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# Allusions to the Stream of Tradition in Neo-Assyrian Oracles

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this article is to begin the evaluation of the rhetorical aims and strategies of the use of allusions within Neo-Assyrian oracles. These allusions are to some of the most prominent texts within the Mesopotamian literary stream of tradition: Adapa and the South Wind, Atra-ḥasis, and the Gilgameš Epic. The authors borrowed imagery from these works and fused it with their own rhetorical purposes. Prophets even used allusions that contained a complex set of apparently conflicting associations. The use of subtle allusions that often contain complex associations should cause modern readers to more greatly appreciate the rhetorical abilities of the Neo-Assyrian prophets.\**

## Allusions to the Stream of Tradition in Neo-Assyrian Oracles

The stylistic sophistication of the Neo-Assyrian oracles from Nineveh has not gone unnoticed by modern scholars.<sup>1</sup> In this connection it has been suggested that the oracles allude to works of literature which belong to what Leo Oppenheim called the “stream of tradition”.<sup>2</sup> However, these

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<sup>1</sup> Parpola 1997, p. lxxvii. The prophecies are published in Parpola 1997 and valuable studies of the prophecies include Nissinen 1998 and 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Parpola 1997, pp. CV n. 246; 4 n. i 7; 16 n. i 19 (in this instance Parpola notes that the “same idea” occurs in both the oracle and the Babylonian Flood story); 41 n. 8.

intertextual allusions have not yet been subject to literary-critical scrutiny. It is the purpose of this article to begin the evaluation of their rhetorical aims and strategies by focusing on three particular instances.

These allusions are to some of the most prominent texts within the stream of tradition: *Adapa and the South Wind*, *Atra-ḫasīs*, and the *Gilgameš Epic*. As we will see, the prophets did not merely cut and paste sections of these works into their oracles. Instead, they borrowed motifs and altered them to fit their own purposes. In so doing, the prophets likely viewed themselves as active participants in the creative process of literary composition.<sup>3</sup> The prophets drew on the authority and high cultural status of the literary stream of tradition in order to enhance their message, while at the same time they subtly changed the phrasing of the passages they alluded to, so as to make their impact even more powerful.

Akkadian prophecies present several challenges to the modern reader.<sup>4</sup> It is often hard to know with certainty when an author is consciously quoting another text. One complicating factor is the fact that authors may create relationships between texts subconsciously.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, we must be mindful in our interpretive efforts to separate conscious allusions from accidental ones. Additionally, the Mesopotamian prophets often alluded to literary works in the stream of tradition in a markedly oblique manner. There are no unambiguous markers of citations such as personal names or exact quotations. So, at times it is unclear whether the prophets drew from a generic trope or intentionally referred to a specific passage.

When approaching allusions that seem only tangentially related to another text we must not automatically dismiss a connection because the link is not strong. Jeffrey Tigay has shown that when scribes translated texts in the Mesopotamian stream of tradition into other languages the differences between two versions were sometimes substantial. Furthermore, he observes that scribes often modified the stories to fit local ideologies or interests.<sup>6</sup> Even though the versions of the stories were in some cases very

<sup>3</sup> Foster 1991, pp. 31–32.

<sup>4</sup> One issue that is less acute for Neo-Assyrian prophecy in contrast to Old Babylonian prophecy is the difficulty of separating the prophets' own words from those of the scribes who recorded the oracles. No doubt the scribes faithfully conveyed the message of the prophets, but the scribes, particularly in the Old Babylonian period, felt free to adapt the wording of the messages to their own personalities while still preserving the voice of the prophet (Sasson 1995, pp. 605, 607; see also van der Toorn 1998, pp. 60–69). The scribes seem more intent upon preserving the actual words of the oracles during the Neo-Assyrian period (cf. Parpola 1997, LXVII), however the exact composition history of these oracles is probably lost forever (Nissinen 2005, p. 165).

<sup>5</sup> Aaron 2006, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Tigay 1993, pp. 254–255.

different, there was nonetheless a relationship between the texts. A similar phenomenon occurred when the Neo-Assyrian prophets borrowed motifs from the literary stream of tradition.

Finally, another challenge to the modern reader is properly identifying prophecy. Nissinen lists three components that distinguish prophecy from other works: 1) the implied speaker is a deity, 2) the implied addressee is a human, and 3) the medium of communication is through a human.<sup>7</sup> Nissinen also distinguishes three types of texts that contain prophetic material: 1) oracle reports and collections, 2) quotations of prophetic messages embedded in letters or literary works, and 3) compilations that reference people with prophetic titles.<sup>8</sup> The allusions to the literary stream of tradition discussed in this article occur in prophetic oracles of the Neo-Assyrian period. These oracles were copied (presumably each oracle was originally written on its own tablet) onto large, vertical, and multi-columned tablets that were intended for archival and reference purposes.<sup>9</sup>

### Adapa and the South Wind

Parpola identifies three Neo-Assyrian oracles that contain references to major literary works within the Mesopotamian stream of tradition.<sup>10</sup> The first of these is, in his numeration, prophecy 1.1.<sup>11</sup> In this prophecy Ištar spoke through the prophet Issar-lā-taīyaṭ and told Esarhaddon that she would destroy the king's enemies. Ištar reassured Esarhaddon that she was capable of protecting him: *ayyû šāru ša idibakkani*<sup>12</sup> *aqappušu lā aksupūmi* "what wind (is there) which has risen against you, (and) whose wing I have not clipped"? This phrase is probably an allusion to *Adapa and the South Wind*: *Adapa ša šūti kappaša išbir* "Adapa broke the wing of the south wind".<sup>13</sup> The prophet alluded to *Adapa* in order to highlight the fact that Ištar had never faced an enemy of the king that she had been unable to subdue.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Nissinen 2003, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Nissinen 2003, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Parpola 1997, p. LIII. Oracle 9 is written on a large, vertical tablet, however unlike oracles 1–4 it is the only oracle written on this tablet.

<sup>10</sup> Parpola 1997, pp. XLVII–XLVIII and CV n. 246.

<sup>11</sup> Photos of the prophecies 1.1–1.10 can be found in Parpola 1997, plates I–III. For hand copies see Smith 1875, plate 4. For a revised copy see Pinches 1891, plate X.

<sup>12</sup> From *tabû* "to rise up," see Parpola 1997, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> For the text of *Adapa* see Piccioni 1981, p. 118:43. For an introduction and study of *Adapa* see Izre'el 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Since Ištar is depicted as having wings, the prophet may have employed a pun with the imagery of breaking the wing of the wind.

At first glance, the allusion to *Adapa* in this oracle seems quite tangential. In fact, apart from the semantic parallel between breaking the wind's wing there is hardly any similarity. First, the compositions use different words to refer to the wind; the *Adapa* myth uses *šūtu* "south wind" but the prophet employs a more general word for wind, *šāru*. Second, the only Akkadian word that occurs in both works, "wing" appears in two different forms; *kappu* occurs in *Adapa* while *aqappu* appears in the oracle. Third, the authors of these texts use different verbs to express the subjugation of the wind; *šebēru* "to break" is used in *Adapa* while *kasāpu* "to chip, trim" in the prophetic text. Finally, the prophet does not include the name *Adapa* at any point in his oracle. While there are semantic similarities that might lead one to conclude that the prophet intended an allusion to *Adapa*, the wording of the allusion is substantially different from that of the myth. However, the differences between the prophecy and the myth were likely purposeful. The prophet alluded to perhaps the most distinctive and defining phrase within the *Adapa* myth. Even though the vocabulary is slightly different no one familiar with both *Adapa* and the oracle would have failed to note this echo between them.

The oracle's reference to *Adapa* mobilized associations of brutality. The main character of the myth, Adapa, broke the wind's wing in a fit of rage. The episode begins with Adapa fishing in the sea. Suddenly, the strong wind came up from the South, capsized Adapa's boat, and threw him into the "home of the fish". His temper flared up and Adapa uttered a curse that broke the wind's wing and the wind did not blow for seven days. Upon hearing the prophet's allusion to this event in *Adapa*, the king would doubtless have recalled the context of Adapa's fury. By alluding to this incident the prophet also linked Adapa's quick temper with that of his goddess, Ištar.

Ištar was the goddess of sex, but also of war.<sup>15</sup> She was known for her easily excitable and dreadfully destructive anger. She was sometimes pictured as holding a rope attached to a ring lodged into the nose of a prisoner.<sup>16</sup> The prophet fused this fearsome imagery of Ištar with Adapa's effective curse. Just as Adapa defeated the might of the South Wind with a mere word, so also will Ištar effortlessly defeat all of Esarhaddon's opponents.

Many of the differences between the prophet's allusion and the text of *Adapa* are not mere happenstance. Instead, they strengthen the force of the prophet's assurance. While the use of *šāru* rather than *šūtu* that appears in

<sup>15</sup> Wilcke and Seidl 1976. Also, Black, Green, and Rickards 1992, pp. 108–109.

<sup>16</sup> Wilcke and Seidl 1976, abb. 1.

*Adapa* might be dismissed as merely inadvertent, instead, it subtly expands the scope of Ištar's support. *Šūtu* refers specifically to the South Wind while *šāru* is a generic word for "wind".<sup>17</sup> By replacing the more specific term with the more general, the prophet indicates that Ištar will protect the king from any threat. Ištar will crush any person or group that opposes the king.

All of the extant Ninevite oracles give the king positive reassurance, but if we read between the lines we will see that this oracle's author was an optimistic realist. The verb that the *Adapa* myth used to describe the subjugation of the wind was *šebēru* "to break" while the prophet used *kasāpu* "to chip, break off a piece, to trim".<sup>18</sup> In a general sense the two verbs share a similar meaning, but their connotations are entirely different. *Šebēru* is forceful and describes the action of breaking, fracturing, or destroying (bows, bones, etc.).<sup>19</sup> By contrast, the verb *kasāpu* is used to describe a chipped beam of wood: *gušūrū ša kassapūni batqu akašsar* "I will supply the replacement for its broken beams"<sup>20</sup> and breaking off crumbs of food: *šumma kalbu liksupūšu kusāpa* "if it is a dog they should break off a bite for it".<sup>21</sup> *Kasāpu* does not imply an action as strong or violent as *šebēru*.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, the CAD translates the prophet's allusion: "Have I not trimmed the wings of the wind that blew against you?"<sup>23</sup> The prophet did not ask the king: "Have I not smashed the wind that blew against you"? Instead, by changing the verb the prophet conveyed the idea that Ištar has rendered the king's enemies ineffective, their wings are clipped, but the enemies remain nonetheless. A prophecy that at first seems more like a bright-eyed platitude is actually a sensible word of encouragement. The king will not lack opponents, but Ištar will ensure their eventual subjugation.

The Neo-Assyrian oracle's allusion to *Adapa* by no means stands alone, but rather sits in a continuum of allusions to *Adapa* across different textual genres. Already in the early second Millennium at Mari a propheticess alluded to *Adapa*<sup>24</sup> as well: *umma-mi šāru ana mātīm itebbēm u kappišu u šitta ta-ak-ka-[...] ašāšsunūti Zimrī-Lim u mār Sim'al ebūram līpušu* "A wind

<sup>17</sup> See CAD Š 408–411 and AHW 1293b "Südwind, Süden".

<sup>18</sup> CAD K 241–42 and AHW 453 "in Stücke brechen".

<sup>19</sup> CAD Š/2 246–50 and AHW 1206–7 "(zer)brechen".

<sup>20</sup> Parpola 1987, no. 77 r 7–8.

<sup>21</sup> Ebeling 1919, no. 114:6.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. also, from the same root, the word *kusāpu*, which indicates a "small bit broken off" as seen in the *Gilgamesh Epic*, [ana X] *bēr ī iksupū kusāpu* "after X double hours they had a bite" (Lambert and Millard 1965, no. 21:2. There also a pun in this line since one meaning of *barū* (adj. *berū*) is "to be hungry.") as well as the *kispu* ceremony where bread is broken.

<sup>23</sup> CAD K 242.

<sup>24</sup> The oldest manuscript of *Adapa* is from *tell el-Amarna* so while the story may have been current in the early second millennium, it cannot be proven.

will rise against this land! I will test its wings and its two...—[let] Zimrī-Lim and the Sim'alite do the harvesting"!<sup>25</sup> Here again the prophetess did not state that the wing was broken, but tested. This is another instance of a prophet adapting a tradition to a current situation. The prophetess refashions the allusion from *Adapa* in order to portray the large role of the king, Zimrī-Lim, in defeating his enemies. While the deity will test the wings of the rising wind, Zimrī-Lim will be the one who completes the defeat.

Two other occurrences of breaking wings include a text from Sultepe: *izīrīšunu ušabber* "I have broken their (the evil winds') wings".<sup>26</sup> This text uses the same verb as in *Adapa*, but the word for wing is different.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the closest parallel to *Adapa* is found in Šin-šarra-iškun's report of divine protection from his enemies: *šāru(im.méš) tibūtīya ušabbiru kap[pišunu]* "...of the attack against me they shattered their wing".<sup>28</sup> This allusion includes both the same verb (although in the D stem, not G as in *Adapa*) and the same word for "wing" but a different word for "wind" (*šāru* instead of *šūtu*).

These texts indicate that authors quoted the *Adapa* myth in a variety of circumstances. Furthermore, a dangerous wind is a familiar trope that likely originated from *Adapa*, yet no author provides an exact quotation.<sup>29</sup> Mesopotamian authors frequently borrowed motifs and tailored them to their own particular situations.

### Atra-Ḥasīs

The *Atra-ḥasīs* epic describes the creation and early history of humankind as well as the great flood. Parpola does not draw a direct relationship between *Atra-ḥasīs* and a Neo-Assyrian oracle, but he commented,

<sup>25</sup> Durand 1988, pp. 429–430. This text also appears in the volume designed for biblical scholars, Nissinen 2003, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> Gurney, Finkelstein, and Hulin 1964, no. 149 r.4.

<sup>27</sup> An allusion to *Adapa* has also been proposed in an inscription on a *Pazuzu* head from Babylon. Approximately 163 heads of animal-like demons have been found throughout Mesopotamia, including Nineveh (For an extensive study of the *Pazuzu* see Heessel 2002) and these heads often contain inscriptions. One such inscription contains the following phrase, which Parpola (1997, p. CV n. 246) links with the *Adapa* myth: *šāru(im.méš) lemmu ša tebū(zī)šu nanduru* "the Evil wind, whose attack is fearsome..." (Lambert 1970, p. 47:2). About the only connection between this text and *Adapa* is the semantic notion of dangerous wind. This is not enough of a connection to constitute a legitimate allusion, rather, it is a mere trope.

<sup>28</sup> Grayson 1972, p. 165 line 5' restoring *kap[pišunu]*.

<sup>29</sup> For example, see the texts listed in the *tebū* entry of CAD T, pp. 316–317.

“the same idea occurs” in both of these works.<sup>30</sup> Neo-Assyrian oracle 2.3 line ii 19’ contains the phrase *mārtu*(*dumu.munus*) *hubburtu* “noisy daughter,”<sup>31</sup> and the related word *hubūru* “din” occurs three times in the “Assyrian recension”<sup>32</sup> of *Atra-ḫasīs* in lines iv r 3, 8, and 41.<sup>33</sup> Each occurrence appears in a virtually identical phrase: *ina riḡmēšīna attādar / ina hubūrīšīna lā iṣabbatanni šittu* “I am disturbed by their shouts / because of their noise sleep will not overcome me.”<sup>34</sup> This phrase illustrates the god’s displeasure at the loud noise produced by human activity. In prophecy 2.3 the prophet described the fidelity of Ištar by contrasting her steadfastness and responsiveness with the deceit and treachery of humans. The prophet stated that Ištar would root out and deliver all of the king’s enemies that were figuratively described with the collective term “noisy daughter”.

The prophet might have picked this illustration in order to recall the *Atra-ḫasīs* epic, but the allusion is more complex than it first appears. The only feature connecting this prophecy and *Atra-ḫasīs* is that they both refer to noise (*ḫbr*) as something negative which, if Parpola’s interpretation is correct, is characteristic of mankind.<sup>35</sup> No names are mentioned, nor does the allusion extend further than this one word, although two lines earlier there is a possible allusion to *Gilgameš* xi 220: *raggat amēlūtu iraggigki* “Being deceitful, mankind will deceive you.”<sup>36</sup> The two occurrences in quick succession lend each other support. However, in the *Atra-ḫasīs* epic the gods’ plan to kill humanity backfired. After killing most of the humans the gods realized that they would have to do work if the humans were not around and the human protagonist, *Atra-ḫasīs*, saved a remnant and was able to repopulate the earth. This usage is an example of the complexity of the cultural resonances mobilized by allusions. On the one hand, the gods killed off almost the entire human population, on the other, a human outwitted the deities (with the help of the god Enki). The prophet likely intended to recall the catastrophic nature of the flood rather than clumsy deities.

<sup>30</sup> Parpola 1997, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> This is a difficult form. In Neo-Assyrian a D-stem verbal adjective would be *hubburtu*. AHw 352a assigns the form to *huburtu* “bundle of reeds”, under the proviso that that the passage is unclear. Parpola’s translation probably presumes a Babylonianism.

<sup>32</sup> Lambert and Millard 1969, p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> Lambert and Millard 1969, pp. 106–115.

<sup>34</sup> The only substantive difference is that lines 8 and 41 read “sleep does not overcome me” while line 3 reads “sleep did not overcome him.”

<sup>35</sup> Parpola 1997, p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> The *Gilgameš* quotation is from George 2003, p. 716. The prophecy reads *amēlūtu tullumâ* “Mankind is deceitful” (Parpola 1997, p. 16 line 17’).

### The Gilgameš Epic

The *Gilgameš Epic* was one of the most widely circulated texts of the Fertile Crescent. Scribes translated it into multiple languages and schools even outside Mesopotamia incorporated *Gilgameš* into their scribal curriculum.<sup>37</sup> A prominent theme of this story is the friendship between Gilgameš and his best friend and journey companion Enkidu. In Neo-Assyrian oracle 9 a woman sent words of encouragement to Assurbanipal on behalf of Mullissu and Ištar in which she alluded to the relationship between Gilgameš and Enkidu:

balāṭ(a)ka ešākuma arappuda šēru(edīn) / etanabbir nārāte(id<sup>mes</sup>) u tāmāte  
(tam-tim<sup>mes</sup>) / ētanattiq šadē ḥursāni ētanabbir nārāte(id<sup>mes</sup>) kalīšīna / ēta-  
nakkalāni yāši / šētāte sarabāte / iltanappatā banū lāni / anākuma šad-  
dalupūka lāniya

Your life I desire. I roam the steppe, I cross rivers and seas, I traverse mountain chains, I cross all rivers. Droughts and rains consume me, they affect my beautiful figure and my body is sleepless on your account.

Commenting on this section, Parpola connects almost every phrase of this prophecy with lines in the *Gilgameš Epic* and he is surely right to do so.<sup>38</sup> As we look at specific links in *Gilgameš* that illustrate the allusion most clearly, we should keep in mind that various permutations of these lines are repeated throughout the *Epic*. The prophetic allusions are not to obscure and tucked away passages.

The first line of this section: *balāṭka ešākuma arappuda šēr(a)(edīn)* “Your life I desire. I roam the steppe...” is a clear allusion to line ix 5 and an often repeated image in tablet x [this exact phrase occurs in lines 139 and 239 while *arappud šēra(edīn)* or similar constructions appear in lines 64, 66, 77, 118, 125, 139, 141, 154, 218, 225, 239, 241, 243; NB: these examples include partially and fully reconstructed lines] of *Gilgameš*: *mūta aplahma arappud šēra(edīn)* “I feared death, I roam the steppe”.<sup>39</sup> The prophetess employs the imagery of a rough and tumble hero valiantly treading through the wilderness propelled by his sense of mission and adventure to represent the gods’ zeal to protect the king. Furthermore, the prophetess alters the refrain of tablet x in order to emphasize the safety of the king. While the *Gilgameš Epic* reads: “I feared death, I roam the steppe”, the prophetess uses the second half of this line but replaces the first half with: “Your life I desire”. If

<sup>37</sup> Demsy 1990, p. 164. See also van der Toorn 2000, p. 105.

<sup>38</sup> Parpola 1997, p. 41.

<sup>39</sup> All quotations from *Gilgameš* are from George 2003.

the prophetess had merely quoted the refrain from *Gilgameš* the motivation for the gods' protection of the king would have been their fear of death. The prophetess changes this intention to the gods' desire for the king's life.

The oracle to Assurbanipal contains two other allusions to the *Gilgameš Epic*. The first is x 251-55:

ašur allika kališina mātāti(kur<sup>mes</sup>) / ētettiqa šadī(kur<sup>mes</sup>) maršūti / u ēteb-  
bira kališina tāmātu / šitta ṭabta ul išbū pānūya / uštēziq ramānī ina dalāpi  
Again, I went through all the lands. I passed time and again over arduous  
mountains, and I crossed time and again all the seas. My face did not have  
enough of sweet sleep, I scourged myself by going sleepless.

Second, *Gilgameš* x 122-25:

lā ibašši nissatu(sag.pa.lagab) ina karšīya / ana ālik urhī rūqāti pānūya lā  
mašlū / ina šarbi u šēti(ud.da) lā qummū pānūya / u pān labbi lā šaknākuma  
lā arappud šēra

Should there not be sorrow in my heart, and my face not be like one who  
has traveled a distant road? Should not my face be burnt by the frost and  
sunshine, and should I not roam the wild got up like a lion?

Both of these passages are from tablet x. This section describes Gilgameš's journey in search of the secret of eternal life. Ultimately, this quest ended in vain since Gilgameš was unable to attain eternal life. Like the complexities surrounding the allusion to *Atra-ḫašīs* in the previous oracle, in this instance the prophetess used the allusion to Gilgameš in order to highlight the fidelity of the deity on behalf of the king. Apparently, in the mind of the prophetess the luster of this allusion was not tarnished by the ultimate ineffectiveness of Gilgameš's journey.

### Conclusion

Contrary to many modern forms of discourse, ancient writers felt no compulsion to provide direct links with their allusions (*cf.* the four lines which appear almost identically in *Istar's Descent*, *Nergal and Ereškigal* (Sultantepe version), and *Gilgameš*). Instead, they borrowed imagery and fused it with their own rhetorical purposes. This makes our task as modern readers very difficult. It is often hard to determine if an intertextual similarity is due to chance, the use of a trope, or a conscious allusion to a specific work. Prophets even used allusions that contained a complex set of apparently conflicting associations. However, when allusions are detected they are often subtly powerful. In the case of the allusions in the oracles from Nin-

eveh, their intertextual nuance and emotional impact contribute to enhancing our appreciation for the rhetorical abilities of the Neo-Assyrian prophets.

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