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## THE ASSYRIAN TREE OF LIFE: TRACING THE ORIGINS OF JEWISH MONOTHEISM AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY\*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

A stylized tree with obvious religious significance already occurs as an art motif in fourth-millennium Mesopotamia, and, by the second millennium B.C., it is found everywhere within the orbit of the ancient Near Eastern oikumene, including Egypt, Greece, and the Indus civilization.<sup>1</sup> The meaning of the motif is not clear,<sup>2</sup> but its overall composition strikingly recalls the Tree of Life of later Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist art.<sup>3</sup> The question of whether the concept of the Tree of Life actually existed in ancient Mesopotamia has been debated, however,<sup>4</sup> and thus many scholars today prefer the more neutral term “sacred tree” when referring to the Mesopotamian Tree.<sup>5</sup>

\* The substance of this paper was presented at the XXXIX Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in Heidelberg, 8 July 1992. The present version has benefited from oral comments received later from T. Abusch, Farouk al-Rawi, J. C. Greenfield, W. G. Lambert, J. Reade, M. Weinfeld, and D. Weisberg; the responsibility for all the interpretations and errors remains, however, entirely mine. I apologize for the massive footnote apparatus, which was unavoidable in order to provide the necessary documentation and background information; those who find it disturbing are advised to skip the notes and to read the text first. Most abbreviations are those of the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* and R. Borger's *Handbuch der Keilschriftliteratur* (Berlin and New York, 1975).

<sup>1</sup> For a general survey of the distribution of the motif see the typological study of H. York, “Heiliger Baum,” in *RIA*, vol. 4, pp. 269–80, with the bibliography of earlier studies, *ibid.*, pp. 280 ff.; see also C. Kepinski, *L'Arbre stylisé en Asie occidentale au 2<sup>e</sup> millénaire avant J.-C.* (Paris, 1982). The Harappan forms of the Tree, attested in pottery, glyptic, and script since 2400 B.C., display Proto-Elamite and Akkadian influence. The earliest Egyptian examples date from the sixteenth century and reveal an affinity with contemporary Babylonian forms (see Kepinski,

*L'Arbre stylisé*, vol. 3, nos. 924–36); they appear to represent an import from the Levant connected with the Hyksos invasion and Egypt's expansion under Tuthmosis I, as also indicated by the Osiris myth explicitly associating the Tree with the city of Byblos. The earliest Greek examples (*ibid.*, nos. 891–94), from the fifteenth century, are even more pronouncedly Babylonian.

<sup>2</sup> See n. 26 below.

<sup>3</sup> For examples, see Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life: Image for the Cosmos* (London, 1978), *passim* (for example, pl. 46, The Great Cross of the Lateran, early Christian, with confronted animals; pl. 49, Christ on the Tree of Life, by Pacino da Bonaguido, early fourteenth century; pl. 47, Tree of Life with confronted centaurs, Saracen Mosaic at Palermo, twelfth century; pl. 52, Menorah as Tree of Life, Hebrew Bible, Perpignan, 1299; pl. 19, Tree of Life and Knowledge flanked by two bulls, India, Vijayanagar period, 1336–1546). See also H. Schmökel, “Ziegen am Lebensbaum,” *AfO* 18 (1957–58): 373 ff.

<sup>4</sup> See most recently Å. Sjöberg, “Eve and the Chameleon,” in W. Boyd Barrick and John R. Spencer, eds., *In the Shelter of Elyon: Essays on Ancient Palestinian Life and Literature in Honor of G. W. Ahlström*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 31 (Sheffield, 1984), pp. 219 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. H. Danthine, *Le Palmier-dattier et les arbres sacrés dans l'iconographie de l'Asie occidentale ancienne* (Paris, 1937), p. 212; J. Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture* (London, 1983), p. 27.

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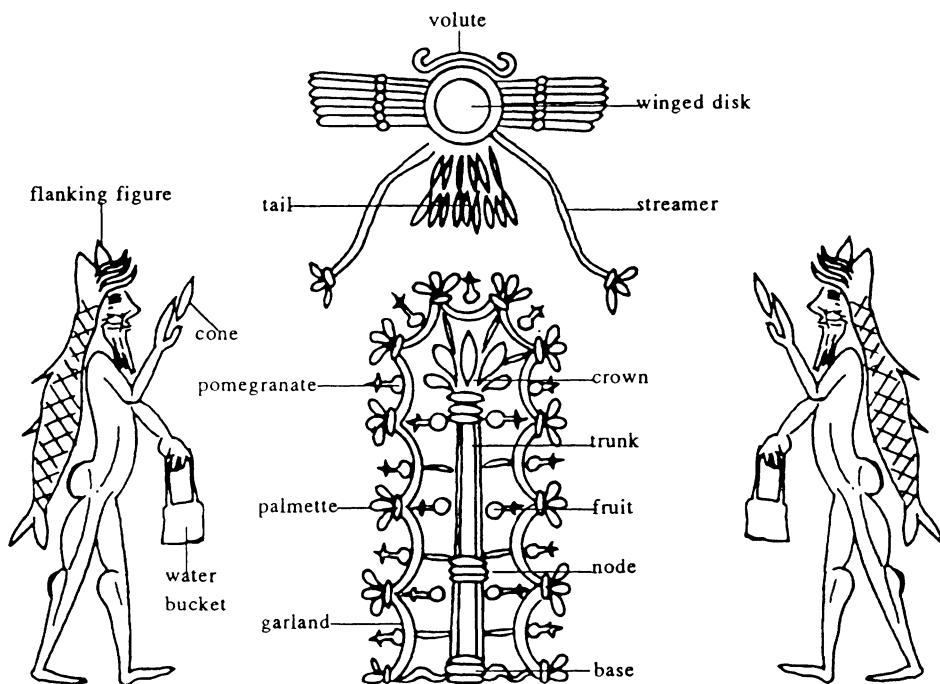


FIG. 1.—Structural elements of the Assyrian Tree Motif

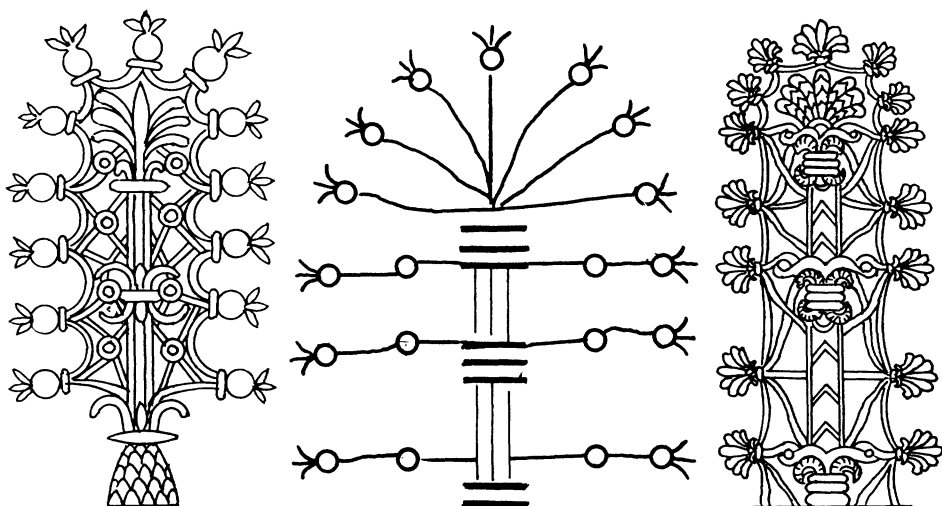


FIG. 2.—Triadic configurations of Nodes, Volutes, and Circles

About the middle of the second millennium, a new development in the iconography of the Tree becomes noticeable leading to the emergence of the so-called Late Assyrian Tree under Tukulti-Ninurta I.<sup>6</sup> With the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, this form of the Tree spreads throughout the entire Near East<sup>7</sup> and continues to be seen down to the end of the first millennium.<sup>8</sup> Its importance for imperial ideology is borne out by its appearance on royal garments<sup>9</sup> and jewelry,<sup>10</sup> official seals,<sup>11</sup> and the wall paintings<sup>12</sup> and sculptures of royal palaces, as in the throneroom of Ashurnasirpal II in Calah, where it is the central motif.<sup>13</sup>

The hundreds of available specimens of the Late Assyrian Tree exhibit a great deal of individual variation (see Appendix A, pp. 200–201 below) reflecting the fact that the motif and most of its iconography were inherited from earlier periods.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless,

<sup>6</sup> This form of the Tree is principally characterized by the “garland” of cones, pomegranates, or palmettes surrounding its crown and/or trunk. Its formal development through the Middle Assyrian period can be traced from dated seal impressions and datable seals; see the studies of Moortgat and Beran in ZA 47 (1941), 48 (1944), and 52 (1957). The earliest examples which can be dated with certainty are a seal impression in a text (KAJ 144) dated in the eponymy of Tukulti-Ninurta (1243 B.C.; for the impression, see ZA 47, p. 77), two ivories from this king’s palace at Assur (Kepinski, *L’Arbre stylisé*, vol. 3, nos. 414 f.), and the wall paintings of Kar Tukulti-Ninurta (*ibid.*, nos. 448 f.; see W. Andrae, *Farbige Keramik aus Assur* [Berlin, 1923], pls. 2 f.). An unscribed seal of unknown provenance (*Collection de Clercq*, 342bis) containing a precursor of the Assyrian Tree is usually dated to the late fourteenth century on stylistic grounds (see Beran, ZA 52, p. 160, fig. 31); note also the seal impression in KAJ 247 (*ibid.*, fig. 30, from a fourteenth-century archive).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Danthine, *Palmier-dattier*, figs. 373 (Cyprus), 472 (Byblos), 487 (Nerab near Aleppo), 499 (Susa), 802 (Gezer), 927 (Naukratis), 930 (Egypt); F. Hančar, “Das urartäische Lebensbaummotiv,” *Iranica Antiqua* 6 (1966): pl. 22:1 (Adilcevaz, north of Lake Van).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Danthine, *Palmier-dattier*, figs. 807 (Neo-Babylonian), 188, 459, 466, 473, 496 (Achaemenid), 186 (Parthian), 302 (Sasanian).

<sup>9</sup> See A. H. Layard, *Monuments of Nineveh* (London, 1849), pls. 5 and 6b (garment of Ashurnasirpal II); see also J. V. Canby, “Decorated Garments in Ashurnasirpal’s Sculpture,” *Iraq* 33 [1971]: 31 ff., pls. XVIII f.); E. Strommenger and M. Hirmer, *The Art of Mesopotamia* (London, 1964), pls. 251 and 254; see also SAA 7 pl. 27 (garment of Assurbanipal). Note also the Assyrianizing trees in the garments of Marduk-nadin-ahhe (1099–1082) and Nabû-mukin-apli (978–943), *BBS*, pls. 54 and 74 (cf. Danthine, *Palmier-dattier*, figs. 417, 462, and 511).

<sup>10</sup> For example, the “Nimrud jewel” found in the grave of a princess (M. E. L. Mallowan, *Nimrud and*

*Its Remains*, vol. 1 [London, 1966], fig. 58) and the ivory handle of a fly whisk from the Northwest Palace at Nimrud (*ibid.*, fig. 85).

<sup>11</sup> For example, the seal of Minu-epuš-ana-ili, the chief of granaries (D. Collon, *First Impressions* [London, 1988], fig. 345).

<sup>12</sup> Note, in addition to the wall paintings of Kar Tukulti-Ninurta (see n. 6 above), the glazed-brick panel of Shalmaneser III from Nimrud restored by Reade, “A Glazed-Brick Panel from Nimrud,” *Iraq* 25 (1963): 38–47 and pl. 9 (also Mallowan, *Nimrud*, vol. 2, fig. 373; color photograph in W. Orthmann, *Der alte Orient*, Propyläen Kunstgeschichte, vol. 18 [Frankfurt, 1988], pl. 19).

<sup>13</sup> See J. Meuszyński, *Die Rekonstruktion der Reliefdarstellungen und ihrer Anordnung im Nordwestpalast von Kalhu (Nimrud)*, Baghdader Forschungen 2 (Mainz am Rhein, 1981), and Irene J. Winter, “The Program of the Throneroom of Ashurnasirpal II,” in Prudence O. Harper and Holly Pittman, eds., *Essays on Near Eastern Art and Archaeology in Honor of Charles Kyrle Wilkinson* (New York, 1983), pp. 15–32. For the Tree of Sargon II’s palace at Khorsabad, see P. E. Botta and E. Flandin, *Monument de Ninive* (Paris, 1849–50), vol. 1, pl. 80, and vol. 2, pls. 116, 119, 139, and 144.

<sup>14</sup> The pre-Assyrian Tree already was a complex motif subject to considerable detail variation in its component elements; by mixing the traditional elements with Assyrian innovations, one could, in principle, produce an unlimited number of tree variants. Nevertheless, considering the predominantly schematic nature of most Neo-Assyrian representations, the extent of attested variation is surprising. As observed by Reade, *Iraq* 27 (1965): 126 f., “so far as can be ascertained, no two full-size trees [in the palace of Ashurnasirpal II] were identical”; the same applies to the hundreds of examples on seals, disregarding obviously mass-produced items. Thus it does seem that there was a conscious effort to make every representation of the Tree look different. See also n. 63 below.

its characteristic features<sup>15</sup> stand out even in the crudest examples and make it generally easy to distinguish it from its predecessors. Essentially,<sup>16</sup> it consists of a trunk<sup>17</sup> with a palmette crown<sup>18</sup> standing on the stone base<sup>19</sup> and surrounded by a network of horizontal or intersecting lines<sup>20</sup> fringed with palmettes, pinecones, or pomegranates (fig. 1).<sup>21</sup> In more elaborate renditions, the trunk regularly has joints or nodes at its top, middle, and base<sup>22</sup> and a corresponding number of small circles to the right and left of the trunk (fig. 2).<sup>23</sup> Antithetically posed animal, human, or supernatural figures usually flank the

<sup>15</sup> Apart from the surrounding network already referred to in n. 6 (see further n. 20 below), these include the winged disk hovering above the Tree (see n. 25) and significant changes in the inventory of the flanking figures (n. 24) and in the iconography of the winged disk and the trunk (n. 22). The systematic introduction of these features is clearly not a matter of style but, rather, indicates a profound change in the symbolism of the Tree (see also n. 66 below).

<sup>16</sup> In view of the great number of variants, it is impossible to give a universally valid, compact description of the Tree; the one given here is an abstraction combining the most typical features of the Neo-Assyrian representations of the Tree.

<sup>17</sup> In elaborate renderings, the trunk is occasionally divided by vertical striae into three parallel columns. This tripartite trunk may correspond to the three-stemmed tree of some representations (see Appendix A).

<sup>18</sup> Occasionally the palmette crown can take the form of a flower, a disk, or a wheel; see Appendix A, and cf. fig. 6 with n. 63 on the significance of these variants.

<sup>19</sup> The base is usually represented as a mountain, rock, or stone block. It can also be omitted altogether, but its place is then taken by the lowermost joint of the trunk. On the symbolic meaning of the base (material world, netherworld), see pp. 180, 187 with n. 98, 192–93, and 198 below.

<sup>20</sup> The number, direction, patterning, and rendition of the lines can vary considerably. In the reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II, they resemble streams of water, while in the reliefs of Sargon II and contemporary seals they resemble interlacing cords in a net; elsewhere, they recall rungs in a ladder (see n. 98). In each case, they effectively reduce the tree to an integral part of a larger whole. On the symbolism of the line network, see n. 55 below.

<sup>21</sup> Hitherto commonly taken as fertility symbols (cf. *RIA*, vol. 3, p. 626), but as Farouk al-Rawi informs me (oral communication), in Iraq pinecones and pomegranates are traditionally symbols of *unity*. In Christian symbolism, the pomegranate represents “multiplicity in unity as the Church, with the seeds as its many members” and, secondarily, “regeneration and resurrection” (J. Baldock, *The Elements of Christian Symbolism* [London, 1990], p. 108); see also A. de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*

(Amsterdam, 1974), p. 371 (“unity in multiplicity; concord; fertility-growth and resurrection”). The fringe would thus have served to stress the underlying unity of the design enclosed by it. It may, however, have had other connotations as well. This is suggested by the fact that the position of the cones and pomegranates in the fringe could be taken by palmettes, a universal symbol of regeneration, self-renewal, and victory over death (see Baldock, *Elements*, p. 105, and de Vries, *Dictionary*, pp. 356 f.). Note that both pomegranate and pinecone carry similar symbolic meanings; see above and, for the latter, de Vries, *Dictionary*, p. 367, s.v. pine (“immortality, longevity; victory”).

<sup>22</sup> The standard number of nodes is three per trunk. They are usually depicted as three superimposed horizontal bands holding together the three-columned trunk (see n. 17 above); they could be reduced to mere lines, and, in some variants, the entire trunk could consist of three superimposed nodes only. In trees with an elaborate crown and base the top and bottom nodes could be omitted as superfluous, while the middle node was more consistently retained. For the four-noded trunk occurring as a variant of the standard three-noded trunk in the reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II, see n. 52 and pp. 188–89 below; note that trees flanked by the king never have four nodes and that the extra node may lack the customary volutes (see, for example, Paley, *King of the World*, p. 96, fig. 12b, second node from top).

<sup>23</sup> In the sculptures of Ashurnasirpal II, these circles are embedded in the loops of the volutes emerging from the nodes and thus are clearly associated with the latter in a triadic arrangement. There are normally two circles per node, one on each side of the tree (see J. Stearns, *Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II*, AfO Beiheft 15 [Graz, 1961], pls. 40, 69, 70, 73, 78, 81, and 84 [three nodes, six circles]; pls. 11, 17, 18, 26, 31, 34, 75, and 80 [four nodes, eight circles]). In some representations, additional volute pairs appear in the empty spaces between the nodes (*ibid.*, pls. 7, 9, 13, 28, 33, 57, 59, and 65, and see also fig. 2). These additional elements must not be confused with the volutes emerging from the nodes; note the different vertical alignment of their loops in Stearns, *Reliefs*, pls. 13 and 59. On the meaning of the circles and volutes, see n. 25 below.

tree,<sup>24</sup> while a winged disk hovers over the whole.<sup>25</sup> Even the most schematic representations are executed with meticulous attention to overall symmetry and axial balance.

## II. THE TREE: ITS SYMBOLISM AND CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE

### THE BASIC SYMBOLISM OF THE TREE

What did this Tree stand for, and why was it chosen as an imperial symbol? There is considerable literature on this question, but despite the most painstaking analyses of the iconographic evidence, on the whole, little has been explained.<sup>26</sup> This is largely due to the almost total lack of relevant textual evidence. The symbolism of the Tree is not discussed in cuneiform sources, and the few references to sacred trees or plants in Mesopotamian literature have proved too vague or obscure to be productive.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The flanking animals consist of goats, ibexes, gazelles, and stags, all associated with sexual potency and animal instincts, but also with regeneration (the ibex specifically with Ea, the god of Wisdom and Life). While extremely common in earlier periods, they are rare in Late Assyrian representations, where their place is largely taken by various kinds of protective genies and/or the king, the latter often portrayed in a mirror image on both sides of the Tree (on private seals, the royal figure could be replaced by that of the private individual). The genies, mostly depicted in the act of sprinkling the king and/or the Tree with holy water, largely consist of mythical sages (*apkallu*) serving the god Ea (see F. A. M. Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits* [Groningen, 1992], especially pp. 65 ff.). Neither the mirror-imaged king nor the mythical sages are attested as flanking figures before the emergence of the Lake Assyrian Tree, so they certainly represent genuine Assyrian innovations.

<sup>25</sup> The association of disk and tree already occurs in Mitannian art, but the Assyrian representations differ significantly from their Mitannian counterparts both regarding the position of the disk and its iconography; see W. G. Lambert, "Trees, Snakes and Gods in Ancient Syria and Anatolia," *BSOAS* 48 (1985): 438 f. Iconographical innovations not found in the Mitannian disk include streamers hanging from the disk, often extended to enclose the tree; a feathered tail; a god riding in the disk; and a volute on its top, resembling those emerging from the nodes of the trunk (see Appendix B pp. 201–2 below). The streamers may terminate in forked lightning bolts, circles, or palmettes. The god in the disk regularly raises his right hand in benediction and may hold a bow in his left hand; in some representations, he is accompanied by two smaller gods riding on the wings of the disk. As pointed out by G. Contenau, "Note d'iconographie religieuse assyrienne," *RA* 37 (1940–41): 160, the blessing gesture recalls the symbolic representation of God the Father in

early Christian iconography; see also de Vries, *Dictionary*, p. 235; Baldock, *Elements* p. 98; and n. 93 below.

It should be noted that the triad of gods and the volute on top of the disk are in complementary distribution: whenever the former appears, the latter is lacking. Hence the volute with its loops seems to be an icon for the gods accompanying the central figure. On some seals, the place of the accompanying gods is taken by two juxtaposed circles; on others, the whole trinity, including the central god, is replaced by three juxtaposed circles (see Appendix B, pp. 201–2 below). This strongly suggests that the triadic arrangements of circles, volutes, and nodes on the trunk (see n. 23 above) also stand for trinities of gods.

<sup>26</sup> Revealingly, apodictic statements about the meaning of the Tree are carefully avoided in recent studies, though there appears to be a general consensus among experts that it was related to fertility. Cf. Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture*, p. 27: "Its exact meaning escapes us, but it could be taken as representing in some way the fertility of the earth, more especially the land of Ashur"; similarly York, *RIA*, vol. 4, p. 279; Paley, *King of the World*, pp. 234 f.; H. W. F. Saggs, *The Might That Was Assyria* (London, 1984), pp. 234 f.; Lambert, "Trees, Snakes and Gods," p. 438. Stearns (*Reliefs*, p. 71) suggests that "the meaning of the tree was as changed as its form and that its precise intent . . . had become, like other mystic symbols of all ages, obscured under the accumulation of religious experience." M. Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia* (Oxford, 1990), p. 226, tersely states "the significance of the motif is not clear." Kepinski's voluminous study of second-millennium iconography of the Tree, *L'Arbre stylisé*, does not deal with the meaning of the motif.

<sup>27</sup> A case in point is G. Widengren's important study *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion* (Uppsala, 1951). Widengren's conclusions have not been accepted by Assyriologists



FIG. 3.—Slab B-23 of the throneroom of Ashurnasirpal II. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum



FIG. 4.—The King impersonating the Tree. After Meuszyński, *Rekonstruktion*, pl. 6

Two fundamentally important points have nevertheless been established concerning the function of the Tree in the throneroom of Ashurnasirpal's palace in Calah. Firstly, Irene Winter has convincingly demonstrated that the famous relief showing the king flanking the Tree under the winged disk (Slab B-23, fig. 3) corresponds to the epithet "vice-regent of Aššur" in the accompanying inscription.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, the Tree here represents the divine world order<sup>29</sup> maintained by the king as the representative of the god Aššur, embodied in the winged disk hovering above the Tree.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, it was observed some time ago that in some reliefs the king takes the place of the Tree between the winged genies (fig. 4).<sup>31</sup> Whatever the precise implications of this fact, it is evident that in such scenes the king is portrayed as the human personification of the Tree.<sup>32</sup> Thus if the Tree symbolized the divine world order, then the king

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because part of the textual evidence he quotes is not pertinent and none of it *demonstrably* pertains to a "Tree of Life." See, however, n. 128 below.

<sup>28</sup> Winter, "Program" (n. 13, pp. 26 ff.). As pointed out by M. T. Larsen, *The Old Assyrian City State and Its Colonies* (Copenhagen, 1976), p. 119, "vice-regent (*iššakku*) of Aššur" was a traditional epithet specifically referring to the king as "intermediary between the god and the community." On the spelling of the epithet with the SANGA sign, see M.-J. Seux, "Remarques sur le titre royal assyrien *iššakki Aššur*," *RA* 59 (1965): 103-4.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *me-gal-gal an-ki-a = ušurāt šamē u eršeti* (GIŠ.HUR.MEŠ AN-e u KI-tim), lit. "the designs (Sum. "the great offices") of heaven and earth," *ACh Sin* 1: 2 and 6, and Tablet V of *Enūma eliš*, where the words *ušurātu*, "designs," and *paršū*, "offices," refer to the organization of the divine and the material world by Marduk (lines 1-5 and 65-67); note also the mystical work I.NAM GIŠ.HUR AN.KI.A (see nn. 66, 87, 89, and 100 below) explaining the "designs" of the world by gematric techniques (see n. 66 below).

<sup>30</sup> Winter, "Program," pp. 16 f. In discussing the composition of Slab B-23 and its crucial position behind the royal throne, Winter makes a telling comparison to the Gothic tympanum: "Compositionally, the organizing principles are clear: axial symmetry governs the placement of the tree at the center; the repetition of figures on either side maintains the axial and absolute balance. The priority of figures moves into the center and then up: from the "genii" at the far sides, to the king in his role as maintainer, to the central tree, and then to the god in the winged disk, set precisely on the axis. It is no different from the organization apparent on the façade of a Gothic cathedral, for example, as a key to the *theological structure of medieval Christianity* (italics mine): basal quatrefoils, as at Amiens, containing earthly and didactic themes; apostles flanking the central door, as the aspiration of men; the figure of Christ on the trumeau at the middle of the central portal as the highest achievement of man; then, directly above all, the scene of the Last Judgment on the tympanum, leading ultimately to an elevating visual as well as religious experience. The theological priorities are as clear

there, then, as one may suggest them to be on slab 23 of Assurnasirpal." The overwhelming "sacramental" aspect of the throneroom reliefs is also stressed by Saggs, *The Might That Was Assyria*, p. 234.

<sup>31</sup> York, *RIA*, vol. 4, p. 278, referring to J. Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Uppsala, 1943), pp. 26 f.; A. Moortgat, *Tammuz* (Berlin, 1949); and Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life*, pp. 43 ff. Conversely, it could be argued that the Tree takes the place of the king in the scenes where it is being purified by the *apkallu* genies. The *apkallu* were the mythical equivalent of court scholars (*ummānu*), whose primary function was to protect the king and attend to his moral integrity, i.e., "purify" his soul. See my remarks in *LAS*, vol. 2, pp. xx f., xxiv f., 40 ff., and 335, and, in more detail, my article "Mesopotamian Astrology and Astronomy as Domains of the Mesopotamian 'Wisdom'," in H. Galter and B. Scholz, eds., *Die Rolle der Astronomie in den Kulturen Mesopotamiens: Beiträge zum 3. Grazer Morgenländischen Symposium 23.-27.9.1991* (Graz, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> The king is portrayed as a flourishing tree offering shelter to his subjects in a Neo-Assyrian letter written by a prominent court scholar (*LAS* 122:14; for many other examples of the verb *šamāhu* referring to the growth of trees, see *CAD*, s.v., pp. 289 ff.). As pointed out in *LAS*, vol. 2, p. 108, this passage resembles Daniel 4, where the tree allegory is explicitly related to the moral conduct of the king:

In the Book of Daniel (ch. 4), King Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a great tree "in the midst of the earth" around which all the "beasts of the field" [see n. 24 above] and "birds of heaven" congregate. Then he sees "a watcher and a holy one" come down from heaven crying: "Hew down the tree, cut off his branches, shake off his leaves and scatter his fruit . . . and let his portions be with the grass in the earth. Let his heart be changed from a man's and let a beast's heart be given unto him." Daniel interpreted this tree as representing the King himself who, in modern psychological terms, had identified his limited and personal self with the divine Selfhood which his kingship symbolized.

(Cook, *Tree of Life*, p. 109; note the illustration from the Bible of Rodan [sixth century] reproduced *ibid.*, closely resembling the Assyrian Tree). For



himself represented the realization of that order in man, in other words, a true image of God,<sup>33</sup> the Perfect Man.<sup>34</sup>

If this reasoning is correct, it follows that the Tree had a dual function in Assyrian imperial art. Basically, it symbolized the divine world order maintained by the Assyrian king, but inversely it could also be projected upon the king to portray him as the Perfect Man. This interpretation accounts for the prominence of the Tree as an imperial symbol<sup>35</sup> because it not only provided a legitimation for Assyria's rule over the world,<sup>36</sup> but it also justified the king's position as the absolute ruler of the empire.<sup>37</sup>

The complete lack of references to such an important symbol in contemporary written sources can only mean that the doctrines relating to the Tree were never committed to writing by the scholarly elite who forged the imperial ideology but were circulated orally.<sup>38</sup> The nature of the matter further implies that only the basic symbolism of the

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further references to the King as Tree in Mesopotamian sources, see Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life*, pp. 42 ff.; cf. also pp. 195 ff. below. Note also the famous anthropomorphic tree from Assur (A. Parrot, *Nineveh and Babylon* [London, 1961], fig. 9).

<sup>33</sup> References to the king as the image (*šalmu*) of God abound in the Neo-Assyrian royal correspondence; see, for example, "the father of the king my lord was the very image of Bel, and the king my lord is likewise the very image of Bel," *LAS* 125:18 f.; "You, O king of the world, are an image of Marduk," *RMA* 170 = *SAA* 8 no. 333 r. 2. Note especially *LAS* 145: "The king, my lord, is the chosen of the great gods; the shadow of the king, my lord, is beneficial to all . . . The king, my lord, is the perfect likeness of the god." For the king as the image of Šamaš, see *LAS* 143:17 ff. and the passages cited in the relevant commentary (*LAS*, vol. 2, p. 130). The concept is first attested in the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic (*AfO* 18, p. 50, late second millennium B.C.).

<sup>34</sup> "Perfect Man" (*eḫlu giṣmālu* is well attested as an Assyrian royal epithet; see Seux, *Epithètes royales akkadiennes et sumériennes* (Paris, 1967), p. 92 and also p. 231 (*qarrādu giṣmālu*, "perfect hero"); note *SAA* 3 no. 25 ii 16 (*šarru giṣmālu*, "perfect king"), and cf. *LAS* 144 r. 4 f.: "What the king said is as perfect as the word of god," and *ABL* 1221 r. 12: "The word of the king is as [perfect] as that of the gods." The concept of "perfect king" goes back to the early second millennium (the time of Hammurabi); see Seux, *Epithètes*, pp. 97 and 331; see also n. 138 below.

<sup>35</sup> The need of visual symbols to epitomize complex ideologies is too obvious for elaboration here; cf. the role of the cross as a symbol of Christianity or that of the sickle and hammer as the symbol of communism. A stylized rendition of the Tree of Life, the Menorah, was the symbol of Judaism in the first century A.D. and still functions (on, for example, the rostrum of the Knesset) as a state symbol in modern Israel. On the Menorah, see L. Yarden, *The Tree of Light: A Study of the Menorah, the Seven-branched Lampstead* (Uppsala, 1972).

<sup>36</sup> Verbal justification of this claim is a regular feature of Assyrian royal inscriptions since the early thirteenth century B.C. See, for example, *RIM* 1, p. 233 ("Tukulti-Ninurta, king of the universe . . . whose name Aššur and the great gods faithfully called, the one to whom they gave the four quarters to administer and the one to whom they entrusted their dominion"); for further examples, see *CAD*, s.v. *bēlūtu*, p. 203.

<sup>37</sup> Note that piety and blameless moral conduct are the most prominent qualities justifying the king's rule in Assyrian royal inscriptions; see Seux, *Epithètes*, pp. 20 f. Cf., for example, the continuation of the inscription cited in the preceding footnote ("Tukulti-Ninurta . . . the attentive one, appointee of the gods, the one who gladdens the heart of Aššur, the one whose conduct is pleasing to the gods of heaven and earth").

<sup>38</sup> That is to say, primarily the chief scribe (also called "the king's scholar") and his "department." On this important state official, see O. Schroeder, "um-mānu = Chef der Staatskanzlei?," *OLZ*, 1920, pp. 204–7; H. Tadmor in F. M. Fales, ed., *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons* (Rome, 1981), pp. 30 ff.; see also my article "The Forlorn Scholar," in F. Rochberg-Halton, ed., *Language, Literature, and History: Studies Presented to Erica Reiner* (New Haven, 1987), p. 257; S. J. Lieberman, "A Mesopotamian Background for the So-called Aggadic 'Measures' of Biblical Hermeneutics," *HUCA* 58 (1987): 212 ff., and idem, in T. Abusch et al., eds., *Lingering Over Words: Studies in Honor of W. L. Moran* (Atlanta, 1990), pp. 313 ff. While the duties of the chief scribe are not specified in Assyrian sources, it is extremely likely that they included the drafting and production of royal inscriptions; note the colophon of the Sargon's letter to Aššur (*TCL* 3), indicating that it was composed by the chief scribe himself, and see the note on *LAS* 7 r. 10 in *LAS*, vol. 2, p. 11. On the other hand, there is evidence that other prominent scholars too were involved in the composition of royal inscriptions and, more generally, in the formulation of the imperial policies; see

Tree was common knowledge, while the more sophisticated details of its interpretation were accessible to a few select initiates only. The existence of an extensive esoteric lore in first- and second-millennium Mesopotamia is amply documented,<sup>39</sup> and the few extant written specimens of such lore<sup>40</sup> prove that mystical exegesis of religious symbolism played a prominent part in it.<sup>41</sup>

#### THE SEFIROTIC TREE

Mesopotamian esoteric lore has a remarkable parallel in Jewish Kabbalah,<sup>42</sup> and, more importantly from the standpoint of the present topic, so does the Assyrian Tree. A

H. Tadmor, B. Landsberger, and S. Parpola, "The Sin of Sargon and Sennacherib's Last Will," *SAA Bulletin* 3 (1989): 3–51, especially pp. 50 f.; Fales, "L'Ideologo Adad-šumu-ušur," *Atti della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rendiconti della Classe di Scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, Serie 8, vol. 29 (Rome, 1974): 453–96.

<sup>39</sup> See Borger, "Geheimwissen," *RIA*, vol. 3, pp. 188–91; J. Elman, "Authoritative Oral Tradition in Neo-Assyrian Scribal Circles," *JANES* 7 (1975): 19–32; J. Tigay, "An Early Technique of Aggadic Exegesis," in H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld, eds., *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures* (Jerusalem, 1983), pp. 169–89; P.-A. Beaulieu, "New Light on Secret Knowledge in Late Babylonian Culture," *ZA* 82 (1992): 98–111; see also n. 66 below. Elman (p. 22) compares the Mesopotamian scholarly oral tradition (*ša pi ummāni*) to the Jewish Oral Law (*Torah še-be-al-peh*); Tigay ("Early Technique," p. 171, n. 4); and, earlier, Lambert ("An Address of Marduk to the Demons," *AfO* 17 [1954–56]: 311) draw a parallel between Mesopotamian commentaries and the Midrashim; thus also, in more detail, A. Cavigneaux, "Aux sources du Midrash: L'Herméneutique babylonienne," *Aula Orientalis* 5 (1987): 243–55. On the transmission of esoteric lore (from teacher to disciple or from father to son), see Lieberman, "A Mesopotamian Background," p. 217, and A. R. George, "Babylonian Texts from the Folios of Sydney Smith, pt. 2" *RA* 85 (1991): 139; in this context, note remarks in the scholarly correspondence such as "I have learned it from my father" (*LAS* 370 r. 23, see *LAS*, vol. 2, p. 373) or "I have heard it from the mouth of my father" (*RMA* 218 = *SAA* 8 no. 454 r. 6).

The evidence discussed in the above articles could be multiplied by including all the references to secret lore in second- and first-millennium texts (see *CAD* and *AHW*. s.vv. *katimtu*, *niširtu*, *pirištu*, and *ikkibu*). For the first millennium, note, above all, Assurbanipal's famous self-description of his education: "I learnt the craft of the sage Adapa, the esoteric secrets of the entire scribal tradition; I observed celestial and terrestrial signs and discussed them in the meetings of

scholars; I ponder with expert diviners the liver, the image of heaven . . ." (Streck, *Asb.*, p. 252 i 13 ff.). For the second millennium, note *Gilg.* XI 9 and 266: "I will disclose to you, Gilgameš, things that are hidden, and I will relate to you the secrets of the gods."

<sup>40</sup> See the list in *RIA*, vol. 3, pp. 189 ff. (with additions in *HKL* 3, p. 119, and *ZA* 82, p. 110) and A. Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Oxford, 1986). The esoteric nature of these texts is made explicit by their colophons, for example, "Secret lore of the great gods/heaven and earth/sages/scholars; an initiate may show it to another initiate, the uninitiated may not see it; taboo of the great gods"; see also n. 42 below. Additional glimpses into the lore are provided by a multitude of random passages in scholarly texts, primarily commentaries and letters.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Livingstone, *Mystical Works*, pp. 116 ff. (= *SAA* 3, nos. 37–39), and the commentary on *Sakikku* I recently edited by George in "Babylonian Texts," pp. 146–63. Calling the kind of hermeneutics exemplified by these texts "mystical" is justified inasmuch as extracting "hidden" meanings from the literal wording of religious texts appears to have been its primary goal. The hermeneutic methods used in this process were virtually identical with those used in rabbinical exegesis, including *mashal*, "allegory"; *remez*, "paronomasia"; *naad*, "homonymy"; and, above all, *gematria* and *notarikon*, on which, see n. 66 below. It may not be merely a coincidence that the rules of Talmudic hermeneutics were laid down by Rabbi Hillel, a first-century (ca. A.D. 30) immigrant from Babylonia.

<sup>42</sup> See again, provisionally, my article "Mesopotamian Astrology and Astronomy." The strictly esoteric nature of Kabbalah and the fact that its secret doctrines were for centuries, and still are, transmitted almost exclusively orally are the principal reasons why next to nothing was known about it until the late Middle Ages (see below). The esotericism of Kabbalah and its fundamentally oral nature are stressed in every Kabbalistic work, ancient and modern. See M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, 1988), p. 109; see also *ibid.*, p. 21:

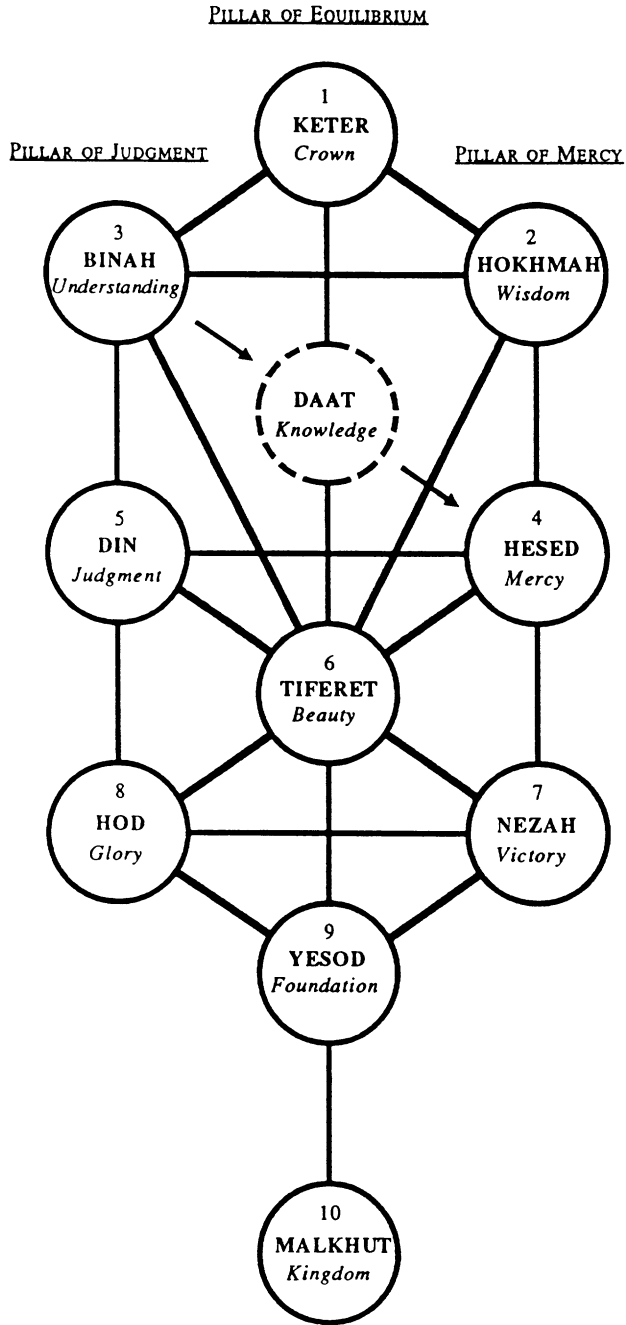


FIG. 5.—The Sefirotic Tree

schematic design known as the Sefirotic Tree of Life<sup>43</sup> figures prominently in both practical and theoretical Kabbalah.<sup>44</sup> In fact, it can be said that the entire doctrinal structure of Kabbalah revolves around this diagram (fig. 5),<sup>45</sup> a form which strikingly resembles the Assyrian Tree.<sup>46</sup>

The Sefirotic Tree derives its name from elements called *Sefirot*, literally “countings” or “numbers,”<sup>47</sup> represented in the diagram by circles numbered from one to ten.<sup>48</sup> They are defined as divine powers or attributes<sup>49</sup> through which the transcendent God, not

This Kabbalistic technique has passed unnoticed by modern scholarship . . . . This situation is not a matter of mere chance but rather a result of the technique's highly esoteric nature . . . . Underneath the diagram we read: “All these allusions must be transmitted orally” . . . . Even more impressive are the statements of the anonymous author of the Kabbalistic responsum: “Know that this is a Kabbalistic tradition which was handed down to you, and we are writing it down, [but] it is forbidden to disclose it or to pass it down to everyone, but [only] to ‘those who fear the divine name and take heed of his name’, blessed be he, ‘who tremble at his name.’”

Compare this with the Mesopotamian colophons cited in n. 40, and note that the Kabbalistic lore is often referred to as *hokhmah nistarah* (or *hokhmah ha-nistar*), “the Hidden Wisdom,” recalling various designations of the Mesopotamian esoteric lore (see n. 39 above and *CAD*, s.v. *nēmequ*, “wisdom”).

<sup>43</sup> Also known as the Tree of Knowledge, with explicit reference to Gen. 2:9 and 3:3–5; see C. Poncé, *Kabbalah* (San Francisco, 1973), pp. 145 ff., and see nn. 54 and 124 below.

<sup>44</sup> Kabbalistic thought is traditionally divided into two branches, practical and speculative (see Scholem, “Kabbalah,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 10, pp. 632 ff.). The former, rooted in post-exilic Merkabah mysticism (speculation on the throne-chariot of God, Ezek. 1) and represented by such Kabbalists as Abraham Abulafia and Isaac Luria, has strong links with ecstatic prophecy; the latter, rooted in Bereshit mysticism (speculation on the creation, Gen. 1–3), is predominantly theosophical in character. This bipartite division of Kabbalah (see also n. 51 below) has a parallel in the ecstatic prophecy and scholarly mysticism of first-millennium Assyria; see my *Assyrian Prophecies*, SAA 9 (Helsinki, 1993), introduction.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Z. Halevi, *Kabbalah: Tradition of Hidden Knowledge* (London, 1979), p. 50: “The first step in Kabbalah is to become familiar with the Sefirotic Tree. Without this key, little can be comprehended”; idem, *The Way of Kabbalah* (Bath, 1991), pp. 88 f.: “The Tree of Life is a diagrammatic scheme of the Sefirot or Divine Principles that govern Manifest Existence. It contains, and this is constantly repeated till learned, the concept of Unity and Duality, the idea of creative trinity, the Four Worlds, and the unfolding of the octave Lightning Flash between One and All, and back again . . . . In short, it is a key to comprehending the laws of the World . . . . In the Tradition it is called the Key of Solomon, and not

without reason.” On the function of the diagram as a mandala in Kabbalistic meditation, see *ibid.*, pp. 90 and 112, and Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 142.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. fig. 2. The Sefirotic Tree, like the Assyrian one, is attested in several variant forms reflecting the various symbolic meanings of the diagram (see fig. 6 with n. 63); the diagram reproduced here represents the most common form of the Tree in current Kabbalistic literature and is attested in this form since the seventeenth century.

<sup>47</sup> The normal meaning of the word in rabbinical Hebrew is “counting” (see Jastrow, *Dictionary*, p. 1014a, s.v. *sefirah*), but in *Sefer Yezirah* and the writings of Abraham Abulafia it clearly has the technical meaning “(primordial/ideal) number”; see G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton, 1987), pp. 26 f., and Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 349, n. 323, referring to a passage in Abulafia's *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, where the source of the Sefirot, En Sof, is called “the One who Counts” (*sofer*). In Kabbalistic speculation, the Sefirot are also commonly associated, through homophony, with the words *sappir*, “sapphire,” and *sferah*, “sphere” (cf. Scholem, *Origins*, p. 81). These associations are consonant with ideas about the nature of the Sefirot but have nothing to do with etymology or the original meaning of the word.

<sup>48</sup> The numbers correspond to the order of emanation (cf. n. 55) of the Sefirot from the En Sof; in Kabbalistic literature, they are referred to by ordinal numbers and associated with the first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet. See Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 108 ff., and cf. the Abulafia passage referred to in n. 47 above: “The influx expanding from the one who counts is comprised in and passes through a[leph] to y[od], from the first Sefirot to the tenth” (Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 148).

<sup>49</sup> See Halevi, *Kabbalah*, pp. 5 f.; Scholem, *Origins*, p. 82; and Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 113 f. As noted by Scholem, an enumeration of ten divine attributes closely resembling the Kabbalistic one already occurs in a Talmudic passage from ca. 230, attributed to the Babylonian scholar Rav (*BT Hagigah* 12a): “By ten things [lit. ‘words’] was the world created: by wisdom (*hokhmah*), by understanding (*tevunah*), by reason (*daat*), by strength (*kah*), by rebuke (*gaarah*), by might (*gevurah*), by righteousness (*zedek*), by judgment (*mishpat*), by compassion (*hesed*), and by loving kindness (*rahamim*).” Idel (*Kabbalah*, pp. 113 f.) adduces further passages in

shown in the diagram,<sup>50</sup> manifests Himself. Each has a name associated with its number.<sup>51</sup> The Tree has a central trunk and horizontal branches spreading to the right and left on which the Sefirot are arranged in the symmetrical fashion: three to the left, four on the trunk,<sup>52</sup> and three to the right. The vertical alignments of the Sefirot on the right and left represent the polar opposites of masculine and feminine, positive and negative, active and passive, dark and light, etc.<sup>53</sup> The balance of the Tree is maintained by the trunk, also called the Pillar of Equilibrium.<sup>54</sup>

Like the Assyrian Tree, the Sefirotic Tree has a dual function. On the one hand, it is a picture of the macrocosm. It gives an account of the creation of the world, accompanied in three successive stages by the Sefirot emanating from the transcendent God.<sup>55</sup> It also charts the cosmic harmony of the universe upheld by the Sefirot under the con-

early Jewish and Gnostic sources, referring to ten creative *logoi* in the context of Creation.

<sup>50</sup> In some Sefirotic diagrams, En Sof is represented by a circle hovering over the Tree (see, for example, Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 92, 101, and 102), recalling the winged disk hovering over the Assyrian Tree (see n. 25 above) as well as the image of the glorified Christ shown above the Tree of Life in Christian art (see Cook, *Tree of Life*, pls. 43, 46, and 49). Cf. pp. 184 ff. below, and nn. 93 f.

<sup>51</sup> The origin of these names, some of which have alternatives, is obscure; cf. Abulafia's remarks in his *Imrey Shefer* (ca. 1270), cited in Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 202:

[The theosophists] claim that they received from the prophets and the sages that there are ten Sefirot . . . and they designated each and every Sefirah by names, some of them being homonyms, others proper names. And when they were asked [to explain them], those who know them were unable to say what these Sefirot are, and to what entity these names refer . . . and their names are well known from their books, but they are very perplexed concerning them.

See further pp. 176 f. and nn. 70–73 below.

<sup>52</sup> A fifth "invisible" Sefirah, *Daat* (Knowledge or Reason), is sometimes inserted in the middle column between *Keter* and *Tiferet*. This "non-Sefirah" represents an interval or void separating the first three Sefirot ("the Supernals" or "the Upper Face") from the following six ("the Lower Face"). See n. 22 above on Assyrian Tree variants with four nodes instead of the standard three, and see nn. 104, 110, and 124 below. Note that *Daat* is included in Rav's list of ten creative "words" (see n. 49), while the Sefirah of *Malkhut* (not forming part of the Lower Face) is lacking from it, and cf. n. 85.

<sup>53</sup> The right-hand alignment of the Sefirot is commonly referred to as the Pillar of Mercy and that on the left as the Pillar of Judgment or Severity. These two "pillars" (also known as Male and Female Columns, or the Good and Evil Sides) are conceived as manifestations of two hidden divine principles constraining the flow of emanation, the active, expansive one of Mercy and the passive, restrictive one of Justice (or Rigor). See Halevi, *Kabbalah*, pp. 5 f., and also Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 142 ff.:

In this configuration . . . the Sefirot contained within each pillar or unit are connected only to the others contained within the same pillar. The theme of polarity, the distinction of the opposites as male/female, positive/negative and dark/light is here emphasized.

<sup>54</sup> Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 7; cf. Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 144 and 148:

The *Zohar* refers to this middle pillar as the perfect pillar. It serves as a mediating factor between the pillars of the right and the left . . . There is also some Kabbalistic speculation . . . that the center pillar is the Tree of Life, and the remaining pillars the Tree of Good and Evil . . . When man ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil he did not draw any sustenance from the Tree of Life, which mediates between the opposites.

See further Scholem, "Kabbalah," p. 575. In this context, note that some Assyrian seals combine *two* trees in the same scene, viz., one with the characteristic garland network and one generally consisting of trunk and crown only (see, for example, Danthine, *Palmier-dattier*, nos. 371, 379, 424, 479, 509, and 521; note especially no. 479 with an *empty* garland arch beside a palm tree ridden by a monkey and an eagle, and no. 509 showing a phoenix rising from a burning(?) tree beside a tree with a nine-petalled fruit crown).

<sup>55</sup> The creation of the world is envisaged as a threefold process taking place in the Divine Mind before the materialization of the physical world. It involves the expression of the idea by the Divine Will, its elaboration by the Divine Intellect, and its actual implementation by the Divine Emotion. The first phase is referred to as the World of Emanation and associated with the first Sefirah, *Keter*; the next two are referred to as the Worlds of Formation and Creation respectively and associated with the "Upper" and "Lower Faces" (see n. 52 above). In an alternative scheme, the Sefirot are distributed in the different worlds in a triadic arrangement, the first three in the World of Emanation, 4 to 6 in the World of Formation, and 7 to 9 in the World of Creation, while the last, *Malkhut*, is located in the material world, "the World of Making" (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 67 f.; cf. Halevi, *Way of Kabbalah*, pp. 27 ff.). Compare this with the three-layered triadic structure of the Assyrian Tree discussed in n. 22 above.

The emanation of the Sefirot is conceived of as a

straining influence of the polar system of opposites. In short, it is a model of the divine world order, and in manifesting the invisible God through His attributes, it is also, in a way, an image of God.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, the Sefirotic Tree, like the Assyrian, can also refer to man as a microcosm, the ideal man created in the image of God. Interpreted in this way, it becomes a way of salvation for the mystic seeking deliverance from the bonds of flesh through the soul's union with God.<sup>57</sup> The arrangement of the Sefirot from the bottom to the top of the diagram marks the path which he has to follow in order to attain the ultimate goal, the crown of heaven represented by the Sefirah number one, *Keter*.

Tradition has it that the doctrines about the Tree were originally revealed to the patriarch Abraham, who transmitted them orally to his son.<sup>58</sup> In actual fact, the earliest surviving Kabbalistic manuscripts date from the tenth century A.D.<sup>59</sup> It is generally agreed,

lightning flash issuing from the ocean of "Endless Light," En Sof Or (see n. 94 below); the energy drawn from this source filters through the Sefirot, who emanate it further throughout the world. The unity of the En Sof and the Sefirot is fundamental to Kabbalah. "The En-Sof and its emanations are inseparable . . . What flows through the Sefirot is the light of the En-Sof which they need for their existence" (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 101 and 130). The flow between the individual Sefirot and the En Sof has been likened to streams of water poured into colored bottles (ibid., p. 103), a zigzagging lightning flash returning to its origin, and the flow of an electric current through a system of functions in a circuit (Halevi, *Tree of Life*, p. 32). Compare this with the streamlike lattice network (see n. 20 above) and the pomegranate or cone garland surrounding the Assyrian Tree (n. 21), and note the lightning streamers emanating from the winged disk above the Tree discussed in n. 25 above; note also the Assyrian Tree scenes with water-receiving or water-emitting bottles. See, for example, H. Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* (London, 1939), fig. 65; Danthine, *Palmier-dattier*, figs. 588 and 843 f. (with a human figure replacing the tree; see also n. 56 below).

<sup>56</sup> See Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 136 ff. The Book of *Bahir* (twelfth century) refers to the Tree as an image of God by the term *ha-male*<sup>2</sup>, "fullness," a direct equivalent of Gnostic *pleroma*, "(divine) fullness"; on this concept, also referred to as "the All" (*to pan, to holon*), see Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 68 ff., quoting the *Gospel of Thomas*, where Jesus says of himself: "I am the All and the All proceeds from me"; cf. Paul's Letter to the Colossians, 1:15–19. In the openly anthropomorphic theosophy of ecstatic Kabbalah and Merkavah mysticism, the Sefirot are associated with the cosmic body of Adam Kadmon, the archetypal or perfect man, or God himself; see Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 134 ff.; Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 20 ff.; J. Dan, *Three Types of Ancient Jewish Mysticism* (Cincinnati, 1984), pp. 12 ff.

An early Assyrian (thirteenth century B.C.) precursor of the idea of the Sefirot as the Divine *pleroma* occurs in a prayer of Tukulti-Ninurta I, where the sun-god is invoked as "the radiance" and the storm-

god as "the voice" of the god Aššur (*KAR* 128 r. 12 f.). The idea of the cosmic anthropos is attested in *KAR* 102, a Neo-Assyrian hymn to Ninurta, where the various parts of this god's body are systematically identified with specific deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon.

<sup>57</sup> See also P. Epstein, *Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic* (Garden City, New York, 1978), pp. 4 and 15 f.:

"The cosmic tree of life conveniently epitomized the emanations of God's "qualities" into the visible world of men. And since imitating God eventually led a man to direct knowledge of God, the Kabbalist exerted himself to perfect each quality on the tree . . . Since he believes that man is literally created in the image of God, the mystic works to polish himself until he becomes so brilliantly clear that he reflects nothing but god. "Union with the absolute" in this case is a matter of "like attracting like."

Cf. also Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 57, citing Rabbi Vital's *Sha'ar ha-Mizvot*: "When studying Torah man must intend to link his soul and to unite her and make her cleave to her source above . . . and he must intend thereby to perfect the supernal tree [of Sefirot] and the holy anthropos."

On *unio mystica* in Jewish mysticism, described with the metaphor of the drop of water and the sea, see ibid., pp. 59–73. Idel stresses (p. 67) that the aim of the mystic was to achieve the state of union without being totally absorbed and lost in the divine abyss. On the practical goals of the mystical union (encounter with souls of the dead and acquisition of supernal secrets from ancient pious men), see ibid., pp. 91 ff.

<sup>58</sup> See Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 39 (referring to *Sefer Yezirah* and a Talmudic legend); Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Frankfurt, 1957), p. 74; and Halevi, *Tree of Life*, pp. 17 f. (naming Melchizedek as the revealer of the doctrines about the Tree). Whatever these traditions are worth, if taken seriously, they imply that Jewish Kabbalah (lit., "tradition") was based on a previous model and, in view of Abraham's prominent association with "Ur of the Chaldees" (Gen. 11:28–31), strongly point to Mesopotamia as the place of origin of that model.

<sup>59</sup> See Scholem, "Yezirah," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 16, p. 786 (commentary on *Sefer Yezirah*

however, that the “foundation stone” of Kabbalism, the *Sefer Yezirah*, was composed sometime between the third and sixth centuries,<sup>60</sup> and the emergence of Kabbalah as a doctrinal structure can now be reliably traced to the first century A.D.<sup>61</sup> The renowned rabbinical schools of Babylonia were the major centers from which the Kabbalistic doctrines spread to Europe during the high Middle Ages.<sup>62</sup>

Altogether, the Sefirotic Tree displays a remarkable similarity to the Assyrian Tree in both its symbolic content and external appearance (see fig. 6).<sup>63</sup> In addition, given the fact that it seems to have originated on Babylonian soil, the likelihood that it is based on a Mesopotamian model appears considerable.<sup>64</sup> As a matter of fact, a number of central

from the Cairo Genizah, dated 955–56; the earliest extant manuscript of the book itself is from the eleventh(?) century; see *ibid.*, p. 782).

<sup>60</sup> Scholem, “Yezirah,” pp. 785 f. Cf. *idem*, *Ori-gins*, p. 25:

the various estimates of the date of its composition . . . fluctuate between the second and the sixth centuries. This slender work is also designated in the oldest manuscripts as a collection of “*halakhoth* on the Creation” and it is not at all impossible that it is referred to by this name in the Talmud (*BT Sanhedrin* 65b, fourth century),

and Dan, *Three Types of Ancient Jewish Mysticism*, p. 21 (ca. fourth century).

<sup>61</sup> The connections of Kabbalah with Jewish apocalyptic esotericism and mysticism of the post-exilic period have never been questioned, and its affinities with Platonism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and Sufism were noted long ago and stressed by many scholars; the crucial question of the evolution of Kabbalistic doctrines, specifically their dependance on external influence(s), however, has remained a matter of controversy. While Kabbalists themselves have consistently stressed the antiquity of their tradition and vehemently denied the existence of any kind of historical development in Kabbalah (see Scholem, “Kabbalah,” p. 493; Halevi, *Way of Kabbalah*, pp. 16 ff.), modern scholarship has tended to see the emergence of historical Kabbalah as a gradual process heavily influenced by Neoplatonic and especially Gnostic thought.

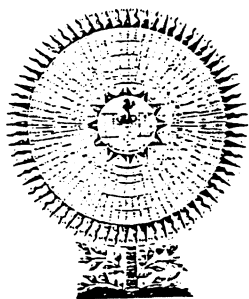
Recent research has significantly altered this picture, however. It is now generally recognized that there is considerable Jewish influence on the emerging Gnostic literature, not the other way around; and that several doctrinal features of Kabbalah previously attributed to Gnosticism in fact belong to a genuine Jewish tradition reaching, through Hekhalot and Mer-kavah mysticism, down to the first century A.D., if not earlier; see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 30 ff. for details. For an unmistakable reference to the Tree of Life diagram in *Hekhalot Rabbati* (third century A.D.?), see Dan, *The Revelation of the Secret of the World: The Beginning of Jewish Mysticism in Late Antiquity*, Brown

University Program in Judaic Studies, Occasional Papers, no. 2 (Providence, 1992), pp. 30 f.

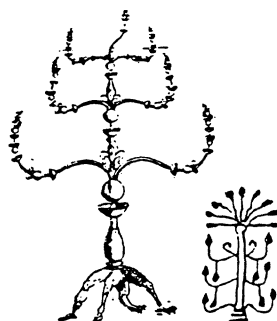
<sup>62</sup> The literature of practical Kabbalah was introduced to Italy in 870 by a Babylonian scholar, Aaron ben Samuel (alias Abu Aharon); see Scholem, *Jüdische Mystik*, p. 44; see *idem*, “Kabbalah,” p. 510; cf. Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 60. Several leading gaonic scholars (for example, Saadiah, Sherira b. Hanina, and Hai) are known to have occupied themselves with *Sefer Yezirah* in the following century; see Scholem, “Kabbalah,” pp. 511 f.

<sup>63</sup> The multiplicity of attested Tree variants is related to the Kabbalistic view of the Sefirotic *pleroma* as a dynamic, constantly changing living organism, which could be contemplated upon but not properly captured in words or writing; this idea is expressed with metaphors such as light reflected by moving water (Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 140), the movement of the planets and stars (*ibid.*, p. 248), or flames emerging from a burning coal (*ibid.*, p. 137). The different variants illustrate the dynamics of the Tree by stressing different aspects of its interpretation, such as the various interrelationships of the Sefirot (cf. Halevi, *Way of Kabbalah*, p. 142).

<sup>64</sup> As uncontestable examples of Jewish cultural borrowings from Mesopotamia during and after the exile, note the Jewish calendar still based on the Neo-Babylonian intercalation system (R. Parker and W. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.–A.D. 75* [Providence, 1956]); the incantation bowls of Babylonian rabbis (J. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* [Philadelphia, 1914]); the medical passages in the Babylonian Talmud discussed by M. Geller in his review of P. Herrero, *La Thérapeutique mésopotamienne* (Paris, 1984), in *BiOr* 43 (1986): 738–43; and the astrological omen text recently published by J. C. Greenfield and M. Sokoloff, “Astrological and Related Omen Texts in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic,” *JNES* 48 (1989): 201–14; the list could easily be made ten times longer. In this connection, it is good to remember that the mystic form of Islam, Sufism, emerged in Babylonia immediately after the Muslim conquest.



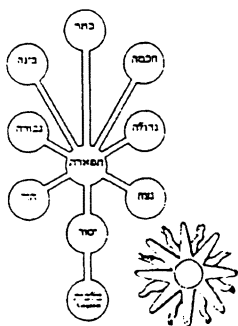
a. The Tree as Sunflower, with the 72 names of God inscribed on its petals. From Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegypticus* (Rome, 1652; Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 177).



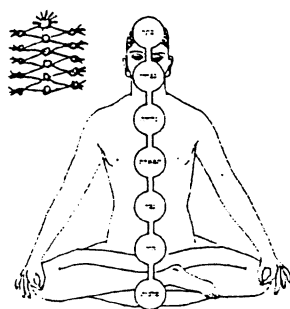
b. Tree in the form of a Menorah. From *Or Nerot ha-Menorah* (Venice, 1548; Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 78).



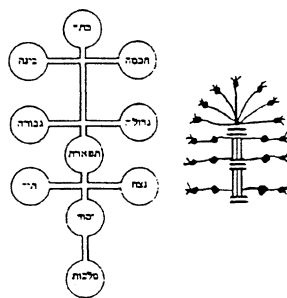
c. The Inverted Tree. From Robert Fludd, *Philosophia Sacra* (1627; Cook, *Tree of Life*, pl. 38).



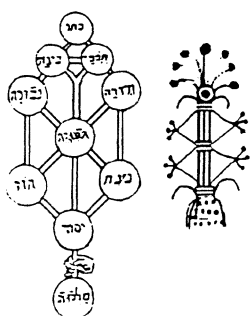
d. Beauty as the Bearer of All the Powers (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 104).



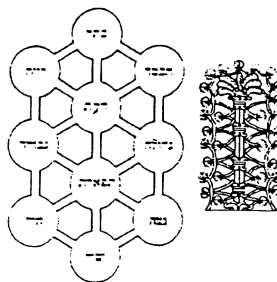
e. Tree of Meditation, using the central column alone (Poncé, *ibid.*, p. 153).



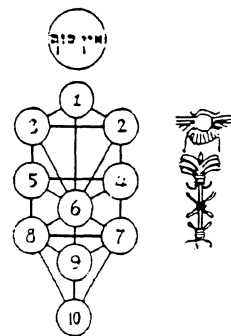
f. Tree of Eternal Life (Poncé, *ibid.*, pp. 105 and 148).



g. The Sefirotic Tree of Paulus Ricius, *Porta Lucis* (Augsburg, 1516; Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 110).



h. The expansion of the Shekhinah, the Tree of Perfection (Poncé, *ibid.*, p. 152).



i. The Sefirotic Tree with En Sof hovering over it (Poncé, *ibid.*, p. 152).

FIG. 6.—Sefirotic and Assyrian Tree variants



Kabbalistic doctrines, such as the location of the Throne of God in the Middle Heaven,<sup>65</sup> are explicitly attested in Mesopotamian esoteric texts.<sup>66</sup>

The crucial question, however, is how the existence of the hypothetical Mesopotamian model can be proven, given the lack of directly relevant textual evidence. It must be admitted that a priori it is possible that the observed similarities are simply coincidental and due to a common cultural heritage rather than to a direct borrowing.

#### THE ASSYRIAN TREE DIAGRAM

For the above reasons, I had for years considered the identity of the Assyrian and Sefirotic Trees an attractive but probably unprovable hypothesis, until it finally occurred to me that there *is* a way of proving or rejecting it. For if the Sefirotic Tree really is but an adaptation of a Mesopotamian model, the adaptation process should be *reversible*, that is, it should be possible to reconstruct the original model without difficulty.<sup>67</sup> The basic

<sup>65</sup> See KAR 307:31 ff. = Livingstone, *SAA* 3, p. 100; cf. Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 64 ff. The Kabbalistic association of the throne-chariot of glory with Enoch/Metatron (ibid., p. 66; cf. Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 124 f., and Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 18 ff.) finds a parallel in the association of Marduk's chariot with the list of antediluvian kings and sages in the Neo-Assyrian canon of religious texts; see, provisionally, Lambert, "A New Fragment from a List of Antediluvian Kings and Marduk's Chariot," in M. A. Beek et al., eds., *Symbolae Biblicae et Mesopotamicae Francisco Mario Theodoro de Liagre Böhl Dedicatae* (Leiden, 1973), pp. 271–80; for the implications of this association as well as the role of the Chariot in Mesopotamian mystical thought, see Excursus 2, pp. 204–5 below.

The Kabbalistic association of heaven with fire (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 41 f.) is attested in the above-mentioned (see n. 56) prayer of Tukulti-Ninurta, KAR 128 r. 32 ("fire of Anu"); see also RA 62, p. 54:17. The doctrine associating the creation of the cosmos with the creation of language, the alphabet functioning as the instrument of creation itself (see Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 27 and 41; cf. Scholem, "Yezirah," p. 784, and the illustration in D. MacLagan, *Creation Myths* [London, 1977], p. 30) has a counterpart in the Middle Assyrian "Silbenalphabet," KAR 4, where mumbo-jumbo combinations of syllables are associated with the creation story culminating in the creation of man; this text is defined as "secret" in its colophon. Similarly, the creation of the "golem" by the recitation of incantations (Scholem, "Yezirah," p. 785) finds an exact parallel in the creation of the primeval man in the Atrahasis myth (see W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-Hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* [Oxford, 1969], p. 61). In general, the Kabbalistic notion of the creation process (see n. 55 above) closely resembles the Mesopotamian one, which involved a decision by a deity (Anu or Enlil) and its elaboration and implementation by the God of Wisdom and/or a birth goddess (see Lambert and Millard, *Atra-Hasis*,

pp. 55 ff.; *En. el.* VI 1–35; *Gilg.* I ii 33 ff.; note the use of word *zikru*, "utterance," in the sense of logos, "idea," in the last passage).

<sup>66</sup> Note also the prominent role of interpretive techniques such as *gematria* (use of the numerical value of the letters of a word) and *notarikon* (taking certain words as abbreviations for complete phrases or letters or syllables as abbreviations for words) in both Kabbalah and Mesopotamian scholarly texts; see Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 168 ff. and Lieberman, "A Mesopotamian Background," pp. 157–225; Tigay, "Early Technique," pp. 176–81, adduces numerous examples of the two techniques from the Babylonian Talmud. As noted by Tigay (ibid., pp. 187 f.), the introduction of such interpretive techniques generally indicates a growing mismatch between the wording of traditional scripture and the prevailing world view. From this point of view, it seems significant that the emergence of these techniques in Mesopotamia neatly correlates with the rise of the Assyrian Empire and the appearance of the Assyrian Tree. Note that the esoteric text L.NAM GIŠ.HUR AN.KI.A (Livingstone, *Mystical Works*, pp. 22 ff.), using these very techniques, associates different lunar phases with different gods and thus manages to explain all major gods of the pantheon as aspects of the moon god; see further n. 89 below.

<sup>67</sup> The case of Christian Kabbalah, represented by outstanding scholars, philosophers, and theologians, such as Pico della Mirandola, Johannes Reuchlin, Egidio da Viterbo, and Jacob Boehme, is instructive. This form of Kabbalah was *demonstrably* taken over from a pre-existing (Jewish) model with only minimal adjustments, such as the translation of the names of the Sefirot, the identification of Adam Kadmon and En Sof with Christ, or the reinterpretation of the three world ages as reigns of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; the essence of the system, including the tree diagram and other central Kabbalistic axioms, was not affected at all. This was possible because Christianity is rooted in both Judaism and Classical philosophy; the Christian Kabbalists "be-

elements of the Tree, the Sefirot, are crucial in this respect. Their names and definitions strongly recall the attributes and symbols of Mesopotamian gods, and their prominent association with numbers calls to mind the mystic numbers of the Mesopotamian gods. They are, in fact, represented as angelic beings in some Sefirotic schemes, which is consistent with their definition as divine powers.<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, in the hypothetical Mesopotamian model they would have been gods, with functions and attributes coinciding with those of the Sefirot.

Consequently, I replaced the Sefirot with Mesopotamian gods sharing their functions and/or attributes (see fig. 7). Most gods fell into their place immediately and unequivocally. Assyriologists will need no justification for associating Ea with Wisdom,<sup>69</sup> Sin with Understanding,<sup>70</sup> Marduk with Mercy,<sup>71</sup> Šamaš with Judgment,<sup>72</sup> Ištar with Beauty,<sup>73</sup> and

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lieved that they had discovered in the Kabbalah an original divine revelation to mankind . . . with the aid of which it was possible not only to understand the teachings of Pythagoras, Plato, and the Orphics . . . but also the secrets of the Catholic faith" (Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 643 f.). Another conservative factor certainly was that the doctrines of Kabbalah, crystallized in the tree diagram, represent a highly integrated system of thought which by its very nature works against radical changes in it.

<sup>68</sup> See the diagram in Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 74, with Sefirah 1 appearing as Metatron, 2 as Raziel, 3 as Zaphkiel, 4 as Zadkiel, 5 as Samael, 6 as Michael, 7 as Haniel, 8 as Raphael, and 9 as Gabriel. A Hebrew magical-astrological text from Nisibis entitled "Wisdom of the Chaldeans," published by M. Gaster, *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 22 (1900): 329 ff., explicitly equates angels with planets: Raphael = Sun, Gabriel = Moon, Samael = Mars, Michael = Mercury, Zadkiel = Jupiter, Anael = Venus, and Qaphsiel = Saturn. Transferring these equations to the diagram just mentioned, one obtains a tree stated in terms of planet(ary gods), to be compared with Halevi, *Tree of Life*, p. 51 (tree composed of Greco-Roman gods and their planets). On a passage in *Bahir* merging the Sefirot with angelic beings, see Scholem, *Origins*, p. 148.

The Hekhalot texts contain long lists of angels with names ending in *el*, "to which the title YHWH is added, making them a group of divine beings, a system of pleromatic powers" (Dan, "Revelation," p. 17); cf. idem, *Three Types*, p. 17:

It should be emphasized that the term "angels" is an inaccurate and confusing one in this context. . . . Medieval definitions gave this term the meaning of a created, subordinated messenger of God, which cannot be an independent divine power. In the Hekhalot literature . . . the powers are called by names like 'Akhatriel Yah Adonai Zeva'oth,' which cannot be interpreted as other than an appellation of a divine power.

According to a legend quoted by Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 13, "the Divine Name EL [was attached] to the functional name of each angelic being, so that it could never exert more of its power than God wished. Thus each celestial being was confined to its task, like the angel Shalgriel who only dealt with snow." One could not hope for a better etiology of

Sumerian *me/garza* and Akkadian *parsu*, "divine power of function"!

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Ea's epithets "sage of the gods/universe, sage/king of wisdom, lord of wisdom/secrets, wise, surpassingly/exceedingly wise, omniscient, knower of ingenious things"; for references, see H. Galter, *Der Gott Ea/Enki in der akkadischen Überlieferung* (Graz, 1983), pp. 34 ff. Wisdom is the theme of one-third of all attested epithets of Ea; a further 25 percent define him as the creator god or the lord of Apsu and the waters of life; the rest are general epithets stressing the greatness of the god.

In a commentary recently edited by George (*RA* 85 [1992]: 152), Ea is referred to as "Great light of Apsu," an allusion consonant with the Kabbalistic notion of *Hokhmah* as a hidden luminary directly in contact with En Sof, the Endless Light (cf. Halevi, *Tree of Life*, p. 74, and Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 66 and 101). Conversely, *Kether* is referred to in the *Zohar* (see Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 118) as "The Wisdom-Gushing Fountain" flowing into a large vessel in the earth called "Sea," an allusion consonant with the Mesopotamian notion of Apsu (cf. Galter, *Enki/Ea*, pp. 80 ff.). For the Kabbalistic notion of *Hokhma* as "the father of all created things" and the archetype of fatherhood, "father of fathers" (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 119 ff.), cf. Ea's epithets "father of the (great) gods" and "creator of everything/all mankind/created things" (Galter, pp. 34 f.).

<sup>70</sup> *Binah*, "Understanding" or "Intelligence," also rendered *Prudentia* (Robert Fludd, *Philosophia Sacra* [1626]), is defined as "intellect in its passive, receptive and reflective capacity, deep pondering" (Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 6), "reflective thinking, to back up inspiration" (idem, *Tree of Life*, p. 38) and "profound intellect act[ing] as a counterbalance to Wisdom" (idem, *Way of Kabbalah*, p. 55). Compare this with references to the moon god Sin as "Anu of the sky whose counsel nobody perceives" (Perry, *Sin*, no. 2:9), "whose profound heart no god can fathom" (ibid., no. 1:37), "whose mind no god knows" (ibid., no. 5:5), and note Sin's epithets "wise, knower of secrets, sage of gods" (Tallqvist, *Götter-epitheta*, p. 446) and *mušīātu*, "judicious, thoughtful, circumspect, deliberate," attested in Perry, *Sin*, no. 5:10, and personal names (*CAD*, s.v., p. 284).

Nabû and Ninurta with Victory (*Nezah*).<sup>74</sup> Crown (*Keter*) was the emblem of both Anu and Enlil,<sup>75</sup> but since in the first millennium Enlil was commonly equated with Marduk

“Understanding, Intelligence” (*Nahî*, an exact semantic equivalent of *Binah*), is explicitly attested as a name of the moon god in Thamudic inscriptions; see D. Nielsen, “Über die nordarabischen Götter,” *Mitteilungen der Vorderasiatisch-Aegyptischen Gesellschaft* 21 (1917): 254 f. In Rav’s list of ten creative powers (see n. 49 above), *Binah* is represented by its synonym *Tevunah*.

Another frequent epithet, “maker of decision(s),” refers to Sin as the Supreme Divine Arbiter; see Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, p. 447. This role agrees with the position of *Binah* on top of the Pillar of Judgment (see n. 53 above); cf. Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 144: “The Pillar of Judgment receives its name from the center Sefirah, *Gevurah* . . . the two [other] Sefirot [above and below it] are integral components of the middle value.” Note that in *Bahir*, the angel “presiding over all the holy forms on the left side of God” is identified with Gabriel, i.e., Moon (see Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 147 f., and n. 68 above). In another section of *Bahir*, *Binah* is explained as “superior justice” (Scholem, *Origins*, p. 136).

*Binah* is “the Supernal Mother, within whose womb all that was contained in Wisdom finally becomes differentiated [and out of whom] the remaining sefiroth proceed” (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 122); compare this with Sin’s epithets “birth-giving (*alidu*) father,” “father of the great gods,” “procreator of all” (Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, pp. 446); on the epithet “fruit (*enbu*) giving birth to itself” (*ibid.*, pp. 24), see also nn. 66 and 89.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Marduk’s epithets “merciful god/father/lord, merciful and forgiving, the merciful one with forgiving heart, merciful to mankind”; for attestations, see Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, p. 371, and the dictionaries s.v. *rēmēnū* and *tajjāru*, and see also *Enūma eliš* VI 137 and VII 27 ff. While “merciful” occasionally occurs as an epithet of other gods, too, its prominence as an epithet of Marduk in first-millennium texts, as well as the fact that it is frequently applied to the king as the image of Marduk (see the discussion in *LAS*, vol. 2, p. 58), confirms that it represented a central characteristic of this god.

The other name of the Sefirah, *Gedullah* (Greatness), corresponds to Marduk’s ubiquitous epithet *bēlu rabū*, “great lord” (Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, p. 52). Note the co-occurrence of both “great lord” and “merciful god” in the incipits of prayers to Marduk (W. Mayer, *Untersuchungen zur Formensprache der babylonischen “Gebetsbeschwörungen”* [Rome, 1976], p. 397, nos. 18 and 23).

<sup>72</sup> Šamaš was the divine judge par excellence: the name *Din* exactly corresponds to Šamaš’s primary epithet *bēl dīni*, “lord of judgment,” not attached to any other god (see Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, p. 43; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 456 ff.). The other common name of this Sefirah, *Gevurah* (Power of Might), corresponds to Šamaš’s standard epithets *eḫlu*, “strong man” (*CAD*,

s.v.) and *qurādu*, “hero” (*CAD*, s.v.); note that the corresponding Hebrew words (*gever*, “man,” and *gibbor*, “hero”) are derived from the same root as *Gevurah*, and that Akkadian *qurdu*, “heroism, valor; mighty deeds” (*CAD*, s.v.) is an exact semantic equivalent of Hebrew *gevurah*, which in the Psalms (71:16, 106:2, 145:2, and 150:2) refers to the “mighty deeds (or acts, works)” of God.

In Rav’s list of ten creative powers (see n. 49), *Din* is replaced by its synonym *Mishpat*, “decision, judgment,” while *Gevurah* there corresponds to *Nezah* (see n. 74).

<sup>73</sup> Note simply Ištar’s well-known identification with Aphrodite and Venus and the epithet “lady/goddess of beauty and love,” which she shares with Nanaya/Tašmētu (Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, pp. 16 and 60; for Nanaya = Ištar; see *ibid.*, p. 385). In the Etana myth (see pp. 195 ff. below), Ištar is portrayed as a beautiful virgin; see J. V. Kinnier Wilson, *The Legend of Etana* (Warminster, 1985), p. 110:10; cf. W. G. Lambert “The Problem of the Love Lyrics,” in H. Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts, eds., *Unity and Diversity* (Baltimore, 1975), pp. 123, 18 ff.: “You are the mother, Ištar of Babylon, the beautiful one, the queen of the Babylonians. You are the mother, a palm of carnelian, the beautiful one, who is beautiful to a superlative degree.”

The alternative name of this Sefirah, *Rahamim* (Compassion or Love), corresponds to Ištar’s epithets “lady of love, the loving one, the one who loves all mankind,” etc. (cf. above and Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, s.v. *bēlet ru<sup>2</sup>ami* and *rā<sup>2</sup>imtu*). In her capacity as the goddess of love, Ištar had a special relationship to the Assyrian king, who is repeatedly portrayed as her baby (see my discussion in the introduction of *Assyrian Prophecies* and cf. *ibid.*, no. 1 iv 24, “[Ištar] have loved you [the king] very much”; see also n. 84 below). This correlates nicely with the primary connotation of the word *rahamim* (“motherly feeling, compassion”). Note, finally, that in contrast to the other Sefirot, the *Sefirah* of *Tiferet* was pictured as female; see n. 97 below, and cf. Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 127 f.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Ninurta’s epithets “the warrior, the mighty son of Enlil, the victor who threshes the foe but makes the righteous stand, who achieved victory for Enlil, whose strength is exalted, [possess]or of might, killer of Anzū” in Lambert, “The Gula Hymn of Bulluṣa-rabi,” *Or.* n.s. 36 (1967): 116 ff., lines 9–13; for Ninurta as the Mesopotamian victory god par excellence, see J. S. Cooper, *The Return of Ninurta to Nippur* (Rome, 1978), pp. 2 ff., and B. Hruška, *Der Mythenadler Anzu* (Budapest, 1975), pp. 116 ff. In the first millennium, Ninurta largely merged with Nabû (see F. Pomponio, *Nabû* [Rome, 1978], pp. 189 ff.); the latter figures as the vanquisher of Anzū in Cooper, *Return of Ninurta*, p. 147, and Livingstone, *SAA* 3 no. 38:12 (see also *ibid.*, nos. 34:57 f., 35:51 f., 39:24 ff. and r. 20, referring to Ninurta).

PILLAR OF EQUILIBRIUM

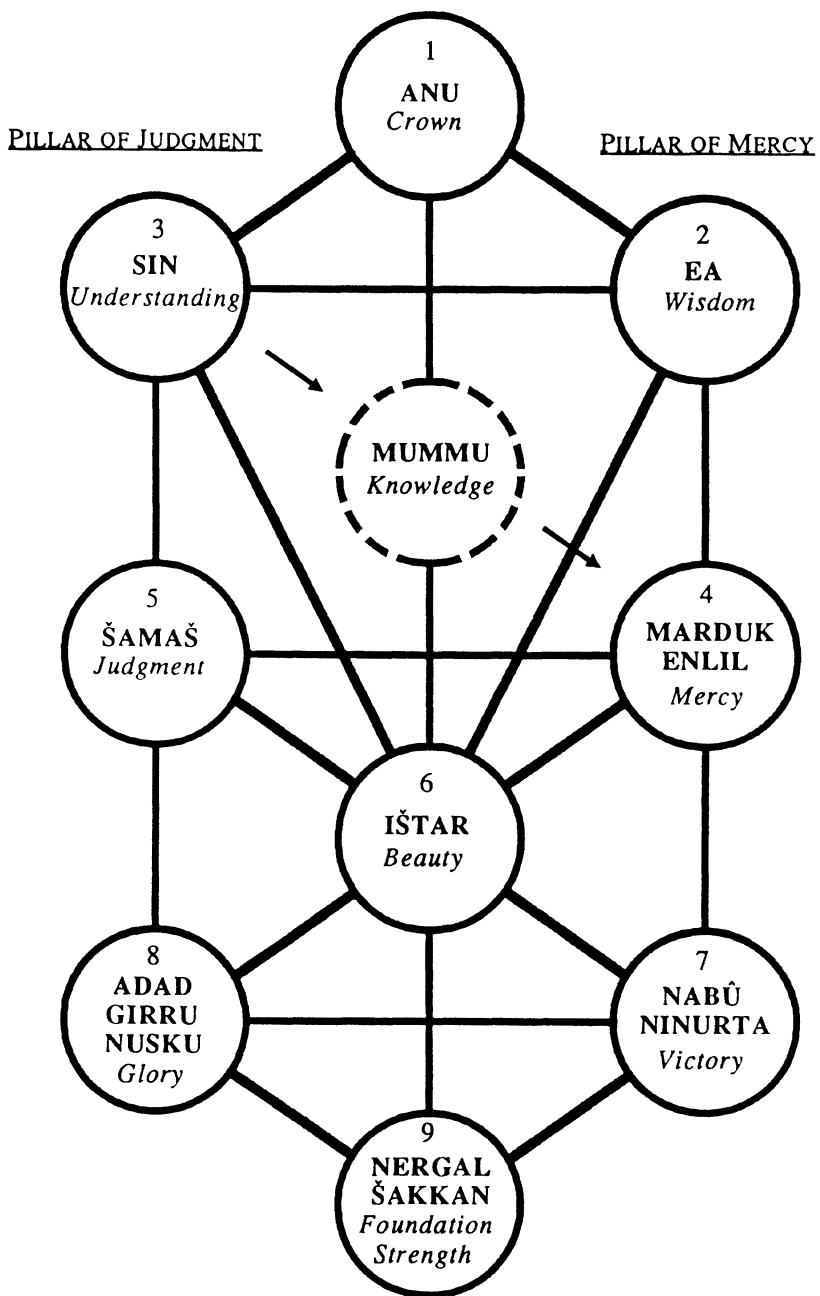


FIG. 7.—The reconstructed Tree

(just as his son Ninurta was equated with Nabû),<sup>76</sup> the topmost Sefirah most naturally corresponds to Anu, the god of Heaven.<sup>77</sup>

Foundation (*Yesod*) corresponds to Nergal, lord of the underworld, whose primary characteristic, strength, is in Akkadian homonymous with a word for foundation, *dunnu*.<sup>78</sup> For the identification of *Daat* with *Mummu* (Consciousness) and the number zero, see notes 111 and 125 below.

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The equation Ninurta = Nabû is explicitly attested in *CT* 25 11:12 and *KAR* 142 i 22 f. In Rav's list of ten creative powers (n. 49), Ninurta is represented as *Ge-vurah*, "might," which in the Sefirotic scheme normally occurs as an alternative name of *Din*.

In modern Kabbalistic literature, *Nezah* is, besides "Victory," also rendered "Endurance, Duration, Permanence, Eternity," and the like. Such renderings agree with the meaning of the word in modern Hebrew but not with the active nature of the Pillar of Mercy (see n. 53 above) nor with the attributes of Nabû and Ninurta. It should be noted that in rabbinical Hebrew the root *nšh* means only "to be victorious, win, prevail" (see Jastrow, *Dict.*, pp. 927 f.) and that the renderings "Endurance," etc., are not found in older Kabbalistic literature (see, for example, Robert Fludd, *Philosophia Sacra* [1626]: "Triumphus Victoria"; Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* [Rome, 1652]: "Victory").

<sup>75</sup> See U. Seidl, "Göttersymbole und -attribute," *RIA*, vol. 3, p. 486. In Assyria the crown also occurs as a symbol of Aššur by virtue of Aššur's equation with Anu and Enlil (see Reade, "Shikaf-i Gulgul: Its Date and Symbolism," *Iranica Antiqua* 12 [1977]: 38; K. Tallqvist, *Der assyrische Gott*, *StOr* 4/3 [Helsinki, 1932], p. 13; and n. 94 below); this aspect of Aššur is referred to in Assyrian cultic texts as Aššur-Crown or Aššur-Enlil, while Aššur himself is referred to as plain Aššur or Aššur-Aššur (see, for example, *3R* 66 i 14, iv 20 and v 24 f.).

<sup>76</sup> See n. 74; on the usurpation of Enlil's position by Marduk, see W. Sommerfeld, *Der Aufstieg Marduks*, *AOAT* 213 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1982), pp. 175 ff. As stressed by Sommerfeld, Enlil's assimilation to Marduk was for political reasons never overt but was realized covertly through Marduk's appellative Bēl ("Lord"), which replaces Enlil (See *SAA* 3 no. 39:31; cf. *ibid.* r. 12, where Bēl = Marduk), and through the mystic number 50, attributed to both gods.

<sup>77</sup> Note also *SAA* 3 no. 11 r. 5 (Assurbanipal's coronation hymn), where Anu is associated with the king's crown and Enlil with his throne. In Kabbalah, *Keter* is referred to as the "Ancient of Ancients, the Primordial Point or Monad," the first expression of God's primal will, which contains the plan of the entire universe and the power of all opposites in unity (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 113); it is the Alpha and the Omega, "all that was, is and will be, the place of first emanation and ultimate return" (Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 6). This corresponds to Anu's epithets "the first

(god), the heavenly father, the greatest one in heaven and earth, the one who contains the entire universe, the father/progenitor of the (great) gods, creator of everything" (Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, p. 254) and to his role in the creation process (see n. 55 above). For Anu as the Monad, see nn. 89, 94, and 104 below.

<sup>78</sup> See *CAD*, s.v., and note that the word occurs in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions not only as a common epithet of Nergal (in *bēl abāri u dunni*, "lord of power and strength") but also as a synonym of *uššu*, "foundation," and as designation of the netherworld (*dunni qaqqari*, "bedrock, terra firma"); cf. *SAA* 3 no. 39: 34 ff. and see n. 38 above. Note also that in Rav's list of ten creative powers (n. 49), *Yesod* (Foundation) is replaced by *Kah* (Strength).

In Kabbalah, *Yesod* is associated with "that aspect of the soul which corresponds to animal life and desires; [it is] located in the third world, the material and sensuous world, [and is] symbolic of both male and female genitals" (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 68 and 129). Nergal's association with animal life and sexual desires is clear from passages such as Ebeling, *Die akkadische Gebetsserie "Handerhebung"* (Berlin, 1953), p. 114:9 ("Enlil your father entrusted to you [Nergal] mankind, all living creatures, the cattle of Šakkan, and the herds of wild animals"), from his uncontrolled sexual behavior in the myth of *Nergal and Ereškigal* (S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* [Oxford, 1989], pp. 171 ff.) and from his appellative "Gazelle" (*CT* 12 16:38, equated with the cattle god Šakkan in *CT* 29 46:13). For Nergal as Pluto, note his names *Lugal-hegal* and *Ud-hegal*, "King of Opulence" and "Day of Opulence" (Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, pp. 353 and 476), as well as the personal name Šubši-mešrē-Šakkan, "Bring-Riches-Šakkan!" (*CAD*, s.v. *mešrū*). For Nergal as a beautiful, cunning Tempter (a role overlooked in E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal*, *AOAT* 11 [Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1971]), note his identification with the fox in Livingstone, *SAA* 3 no. 38:37 (cf. Fox Star = Erra, *CT* 33 i 17), his appellatives and epithets "King of Tricks" (*Lugal-gamma*), "cunning in tricks" (*uzun nikilti*), "of handsome face" (*ša pāni banū*), (Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, pp. 352 and 393 ff.), and his ability to evade recognition in *Nergal and Ereškigal* (Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 174). It seems likely that epithets such as "the power of earth" or "the strongest/most potent/powerful of gods" refer to Nergal specifically as the personification of sexual potency and man's animal instincts.

I had to resort to Tallqvist's *Akkadische Götterepitheta* to find that the only gods with epithets fitting the Sefirah of *Hod* (Splendor or Majesty) were the stormgod Adad, the firegod Girru, and Marduk, Nabû, and Ninurta,<sup>79</sup> the last three of whom already had their place in the diagram. Accordingly, this Sefirah corresponds to Adad and Girru, who share the same mystic number,<sup>80</sup> and it is noteworthy that in the Bible the word *hod* refers to Jahweh as a thundering and flashing storm.<sup>81</sup>

The last Sefirah, Kingdom (*Malkhut*), is defined as "the receptive potency which distributes the Divine stream to the lower worlds,"<sup>82</sup> which in Mesopotamia can only apply to the king as the link between God and Man.<sup>83</sup> The motif of the king as distributor of the Divine stream is repeatedly encountered on Assyrian seals, where he holds a streamer emanating from the winged disk above the sacred Tree (fig. 8).<sup>84</sup> I have excluded this Sefirah from the reconstructed model because it breaks the compositional harmony of the Tree and because the king, though impersonating the Tree, clearly does not form part of it in Assyrian art.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>79</sup> The Hebrew word *hod* means "glory, splendor, beauty, majesty" and in rabbinical Hebrew also "distinction, pride" (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, p. 337a); its closest semantic equivalent in Akkadian is the root *šrh* with its derivatives *šarhu* and *šitrahu*, "glorious, splendid, proud," both of which are well attested as epithets of Adad, Girru, Nabû, Ninurta, and Marduk (see Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, p. 230); the same gods also share the epithet *gašru*, "mighty" (ibid., p. 77). When referring to Adad and Girru, such epithets were certainly associated with the continuous flashing and roaring of a violent thunderstorm.

*Hod* is defined in Kabbalah as "the support of the fifth Sefirah Judgment" (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 129), which "picks up and passes on information" (Halevi, *Tree of Life*, p. 32) and "reverberates the impulse throughout the Tree" (idem, *Way of Kabbalah*, p. 31). This agrees with Adad's role as the oracle god *par excellence*, announcing, by his roar, divine judgments and decisions to mankind; cf. his name "King of Decisions" and epithets "lord of oracles/decisions, august judge," and the like (see Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, s.vv. *Lugal-ešbarra*, *bēl biri/purussī*, and *dajjānu širu*). Note that in Rav's list of ten creative powers (see n. 49 above), *Hod* is replaced by *Gaarah*, "Rebuke."

<sup>80</sup> See *RIA*, vol. 3, p. 499b (for *Gibil* = *Girru*, see ibid., pp. 383 f.). Besides Adad and Girru, the mystic number 10 was also assigned to Madanu ("Verdict") and Nusku, the god of vigilance and hope (manifested in the lunar crescent, cock, and lamp); the equation *Girru* = *Nusku* = *Madanu* = *Nuru* ("Light") is explicitly attested in Assyrian prayers; see Mayer, *Untersuchungen*, pp. 386 and 406 f. For Nusku-Girru's epithets *gašru*, *šarhu*, *bukur/ilitti Anim*, and *tappē Šamaš*, which this god shares with Adad, see ibid.

<sup>81</sup> "Then the LORD will make his voice heard in majesty (*hod*) and show his arm sweeping down in fierce anger with devouring flames of fire, with cloudburst and tempests of rain and hailstones" (Isa. 30:30, translation of the *New English Bible* [Oxford,

1970]). The beginning of this passage literally reads "Yahweh will make the majesty of his voice heard" (*hšmy<sup>c</sup> yhw<sup>h</sup> ʿt-hwd qwlw*), to be compared with "Adad, the voice of your [Aššur's] majesty" (*siqir illilūrika Addu*), *KAR* 128 r. 24.

<sup>82</sup> *The Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* (Jerusalem, 1958–59), p. 1090. Cf. Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 7 ("The lowest Sefirah, the complement to *Keter*, the Crown, is *Malkhut*, the Kingdom. In it the Divine Light is earthed. It constitutes the *Shekhinah*, the Presence of God in Matter"), and Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 130 ("It is through her that the divine grace of En-Sof passes through into the lower world").

<sup>83</sup> See n. 28 above and M.-J. Seux, "Königtum," *RIA*, vol. 6, pp. 162 f. and 166 ff.; A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago, 1964), pp. 98 f.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. nn. 25 and 55, and see, for further examples, Danthine, *Palmier-dattier*, figs. 163, 333, 371, 372, 379, 420, 424, 429, 430, 432, 435, 437, and 445. In Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 345, the streamers are exceptionally grasped not by the king but by a royal eunuch, probably the owner of the seal; the goddess Ištar appears in the background. The appearance of the goddess in the scene is not fortuitous; it should be noted that in Kabbalah, God's "Presence," *Shekhinah*, is envisioned as a beautiful woman, "virgin of light," with whom the mystic seeks to be united; see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 83 ff., 229 ff., and 315, with many striking examples, and see n. 145 below. This notion of the *Shekhinah* agrees perfectly with the role played by Ištar in Assyrian ecstatic prophecy, where she represents the Word of God manifested through prophetic spirit (*to pneuma*, "spiritus sanctus"); see my introduction in *Assyrian Prophecies*, and cf. n. 73 above. In a seal published by Lambert, "Near Eastern Seals in the Gulbenkian Museum of Oriental Art, University of Durham," *Iraq* 41 (1979): pl. 8:67, the streamers are held by Ištar herself along with another, unidentified, god.

<sup>85</sup> The secondary nature of the Sefirah *Malkhut* is also indicated by the fact that it is not included

Once the gods had been placed in the diagram, which did not take longer than half an hour, I filled in their mystic numbers using as a guide W. Röllig's article "Götterzahlen" in the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* (see fig. 9). For the most part, this was a purely mechanical operation;<sup>86</sup> in some cases, however, I had to choose between two or three alternative numbers.<sup>87</sup> The numbers shown in figure 9 are those used in the spelling of divine names in the Middle and Neo-Assyrian standard orthography, and all of them are securely attested.<sup>88</sup> I should point out that the number for Anu, 1, is erroneously given

among the six Sefirot constituting the "Lower Face" (see n. 52 above) in Kabbalistic tradition, nor in Rav's list of the ten creative divine powers (n. 49).

<sup>86</sup> That is, there was generally only one number per god and only one god per number. Gods with the same number were taken as equated and assigned the same place in the diagram (see nn. 74, 76, and 80).

<sup>87</sup> In Röllig's list, Ea has three numbers, 40, 50(?), and 60; Adad has two numbers, 6 and 10; Šamaš has two numbers, 10 and 20; Ninurta has two numbers, 9(?) and 50. Actually, "9" for Ninurta, deduced only from the god's association with the ninth day, remains unattested and is best ignored; "50" for Ea occurs only in <sup>m</sup>ur-50 = <sup>m</sup>l.ú-<sup>u</sup>é.A (5R 44 iii 15), which certainly is a mistake for Ur-40 (*Gilg.* X ii 22 and passim). This still leaves 6 and 10 for Adad, 10 and 20 for Šamaš, and 40 and 60 for Ea. In addition, a passage overlooked by Röllig has 40 = Ninurta, so that this god too had two numbers, 40 and 50.

Adad's number 6, which is the reciprocal of 10, plays a role only in the gematric speculations of I.NAM GIŠ.HUR and the cultic calendar *Inbu bel arhi*, where it is used to derive days sacred to Adad from combinations of 6 and 10 (6, 6 + 10, 6 + 10 + 10 and 6 + 6 + 6 + 10); see Landsberger, *Kult. Kalender*, p. 114. For a similar play with a mystic number, see Livingstone, *Mystical Works*, p. 41, lines 20–24, where Šamaš is equated with Sin (30 = 3) through the reciprocal of his mystic number 20 (3 = 60/20). Šamaš's number 10 has been derived from 20 by splitting the latter into two (cf. Livingstone, *ibid.*, lines 18 f.); it is attested only once in a lexical passage (see n. 104 below) and is clearly secondary to 20, used passim for writing the god's name. Ninurta's number 50, attributed to him as son of Enlil, is well attested and possibly of great antiquity (note Gudea's temple É-50 and the Ur III personal name *i-lf-ha-an-ša*, "My-God-is-50," UET 3 1080 r. ii 3); unlike 40, it was, however, never used for writing the god's name. For Ea's numbers 40 and 60, see Excursus 1, pp. 203–4 below.

<sup>88</sup> For numerous examples of Ea written with the sign 60 (𒂗), all but one of them Assyrian, see Galter, *Enki/Ea*, pp. 10, 228 (NB), 236, and 268, and note also *BBR* 26 iii 44; *KAR* 35 r. 15 and 37:8; 4 *R<sup>2</sup>* 33 iii 43; *Or.* n.s. 22 39 r. 8; *SAA* 3 no. 37:17.23.32, 38:26.32, 39:35; *STT* 88 r. iv 16; and G. van Driel, *The Cult of Aššur* (Assen, 1969), p. 98:32. Ea was never spelled 40 in Assyrian texts; the two examples cited by Galter (*Enki/Ea*, pp. 230 and 248) are Neo-Babylonian or Late Babylonian, and ND 4358+:67

(see I. Finkel, in E. Leichty et al., eds., *A Scientific Humanist: Studies in Memory of Abraham Sachs* [Philadelphia, 1988], pp. 148 f.) is a copy of a Middle Babylonian original. For 50 = Enlil, see *MSL* 14, pp. 255 and 285 (*Ea* II 176 and *Aa* II/4:203 ff.). The equation 50 = Marduk is established by 50 = <sup>d</sup>BE in *CT* 13 32 r. 12, commenting on the fifty names of Marduk in *Enūma eliš* VII 144. For 40 = Ninurta see *SAA* 3 no. 47 r. 3 (Neo-Assyrian); the reading is ascertained through collation by A. K. Grayson, "Literary Letters from Deities and Diviners: More Fragments," *JAOS* 103 (1983): 148; Borger, *RIA*, vol. 3, p. 576b; and *HKL* 1, p. 327. 30 = Sin was prolific in personal names from the Akkadian period on, see W. von Soden, *Das akkadische Syllabar*, AnOr 42, [Rome, 1967], p. 55, Ranke, *PN*; Saporetti, *Onomastica*; and Tallqvist, *APN* and *NBN*, passim. For 15 = Ištar and 10 = Adad in Middle Assyrian/Neo-Assyrian names, see Saporetti, *Onomastica*, vol. 2, pp. 177 ff., 191, and Tallqvist, *APN*, passim; only sporadic examples (all NB) are known from Babylonia. For many examples of 20 = Šamaš in Neo-Assyrian/Neo-Babylonian astrological texts, see *SAA* 8, p. 352; the spelling was avoided in personal names for fear of confusion with 20 = šarru. For 14 = Nergal/Šakkan, see *CT* 25 50:15 and cf. Landsberger, *Kult. Kalender*, p. 131, and von Weiher, *Nergal*, pp. 52 f.; the accuracy of King's copy (against Livingstone's "11," *Mystical Works*, pp. 32 f.) is ascertained through collations by M. Geller and W. G. Lambert.

After a single occurrence in the reign of Adad-nirari I (Andrae, *Stelenreihen* 90:2.4), the spelling 10 = Adad suddenly becomes productive under Shalmaneser I (1273–1244); see *KAJ* 48:17, 51:18, 57:5, 62:4, 81:6, 90:20, 114:15, 118:9, 120:14 and 27 ff., 123:3, 156:4, 180:12, 217:10, 224:20, 275:5, 299:6, *KAV* 104:18, *TR* 100:12 f., 101:10 f., 102:12, 2086:4, and 2904:1 (datings after Saporetti, *Gli eponimi medio-assiri* [Malibu, 1979]). The earliest attestation of 15 = Ištar (*KAJ* 85:30) is from the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207); see O. Pedersen, *Archives and Libraries in the City of Aššur*, vol. 1 (Uppsala, 1985), p. 115 with n. 9. The earliest examples of 60 = Ea (Weidner, *Tn.* 60:2 and 61:1) date from the late twelfth century (reign of Aššur-reš-iši I).

In sum, it can be seen that the practice of writing divine names with numbers emerged under the Middle Assyrian Empire and represents a genuinely Assyrian innovation; previously only the name of the moon god had been written this way, and only



FIG. 8.—The King as distributor of the Divine Stream. Cylinder seal impression, courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

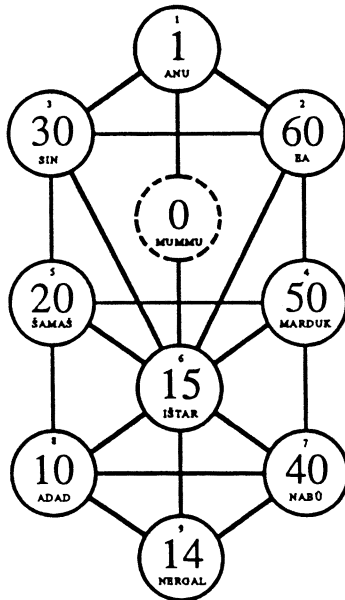


FIG. 9.—The distribution of the mystic numbers



as 60 in Röllig's article. Of course, the vertical wedge can also be read 60, but in the case of Anu, "the first god," the only reading that makes sense is 1, as we shall see presently.<sup>89</sup>

The ease with which the gods and their numbers fitted into the diagram was almost too good to be true, and the insights obtained in the process were more than encouraging. Suddenly, not only the diagram itself but the perplexingly opaque Mesopotamian *religion* as well started to make sense;<sup>90</sup> I felt on the verge of a major discovery.

#### THE DISTRIBUTION OF GODS AND NUMBERS IN THE DIAGRAM

Looking at the reconstructed diagram more closely, one observes that practically all the great gods of the Assyro-Babylonian pantheon figure in it, some occupying the same place because they were theologically equivalent.<sup>91</sup> Only one major god is missing, Aššur, for whom no mystic number is attested.<sup>92</sup> This strongly suggests that this impor-

sporadic examples of other numerically written god names are known from later Babylonia. This orthographical innovation can be securely dated to the early thirteenth century and thus coincides with the appearance of the Late Assyrian Tree (see n. 6).

<sup>89</sup> See p. 188. The point is that the vertical wedge, in the absence of a symbol for zero in the Mesopotamian number system, stood for *both* 1 and 60, just as our number 1 (depending on its context) is a symbol for both 1 and 10; the value "1" is of course the primary one in both cases. As "One and Sixty," Anu's number comprised the mystic numbers of all other gods; he was the Alpha and the Omega (cf. above, n. 77). This point is made quite explicit in the esoteric work *INAM GIŠ.HUR*, where Anu is associated not only with the crescent ("Appearance on the first day: the crescent (is) Anu . . . . The first (*rēšū*) god, father of the gods, 1 (is) Anu"), but, through a gematric operation, also with the full moon: "15 times 4 is 60 ['1']; 60 (is) Anu; he called the 'fruit' [= full moon]" (see Livingstone, *Mystical Works*, pp. 23 and 30; for passages associating Anu with the first month and the first day, see B. Landsberger, *Der kultische Kalender der Babylonier und Assyrer* [1915; Leipzig, 1968], p. 105, and D. D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib*, OIP 2 [Chicago, 1924], p. 136).

<sup>90</sup> In reducing the multitude of Mesopotamian gods to mere aspects of a few "great gods," and these again to mere aspects or powers of a single universal God (see below), the diagram unfolds a sophisticated monotheistic system of thought sharply deviating from the current simplistic notion of Mesopotamian religion and philosophy. As in Kabbalah, the key to the system is the Tree diagram, which functions as a mandala defining the essentials of the system in the simplest possible visual terms. Without this key, it would be next to impossible to understand the system on the basis of the scattered, highly symbolic, and often seemingly contradictory evidence of the Mesopotamian religious texts. A case in point is the god Ninurta/Nabû, who is still commonly regarded as "the god of war or hunting" (cf., for example, Saggs,

*The Might That Was Assyria*, p. 202) but is in fact a savior god comparable to Christ or Mithra; see Excursus 2, pp. 204–5 below.

<sup>91</sup> See nn. 74, 76, 78, 80, and 97. The pattern of equations and interrelationships found in the diagram is already discernible in the late second-millennium god list *An = Anum* (see Lambert, *RIA*, vol. 3, pp. 275 f.), which surveys the whole pantheon as an extended royal family starting with the divine king, Anu, and then proceeding as follows: 2. Enlil, Ninurta, Bēlet-ili; 3. Ea, Marduk, Nabû; 4. Sin, Šamaš, Adad; 5. Ištar; 6. gods equated with Nabû and Ninurta (Lugalmarada, Lugalbanda, Amurru, Tišpak, Inšušinak, Ištaran, Zababa, Uraš, Ningirsu); 7. Nergal and other chthonic deities. As can be seen, the structure of the list perfectly agrees with that of the diagram, bearing in mind that, for political reasons, the family of Enlil had to be presented as distinct from that of Marduk (see n. 76 above). In the diagram, which was esoteric, this requirement did not apply.

From the reign of Tiglath-Pileser I on (1114–1076), the gods found in the diagram appear as a group in Assyrian royal inscriptions, and by the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859), the composition of the group has become more or less standardized (cf. Grayson, *ARI*, vol. 2, §§ 8, 413, 486, 646; Tadmor, *SAA Bulletin* 3 [1989]: 26). Interestingly, transferring the Ashurnasirpal group into the diagram in the order in which the gods are enumerated, one obtains a complete outline of the Tree divided into the "Upper" and "Lower Faces" (see n. 52), with Ištar in the heart of the diagram as the terminal point (see fig. 10a); the same result is obtained when Rav's list of the ten creative powers are transferred to the diagram (see fig. 10d). This seems more than a coincidence; do we have in figure 10b the Assyrian "sign of the cross" defining the body of the Divine anthropos (cf. Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 138)?

<sup>92</sup> On the special status of Aššur within the pantheon, see also Lambert, "The God Aššur," *Iraq* 45 (1983): 82–85, who points out, among other things, that this important god "lacks the family connections which are characteristic of all the major gods and

tant god has to be identified with the winged disk over the Assyrian Tree from which the Divine stream emanates<sup>93</sup> and, accordingly, is identical with the transcendent God of Kabbalah, En Sof.<sup>94</sup> As a matter of fact, the various spellings of Aššur's name can, without difficulty, be interpreted as expressing the idea of the One, Only, or Universal God,

goddesses of the Babylonians and Sumerians, uniting them in one big clan. . . . One seeks in vain for his identity" (p. 82).

<sup>93</sup> On the still open debate concerning the meaning of the winged disk, see Reade, "Shikaft-i Gulgul," pp. 38 f., with earlier literature; cf. idem, *Assyrian Sculpture*, pp. 26 f., and Lambert, "Trees, Snakes and Gods," p. 439. While the plain winged disk certainly was a symbol of the sun god, the anthropomorphic disk with streamers (see n. 25 above; hereafter "the Icon") must be interpreted differently. Of decisive importance here is the textual evidence discussed in n. 28, which unquestionably establishes this particular form of the disk as a symbol of Aššur (see also n. 56 for the sun as a manifestation of Aššur). This symbolism—and it alone—accounts for the role of the Icon in the Achaemenid Empire, where it (despite P. Calmeyer, "Das Zeichen der Herrschaft . . . ohne Šamaš wird es nicht gegeben," *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 17 [1984]: 147) certainly symbolized Ahura Mazda, the "God of Heaven," equated with Jahweh in Ezra 1:2.

It should be stressed, however, that, according to the Assyrian(!) esoteric text SAA 3 no. 39 r. 4 f., the god riding in the disk was not Aššur but Marduk. This shows that the Icon represented a composite symbol consisting of several subordinate elements, each of which defined one aspect of Aššur. The figure of Marduk portrayed him as the creator, the winged disk, as the light of the world; the arrows shot by the god identified him as the conqueror of evil (see Excursus 2, pp. 204–5 below), the bow held by him represented Ištar, the power of love (cf. *En. el.* VI 84–91 and *CAD*, s.v. *qaštu*, pp. 149b and 152b). The streams emanating from the disk identified him as the source of wisdom (see nn. 55 and 69), their lightning ends underlined his might (see nn. 72 and 79); the Maltese Cross sometimes drawn inside the solar disk (Calmeyer, "Das Zeichen der Herrschaft," pp. 142 f.) portrayed him as the lord of the universe (see *LAS*, vol. 2, pp. 330 f., and note the Assyrian spelling of Ninurta with the sign of the cross, <sup>d</sup>MAŠ; see also n. 103 below).

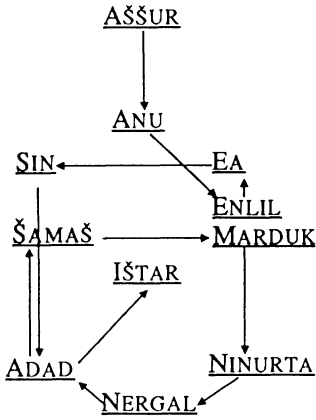
Thus the Icon portrayed Aššur as the sum total of the entire divine *pleroma* (see n. 56). This is consistent with the fact that in some seal scenes (for example, Danthine, *Palmier-dattier*, figs. 444, 471, 476; Orthmann, *Der alte Orient*, no. 274; S. Herbordt, *SAA Studies* 1, p. 99), the solar disk of the Icon is replaced or accompanied by the lunar crescent; for the moon as an embodiment of the divine *pleroma*, see nn. 66 and 89 above. In Collon, *First Impressions*, no. 346, the crescent replaces the Tree.

According to SAA 3 no. 39 r. 4 f., the divine figure

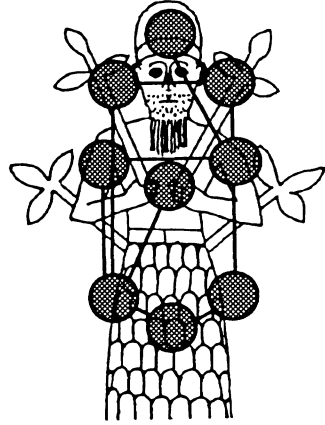
inside the moon represented Nabû. Thus it may be hypothesized that in Icons showing two minor gods beside the central figure (see n. 25 above), the right-hand god likewise represented Nabû, occupying a place of honor beside his father comparable to that of Christ or Michael as "the archon of all the holy forms on the right side of God" (see Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 147 f. and Excursus 2 below). To complete the trinity with a female member, the left-hand god would then logically be Marduk's wife Zarpanitu, alias Bēltiya, "My Lady," the Babylonian Madonna (cf. SAA 3 no. 37 r. 24 ff. and SAA 9 no. 1 ii 16 ff., and see n. 97 below).

<sup>94</sup> See nn. 50, 55, 56, and 113. In Kabbalistic theosophy, En Sof ("The Limitless") is defined as total unity beyond comprehension; his Will to manifest himself, which lies behind all existence, is called *En Sof Or*, "The Endless Light," and envisioned as a boundless ocean of light engulfing and pervading the physical world (see, for example, Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 5, and *Tree of Life*, pp. 28 f.; Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 93 ff.; Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 67 f. and 307 with n. 72; for En Sof as "the circle," see *ibid.* p. 63). The relationship of the Will of En Sof (i.e., *En Sof Or*) to his first emanation (i.e., *Keter*) has been a matter of debate among Kabbalists, and many claim the identity of the two of them (see Scholem, "Kabbalah," pp. 560 f.). In the popular Kabbalah, En Sof is "merely a synonym for the traditional God of religion" (*ibid.*, p. 559).

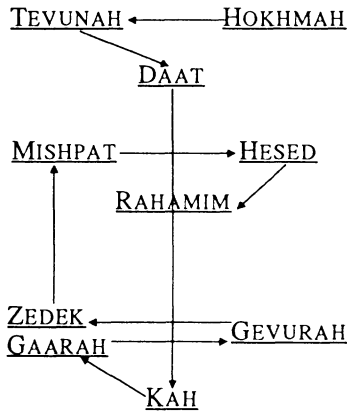
This accords well with the fact that Aššur is commonly referred to as "the God" in Assyrian cultic texts (e.g., *KAR* 215 r. ii 9; van Driel, *Cult of Aššur*, pp. 88:36 and 136:16 ff.; Ebeling, "Kultische Texte aus Assur," *Or.* n.s. 22 (1953): 36 r. 5 ff. and 39 r. 4) and identified with Anu in god lists (see Lambert, "The Gula Hymn," p. 130, and see also n. 75 above and pp. 191 f. below). In Craig, *ABRT* I 83, Aššur is called "king of the totality of gods, creator of himself; father of the gods, who grew up in the Abyss; king of heaven and earth, lord of all gods, who emanated (lit., "poured out") the supernal and infernal gods and fashioned the vaults of heaven and earth"; in SAA 3 no. 34:53 ff. and 35:44 ff., he is said to be "dressed in water" (see n. 96 below) and have "come into being before heaven and earth existed." Note that the solar disk in Aššur's icon is sometimes replaced by two concentric circles with a point in the center (see Collon, *First Impressions*, no. 340; Danthine, *Palmier-dattier*, fig. 488), identical with the Kabbalistic diagram illustrating the manifestation of En Sof as the Universal Monad (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 52). For the Apsu (Abyss) as ocean of light, see nn. 69 and 96.



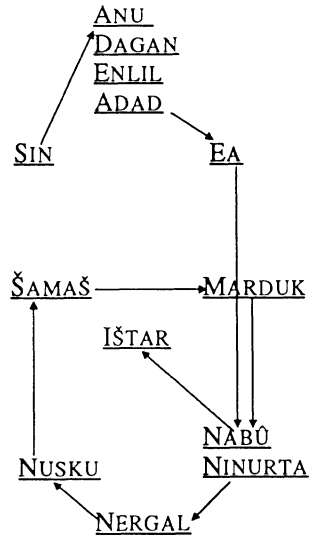
a. Grayson, *ARI* 2, §§ 486 and 646 (reigns of Tukulti-Ninurta II and Ashurnasirpal II).



b. The same plotted on the body of the Divine anthropos. After A. Parrot, *Nineveh and Babylon* (London, 1961), fig. 9.



c. KAR 25 (see Excursus 2). In this list, Adad exceptionally appears among gods of the Upper Face to make possible the clockwise round of the Lower Face.



d. Rav's list of creative powers (see nn. 49 and 70 ff.).

FIG. 10.—Enumerations of Gods and divine powers

as well as the various qualities of En Sof.<sup>95</sup> The solar disk through which he was primarily represented implies that his essential nature was light, as in Kabbalah.<sup>96</sup>

Of the gods found in the diagram, Anu, king of Heaven, occupies the crown; Ištar, his daughter, representing all female deities,<sup>97</sup> occupies the middle; and Nergal, the lord of the underworld, the base of the trunk. The remaining gods are arranged to the right and left sides of the trunk in a corresponding way, with sons lined under their fathers. In other words, the tree is composed of three successive *generations of gods* appearing horizontally as interrelated trinities, to be compared with the triadic configuration of nodes, volutes, and circles of the Assyrian Tree (see fig. 2 and nn. 22–25 above).<sup>98</sup> The

<sup>95</sup> See Excursus 3, pp. 205–8 below.

<sup>96</sup> The “garment of water” covering Aššur (n. 94) is a metaphor identifying him as “the ocean of divine light, to whom all returns”; on this Kabbalistic metaphor, also used in Christian, Muslim, and Indian mysticism, see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 67 ff. On seals, the Icon is often abbreviated to a mere winged disk (see Appendix B, pp. 201–2 below).

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Landsberger, *Kult. Kalender*, pp. 105 and 131, on the “vereinfachung des weiblichen Pantheons” in the Assyrian cultic calendar, and note the equations Zarpanitu = Bēlet-ilī = Šerua = Erua = Ištar in Mayer, *Untersuchungen*, pp. 379 f. and 425, and Gula = Nintinugga = Nanše = Ninkarrak = Baba = Ninsun = Mullissu in Lambert, “The Gula Hymn,” p. 109; in KAR 109, Baba is addressed as “Mullissu of the gods” and equated with Ningal, Aya, Ištar, Erua, etc. In accordance with this, Assyrian texts frequently speak of “the gods and Ištar,” the singular implying that there was, in fact, only one, not several, “female” deities; see, for example, Ebeling, “Mittelassyrische Rezepte,” pl. 26 r. 9; *TCL* 3, p. 20: 115; SAA 3 no. 1: 16 (Aššur as the progenitor of “the gods and Ištar”). Such a usage of course perfectly agrees with the Tree diagram, where Ištar is surrounded by eight “male” deities; cf. the Kabbalistic parable in *Bahir* explaining the divine *pleroma* as a garden planted with nine male (palm) trees and one feminine tree (the ethrog), analyzed in Scholem, *Origins*, p. 172 (cf. n. 124 below).

In this context, it is noteworthy that the plural *ilāni*, “gods,” is used as a divine name and *construed as a singular noun* in Middle and Neo-Assyrian personal names. Examples are Iqbi-ilani “*ilāni* commanded (sg.)” (*CTN* 3 52 r. 9, *VAS* 1 99 r. 2, etc.) and Remanni-ilani “*ilāni*, have (sg.) mercy on me!” (*VAT* 9693 r. 1), both seventh century, to be compared with Iqbi-Aššur/Ilu/Ištar, “Aššur/God/Ištar commanded,” and Remanni-Aššur/Ilu/Ištar; Ilani-eriš, “*ilāni* requested (sg.)” (*Afo* 10 39 no. 84:8, twelfth century); and Ilani-aha-iddina (*TR* 3016:6, thirteenth century), to be compared with Aššur/Ilu/Ištar-eriš and the royal name Aššur-ahu-iddina (*Esarhaddon*). The parallel names imply that *ilāni* here stands for the divine *pleroma* conceived as one god, and this conclusion is corroborated by such names as Gabbu-ilani-šarru-ušur, “All gods, protect (sg.) the king!” (*Ass.* 8890: 9 and r. 5) and Gabbu-ilani-eriš,

“All gods requested (sg.)” (Tallqvist, *APN*, p. 78). Note that the latter name was borne by the chief scribe and ideologist of Ashurnasirpal II; and see nn. 30, 31, and 38 above. This usage of *ilāni*, of course, has a well-known parallel in this biblical *pluralis majestatis*, *elohim*, “God” (lit. “gods”).

<sup>98</sup> On the triadic structure of the Sefirotic Tree, in general, see Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 8. The horizontal triads, corresponding to the divine generations, are referred to as “a succession of layers” (see Scholem, *Origins*, p. 75, quoting the Book of *Bahir*) and associated not only with the “Worlds of Creation” (see n. 55), but also with three degrees of consciousness and layers of the soul. The latter association gives the Tree a psychological dimension equaling in importance its theological and cosmological dimensions.

The topmost triad, representative of En Sof’s power of thought, corresponds to the highest degree of consciousness, the divine or “over-soul” *Neshamah* located in the center Sefirah, *Keter* (head). It is “the place where the individual perceives the ‘plan’ or meaning of being” (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 204).

The second triad, representative of En Sof’s moral power and emotion, corresponds to the self-conscious soul *Ruah* located in the Sefirah *Tiferet* (heart). It is the world of “moral virtues and ability to distinguish between good and evil . . . a position where [man can] see others not in the light of his own needs, but in the light of their own” (*ibid.*, pp. 202 ff.).

The lowermost triad corresponds to the “animal soul,” *Nefesh*, located in the Sefirah *Yesod* (genitals). It is the world of instincts where “all conscious energies are concentrated in the sexual and instinctual sphere [and] the individual is conscious only of his own needs” (*ibid.*).

In contrast to the cosmological Tree, which is visualized as emanating from above (cf. the “inverted tree” in Cook, *The Tree of Life*, pl. 38), the psychological Tree is rooted in the netherworld, and its different layers are viewed in terms of a gradual progress towards a higher form of consciousness. In *Hekhalot Rabbati*, the Tree is likened to “a celestial ladder whose first edge is on the earth and second edge on the right leg of the throne of glory” (Dan, *Revelation*, p. 30; see also *ibid.*, p. 22, where “the one who is worthy to observe the King and the throne” is likened to “a man who has a ladder in his house”). This imagery is reflected in the iconography of the Assyrian Tree (cf. nn. 20 and 22).

lines connecting the gods exactly render the divine genealogies known from late second- and early first-millennium texts.<sup>99</sup>

But that is not all. The distribution of the mystic numbers in the diagram (fig. 9) adds to it a dimension unknown in the Sefirotic Tree. Six of the numbers are full tens, all neatly arranged, in descending order, on the branches of the Tree: those higher than 30 to the right, the rest to the left side. The numbers on the trunk are not tens, and their arrangement is different: they begin with 1, as in the Sefirotic Tree, but the following two are not in numerical order. Does this distribution make any sense?

Initially, we note that the numbers on the trunk, when added together, yield 30, the median number of the sexagesimal system.<sup>100</sup> From the standpoint of number harmony, this tallies beautifully with the medium position of the trunk and recalls its Kabbalistic designation, the Pillar of Equilibrium. The position of the number 15 in the center of the diagram is justifiable from the same point of view.<sup>101</sup>

On the surface, the numbers on the right and left of the trunk seem to upset the balance of the Tree because the numbers on the left are consistently smaller than those on the right. Yet, when one adds the numbers together, one obtains for each branch the same total (30) as for the trunk, the Pillar of Equilibrium. This is so because the numbers on the left side, according to the polar system of oppositions governing the Tree, are negative and thus *have to be subtracted* from those on the right side.<sup>102</sup> The sum total of the branches and the trunk ( $4 \times 30 = 120$ ) added to the sum total of the individual numbers ( $1 + 10 + 14 + 15 + \dots + 60 = 240$ ) yields 360, the number of days in the Assyrian cultic year and the circumference of the universe expressed in degrees.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>99</sup> For Anu, Ea, Sin, Šamaš, Ištar, Marduk, Nabû, Ninurta, and Nergal, see Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, pp. 251 ff. and see also n. 91 above. Adad, Girru, and Nusku are, because of their association with fire, addressed as sons of Anu (see nn. 65 and 79 f.). Note that Marduk and Ištar are called “the brother” (*talimu*) and “sister” (*talimtu*) of Šamaš, while Ištar is “the daughter” of both Anu and Sin and “the daughter-in-law” of Ea. This fits Ištar’s position in the diagram perfectly and recalls a passage in the Assyrian prophecies (SAA 9 no. 3 ii 35), where Ištar invites her “divine fathers and brothers” to join the covenant she is concluding with the King. In this text, Ištar is unquestionably identical with Aššur (cf. *ibid.* ii 27 with iii 14 f., and see Excursus 2, pp. 204–5 below).

<sup>100</sup> For 30 as the median number, see the esoteric passage “*bà = share, bā = half; half (bā) of Sin (30) is half of a half*” (Livingstone, *Mystical Works*, p. 23:12 [I.NAM GIŠ.HUR]).

<sup>101</sup> The position of Beauty in the middle of the Tree makes it “the central focus [which] joins and reconciles the flow of various paths that come through its junction station” (Halevi, *Way of Kabbalah*, p. 31); in *Sefer Yezirah*, the Sefirot are said to be “knotted in unity in the middle,” as if the writer had the Assyrian Tree with its central node (see n. 22 above) before his eyes. A diagram in Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 104, captioned “Beauty as the bearer of all powers,” represents the Sefirotic Tree in the form of an eight-pointed star, with *Tiferet* as its source of

light. This, of course, immediately recalls the eight-pointed star attested as a symbol of Ištar since the late second millennium B.C. (cf. Seidl, *RIA*, vol. 3, pp. 484 f.; Reade, “Shikft-i Gulgul,” pp. 37 f.). The choice of 15 as the mystic number of Ištar can actually be explained only with reference to the diagram; note that the emergence of this mystic number coincides with the emergence of the Assyrian Tree (see n. 88 above).

<sup>102</sup> See n. 53 above.

<sup>103</sup> The significance of this grand total can be appreciated when it is recalled that in the doctrinal system of Basilides (early second century), God is the union of the 365 days of the year, 365 being the gematric value of both His mystic name ABRASAX and its Greek appellation *hagion onoma* (“holy name”); see Contenau, “Notes d’iconographie,” p. 156, for many other examples of gematria (Greek: isopsephy) in early Christianity and Gnosticism. As noted by Contenau, the letters of Mithra (Greek *Mithras*) interpreted gematrically likewise yield the number 365. See also Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 170 f., for 358 as the number of the Messiah (Hebrew *mšyḥ* =  $40 + 300 + 10 + 8$ ).

A schematic year of 360 days divided into twelve months of 30 days each is encountered not only in the Assyrian cultic calendar *Inbu bēl arhi* (see n. 87 above) but also in the late second-millennium astronomical text *Mul Apin* (see Excursus 1, pp. 203–4 above); in the latter, it is correlated with a division of

In all, it can be said that the distribution of the mystic numbers in the diagram displays an internal logic and, remarkably, contributes to the overall symmetry, balance, and harmony of the Tree. All this numerical beauty is lost with the decimal numbering of the Sefirotic Tree, which only reflects the genealogical order of the gods.<sup>104</sup> The fact that the numerical balance of the Tree can be maintained only on the condition that the left-side numbers are negative, as required by Kabbalistic theory, in my opinion amounts to *mathematical proof* of the correctness of the reconstruction. Considering further the perfect match obtained with the placement of the gods, their grouping into meaningful triads and genealogies,<sup>105</sup> and the identification of Aššur with the winged disk, I feel very confident in concluding that the Sefirotic Tree *did* have a direct Mesopotamian model and that this model was perfected in the Assyrian Empire, most probably in the early thirteenth century B.C.<sup>106</sup>

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the solar year into four seasons of equal length, corresponding to the later division of the ecliptic into twelve zodiacal signs of 30 degrees each (see van der Waerden, *Anfänge der Astronomie*, pp. 78 f.). Since the correct length of the solar year (365 days) is also found in *Mul Apin*, the text's insistence on the schematic year indicates a desire to state the length of the year in terms of "time degrees" derived from the circular path of the sun "round" the earth. In other words, the author of the text associated the sun not only with the length of the year but with the circumference of the universe as well. This conclusion is confirmed by Julianus Apostata's (361–363) hymn to King Helios, which, as observed by van der Waerden (*ibid.*, pp. 227 ff.), is directly based on *Mul Apin*.

This association explains the particular form of the solar disk in Aššur's icon (see n. 93 above): the Maltese Cross symbolized the turning points and thus gave the disk a cosmic dimension, making it a symbol of the universe. The wavy lines radiating out between the arms of the cross, sometimes terminating in palmettes (Calmeyer, "Das Zeichen der Herrschaft . . .," pp. 142 f. and 150), turn the disk into a variant of the eight-pointed star symbol of Ištar (n. 101), representing the divine *pleroma* in the form of a four-spoked wheel. The wheel form certainly referred to the eternal rotation of the seasons and thus added to the disk the notion of eternity.

We thus have the following string of associations: Sun = Year = Universe = Eternity. It is not difficult to see why both Christ and Mithra were associated not only with the year but also with the sun and (Mithra) with the Zodiac.

<sup>104</sup> The decimal numbering of the Sefirot derived from their order of emanation (see n. 48 above) of course also applies to the Assyrian Tree; see n. 87 showing that the number 3 was associated with Sin, the third god to be emanated; see also n. 117. With the inclusion of Mammu (zero), the equivalent of the non-Sefirah *Daat* (see nn. 110 and 124, and cf. nn. 49 and 52), the total of the gods in the reconstructed Tree becomes 10, equaling the number of the Sefirot in the Sefirotic Tree. In early Kabbalah, as also in

Gnosticism, the need to unify the ten divine powers is commonplace; see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 120 f. Note especially the following passage from *The Refutation of All Heresies* by the Gnostic Monoimos, cited *ibid.*: "The monad, [that is] the one tittle, is, therefore, he says, also a decad. For by the actual power of this one tittle are produced duad, and triad, and tetrad, and pentad, and hexad, and heptad, and ogdoad, and ennead, up to ten. For these numbers, he says, are capable of many divisions, and they reside in that uncompounded and single tittle of the iota." Compare this with the Mesopotamian lexical passage *Aa II/4*: 1 ff. (MSL 14, p. 280) explaining the number ten as "Anu, Antu, Enlil, Sin, Šamaš, Adad, Ištar, Ištar as a star, totality, wisdom, god, creation, and counting." It will surely not have escaped the attention of Mesopotamian mystics that 360 (see preceding note) multiplied by ten yields 3,600, the number of totality and perfection (ŠĀR); cf. Excursus 3, pp. 205–8 below.

<sup>105</sup> See also nn. 70, 74, 79, and 99 f. on the positions of Sin, Ninurta, Adad, and Ištar in the diagram.

<sup>106</sup> In light of the evidence discussed above (see nn. 6, 33, 36 f., 56, 65 f., 88, and 97, and Excursus 2 below), it is clear that the emergence of the Tree, and the monotheistic ideas connected with it, correlates with the rise of the Middle Assyrian Empire and the assumption of the title "king of the universe" by the Assyrian emperors; the doctrine of "unity in multiplicity" (see n. 21 above), of course, admirably suited the structure of this empire, which was not just a large multinational state but a veritable *pleroma* of diverse semi-independent vassal powers unified under the absolute power of the king. The title "king of the universe" is already attested for the founder of the empire, Aššur-uballit I (1369–28), and his Babylonian contemporary Burnaburiaš II (see Seux, *Epithètes*, pp. 308 ff.: the single attestation of the title for Kurigalzu I listed there comes from a late copy and is uncertain); the numerical spelling of the word "universe" with the sign ŠĀR, "3,600," however, becomes established only under Adad-nirari I (1305–1274) and Kurigalzu II (1332–1308), the son of Aššur-uballit installed by the latter on the Babylonian throne. It is worth noting that

Being able to reconstruct this Tree, date it, and understand the doctrinal system underlying it has tremendous implications to the history of religion and philosophy which cannot be pursued within the limits of this paper.<sup>107</sup> I will content myself with three concrete examples illustrating how the insights provided by the Tree are bound to revolutionize our understanding of Mesopotamian religion and philosophy.

### III. THE TREE AND MESOPOTAMIAN RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

#### THE BIRTH OF THE GODS IN *ENŪMA ELIŠ*

In *Enūma eliš*, the narrator, having related the birth of Anu, mysteriously continues: "And Anu generated Nudimmud (= Ea), his likeness." This can only be a reference to

the first attestation of the spelling AN.ŠĀR = Aššur likewise occurs in an inscription of this very Kurigalzu II (see Seux, *Epithètes*, p. 311).

Thus, already by the late fourteenth century, the Tree with its pinecone "garland" certainly connoted the idea of "unity in multiplicity" and may also have involved a numerical interpretation; note that the mystic numbers of Šamaš (20), Sin (30), Ea (40), and Enlil (50) occur in the Middle Babylonian lexical text *Ea* (Tablet II, 164–76), tentatively assigned "to the middle of the Kassite period" by M. Civil, *MSL* 14, p. 169; cf. *ibid.* p. 156. The fact that the numbers of Adad (10) and Ištar (15) are *not* included in *Ea* but appear only under Shalmaneser I and Tukulti-Ninurta I, however (see n. 88), strongly suggests that the final (mathematical) form of the Tree diagram was perfected no earlier than about 1250 B.C.

While the Tree diagram and the elaborate doctrinal system associated with it can thus be considered an Assyrian creation, the general symbolism of the Tree, including its psychological dimension, is much older and may well go back to the third millennium B.C., if not earlier; see p. 1 above with nn. 1 and 14, and nn. 109, 139, and 149 below.

<sup>107</sup> As a point of departure, it should be understood that the Assyrian religion was not only imposed on vassals (see *SAA* 2 no. 6:393 f. and p. xxx), but also actively propagated throughout the empire (cf. *SAA* 3 no. 1:3–10 and r. 9–12). Thus the religious ideas connected with the Tree were, with time, bound to spread out and take root within the confines of the empire and even abroad. This process is amply documented by archaeological evidence (the most striking example being the direct transfer of Assyrian religious symbolism to Achaemenid imperial art [see n. 93 above]), and it is reflected in the sudden emergence of "new" religions and philosophies (Zoroastrianism, Pythagoreanism, Orphism, Platonism, Jewish monotheism) in Assyria's former dependencies after the collapse of the empire. It is well known that leading Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus and Porphyry (who as Orientals should have known!), believed that the teachings of Pythagoras, Plato, and the Orphics originated in the East (see, for example, D. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived: Mathe-*

*matics and Philosophy in Late Antiquity* [Oxford, 1989], p. 27, and R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* [London, 1972], pp. 13 ff. and 104 ff.). This claim, which is perfectly consonant with what is known of the lives of Pythagoras and Plato, and has been repeated several times, though never "proven" (see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 256 f., and n. 67 above), is put in a totally new light by the evidence cited in this article.

As regards the birth of Jewish monotheism in particular, which has been taken as a "reaction" to syncretistic and polytheistic pressures from the outside world threatening the national and religious identity of the Jews, the evidence presented in this article shows that the truth is not that simple. During the seventh through fifth centuries B.C., the Jews did in fact face the threat of national extinction, but that threat was caused by Jehoiakim's and Zedekiah's adventurous foreign policies leading to the destruction of the Jewish state and the cult of Jahweh, not by foreign ideologies. Biblical passages such as Chron. 29:11, enumerating the Sefirot constituting the "Lower Face" in the very order *gedullah-gevurah-tiferet-nezah-hod* in David's blessing to Solomon, or Prov. 3:19, presenting the triad *hokhmah-tevunah-daat* as God's power of creation (see nn. 49, 52, and 55 above), are clear evidence that the backbone of Assyrian and Kabbalistic monotheism, the Tree diagram, was part and parcel of the Deuteronomistic religion as well. As soon as it is realized that the Biblical image of God, epitomized in the diagram, is but a copy of an Assyrian model, there is nothing unique in Jewish monotheism to differentiate it from its Assyrian predecessor (see also n. 97, on Biblical *elohim* = "God," and nn. 68, 90, 93, and Excursus 3 below).

The same applies to Christianity with its doctrines of the Trinity, God the Father, the Holy Ghost, Unity of the Father with the Son, etc., all of which are derived from Assyrian religion and philosophy (see nn. 3, 21, 25, 56, 67, 84, 90, 93, 96, 103, and Excursus 2 below). The crucial significance of the Tree to early Christianity is made evident by the reference to it in Rev. 22, the last chapter of the Bible, mirroring the famous Tree passage in Gen. 2–3, at the very beginning of the Bible. This configuration makes the

the fact that the mystic numbers of these two gods, 1 and 60, were written with the same sign,<sup>108</sup> and indicates that the composer of the epic conceived the birth of the gods as a mathematical process.

On the surface, of course, the theogony of *Enūma eliš* is presented in terms of human reproduction.<sup>109</sup> As the example just quoted shows, however, it did involve more than just one level of meaning. In fact, the curious sequence of “births” presented in Tablet I 1–15 makes much better sense when it is rephrased “mathematically” as follows:

“When the primordial state of undifferentiated unity (Apsu + Mummu + Tiamat, “±0”),<sup>110</sup> in which nothing existed, came to an end, nothingness was replaced by the binary system of oppositions (Lahmu and Lahamu)<sup>111</sup> and the infinite universe (Anšar = Aššur) with its negative counterpart (Kišar).<sup>112</sup> Aššur emanated Heaven (Anu) as his primary manifestation, to mirror his existence to the world.”<sup>113</sup> Thus rephrased, the passage comes very close to Kabbalistic and Neoplatonic metaphysics.<sup>114</sup>

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Tree, which is Christ, *the key to the theological structure of early Christianity*, its “Alpha and Omega, [its] first and [its] last, [its] beginning and [its] end” (Rev. 22:13).

<sup>108</sup> See n. 89 above.

<sup>109</sup> The metaphysical propositions of Tantra are stated in very similar terms, but the sexual allegory is taken much further. Reality in its primordial state is presented as consisting of two principles, male and female [= Apsu and Tiamat], so deeply joined in bliss that they are unaware of their differences and beyond time. Slowly, consciousness [= Mummu] awakens, and the pair become aware of their distinction [= Lahmu and Lahamu]. The female “objective” [= Kišar] separates from the male “subject” [= Aššur] and begins the sacred dance which “weaves” the fabric of the world (see P. Rawson, *Tantra: The Indian Cult of Ecstasy* [London, 1973], pp. 18 f.). It is clear that this allegory is strongly implicit in *Enūma eliš*, too, but the phrasing of the text is kept intentionally vague to allow other interpretations as well, including misinterpretations.

The idea of an inverted tree (see n. 98 above) representing a manifestation of the cosmos from a single transcendent source, Brahman, is already attested in the earliest Indian scriptures, the Vedas and Upanishads (ca. 900–500 B.C.). This inverted tree is not derived from the Assyrian Tree; its visualization as the fig tree (*asvattha*) links it with the Harappan sacred tree motif (see n. 1 above), suggesting that the basic doctrines of the Tree had already spread to India by the early third millennium B.C. via Proto-Elamite intermediaries.

<sup>110</sup> Note the way in which the unity of Apsu, Mummu, and Tiamat is presented in the text: the waters of Apsu and Tiamat are said to mix with each other, and Mummu (lacking the divine determinative, in contrast to line 31 ff.) is not presented as a distinct being but directly attached (almost as an attribute) to Tiamat. For Mummu as the cosmic mind or consciousness “zeroed” in the primordial state see n. 109, and note that Damascius, *Questiones de pri-*

*mi principiis*, chap. 125 (see Excursus 3 below), referring to Babylonian informants, explains Mummu as *ton noeton kosmon*, “cosmic reason (or consciousness).” In *En. el.* I 48, *mummu* (without the divine determinative) clearly has the meaning “mind, reason”; cf. *milik tēmiya*, OIP 2, p. 109 vii 5, and note that there was no semantic distinction between “mind,” “reason,” or “consciousness” in Akkadian (cf. *AHW*, s.v. *tēmu*). For Mummu as an equivalent of the Sefirah *Daat*, see n. 124 below, and note the definitions of *Daat* as “the cosmic consciousness” and “the door into Timelessness . . . the edge of where Time does not exist” in Halevi, *Kabbalah*, pp. 168 and 182. The interpretation of Mummu as the equivalent of zero, implied by its position in the Tree diagram (cf. n. 116), is also clear from its insertion between the male and female principles in *En. el.* I 3–4.

<sup>111</sup> That Lahmu and Lahamu represent the binary oppositions is made clear by Mesopotamian iconography, where they are represented as antithetically (often upside-down) posed naked figures struggling with each other or separating heaven from earth; see Lambert, “The Pair Lahmu-Lahamu in Cosmogony,” *Or.* n.s. 54 (1985): 189–202, especially 197 ff. For the nudity of the figures, see Gen. 3:7–11.

<sup>112</sup> As the opposite of Aššur (Endless Light), Kišar must be understood as the finite physical universe (dominated by darkness). It corresponds to the void created by En Sof for his manifestation; cf. Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 5, and Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 79 ff.

<sup>113</sup> Note that in this connection the text carefully avoids using the word “created” or “made”: literally translated, the passage reads “Anšar reflected (*umaššil*) Anu, his first-born.” The idea of reflection is further strengthened by the chiasmic insertion of Anu in the preceding line. For the emanation of *Keter* as the “mirror” of En Sof’s existence see Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 5; on the identity of Aššur and Anu and En Sof and *Keter*, see nn. 75 and 94 above.

<sup>114</sup> For the latter, see, for example, Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp. 47–72.



Lines 21–24 of Tablet I of *Enūma eliš* seem to describe the “birth” of the mystic number of Sin which can be derived from the number of Ea by simply dividing it by two.<sup>115</sup> The irritation of Apsu caused by this play with numbers and the subsequent killing of Apsu and “leashing” of Mummu (lines 29–72) seem to be an etiology for the emanation of the third number and the establishment of the places of Ea and Mummu in the Tree diagram.<sup>116</sup> The “birth” of Marduk, the next god in the diagram, is described in the following lines as expected. Marduk’s mystic number, like the numbers of all the remaining gods, can be derived from the preceding numbers by simple arithmetical operations.<sup>117</sup>

The prominent part played by numbers both in *Enūma eliš* and the Assyrian Tree of course immediately recalls the central role of mathematics and divine numbers in Pythagorean philosophy.<sup>118</sup>

#### THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH<sup>119</sup>

Looking at the Epic of Gilgamesh through Kabbalistic glasses, a new interpretation of the Epic can be proposed viewing it as a mystical path of spiritual growth culminating in the acquisition of superior esoteric knowledge (see fig. 12).<sup>120</sup> The Path proceeds in stages through the Tree of Life, starting from its roots dominated by animal passions,

<sup>115</sup> The passage tells that the gods (i.e., the numbers 1, 60, and 2 that had come into being thus far, 2 as the sequential number of Ea) “came together” and disturbed Apsu by their “playing.” This can be taken literally as referring to the “play with numbers” (see n. 87) by which all the mystic numbers in the Tree diagram can be derived from the previously “emanated” values (see also n. 117).

<sup>116</sup> With the emergence of the number of Sin (30), the flow of emanation gets temporarily out of balance until Ea “establishes a universal pattern” (line 62, probably referring to the zigzagging pattern of the stream of emanation) and assumes a position “on top” of Apsu, the male principle (line 71; cf. Ea’s position on top of the right-hand male column, fig. 9). The “binding” of Mummu (line 70, referring to the Pillar of Equilibrium) restores balance by forming the symmetrical tetrad of the “Upper Face” (Anu-Ea-Sin-Mummu; see n. 52). The “leashing” of Mummu, with Ea holding the leash, certainly refers to the stabilization of the positional value 60 for Ea’s number, in contrast to the number of Anu, written with the same sign, which could be read both 1 and 60 (see n. 89). Incidentally, the fact that Ea’s number in *Enūma eliš* is the “Assyrian” 60, not the “Babylonian” 40 (cf. n. 88), confirms the late (Isin II) date assigned to the Epic by Lambert, in W. S. McCullough, ed., *The Seed of Wisdom* (Toronto, 1964), pp. 3 ff.

<sup>117</sup> Marduk’s number 50 is derived from the numbers of Ea (60) and Sin (30) by the following equation:  $60 - 30 \div 3 = 50$ ; the divisor 3 (representing Sin’s position in the order of emanation) is attested as a number of Sin in the mystical work I.NAM GIŠ.HUR (see n. 87). Note Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 125: “Hesed [Marduk] is produced by the union of Wisdom [Ea] and Understanding [Sin].”

The numbers of the other gods (in their order of emanation) can be derived as follows: Šamaš (6th):

$60 \div 3 = 20$ ; Ištar (7th):  $60 \div 4 = 15$ ; Nabû/Ninurta (8th):  $60 - 60 \div 3$  (or  $2 \times 20$ ) = 40; Adad (9th):  $60 \div 6 = 10$ ; Nergal (10th):  $15 - 1$  (or  $2 \times 7$ ) = 14.

<sup>118</sup> On the Babylonian background of Pythagorean mathematics and astronomy, see van der Waerden, *Die Pythagoreer* (Zurich and Munich, 1979), pp. 40 ff.

<sup>119</sup> In the absence of an adequate critical edition, the following analysis is based on my own unpublished reconstruction of the Epic. The recent translations by M. Gallery Kovacs, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Palo Alto, 1985), and S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 50 ff., can be consulted for general orientation.

<sup>120</sup> Gilgameš is prominently marked as a mystic by the following features in the Epic:

(1) the epithet “perfect” accorded to him in Tablet I (cf. n. 57) which qualifies him as a Zadek, “just or saintly man, not born but made, partly by the assistance of God and partly by his own effort” (see Halevi, *Way of Kabbalah*, pp. 74 ff.);

(2) the special technique (pressing head between knees) he uses for attaining dreams (Tablet IV iii 6); on this “posture of Elijah,” see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 78 ff. and 90;

(3) the technique of weeping, fasting, and praying (Tablet IX 1–14) he uses for achieving the paranormal state of consciousness and visions recounted in Tablets IX–XI; see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 75 ff.; Dan, *Three Types*, p. 29;

(4) his role as revealer of hidden mystical knowledge (Tablet I 4–7); see *ibid.*, p. 28, and *Revelation*, pp. 24 ff.;

(5) the recurrent references to his ascetic appearance and behavior in Tablets I and IX–X (dress of skin, unkempt hair, roaming the desert), consonant with his prophetic role; see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 234 ff.

(6) the warnings he gives to Enkidu in Tablet XII; see n. 132 below.

the realm of Nergal (Tablet I); the names of the gods governing the individual stages are encoded in the contents of the tablets, and they follow the order in which they are found in the Tree, read from bottom to top.<sup>121</sup> Tablet II, which has no counterpart in the Tree, deals with spiritual awakening;<sup>122</sup> Tablet III outlines the Path;<sup>123</sup> and Tablet IX describes the final breakthrough to the source of supernal knowledge.<sup>124</sup>

The late version of the Epic consists of twelve tablets, the last of which is widely considered an “inorganic appendage break[ing] the formal completeness of the Epic, which had come full circle between the survey of Uruk in Tablet I and the same survey at the end of Tablet XI.”<sup>125</sup> In reality, nothing could be farther from the truth. Without the

<sup>121</sup> The codes for the individual gods are as follows:

Tablet I (Nergal): the strength, animal drive, and sexual potency of Gilgamesh; the strength and animal characteristics of Enkidu, his life on the steppe (a synonym of the netherworld), his association with gazelles and the cattle god Šakkan, his instinctive behavior and instantaneous fall to temptation by the whore (cf. n. 78), as well as the length of the coitus (6 days and 7 nights), which ended only barely before it would have completed the number of Nergal (14);

Tablet IV (Adad and Girru): the repeated dream oracles received by Gilgamesh; the thunderstorm, fire, lightning, and bull (Adad’s sacred animal) seen in the dreams; the voice calling from heaven; the fear striking the travelers (see n. 79 ff.);

Tablet V (Ninurta and Nabû): the slaying of Humbaba, described in terms resembling Ninurta’s battle with Anzû and referred to as “triumph” in Tablet II (see nn. 74 and 123);

Tablet VI (Ištar): the word *dumqu* “beauty” in line 6, Ištar’s love affairs recounted, etc. (see n. 73);

Tablet VII (Šamaš): the divine court of justice, the harsh judgment passed on Enkidu, Enkidu’s appeal to Šamaš (see n. 72);

Tablet VIII (Marduk): Gilgamesh’s emotion and compassion for Enkidu, pervading the whole tablet; the magnificence of Enkidu’s funeral (see n. 71);

Tablet IX (Mummu): penetration into the Garden of Knowledge (see n. 124);

Tablet X (Sin): the counsels of wisdom given to Gilgamesh, the role of the boat (cf. moon’s barge), Utnapishtim’s reflection and pondering (see n. 70). Note also the assonance of Siduri to Sin; Siduri, “the Ištar of Wisdom” (*Šurpu* II 173), is here portrayed, through her veiling, as the daughter-in-law of Ea, the god of wisdom (see n. 99);

Tablet XI (Ea); the divine secrets revealed to Gilgamesh, the role of Ea in rescuing Utnapishtim and granting him eternal life, the plant of life fetched from the Apsu (see n. 69);

Tablet XII (Anu): reunion with Enkidu (see n. 57 above and n. 132 below).

<sup>122</sup> The process described in the tablet reads like an extract from a modern Kabbalistic textbook: the appearance of a *maggid* (Šamhat, “who leads Enkidu like a god,” later Enkidu himself), the recognition of one’s state (Enkidu weeping), and the yearning for a

higher purpose in life (the journey to the Cedar Forest being a metaphor for spiritual growth; cf. Halevi, *Way of Kabbalah*, pp. 64 ff.).

<sup>123</sup> The goal of the journey is explicitly defined in this tablet (ii 18) as *the destruction of evil*, to be compared with the aspirant Kabbalist’s struggle with the dark side of his ego (Halevi, *Way of Kabbalah*, pp. 153 ff.). In Assyrian glyptic, “Killing of Humbaba” occurs as a theme supplementing the Tree Motif in the same way as the “Killing of Anzû” or the “Killing of Asakku”; see, for example, Danthine, *Palmier-dattier*, figs. 92 (Humbaba), 78–86 (Anzû), and 52 (Asakku).

<sup>124</sup> Tablet IX corresponds to the Sefirah *Daat* (Knowledge), which in the psychological Tree represents the gate to supernal knowledge, “the point where identity vanishes in the void of Cosmic consciousness before union with Keter” (Halevi, *Tree of Life*, p. 47; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 42 and 158); passing through it is sometimes compared to spiritual death (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 206). The revelation of supernal knowledge, on the other hand, is described “in Jewish classical texts as a tremendous eschatological event, when the sun will shine with an overwhelming light. The act of acquiring supernal knowledge involves a change in both the known and the knower; it is presented as a active event, or penetration” (Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 228). Compare this with the penetration of Gilgamesh through the dark passage of the cosmic mountain guarded by the Scorpion man and woman and his emergence to the dazzling sunlight on the other side. The beautiful jewel garden he finds there is the Garden of Knowledge; it corresponds to the “garden of God” of Ezek. 28:12 ff. associated with wisdom, perfection, and blamelessness, and “adorned with gems of every kind: sardin and chrysolite and jade, topaz, carnelian and green jasper, sapphire, purple garnet and green feldspar.” On the association of the Sefirot with jewels and translucent colored glass vessels, see nn. 47 and 55 above, and see also Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 103, and Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 104 ff.; for a Neo-Assyrian seal scene showing the scorpion man and woman as guardians of the Tree, see Danthine, *Palmier-dattier*, fig. 354. See also n. 97 above on the passage in *Bahir* comparing the Sefirotic *pleroma* to a garden.

<sup>125</sup> See, in more detail, Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 116 f., and J. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Philadelphia, 1982), pp. 26 f.

twelfth tablet, the Epic would be a torso because, as we shall see, it contains the ultimate wisdom that Gilgamesh brought back from his arduous search for life.

That wisdom was not meant for the vulgus, and it is therefore hidden in the text.<sup>126</sup> But the Epic is full of clues to help the serious reader to penetrate its secret. The refrain at the end of Tablet XI is one of these. Far from signaling the *end* of the Epic, it takes the reader *back to square one*, the Prologue, where he is advised to examine the structure of “the walls of Uruk” until he finds the “gate to the secret,” a lapis lazuli tablet locked inside a box.” “The walls of Uruk” is a metaphor for Tablets I–XI,<sup>127</sup> “the tablet box” is the surface story, and “the lapis lazuli tablet” is the secret structural framework of the Epic, the Tree diagram.<sup>128</sup>

Once it is realized that the Epic is structured after the Tree, the paramount importance of Tablet XII becomes obvious, for it corresponds to the Crown of the Tree, Anu (Heaven), which would otherwise have no correspondence in the Epic.

On the surface, there is no trace of Heaven in Tablet XII. On the contrary, it deals with death and the underworld, the word “heaven” (or the god Anu) not even being mentioned in it, and it seems to end on an utterly pessimistic and gloomy note. When considered in the light of the psychological Tree and the spiritual development outlined in the previous tablets, however, the message of the tablet changes character. We see Gilgamesh achieving reunion with his dead friend Enkidu, being able to converse with him and thus to acquire precious knowledge from him about life after death;<sup>129</sup> and what is more, he achieves this reunion in exactly the same way as he did in Tablet IX, by prolonged weeping and praying.<sup>130</sup> In other words, the unique mystical experience recounted in Tablets IX–XI, there presented as something totally new and unusual, has in

<sup>126</sup> According to the Prologue, Gilgamesh brought back to Uruk the “ultimate sum of all wisdom,” which is said to be revealed in the Epic (referred to by the term *narû*, “stela,” in line 8). Note the emphasis placed on the word *hidden* in line 5.

<sup>127</sup> This metaphorical significance of the “walls” (framing Tablets I–XI like brackets) is made clear by the *parallelismus membrorum* of lines 8–9, equating the building of the walls with the inscribing of the “stela.” The meaning of the metaphor is clarified by the epithet *supûru* (“fold”) attached to Uruk, elsewhere used to refer to the halo of the moon (see *CAD*, s.v., pp. 397 f.) and thus clearly connoting the idea of a return to the beginning (cf. nn. 89 and 103); compare the similar use of the Tree of Life motif as a framing device in the Bible, discussed in n. 107. The reference to the seven sages in lines 18–19 looks like a metaphor stressing the antiquity and solid philosophical background of the Epic.

<sup>128</sup> Note the lapis lazuli foliage of the Tree of Knowledge in Tablet IX (see n. 124 above) and the unique description of the Tree of Life in *CT* 16 46:183 ff.: “A black *kiškanû* tree grew up in Eridu, was created in a holy place; its sheen is pure *lapis lazuli*, drawing from the Apsu . . .” (for the continuation, see Widengren, *King and the Tree*, pp. 6 f.). In addition, the conspicuous omission of the *huluppu*-tree theme from Tablet XII (see A. Shaffer, “Sumerian Sources of Tablet XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh” [Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1963], pp. 99 ff.) is certainly also meant to direct the read-

er’s attention to the Tree; see the discussion on pp. 195 ff. below, and note that the felling of the *huluppu* is referred to as a feat comparable to the conquest of Anzû in Cooper, *Return of Ninurta*, p. 147 (see n. 123 and Excursus 2 below).

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 94, quoting an eighteenth-century Kabbalist, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer: “I performed an incantation for the ascent of the soul, known to you. And in that vision I saw . . . the souls of the living and of dead persons . . . ascending from one world to the other through the column known to adepts in esoteric matters.” See also *ibid.*, p. 92, and cf. n. 57 above. On the death of Enkidu, attributed in Tablet XII to his ethical imperfections, see n. 132 below.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. n. 120 and Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 86, quoting Safrin’s commentary to the *Zohar*: “By much weeping, like a well, and suffering I became worthy to be transformed into a flowing stream, a fountain of wisdom; no secret was revealed to me, nor a wondrous apprehension, but afterward I became like dust and wept before the Creator of the universe like a spring, lest I should be rejected from the light of his face, and for the sake of gaining apprehensions out of the source of wisdom.” This passage illustrates the rationale behind the weeping technique, associating it, in Mesopotamian terms, with the ocean of wisdom, Apsu, and thereby with Ea (cf. n. 69); note that it is explicitly Ea, not Enlil, or Sin, who finally grants Gilgamesh his rendezvous with Enkidu.

Tablet XII become a firmly established technique by which similar experiences can be sought at will.<sup>131</sup>

In Jewish mysticism, such experiences are referred to as “ascent to heaven” or “entering Paradise” and regarded as tremendous events reserved only to perfectly ethical, perfectly stable men.<sup>132</sup> The evolution of Gilgamesh into such a man is described in detail in Tablets I–VIII.<sup>133</sup> In the early (third century?) Jewish mystical text *Hekhalot Rabbati*, the very concept of mystical “ascent to heaven” is revealed to the Jewish community as a revolutionary “secret of the world.”<sup>134</sup> There can be no doubt whatsoever that this very secret, revealing the way to Heaven, was the precious secret that Gilgamesh brought back from his journey to Utnapishtim.

#### THE ETANA MYTH

The Mesopotamian myth of Etana is well known for its central motif, a man’s ascent to heaven on an eagle’s back. It has thus been classified as an “adventure story” or early

<sup>131</sup> On “weeping [and prayer] as a means of attaining revelations and/or a disclosure of secrets—a practice that can be traced back through all the major stages of Jewish mysticism over a period of more than two millennia,” see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 75 ff.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88 ff. and n. 124 above. The perilous nature of such experiences is constantly emphasized in Jewish mysticism, and the following Talmudic story (Epstein, *Kabbalah*, p. 3) is told to illustrate the point:

Legend relates that each of the four [sages] entered *Pardes*, that is, embraced the mystical life. Rabbi Akiva, the oldest and best prepared was first to achieve superconscious states. However, on his “return” to waking consciousness, he warned the other three not to succumb to the illusions their minds would create along the way. “When you enter near the pure stones of marble, do not say, ‘Water! Water!’ for the Psalms tell us, ‘He who speaks falsehoods will not be established before My Eyes.’”

The saintly Rabbi ben Azai “gazed and died,” for his soul so longed for its source that it instantly shed the physical body upon entering the light . . . Only Rabbi Akiva, the man of perfect equilibrium, entered and left in peace.

This story immediately recalls the warnings dealt by Gilgamesh to Enkidu in Tablet XII before the latter’s descent to the netherworld to retrieve the lost “hoop” and “driving stick.” And that is not all. The passage has other important affinities with Jewish mysticism too. The “hoop” and “driving stick” clearly correspond to the “date stone” and “palm branch” of Jewish mysticism, where they symbolize the syzygy of masculine and feminine, but especially the mystical reunion with the Divine (see Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 173 ff.). Setting out to retrieve them, Enkidu was attempting to restore the broken unity with the Divine, the very purpose of the mystical union (see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 62 ff.); he succumbed because he, like the sages of the talmudic story, was not morally and ethically stable enough. Thus Enkidu’s “descent” is paradigmatic for a failed mystical ascent. Note that in the *Hekhalot* literature the practice of ascension is paradoxically called “de-

scension” (*yeridah*), an idiom that has not been satisfactorily explained (see Dan, *Three Types*, pp. 8 and 34 with n. 29).

<sup>133</sup> The first phase in the process is the long journey into one’s self (Tablet IV), involving practice of religious duties and love of one’s neighbor; the goal, the subjugation of the dark side of the ego (Tablet V), is reached with divine guidance (*Šamaš*) and human help (Enkidu). The purity of one’s soul is put to test by major temptations (Tablet VI) and the severities of life (the death of Enkidu, Tablet VII); both tests have to be stood while still retaining a humble and compassionate heart (Tablet VIII). The overall goal of the program seems to be a stepwise control over all psychic powers operative in the human soul, represented by the gods for whom the tablets are encoded (cf. the bird’s nest metaphor of Moses Cordovero cited in Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 123). This certainly looks like a clearly defined program of spiritual growth resembling the Kabbalistic and Neoplatonic strategies of conquering the “vegetable” and “animal” levels of the soul (cf. Halevi, *Way of Kabbalah*, pp. 117 ff., and Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp. 72 ff.). Its prominently theurgic character is well in line with the professional background (exorcist) of Sin-leqe-unninni, the author of the Late Version.

<sup>134</sup> See Dan, *Revelation*, pp. 24 ff., and note especially pp. 29 f.:

The last paragraph of the above-quoted text defines, briefly, the rewards of the mystic. If the person successfully overcomes the earthly inclinations to sin, and observes the commandments as presented by Rabbi Nehunia, he will be rewarded by the opportunity to observe the beauty, the power, the magnificence and the secrets of the divine world . . . This passage does not leave any doubt in that the authors of this text realized completely the far-reaching historical and spiritual meaning of the[ir] mystical claim: [Rabbi Nehunia] is speaking about the most important, the most central subject that a man can know. This indeed is a gnosis of cosmic dimensions.

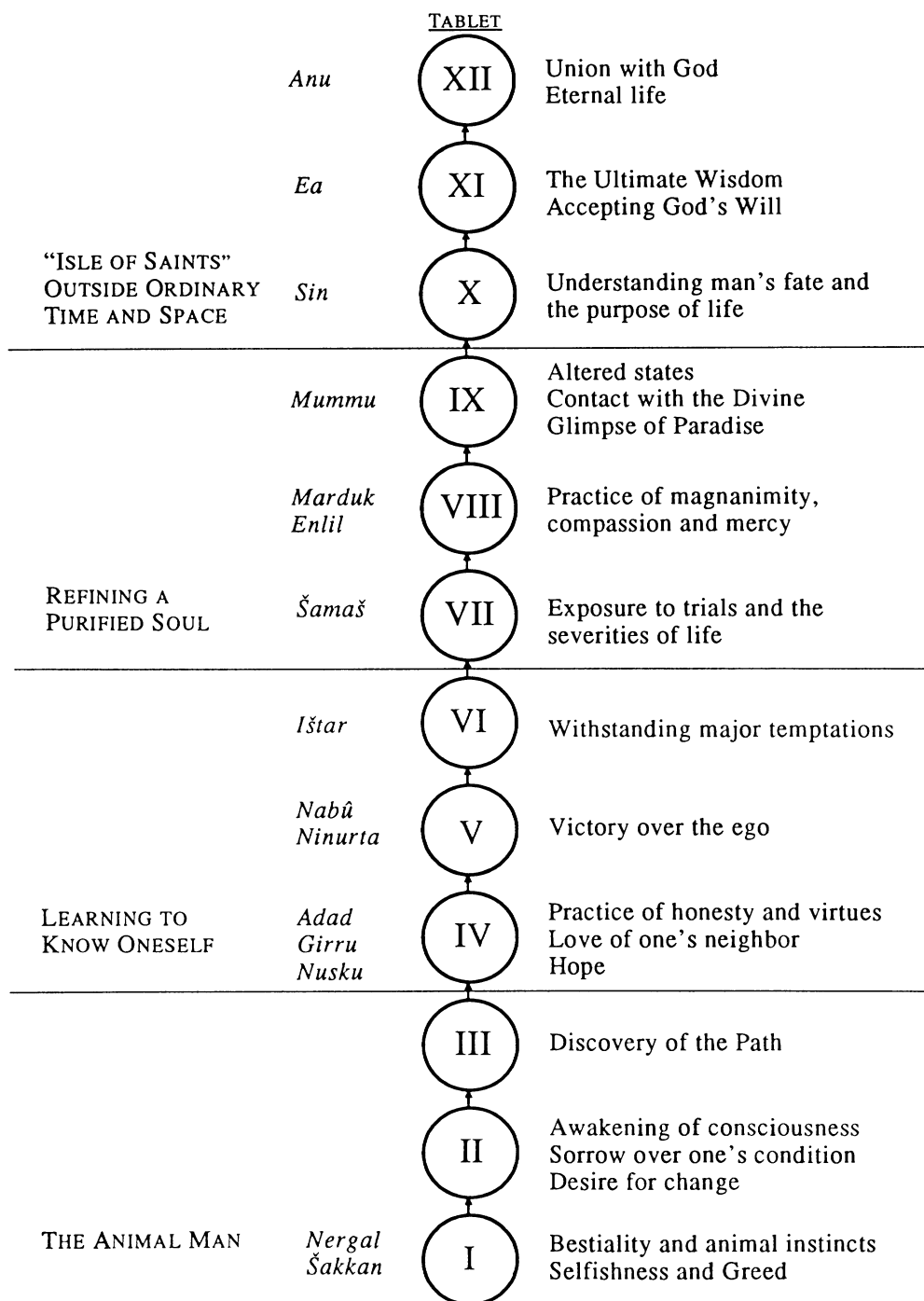


FIG. 12.—Via Mystica in the Gilgamesh Epic

“science fiction” containing the first known account of “space travel.”<sup>135</sup> The eagle-back ascent motif has been recognized to recur in Hellenistic, Jewish, and Islamic folk tales and legends and has also been connected with the Greek myth of Ganymede and the Alexander Romance.<sup>136</sup> Much less attention has been paid to the tree inhabited by the eagle and the snake which figures so prominently in the second tablet of the myth.<sup>137</sup>

Without going into unnecessary detail, it can be suggested here that the tree-eagle-serpent theme in Tablet II is an allegory for the *fall of man* and that the ascent to heaven described in Tablet III is to be understood as *mystical ascent of the soul* crowning an arduous program of spiritual restoration. Seen in this light, the myth becomes closely related to the Gilgamesh Epic in substance, and in presenting Etana as the first man to achieve the ascent, it forcefully contributes to the notion of the Mesopotamian king as the “Perfect Man.”<sup>138</sup>

The tree of Tablet II is Etana himself, whose birth its sprouting marks. The eagle and the serpent are conflicting aspects of man’s soul, the one capable of carrying him to heaven, the other pulling him down to sin and death.<sup>139</sup> The deal struck by the eagle with the serpent marks the beginning of Etana’s moral corruption as king. Ignoring the voice of his conscience, he becomes guilty of perfidy, greed, and murder;<sup>140</sup> for this, he is punished. The serpent attacks the eagle, cuts off its wings, and throws it into a bottomless pit. This is an allegory for spiritual death; the same idea is expressed by the childlessness of Etana, to whom the narrative now returns.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>135</sup> See J. V. Kinnier Wilson, *The Legend of Etana* (Warminster, 1985), pp. 5 f.; J. Aro, “Anzu and Simurgh,” *Kramer Anniversary Volume: Studies in Honor of Samuel Noah Kramer*, AOAT 25 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1976), pp. 27 f.

<sup>136</sup> See S. Langdon, *The Legend of Etana and the Eagle* (Paris, 1932), pp. 3 f.; Aro, “Anzu and Simurgh,” p. 26; Dalley, *Myths*, p. 189. In addition, one may compare the story of Abu Muhammad al-Kaslan in the *Arabian Nights*, the Greek myth of *Daidalos and Ikaros*, and, above all, the Indian mythical bird Garuda as spiritual vehicle of the yogis (see below).

<sup>137</sup> The recurrence of this theme in the Sumerian myth of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld* (see n. 128) has, of course, been noted, but the meaning of the theme in either myth has not been discussed at all.

<sup>138</sup> Cf. nn. 34 and 58.

<sup>139</sup> In Christian symbolism, “The eagle holding a serpent in its talons or beak represents the triumph of Christ over the ‘dark forces’ of the world (see Serpent)” (Baldock, *Elements*, p. 92). In Indian mysticism, the bird Garuda likewise achieves its ascent to heaven in spite of the serpents coiling around its head, wings, and feet (see the illustration in Rawson, *Tantra*, pl. 67).

In the Etana myth, the eagle plays two roles. At first, it is “an evil eagle, the criminal Anzû (var.: criminal and sinner), who wronged his comrade”; as such, it parallels the eagle inhabiting the *huluppu*

tree in the Sumerian Gilgamesh epic, which is explicitly called Anzû. Later, however, having suffered and been rescued by Etana, it carries the latter to heaven. The evil aspect of the bird corresponds to the natural state of man’s soul, which, despite its divine origin, is contaminated with sin (see *Enûma eliš* VI 1–33 and Lambert and Millard, *Atra-hasis*, p. 59: 208 ff.; cf. Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 61 f. and 82 f.). The second aspect of the bird corresponds to the soul of a “purified” man (see below).

The “tree” itself is marked as sinful by its species (the poplar), associated with Nergal; see *CAD* s.v. *šarbu*, pp. 109 f., and note Bēl-šarbu “Lord of the Poplar” = Nergal, *CT* 25 37:16. This accords with Ebeling, *Handerhebung*, p. 114:9, which explicitly states that mankind is “entrusted to Nergal,” that is, under the power of sin.

<sup>140</sup> Etana’s voice of conscience is the “small, especially wise fledgling” of II 45 and 97. Note that the theme of bird’s nest with the young (taken over from the Sumerian Lugalbanda epic; see Aro, “Anzu and Simurgh,” pp. 25 and 28) also plays a role in *Kabbalah*, where it is explicitly associated with self-discipline and wisdom; see Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 123 f., and Scholem, *Origins*, p. 134.

<sup>141</sup> Etana’s barren wife is the feminine, spiritual half of his soul, corresponding to the *Shekhinah* (cf. Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 208 f.); the desired “son” is Etana’s “fruit,” the deeds by which he will be judged. For a similar allegory, see Matt. 21:19–25 (Jesus cursing the fruitless fig tree).

Etana's realization of his condition is the beginning of his salvation; from now on, he appears as a person referred to by his own name. Admitting his guilt and shame, he prays for a "plant of birth" (that is, a chance for spiritual rebirth) and is guided to the path that will take him there.<sup>142</sup>

The path leads him to the mountain where he finds the eagle lying in the pit with its wings cut, a metaphor for the imprisonment of the soul in the bonds of the material world. Complying with the wish of the eagle, his better self, he starts feeding it and teaching it to fly again, an allegory for spiritual training and self-discipline. It takes eight months to attempt the first ascent to heaven, which fails because Etana himself is not ready for it.<sup>143</sup> The second ascent, better prepared, is successful and takes Etana into a celestial palace where he, having passed through several gates, finds a beautiful girl sitting on a throne guarded by lions.

All this is so reminiscent of the terminology and imagery relating to the ascent of the soul in Jewish mysticism that mere coincidence can be excluded. The several heavens and heavenly palaces through which Etana passes are commonplace in the Hekhalot texts and later mystical literature.<sup>144</sup> The girl seen by Etana is the *Shekhinah*, the Presence or Beauty of God.<sup>145</sup> Etana's fall from the heavens has ample parallels in Kabbalistic literature, where the ascent is considered a dangerous practice and the return to a normal state referred to as being "thrown down like a stone."<sup>146</sup>

<sup>142</sup> The spiritual meaning of the prayer (concealed under the "plant of birth" metaphor) is made clear by the preceding prayer of the eagle (II 121–23): "Am I to die in the pit? Who realizes that it is your punishment that I bear? Save my life, so that I may broadcast your fame for eternity!" In the late Turkish version of the myth, which survives in the folk-tale collection Billur Köşk (Aro, "Anzu and Simurgh," p. 28), the bird rescues the hero from the netherworld.

<sup>143</sup> Note that the Old Babylonian version (Tablet I/E 8) at this point states that Etana wished to ascend to heaven "to disclose concealed things." Compare this with nn. 57 and 130 above, and note also Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 91: "[He] asked questions, and his soul ascended to heaven in order to seek [answers to] his doubts."

The eagle's wings are a well-known symbol for transcendental ascent to heaven. See, for example, Rawson, *Tantra*, p. 27: "The achievement of the ascent may be symbolized by a great bird, equated with the mystical Persian Simurgh. This is sometimes shown in art as carrying a pair of divine lovers"; and Baldock, *Elements*, p. 92: "Eagle: A symbol of the Ascension, and of Christ. The eagle was reputed to be able to look directly into the sun, without diverting its gaze. It trained its young to do likewise, rejecting those who failed. In this respect it represents Christ who raises his followers, through faith, to contemplate God, the source of Divine Light." This symbolism certainly goes back to Mesopotamia, where the eagle (i.e., Anzû) was the bird of Ninurta, Nabû, and Zababa (see Excursus 2 and Seidl, *RIA*, vol. 3, pp. 487f and 488b; and also *STT* 341:7: "The vulture is the bird of Ninurta; its cry is: 'Hero [. . .] killed Anzû!'," and

*KAR* 125:6: "the vulture is the bird of Nabû; [its cry is]: 'Hero, hero Ninurta [killed Anzû]!"). Note that the Christian symbolism of the cock ("vigilance and watchfulness," Baldock, *Elements*, p. 88) likewise goes back to Mesopotamia, where the cock is the bird of Nusku (see *CAD* and *AHW*. s.vv. *tarlugallu*, *kub-šānu*, and *hāšibaru*, and cf. n. 80 above).

<sup>144</sup> For the Hekhalot texts, see Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 19 ff.; Dan, *Three Types*, pp. 5 ff., and idem, *Revelation*, pp. 14 ff.; the technical term used in these texts for the heavenly palaces, *hekhalot*, is a loan from Akkadian *ekallu* (pl. *ekallāti*), "palace." For later mysticism, see, for example, Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 94, continuing the story of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer already cited in n. 129 above:

And I asked my teacher and master that he come with me, and it is a great danger to go and ascend to the supernal worlds, whence I have never ascended since I acquired awareness, and these were mighty ascents. So I ascended degree after degree, until I entered the palace of the Messiah.

<sup>145</sup> See n. 84 above. Cf. the following vision of R. Isaac Yehudah Yehiel Safrin cited in Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 83:

And I wept many times before the Lord of the world, out of the depth of the heart, for the suffering of the *Shekhinah*. And through my suffering and weeping, I fainted and I fell asleep for a while, and I saw a vision of light, splendor and great brightness, in the image of a young woman adorned with twenty-four ornaments. . . . And she said: "Be strong, my son."

<sup>146</sup> See Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 95. Incidentally, since the fall effectively marks the end of the "ascent," Tablet III is likely to represent the end of the myth;

The heavenward ascent of Etana is already attested on seals from the Akkadian period (ca. 2300 B.C.)<sup>147</sup> and thus antedates the earliest Hekhalot texts by more than two and a half millennia, and the mystical experiences of nineteenth-century Kabbalists by more than four thousand years.<sup>148</sup> In saying this, I do not want to stress the antiquity of the “ascent” phenomenon in Mesopotamia. The point I wish to make is that, against all appearances, Mesopotamian religion and philosophy are *not* dead but still very much alive in Jewish, Christian, and Oriental mysticism and philosophies. The Tree diagram provides the key which makes it possible to bridge these different traditions and to start recovering the forgotten *summa sapientia* of our cultural ancestors.

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there is no need to assume the existence of further tablets (thus Kinnier Wilson, *Etana*, p. 2; cf. Dalley, *Myths*, p. 189).

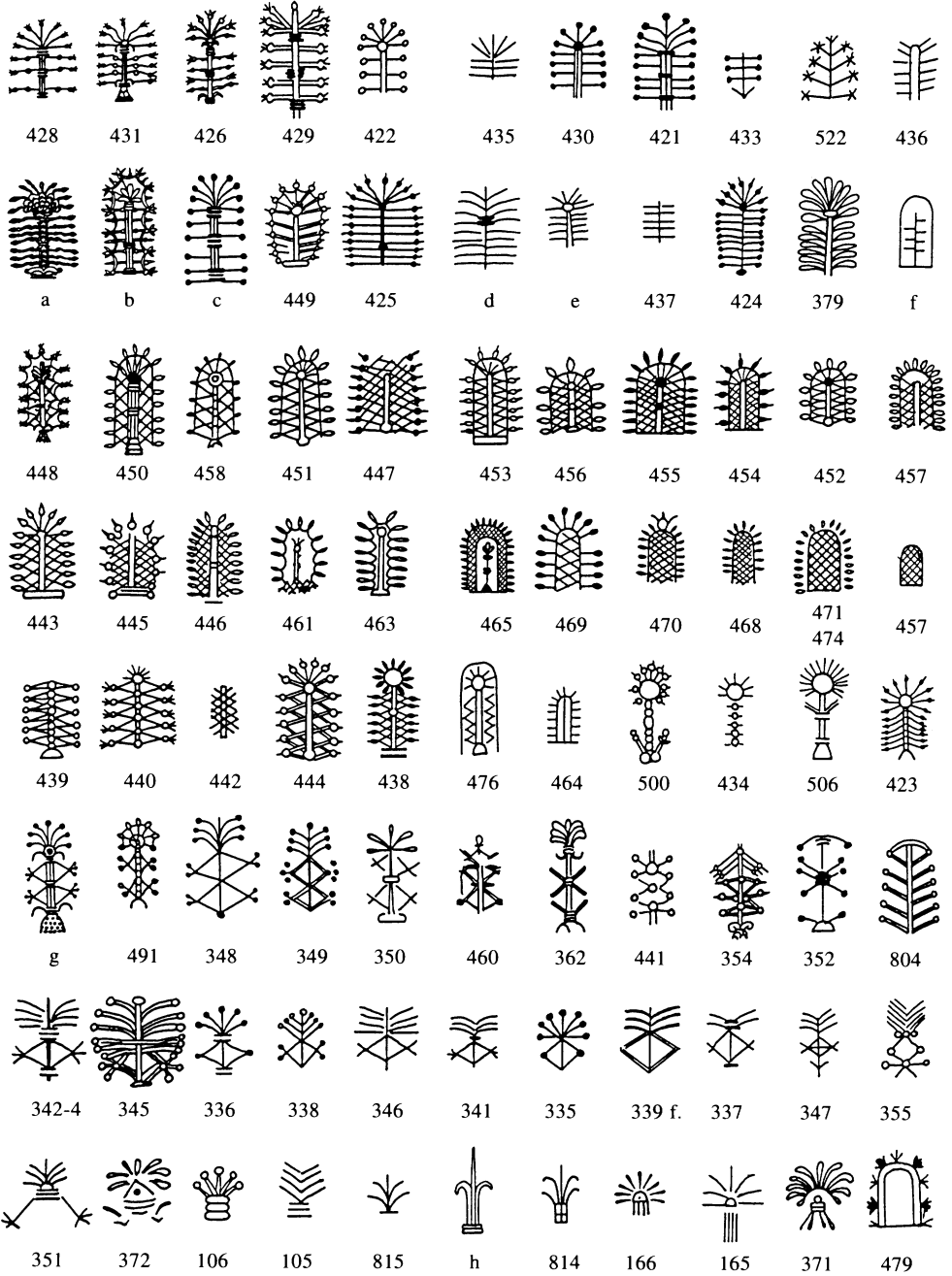
<sup>147</sup> See R. Boehmer, *Die Entwicklung der Gypitik während der Akkad-Zeit* (Berlin, 1965), pp. 123, 190, and figs. 168, 192, and 693–703; all examples are “Akkadisch III,” i.e., Naram-Sin or later. The dogs barking at the ascending pair symbolize envy and other vices, while the earthly possessions (cattle, jugs of beer, butter, cheese, etc.) shown on these seals symbolize material values left behind by Etana. See n. 78 on the association of material values with Nergal, and note that in the Gilgamesh Epic, Utnapishtim is told to “leave the riches” and “hate possessions”

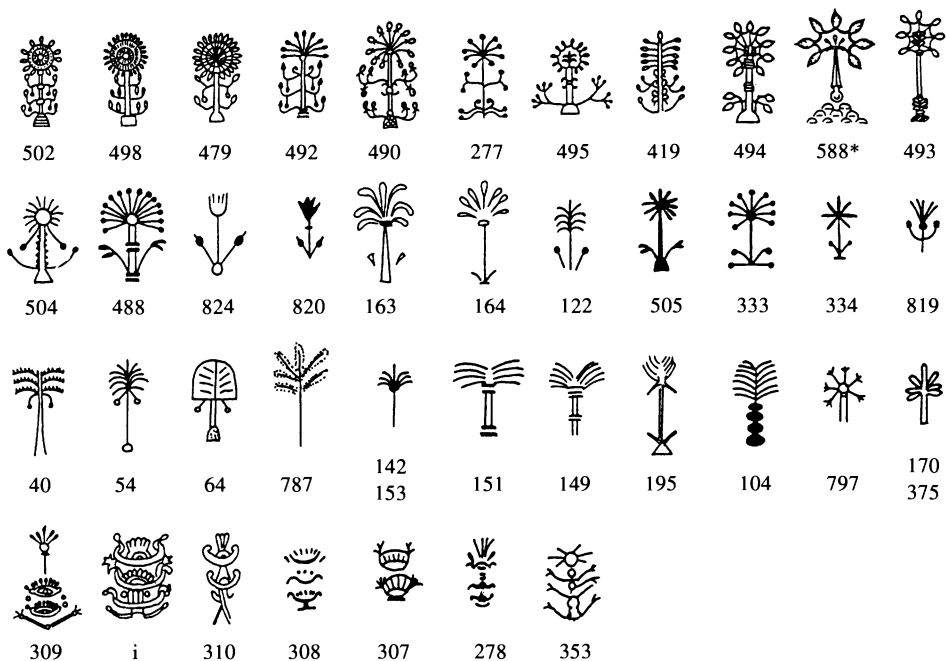
(*muššir mešrê makkūra zērma*) before embarking on the Ark. This parallel indicates that the deluge story in Gilgamesh too, as in the Bible, is an *allegory for the end of carnal men*, eternal life being the share of morally and ethically perfect, saintly men only. Note, in this context, the suffering of the Goddess at the fate of her creatures (Tablet XI 116–126), which provides a perfect parallel for the suffering of the *Shekhinah* because of the sins of the world (see n. 145 above).

<sup>148</sup> For the date of the earliest Hekhalot texts (second through fourth centuries A.D.), see Scholem, *Origins*, p. 20, and Dan, *Three Types*, p. 16. The vision of Rabbi Isaac cited above (see n. 145) dates to 1845.



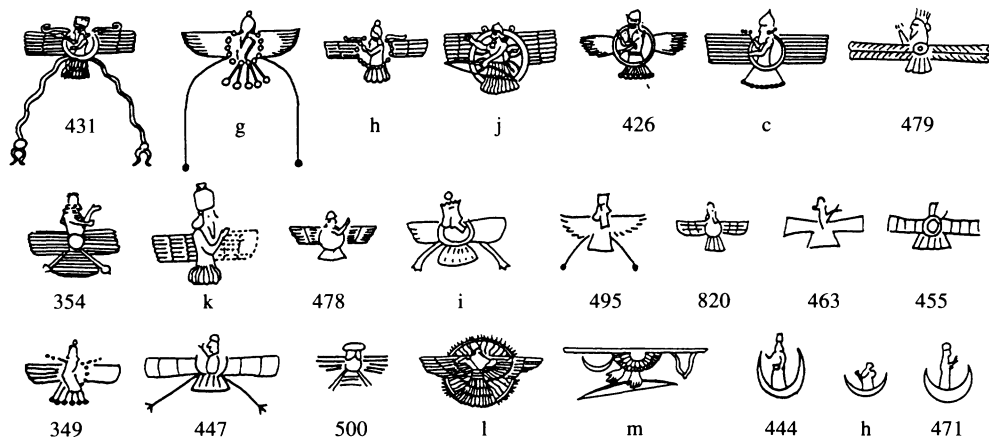
APPENDIX A. GLYPHIC VARIANTS OF THE ASSYRIAN TREE

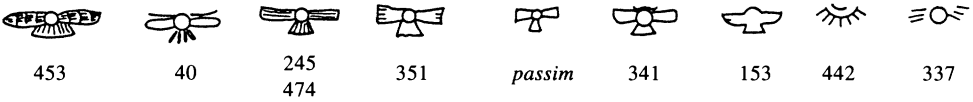
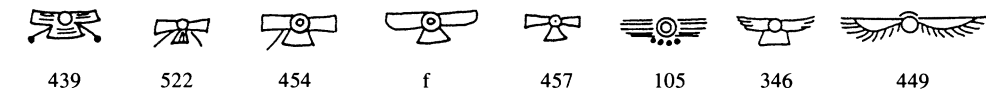
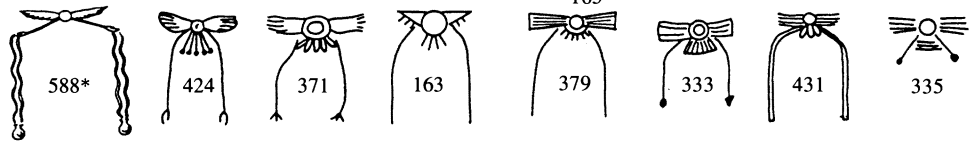
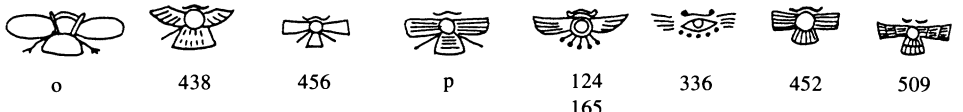
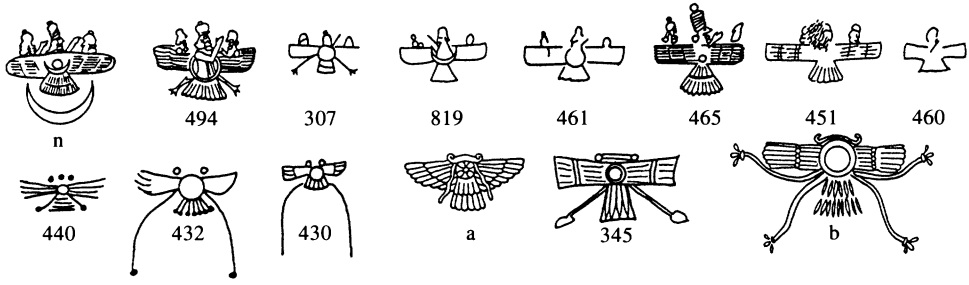




NOTE: numbers refer to Danthine. *Palmier-dattier*, Album. — a = *AfO* 8, pl. 5:1; b = Collon, *First Impressions*, no. 351; c = Orthmann, *Der alte Orient*, fig. 273g; d = *ibid.*, 275e; e = *ibid.*, 275b; f = *Iraq* 17, p. 125:3; g = Collon, *ibid.*, no. 345; h = Orthmann, *ibid.*, 274g; i = *Iraq* 17, pl. 23; j = *AMI* 17, p. 142; k = *Iraq* 24, p. 20; l = Parrot, *Nineveh and Babylon*, fig. 282; m = *IrAnt* 12, pl. 4; n = BM 130699 (traced from photograph); o = *Iraq* 17, pl. 23:2 and p. 115:6; p = Orthmann, *ibid.*, 275b. No. 588\* traced from Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*, p. 213.

APPENDIX B. VARIANTS OF THE WINGED DISK ICON





## EXCURSUS 1: THE MYSTIC NUMBERS OF ANU, ENLIL, AND EA

Ea's number 40 was conceived as a sexagesimal fraction ( $40/60 = 2/3$ ), as indicated by the name of Ea's boatman, Ur-šánabi/40 (see above), and by the entry "*nimin/Ea/šanabi* = 40 = forty/Ea/two-thirds" in *Aa* II/4: 193 ff. (MSL 14, p. 285). Its origin is hitherto unexplained, but it is very likely derived from the relative length of time of daylight at the winter solstice (associated with Ea), just as the mystic number of the moon was derived from the ideal length of the month; the required 2 : 3 ratio between the maximum variation of daylight is attested in both I.NAM GIŠ.HUR (see B. L. van der Waerden, *Die Anfänge der Astronomie*, *Erwachende Wissenschaft*, vol. 2 [Groningen, 1965], pp. 86 f., and Livingstone, *Mystical Works*, p. 25: 26 f.) and the late second-millennium astronomical work *Mul Apin* (H. Hunger and D. Pingree, *MUL.APIN: An Astronomical Compendium in Cuneiform*, AfO Beiheft 24 (Horn, 1988), p. 95). Taking 1 (= 60) as the length of the longest day (IV 15) and stating the length of day and night at the other turning points in sexagesimal fractions of this value, one obtains the following scheme for the year ("Path" refers to the sun's position on the horizon, expressed in terms of "paths" assigned to Anu, Enlil, and Ea; "total" is the length of the 24-hour day expressed sexagesimally; "notes" refers to Hunger and Pingree, *MUL.APIN*, pp. 88 ff.):

Month	Path	Day	Night	Total	Notes
I 15	Anu	50	50	1,40	Spring, "Winds"
IV 15	Enlil	1	40	1,40	Summer, "Heat"
VII 15	Anu	50	50	1,40	Fall, "Winds"
X 15	Ea	40	60	1,40	Winter, "Cold"

This scheme perfectly explains the numbers of Ea, but the numbers of Anu (60) and Enlil (50) are not in the expected order. One is also surprised to note that the order of the "paths" does not follow the otherwise standard order Anu-Enlil-Ea; that Enlil, Sumerian "Lord Wind," is not associated with "winds"; and that the sky-god Anu is not associated with the summer solstice (see n. 65 above). All these difficulties disappear if the order of the paths is adjusted as follows:

Month	Path	Day	Night	Total	Notes
I 15	Enlil	50	50	1,40	Spring, "Winds"
IV 15	Anu	1	40	1,40	Summer, "Heat"
VII 15	Enlil	50	50	1,40	Fall, "Winds"
X 15	Ea	40	60	1,40	Winter, "Cold"

This emendation presupposes that the compiler of *Mul Apin* had reversed the order of the paths of Anu and Enlil in an attempt to mitigate the effect of the precession of the equinoxes, which had shifted constellations traditionally associated with Anu and Enlil to the wrong paths. Indeed, earlier star lists differ considerably from *Mul Apin* in this respect: out of the twelve constellations assigned to the Path of Anu in *Astrolabe B* (mid-second millennium?), six appear in the Path of Enlil in *Mul Apin* and vice versa; in the Path of Ea there are fewer differences (see van der Waerden, *Anfänge der Astronomie*, p. 70, and Pingree, in *Enūma Anu Enlil, Tablets 50–51*, BPO 2 [Malibu, 1981], p. 7 and tables 3 and 4). Thus the emendation seems perfectly justified. The pronouncedly

Sumerian character of the posited scheme points to the third millennium B.C., which would date the emergence of the mystic numbers of Anu, Enlil, and Ea to Sumerian or early Old Babylonian times. This agrees with the fact that 40 (= 40/60) as the number of Ea is already attested in the Old Babylonian period (in the name *Su-ur-su-na-bu* = Ur-šanabi, *Gilg.* M iv 7 ff.).

It is worth pointing out that the reconstructed scheme also agrees with the Kabbalistic scheme of the “three worlds” briefly discussed in n. 55. Compare Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 41 f., citing *Sefer Yezirah*: “The heavens were created out of the substance of Fire [= Anu];<sup>1</sup> the earth from Water [= Ea], and the Air from the Spirit [= Enlil] which mediates between the two’. In addition to being symbolic of the elements, the three mothers [= the letters Aleph, Mem, and Shin, functioning as instruments of creation] also define the temporal year: the element fire [= Anu] corresponds with the summer season; the element water [= Ea] corresponds with the winter season, and the element air [= Enlil] corresponds with the seasons of spring and autumn.”

#### EXCURSUS 2: THE EXALTATION OF THE VANQUISHER OF SIN

In a prayer to Marduk (*KAR* 25 ii 6 f.), both Nabû and Ninurta are presented as powers of Marduk, the former as his “victory” (*lê<sup>2</sup>ûtu*), the latter as his “prowess” (*ašarêdûtu*), and it is certainly not by accident that in *SAA* 3 no. 2:15 Marduk himself is called “the smiter of the skull of Anzû.” Note Ninurta’s epithets “weapon” and “arrow” in Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, p. 424; in *SAA* 3 no. 37:11–15 it is by Marduk’s “arrows” that Anzû and Asakku are vanquished. Anzû and Asakku, on the other hand, personified evil and sin: in the Etana myth, Anzû alternates with *anzillu*, “abomination, sin” (see n. 139 above and *CAD* A/2 s.v. *anzillu*, pp. 153 f.). Thus Ninurta and Nabû basically represent the power to resist and prevail over evil and sin, recalling the roles of the archangel Michael in Judaism, Christ in Christianity, or Mithra in Mithraism (see n. 103 below). The concept of Ninurta/Nabû as “God’s weapon” is first attested in the Middle Assyrian royal name Ninurta-tukul-Aššur (Saporetti, *Onomastica*, p. 354, twelfth century B.C.).

For his triumph over Anzû, Ninurta/Nabû obtains the “Stylus” and the “Tablet of Fates” (see Pomponio, *Nabû*, p. 182; Finkel, *Studies Sachs*, p. 149:22; Hruška, *Anzu*, p. 168:21; W. Mayer, “Ein Hymnus auf Ninurta als Helfer in der Not,” *Or.* n.s. 61 [1992]: 29 v 9; for Nabû as the Recorder of Sins, see Finkel, “The Dream of Kurigalzu and the Tablet of Sins,” *Anatolian Studies* 33 (1983): 75–80 and *ABL* 545:7 ff.). His looks are changed; his eyes flame like fire, his [garments] glow like snow (E. Ebeling, “Mittelassyrische Rezepte zur Herstellung von wohlriechenden Salben (Taf. 1–49),” *Or.* n.s. 17 [1948]: pl. 26, r. 4 f.); casting numinous splendor and silence over god and man, he returns in his triumphal chariot to his father, who rejoices in his son, blesses him, and magnifies his kingship (*ibid.*, r. 9 ff.; *SAA* 3 no. 37:24 ff.; Cooper, *The Return of Ninurta*, pp. 73 ff.; Hruška, *Anzu*, p. 174). In a Neo-Assyrian hymn glorifying Ninurta, his body is described as encompassing the whole universe, with different gods equated with his limbs, his face being the sun, etc. (see *KAR* 102, translated in A. Falkenstein and W. von Soden, *Sumerische und akkadische Hymnen und Gebete* [Zurich, 1953], pp. 258 f.); cf. the Jewish mystical text *Shiur Qomah* from the second century

<sup>1</sup> My explanations appear within brackets.

A.D., on which see Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 21 ff., and Dan, *Three Types*, pp. 13 ff. (In line with his magnification, Nabû's name could occasionally be spelled with the vertical wedge, "One and Sixty" = Alpha and Omega; see CT 53 151:5 and cf. n. 89 above.)

All this recalls the appearance of God on his Throne-Chariot of Glory in Ezekiel 1:26 ff. and Daniel 7:9 ff., that of resurrected and glorified Christ in the Revelation of John (1:14 ff.), as well as the role of Michael as the keeper of the celestial keys and "the archon on the right side of God" (Scholem, *Origins*, p. 147). It should be stressed that just as Christ and the Father are one, so is triumphant Ninurta/Nabû one with his Father: both Marduk and Enlil are included among Ninurta's limbs in KAR 102. He is repeatedly addressed as Bēl in the text, an appellative otherwise reserved to Marduk/Enlil, and, as observed by Lambert, Ninurta's triumphal chariot is identical with what is called Marduk's Chariot in the Böhl festschrift, pp. 276 ff. (see n. 65 above). Against this background, it is not accidental that the throne of God in Ezek. 1 and Dan. 7 is known as the Chariot in Jewish tradition; the aspect of God on it is that of God triumphing over evil and sin (cf. Ezek. 7:1 ff., 11:14 ff.; Dan. 7: 11 ff.; Rev. 7:10 and 8:6 ff.).

According to the doctrine of the Tree, the power to combat evil also resided in man; the man who succeeded in conquering sin would become the Son of God himself and eventually triumph in Heaven. In Jewish mystical tradition, the patriarch Enoch (Gen. 5:23 f.) was, because of his piety, transformed in the heavens into a great divine power, second only to God, called Metatron, an angel with flesh of fire, eyelashes of lightning and eyes of flaming torches. "After overcoming the objection of the archangels to include Enoch among them, God gradually gave Enoch-Metatron divine powers of knowledge, and a body, a garment, and a chariot of fire. Step by step, Enoch loses all his human attributes, grows enormous wings, has one hundred eyes, and even acquires the divine name itself" (Dan, *Three Types*, pp. 15 f., paraphrasing *Sefer Hekhalot*, probably written in Babylonia in the fifth century A.D. or later).

The figure of Enoch/Metatron is based on Mesopotamian traditions about Adapa, the antediluvian sage who was taken to heaven after he had "broken the wings of the south wind," a metaphor corresponding to the slaying of Anzû (cf. S. A. Picchioni, *Il poemetto di Adapa* [Budapest, 1981], pp. 74 f.); note Adapa's common appellative *Uanna* "storm of Anu" and his representation as a winged eagle-headed genie in Neo-Assyrian sculpture (see nn. 24 and 31 above). The divine power Anafiel, responsible for bringing Enoch into the heavens, "who seems to have been a prototype of Metatron himself and connected with demiurgic elements" (Dan, *Three Types*, pp. 15 f.), corresponds to Adapa's patron, the god Ea. It is noteworthy in this context that the Kabbalistic *Book of True Unity* explains Anafiel as the supreme luminary "whose power is ramified in seven lights that 'stand before the place of the unity as a burning fire' (see Scholem, *Origins*, p. 346). This agrees perfectly with Ea's appellative "the Great Light of Apsu" (n. 69) and his position in the diagram before Sefirot 3 to 9, associated with the seven classical planets (see n. 68).

### EXCURSUS 3: THE NAME OF AŠŠUR

Applying the technique used in the exegesis of the fifty names of Marduk in *Enūma eliš* (see n. 66 and J. Bottéro, "Les Noms de Marduk, l'écriture et la 'logique' en Mésopotamie ancienne," in M. deJong Ellis, ed., *Essays on the Ancient Near East in Memory*

of Jacob Joel Finkelstein [Hamden, Conn., 1977], pp. 5 ff.), the principal spellings of Aššur's name can be interpreted as follows:

1. AŠ	AŠ	<i>ištēn</i>	"The One"
	DILI	<i>ēdu</i>	"The Only One"
		<i>pirištu</i>	"Mystery"
2. <sup>d</sup> AŠ	RÙ	<i>gītmālu</i>	"The Perfect One"
	DINGIR AŠ	<i>ilu ištēn</i>	"God is One"
	DINGIR DILI	<i>ilu ēdu</i>	"The Only God"
		<i>il pirišti</i>	"The Hidden God"
3. aš-šur	AŠ ŠUR	<i>ištēn širhu</i>	"A Single Flash" (see n. 45)
			"The First Flash" (see n. 55)
4. <sup>d</sup> a-šur	A ŠUR	<i>mê šarrūti</i>	"Flashing Water" (see n. 63)
			"Flowing Waters" (see n. 55)
5. AN.ŠÁR	AN ŠÁR	<i>kiššat šamē</i>	"Totality of Heaven" (see n. 94)
	DINGIR ŠÁR	<i>kiššat ilāni</i>	"Totality of Gods"
		<i>il kiššati</i>	"Universal God"
		<i>ilu ma<sup>2</sup>ad</i>	"God is Many"

It is true that no Assyrian text actually giving the above analysis is extant. But if the names of such gods as Marduk, Zarpanitu (Lieberman, "A Mesopotamian Background," pp. 179 f.), Zababa (Lambert, "A Late Babylonian Copy of an Expository Text," *JNES* 48 [1989]: 217), and even Šulak (Hunger, *Uruk*, no. 47:4 f.) could be subjected to mystical exegesis, one can be sure that the name of the highest god of the pantheon constituted no exception. The exegesis of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) plays a paramount role in Kabbalah, and "the secret knowledge of the great name" was considered in early Kabbalah tantamount to the highest wisdom and even a key to the attainment of superior divine powers (see Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 174 ff.; Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 236; Dan, *Three Types*, pp. 18 ff.). The highly esoteric nature of such knowledge accounts for the total lack of extant speculations concerning Aššur's name.

For numerous examples of a similar exegesis of Mesopotamian temple names (extracting hidden significance from the names by playing with the readings of their component logograms), see A. R. George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts*, *Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta* 40 (Louvain, 1992), passim. The Mesopotamian scholars' hermeneutical attitude to their (predominantly logographically spelled) canon has a striking parallel in the Kabbalistic attitude to the unvocalized text of the Bible, illustrated by the following statement in Rabbi Bahya ben Asher's thirteenth-century *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, quoted by Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 214: "The Scroll of the Torah is [written] without vowels, in order to enable man to interpret it however he wishes . . . . When it is vocalized it has but one single significance; but without vowels man may interpret it [extrapolating from it] several [different] things, many, marvellous and sublime. . . . The relationship between vocalization and consonants is like that between, respectively, soul, or form, and matter." Cf. also Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 227, citing the *Zohar*: "The Torah . . . is dressed in four, or perhaps even five, levels of meaning that must be penetrated by the perfect student of the Torah in order to reach its ultimate layer, the Kabbalistic meaning."

Most of the logographic values included in the above analysis are so common that the meanings “hidden” in the spellings must have been obvious to almost any Assyrian scribe (regarding nos. 1–3, note that the sign *aš* did not have the phonetic value *aš* in Assyrian orthography, so the spellings concerned certainly were inherently logographic from the beginning). Incessant meditation on the name by generations of scholars and mystics must have produced an extensive, much more sophisticated oral lore relating to the name. A reconstruction of this lore cannot be attempted here, but two observations seem worth noting.

The graphic shape of the name should have attracted much attention, considering the role that syllables and numbers played in Assyrian cosmogonic speculations (see nn. 65 and 115–18); *A* and *šUR* were the first signs of the Assyrian syllabary (see MSL 3, pp. 5, 15, and 96), and the horizontal wedge *aš* not only represented the basic element of writing but also the basic number, equivalent to *diš* (see n. 89 above). Now, if one considers the spelling *aš-šur* as consisting of *aš* (“One”) and *šUR* (“to flash, flow; to emanate”), one obtains a mantra capturing the basic symbolism of the Tree in two syllables: “[God] is One [in His Multiple] Emanation.” For the Tetragrammaton as a mantra, see Poncé, *Kabbalah*, pp. 181 ff.

Secondly, if one writes the elements of the word *aš-šur* vertically in their “order of emanation” (from above to below), one obtains a figure closely resembling the Kabbalistic “Tetragrammaton as Man” (see Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 179):

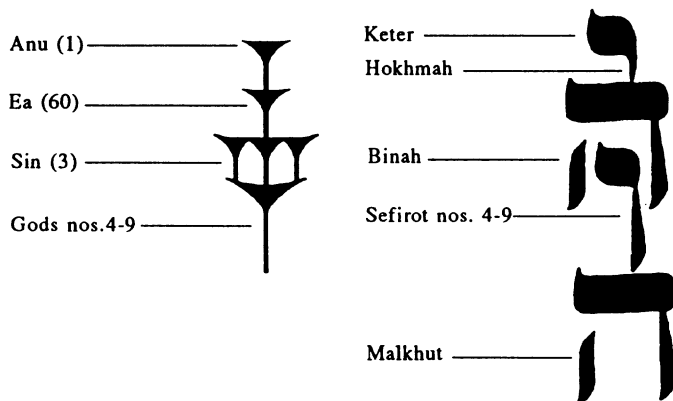


FIG. 11.—a. The “Emanation” of *aš-šur*; b. The tetragrammaton as man

Not only is this figure produced in the same way as the Kabbalistic one (this, too, being obtained by writing the letters YHWH from above to below), but the specific symbolism of the Tetragrammaton works in it too: the topmost wedges (1 to 60) stand for Anu and Ea, just as the tittle and the body of Y stand for *Keter* and *Hokhmah* (see nn. 70, 90, and 108); the group of three wedges (3) stands for Sin, just as H stands for *Binah* (see n. 88 above); and the lowermost wedge stands for the entire “Lower Face” (cf. n. 52 above), just as W stands for the Sefirot 4 to 9. The Sefirah of *Malkhut* (the last letter of the Tetragrammaton) has no counterpart in the scheme; see n. 85 above. If all this is merely a coincidence; the coincidence certainly is a most striking one.



In conclusion, it may be pointed out that the name Aššur also provides an “etymology” for the name of the God of Kabbalah, En Sof. Applying the principle of notarikon (n. 66) to the alphabetic spelling of Aššur, one obtains

$${}^2s(w)r = {}^2yn swp {}^2wr, \text{ “En Sof Or.”}$$

En Sof Or would thus represent a Jewish reinterpretation of the mantra *aš-šur* just discussed, expressing the idea of transcendent God in his essential nature, “Endless Light” (cf. n. 94); correspondingly, En Sof would be a reinterpretation of the “holy syllable” *aš* referring to the Unmanifest God. Compare the Kabbalistic interpretation of “Amen” (*{}^2mn*) as *{}^2l mlk n{}^2mn*, “God, the faithful king” (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 172, an allusion to Deut. 7:9), and the hidden meanings derived by notarikon from the Persian loanword *Pardes* “garden, paradise” (a metaphor for mystical life):

“Jewish sages warn all but the perfectly stable, perfectly ethical man away from this place. The letters of the Hebrew word *Pardes*, they say, contain the clue to the secret contained there: P represents *Peshat*, the simple, exterior meaning of the Torah; R stands for *Remez*, the homiletical meaning; D is *Drush*, the allegorical meaning; and S is *Sod*, its secret, or innermost, meaning” (Epstein, *Kabbalah*, p. 3; note, in this context, the title of Moses de Cordovero’s famous sixteenth-century exposition of Kabbalah, *Pardes Rimmonim*, “The Pomegranate Garden,” and cf. n. 21 above).

For the pronunciation and alphabetical spellings of Aššur in the first millennium B.C. and first millennium A.D., see my articles, “A Letter from Šamaš-šumu-ukīn to Esarhad-don,” *Iraq* 34 (1972): 29, n. 40, and “The Alleged Middle/Neo-Assyrian Irregular Verb \*našš and the Assyrian Sound Change š>s,” *Assur* 1/1 (1974): 1 ff.; R. Zadok, “Assyrians in Chaldean and Achaemenian Babylonia,” *Assur* 4/3 (1984): 3, with examples from Hatra and Dura Europos; B. Aggoula, *Inscriptions et graffites araméens d’Assour* (Naples, 1985), passim, third century A.D.; Fales, *Aramaic Epigraphs on Clay Tablets of the Neo-Assyrian Period* (Rome, 1986), p. 62 and nos. 46–49; R. Frye, “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms,” *JNES* 51 (1992): 281–85. Note especially the Greek spelling *Assōron* (long *o*) in Damascius (*Quaestiones de primis principiis*, chap. 125 (ed. Kopp, p. 384), which proves that the tradition of *Enūma eliš* known to this sixth-century Neoplatonist took Aššur as the father of Anu and fully accepted the “Assyrian” equation AN.ŠĀR = Aššur, introduced as early as in the fourteenth century B.C. (see n. 106 above).