

## **SOME OTHERWORLDLY JOURNEYS IN MESOPOTAMIAN, JEWISH, MANDAEAN AND YEZIDI TRADITIONS<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper tries to demonstrate that some motifs in the descriptions of the soul's journey to the hereafter in Mandaean and Yezidi beliefs have parallels in ancient Mesopotamian texts. The same motifs are applied to heavenly ascents in Jewish apocalypticism and mysticism, and also in some Mandaean texts. The Netherworld or Paradise images in those descriptions often correspond to specific features in Babylonian mystical texts and literature.

The continuity of the Mesopotamian intellectual traditions in the later world, especially in Jewish mysticism has been a favourite area of research for Simo Parpola during the last two decades. The assumption of a Mesopotamian heritage in the Jewish traditions such as Kabbala still raises considerable controversy among many scholars, and the cognate models of reconstruction are often said to belong to the methods of the "Helsinki school". I am rather sceptical about the existence of such a school as a real institution either in the past or present, and moreover, the evidence seems to indicate that the influence of professor Parpola's ideas in the scholarship of ancient Near Eastern religion is more widespread than just the Helsinki area. Prof. Parpola has given a fresh impetus to comparative studies in Near Eastern religions, both ancient and modern.

While reading religious and literary texts from the Middle East, irrespective of their age and origins, one is frequently struck by how similar the texts in different languages, ages and regions can be, both in style and content. The intermixture of cultures and traditions is evident in every step one takes in the study of the ancient Near East, but only much luck and scholarly open-mindedness can enlighten us to see how precisely religious ideas, the pieces of ancient wisdom spread and circulated from one culture to another. One such case was analyzed by Peter Kingsley in

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his excellent paper (Kingsley 1992). He has shown that the visionary description of God's throne in the biblical Book of Ezekiel 1:26–27 exactly corresponds to cosmological setting of the Marduk's throne in a cuneiform text of mystical content that belonged to the traditions of the Babylonian scholars:

The parallel between Ezekiel's vision and the imagery in the Babylonian text is remarkable. In both cases the Lord is seated on his throne above the lowest heaven, or heaven of the stars; the throne is made of lapis lazuli, and illuminated by the gleam of amber. Beyond every reasonable possibility of doubt the parallel is far too exact just to be a coincidence, and there can be no question of the Babylonian version deriving from the Jewish. Apart from the preciseness of the parallel, the very fact that Ezekiel had his vision in the heartland of Babylonia must be allowed to speak for itself. (Kingsley 1992: 342)

The vision of Ezekiel 1 is the cornerstone of Jewish Merkabah mysticism and it had immense significance in the Judeo-Christian tradition (Kingsley 1992: 344). The interpretation of Ezekiel's vision was considered to be esoteric by Jewish rabbis, as also was related doctrine in Mesopotamia. The colophon of the cuneiform tablet VAT 8917 explicitly says that the information on it is considered to be esoteric.<sup>2</sup> There is one more striking detail that points to the common origin of Ezekiel's vision and the sections of VAT 8917 in the Babylonian priestly lore that was not discussed by Kingsley. The cuneiform tablet is divided by separating lines into the segments of divine speculations. The segment exactly preceding the description of Marduk's throne is about the chariot of the "warrior king, the lord Ninurta", which is pulled by the "ghost of Anzû". Thus the descriptions of Ninurta's chariot and Marduk's throne appear in nearby segments in the cuneiform text, as the chariot of God and his throne in the middle heaven appear in Ezekiel's vision in the same order (Dalley 1994: 256–257).

Kingsley himself also called attention to a third related parallel passage that is found in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 1.25 (Kingsley 1992: 343 n. 20). This text describes the visit to Babylon of the famous Pythagorean sage during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. According to the text in the following passage, the local king sat in judgement in a celestial dome of sapphire:

They say that they also visited men's quarters (in the palace of Babylon) with a doomed roof imitating a kind of sky, roofed with sapphire. This stone is very blue and heavenly to look at. Images of the gods whom the Persians worship were set up on high and looked golden, as if they were in the upper air. This is where the king sits in judgement, and four golden fetishes (*inyges*) hang from the ceiling, reminding him of Adrasteia (= Nemesis, the goddess of retribution) and that he must not elevate himself above the human. The Magi say that they themselves hang these up when they visit the palace, calling them "the tongues of the gods". (Jones 2005: 98–99)

<sup>2</sup> VAT 8917 (KAR 307) has been most recently edited by A. Livingstone in SAA 3 39.

If one compares a larger section of the cuneiform tablet VAT 8917 both to details in Ezekiel's vision and to those found in Philostratus, one more interesting, if quite obscure correspondence connects the three descriptions of the divine or royal throne. In Philostratus' account, there are "four golden *inyges*" that the local priests hang up when they visit the palace, probably during the courts of justice. It is striking to compare that in the Ninurta section of VAT 8917 there are mysterious "tongues of Anzû" that the ecstatic priest holds in his hand while standing in the chariot with the king, the god Ninurta. The relevant sections of the tablet read as follows:

The Elamite chariot, which has no seat, carries inside it the corpse of Enmešarra. The horses which are harnessed to it are the ghost of Anzû. The king who stands in the chariot is the warrior king, the lord Ninurta. The ecstatic priest, who stands with him, pulled out the tongues of Anzû and holds them in his hand. [...]. The middle heaven of sapphire stone is of the Igigi gods. Bel sits there in a high temple on a dais of lapis lazuli and has made a lamp of amber shine there. (SAA 3 39:24–27, 31–32)

What function those "tongues of the gods", which were referred to by Philostratus, might have had in the palace of Babylon is unclear, but it is nevertheless striking to find them corresponding to the "tongues of Anzû" in much older cuneiform text. The four *inyges* in Philostratus' account also bear a similarity to the four mysterious creatures in Ezekiel with their wheels. The *inyges* also occur as a technical term in the collection of *Chaldaean Oracles*, where they are communication instruments of the Supreme Father. The Greek word *inyges* can be translated as "connectors", probably connecting there the divine world with the human by means of the divine messages and sustenance from above.<sup>3</sup> One wonders if the judgement scene on the famous stone Sun-God tablet of Nabû-apla-iddina (9th century BC), where the hanging Sun disk is handled by a priest with the help of ropes (BBSt 36), is to be interpreted in the comparative light of the cuneiform text VAT 8917 and the Ezekiel and Philostratus passages. In all those scenes, there is a god or a king sitting on the throne of heaven symbolized by sapphire stone and having four mysterious communication instruments acting nearby. According to the *Chaldaean Oracles* and theurgy, the "magic wheel" of Hecate was equated with "connectors":

As Psellus describes it, this "magical wheel" (or *Iynx*) was a golden sphere embedded with a sapphire and swung around by means of a leather strap. On the surface of the wheel magical characters were engraved. By swinging this wheel, the theurgist would imitate the motion of the heavenly spheres and thus "sympathetically" attract the celestial *Iynxes* (which would then function as "messengers" between the theurgist and the gods). In addition, the swinging of this wheel could evidently be used for more profane ends. Marinus (*Vita Procli* 28) tells us that Proclus, by using "certain *Iynxes*" (*iygga tina*) caused rain to fall in Attica, thus ending a serious drought. (Majercik 1989: 30)

<sup>3</sup> For a comparison of the *inyges* in the *Chaldaean Oracles* with Ezekiel's creatures, see Kingsley 1992: 343 n. 20; see also my remarks in *Annus* 2006: 10–12.

The Babylonian image behind the passage in Ezekiel 1:26–27 has much influenced the way the soul's journey to the hereafter and the visionary ascents to heaven are described in Jewish apocalypticism, Jewish mysticism, and Mandaeanism. Some of those descriptions have creatively combined other pieces of ancient lore that are familiar from the ancient Babylonian texts into their accounts. The descriptions of otherworldly journeys in late antique religious texts often combine the material from many ancient Mesopotamian sources, as I have written about elsewhere (see Annus 2007).

The motifs from the travel of Gilgameš to Uta-napišti occur in many instances where the soul's journey to the hereafter is described in the Jewish, Mandaean and Yezidi texts. The association of the fate of the departing spirit and the fate of Gilgameš is already Babylonian, because Gilgameš had a double role in Mesopotamian religion and literature. He is the hero of the epic, but simultaneously he is one of the rulers of the Netherworld, sometimes a senior chthonic deity, "king of the Netherworld" (George 2003: 127). He sits in judgement in the Netherworld, passes judgements and hands down verdicts (George 2003: 128). In Mesopotamian incantations, Gilgameš is also attested as the ferryman of the dead, and once he controls the shades' crossing of the Hubur river and perhaps receives from them payment (George 2003: 130). Gilgameš was present at rites of burial, because his prominent function was to convey the dead safely into the Netherworld's custody (George 2003: 131). The Epic of Gilgameš describes man's quest for immortality, but on his way the hero oversteps the boundary between the life and death by crossing the "waters of death", and after his own death becomes a ruler and judge of the Netherworld. Accordingly, every departing spirit undertook a journey similar to that of Gilgameš after death in order to reach the Netherworld and encounter him there as judge. It is no wonder then that sometimes the soul's ascent to heaven after death is described in Jewish, Mandaean and Yezidi sources in a similar way as Gilgameš's journey to Uta-napišti. Some specific points are recognizably similar.

According to Mandaean cosmology, the World of Light, where the soul ascends after death, is separated from the physical cosmos by a water called *hafiqia mia* or "water brooks". Beneath it lie seven or eight "watchhouses" or *mattarta*, which function as dwelling places for a variety of demons and purgatories for the ascending soul (Deutsch 1999: 111). According to E. S. Drower, *hafiqia mia* is the name of the river of departure, of death, which is the frontier of the World of Light. In the Mandaean treatise *Diwan Abathur*, a ship ferries souls across this river (Deutsch 1999: 111). In this respect the Mandaean river corresponds to the Mesopotamian underworld river Hubur and to the "waters of death" (Akkadian *mê mūti*) in the Epic of Gilgameš. The "waters of death" in the Epic of Gilgameš are most hazardous part of the great ocean between the edge of the world and the region in the far east where the gods settled Uta-napišti. Those waters are difficult to dissociate from the water that the dead crossed on their way to the Netherworld, the

river Hubur (George 2003: 499–500). The Mesopotamian river of the Netherworld flows according to the texts either outside the series of underworld gates or within them. In the text *Address of Marduk to the Demons* (E 23–32), the “stream of the great earth” appears to be within the underworld gates (Horowitz 1998: 356–357). According to Babylonian geography, the waters of death encircled the earth as part of the great ocean. Both the lethal river Hubur and the waters of death stood in the way of a passage to the far west and could be identified with one another (George 2003: 500).

According to Mandaean sources, the soul after death encountered *hafiqia mia* at the end of its heavenly journey through the watchhouses. Once the soul ascended to the “gate of the House of Life,” the weigher of souls Abathur tested the soul to determine whether it is worthy to enter the pleromatic realm: “If the soul is worthy, then it is helped over the waters into the House of Life, if it is unworthy, then the soul is overcome by *hafiqia mia* and remains in one of the purgatories, receiving punishment until the final judgement.” (Deutsch 1999: 111–112.) The same angelic weigher of souls is depicted in the Jewish apocryphon *Testament of Abraham* (ch. 12) as the judge sitting on the throne of terrifying crystal, while another “sunlike angel” actually weighs the souls in a balance. In the Mandaean text *Diwan Abathur* the motifs of the crystal throne and the psychostasy are also juxtaposed. In 1 Enoch 14, Enoch encounters at the peak of his ascent a heavenly crystal vault, where the throne of crystal is associated with the image of an enthroned judge (Deutsch 1999: 108–109). Enoch’s description owes much to Ezekiel’s vision and secondarily to the corresponding Babylonian priestly lore. The heavenly structures are mostly composed of crystal or sapphire in Jewish and Mandaean texts, and the enthroned being there is either the God himself or the angelic weigher of souls and merits. The Iranian parallels may indeed be significant in the formation of those speculative images (Deutsch 1999: 110), but one cannot ignore the Babylonian background, where the heavenly throne and the waters of death are attested as motifs in various myths.

The common motif of the soul’s ascent journey and of Gilgameš’s journey is the lethal water found at the end of it. N. Deutsch seeks the origin of the Mandaean *hafiqia mia* in Persian sources and in the Hebrew Bible (1999: 112–114), but it is clear that the oldest attestation of this Netherworld stream stems from Mesopotamia, and the Mandaean and Jewish traditions have modified and added to this. As did its Babylonian counterpart Hubur, the Mandaean Netherworld river had the power to exert control over the departed soul and keep it in its confines (see Horowitz 1998: 356–357). In the Mesopotamian texts, the Netherworld river is occasionally merged or confused with the Apsû of Ea/Enki, and the name of the boatman Ur-šanabi is traditionally interpreted as “Man of the god Ea” because of the same confusion (see George 2003: 500). Sometimes the Apsû itself was thought to be a netherworld inhabited by malevolent spirits. In congruence to the fact that Gilgameš’s journey

was on the path of the Sun, in the great Akkadian hymn to Šamaš, the latter renders his verdicts at the underworld Hubur river after descending into the Apsû (Horowitz 1998: 342–343). Some epithets of Šamaš also imply that the Sun god rendered judgements in the underworld (Horowitz 1998: 352). There is no judgement episode in the Gilgameš epic, but geographically the location where the hero arrives at the end of his journey corresponds to the Sun God's place of judgement. The confusion of Apsû with Hubur shows that the waters around the earth continually threaten the cosmos, but also form the boundaries of human life. The Hubur is at the entrance of the Netherworld, but the primordial sea Tiamat is also referred to in the Creation Epic as “Mother Hubur, she who fashions all things” (I 133; II 19; III 23, 81). Some Mesopotamian birth incantations refer to a birth boat which brings the child across the seas toward life (Bautch 2003: 73–74). Thus the life-bringing waters and the waters of death were not geographically strictly separated, sometimes fulfilling the same function.

In the mystical accounts of the soul's ascent, the “waters of death” become “heavenly waters” or even cosmic waters in the Mandaean and Hekhalot traditions, but these are still dangerous to the ascending spirit. The ascending individual, who has already passed through a series of “watchhouses” or “palaces” correspondingly, encounters the cosmic water at the end of his journey, which is fraught with danger. Thus, a passage in the Mandaean *Canonical Prayer Book* reads as follows:

The soul flieth and travelleth on until she reacheth spirits of Purgatory. The spirits of Purgatory abased their heads and the soul passed the purgatory-spirits by. The soul flieth and goeth until she came to the waters of death (*hafiqia mia*) there came forth towards her a great beam of radiance (and) of life, (who) grasped her by the palm of her right hand and brought her over the waters of death. The soul flieth and goeth until she reacheth the House of Life. (translation by E. S. Drower, from Deutsch 1999: 115)

As Deutsch notes, the motif of heavenly or cosmic waters occurs in the Jewish, Christian and Gnostic cosmological traditions, but only some of these sources emphasize that the ascending soul or individual encounters this water during the heavenly journey (see Deutsch 1999: 115). That “heaven is of water” is attested already in Babylonian mystical tradition. A simple notariqon is used in the cuneiform tablet K 170 + Rm 520 r.6, where the Sumerian logogram AN, “heaven”, with the Akkadian reading *šamê* is interpreted as *ša A.MEŠ (mê)* “that of water”. This explanation finds a Jewish Rabbinic counterpart in the interpretation of Hebrew *šmym* “heaven” as coming from the word *šm* “there” plus the word “water” (*mym*) in the Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 12a and Genesis Rabbah 4.8 (Lieberman 1987: 177). Thus we already find in the Babylonian mystical tradition two independent or inter-dependent notions of a heaven that is of blue stone and of a heaven that is of water.

The same alteration is also found in some late antique traditions. While most passages in apocalyptic and Gnostic literature merely mention the existence of heavenly water, Rev. 22:1 likens the heavenly water to crystal, and in Rev 4:6 there is a sea of glass-like crystal before the throne of God. A sea of glass appears also in Rev. 15:2–3, where it is mingled with fire, and its fiery appearance presents a threatening aspect to the enemies of God who would cross over it. Those who have remained faithful to God, are permitted to cross over the sea and gain access to his presence. The apocalyptic identification of heavenly water with crystal may be partly a result of the combination of biblical verses Ezek 1:22, where the firmament between the God and mysterious beings is likened to crystal and Gen 1: 7, where the upper and lower waters in heaven are separated by a firmament (Rowland 1979: 148–149). In some parts of late antique intellectual traditions the contradiction of stony and watery heaven was resolved by means of a belief that the watery nature is illusory. This is known from a famous passage in the Babylonian Talmud, which is called Rabbi Akiba’s “Water Warning”, to whoever ascended to Pardes: “When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, do not say ‘Water, Water’, for it is said, ‘The speaker of lies shall not be established before my eyes.’” (*Hagigah* 14b.) The entrance into Pardes in the Talmud passage corresponds to the entrance of the sixth palace in the Hekhalot tradition and to a vision of the Merkabah. The same water episode appears in several passages of the Hekhalot literature, and all but one locate the water at the sixth palace and several threaten decapitation or mutilation by “iron axes” to those foolish enough to mistake the “stones of pure marble” for water (Deutsch 1999: 117). Thus *Hekhalot Zutarti* § 408–409 says:

The sixth palace appears as though someone splashes a hundred thousand thousands and myriads of waves of the sea onto him. But there is not really even one drop of water on him; rather it is the splendid atmosphere of the pure alabaster stones that are paved in the palace, which is a splendour more fearsome than water. [...]. Let it be according to this sign for (all) generations, so that no one err at the gate of the sixth palace and see the splendid atmosphere of the stones and ask and say, “Are they water?” lest he bring himself into danger. For even if he is unfit to see the King in His beauty, if he does not ask them about the splendid atmosphere of the pure alabaster stones that are paved in the palace, they will not annihilate him. Rather, they judge him inclining to his having merit, saying, “If he is unfit to see the King in His beauty, how did he enter the six palaces?” (Davila 2001: 177–178)

Mistaking the splendid atmosphere of precious stones for water at the end of the heavenly journey curiously resembles the situation in the Epic of Gilgameš where the final obstacle of the hero, the waters of death, were routinely crossed by the boatman Ur-šanabi with the help of the “Stone Ones” (*šūt abni*). Gilgameš smashes these Stone Ones with his axe and drops them into the river (X 106). What is the meaning of this episode? In the parallels from the Hekhalot literature, the one who mistakes the heavenly splendour of stones for water, will be punished with axes and

his crossing into the ultimate palace will be barred. Thus in *Hekhalot Zutarti* § 259 the ascendant, who asks at the gate of the sixth palace, “What is the nature of those waters?”, will be pursued by the guardians of the gate, who will stone him. Finally, “he does not move from there before they throw upon him thousands and thousands of iron axes” (Deutsch 1999: 117). Thus the stones-and-water episode both in the Mesopotamian epic and the Hekhalot texts serve as a trial for the protagonist. It seems that in the case of Gilgameš, the hero fails his trial just by destroying the Stone Ones.

It is clear that the Stone Ones in the Epic of Gilgameš were necessary for safe passage across the ocean and the waters of death. In the Hittite version they were Ur-šanabi’s crew, comprised of a pair of stone statues. There are many attempts at an explanation of what the Stone Ones in the epic are, but none of them is compelling (see George 2003: 501). My proposal of an explanation is based on the comparative evidence from Mandaean and Hekhalot sources. It can be understood from the Epic of Gilgameš that the Stone Ones were a body of magic instruments that “sealed the boat” (XI 102). It is probable that the Stone Ones made the surface of the waters of death crossable by petrifying it, thus they were doing the opposite of modern icebreakers. The use of the Stone Ones is similar to the kind of miracle attributed in the gospels to Jesus, who walked on the sea, and Marduk is also called in the Babylonian Creation Epic the “one who crossed vast Tiamat (= the sea) back and forth in his wrath” (VII 75). Tiamat is also called “Mother Hubur”, which links Marduk’s feat explicitly with the crossing the waters of death in the Epic of Gilgameš.

The same motif of solidifying the waters in order to cross them is found in the Latin version of *Vita Adae et Evae* (29: 1–3), where Michael “touched the waters which were round about Paradise, and they froze hard” (Dalley 1994: 253). In the Mandaean sources the soul is helped over the waters of death by “a ray of the great radiance (*ziwa*) of Life” or otherwise by “great beam of radiance”, who grasps the soul with the palm of his right hand and hands her over to the sons of light. This divine splendour surrounds the world and is personified as a divine being, the personified Ether, sometimes also called the source of life (Deutsch 1999: 119). According to Mandaean sources, the heavenly water is only a form of light, which is the counterpart of the illusion created by the gleam of precious stones in the Hekhalot literature. Thus, there is a remarkable agreement among Mesopotamian, Jewish and Mandaean traditions that the dangerous water encountered at the outmost fringes of the world during the otherworldly journey is crossable only by means of perceiving it as an emanation of a solid substance. Thus the ascending soul is helped in the Mandaean texts by the divine splendour, in the Hekhalot texts the ascendant must experience the water as solid substance and in the Epic of Gilgameš, the Stone Ones make the way through the water for Uta-napišti.



The dangerous waters that must be crossed at the last stage before the goal of the otherworldly journey are present in the various versions of the *Tale of Buluqiya*, some of which were incorporated into the collections of the Arabian Nights. That the story is a descendant of the Epic of Gilgameš via various versions of the *Alexander Romance* has been proposed by S. Dalley (1991, 1994). According to the *Tale of Buluqiya* version in al-Tha‘labī, the hero and his companion Affan come across a tree which voluntarily tells them it contains magic juice with which they can travel to their goal, the Isle of the Seven Seas. They cut it down, take the juice and rub it upon the soles of their feet, and with the help of the juice they are capable of walking on the surface of two seas (Dalley 1991: 7). The magic juice in a tree constitutes a parallel to the use of punting poles in order to cross the waters of death in the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgameš, which is the alternative measure to the use of the Stone Ones. In the versions of the *Arabian Nights*, the magic juice which enables the companions to travel across the seven seas is given to them either by the Queen of Serpents or by the Queen Yamlika, who reigns over the subterranean kingdom (Dalley 1991: 5–6). Sometimes a stone also is the guide of the hero. In the Ethiopic version of the *Alexander Romance*, the king of the Land of Darkness gives Alexander a precious stone, which was one of those brought out of Paradise by the father Adam, to show him the way. The stone points out the right road and leads him to the fountain of life (Budge 1889: CV).

That the versions of the *Tale of Buluqiya* are descendants of the Epic of Gilgameš was seriously questioned by A. George (2003: 65–68), who commented that in Dalley’s exposition “many contentious observations are made and taken as fact, so that the argument becomes less and less convincing” (George 2003: 67). George’s discussion with Dalley shows how differently the two understand the notion of *continuity*. A. George refers to Dalley’s discussions as “proposed cases of literary continuity” (2003: 69), and pessimistically concludes that “the epic that we know died with the cuneiform writing system” (2003: 70). In my opinion, A. George apparently overstates the importance of the fact that the Epic of Gilgameš was a literary creation, a masterpiece read and known only by the small circle of literati. But there is no problem for an assumption that various stories of Gilgameš were told and heard in ancient Mesopotamia as parts of popular folklore. Even at the literary level it is clearly discernible that several stories, which existed in Sumerian, were quite freely edited into the Standard Babylonian version. Accordingly, the tales of Gilgameš must have circulated orally in many, perhaps freely alternating, versions already in ancient Mesopotamia. The storytellers probably combined the popular motifs into different sets of entertaining stories, according to the expectations of their audiences. Variation, not stability of the text is the rule in folklore. The written form of the epic was only its canonized form, and was already a recension, a compilation consisting of a mass of stories and motifs about the king or hero searching for immortality. If one accepts the primarily oral character and

oral transmission of the story, the parallels in Jewish and Arabic sources cease to be disturbing as ‘imprecise’, and in this case one really searches in vain for “the wholesale adoption of the story into other languages” (George 2003: 69).

By assuming the oral transmission of the epic, most of A. George’s arguments against Dalley will dissolve. For example, George critically comments on Dalley’s derivation of *Buluqiya*’s name from the ancient pronunciation of the hero’s name as *Bilgameš*: “there is no evidence that the old pronunciation *Bilgameš* [...] survived into the first millennium” (2003: 66). How do we know how the name was actually pronounced by popular storytellers of Babylonia? George comments on Dalley’s comparison of the variant stories:

What the two narratives have in common is not so much plot, beyond the fact that both compositions involve legendary kings going on impossible quests, as what Dalley called ‘points of detail’. These details – the plant of rejuvenation, the death of the companion in danger, the magic realm of an immortal king beyond a cosmic mountain – cannot be denied. However, they are the stuff of fairy tales, the sorts of motifs that recur in many literatures. They may be distantly descended from the written Epic of *Gilgameš* but other sources are also possible. (George 2003: 67)

A. George’s discussion reveals his lack of experience in working with real folklore and in studying the types of widespread international fairy-tales. The different versions of many types of stories in international folklore may vary considerably, but still represent the same story. The argument that certain motifs “are the stuff of fairy tales” cannot be taken seriously. Do we know any other folktale, either from the Middle East or elsewhere, which contains exactly the same motives in one plot? This is not probable. The *Tale of Buluqiya* is certainly a *mélange* from different sources, but the ancient story of *Gilgameš* was certainly among them. According to the rules developed by the Finnish school of folklore research, its geographical-historical method tries to establish the origin of a folktale by studying the variants in folktales over time and from region to region.<sup>4</sup> Some contaminated forms may also have multiple origins. I would like to claim that from the point of view of the Finnish school of folklore, the parallels presented by Dalley are valid.

To me it seems that the variant versions in the Middle Eastern sources even help us to understand better some details in the written form of the Babylonian epic. Thus there is an episode in the Epic of *Gilgameš* where the hero loses his magic plant of rejuvenation to a snake during his bath in a pool. Only the Standard Babylonian version is preserved, where no logic or motivation is given for why *Gilgameš* descended to bathe in the pool. The whole story is told in only two lines: “*Gilgameš* found a pool whose water was cool, he went down into it to bathe in the water.” (XI 303–304, George 2003: 723) But why? The hero, who was able to endure so much during his previous epic sufferings, is all of a sudden grown sensitive to the warmth

<sup>4</sup> See the articles by Bausinger (1984: 342–348) and Röhrich (1987: 1012–1030) in the multi-voluminous *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* [EM, 1977–].

of the day? I think that the origin of this motif is to be sought in the variant versions of the story, where the hero is searching for the fountain of life, wherein to bathe. As a rule, somebody else bathes in the fountain in his stead in these stories. Thus in the Ethiopic narrative of the *Alexander Romance* the hero seeks the fountain of life in the land of Darkness:

Alexander had dried fish with him which he put into the water to see if it would live and swim, and as soon as the fish touched the water it came to life, and darted away and escaped. When Mātūn, that is el-Khiḍr (or Elijah) saw that the fish came to life he took off his clothes and bathed in the water of life, and dipped himself therein three times, saying, "In the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Ghost". The sixty thousand kings that live in that land contend with el-Khiḍr, who asks their permission for Alexander's army to go through the land because he is doing God's will. Alexander passes through the land, and comes to a place where the water was so clear that he thought it was the water of life. He saw there emeralds and jacinths and other precious stones and a bird with a ring in its nose with which he talked. A place near here he finds much gold, and he makes for himself a crown of it, in which he sets the stone which came from Paradise. (Budge 1889: CVI)

It seems clear to me that the author of the Gilgameš Epic used the motif of bathing in the fountain of life that was familiar from the oral sources of the epic in numerous variants, and used it in his own way. In the Babylonian epic the hero loses his magic plant of rejuvenation during his bath, while in some oral variant he may have obtained rejuvenation by bathing in a fountain. Thus the presence of a meaningless motif in one narrative becomes understandable in the light of the other.

Finally, the travel of the soul to the hereafter in Yezidi oral traditions has already been compared to Gilgameš's travel to Uta-napišti in the Babylonian Epic by Manfred Dietrich (1974: 158–161). The Yezidi account runs as follows:

Es heisst nämlich, dass die Seele auf ihrer Reise nach dem Tode zunächst an einen Wald kommt, vor dem ein „grimmiger Löwe“ (oder ein Engel) wacht, der die Sünder zerreisst und verschlingt, die Tugendhafter aber „sogleich den Himmel in das Paradies trägt“. Jene Seele indessen, deren Verdienste sich mit ihren Verfehlungen die Waage halten, lässt er durch, und sie empfangen von ihm (bzw. dem Engel) eine Axt, um sich damit einen Weg durch den Wald zu bahnen. An dessen Ende gelangen sie dann an eine „lange äusserst schmale Brücke“, unter der ein Meer von Flammen lodert. Die Besseren kommen gut hinüber, die Schlechteren stürzen ab und verbrennen. Aber damit noch nicht genug: hinter der Brücke lauert eine „grosse furchtbare Schlange“, welche die Ankömmlinge ohne Ausnahme verschluckt und je nach der Schwere ihrer Vergehen für Kürzere oder längere Zeit bei sich behält, bis endlich ein Engel erscheint und ihr befiehlt, „die Seele wieder von sich zu geben“. Widrigenfalls macht er von seinem Stocke Gebrauch. „Kohlschwarz kommt die Seele aus dem Leibe der Schlange heraus. Der Engel führt sie auf einen Berg, auf welchem eine Quelle ist. Dort muss sie sich waschen, wird weiss wie Schnee und erhält ein Kamm, sich zu kämmen, sowie reine Kleider. So geschmückt kommt

sie in den Himmel, wo die Piran, ‚die Alten‘, ihr Früchte entgegenbringen“.  
(Müller 1967: 201)<sup>5</sup>

According to Dietrich, the common motifs in the Yezidi narrative and the Gilgameš Epic are the following: 1. The hero meets lions during his initial steps on the otherworldly journey as well as an angel or a demon, the scorpion-man. 2. This is followed by the walk through the darkness zone that corresponds to the thick forest in the Yezidi narrative. 3. The sea of fire, which the soul crosses on a very narrow bridge, is comparable to Gilgameš’s arrival at the seashore and the jewel-garden according to Dietrich (1974: 161), but the presence of the sea at the end of the world is also important. 4. Gilgameš crosses over the waters of death, while the soul in the Yezidi narrative has to go through the snake. The soul remains inside the snake for a longer or a shorter period according to its merits. This has a parallel in Mandaean traditions also, where the soul is weighed just before the “waters of death” at the end of the world. 5. Gilgameš finally reaches to Uta-napišti, and the soul heaven in the Yezidi narrative. After her delivery from the snake the soul is brought to a mountain, where she bathes and combs herself and receives new clean clothes for entering heaven. This is also paralleled by a section in the Gilgameš Epic XI 247–272, where Uta-napišti orders Ur-šanabi to bring Gilgameš into the washtub to wash his hair and body, and to clothe him with new, royal dress for his return journey to Uruk.

At the beginning of this paper I studied an esoteric parallel in the Mesopotamian and Jewish mystical traditions. In the rest of it I argued for treating the Babylonian Epic of Gilgameš as a part of folklore. I am convinced that many traditional stories and beliefs have both esoteric and exoteric dimensions and both sides can be orally transmitted into another culture.

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<sup>5</sup> Müller’s account is based on two sources: Petermann 1860–1861: 334–335 (Vol. II), and Klip-pel 1942: 221. For a general background, see Gündüz 2004: 109–126.