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“A Janus Parallelism in the Gilgamesh Flood Story.”

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In 1978, C.H. Gordon coined the term "Janus parallelism" for a literary device in which a middle stitch 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. Several have continued the search and have been able to find additional examples of this most hidden of literary devices.

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. muššur meššē še'ī napšati
26. makkura zerma napšata bul-lat
27. [],uišma zēr napšati kalama ana libbi əklippi

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 "Atrahasis Epic," H.A. Hoffner pointed out the polysemy of two words in line 26; the noun makkura and the verbal form zerna. 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 mā-gur₂). Although the doubled k is not the expected syllabic orthography for makkura = "ark," it is not untested. 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: makkāru (mā-gud₂-dā), makkānu (mā-gur₂-dā), notably all examples contain the Sum. phoneme g. Thus, the word makkura signifies here both "property" and "ark."

Now we turn our attention to the word zerna, usually translated "spurn, shun," or the like. The initial sibilant in ze-e-em-ma may be either š, ū, or z, and as Hoffner remarked, "neither the spelling nor the form indicates whether the verb used is esēru. as/ū/šēru or s/zēru. ..." 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." This leaves us with two possibilities, both equally plausible in light of the polysemous use of makkura. The word in question could be read as both zerma = "Spurn!," and šēru = "Build, construct!". Thus, the Janus effect is accomplished in the following manner:

25. makkura zerma šērusa
   Abandon wealth! Seek life!
26. makkura šēru šēru šēru
   Properly spurn! (Construct a boat!) Keep living beings alive!
27. mlumma šēru šēru kalama ana liibbi šelippī
   Make all living beings go up into the boat!

The significant feature of a Janus parallelism is that the middle line of a trisdeh both echoes the line that precedes it and anticipates the line that follows it. This is precisely the case here. With the reading "Spurn properly!," line 26 is to be connected with line 25, "Abandon wealth!". With the understanding "Construct a boat!," the sentence alludes to the ana liibbi šelippī 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.L. Owen for their helpful comments on this note.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.