“Another Janus Parallelism in the Atra-Hasis Epic.”

First Published in:
We thus seem to have here a deliberate ambiguity in the text, the employment of a word which connotes two meanings: 1. army, troops, and 2. woman in labor. The first meaning echoes the preceding line, and the second anticipates the following. Furthermore, via their use as similes in the process of drawing a picture of a raging storm, these two meanings, though apparently unrelated, seem to fall together nicely and convey quite a lively and realistic picture of a stormy and devastating flood.

Department of Biblical Studies
University of Haifa

Another Janus Parallelism in the Atrahasis Epic

Janus parallelism is a literary device in which a pun faces back to a previous stich of poetry in one of its meanings and ahead to a following stich in another. The polysemy can occur either in two stichs ("asymmetrical Janus parallelism") or three ("symmetrical Janus parallelism") and both types are attested in biblical Hebrew and Akkadian.¹

Since my initial discovery and publication of two Janus parallels in the Gilgamesh flood story,² additional examples of the device have been discovered in Akkadian literature³ making it increasingly clear that the device was one of many in the sophisticated repertoire of the ancient Mesopotamian bards.

Another Janus Parallelism in the Atraḫašīs Epic

I turn now to yet another example of Janus parallelism in Akkadian, this time, in the Old Babylonian version of the Atraḫašīs epic III: viii, 9-17.4

9. kīma nīskunu [abūba]
   How we have brought about [the flood]
10. awīlum ībluṣu ina karāṣī
    yet a man survived [the cataclysm].
11. atā mālik īl raḫūti
    You, counsellor of the great gods,
12. tēretišiška
    at [your] command
13. usābšt [qabla]
    I caused the [destruction].
14. šanittiška
    For your šanittiš
15. annītam zamāra
    this song
16. lišmūma Igigi
    let the Igigi-gods hear;
17. lišširū narbūka
    let them make famous your greatness!

As A. D. Kilmer notes,5 the word šanittiš in 1. 14 is a pun which can mean both “praise” (from nadū)6 and “hostile, inimical word or matter” (from šanitu).7 As the former, the Janus pun faces ahead to zamāra “song” and lišmūma Igigi lišširū narbāka “let the Igigi-gods hear; let them make famous your greatness!” As “hostile word,” šanittiš looks backwards to the “flood” abūbu, “cataclysm” karāṣī, and “destruction” qablu. The Janus is reinforced by yet another pun on narbū, both “greatness”8 and “softness/cowardice.”9

Other studies on wordplay in the Atraḫašīs epic have shown puns and paronom-

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6. CAD N 1, 101, s.v. nadū; AHw 1319, s.v. ianitu.
7. CAD § 1, 388, s.v. šanitu; AHw 1164, s.v. šanitu.
8. CAD N 1, 351, s.v. narbū; AHw 746, s.v. narbū.
9. CAD N 1, 350, s.v. narbu; AHw 746, s.v. narbu.
sia to serve emphatic or referential roles in the story. Here both functions are at work. As the last lines of the poem, the puns underscore the ambiguity of Enlil’s role in the story by referring the reader to a previous event in the poem. As A. D. Kilmer comments, the puns “refer to Enlil’s cowardice at the time of the worker god’s rebellion and to the fact that he himself was apparently in absentia during the most terrifying part of the Flood.” Thus, the Janus parallelism connects Enlil’s hostile, yet cowardly act, with his follower’s praise of his greatness.

Moreover, as A. D. Kilmer also has demonstrated, clues to the presence of the puns often appear in the text. Accordingly, we may wonder if the poet has flagged the puns for us by emphatically concluding with an exhortation to “listen!” (ṣimā).

On the Reading of Nağ-su1

In a brief communication published in N.A.B.U. 1991/No. 1, pp.3-4 (4. The Container kabkuru), Piotr Steinkeller has pointed out the possibility that /nağ/ has a phonetic value /kāb/. This view was also followed by W. Sallaberger in a brief communication entitled “Zur Lesung der Bewässerungs-einrichtung NAG-kud = kab-kud”, N.A.B.U. 1991/No. 2, pp.31–32, and further by Josef Bauer in Altorientalische.