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"A Janus Parallelism in the Gilgamesh Flood Story."

BRIEF COMMUNICATION

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A Janus Parallelism in the Gilgamesh Flood Story[1]

In 1978, C.H. Gordon coined the term "Janus parallelism" for a literary device in which a middle stich of poetry parallels in a polysemous manner both the line that precedes it and the line which follows it. Gordon's observation suggested a "new direction" with which biblical scholars could approach their text.[2] Several have continued the search and have been able to find additional examples of this most hidden of literary devices.[3]

Given the fact that literary, and especially poetic techniques, often transcend cultural boundaries, one should not be surprised to find the device in other ancient Near Eastern sources. An excellent example of Janus parallelism can be recognized in the Akkadian Flood Story of the "Epic of Gilgamesh." In Tablet XI, lines 25—27, we read as follows:

25. *muššir mešrê še'i napšāti*
26. *makkura zerma napišta bulliṭ*
27. [*š*]*ulima zēr napšati kalama ana libbi* ᵍⁱˢ*elippi*

Translation:

25. Abandon wealth! Seek life!
26. Property spurn (it)! Living beings keep alive!
27. Make all living beings go up into the boat!

While explaining the redaction of these lines from the text's Vorlage, the "Atraḥasis Epic," H.A. Hoffner pointed out the polysemy of two words in line 26; the noun *makkura* and the verbal form *zerma*.[4] Although Hoffner was aware of the pun, he did not recognize the presence of Janus parallelism. His first observation was that *makkura*, aside from its more common meaning "property," also means "a kind of boat," (the word is borrowed from the Sumerian má-gur₈).[5] Although the doubled *k* is not the expected syllabic orthography for *ma(k)kuru* = "ark," it is not unattested. As Hoffner stated:

> Indeed a doubling of the first consonant following *ma* in the Akk. form of the Sum. loanwords for boat types is not isolated: *makkītu* (má-gíd-da), *makkūtu* (má-gud₄-da), notably all examples contain the Sum. phoneme g.[6]

Thus, the word *makkura* signifies here both "property" and "ark."

Now we turn our attention to the word *zerma*, usually translated "spurn, shun," or the like. The initial sibilant in *ze-e-er-ma* may be either *s*, *ṣ*, or *z*, and as Hoffner remarked, "neither the spelling nor the form indicates whether the verb used is *esēru. as/ṣ/zâru* or *s/ṣ/zerû.*"[7] While this allows a certain flexibility in rendering the line, one possibility may be ruled out by context. Our word cannot derive from *sēru* =

"to coat, besmear, cover," for as Hoffner noted, its uses in Akkadian are limited to plating a surface with "a metal foil, liquid or paste, and not the construction of a roof."[8] This leaves us with two possibilities, both equally plausible in light of the polysemous use of *ma(k)kuru*. The word in question could be read as both *zerma* = "Spurn!," and *ṣêru* = "Build, construct!".

Thus, the Janus effect is accomplished in the following manner:

25. *muššir mešrê šē'i napšāti*

     Abandon wealth! Seek life!

26. *makkura zerma napišta bulliṭ*

     Property spurn! (Construct a boat!) Keep living beings alive!

27. [*š*]*ulima žer napšati kalama ana libbi* ⁱˢ*elippi*

     Make all living beings go up into the boat!

The significant feature of a Janus parallelism is that the middle line of a tristich both echoes the line that precedes it and anticipates the line that follows it. This is precisely the case here. With the reading "Spurn property!," line 26 is to be connected with line 25, "Abandon wealth!". With the understanding "Construct a boat!," the sentence alludes to the *ana libbi* ⁱˢ*elippi* in the following line.

As far as I am aware, this is the first example of Janus parallelism demonstrated in Akkadian literature. The device now hitherto known only from the few examples pointed out in the Bible, may now be placed in its ancient Near Eastern context. Janus parallelism was not necessarily a unique invention of the biblical writer(s), rather it may have been a technique common to the Near East in general.[9]

Notes

1. I would like to thank my teachers, Profs. G.A. Rendsburg and D.I. Owen for their helpful comments on this note.

2. C.H. Gordon, "New Directions," *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 15 (1978), 59—66.

3. See G. Rendsburg, "Janus Parallelism in Gen. 49: 26," *JBL* 99 (1980), 291—93; E. Zurro, "Disemia de brh y paralelismo bifronte en Job 9, 25, "*Bib* 62 (1981), 546—47; W.G. Watson, "Hebrew 'To Be Happy'--an Idiom Identified," *VT* 31 (1981), 92—5; D.T. Tsumura, "Janus Parallelism in Nah 1: 8," *JBL* 102 (1983), 109—11; W.G. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, (JSOTSS 26, 1984), p. 159.

4. H.A. Hoffner, "Enki's Command to Atraḫasis," in B.L. Eichler, et al., *Kramer Anniversary Volume* (AOAT 25) (Verlag Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer, Neukirchener Verlag Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1976), p. 244.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid. Hoffner cites *CAD* E, 349.

8. Ibid.

9. For additional instances of word play in Akkadian literature, see E.A. Speiser's, "W the Creation Epic's Version of the Founding of Babylon," in ed. J.J. Finkelstein and M. Green and *Biblical Studies; Collected Works of E.A. Speiser*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania pp. 53—61.

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