".¹ Indeed, at the beginning of his investigation the author admits that the task ahead is "difficult and hazardous" (p. 5). To anticipate, it may be said here that, although many of its claims do not command immediate agreement, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia* is a fascinating study, rich in sharp insights on opaque texts, a book which every scholar addressing the comparative study of ancient mythologies will have to examine thoroughly.

In *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia* Charles Penglase demonstrates vast erudition in two fields of knowledge which have now grown wide apart, namely Classical Studies and Assyriology. Seen from the Assyriological perspective, it can safely be said that the Mesopotamian part of *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia* is based on recent studies and reliable translations, and many of the Mesopotamian literary compositions are carefully and thoughtfully analyzed. Albeit not always convincing, the author's endeavor to bridge over the constantly growing gap between the Classical field and Ancient Near Eastern studies is certainly fruitful and enlightening. In some cases, however, the author interprets the texts in a way which contradicts their common-sense reading. I shall touch upon some of these below.

The study starts by delineating its methodological foundations. The author lays out the conditions which must be met in order to make a connection between two literary corpora conceivable. First, it is necessary to establish the historical framework in which connections between the two regions might develop. Another requirement is that the literature in question needs to have existed in some (material?) form which could be transmitted from one place to another (so on p. 5, but note that at pp. 145f. an oral mode of transmission is preferred). The author suggests that the most plausible time for intensive cultural contacts between the Mesopotamian and Aegean worlds would have been the period of rapid Assyrian expansion to the West, i.e. from the ninth to the eighth century BCE, especially during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III and his successors (p. 6).

As to the method of examining literary content, the author states that "... the purpose [of the book] is to let the myths speak for themselves, as far as this is

¹ W. G. Lambert, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 116/4 (1996), 768-71.

possible: to reveal the structures which reflect the abstract, or belief, system of the people concerned, rather than to impose one upon them from outside" (p. 10). Well aware that this goal is hard, if not impossible, to achieve, the author's aim is nevertheless to arrive at "complete objectivity, in the sense of being free of subjectivity to philosophical schema: to be able to stand outside the modern belief systems with all of their assumptions ..." (p. 11). Though honest, and in principle correct, these aims are unattainable, especially as the author has chosen the particularly troublesome path of comparative research. The author could have met his own methodological demands better by laying down less demanding criteria and admitting that this kind of study is unavoidably subjective.

Chapters two and three focus on the mythology of two major Mesopotamian deities, namely Inanna (or Ishtar, her Akkadian name), the great Mesopotamian goddess of love and war, and Ninurta, the major warrior god of the Mesopotamian pantheon. Chapter four stresses the affinity between the Ekur, the temple of Enlil, the head of the Mesopotamian pantheon, and Olympus of Greek mythology. Chapters five and six comprise the beginning of the main part of a comparative discussion on the Homeric Hymns; the first of these is devoted to Apollo and the second to Demeter. The hymns are examined and compared to various Mesopotamian myths. Chapter seven deals with myths of Aphrodite and examines her Mesopotamian origins as evolving from the goddess Inanna/Ishtar and the west-Semitic goddess Astarte. Chapter eight analyzes the Homeric Hymn to Hermes and the myth of Zeus' birth in the *Theogony*. These myths are compared to Mesopotamian compositions, such as the Sumerian *Edinna usagga* and parts of the *Enume Elish*, the Babylonian myth of creation. The ninth chapter parallels the myth of Prometheus and Pandora as recounted in the *Theogony* and in *Works and Days* with myths involving Enki/Ea, the creator god *par excellence* in Mesopotamian mythology. Chapter ten, the concluding section of the book, tackles the birth story of Athena as found in the Homeric Hymn dedicated to this goddess, and compares some of its elements with various mythological and iconographic aspects of the goddess Inanna/Ishtar. Short conclusions and an up-to-date bibliography conclude the volume.

As the scope of the book is so large, the following remarks will concentrate on one key-concept found all along Penglase's discussion, namely the "journey for power" — a journey of a deity to obtain power or to display it. With the help of this motif, it is argued, many hidden interconnections between Greek and Mesopotamian mythologies can be revealed. A typical example of this motif is the famous myth of *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld* (both in its Sumerian and in its Akkadian versions). The gist of this myth is Inanna's unexplained and whimsical decision to go to the Great-Down-Below. This, maintains the author, is to be understood as a voyage to obtain power over the netherworld. Since Inanna/Ishtar was eventually able to return safely to the upper regions, the author considers this cosmological journey a successful "journey for power". Nevertheless, as already remarked by W. G. Lambert in his review of the present study, it is difficult to see in this compact story a true victory of the goddess. The text tells us explicitly that while descending to the netherworld, Inanna was stripped of her divine insignia and finally put to death. It was only through the skills of Enki/Ea, the god of wisdom and magic, that she revived. The crafty god found a cunning way of conveying to the dead goddess the water of life, thus enabling her corpse to come back to life. Finally, only after Dumuzi, the

goddess' poor lover, was taken to serve as a substitute for her in the netherworld was the goddess allowed to leave the Land-of-No-Return and go back up to the land of the living. Hence, the present reviewer fully agrees with Lambert's words that "to claim that Inanna/Ishtar was victorious over the netherworld in this escapade is not to use words in their normal sense..."²

A "journey for power" is further found, argues the author, in the Hymn to Delian Apollo where Leto is described wandering around in search of a safe place to give birth to her son (pp. 80ff.). The goddess did ultimately give birth to the vigorous and heroic Apollo who in turn also performs a "journey for power" when he travels around various islands looking for suitable sites to establish his cult center (pp. 96ff.).

These are only two examples from many instances where the author detects a "journey for power" in the texts. To be sure, divine journeys for power can be traced in Greek and Mesopotamian mythology (limiting ourselves to the Mesopotamian part, see, for instance, Ninurta's triumphal return to Nippur in *Angim Dimme*). The problem lies not so much in the concept itself, but rather in the sweeping way it is employed throughout the book. A major obstacle with this terminology is that gods are powerful entities by definition, so the acquiring or demonstration of power can be recognized quite often. Secondly, gods in Mesopotamian mythology are customarily depicted as setting out for journeys, in order to pay visits to other deities or for other reasons. This tendency reflects, no doubt, common cultic practices of carrying divine statues out of temples during seasonal festivities.³ Many of these cultic voyages, however, should not be automatically labeled "journeys for power". And lastly, the author seems to confound two kinds of mythological journeys: the first can be termed "once-and-for-all-journeys", the second "periodical journeys" (typical especially of myths from the Inanna/Dumuzi cycle). Here again the appellation "journey for power" is hardly applicable to the latter kind. For, as is commonly understood, such periodical journeys describe in mythical terms various cyclic natural phenomena or recurring astral movements. For instance, Inanna's descent into and ascent from the netherworld three days later reflect most probably Venus' periodical rising and setting above the horizon, just as Dumuzi's disappearance and reappearance depict the yearly changes in vegetation.

A demonstrative example of the problematic way the concept "journey for power" is employed here is found in the comparison between Apollo's birth from the soil of Delos and the scene in which Gilgamesh is trying to obtain the plant of life (pp. 92ff). In the XI tablet of the standard edition of the epic of Gilgamesh, the hero, desperate to gain eternal life, dives to the bottom of the sea where he finds the plant of life. He picks it up only to lose it, soon after, to a serpent. Penglase concludes that "Gilgamesh performs a return journey symbolic of a return from the netherworld; he bathes and dresses as part of it, *with the subsequent gain in power* [my emphasis N.W.] ... and the power motif takes the form of food. In the same way, Apollo performs an ascent journey from within the earth ... he is bathed and dressed, and afterwards *clearly gains power* [my emphasis N.W.], ... also by the use of the food motif"

² Lambert, *ibid.* 768-9.

³ Cf. B. Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina Šulmi Īrubb. Die kulttopographische und ideologische Progamatik der akītu-Prozession in Babylonien und Assyrien im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (= Baghdader Forschungen, Band 16), Mainz am Rhein, 1994.

(p. 94). Interesting similarities can be traced, no doubt, between these two mythologemes. The crucial points of the two plots are, however, utterly different. Gilgamesh does not gain any power at the end of the story — on the contrary: the very emphasis of the epic lies in the growing consciousness of the maturing hero that his infantile wish to overcome death and acquire eternal life is impossible. It is therefore not a “journey for power” but rather a journey towards *loss* of power: Gilgamesh is painfully coming to terms with the unavoidable reality of death.

These and other critical remarks⁴ should not obscure the fact that *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia* is an erudite and valuable study into the perilous field of comparative religion and literature. The real importance of this study is not so much in the answers it offers as in the questions it raises and the new approaches it paves.

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H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. Stuart Jones and R. McKenzie (eds.), *Greek-English Lexicon. Revised Supplement*, ed. by P.G.W. Glare, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. xxxi + 320 pp. ISBN 0-19-864223-7. \$65.

The prototype of this volume is the list of Addenda attached to the eighth edition of the *Greek-English Lexicon* by H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, which appeared in 1897. The list contained references to new sources which could not be included in that edition, among them the Ἀθηναίων Πολιτεία. Both this and other newly recovered ancient Greek texts were incorporated into the ninth edition, thoroughly revised and augmented by H. Stuart Jones (henceforth, LSJ), which was published in 1940. This edition, which is still the latest edition of the *Lexicon*, was in turn accompanied by *Addenda and Corrigenda* of its own, which consisted of the materials accumulated in the course of its publication between 1925 and 1940. These, together with the new material supplied by inscriptions and papyri, were incorporated into *A Supplement* to the ninth edition, edited by E. A. Barber in 1968. It is this latter that the *Revised Supplement* has come to replace.

If the main difference between the present Supplement and its predecessor ought to be signalled in a single word, ‘Mycenaean’ would definitely be the one. Indeed, although this Supplement has again incorporated a considerable amount of important contributions from inscriptions and papyri, the inclusion of the material of the Linear B tablets is much more than simply augmentation of LSJ by new evidence. To see that, it is sufficient to turn to the following statement in the Preface to the 1968 edition: ‘No attempt has been made to deal with the Linear B tablets. The scholarly world is at present divided on the validity of the Ventris decipherment, and it would be at least premature to receive into this standard lexicon the incomplete and sometimes bizarre interpretations that have so far been proposed. If the decipherment eventually wins general acceptance, it may still be thought that a dialect so much older than classical Greek, and written in so different a script, is better left to special lexica’ (p. v).

⁴ Again, see W. G. Lambert’s review.