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## Back to Delitzsch and Jeremias: The Relevance of the Pan-Babylonian School to the MELAMMU Project

Almost exactly one hundred years ago, perhaps at this very hour, the German Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch started preparing his famous series of lectures entitled “Babel und Bibel.”<sup>1</sup> His purpose was to demonstrate, on the basis of recent discoveries and in conjunction with the opening of German excavations at Babylon, the relevance of cuneiform studies to Biblical research in particular and the history of Western culture in general.<sup>2</sup> We all know, at least in rough outline, how this enterprise ended.<sup>3</sup>

All of the three lectures, especially the first two, generated enormous interest and a fierce public debate. The first two lectures were delivered on 13 January 1902 and 12 January 1903 respectively in the presence of the German emperor Wilhelm II himself, and were published in printings of more than 60,000 and 45,000 copies each. They were reviewed in more than 1350 short and 300 long newspaper and journal articles and in 28 pamphlets in Germany alone; in addition, there were reviews and debate in several

other countries. The reactions varied from enthusiastic acceptance to violent attacks against Delitzsch’s ideas; they came from the man of the street as well as from historians, theologians, clergymen, biblical scholars, philosophers, and orientalist. Delitzsch took pains to answer to the most important criticism briefly in the published versions of the lectures, but noted that the majority of the feedback was scientifically substandard and not worthy of reply.<sup>4</sup>

The third and final lecture was delivered on 27 October 1904. It was no longer attended by the *Kaiser*, who, disturbed by some theological implications of the second lecture,<sup>5</sup> had publicly distanced himself from Delitzsch’s views and advised him to stay within Assyriology and leave “religion as such” to others. This was widely (though wrongly!) interpreted as a deathblow to the substance of Delitzsch’s argument and, much to the disappointment of the general public, as an end of the whole Babel-Bibel debate.<sup>6</sup> In reality, however, the debate continued after the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Delitzsch’s letter to Karl Bruckmann cited in Lehmann 1994: 285, dated 12.XI.’01, which shows that he had been already working on the lecture for some time in November 1901.

<sup>2</sup> Delitzsch 1902: 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent in-depth presentation and analysis of the Babel-Bibel controversy, making extensive use of unpublished documents in the literary remains of Delitzsch and others, see Lehmann 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Delitzsch 1903<sup>2</sup>: 47-48.

<sup>5</sup> Ironically, the conclusion of the lecture shows that it had been intended as a positive response to a recent speech of Wilhelm II calling for “Weiterbildung der Religion.” See Lehmann 1994: 217-219.

<sup>6</sup> Lehmann 1994: 250f. Contrary to what is/was commonly thought, Delitzsch never lost the favour of the *Kaiser* but the two men remained on friendly terms until the death of Delitzsch (see Lehmann 1994: 242 and 355).

third lecture as well and was extended to new, much wider horizons.

Soon after the first Babel-Bibel lecture, a student of Delitzsch, Hugo Winckler, had published a small book entitled *Die babylonische Kultur in ihren Beziehungen zur unsrigen* ("The Babylonian Culture in its Relationship to Ours"). This booklet of 52 pages was immediately reprinted, and inaugurated a long series of other books produced in the course of the next ten years by a small group of German scholars subsequently to be known as the "pan-Babylonians" (German: *Panbabylonisten*). Beside Winckler, the "founder" of the pan-Babylonian school, the "group" initially consisted only of two other Assyriologists, Alfred Jeremias and Heinrich Zimmern, both of whom likewise were former students of Delitzsch and active in Leipzig,<sup>7</sup> although later on it also included Ernst Weidner, a student of Jeremias.<sup>8</sup> A further former student of Delitzsch, Peter Jensen, who published his controversial book *Das Gilgamesch-Epos in der Welt-*

*literatur* at the same time as Winckler and Jeremias were writing, is often also associated with the pan-Babylonian school. This is a mistake, however, as Jensen and the pan-Babylonians were on inimical terms and the latter, especially their most prolific representative, Alfred Jeremias, sharply dissociated themselves from Jensen's ideas and writings.<sup>9</sup>

The pan-Babylonians took as their point of departure Eduard Stucken's mythological studies of the late 19th century, which they developed further. Their basic contention was that the astral mythologies and conceptions of the ancient peoples all over the world were borrowed from the cradle of all astrological knowledge, Babylonia, and that this lore was part of a larger system, a comprehensive, coherent world-view that had taken its shape in prehistoric times and is first attested, already fully developed, in ancient Babylonia. The central tenets of this world-view were circulated as esoteric secrets and included the following<sup>10</sup>:

<sup>7</sup> Jeremias was a great admirer of Winckler who embraced and defended his views wholeheartedly; Zimmern was more critical in his evaluation of Winckler's theories.

<sup>8</sup> The group also included a non-Assyriologist, August Wünsche, a colleague of Jeremias specialising in Judaism and Jewish mysticism, who contributed four articles to the pan-Babylonian series *Ex Oriente Lux* in 1904-1906. The founder of Finnish Assyriology, Knut Tallqvist, who got his Assyriological training in Leipzig under Delitzsch, may also be considered a pan-Babylonian based on his intercultural studies in the early twenties and thirties.

<sup>9</sup> See Lehmann 1994: 46 and Jeremias 1913: 7 n. 2. Eberhard Schrader can be counted to the pan-Babylonians (cf. Rollinger 1999: 382) only insofar as the third, revised edition of his *Die Keilinschriften und das Alte Testament* was essentially the work of Winckler and Zimmern.

<sup>10</sup> See basically Winckler 1902: 49 and Jeremias 1913: 9. Note, however, the following important qualification of Winckler's model in Zimmern 1909: 309: "We have to deal, in the first place, with the following question: Are we to hold, with Winckler especially, that the religion of the Babylonians and their theory of the universe in general are to be regarded, at the time when our sources begin, *i.e.* about B.C. 3000, as es-

entially complete a fixed system, based on astronomical principles, which arose in a period which, for us, is entirely prehistoric. Or, are the undoubted traces of the systematizing of the religion, which are found in our sources, only the product of a comparatively late period? ... The present writer feels compelled, from his study and interpretation of the sources, to adopt an intermediate theory between the two extremes just mentioned. It seems to him undeniable that there was among the Babylonians, even at an early date, a tendency to reduce the world of the gods to a single system, and to carry out the law of correspondence between [...] the macrocosm and the microcosm. At the same time, he does not feel inclined to exclude the element of historical evolution from the actually known period of Assyro-Babylonian history to the same extent as Winckler does... Moreover, to a far larger extent than Winckler is disposed to admit, we seem to have to deal in the Babylonian religion with unreconciled differences, due partly to widely deviating local cults which once existed... We cannot, then, speak of a finished scheme as present in the Bab. *Weltanschauung* and consequently in its religion. At the same time, it must be conceded that Winckler's reconstruction of a Bab. *Weltanschauung* has in many ways, in spite of its one-sidedness and evident exaggeration, made possible a better understanding of the religion of the Babylonians."

1. The visible world is to be understood as a materialization of or an emanation from the transcendent God.
2. God is one, but manifested in a multiplicity of forms.
3. All mundane existence reflects celestial order.
4. All knowledge about the cosmos and its organization is based on divine revelation received at the beginning of time, and
5. Knowledge of the heavens is the source of all wisdom.

These, and other theses of the pan-Babylonians were publicized and backed up in a great number of monographs produced within a short period of time. Between 1903 and 1908, Winckler and Jeremias alone published a total of 19 books and pamphlets relating to the subject (not counting the former's strictly Assyriological publications). The central theses were presented to the general public by Winckler in a book entitled *Die babylonische Geisteskultur*, published in 1907, and in several penetrating studies by Jeremias, such as *Das Alte Testament im Lichte des Alten Orients* (1904), *Babylonisches im Neuen Testament* (1905) and particularly *Handbuch der altorientalischen Geisteskultur* (1913).

As indicated by these titles, the work of the pan-Babylonians continued the Babel-Bibel debate. It also immediately became the target of similar vehement attacks and criticism. The critics expectedly attacked the alleged great antiquity of Babylonian astronomy and the spread of Babylonian doctrines all over the world in remote antiquity.<sup>11</sup> The Mesopotamian world-view, as reconstructed by the pan-Babylonians, also came under attack; it was declared a methodically flawed projection of phenomena and

doctrines specific to the Hellenistic age and late antiquity backwards in time. Winckler and Jeremias sought to refute such criticism by carefully documented arguments, also adducing new evidence in support of their theories, e.g. from the recent excavations of the Hittite capital, Hattuša.<sup>12</sup> They also defiantly adopted the designation pan-Babylonians coined by their critics as their own, claiming that none of the pillars on which their theory rested had been shaken in the least by the criticism.<sup>13</sup>

The long and bitter debate came to an end with the death of Winckler in 1913, just before the appearance of Jeremias's magnum opus, *Handbuch der altorientalischen Geisteskultur* and the outbreak of the First World War. True, Jeremias's brilliant student Ernst Weidner still contributed a final piece to it two years later with the publication of his *Handbuch der babylonischen Astronomie*; but the book had actually been completed earlier and had been in press since 1913. Jeremias himself continued his work after the war, preparing updated editions of his principal works and publishing several new monographs in the pan-Babylonian tradition, the last of which (*Der Kosmos von Sumer*, 1932), appeared only three years before his death; but in effect, the pan-Babylonian polemics had ended with World War I, and it was well over by the thirties.

The pan-Babylonians thus passed away defiant and unshaken in their central theses. However, although they left a stunning legacy in the field of intercultural studies, they did not find many followers. In 1926, Zimmern's student and successor, Benno Landsberger, sowed the seeds of a major turning point in Assy-

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Kugler 1910.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremias 1902, 1907, 1908a; Winckler 1906a,

1907b.

<sup>13</sup> Jeremias 1913: VII and 7.

riological studies. In his inaugural lecture at Leipzig, Landsberger distanced himself from the work of his predecessors<sup>14</sup> and outlined his own research programme, which stressed the “conceptual autonomy” (*Eigenbegrifflichkeit*) of the Mesopotamian civilisation and insisted that it should be reconstructed in its own terms and basically with recourse to the cuneiform evidence only.<sup>15</sup> Although Landsberger by no means denied the value of comparative studies,<sup>16</sup> the subsequent almost exclusive implementation of his heuristic method in Assyriology effectively paralysed interdisciplinary study of Mesopotamian religion for several decades.<sup>17</sup> Today, 72 years after the appearance of the second, completely revised edition of Jeremias’s *Handbuch der altorientalischen Geisteskultur*, this work remains the only systematic, well-documented attempt to reconstruct the Mesopotamian world-view and correlate it with other comparable systems in the ancient world. While it cannot be said that cross-cultural studies are completely lacking in Assyriology since the pan-Babylonians, it is certainly true that there has been little effort to correlate Mesopotamian intellectual culture with the outside world since them. And that is not all. Not only has the work of the pan-Babylonians not been continued; it has also been largely forgotten; and if not forgotten, then tainted with a stamp of *questionability* that has made many serious scholars shun away from it as

something “suspicious.”

Who nowadays reads Jeremias and Winckler, or for that matter, Delitzsch? Even the most recent, revised editions of their works are in many respects hopelessly out of date today. They refer to antiquated and/or defective editions of texts, and use name forms and chronological schemes that have long since been shown to be incorrect.<sup>18</sup> Worse still, their authors have been summarily branded as tendentious racists or charlatans with grossly exaggerated, fantastic claims.<sup>19</sup> Recent, on the whole factual, accounts of the Babel-Bibel debate paint a picture of Delitzsch as an embittered man imbued with Aryan ideology and trying to present Christianity as an ultimately Aryan religion.<sup>20</sup>

In consequence, the main theses of the pan-Babylonians have been ridiculed and effectively rejected or turned upside down during the past decades. The recent revised edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, for example, expressly denies that there was *any* Mesopotamian mysticism before Hellenistic times.<sup>21</sup> Thus, whereas the pan-Babylonians maintained that Babylonian mysticism deeply influenced the entire ancient world, the current mainstream view is different and in fact diametrically opposed to theirs. Similarly, claims that the ancient Mesopotamians entertained a belief in resurrection from the dead, or a monotheistic concept of God, as maintained by the pan-Babylonians, have long been an

<sup>14</sup> Landsberger 1926: 356-357 = 1976: 5-7. Ironically, at the beginning of the lecture he praises both Delitzsch and Zimmern highly and refers to them as “men to whom our science owes most.” See also below.

<sup>15</sup> Landsberger 1926: 358 = 1976: 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> See Landsberger 1926: 357 = 1976: 6, and cf. n. 28 below.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, Landsberger was not alone responsible for this development, but his views were very influ-

ential. It is no coincidence, for example, that I. J. Gelb’s famous article, where he urged Assyriologists to concentrate on the study of onions instead of religion (Gelb 1965), was published in a *Festschrift* presented to Landsberger.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., “Ninib” for Ninurta, and 2850 as the approximate year of accession of Sargon the Great.

<sup>19</sup> Cf., e.g., König 1954.

<sup>20</sup> Huffmon 1983: 318; Larsen 1995: 103-105.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon 1996.

anathema in Assyriology. Presenting such views in print is nowadays widely felt as *dangerous* in scholarly circles, as it automatically leads to association with the ideas of the pan-Babylonians, and thus to being stigmatised as a scholar of dubious judgement and outdated views.

This is a paradoxical and, in many respects, surreal situation, as the diffusionist model of cultural evolution espoused by Delitzsch and the pan-Babylonians has by no means been proven wrong by later research.<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the central contention of the pan-Babylonians, namely that Mesopotamian ideas, knowledge, and systems of thought were widely diffused throughout the ancient world since the earliest times, has by now become a firmly established fact, and can be extensively documented today. And how could it be otherwise? The ancient Mesopotamians did not live in a vacuum, but in constant interaction with their neighbours, and it is but natural that ideas and knowledge from Mesopotamia spread to the surrounding world, just as the Mesopotamians (of course) also received significant impulses from the outside world. Hence, it is *not* enough to study the Mesopotamian civilisation as an alien, isolated system only to be understood in its own terms, as such an approach artificially separates Mesopotamia from the rest of the world and obscures its pivotal role in the genesis and growth of a cultural *oikumene* that has kept growing and continually expanding to the present day. Since our knowledge of the past is fragmentary, it is essential that the available

Mesopotamian data be systematically correlated with other relevant (interdisciplinary) evidence to yield a deeper and more diversified understanding of the past. Interdisciplinary data are often mutually complementary and can thus significantly contribute to the understanding of the past, usually to the benefit of more than one discipline.

Since cultural borrowings, like loan-words, are subject to variation from culture to culture on the surface level, different frames of reference often leading to surprisingly different modes of expression of the same ideas,<sup>23</sup> intercultural studies require considerable interdisciplinary competence, good critical judgement and sound methodology in order to produce viable results.<sup>24</sup> In view of the overwhelmingly negative acceptance of their work, it is ironical to note that the pan-Babylonians, as a whole, meet this requirement *far better* than most of their critics. Winckler, Zimmern, Jeremias and Weidner were all highly competent Assyriologists who had an excellent first-hand command of cuneiform sources of all types and periods, even by today's standards. In addition, they had good knowledge of many fields of ancient Near Eastern studies and were well informed in astronomy, astrology, comparative mythology, biblical studies, classics, ethnology, and the relevant methodologies. Jeremias was a trained Christian theologian. Their teacher, Delitzsch, not only was the leading Assyriologist but also one of the leading Semitists of his time. The school of Delitzsch laid great stress on sound methodology, scientific accu-

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Albright 1964: 50 and 309; Oppenheim 1964: 333-334; Beaulieu 2002: 14-15.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Panaino 2001 and the article of Grotanelli in the same volume.

<sup>24</sup> Needless to say, historical connections between intercultural phenomena cannot be established on the

basis of isolated superficial similarities only; the similarities between the phenomena compared have to be historically and geographically feasible, systematic, functional, and specific enough to justify the hypothesis of a common origin.

racy and the importance of carefully documenting all scientific assertions. In his famous lecture already referred to, Landsberger says of Delitzsch:

In their enthusiasm of discovery the early decipherers often imbued the simple monuments with too much of their own ideas and so gave Assyriology a reputation for fancifulness. Friedrich Delitzsch imposed on this freely creative fantasy the fetters of sound methodology and laid the foundations of our philology by quiet, persevering work, uninfluenced by sensationalism.<sup>25</sup>

Reading the Babel-Bibel lectures today, it is almost unbelievable that they could have stirred such emotions and opposition as they did in their time. Many of the things presented in them have since then become firmly established parts of Assyriological and even general knowledge. What is more, the facts are presented in the same clear, intelligent and accurate manner that is also characteristic of Delitzsch's scientific work. Along with established facts, he does present challenging ideas and interpretations that are still fresh and worth pursuing even today. However, he does not press them, but leaves the final judgement about them to future research.

Despite allegations to contrary, it is difficult to find any racism or bitterness in the lectures.<sup>26</sup> The only occurrence of the word "Aryan" there is at the beginning of the first lecture, where Delitzsch discusses a drawing of Assurbanipal's queen made by Billerbeck and remarks: "Wohl möglich, dass diese Gemahlin Sardanapals eine Prinzessin arischen Geblüts ist und blondhaarig zu denken." But such remarks must be understood within the context of the time, when

racial theories were in vogue everywhere, not from the perspective of later times! There is nothing in the lectures even remotely suggesting that Delitzsch wanted to promote the idea of an Aryan Jesus. In the third lecture, he does (rightly) emphasise the (often overlooked) fact that the population of Galilee included a strong Babylonian element, but his point was to draw attention to the relevance of cuneiform evidence for New Testament studies, not to suggest a new racist interpretation of Christianity.<sup>27</sup>

It is true that one can detect a certain change of tone and an occasional sarcasm in the last two lectures. But that is understandable considering the vicious and mostly totally unjustified feedback that the lectures received. It is also true that Delitzsch's personal religious convictions surface here and there, and that he occasionally presents ideas that are difficult to endorse or sustain. But on the whole the tone of the lectures remains factual and the quality of information contained in them remarkably high throughout.

The same can be said about the writings of Hugo Winckler, Alfred Jeremias and the other pan-Babylonians. One can disagree with the details of their reconstruction of the Mesopotamian worldview and its supposed spread all over the world, and many parts of their theories are certainly subject to refinement, adjustment and correction in light of the evidence that has become available afterwards. But the *facts* collected by them are on the whole presented accurately and reliably, and have not lost their validity. As far as the reconstruction of Mesopotamian esoteric thought is concerned, my own conclusions, based on a

<sup>25</sup> Landsberger 1976: 5 = 1926: 356.

<sup>26</sup> Lehmann 1904: 268.

<sup>27</sup> See Delitzsch 1905: 11, 56f.

different approach and a different set of data, in many essential points agree with theirs.<sup>28</sup>

It seems to me that the negative attitude to the work of the pan-Babylonians, like the emotions stirred by the Babel-Bibel lectures, largely stems from careless and/or ideologically biased reading of their writings and insufficient first-hand knowledge of Mesopotamian primary sources, rather than impartial study of the actual facts. I cannot but concur with Marie Pancratius who, in response to Cumont's slighting evaluation of the work of the pan-Babylonians, wrote in 1913:

Even one who – like the reviewer – has never stood in the ranks of the pan-Babylonians, must protest against such a summary. A feuilletonist may not resist the temptation of it; but if a scholar like F. Cumont wishes to judge a group of scholars before a circle of laymen, he must know their work otherwise than just from disputatious writings. Even if the paths which a scholar undaunted by error boldly cleared to an unknown land unfolding from a new, constantly increasing documentation taking us into an ever more distant past, would not seem to lead where they should lead – even Columbus did not discover India – they have nevertheless led to a more diversified orientation, and broad vistas and overviews. And how many stimuli have come from the pan-Babylonian idea – even beyond the confines of Assyriology! I am reminded of the strong impulse that comparative mythology received from it.

Even if one does not want to believe in Babylon as the source of all the myths of the world nor in the uniquely mythologizing power of the Aryans or the hoary antiquity of the sky myth, one must acknowledge an admirable work achievement valuable, in any case, as a preliminary work and fresh effort to penetrate the riddles of myth... Such a successful hypothesis can impossibly be placed in the same line with a futile soap bubble.<sup>29</sup>

Naturally, much in the writings of the pan-Babylonians is obsolete and redundant today. Nevertheless, I believe their work is still valuable and should by no means be overlooked or summarily discarded. Apart from the fact that it is the only systematic attempt to date to reconstruct the Mesopotamian world-view in a coherent manner, it also contains a great deal of cuneiform data correlated with parallel evidence from other Near Eastern and classical traditions, much of which is not found or discussed in later Assyriological publications. From the viewpoint of the MELAMMU project and intercultural studies in general, it is absolutely essential that these data be checked for their reliability, brought up to date and made available in a revised form – otherwise they will remain accessible exclusively through the writings of the pan-Babylonians, and will, *en faute de mieux*, continue being cited in this form indefinitely.

I intend to go through all interdisciplinary publications of the pan-Babylonian

<sup>28</sup> My scholarly work has from the beginning been guided by Landsberger's heuristic method, as can be easily seen from my analysis of the correspondence of Neo-Assyrian scholars (Parpola 1983). However, I also attach considerable importance to the comparative method and the use of interdisciplinary evidence (cf. Parpola 1997). These methods are not mutually exclusive but complementary: as stressed by Landsberger (1976: 7 = 1926: 358), interdisciplinary evidence is *vital* for the success of the heuristic method. There is, of course, an order of priority in which the two methods must be applied. The heuristic method

comes first; only after the Mesopotamian data have been thoroughly analysed in their own right, can they be successfully compared with cross-cultural data, which naturally must also be well explored (cf. Landsberger 1976: 6 = 1926: 357). While Delitzsch and the pan-Babylonians may have laid greater stress on the comparative method, their extensive first-hand familiarity with the cuneiform sources makes it certain that they had by no means neglected the heuristic approach.

<sup>29</sup> Pancratius 1913: 405 (my translation).

nians, extract from them data that can be considered valid, and have them incorporated in the MELAMMU database now under construction. This way, the pioneering work of the pan-Babylonians will not get lost but can be put at the service of the scholarly world and the general public. The aim of this enterprise, which certainly is not an easy one but will take time and effort, is not to prove or disprove the theories of the pan-Babylonians but simply to take advantage of their pioneering work. The MELAMMU

project does not advocate a Mesopotamia-centred view of cultural evolution but studies the *interaction* of Mesopotamian culture with other cultures over a broad time scale. The pan-Babylonians have already collected and analysed much of the relevant evidence, which is not always easy to identify, and sooner or later it will be necessary to readdress the issues raised by them in light of the evidence available today. I believe it makes sense to check out their evidence and give it the credit that it deserves.

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