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## Mesopotamian Precursors of the Hymn of the Pearl

### Introduction

The so-called *Hymn of the Pearl* is a Hellenistic poem of 105 verses presenting in allegorical form the Gnostic doctrine of the soul's heavenly origin and salvation through self-recognition (*gnosis*).<sup>1</sup> It is phrased as a first-person monologue recalling another Gnostic treatise, the so-called *Thunder*;<sup>2</sup> the speaker identifies himself as the son of "the King of Kings, the great king of the East."<sup>3</sup> The title "Hymn of the Pearl," reflecting the contents of the poem, is the creation of modern scholarship and is not found on any manuscript.<sup>4</sup>

The poem begins with the protagonist reposing as a young prince in the wealth and luxury of his father's palace in the East. Suddenly the setting changes: the parents send him on a dangerous mission to a foreign land, Egypt, to snatch a precious pearl from a terrible dragon. Armed with weapons of steel, he sets out and arrives in Egypt, where he encamps near the dragon's

lair, lying in wait for it to grow drowsy and fall asleep. To mislead the Egyptians, lest they recognize him as a stranger and arouse the dragon against him, he disguises himself, putting on the dress of the country. However, the enemy outwit him with cunning and treachery. He tastes their food and falls into a deep sleep, forgetting his mission, his parents, and his origin.

Ultimately, his parents get worried and send him a letter, which flies to him in eagle form, transforms itself into a voice, wakes him up, reminds him of his mission and calls him back. With a start the prince remembers everything; instantly, he puts the dragon to sleep by a charm, snatches the pearl and turns back, taking the straight road home. On the way back he removes his filthy dress, and guided by the messenger, finds the jewel-studded garment that he used to wear as a child but had to leave back in his father's palace. He puts it on, and is lifted into the presence of his father, who receives him with pleasure and takes delight in him.

<sup>1</sup> References to the Hymn of the Pearl below follow the verse count of the English translation of the Greek version in B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, NY, 1987), 371-75. For the Syriac version I have used the translation of R. Köbert, "Das Perlenlied," in *Or.* 38 (1969) 447-56. The bibliographical abbreviations are those of the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*. On the Hymn of the Pearl see also P.-H. Poirier, *L'Hymne de la perle des Actes de Thomas: Introduction, texte, traduction, commentaire* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1981), and idem, "L'Hymne de la Perle et le Manichéisme à la lumière du *Codex manichéen de Cologne*," in L. Cirillo (ed.), *Codex manichaicus colonensis. Atti del Simposio Internazionale, Rende-Amantea, 3-7 settembre 1984* (Cosenza, 1986), 235-48.

<sup>2</sup> The anonymous speaker in the *Thunder* (see J. M. Robinson [ed.], *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* [rev. ed. Leiden, 1988], 295-310) is a female figure who combines features of the higher and lower Sophia and has been identified with the Gnostic "Holy Spirit"; see G.

Quispel in J.-E. Ménard (ed.), *Les textes de Nag Hammadi* (Leiden, 1975), 105. On the relationship of the *Thunder* to the Nag Hammadi treatise *Exegesis on the Soul* and the Mesopotamian myth of *The Descent of Ištar to the Netherworld*, discussed below, see S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies* (SAA 9, Helsinki, 1997), xciv, n. 130.

<sup>3</sup> See verses 33 and 41. However, the end of the hymn unexpectedly gives to understand that the father was only a vassal of the King of Kings (see verses 104f). On this apparent contradiction see note 73 below.

<sup>4</sup> The poem is also called (with reference to its allegorical content) "The Hymn of the Soul" and (with reference to its literary context) "The Hymn of Judas Thomas the Apostle in the Country of the Indians," based on the Syriac version which inserts after the hymn the remark, "The Hymn of Judas Thomas the Apostle, which he spake in prison, is ended." This remark is missing in the Greek version of the *Acts of Thomas* (chs. 108 and 113), where the poem is referred to simply as a "hymn" or "psalm" (Greek *psalmós*).

It is generally agreed that on the allegorical level the “Great King” of the hymn is to be understood as God, his “palace” as heaven, the “land of Egypt” as the world, the “dragon” as Satan, the “pearl” as self-recognition, the “messenger” as the word of God (*logos*), and the “jewel-studded garment” as the gnosis opening up the road to heaven.<sup>5</sup> The allegorical sense of the hymn is not made overt in the text but is left for the reader to discover on his own. That it was from the beginning intended as the *primary level of understanding* of the text is, however, made clear by the fact that the narrative contains all kinds of clues guiding the reader towards a spiritual interpretation of it.<sup>6</sup>

The hymn exists in two versions, Syriac and Greek, each represented by a single manuscript only dating from the 10th and 11th centuries respectively; it is a matter of dispute in which language it was originally written. In any case, it was certainly composed between ca. 240 BCE and 220 CE in a country subjected to the Parthian empire, since the kingdom of the Great King is explicitly identified as Parthia in verse 38. In both manuscripts the hymn appears as part of the Edessene *Acts of Thomas* (third century),<sup>7</sup> where it is sung by the apostle Judas Thomas during his imprisonment in India. It is, however, generally agreed that the hymn is older than the Acts and has been only secondarily incorporated there.

St. Thomas reputedly died in Edessa, and the allegorical story finds parallels in two other writings of the Gnostic-Christian

school founded by him, viz. *The Gospel According to Thomas* and *The Book of Thomas*.<sup>8</sup> It has been suggested that the Hymn of the Pearl likewise was a product of the Thomas school and that its author might be the bilingual Christian poet and theologian of Edessa, Bardaisan, who was born in 154 and was active at the court of King Abgar VIII (177-212).<sup>9</sup> The doctrine of the soul’s heavenly origin and salvation through self-acquaintance had of course been part and parcel of Greek philosophy since Plato and Pythagoras, both of whom were certainly known to Bardaisan.<sup>10</sup>

It would thus seem that the historical, literary and philosophical background of the hymn is reasonably clear. Like other Gnostic-Christian works, it certainly originated in a multicultural Hellenistic milieu and was accommodated with Greek philosophy and Christian traditions. Why then not be satisfied with this; why look for Mesopotamian precursors, as indicated by the title of my paper?

The reason is that there is no real evidence that the poem originally was a Christian work, and its connections to Greek philosophy are very vague. As a matter of fact, as pointed out by Bentley Layton, “the total lack of any specifically Christian and Jewish details or characters raises the possibility that the work was first written for a non-Christian readership.”<sup>11</sup> Layton concludes that it could “have been imported to Edessa and secondarily adopted by the school of St. Thomas for its own purposes.”<sup>12</sup> This being so, the origin of the hymn remains an

<sup>5</sup> See Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 367.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, line 88, “And I saw that motions (Syr.: excitement) of recognition (Gk. *gnosis*, Syr. *ida’tâ*) were pulsating from it,” referring to the “jewel-studded garment.”

<sup>7</sup> A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction-Text-Commentary* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum, vol. 5, Leiden, 1962); cf. R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge, 1975), 26-27 and *passim*. Note that of the numerous

manuscripts of the *Acts of Judas Thomas* (75 Greek and 6 Syriac ones), only two contain the Hymn of the Pearl.

<sup>8</sup> See Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 368.

<sup>9</sup> M. R. James (ed. and transl.), *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1926), Introduction; cf. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 367, and Murray, *Symbols*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> See J. Teixidor, *Bardasene d’Edesse: la première philosophie syriaque* (Paris, 1992), 82f. and *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 367.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

open question. It has the strophic form typical of Semitic poetry and was probably designed to be sung,<sup>13</sup> and in its mythical orientation and allegorical obscurity it completely differs from the Acts of Thomas and other writings of the Thomas school.

On the other hand, precisely these features strongly link it with Mesopotamian mythological literature.<sup>14</sup> What is more, the

story itself, which has no obvious Greek, Christian or Jewish parallels, is closely paralleled by *several* Mesopotamian myths that were popular from the early second through the late first millennium BCE. I will now briefly review the most important of these, focusing on the narrative elements paralleling the Hymn of the Pearl.

## Mesopotamian Myths Paralleling the Hymn of the Pearl

### *The Battle of Ninurta against Asakku*

The bilingual Sumero-Akkadian epic *Lugal-e*<sup>15</sup> begins exactly like the Hymn of the Pearl, with Ninurta, son of the king of the gods, relaxing in his celestial palace with his father and mother (lines 1-16). Unexpectedly, news is brought of the birth of a terrible monster, Asakku, who has taken over the entire world with an army of stones; nobody dares to oppose him, and even the kingdom of heaven is threatened (17-69). Hearing this, the prince cries “woe” and without delay sets out against the monster, armed with strong weapons (70-150). When he approaches the mountain (*kur*) where Asakku resides, the sun fades away and the day becomes pitch dark (151-167). Suddenly the monster attacks Ninurta, “hissing like a snake” and submerging him

“like a crumbling wall” (168-175). At this moment, sickness, droughts and death befall the entire world (176-181).

Having learnt of Ninurta’s plight, the gods in heaven fall in distress (182-199), and Ninurta’s father, the divine king, sends him a message, urging him to stand up and not let the world perish (200-243). When Ninurta receives the message, he attacks Asakku with new vigor, slays him, and usurps his powers, the stones (244-333). In an eschatological judgment scene, he decrees their fates, rewarding the good and punishing the evil, and creates a new world (334-647). The myth ends with Ninurta’s triumphal return to his celestial home, where he receives the blessings of his father and the kingship of all the gods (648-727).

<sup>13</sup> See Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 369.

<sup>14</sup> All Mesopotamian myths were phrased as epical poems having a strophic structure and were designed to be sung, as indicated by the fact that they were referred to as “songs” (*zamāru*). See M. L. West, “Akkadian Poetry: Metre and Performance,” *Iraq* 49 (1997) 175-87, and J. Goodnick Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade* (Mesopotamian Civilizations 7, Winona Lake, IN, 1997), 27. On the allegorical dimension of Mesopo-

tamian myths see S. Parpola, “The Esoteric Meaning of the Name of Gilgamesh,” in J. Prosecký (ed.), *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East, Papers Presented at the 43rd Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, Prague, July 1-5, 1996 (Prague, 1998), 315-29.

<sup>15</sup> J. van Dijk, *LUGAL UD ME-LĀM-bi NIR.ĜĀL. Le récit épique et didactique des Travaux de Ninurta, du Déluge et de la Nouvelle Création. Texte, traduction et introduction*, vols. I-II (Leiden, 1983).

*Ninurta's Triumph over Anzu*

The *Anzu* epic<sup>16</sup> introduces Ninurta as the “son of the king of the world” and likewise begins with a peaceful scene, which suddenly turns into a crisis. While Enlil, the divine king, is taking a bath, a gigantic eagle, Anzu, steals the Tablet of Destinies and flies away with it (I 64-83). The celestial palace instantly loses its radiance and an awesome silence sets in. The gods gather for counsel, but nobody dares to attack Anzu, to retrieve the tablet (I 87-158). Finally, the task is entrusted to the young prince, Ninurta (I 159-II 27). He sets out and meets Anzu at the cleft of a mountain (II 28-47). When the monster attacks him, roaring like a lion, the sun is darkened, and when Ninurta shoots his arrow, it turns back, because Anzu has charmed it with the Tablet of Destinies (II 48-69).

In desperation, Ninurta sends to the god of wisdom for help and receives an encouraging message: he is to attack and cut off the wings of Anzu (II 70-145). The prince does accordingly, slays the monster and regains the Tablet of Destinies. The myth ends with the elevation of Ninurta to heavenly glory and bliss among jubilant gods (III 24-181).

*Other Parallel Myths*

The mythical poem *Angim*<sup>17</sup> describes the triumphal return of Ninurta to his celestial home, Ekur, after the accomplishment of various missions. None of the missions is described in detail, but an initial doxology enumerates the individual feats.<sup>18</sup> We then find the prince loading his trophies on his chariot, entering the celestial palace, presenting the trophies to his father, and receiving a place of honor beside him in the celestial throne room.

In the myth of *Labbu*, the god Tišpak, elsewhere equated with Ninurta,<sup>19</sup> is sent to slay a huge dragon-serpent terrorizing the world. The story is only fragmentarily preserved, but the extant portions of it, including the slaying of the dragon, neatly parallel the myths already discussed.<sup>20</sup>

In the Babylonian Epic of Creation, *Enūma eliš*, the same pattern recurs. A young prince, Marduk, is sent against the sea-dragon Tiamat, who threatens the very existence of the gods. The prince proceeds straight against the dragon, outwits its stratagems, undoes its charms, slays it, creates the visible world out of its body, and is then elevated to the kingship of the gods, taking over the functions and names of all of them.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See M. E. Vogelzang, *Bin šar dadmē. Edition and Analysis of the Akkadian Anzu Poem* (Groningen, 1988), supplemented by H. W. F. Saggs, “Additions to Anzu,” *AfO* 33 (1986) 1-29. The most up-to-date reconstruction of the epic, with a long introduction discussing its religious and ideological significance but without translation, is A. Annus, *The Standard Babylonian Epic of Anzu* (SAACT 3, Helsinki, 2001). The citations from the epic here follow the edition of Annus.

<sup>17</sup> J. S. Cooper, *The Return of Ninurta to Nippur: an-gim dīm-ma* (AnOr 52, Rome, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Lines 32-39, listing ten (or nine) monsters defeated by Ninurta: “the six-headed wild ram,” “the dragon,” “the warrior,” “Magilum,” “the bison,” “Kulianna,” “the gypsum,” “strong copper,” Anzu, “the seven-headed serpent.” A similar list is also found in *Lugal-e* and other texts related to the Ninurta mythology, see Cooper, *Return of Ninurta*, 141-54, and W. G. Lambert, “Ninurta

Mythology in the Babylonian Epic of Creation,” in K. Hecker and W. Sommerfeld, *Keilschriftliche Literaturen. Ausgewählte Vorträge der XXXII. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* (Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient 6, Berlin, 1986), 57-58. On the relationship of the list to the feats of Herakles and the seven-headed dragon of Revelation see S. Parpola, “From Whence the Beast,” *Bible Review* 15/6 (December, 1999) 25.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Anzu III 149.

<sup>20</sup> See J. Prosecký, “Le mythe de Labbu revu et repensé,” in J. Prosecký (ed.), *Ex pede pontis. Papers presented on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the Oriental Institute Prague* (Prague, 1992), 234-42.

<sup>21</sup> On the dependence of *Enūma eliš* on Ninurta mythology see Lambert, “Ninurta Mythology,” 55-60, and idem, “Antediluvian Kings and Marduk’s Chariot,” *Symbolae Böhl* (1973), 275-80.

Finally, the same overall story pattern can also be discerned in the myth of *Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld*. Here, too, we have a divine child leaving the heavenly home, going down to a dark, hostile land, succumbing to it, waking up thanks to a word sent from heaven, and finally returning home in glory, dressed in regal garments and jewelry left behind at the beginning of the story.<sup>22</sup>

All these myths of course differ considerably in details. Their protagonists have partly different names and fight against different kinds of monsters, and there are many differences in the individual plots and in the narrative techniques. However, all the myths share the same broad story line and the particular heaven-earth orientation also characteristic of the Hymn of the Pearl, so that they can be considered as variations of a single underlying theme, “the battle of the divine prince against a monster, and his subsequent elevation.” Most of the individ-

ual myths originated in different cities of Mesopotamia, which explains the different names of the hero. However, by the end of the second millennium at the latest all the different local gods playing the role of the “victorious divine prince” had been syncretized with Ninurta,<sup>23</sup> so that the protagonist could in each case be considered to be the same, despite the different names.

Iconographic representations in imperial glyptics confirm the great popularity of these myths: a youthful winged hero combatting various kinds of monsters is a frequently recurring motif on the seals of the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods. While the iconography of the hero and the monsters exhibits a great deal of variety and thus neatly correlates with the variety found in the relevant myths, the combat scenes themselves display the same fixed compositional pattern, thus reflecting the underlying identity of the hero and the similarity of the individual myths.

### The King as Incarnation of Ninurta, the Divine Prince

In Mesopotamia, most prominently in the Assyrian empire, the youthful male hero of the myths was without any doubt identified with the king and the crown prince as *defenders of the divine world order* (represented by the empire) against forces of darkness

and chaos.<sup>24</sup> This is evident from passages such as Esarhaddon's famous account of his triumphal return to power,<sup>25</sup> where his battle against his rebel brothers is presented in terms directly taken over from Lugal-e and *Enūma eliš*.<sup>26</sup> In this passage, the prince

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed analysis of the allegorical meaning of the Descent of Ištar see my *Assyrian Prophecies*, xxxi-xxxiii.

<sup>23</sup> In Tablet III of SB Anzu, Ninurta is explicitly identified with Ningirsu of Girsu, Inšušinak of Susa, Ištaran of Der, Zababa of Kiš, Lugalbanda of Nišur, Lugalmarada of Marad, Tišpak of Ešnunna (the hero of *Labbu*), and other gods whose names are partly destroyed. In this article, the name Ninurta is for the sake of clarity occasionally used even in cases where another name (mostly, Nabū) may have been used in the original source.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. S. Maul, “Der assyrische König – Hüter der Weltordnung,” in K. Watanabe (ed.), *Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near East* (Heidelberg, 1999), 201-14.

<sup>25</sup> Borger Esarh., pp. 40-45.

<sup>26</sup> For word-for-word citations from Lugal-e, note Borger Esarh., p. 43:53-68 to be compared with Lugal-e 70-73 and 236-246 (Esarhaddon: “I heard of their evil deeds, and said, Woe [u<sub>8</sub>]! ... I beat my wrists ... [Aššur and the great gods] sent word to me, saying, ‘Go, do not tarry [*alik lā kalāta*]!’ ... Like a flying eagle I spread out my wings to defeat my enemies”; Lugal-e: “The Lord [heard of Asakku's evil deeds and] said, Woe [u<sub>8</sub>]! ... The hero beat his thigh with his fist ... [Enlil and the gods sent word to Ninurta], saying, ‘Go, do not tarry [*alik lā kalāta*]!’ ... The Lord spread his wings towards the clouds [to attack Asakku]”). For *Enūma eliš*, note Borger Esarh., p. 44:70-73 (“In front of me, their warriors were sharpening their weapons ... When they saw the strength of my onslaught, they went mad [*mahhūtiš*]”), to be compared

confronting his brothers is Ninurta rushing against evil monsters.<sup>27</sup> The sudden transformation of Esarhaddon into his divine paragon at hearing the news of his father's murder must not be understood as mere rhetoric only but seems to imply a deeper meaning: the body of the prince at the moment of crisis becomes a seat for Ninurta – a spiritual entity sent from heaven – who at that very moment takes his residence in it and spiritually *merges* with the prince.

The virtual identity of Ninurta and the human king/prince was not an invention of Esarhaddon's scribes but was from the beginning written in the myths themselves. The very first word of Lugal-e identifies Ninurta as “the king,” and at the end of the myth he is blessed as follows:

May the heavenly weapon, an unchanging, prosperous reign, eternal life, and the support of Enlil be your share, O King, power of heaven!<sup>28</sup>

Eternal life being the prerogative of gods, such a blessing, where eternal life is invoked for Ninurta, makes sense only if the writer of the epic considered Ninurta to be identical with the *human king*.

Similarly, at the end of the Anzu epic, Enlil exhorts the assembled gods after Ninurta's victory over Anzu:

Come on! Let him come to us, let him re-

joice, play, make merry. Let him stay with the gods, his brothers, and hear the secrets; let him hear the secrets of the gods, and let [the god ...] with the gods, his brothers, bestow the offices on him.<sup>29</sup>

This passage, too, implies Ninurta's identity with the human king. On the one hand, he is one of “the gods, his brothers”; on the other hand, he is *at the same time* human, too, and thus has to be admitted to the assembly of gods and given permission to learn the divine secrets, which otherwise were accessible to mortals through dreams and omens only.<sup>30</sup>

In Assyrian prophecies addressed to Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, the king has both a human and a divine mother, and is referred to as the son of Mullissu (= Ninlil), the divine mother of Ninurta.<sup>31</sup> The same doctrine, implying the king's virtual divinity, is a commonplace in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, where the king is time and again presented as miraculously created in his human mother's womb by his divine mother.<sup>32</sup> It also occurs in the Epic of Gilgamesh, where the hero – the paragon of the Mesopotamian “perfect king” (*šarru gitmā-lu*) – is likewise created by the mother goddess and defined as “two-thirds god, one-third man” from the moment of his birth.<sup>33</sup>

The divinity of the king resided in the dogma of his *spiritual perfection*, symbolised by the so-called “sacred tree,” which

with En. el. IV 88-92 (“Meanwhile, the gods of battle were sharpening their weapons ... When Tiamat heard this, she went mad [*mahhūtiš*]”). Note that the allusions to Lugal-e and En. el. are seamlessly combined in Esarh., as if taken from the same myth; yet the protagonist in the latter is formally *not* Ninurta but Marduk. This shows that both Ninurta and Marduk were understood in Assyria as *names* for two divine qualities or *aspects*, Marduk (like the king) *being* Ninurta when playing the role of hero and victor. Cf. KAR 25 II 1-12 and CT 24 50, see my remarks on these texts in JNES 52 (1993) 204-205 and AOAT 240 (1995) 398-401.

<sup>27</sup> For a another similar passage see E. Weissert, “Creating a Political Climate: Literary Allusions to *Enūma Eliš* in Sennacherib's Account of the Battle of Halule,” in H.

Hauptmann and H. Waetzoldt (eds.), *Assyrien im Wandel der Zeiten. Akten der XXXIX. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale 6.-10. Juli 1992* (Heidelberger Studien zum Alten Orient 6, Heidelberg 1997), 191-202.

<sup>28</sup> Lugal-e 698-700.

<sup>29</sup> Anzu III 28-32 (Enlil is here referred to under another name of his, Dagan).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. the way in which divine secrets were disclosed to Utnapishtim in the Epic of Gilgamesh (SAA Gilg. XI 193ff).

<sup>31</sup> See in detail my *Assyrian Prophecies*, p. xxxvi.

<sup>32</sup> For the evidence see Parpola, *Prophecies*, n. 186.

<sup>33</sup> SAA Gilg. I 46-48. Note that “two-thirds” (sexagesimal 40/60), is the number of Ea, the god of wisdom, and interpreted as 40, the number of Ninurta.

also provided the basis for his identification with Ninurta.<sup>34</sup> As a “perfect man/hero” (*eṭlu/qarrādu gitmālu*), the king was spiritually homologous (*homoousios*) with Ninurta, whose perfection is praised in several contemporary texts.<sup>35</sup> In Lugal-e 310, Ninurta is addressed as “gigantic *mes*-tree grown by abundant waters,” an image applied to the king since Sumerian times.<sup>36</sup> In

fact, *all* the attributes and epithets of Ninurta are also applied to the king in Assyrian royal inscriptions, thus underlining the perfect *homoousia* of the two.<sup>37</sup>

It is worth stressing that such an understanding of the king’s divinity (the king being at the same time both god and man) is essentially identical with the Christian theology’s understanding of Christ’s divinity.<sup>38</sup>

### The Spiritual Dimensions of the Myths

In the example cited above, the monsters figuring as Ninurta’s mythical opponents corresponded to the parricidal brothers of Esarhaddon, i.e., political enemies and opponents of the (future) king. This does not, however, mean that the myths were always understood or interpreted in this way. The king’s *homoousia* with Ninurta implied that he was *everything* that the latter stood for, and Ninurta was much more than just a god of war. He was above all the divine saviour par excellence who fought against everything diametrically opposed to the world of the gods: darkness, ignorance, disease, sin, and death. Thus he was also known as the dispenser of light, enlightenment and wisdom,

the great healer, the great farmer who feeds the hungry with the bread of life, the helper of the poor, the meek and the oppressed, and the supreme judge and holder of “the tablet of destinies” (= “the book of life”).<sup>39</sup>

The various myths will consequently have been interpreted from these perspectives as well and the monsters fought by Ninurta understood accordingly. The timing of the festival commemorating the defeat of Anzu at the *winter solstice* indicates that this monster was understood to symbolize forces of darkness, and the myth could thus be interpreted in terms of the (seasonal) victory of light over darkness.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, the fact that Anzu was

<sup>34</sup> See S. Parpola, “Sons of God: the Ideology of Assyrian Kingship,” *Archaeology Odyssey* 2/5 (1999), 16-27.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., *Angim* 15; *Maqlû* IV 2; OECT 6 pl. 14 r. 25; WVD OG 15 54; Langdon, *TI*, pl. 6:16.

<sup>36</sup> For references and discussion see Parpola, “Name of Gilgamesh,” 325.

<sup>37</sup> See Annus, *Anzu*, xxii.

<sup>38</sup> See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (5th ed., London 1977), 90-95, 116-118 and 138-49 on the starting point of apostolic Christology (“simultaneously fully divine and fully human”) and the various other competing definitions of Heras and the Marcionites, Ebonities, Gnostics, Docetists, Monarchists and others, and cf. my article “Monotheism in Ancient Assyria,” in B. N. Porter (ed.), *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World* (Casco Bay, 2000), 165-209, esp. 202-205. The long debate of the early Church about the precise nature of Christ’s divinity becomes understandable against the background of Mesopotamian religion, which distinguished between the earthly emperor and his

heavenly paragon, while at the same time maintaining the doctrine of their *spiritual* identity.

<sup>39</sup> See K. Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Helsinki 1938), 424-27; W. G. Lambert, “The Gula Hymn of Bulluṣa-rabi,” *Or.* 36 (1967) 105-32; W. Mayer, “Ein Hymnus auf Ninurta als Helfer in der Not,” *Or.* 61 (1992) 15-57; S. Paul, “Heavenly Tablets and the Book of Life,” *JANES* 5 (1973) 345-54; I. L. Finkel, “The Dream of Kurigalzu and the Tablet of Sins,” *AnSt* 33 (1983) 75-80; S. Parpola, “The Assyrian Tree of Life,” *JNES* 52 (1993) 204f and *Assyrian Prophecies* (1997), p. 6. As already noted, all these were also qualities of the Assyrian king. For the king as dispenser of the “medicine of life” (*šammu ša balāti*) see, e.g., SAA 10 166 r.2; as provider of light, *CCE* N 349f; as helper of the poor and destitute, *ABL* 166 r.1 and 1250 r.5 (*dūr makī šarru*); as holder of the tablet of destinies, A. R. George, “Sennacherib and the Tablet of Destinies,” *Iraq* 48 (1986) 133-46.

<sup>40</sup> See SAA 3 34:57-60 // 35:51-54.



repeatedly referred to as “evil” and associated with *anzillu* “abomination, taboo, sin” indicates that it also symbolized sin in general, so Ninurta’s victory over it could also be understood as *victory over sin*.<sup>41</sup>

An important function of the *Asakku* myth certainly was to establish Ninurta (and hence the king as well) as “the great healer” and the “the great farmer”: the victory over the stones explains why Ninurta possessed extraordinary healing powers,<sup>42</sup> and creation of the new world after the punishment of the stones (ll. 348-367) gives an etiology for the appearance of organized agriculture. However, the myth could also be allegorized as an eschatological revelation of *the fate of the sinners and the just on the day of judgment*. *Asakku*, the leader of the stones, is, like Anzu, referred to as “evil” and associated with the netherworld, taboo, and sin,<sup>43</sup> while the stones themselves are divided into “evil” and “good” ones on the basis of their actions, and cursed or blessed accordingly (lines 411-647). The cursing and blessing scene is phrased as a formal pronouncement of judgment in court, and it is clear that the “stones” are not to be understood there as mere inanimate objects but as individuals endowed with reason, being judged on the basis of their comportment towards the divine will. One should note

that the list of blessed stones includes **giš-nu<sub>11</sub>-gál**, “alabaster” (l. 513), which can also be esoterically interpreted as “emasculated,”<sup>44</sup> and *kurgarrânu* (l. 637), which can hardly be dissociated from the class of emasculated devotees of Ištar called *kurgarrû*,<sup>45</sup> while the list of cursed stones includes **maš-da** (l. 569) and *šakkarû* (l. 582), which can hardly be dissociated from the homophonous words for “gazelle” (a symbol of instinctuality) and “drunkard” respectively.<sup>46</sup> The exegesis of the remaining stones is not transparent, but the four examples quoted suffice to make it very likely that the proposed spiritual dimension of the myth was real and *again inherent in it from the beginning*.

The myth of Ninurta’s triumphal return (*Angim*) provided the paradigm for the triumphal return of the king from a victorious military campaign.<sup>47</sup> In such cultic and ritual application, the scene of the myth becomes a mundane locality, the temple or palace where the festivities took place. It must be emphasized, however, that in the myth itself Ninurta does not return to a place located on earth but to *heaven*,<sup>48</sup> and this idea was certainly also implicit in the cultic and ritual applications of the myth, the temples and palaces in question being defined as replicas of their heavenly counterparts.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>41</sup> See SAA Etana II 12f, 72 and 130f (J. Novotny, *The Standard Babylonian Etana Epic*, SAACT 2, Helsinki 2000); cf. *anzillu* = *hītu* “sin,” Malku II 249f.

<sup>42</sup> *Asakku* was the name of a disease-causing demon and also meant epidemics in general, and the stones whose “destinies” are determined after *Asakku*’s defeat are well known as *materia medica* and amulets used for warding off disease-causing demons. In the hands of Ninurta, they all turn into “medicine of life.”

<sup>43</sup> See CAD s.v. *asakku* A and B. Note that the defeat of Anzu, *Asakku* and Qingu (the evil husband of Tiamat) was celebrated in Assyria during the same festival (see SAA 3 34:57-60 // 35:51-54). Functionally, *Asakku* neatly corresponds to the Antichrist of the Revelations.

<sup>44</sup> Reading the individual signs as **giš-nu-gál**, “having no penis.” On the methods of Mesopotamian literary exegesis see, e.g., S. Lieberman, “A Mesopotamian Background for the So-Called Aggadic ‘Measures’ of Biblical

Hermeneutics?” *HUCA* 38 (1987) 157-225, esp. 176-86; J. Bottéro, “Les noms de Marduk, l’écriture et la ‘logique’ en Mésopotamie ancienne,” *Finkelstein Mem. Vol.* (1977), 5-28; S. Parpola, “Name of Gilgamesh,” 318ff.

<sup>45</sup> On the emasculation of the *kurgarrû*, see most recently, Parpola, *Prophecies*, nn. 138-41.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. CAD s.vv. *šabītu* and *šakkarû* A and B.

<sup>47</sup> See the cultic commentaries SAA 3 37 r.24-28, 38:12-13, 39:24-25 and B. Pongratz-Leisten, Ina Šulmi Īrub. *Die kulttopographische und ideologische Programmatik der akītu-Prozession in Babylonien im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Mainz am Rhein, 1994), 82.

<sup>48</sup> Note especially *Angim* 157, where Ninurta explicitly refers to the chariot on which he returned home as “my chariot of heaven” (<sup>85</sup>**gigir-an-na-mu**).

<sup>49</sup> See En. el. IV 143-146, V 119-123 and VI 62-66, and A. R. George, *House Most High. The Temples of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Winona Lake, 1993), 145 s.v. Ešarra.

What is more, there is reason to believe that the myth was also understood in terms of the king's resurrection from the dead and subsequent glorification in heaven (apotheosis). This is strongly suggested by lines 648-655 of Lugal-e, where Ninurta is *profusely wept over and blessed by mourners* before his ascent to heaven.<sup>50</sup> The reference of profuse weeping in such a context makes sense only by assuming an associative link between the god's return to heaven and the physical death of the king. The apotheosis of kings is explicitly attested in Mesopotamian texts since the time of the Ur III empire, the time of composition of both Lugal-e and Angim.<sup>51</sup>

The idea of royal apotheosis is even more implicit in Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld. In this myth, the protagonist leaving heaven and returning to it is not Ninurta (alias the king) but the goddess Ištar representing, on the allegorical level, the descending and ascending soul; however, the king is involved in it in the disguise of the god Tammuz, given to the netherworld as a ransom for Ištar's release from it. I have argued in detail elsewhere that the figure of Tammuz is an "etiology" for the king's role as a good shepherd dying for his flock.<sup>52</sup>

Hence, he appears in Neo-Assyrian sources almost exclusively in funeral contexts only, in contrast to Ninurta, who is the paragon of the victorious king and has a different and much wider "distribution." The resurrection of Tammuz is foreshadowed in the concluding line of Ištar's Descent, which, like Lugal-e, contains an explicit reference to the mourning and wailing of the dead god.<sup>53</sup>

In sum, the myths reviewed above present the king as a prince fighting against forces of chaos, darkness, and death, elevated to supreme power and glory after his victory, and resurrected after his death. As Ninurta, he was the *divine saviour* who brought down godless, tyrannical regimes, defended the weak and oppressed, cured the sick, and provided the daily bread (of life) for the (spiritually) poor; as Tammuz, he was the good shepherd and *redeemer* who guided his "sheep" onto the right path and ultimately died for them. While it should not be forgotten, or even minimized, that the myths surely had many other functions and levels of interpretation as well,<sup>54</sup> the spiritual level focused on here must be considered *primary* since it was, as shown above, encoded in the wording of the myths themselves.

## The Relationship between the Hymn of the Pearl and Ninurta Mythology

To return now to the Hymn of the Pearl, we can note several structural and thematic similarities as well as points of detail that

link it with the Mesopotamian myths just reviewed. The parallelism is closest with the Ninurta myths, especially Lugal-e, which in

<sup>50</sup> **a-igi-lu-e-ne šir dūg-ge-éš im-mi-ib-bé-ne** "(mourners) shedding abundant tears were intoning sweet psalms," line 652.

<sup>51</sup> The Mesopotamian belief in the resurrection of the king is confirmed by an economic text dated to the 11th month of the last regnal year of Šulgi, which contains the remark "when the divine Šulgi ascended to heaven" (see C. Wilcke, "König Šulgis Himmelfahrt," *Münchener Beiträge zur Völkerkunde* 1 [1988] 245-55), and by a similar text referring to the resurrection of a later king (Išbi-Erra or Šu-ilišu), see M. Yoshikawa, *ASJ* 11 (1989) 353 and

P. Steinkeller, *NABU* 1992/1 no. 4.

<sup>52</sup> See Parpola, *Prophecies*, p. xxxiii and nn. 123-27; cf. also S. Parpola, "The Concept of the Saviour and Belief in Resurrection in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Academia Scientiarum Fennica, Year Book 1997* (1998) 51-57.

<sup>53</sup> "When Tammuz rises, the lapis lazuli pipe and the carnelian ring will rise with him, the male and female mourners will rise with him!" (lines 136-138; Borger, *BAL I*, p. 103).

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Annus, *Anzu*, pp. xxxi-xxxiii.

broad outline parallels it from the beginning to the end. Note the princely status of the protagonist, the initial peace at the father's court, the subsequent dangerous mission to the foreign land, the fight against the monster, the initial defeat, the invigorating message from home, the victory over the monster, the retrieval of its possessions, and the subsequent triumphal return and exaltation at home. While the parallelism may not be one-to-one overall (for example, the adversary in Lugal-e is not a dragon), the parallels missing in one myth can be filled in from the other, related myths. Thus the opponent of the prince does appear as a dragon in Labbu and *Enūma eliš*, as well as in the list of Ninurta's trophies in Angimdimma and elsewhere; the celestial home of the protagonist is explicitly located in the East in the Sumerian version of Ištar's Descent, as in the Hymn of the Pearl; the jewel-garment of the latter corresponds to the jewelry and garments that Ištar puts on during her return, and so on. The first-person monologue format of the Hymn of the Pearl is not found in any of the myths reviewed above, but is well attested in Mesopotamian legends (the so-called *narû* literature), for example the so-called *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sîn*.<sup>55</sup>

Sure enough, the Hymn of the Pearl, being set in a Parthian frame of reference, also contains features that do not have direct Mesopotamian parallels.<sup>56</sup> These features certainly make it an independent com-

position, but are of relatively little significance in comparison with the numerous features that it shares with the earlier Mesopotamian myths. Each of the latter were likewise independent compositions originating in different times and differing considerably from each other; yet they were all rooted in the same mythological tradition and, in the course of their long textual history, surely inspired and influenced each other. The numerous structural, thematic and functional parallels reviewed above strongly suggest that the Hymn of the Pearl was also rooted in this tradition and inspired by it. Rather than being a literal rendering or adaptation of any single myth, it is an amalgam of several interrelated myths making use of a religious theme common to all of them and picking up details from *all* of them.

The creative use of this material implies familiarity not only with Mesopotamian mythology at large but also with its spiritual exegesis. As I have tried to show elsewhere, there is another similar example of the use of Mesopotamian mythological material in the Gnostic corpus: the Nag Hammadi treatise *Exegesis on the Soul*, which can be best defined as a homiletical rephrasing of the Descent of Ištar.<sup>57</sup> Other Gnostic and Hermetic treatises like the *Thunder and Poimandres* likewise display intimate familiarity with Mesopotamian religious thought although no clear connection with any specific myth.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> See J. Goodnick Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade* (Winona Lake, 1997), 294-331.

<sup>56</sup> For example, the motif of a *pearl* guarded by a dragon is not found in the Mesopotamian myths discussed above (nor indeed, as far as I know, in any extant Mesopotamian myth). The reason for the introduction of this motif into the story is probably to be sought in the particular allegorical orientation of the hymn: the protagonist, though identified as a "prince," is not to be equated (as in the Mesopotamian myths) with the saviour king but with the *individual soul*, and the battle which he wages against the dragon is not just to slay it but to regain the ability of self-recognition that the monster has appropriated. In this

sense the pearl parallels the Tablet of Destinies appropriated by Anzu and the cedar forest guarded by Humbaba in the Epic of Gilgamesh.

<sup>57</sup> See Parpola, *Prophecies*, xxxi-xxxiii, and cf. C. Müller-Kessler, "Ištar als 'Heiliger Geist,'" NABU 1998/120.

<sup>58</sup> A. Annus has recently pointed out that a passage in another Nag Hammadi treatise, *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (J. M. Robinson [ed.], *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, p. 166), is heavily indebted to the Mesopotamian account of the Flood; see Annus, "Babylonian Flood Story in the Nag Hammadi Writings," NABU 2000/68.

## The Survival of Mesopotamian Religious Traditions in Hellenistic and Parthian Times

Cuneiform texts continued to be copied and composed in Hellenistic Babylonia and significant cuneiform libraries still existed as late as the first century CE, so Mesopotamian mythological tradition certainly was still alive at the time when the Hymn of the Pearl was composed.<sup>59</sup> What is more, Mesopotamian religious traditions continued to flourish not only in Mesopotamia proper but in Syria, Anatolia and Palestine as well. The cult of Nabû, for example, is well attested in second-century CE Edessa and persisted in the neighboring Harran until the 10th century CE.<sup>60</sup> Eye-witness testimonies such as Lucian's *De Dea Syria* strikingly demonstrate how alive Mesopotamian cults still were in second-century Syria, the presumed time and place of composition of the Hymn of the Pearl.<sup>61</sup> Lucian mentions that the temple of the Syrian goddess in his time still housed statues of Assyrian kings, and refers to the Sumerian flood hero by his Mesopotamian name, Ziusudra (Sisythes).<sup>62</sup>

It is true that by Seleucid/Parthian/Roman times, Mesopotamian myths probably could be read only by a precious few in their original Sumerian and Akkadian form. However, being of central importance to Mesopotamian religion (especially to the cults of Nabû and Ištar and their Aramaic equivalents Nebo and Atargatis), the myths

discussed above certainly continued to be propagated and explained to religious devotees as long as the cults of the relevant gods existed – if not in Akkadian or Sumerian, then in Aramaic, which had been the *lingua franca* of the entire Near East since the eighth century BCE.

We know for certain that the creation myth, *Enūma eliš*, continued to be publicly recited in the Babylonian New Year's festival through Hellenistic times,<sup>63</sup> and that at least this myth was propagated and explained to the masses throughout the first millennium BCE. This is made quite plain by the end of the myth, which prescribed that its central ideas be incessantly studied, explicated and reflected upon by the whole population – not only the wise and learned, but the shepherd and herdsman as well. Similar exhortations are also included in other pieces of Mesopotamian literature, and Victor Hurowitz has convincingly argued that the oral, explanatory dimension was an essential component of the Mesopotamian literature from the earliest times on.<sup>64</sup> A relief in the Bel temple of Palmyra, interpreted to depict the battle between Marduk and Tiamat, is strong evidence that an Aramaic version of *Enūma eliš* was known in this city in the first centuries CE and played a role in the Akitu festival which

<sup>59</sup> See M. Geller, "The Last Wedge," *ZA* 87 (1997) 43-95.

<sup>60</sup> See T. M. Green, *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran* (Leiden, 1992).

<sup>61</sup> See H. W. Attridge and R. A. Oden, *The Syrian Goddess (De Dea Syria)* (SBL Texts and Translations 9, Montana, 1976).

<sup>62</sup> *De Dea Syria* 12. Lucian uses the Greek name Deukalion in the passage, but is careful to point out that the hero was [locally] called Sisythes.

<sup>63</sup> See F. Thureau-Dangin, *Rituels accadiens* (Paris, 1921), p. 137, lines 279-283. The text is available in both Neo-Assyrian and Seleucid copies. For further evidence

that the New Year's festival continued to be celebrated in Babylon in Seleucid times and that the kings Antiochus I and Antiochus III (222-187) participated in it, see L. Dirven, "The Exaltation of Nabû: A revision of the relief depicting the battle against Tiamat from the temple of Bel in Palmyra," *WO* 28 (1997) 96-116, esp. 104 n. 30.

<sup>64</sup> V. Hurowitz, "Spanning the Generations: Aspects of Oral and Written Transmission in the Bible and Ancient Mesopotamia," in R. L. Geffen and M. B. Edelman (eds.), *Freedom and Responsibility. Exploring the Challenges of Jewish Continuity* (Ktav Publishing House, 1998), 11-30.

continued to be celebrated in the city.<sup>65</sup>

It can thus be safely assumed that the Mesopotamian religious and mythological tradition lived on in Aramaic (and, after the establishment of Seleucid rule, in Greek as well) long after it ceased to be written down in cuneiform.<sup>66</sup> The author of the Hymn of

the Pearl could thus draw on the literary and oral tradition of an Aramaic-speaking clergy dedicated to maintaining the cult of Mesopotamian deities, and was hence very likely familiar with the central tenets of Mesopotamian religion as well.<sup>67</sup>

### Mesopotamian Religion and Primitive Christianity

In conclusion, an important question remains to be considered: if the Hymn of the Pearl was based on and inspired by Mesopotamian mythology, how could it be, and why was it incorporated into the Acts of Thomas?

As noted above, the myths reviewed above presented the Mesopotamia king as a saviour sent from heaven to liberate mankind from oppression and misery. As a righteous, perfect man resurrected after his death, the king also functioned as a model for human salvation in general. This idea certainly was central to the myth of Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld, which provided the Mesopotamian paradigm par excellence for the salvation of man. Since the motif of the "jewel-studded garment" in the Hymn of the Pearl clearly derives from Ištar's Descent, its integration with motifs from Ninurta mythology suggests that the idea of personal salvation was inherent in

the Ninurta myths as well. Thus interpreted, these myths had relevance to any individual who, having "vanquished" the material world, had attained divine perfection, symbolized by the "jewel-studded garment."

Personal salvation indeed appears to have been the essential goal of the cult of Nabû, the son of Marduk who since the late second millennium BCE was syncretized with Ninurta.<sup>68</sup> The devotees of Nabû appear to have striven for salvation through intensive study and exegesis of canonical scripture; the cult itself was esoteric and, like the cult of Ištar, has affinities with Gnosticism, Hermeticism and Mithraism.<sup>69</sup> In the Hellenistic and early Christian period Nabû was identified with the Greek Hermes *logios* and Egyptian Thot, and he appears in Mandaeic and Jewish apocryphal and rabbinical texts as an equivalent of the great angelic prince Michael and Jesus Christ.<sup>70</sup> The central beliefs and doctrines of his cult, which

<sup>65</sup> See Dirven, "Exaltation of Nabû," and H. Niehr, *Religionen in Israels Umwelt. Einführung in die nordwestsemitischen Religionen Syrien-Palästinas* (Würzburg: Echter, 1998), 176 and 185.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. the article of Grottanelli in this volume (pp. 19-28).

<sup>67</sup> Note simply the case of Bardaisan, who according to tradition was the son of a pagan priest from Mabbug (Assyrian Nampigi) or Arbela (Teixidor, *Bardesane*, p. 65).

<sup>68</sup> See F. Pomponio, *Nabû: il culto e la figura di un dio del pantheon babilonese ed assiro* (Rome, 1978), 189ff.

<sup>69</sup> The cult of Nabû, which was intrinsically linked to that of Ištar and Tammuz, has never been adequately investigated, despite the existence Pomponio's monograph on the god. The significance attached in the cult to discovering wisdom through textual exegesis can be in-

ferred from passages such as SAA 3 12:8-10 and 6:9-11, which imply that mystical insights gained through textual exegesis could be compared to glimpses of paradise, mystical union with god and admission to the assembly of gods; cf. the sacred marriage text SAA 3 14 analysed in M. Nissinen, "Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu: An Assyrian Song of Songs," in M. Dietrich and I. Kottsieper, "*Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf*": *Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient* (Festschrift O. Loretz, AOAT 250, Münster 1998), 585-634, and the article of Nissinen in this volume (pp. 93-136).

<sup>70</sup> See, e.g., Green, *City of the Moon God*, pp. 71, 85f, 136-39; Pomponio, *Nabû*, 232ff; Parpola, *Prophecies*, nn. 7, 441 and 196f; J. A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia, 1913), 97-99.

can with reason be referred to as *Mesopotamian gnosis*, must have been rather close to those of the various Gnostic and primitive Christian movements.

According to Christian tradition, the apostle Thomas, the alleged twin brother of Jesus, was responsible for the conversion of northern Mesopotamia to Christianity. In the Acts of Thomas, he utters the Hymn of the Pearl in prison as a sort of personal confession of faith, having first given thanks to God for his tribulations. In such a context, the hymn seems to take on the function of a spell: it affirms the heavenly origin of the soul of Thomas and its eventual triumph in heaven, but at the same time also conjures his physical liberation by suggesting a connection between the “foreign country” and “dragon’s lair” of the hymn and the Indian prison he had been cast in. In the continuation (ch. 119), Thomas miraculously walks out of the prison. It is not unthinkable that the hymn may have played a similar role (a sort of soteriological charm) in other contexts as well, as it merges the triumph of the individual soul with that of the resurrected saviour.

From this perspective, one cannot exclude the possibility that the Hymn of the Pearl is a Christian work composed by a Syrian follower of St. Thomas, who may have wished to state the fundamentals of his faith to his countrymen in a way compatible with the Mesopotamian religious and myth-

ological traditions (note that the hymn seems to introduce Christ into the story as a heavenly “brother” of the protagonist).<sup>71</sup> If so, he may have purposely eliminated all specifically Mesopotamian mythological elements from the story (except the general story line) in order to render it acceptable to his Jewish-Christian fellow believers as well. However, the complete lack of any specifically Jewish or Christian elements makes it likelier that the hymn is a pagan work composed before the introduction of Christianity into Mesopotamia. Whichever the case, the fact that it could be included in the Acts of Thomas is a healthy reminder that primitive Syriac Christianity of the third century was very different from later (orthodox) Christianity. It believed in a trinity composed of Father, *Mother*, and Son, who resided in a heavenly court including many other divine beings as well,<sup>72</sup> but were *subordinate to the transcendent God* himself (the “King of Kings” of the hymn).<sup>73</sup> As such, it was close to Gnosticism and primitive Judaism, but also to Mesopotamian religion, which, moreover, as we have seen, likewise involved belief in redemption and resurrection. This explains why Christianity could take root relatively easily in Mesopotamia and why elements of Mesopotamian religious thought could contrariwise be integrated into Christian thought.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>71</sup> See verses 15, 42 and 48. The “brother” resides in heaven with the father and mother and is referred to in all instances as their *pašgrībā*, i.e. “crown prince” or “representative” (on the meaning of *pašgrībā* see Köbert, *Or.* 38 [1969] 450 and T. Gnoli, *Roma, Edessa e Palmira nel III sec. d. C. Problemi istituzionali* [Pisa and Roma 2000], 70f). This would fit Christ, but even better Ninurta/Nabû, who was the heavenly crown prince and, as king, the earthly representative of his mother and father.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. verses 38-40 and 101-103, referring to the “kings and chiefs of Parthia” and “magnates of the East” as components of the (heavenly) court.

<sup>73</sup> See verse 104. The transcendence of the God of the hymn is implied by the fact that he is not immediately accessible to the members of the heavenly court. Note that in verse 41 the protagonist’s heavenly father himself is identified with the King of Kings. This seeming inconsistency is explained by the fact that in Mesopotamian religion, all the “great” and lesser gods, including Marduk/Enlil, the divine king, were understood as creations and/or aspects of the supreme (transcendent) god.

<sup>74</sup> On the latter point cf. my remarks in Porter, *One God or Many*, 205-207.