10-1-1994

Stepanie Dalley. *Myths from Mesopotamia*

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ANCIENT MYTHS OF CURRENT RELEVANCE


"[F]rom the first, Greece’s face was turned towards the sun. Greece is part of Asia; Greek literature is a Near Eastern literature." M.L. West, Hesiod, <em>Theogony</em> (edition and commentary). Oxford, 1966. Pp. 20-21 (introduction).

Who am I? (1) a classicist whose specialty once was (20 years ago) Geometric Greece and the Homeric poems, to which poems like “Gilgamesh” are parallel. I have kept up fairly well with new material as it is published, but this is a fast-moving field.

(2) a teacher in a “metropolitan” university where there are relatively few students in traditional liberal arts majors but which does have a General Education core (including required courses in “Western World” and in the non-Western area too) that would be more characteristic of a liberal arts college. Besides Classics courses I teach two courses in this core: Western World: Ancient and Medieval Eras (the first of a three-quarter sequence required of all students) and Great Books: Literature (one of a set of three courses from which all students must choose).

Why am I interested in Stephanie Dalley’s <em>Myths from Mesopotamia</em> (she has selected these stories, translated them, and provided notes)?

From the perspective of Aegean archaeology as I knew it well 25-30 years ago I have always seen the Greek world as part of an Eastern Mediterranean <em>koine</em>, and M.L. West’s statement about Greek literature with which I start seemed to me perfectly natural although I did not know the Near Eastern literature in detail. The recent Black Athena controversy which claims that “classicists” have “ignored” the Greek debt to Egypt and the Near East has struck me as bizarre and has encouraged me to look at this material again.

I am uncomfortable dealing with material I cannot control in the original languages, and I am sure that what I have to say will strike a professional Assyriologist the way I bristle, for example, when a non-classicist begins a presentation on Sophocles’ <em>Oedipus Rex</em> (it should be Tyrannos) with an exposition of Aristotle’s Poetics. Aristotle is 4th century B.C., Sophocles is 5th century and certainly never read or cared about Aristotle! The O.T. isn’t a typical Greek tragedy either. So let me humbly apologize at the outset.

Dalley’s translations are made from Akkadian originals incorporating evidence from scholarship up to 1988 for the 10 myths she selects; these vary in length from very short — the two-page “Theogony of Dunnu” — to fairly long — the famous “Gilgamesh,” in the Standard Version and the Old Babylonian Version, about 100 pages altogether. I am sure that she has been careful to reflect the state of the texts. Witness the following from pp. 142-143, Tablet III of the Old Babylonian Version of “Gilgamesh,” column iii (about 4 lines missing):
Smiting Huwawa [ ]
[ ] shall I slay
And [ ] shall I destroy!
[I shall cut down] pines
[ ] the forest.

The dust jacket designer wisely picked for the back a passage from column iv of this Table (p. 144) with no gaps and only one bracket and question mark (omitted on this jacket):

Gilgamesh made his voice heard
And spoke to [Enkidu],
‘Who can go up to heaven, my friend?
Only the gods dwell (?) with Shamash forever.
Mankind can number his days.
Whatever he may achieve, it is only wind.
Do you fear death on this occasion?
Where is the strength of your heroic nature?
Let me go in front of you,
And your voice call out: “Go close, don’t be afraid!”
If I should fall, I shall have won fame.
People will say, “Gilgamesh grappled in combat
With ferocious Huwawa.”

This passage too shows why we are in: the two friends (Thomas van Nortwick’s “Second Self”)—Somewhere I Have Never Travelled: The Second Self and the Hero’s Journey in Ancient Epic, (Oxford 1992), the nature of heroism and the importance of fame, the recognition of the human condition. These are “human interest” themes, and there are many echoes in the Homeric poems and in Virgil.

But who is Dalley’s audience? Is it students? The price of the book in hardback ($59.00) would keep it from being assigned as a text, but Oxford has now issued it as an inexpensive paperback (under $10.00). I believe that I would not dare assign it for one of my classes, even an advanced one in Ancient Epic, and it is not just the lacunose pages in the translations that give me pause.

Is it classicists, ancient historians, literary critics? I am moderately well informed about the general subject matter, and I had to do a great deal of work to figure out what is going on. Dalley’s introduction and bibliography do not send the reader to general works that would help get one up to speed; there is also no discussion of other translations so that one can assess how trustworthy they are. I am put off balance by seeing in the Select Bibliography things like Lattimore’s translation of the works of Hesiod (not just the Theogony as she lists it) and not M.L. West’s edition with commentary of the Theogony on the one hand (my point is that the classics material is very general), but on the other hand she gives only specialized articles on the material she is translating. One has to know already the Sumerian background, for instance: it is never really explained, and we get tantalizing statements dropped on us (here from the section of introduction to “Gilgamesh” called “Early Sumerian Stories for Uruk”) like:

“Until quite recently, it was supposed that Sumerian was the
indigenous, spoken language of Ur and Uruk at that time [when these stories were written], but we now think that this may not have been the case; it has even been suggested that Gilgamesh himself would have spoken in Akkadian, not Sumerian.” (p. 42)

I can’t trace in the footnotes or bibliography where to go to find out more about this. At any rate, I ended up reading Dalley’s book with the help of the relevant discussions in Thorkild Jacobsen’s Treasures of Darkness (Yale 1976), a book which she does not include in her bibliography. Presumably it is out of date and fashion: I noted in the helpful Glossary (thank goodness for it and for the chronological chart, the map of Fig. 1 and the monster drawings of Fig. 2) in the entry under Enlil (p. 321) that the “Old interpretation of his name as ‘Lord wind/air’ is disputed”; that, I suppose, is a reference to Jacobsen’s view, Treasures, pp. 98-104.

Maureen G. Kovacs, The Epic of Gilgamesh (Stanford 1989) is also translated from the originals and also indicates gaps and problems, but in a more readable way. She gives far more help to the reader in a splendid introduction with illustrations and map, continuity explanations, and bibliography. Another inexpensive “translation” or rather “verse rendition” by Danny P. Jackson (Bolechazy-Carducci 1992) might appeal more to students although he gives no sense of what versions (translations) he is using: let me cite what he does with the passage on Dalley’s dust jacket (which comes from the Old Babylonian Version, not the Standard):

... Only gods live forever with Shamash, my friend; for even our longest days are numbered. Why worry over being like dust in the wind? Leap up for this great threat. Fear not. Even if I were to fail and fall in combat, all future clans would say I did the job. (pp. 21-22)

Jackson’s version is accompanied by a map, excellent ancient illustrations with captions by Robert D. Biggs, and striking modern illustrations by Thorn Kapheim commissioned by the publisher.

But there are also significant advantages to Dalley’s book. It includes many more stories: “Atrahasis,” “Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld,” “Nergal and Ereshkigal” in two versions, “Adapa,” “Etana,” “Anzu” in two versions, “Epic of Creation,” “Theogony of Dunnu,” and “Erra and Ishum.” She obviously controls the material as a scholar. She also sees continuity in Near Eastern civilization from the earliest times to the present and includes in her bibliography her forthcoming book on Gilgamesh and the Arabian Nights. Hints of this perspective appear constantly throughout the commentary. One of the most interesting comments comes at the end of the introduction to “Gilgamesh” (pp. 48-49) where she has examined “points of contact between stories of Gilgamesh, of Odysseus, and of Sinbad and Buluqiya in the Arabian Nights.” She points out that desert people who travel in trading caravans in the Near East take along the “musician-poet” and that ships’ captains do also for “the long voyage from Basra to India, Ceylon, and Indonesia.” The “different versions” of a story display “an endless variety due to the inventive imagination and embroidery of three or four millennia’s worth of travelling raconteurs who were highly prized professionals.” This is certainly a longue durée!
From “Atrahasis” and “Epic of Creation” I gather that the Mesopotamians must have had a difficult time with noisy neighbors who kept them from sleeping: the gods get mad at noisy humans in the first example and at overexuberant younger gods in the second. The introduction to “Atrahasis” (= extra-wise) gives us a whole parade of possible linguistic parallels: Prometheus, Noah, Ulysses, an Islamic sage Al-khîdîr who is buried in the Golan Heights! The “Descent of Ishtar” is a lot more fun in the Sumerian version where Inanna ends up, temporarily anyway, in the Underworld as a moldy green piece of meat; see Jacobsen, pp. 55-63, for this. “Adapa” is one of the seven sages before the flood who brought the arts of civilization to humans; like Gilgamesh, he loses the chance for immortality. The sages were banished from earth to the Apsu (fresh water) according to “Erra and Ishum” I (p. 291, n. 19), not II as she says on p. 182 (this is the only reference I caught that was not quite right); the sages end up as a kind of fish, “possibly carp, a fish still kept as a holy duty in the precincts of Near Eastern mosques and monasteries” (also p. 182).

The latest piece in the collection, “Erra and Ishum,” is the result of a dream its scribe had; his family is first attested about 765 B.C. and “associated with high temple office in both Babylon and Urk” (p. 284). The colophon by Assurbanipal reminds me of the Swann and Flanders song about “Greensleeves” and Henry VIII — “and the royalties go to royalty”:

“Fifth tablet, series ‘Erra’.

I, Assurbanipal, great king, mighty king, king of the world, king of Assyria,

Wrote, checked, and collated this tablet in the company of scholars

In accordance with clay tablets and wooden writing boards, exemplars from Assyria, Sumer, and Akkad,

And put it in my palace for royal reading.

Whoever erases my written name and writes his own name,

May Nabû, the scribe of all, erase his name.” (p. 312)

There are several points to be made in connection with this last selection. The first involves colophons. Dalley tells us in a footnote at the end of her first selection (“Atrahasis”) when she prints a colophon for its third tablet which gives the poem’s title, number of lines for the third tablet, the total of lines for the three tablets, the scribe’s name, the month, the king (p. 35) that she selects colophons “arbitrarily . . . to illustrate the kinds of information which they can provide” (p. 38, n. 47).

“Atrahasis” is the earliest text in her collection; it is an Old Babylonian Version of about 1700 B.C. It would be helpful (again this is a question of audience) if she had defined colophon. Everyone who tries to use Dalley had better first be familiar with C.B.F. Walker’s short book on Cuneiform in the “Reading the Past” Series (California 1987):

The word colophon (taken from the Greek and meaning ‘summit’) describes the inscription formerly placed at the end of a book, containing the title, the printer’s name, date and place of printing, etc. Nowadays books have title pages instead of colophons, but the term is regularly used by
Assyriologists to describe the information which scribes wrote at the end of tablets. There are three normal constituents to a colophon on a cuneiform tablet, the name of the scribe, the date, and the name of the town in which the tablet was written. Not all tablets have colophons ... (pp. 36-37)

The problem of keeping the relative dates in mind for these texts is also highlighted by this last selection. I know the trouble I have explaining to my students the relative date of the Rosetta Stone: Hellenistic (196 B.C.) — they think: it's Egyptian, isn't it, so it must be as old as the pyramids! Dalley herself in the prologue to a book aimed at the same audience I wish she had kept in mind for Myths from Mesopotamia is careful to shape the correct perspective:

“If we have heard the name of Hammurabi, King of Babylon, who wrote a code of laws, we tend to associate it with ... other familiar names, and we may be surprised that the span of time between Nebuchadnezzar and Hammurabi is as great as that which divides us from Alfred the Great. Nor did the great lawgiver live at the dawn of Mesopotamian civilization, but roughly halfway through it. To Hammurabi, the heroic tales of Gilgamesh were already of great antiquity.” Stephanie Dalley, Mari and Karana: Two Old Babylonian Cities (Longman 1984), p. xv.

The last point involves the character of Erra in this selection: he apparently equals Nergal, the god of plague, death, and other nasty things, and he apparently likes to destroy people and things just for the fun of it (certain Middle Eastern rulers of recent times come to mind), but he can be placated by his smooth-talking “prime minister” Ishum. Here again we have the apparent Mesopotamian problem of getting enough sleep (was that already a device for torturing enemies?): “Yet Erra himself felt as weak as a man short of sleep” (p. 285) from the run-up to his homicidal outbursts. Here is part of Ishum’s description of what Erra has done:

“O warrior Erra, you have put the just to death,
You have put the unjust to death.
You have put to death the man who sinned against you.
You have put to death the man who did not sin against you.”
(p. 307)

Then here is part of what Erra says to the gods after a rampage:

“Keep quiet, all of you, and learn what I have to say!
What if I did intend the harm of the wrong I have just done?
What I am enraged, I devastate people.”
(p. 309)

Then eventually Ishum says:

“Warrior, be still and listen to my words!
What if you were to rest now, and we would serve you?
We all know that nobody can stand up to you in your day of wrath!”

And “Erra heard him and his face brightened” (p. 310), and the scribe eventually
summarizes the song’s subject as

“How Erra became angry and set his face towards overwhelming countries and destroying their people,
But Ishum his counsellor placated him so that he left a remnant!” (p. 311)

I think Assurbanipal’s interest in this text is highly significant, and I suspect that Dick Cheney and Warren Christopher would learn more about Iraq from studying it carefully than they have evidently learned up to now (January 17-18, 1993).

Cynthia King