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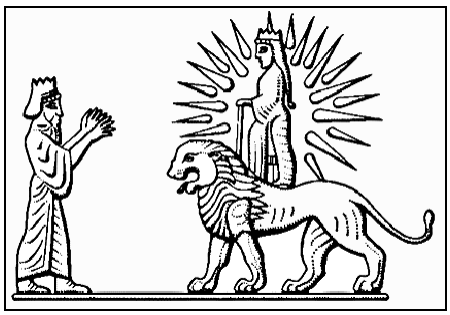

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"The Soul's Journeys and Tauroctony. On Babylonian Sediment in the Syncretic Religious Doctrines of Late Antiquity"

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Published in Forschungen zur Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte 42:

Manfried L.G. Dietrich and Tarmu Kulmar (eds.),

Body and Soul in the Conceptions of the Religions

(Münster: Ugarit-Verlag 2008), 1-46.

Publisher: http://www.ugarit-verlag.de/

The Soul's Journeys and Tauroctony

On Babylonian Sediment in the Syncretic Religious Doctrines of Late Antiquity

Amar Annus, *Tartu*

Introduction

This paper tries to investigate some important concepts in the syncretic world of the religions of late antiquity with respect to its Mesopotamian heritage.[1] These features include the origin of Gnostic archons, the doctrines of fate, the soul's ascent and descent and its clothing, and some concepts especially pertinent to Mithraism such as grade systems, Mithras' rockbirth, and the tauroctony. Before giving an account of the Mesopotamian sediments in the religions of late antiquity perhaps a justification of the endeavour is in order. Apart from the pan-Babylonian school, there were some other scholars in the first half of the 20th century who admitted Mesopotamian influence on the late antique religions, most notably W. Anz (1897), F. Cumont (1912; 1949) and G. Widengren (1946). For example, according to the famous dictum of Franz Cumont, the mysteries of Mithras derived its origins from ancient Persia, and subsequently were deposited in Babylonia with "a thick sediment of Semitic doctrines" (*un sédiment épais de doctrines sémitiques*).[2]

In the second half of the 20th century, the Mesopotamian influences on the religions of late antiquity have for a quite long time been out of fashion, and the "Babylonian sediments" have never been systematically studied. This has led many scholars to think that Cumont's verdict was mistaken and any similar endeavour is probably based on a misapprehension. For example, a recent account of the genesis of the mysteries of Mithras, which postulates a founding group at the end of the first century AD among the dependents of the dynasty of Commagene,

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[1] Part of the present paper was presented at the symposium in Tartu 29.09.2006 under the title „Ancient discourses on soul's clothing and qualities: from Sumerian *me* to Latin *obvolutio*." I thank Stephen Donovan (Helsinki) for correcting my English. I have published a paper with very similar, but not entirely identical content in T. R. Kämmerer (ed.) *Studien zu Ritual und Sozialgeschichte im Alten Orient* / *Studies on Ritual and Society in the Ancient Near East.* BZAW 374 (2007) 1–53.

[2] F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra*, 3rd edition, 1913, p. 27.

> looks again to Anatolia and to an Anatolian group steeped in an Iranian religious tradition. These, however, are not the Hellenized Mazdean magi, the *Magousaioi*, to whom Cumont remained so attached as Mithraism's putative ancestors. They are a less diffuse group and one whose devotion to Mithras may be inferred directly from the much heralded devotion of their dynastic patrons to that god. In an economy that is surely a desirable feature of any such account, this group also becomes the origin of another component of the Mysteries, the astrologically based cosmology, which Cumont located more distantly in space and time, in Babylon as the Semitic 'stratum' and contribution to Mithraism (Beck 1998, 125).

The present paper diverges from this stream of scholarship that refrains from recognition of any genuinely ancient elements in the syncretic religions of late antiquity, but rather tries to investigate some key concepts in these religions from a point of view of continuity of the ancient Mesopotamian ones. In the following pages, I will try first to show that the concept of Hellenistic astrology, which assumed the determination of mundane affairs from the influences of the movements of the seven planetary gods, derived quite obviously from Mesopotamian divination. Secondly, it will be my concern to show that the grade systems, so characteristic of the mystery religions, and especially of Mithraism, were also current in ancient Mesopotamia. The soul's gradual descent or genesis and its ascent or apogenesis in the late antique religions have several antecedents in the Mesopotamian myths and rituals, most prominently in the myth of the descent and ascent of the goddess Inanna/Ištar. The seven grades of the soul's ascent and descent can be shown to be related to the stations of the seven planetary gods in Mesopotamia. The investment and divestment of the soul with seven different kinds of qualities during its descent into bodily existence and ascent to the heavenly realm can be seen as parallel to the clothing and stripping metaphor in the Mesopotamian myth. Finally, I find parallels of the most important iconographic symbol of Mithraism, that of Mithras killing the bull, to the episode in the Epic of Gilgamesh, where Gilgameš and Enkidu kill the Bull of Heaven. Although I am not the first to put forward this connection, deeper analysis has been still lacking. The Bull of Heaven as the name of the constellation Taurus in Mesopotamia may have a relevance to the astrological interpretation of the main iconographic symbol in Mithraism, and other details in the Epic of Gilgamesh can point to a possibility of later astronomical interpretation. The late antiquity evidence quoted or referred to comes from a variety of sources, assuming that these doctrines of ultimately Mesopotamian origin were syncretically represented in several schools of late antiquity, including Mandeanism and Syrian Christianity.

The Seven Gods of Destinies

The gods fixing destinies for the king and his people is a pivotal theme in Mesopotamian literature. The royal fates were fixed in the assembly of the gods, and

the most important decisions were made in the main temple of the religious centre of the land, in Nippur, or Babylon (see Annus 2002, 21–61). In the Sumerian composition *Enlil and Ninlil*, which can be with certainty dated to the 21st century BCE, the gods who determined the destinies in Nippur are referred to as "the fifty great gods and the seven gods who decide destinies".[3] Exactly the same configuration is mentioned in the much later composed Babylonian Creation Epic VI 80–81, in the context of decreeing Marduk's lofty status: "The fifty great gods took their seats, the seven gods of destinies were confirmed for rendering judgement."[4]

In the Sumerian texts, the decreeing of royal destiny appears frequently in the context of enthronement of a new king. In the first millennium BCE, an assembly of gods decrees the destinies of the king, who represents Marduk (or Bēl "the Lord"), and of the Babylonian people at the New Year festival, and the passage cited from the Creation Epic refers to this occasion. The New Year festival *akītu* was the most important religious festivity in Babylonia, and it continued to be celebrated until Roman times. From the Hellenistic period onwards, an *akītu* festival was celebrated in honour of these several Bēls, and not necessarily in the month of Nisan:

> cults of Bel continued to flourish during the Parthian period both within and outside areas controlled at times by Rome: at Palmyra, Dura, Apamea-on-Orontes and Hatra the cult or at least its buildings appear to be newly emerged, but at Ashur, Arbela, Harran and Babylon powerful traditions of great antiquity have survived into the Roman period. The language in which the epic of creation was recited began as Babylonian, but creeping Aramaicisation may have resulted eventually in an all-Aramaic version. (Dalley 1995, 150–151)

The mythological concept of the seven gods forming an assembly for decreeing the destinies for the whole world and writing them down on the Tablet of Destinies formed the backbone of the later practice of horoscopy, which emerged only in the Achaemenid period. The planets were associated with the gods already in the second millennium BCE Mesopotamian celestial omen texts. The planetary gods were treated as persons, because the protases of celestial omens refer to the actions or appearances of the planets and stars not appropriate to inanimate objects, but rather as anthropomorphic beings with agency and feeling. Futhermore, the anthropomorphic references in the celestial omens are to

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[3] In Sumerian, lines 56–57: *dingir gal-gal 50–ne-ne dingir nam tar-ra 7–na-ne-ne.* See the edition of the text in the home page of the *Electronic Text Corpus of the Sumerian Literature* (ETCSL), http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/ under 1.2.1. From this electronic database are extracted all English translations of Sumerian texts in present paper.

[4] In Akkadian: *ilāni rabūti ḫamšatsunu ušibu-ma ilāni šīmāti šebūssunu ana purussê uktinnu*. See the latest edition by Talon 2005. There is no consensus in dating the composition of this epic—the present writer opts for the middle of the second millennium BCE, see Annus 2002, 37–39.

gods. For example, instead of simply stating, that there was a lunar eclipse, normally expressed by the Babylonian term *attalû* "eclipse," the moon, in anthropomorphic guise, is described as "mourning" or "feeling distress." The lunar eclipse was understood in terms of the distress of the moon god (Rochberg 1996, 478). The heavenly bodies were quite often personified as gods, and the metaphorical terms of description refer in each case to the particular deity of which the heavenly body was considered to be a manifestation (Rochberg 2004, 72, 167–173).

The seven gods were associated with the planets as follows—Šamaš with Sun, Sin with Moon, Jupiter with Marduk (= Bēl), Saturn with Adad, Mercury with Nabû or Ninurta, Venus with Ištar, and Mars with Nergal. According to the canonical Babylonian texts of the first millennium BCE, listing cultic topography, the Marduk's temple in Babylon, called Esagil, contained the Dais of Destinies where the two assemblies of the gods convened for making decisions on the 8^{th} and 11^{th} of Nisan, and which was equipped with seats for the seven destiny-decreeing gods (see Annus 2002, 76–81).

An aspect of the Mesopotamian gods, who formed an assembly to determine heavenly and mundane affairs, was revealed in planetary orientations (Rochberg 2004, 187–190). The decisions of fate were read from the night sky by learned men, who composed and used compendia of celestial omens. The assembly of Mesopotamian gods was thought to rule over the society and to be represented on earth by the Assyrian or Babylonian state council. The functional relationship in Mesopotamian divination was between the deities, the givers of signs, and humankind, for whose benefit the signs were given. The predictions given for the signs, the apodoses of the omens were sometimes called *purussû*, "(divine) decisions" (Rochberg 2004, 53, 59). In the Mesopotamian system of divination, agency is placed in the gods, who decide what events will happen on earth in association with ominous celestial phenomena (*ibid*: 266–267).

The notion of the gods' assembly also forms the ideological background for the cuneiform horoscopes, which are based on the idea of ascribing the planetary alignment at the moment of birth to the life and fortune of an individual. Surviving Babylonian horoscopes all date to the second half of the first millennium (see Rochberg 1998). From this branch of Babylonian astrological practice developed Hellenistic Greek genethlialogy that is at the base of later astrological doctrines. The evidence for Babylonian influence on Greek astrology:

> derives largely from the later periods of cuneiform tradition, i. e., the Achaemenid and Seleucid periods. The most fundamental tool for Greek astrology, the zodiac, is of Babylonian origin in the fifth century. Not only is the Babylonian origin of the zodiac assured on the basis of cuneiform documentation, but, as Neugebauer has demonstrated from the deviation (= 5^0) between modern longitudes and those given in Greek horoscopes, the astrological literature of hellenistic and Roman period continued to use the norming point of the Babylonian zodiac (Aries 8^o or 10^o). In two cases, the exaltations (hypsomata) and the forerunners of trine as-

> pect, textual evidence traces the origins of these doctrines to the seventh century and even earlier traditions in the celestial omens of Enūma Anu Enlil. The Babylonian elements which can be pinpointed as direct contributions to Greek astrology, specifically, the planetary exaltations, the dodekatemoria, and trine aspect, represent significant features of the later system." (Rochberg-Halton 1988, 61)

The Babylonian horoscopes represent a significant departure from the earlier Babylonian celestial divination, as represented by the omen series *Enūma Anu Enlil*, which always retained its concern with public matters—king and state. Babylonian horoscopy combines this with the tradition of birth omens, in which the birth had mantic significance in the way of any action occurring on a certain month and day, just as is seen in menologies and hemerologies, and finally, the personal divination such as is represented by the physiognomic omen series. In this way, the Babylonian "horoscopy" grew out from a complex foundation of interrelated mantic forms: the date of birth omen, the personal omen, the celestial omen and the nativity omen (Rochberg 1999–2000, 240–241).

Given the overwhelming evidence which we have for the influence of Babylonian celestial sciences on Hellenistic astrology and astronomy, it is not difficult to believe that the seven planetary gods involved in the late antique science of the celestial spheres were of Mesopotamian origin.[5] Deities or angels as planets or planetary spheres were considered in late antiquity as the divine powers who rule the physical universe and as such they corresponded to gnostic archons. In a fashion characteristic to Gnosticism, both the Jewish creator god and the Mesopotamian gods were demonized as evil beings. The number of archons was seven like the number of gods, who were involved in astral fatalism. In the gnostic texts the former Mesopotamian gods were transformed into evil archons, governing the physical universe under the service of the evil creator god. The term *kosmokratores* was frequently used for planets in the Greek magical papyri, personified as rulers of the heavenly spheres, sometimes regarded as evil.[6]

Thus the Mesopotamian religion and literary works must be considered as one of many resources for the developing branches of Gnosticism. In the Nag Hammadi treatise *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (92, 4ff.) there is a passage which curiously resembles the Mesopotamian account of the Flood, the only difference being that instead of the "great gods" there are "archons", and the god Ea is represented as "the ruler of the forces". The passage, however, is by no means a rewording of the biblical flood story:

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[5] Another case is the recently published astronomical papyri from Oxyrrhyncus, which show that some types of Hellenistic astronomical texts are partially very similar to those extant in cuneiform. See Jones, A. *Astronomical Papyri from Oxyrhyncus (P. Oxy. 4133–4300a).* Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society 223. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1999. See also Rochberg 2004, 34–35, 237–244.

[6] See D. E. Aune in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, (E. J. Brill, 1996) col. 154.

> Then mankind began to multiply and improve. The rulers took counsel with one another and said, "Come, let us cause a deluge with our hands and obliterate all flesh, from man to beast." But when the ruler of the forces came to know of their decision, he said to Noah, "Make yourself an ark from some wood that does not rot and hide in it—you and your children and the beasts and the birds of heaven from small to large—and set it upon Mount Sir."[7]

This is a legacy of the Mesopotamian notion of the divine assembly, consisting of seven destiny-decreeing gods and their irrevocable decisions. The religions of Hellenistic and Roman periods witnessed a high point of astrological determinism, astrology was an element of general education in that period, and astronomy as a science was more developed than ever before. Also in the Hellenistic world, the planets were associated with gods:

> The acceptance of astrology led to a growing belief that the dwelling place of the gods was in the realm of the stars. For example, it was during the Hellenistic period that it became the standard practice to call the planets by the names of various Greek gods, such as Zeus (Jupiter) and Ares (Mars). Astrology also encouraged a new conception of life after death, according to which the soul did not go to the underworld, as had earlier been believed, but rather rose through the planetary spheres to the sphere of the fixed stars and then to the paradise that lay beyond the outermost sphere. In time this journey came to be imagined as difficult and dangerous, with secret passwords required to cross each planetary threshold (Ulansey 1989, 133).

One may conclude that in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, stars as gods virtually formed the divine government over the events of the cosmos. While for large masses of people this was a welcome device for explaining the world, still by others, consisting of the limited number of devotees of salvation religions, this acknowledged truth was regarded as calamitous. The rule of astral bodies over the society was probably better approved by upper classes and more fortunate ones in life, while hostility to the *status quo* can be associated with lower classes and the victims of social or religious persecution.[8] For the second group of people the religion of astral fatalism, whose earliest forms ultimately origi-

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[7] Translation by R. A. Bullard and B. Layton, see Robinson 1996, 166. For the Babylonian Flood Story in the Epic of Gilgamesh, see George 2003, 508ff. and 700ff. The name of the mountain Sir probably derives from the name Niṣir in Babylonian source, where Utnapištim's boat landed, although the name can also be read Nimuš.

[8] My interpretation has nothing in common with the notion of "cosmic pessimism," allegedly present in Roman world of third and fourth centuries AD, according to some prominent scholars, e. g. F. Cumont and E. Dodds. See N. Denzey, "'Enslavement to fate,' 'cosmic pessimism' and other explorations of the Late Roman psyche: A brief history of a historiographical trend." *Studies in Religion* 33 (2004) 277–299. My understanding can perhaps be used as a starting point for sociology of Gnosticism.

nated in the Mesopotamian world view, became a prison of this-worldly powers. Opinions certainly varied to what extent the astral powers govern the universe, but it was only rarely denied altogether before the fourth century. The notion of soul's redemption from planetary powers became very important on the basis of these assumptions. The following statement by Culianu is certainly true in the context of Gnostic world-view, where

> the whole universe becomes an abode for evil. The seven planetary spheres, whose influence upon human affairs has become overwhelming thanks to astrology, are viewed as seats of vicious astral Rulers or archons, who, on the one hand, confer their own vices to all the souls entering the world, and, on the other hand, forbid heavenly passage to souls that attempt to leave the world. Fortunately, a saviour descends from heaven to earth, and reveals to his disciples the watchwords they must utter before the archons, in order to get free passage through the heavenly customs." (Culianu 1983, 2)

In addition, the Neopythagorean Nicomachus of Gerasa (2nd century AD) reports in his *Theology of Arithmetic* that "the best-qualified among the Babylonians and (the famous sage) Ostanes, and Zoroaster" call the seven planetary spheres "herds" or "flocks" (*agélai*). The standard way of referring to the seven planets in Babylonian religious and astronomical texts was as "the seven sheep" (*bibbi*). In the seventh tablet of *Enūma Eliš* the planetary gods are once compared to a "flock", line 131.[9] The conversion by Greeks of the Babylonian flock of planetary sheep into planetary flocks is clearly related to the forced parallel, emphasized by Nicomachos, between the word *agelai* "flocks" and *aggeloi* "messengers, angels" (Kingsley 1995, 202).

Heavenly Grades in Ancient Mesopotamia

Even as in the theologies of the mystery religions of late antiquity, there is evidence for grade systems in ancient Mesopotamia. It is not surprising to find it in the seven-fold grade structure of the ziggurat, the edifice for communication between men and gods. The textual evidence comes already from about 2115 BCE, when the ruler of the city-state Lagaš, Gudea, built a new temple for his god Ningirsu, called Eninnu "the house of fifty (powers)". The account of his building is written on clay cylinders. According to an improved reading of the crucial sign, the following passage can be shown to contain a reference to the seven-fold stucture of his temple under construction (Gudea Cylinders 562–577):

> Gudea, in charge of building the house, placed on his head the carrying-basket for the house, as if it were a holy crown. He laid the foundation,

[9] See Talon 2005, 75, and Assyrian Dictionary of the University of Chicago, vol. Ṣ, s. v. ṣēnu.

> set the walls on the ground. He marked out a square, aligned the bricks with a string. He marked out a second square on the site of the temple, (saying,) "It is the line-mark for a topped-off jar of 1 ban capacity (?)". He marked out a third square on the site of the temple, (saying,) "It is the Anzud bird enveloping its fledgling with its wings". He marked out a fourth square on the site of the temple, (saying,) "It is a panther embracing a fierce lion". He marked out a fifth square on the site of the temple, (saying,) "It is the blue sky in all its splendour". He marked out a sixth square on the site of the temple, (saying,) "It is the day of supply, full of luxuriance". He marked out a seventh square on the site of the temple, (saying,) "It is the E-ninnu bathing the Land with moonlight at dawn".[10]

The seventh level of the building can be associated with the Moon-god, the Sumerian Su'ena. The sixth contains the word "day" which can be a reference to the Sun-god, as the two words are written with the same sign in Sumerian (Utu, or ud). The "blue sky" in the fifth level can be a reference to the sky-god An or to the storm-god Iškur. The panther and lion in fourth can be associated with Inanna, and the Anzud bird on the third with the owner of the temple himself, with Ningirsu, whose bird Anzud was.[11] The two uppermost levels can be quite certainly associated with the Moon on top and the Sun next to it.

The famous ziggurat of Marduk's temple in Babylon, E-temen-anki, also consisted of seven storeys, perhaps with an eighth roof-top structure above it, according to Babylonian metrological texts and where, according to Herodotus, only the god-chosen women could spend the night with the deity (1.181).[12] There is some evidence that the Christian heretic Bardaisan of Edessa (154–222 AD) situated the Paradise on the top of the ziggurat. Ephrem the Syrian wrote, while criticizing the views of Bardaisan that "the top of the building (*rēšâ d-benyānâ*), whose gates open to the Mother at command—in a shameful place he situated paradise" (*Hymns against Heresies* 55:7). The "top of the building" here quite certainly refers to what is the mythological equivalent to the top of the ziggurat as the divine bed-chamber (Babylonian *kiṣṣu elû*). The shamefulness of Bardaisan's paradise for Ephrem is, that there takes place a sexual union between the Father and the Mother, in his words:

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[10] For the reading of the sign, see Suter 1997. The translation here is taken from ETCSL website. There is supporting evidence for this translation from another inscription of Gudea, the Statues of Gudea G i 1–18 and E i 1–17 which read "For his king Ningirsu, the powerful warrior of Enlil, Gudea, ensi of Lagaš, who had built Eninnu of Ningirsu, built Epa, the temple of seven stages (*é-ub-7*), (and) his king Ningirsu decreed good fate for the temple, whose PA (*é pa-bi*) rose foremost" (Lapinkivi 2004, 147).

[11] Simo Parpola, personal communication. See J. Black / A. Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (London, 1992), *s. v.* Imdugud, lion.

[12] See A. R. George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts* (Leuven, 1992) pp. 117, 430–433, on the terminology of divine bed-chamber see p. 432–433.

> He also hated the blessed paradise of the Holy One and believed in another paradise of shame, (saying:) "Gods measured it and laid it out, that is the Father with the Mother, by their sexual union they founded it, they planted it with their descendants." (*ibid.* 55:8)

The strophe 10 finally tells who the Father and the Mother were according to Bardaisan—viz. Sun and Moon: "He considered Sun and Moon; with the Sun he compared the Father, with the Moon he compared the Mother, male and female gods and their children" (Drijvers 1966, 147–148). Thus the sun and moon are here associated with "the top of the building" as they were in ancient Mesopotamia.

Similarly, as pertains to silver, associated with moon, and gold, associated with the sun in the ancient Mesopotamia, Herodotus describes a very similar seven-fold structure in his discussion of the seven concentric walls of Ecbatana (1.98):

> [Dioces, the king of Medes] built the great and mighty circles of walls within walls which are now called Ecbatana. The fortress is so planned that each circle of walls is higher than the next outer circle by no more than the height of its battlements; to which end the site itself, being on a hill in the plain, somewhat helps, but chiefly it was accomplished by art. There are seven circles in all; within the innermost circle are the king's dwellings and the treasuries; and the longest wall is about the length of the wall that surrounds the city of Athens. The battlements of the first circle are white, of the second black, of the third circle purple, of the fourth blue, and of the fifth orange: thus the battlements of five circles are painted with colours; and the battlements of the last two circles are coated, these with silver and those with gold (translation by Godley, Loeb edition).

Simo Parpola has argued that the remains of the colouring on the ziggurat of Dur Šarruken, the Assyrian capital of Sargon II, show that each of its stages was painted in different colour, and the sequence of colours corresponded to the colouring of the seven concentric walls of Ecbatana in the Herodotus passage—white, black, purple, blue, orange, gold, silver. These colours symbolized the seven planetary spheres in the order Venus, Saturn, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Sun, and Moon.[13] Through its seven-staged colouring, the ziggurat was associated

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[13] Parpola 1997, xcii, n. 114. V. Place (*Ninive et l'Assyrie*, Paris 1870, vol. II, 79):

> "Chacun des sept étages de l'Observatoire était peint d'une couleur particulière. La peinture des quatre premiers étages se voyait encore sur la ruine; celle des trois autres a été restituée, avec les étages eux-mêmes, et suivant les données que nous avons déjà fait connaître. Les sept couleurs, blanche, noir, rouge, bleu, vermillon, argent et or, sont de larges teintes plates, hautes chacune de 6 mètres; leur étendue, qui va en diminuant, selon l'étendue des étages, commence à la base par une longueur de 43 mètres et finit au dernier étage par une longueur de 17 mètres. Ces surfaces monochromes n'eussent produit qu'un effet assez médiocre, si elles

with descent and ascent of the goddess Inanna or Ištar, as related in the Sumero-Akkadian myth. "Ziggurat" occurs as the epithet of Ištar of Nineveh in Assurbanipal's hymn to her, and the colours of the ziggurat's levels correspond to the seven garments or powers of the goddess, which she removes during her descent to the netherworld and subsequently puts on again during her ascent (Lapinkivi 2004, 146–147). The descent from the ziggurat's silver-coloured top (= the Moon) would symbolize undressing, while ascending it would symbolize putting on these coloured garments (Parpola, 1997, xcii, n. 114). The goddess in the myth can be plausibly interpreted as referring to the human or cosmic soul (see Lapinkivi 2004).

Planets and metals are associated with a Mithraic "ladder of seven gates" through which the soul passes in ascension, according to Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.22:

> Celsus also describes some Persian mysteries, where he says: 'These truths [= celestial ascent] are obscurely represented by the teaching of the Persians and by the mystery of Mithras, which is of Persian origin. For in the latter there is a symbol of the two orbits in heaven, the one being that of the fixed stars and the other that assigned to the planets, and of the soul's passage through these. The symbol is this. There is a ladder with seven gates and at its top an eighth gate. The first of the gates is of lead, the second of tin, the third of bronze, the fourth of iron, the fifth of an alloy, the sixth of silver, and the seventh of gold. They associate the first with Kronos (Saturn), taking lead to refer to the slowness of the star; the second with Aphrodite (Venus), comparing her with the brightness and softness of tin; the third with Zeus (Jupiter), as the gate that has bronze base and which is firm; the fourth with Hermes (Mercury), for both iron and Hermes are reliable for all works and make money and are hard-working; the fifth with Ares (Mars), the gate which as a result of the mixture is uneven and varied in quality; the sixth with the Moon as the silver gate; and the seventh with the Sun as the golden gate, these metals resembling their colors.' He next examines the reason for this particular arrangement of the stars which is indicated by means of symbols in the names of the various kinds of matter. And he connects musical theories with the theology of the Persians which he describes. (translation by H. Chadwick in Meyer 1987, 209)

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n'avaient pas été habilement accidentées par les saillants et les rentrants dus à l'invention du constructeur. La monotonie disparaissait ainsi par suite des accidents d'ombre et la lumière. D'un autre côté, la variété des teintes, se différenciant d'étage en étage, devait accuser avec plus d'energie les proportions du monument."

See also C. L. Woolley, *Ur Excavations*, vol. 5, *The Ziggurat and its Surroundings* (1939), pp. 125, 142–143.

A ladder or a staircase leading to the upper levels of heaven is also attested in Mesopotamian sources. Thus Namtar, the vizier of the netherworld goddess Ereškigal, "ascended the length (?) of the stairs of heaven" to visit the gods of heaven.[14] Also Šamaš is addressed as "you opened the bolt of heaven's door, you ascended the stairs of pure lapis lazuli".[15]

The sequence of planets in Origen's passage is summarized in the fifth column in the table below. It is interesting to note in comment that the sequence of planets listed by Origen corresponds exactly to the order of weekdays in Greek horoscopes, only in inverted order.[16] Why is the order inverted? My answer is that the ordinary weekday sequence corresponds to birth or genesis, but because the Origen passage deals with the backward movement, namely, the ascent of souls to their heavenly home, the normal weekday order of the planets is inverted.

There is one more difference—the heavenly ascent in Origen begins with Saturn and attains its summit with the Sun, while the weekday order usually begins with Mars and ends with the Moon. As Neugebauer notes, in some Greek magical papyri the weekday sequence also begins with the Sun, and in a papyrus from the 4th century AD this sequence is called *hellenikon*.[17]

The Greek weekday order beginning with the Sun is also maintained in Mandean astrology, where all weekdays are governed by beings bearing names of ancient Mesopotamian gods. Sunday, which is governed by Šamiš, is the first day of the week and associated with the personified Habšaba, "First-Day-of-the-Week", a saviour spirit, who takes the souls to the seat of the Polar Star, Awathur. Sunday is associated also with ascent of the souls, as Lady Drower was informed, thus it is the holiest of the weekdays:

> "[Habšaba] takes purified souls in his ship to Awathur and to the World of Light. The Gate of the World of Light is ajar on this day and Hoshaba (Habshaba) takes the souls by means of electricity into the midst of the world of light." I was told that "Hoshaba" descends into Maṭaratha (Purgatories) on Sunday, returning with seven Mandaean souls to the world of light. "The revolving wheels of light whirl more swiftly on this day, thus assisting the souls in their ascent." (Drower 1937, 74–75)

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[14] Assyrian Dictionary of the University of Chicago, vol. S, s. v. *simmiltu*, p. 274: *ēlâ Namtar arkat ^{si}simmelat šamā*[*mi*] (STT 28 V 13 and 42).

[15] *ibid.*: *sik*[*kūri*] *dalat šamê teliam simmila*[*t*] *uqnîm ellim*. On ladders leading to the stars in late antiquity, see K. Volk, "'Heavenly Steps': Manilius 4.119–121 and Its Background", in R. S. Boustan / A. Y. Reed (eds.): *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions* (Cambridge: University Press 2004), especially 40–46.

[16] The weekday order of the planets is Mars—Mercury—Jupiter—Venus—Saturn—Sun—Moon, which became the standard order of the planets in Indian astronomy.

[17] O. Neugebauer, *History of Ancient Mathematical Astronomy* (Berlin, 1975), vol. 2, p. 691.

According to Mandeans, the second day of the week, Monday, is governed by Sin, the name of the ancient Mesopotamian Moon-god. Tuesday is governed by Nirig or Mars, which name derives from the Mesopotamian Nergal. Wednesday is governed by Nbu = Mercury = Mesopotamian Nabû, and Thursday by Bil or Bel = Jupiter = Babylonian Marduk (= Bēl). Friday is the day of Libat or Liwet, which name derives from Sumerian writing of Ištar's planet Venus, *Dilbat.* Saturday is the day of Kiwan, a name deriving from the Akkadian epithet of Saturn, *kajjamānu* "the steady one". Thus the order of planets in the Greek horoscopes which Mandeans still used in the 20th century is Sun—Moon—Mars—Mercury—Jupiter—Venus—Saturn, which corresponds exactly to the order listed by Origen, only beginning from the other end. It is also important to note that in both systems the Sun is associated with the ascent of the soul.

There are two orders of the planets that occur in cuneiform texts, the older is listed in the first column below, and the later, in common use during the Persian-Hellenistic period, in the second column. Neither order occurs in the astrological compendium *Mul Apin*, nor is there any consistent order in that text (Hunger and Pingree 1989, 147). The third column lists the order according to the passage of Herodotus, supported by the evidence of ziggurat colouring in Dur Šarruken. The fourth column lists the order according to supposed distance from the earth, from the most distant planet inwards. This was the first and primary order in Greek astrology, it was known already to Cicero (*De divinatione* II, 43) and later it became the sequence of the deferents in Ptolemy's system. The weekday order was derived from it (Beck 1988, 4). The last column lists Origen's order, which in turn inverts the weekday order:

CT older	**CT later**	**Herodotus**	**Acc. to distance**	**Origen**
Jupiter	Jupiter	white (Venus)	Saturn	Saturn (lead)
Venus	Venus	black (Saturn)	Jupiter	Venus (tin)
Saturn	Mercury	purple (Mars)	Mars	Jupiter (bronze)
Mercury	Saturn	blue (Mercury)	Sun	Mercury (iron)
Mars	Mars	orange (Jupiter)	Venus	Mars (mixed)
		gold (Sun)	Mercury	Moon (silver)
		silver (Moon)	Moon	Sun (gold)

The unique grade system of Mithras' Mysteries also had seven tutelary deities for each of the seven grades. Origen's "ladder with seven gates" appears to be connected with the seven levels of Mithraic initiation, and the symbols for these initiatory stages are found associated with symbols of the seven planets in the mosaics found in the mithraeum at Ostia (Ulansey 1989a, 18–19). As shows the mosaic pavement of the Mithraeum of Felicissimus at Ostia, the gods for each rank were the seven planetary deities which are found presiding over the days of the week, thought not in the same order. The symbols of the grades are juxtaposed with symbols of the tutelary planets in a sequence of squares extending ladder-like up the aisle, beginning from the bottom of the slide to the top, in the following order (Beck 1984, 2011–2013):

1. Corax—Mercury—"the Raven"
2. Nymphus—Venus—"the Male-bride"
3. Miles—Mars—"the Soldier"
4. Leo—Jupiter—"the Lion"
5. Perses—Moon—"the Persian"
6. Heliodromus—Sun—"the Sun-runner"
7. Pater—Saturn—"the Father"

This Mithraic order of planets does not correspond to any of these which were discussed above. It is confusing that it does not coincide by any reasonable measure with planetary stages of Mithraism reported by Origen. It may be inferred that many different planetary orders were simultaneously used in the mystery cults, therefore

> the order of the *Contra Celsum* was *but one* of the orders which the Mysteries used to explore, and to conduct the *mystes* through, the mystery of the celestial voyage. … Celsus has given us neither the full truth, nor a distortion of the truth, but a *partial* truth. (Beck 1988, 76.)

Porphyry wrote about the mysteries of Mithras as follows: "Thus the Persians, as mystagogues, initiate the *mystes* by teaching him the downward way of the souls and their way back, and calling the place a grotto" (*De antro nympharum* 6). Thus the main teaching of the mysteries was the descent and ascent of the human soul from the world above and its return to the heavenly origins. The "place" is a grotto, "an image of the cosmos that Mithras created" (*ibid.*). Calling the visible world a grotto was most probably influenced by Plato's allegory of the Cave (*Rep.* 6–7). In towns, the temples of Mithras, or at any rate the cult-room itself was accordingly constructed below ground-level, so that one entered it by means of steps, sometimes seven in number (Clauss 2001, 44).

The teaching of upward and downward way of the souls was not confined to Mithraism.[18] In the eras of late antiquity, the earth was postulated as the center of the cosmos, and the other realms in spherical levels above it. The most significant cosmological divisions were either tripartite, distinguishing the material, heavenly, and hypercosmic realms, or sevenfold, dividing it into seven planetary spheres. In a tripartite system, the sun and the moon as luminaries tended to play a more important role than in a sevenfold system, in which they are included with the other planets. The importance of these divisions in the cosmological system lies in the descent of the soul into the material world during the process of genesis (Edmonds 2004, 277–279).

Despite the undisputably inventive spirit, a "sheer creativity that gave rise to the mystery-cult" (Clauss 2001, 7), and the creation of the basic tenets of the mystery religions, it seems unreasonable to suggest that the conception of the

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[18] See V. D. Arbel, *Beholders of Divine Secrets: Mysticism and Myth in the Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature* (State University of New York, 2003), chapter 4, "Mystical Journeys in Mythological Language."

planetary spheres and orders, and the doctrine of the soul's descent and ascent were invented all anew by these new religious movements without any recourse to previous Oriental traditions. The gods and planets were associated with the levels of ziggurat in ancient Mesopotamia, which as a model of cosmos also represented the order of universe. Therefore it is not valid to say, as Culianu does, that according to Babylonians, the seven planets moved on the same plane, at the same distance from the earth, and there was never a link between the vaults of heaven and the planets (Culianu 1983, 27–28). In the standard cosmology of ancient Mesopotamia, there are three heavens or "paths" of Anu, Enlil and Ea that are arcs along the horizon over which the stars are seen to rise (Rochberg 2004, 7). In Jewish apocalyptic literature a threefold heaven is found in *1 Enoch* 14 and in the *Testament of Levi*. The sevenfold heaven is found in the *Ascension of Isaiah* and in *Hekhalot* texts that corresponds to sevenfold descent to the Queen of the Underworld in the Mesopotamian myths *Descent of Ištar* and *Nergal and Ereškigal* (Dalley 1994, 253). Thus the teachings of three and seven heavens in Jewish and Christian apocalypticism indeed originate in Babylonian tradition (cf. Yarbro-Collins 1995).

Garments and Faculties associated with Descent and Ascent

There are some details which help us to point out the Babylonian sediments in the mystery religions. The themes of descent and ascent are also found in the Sumerian and Akkadian myth *Inanna's/Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld*. The first half of the story presents the soul's heavenly origin and the defilement of the soul in the material world (= the Netherworld), and the latter half presents her way back to her heavenly home. In the Sumerian version, the goddess abandons heaven and earth and goes to the Netherworld as the queen, dressed in her royal garments, holding the seven divine powers (*me* in Sumerian) in her hand. At each of the seven gates of the Netherworld, Inanna is stripped of her ornaments, equated with the seven divine powers, from top to bottom. At every gate the goddess enters into a dialogue with the gatekeeper, asking finally the purpose of the removal of her clothes, and getting the answer, "Be silent, Inanna, a divine power of the underworld has been fulfilled." When she arrives at her sister's, Ereškigal's throne, she is completely naked and dead (Lapinkivi 2004, 189–190).[19]

Before she leaves heaven, she instructs her minister to make a lament for her after she has gone, and go to her fathers Enlil, Nanna-Su'ena, and Enki to ask them not to let their "precious metal be alloyed there in the dirt of the underworld." After Inanna has spent three days in the Netherworld, her minister goes

[19] The Mesopotamian goddess of the Netherworld Ereškigal frequently occurs in later Greek defixions and magical papyri. This is one of the most exact transcriptions from Sumerian into Greek. Ereškigal occurs still only on the texts of imperial era, but the period of borrowing may well have been much earlier (see Burkert 1992, 68).

to her fathers, who all refuse to help his daughter, except Enki, who creates the two helpers so that they might sneak into the Netherworld and make the goddess alive by sprinkling the life-giving plant and water over her. In her ascent, the goddess is given back her clothing, thus making her complete and able to return to heaven. The drawback of her release is that the goddess must give someone to the Netherworld as her substitute, and finally she proceeds to Dumuzi. She decides to give Dumuzi as her substitute but regrets his fate and begins to weep. Finally she allows his sister Geštinanna to release him by taking his place after six months (Lapinkivi 2004, 190).

There has been much recent discussion of this myth and its parallels in Jewish mysticism, Gnostic myths, and Chaldean Oracles. The corresponding figures of Matronit-Shekhinah, Sophia and Hekate can be shown to play a very similar role in corresponding cosmologies (Lapinkivi 2004). A Nag Hammadi text, the *Exegesis on the Soul* (NHC 2.6), portrays the fall of the originally androgynous soul (= Sophia = Wisdom) from her "Father's house" in heaven into the earthly world, and her subsequent return to her original position. This text has been taken as a rephrasing of the Valentinian myth of Sophia, but its narrative much more closely follows that of the *Descent of Ištar to the Netherworld*, to the extent that it could be considered a running commentary or a paraphrase of the latter (Parpola 1997, xxxi). The nature of the soul is feminine—she has a womb—but as long as she is in heaven with her Father, she is virginal and androgynous. After her fall to this world, she is trapped in a body and loses her virginity; she falls into the hands of "robbers" and defiles herself. Soul's defilement is compared to dirty garments:

> So when the womb of the soul by the will of the father, turns itself inward, it is baptized and is immediately cleansed of the external pollution which was pressed upon it, just as [garments, when] dirty, are put into the [water and] turned about until their dirt is removed and they become clean. And so the cleansing of the soul is to regain the [newness] of her former nature and to turn herself back again. That is her baptism.[20]

She is helped by the will of the Father, who sends her Christ as her bridegroom, her brother, the "first-born," who can be compared to salvatory role of Tammuz

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[20] Translation is by W. C. Robinson and M. Scopello in Robinson 1996, 194. A lay Mandean explained to Lady Drower the dissolution of the soul as follows:

> "When it leaves the body the soul is in the shape of a person, wearing clothes, but it is of air and not substantial. We cannot see it. If an evil-doer, the garments it wears are black, and if it asks, "Why I am clothed in black?" the two angels answer it, "Are there not sacred books, given to man since the time of Adam? Hast thou not beheld sun, moon, and stars?" (Drower 1937, 197)

According to Maruta of Maipherkat (4th century AD) the followers of Bardaisan "wear and wrap themselves in white clothing, because they say that who wears white clothes belongs to the followers of Good, and who wears black, to the followers of Evil" (Drijvers 1966, 106–7.)

in the myth of Ištar, who was "her childhood lover" (*Ištar's Descent*, l. 127). The soul cleanses herself, and sits in the bridal chamber filled with perfume waiting for her consort. But because of her fall, she has lost her memory of the time in her Father's house in heaven, and consequently she does not remember that she was once married to her brother. When the bridegroom arrives, he first decorates the bridal chamber, and there they unite with each other. She gets from him the seed that is the life-giving spirit, in order to be able to bear healthy children. Now she is also able to return to her Father's house with him: by her ascent to heaven, she is resurrected from death, i. e., from the state of ignorance (Lapinkivi 2004, 168). It is not my task here to give a full account of this and other comparisons made by Parpola (1997) and Lapinkivi (2004), I will only supplement their data from the point of view of this paper's interest.[21]

The first parallel which I want to add comes from a song in the Mandean Ginza, from the left part (52), which is entirely concerned with death and the fate of the soul in the next world (Drower 1937, 185). The Mandeans, both a people and a gnostic sect, preserved in their writings all of the more important god names of ancient Mesopotamia and a large portion of its culture until modern times. The seven planetary gods often occur in Mandean texts and are called by their ancient Mesopotamian names. In the song in question "a soul" makes its upward journey through the heavenly spheres and their watch-houses (*maṭarta*), each ruled by a planetary spirit. The song is repetitive, and there are only minor variants in the description of how the soul proceeds from the first planet to the seventh:

> Meine Seele verlangte in mir nach dem Leben, in meinem Innern blühte mir das Wissen auf. Meine Seele verlangte in mir nach dem Leben, nach dem Orte des Lebens war mein Gang. Ich flog und zog hin bis ich zum Ersten (der Planeten) kam. Die Diener des Ersten kamen mir entgegen: „Auf, wir wollen den Mann gefangen nehmen und ihn fragen, woher er gekommen ist: Genosse, woher kamest du hierher, wohin gehst du denn?" – „Ich komme aus der Tibil, aus dem Hause, das die Planeten gebauet. Meine Seele verlangte in mir nach dem Leben, nach der Orte des Lebens ist mein Gang." – „Dies ist das Haus des Lebens. Hierher! Wohin gehst du denn? Wenn du dich unter sie begiebst, tun sie (dir) alles Erdenkliche an." – „Das ist nicht, was ich wünsche, das ist nicht, was meine Seele begehrt" (Lidzbarski 1925, 578–282).

Quite obviously, the text describes the ascension of the soul through the

[21] For example, the allegorical theme of soul's descent occurs also in Hrotswitha of Gandersheim's (10th century AD) play *Abraham*, where Abraham, the aged holy man, after much searching, finds his adopted daughter, Maria, in a inn/brothel, some years after she has run away. He acts the part of a customer and hires Maria's services, brings her back to the cloister and after much repentance, Maria purifies through fasting, weeping and praying. See *The plays of Hrotswitha of Gandersheim*. Translated by Larissa Bonfante, with the collaboration of Alexandra Bonfante-Warren. (New York, 1979).

planets, and corresponds to the goddess' ascent in the Mesopotamian myth. The dialog of the soul with heavenly customs inspectors is very reminiscent of the scenes in the Mesopotamian myth. After entering the seventh level, we can find a clothing metaphor in the song as well:

> Ich flog und zog hin, bis ich zum Hause des Lebens kam. Als ich am Hause des Lebens anlangte, ging das Leben mir entgegen. [Das Leben] ging mir entgegen, es kleidete mich in Glanz, brachte Licht und bedeckte mich damit. Es schloss mich in seine Rechnung ein, und in seiner Mitte kamen auch die Guten heraus: „Zwischen den Lampen des Lichtes sollen deine Lampen emporgezogen werden und leuchten." (Lidzbarski 1925, 582.)

The importance of the theology of clothing, can be seen in the writings of the Syrian Church fathers (Brock 1992, XI). The salvation history is described by some Syrian Christian writers as consisting of four main scenes. All four scenes are rarely presented together, but there is no doubt that the entire scenario was familiar to all Christian Syriac writers during the 4th to 7th centuries. In the first scene, Adam and Eve are together in Paradise, viewed as a mountain, and clothed in "robes of glory/light". In the second scene the Fall takes place, Adam and Eve are stripped of their "robes of glory/light". In order to remedy the naked state of Adam and mankind, brought about by the Fall, in the third scene the Divinity himself "puts on Adam" when he "puts on a body", and the whole aim of incarnation is to "reclothe mankind in the robe of glory". The Nativity, the Baptism, the Descent or Resurrection are the three central "staging posts" of the Incarnation that are separate in profane time, but intimately linked in sacred time. All three are seen as descents of the Divinity into successive wombs, the womb of Mary, the womb of the Jordan, and the womb of Sheol. It can be remembered here that the womb of soul also played a decisive role in the *Exegesis on the Soul*.

Divinity's descent into the Jordan is of central importance, for it is then that Christ deposits the "robe of glory/light" in the water, thus making it available to the mankind for the second time to be put on in baptism. In the fourth scene the baptism of Christ is the foundation and source of Christian baptism: by descending into Jordan, Christ sanctified in sacred time all baptismal water; at Christian baptism it is the invocation to the Holy Spirit in the prayer of consecration of the water which effectually makes the water of the individual source identical in sacred time and space with the Jordan waters (Brock 1992, XI). This compares favourably with the role of life-giving water in resurrecting the fallen goddess from the Netherworld in the Mesopotamian myth.

In baptismal sacrament the Christian himself goes down into the Jordan waters and thence he picks up and puts on the "robe of glory" which Christ left there. Baptism is a reentry to Paradise, but this final stage of mankind is seen as far more glorious than the primordial Paradise, and God will bestow mankind with divinity that Adam and Eve tried to assume by eating from the Tree of

Life.[22] It is important to note here that the descent or fall in the schemes of Syrian Church Fathers is not associated with putting on the garments, as in Genesis 3:7, but with loss of the original "robe of glory".

According to some other religious doctrines of late antiquity, in each of the seven planetary realms through which the soul descends on its way to incarnation it picks up some element of its mortal composition. In other words, the soul acquires some characteristic of every planetary ruler as it passes through its sphere of influence (Edmonds 2004, 279). This doctrine partly derives from an astrological interpretation of Mesopotamian myth of Goddess' descent. And not only—it is also an astrologized and democratized version of the prominent element in ancient Mesopotamian royal ideology. According to royal inscriptions and some myths, the king received a package of regalia during his enthronement and determination of his destiny from the assembly of gods. Many royal hymns and inscriptions, both in Sumerian and Akkadian, refer to this occasion. There is also a myth called "The Creation of Man and King" where the creation of ordinary man is followed by the creation of the king. This myth refers to gods giving their attributes to the king as gifts—crown (Anu), throne (Enlil), weapons (Nergal), radiance (Ninurta), physical beauty (Bēlet-ilī) (see Mayer 1987). The gods bestowing the gifts are sometimes numbered seven in these texts, sometimes more and sometimes less. The objects given to the king include both concrete royal insignia and abstract abilities, and among the latter both physical and mental faculties (see Dietrich 1998, 171–179). In Sumerian these gifts are described by the word *me*, which is also used for Inanna's clothes in the myth of her descent to the netherworld.

In a very clear description of soul's incarnation process by Macrobius, in the *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.11–12, the characteristics received from the planetary spheres are called with a general term *obvolutio*, "envelopment" which are "put on" by the soul. According to a Neoplatonic group,

> [T]he blessed souls, free from all bodily contamination, possess the sky; but the soul that from its lofty pinnacle of perpetual radiance disdains to grasp after a body and this thing that we on earth call life, but yet allows a secret yearning for it to creep into its thoughts, gradually slips down to the lower realms because of the very weight of its earthly thoughts. It does not suddenly assume a defiled body out of a state of complete incorporeality, but, gradually sustaining imperceptible losses and departing farther from its simple and absolutely pure state, it swells out with certain increases of a planetary body: in each of the spheres that lie below the sky it puts on another ethereal envelopment (*aetheria obvolutione vestitur*), so that by these steps it is gradually prepared for assuming this earthly dress. Thus by as many deaths as it passes through spheres, it

[22] Brock 1992, XI 11–13. Examples of clothing metaphor may also be found in Jewish literature, see G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary 1960), 56–64.

> reaches the stage which on earth is called life (1.11.10–12). … Now if souls were to bring with them to their bodies a memory of the divine order of which they were conscious in the sky, there would be no disagreement among men in regard to divinity; but, indeed, all of them in their descent drink of forgetfulness, some more, some less. Consequently, although the truth is not evident to all on earth, all nevertheless have an opinion, since opinion is born of failure of the memory (1.12.9). … By the impulse of the first weight of the soul, having started on its downward course from the intersection of the zodiac and the Milky Way to the successive spheres lying beneath, as it passes through these spheres, not only takes on the aforementioned envelopment in each sphere by approaching a luminous body, but also acquires each of the attributes which it will exercise later. In the sphere of Saturn it obtains reason and understanding, called *logistikon* and *theoretikon*; in Jupiter's sphere, the power to act, called *praktikon*; in Mars' sphere, a bold spirit or *thymikon*; in the sun's sphere, sense-perception and imagination, *aisthetikon* and *phantastikon*; in Venus' sphere, the impulse of passion, *epithymetikon*; in Mercury's sphere, the ability to speak and interpret, *hermeneutikon*; and in the lunar sphere, the function of molding and increasing bodies, *phytikon*" (1.12.13–14, Stahl 1952, 132–136).

In Macrobius' description of the descent we find a clothing metaphor (*vestitur*), when the heavenly soul "takes on the aforementioned envelopment (*obvolutio*) in each sphere by approaching a luminous body". Here we can see the clothing metaphor as leading the soul to imprisonment and death, but the characteristics obtained by the soul are still positive attributes, useful to a productive life. In the Hermetic tractate *Poimandres*, the soul sheds the negative characteristics at each planetary station as it makes its way out of incarnation (Edmonds 2004, 280):

> Poimandres said: "First, in releasing the material body you give the body itself over to alteration, and the form that you used to have vanishes. To the demon you give over your temperament, now inactive. The body's senses rise up and flow back to their particular sources, becoming separate parts and mingling again with the energies. And feeling and longing go on toward irrational nature. Thence the human being rushes up through the spheres, at the first zone surrendering the energy of increase and decrease; at the second evil machination, a device now inactive; at the third the illusion of longing; at the fourth the ruler's arrogance, now freed of excess; at the fifth unholy presumption and daring recklessness; at the sixth the evil impulses that come from wealth, now inactive; and at seventh zone the deceit that lies in ambush. And then a human is stripped naked of what the spheres had effected on him (during the descent of the soul) and enters the region of the ogdoad, possessing his own power, and

along with the blessed he hymns the Father."[23]

The process of physical descent is not described here, but the planetary influences are certainly presupposed. The soul arrives at the last heavenly region in a pure state as naked. So the stripping metaphor has here a positive connotation and clothing a negative one, as in this case descent of the soul is associated with clothing and ascent with stripping off the material qualities. Also in Porphyry, *De Abstinentia* 1.31.3, stripping is associated with the ascent of the soul:

> We have to strip off our many garments, both this visible one made of flesh, and the inner ones we have put on, which resemble 'those of skin'. Let us ascend to the stadium naked and without a garment to contest the soul's Olympic Games (Brock 1992, XI, 33–34).

In spite of this inversion, descent still means sinking into materiality and ascent liberation from it, as in the Mesopotamian myth. So also according to Proclus:

> The vehicle of every particular soul descends by the addition of vestures (*chitōnes*) increasingly material; and ascends in company with the soul which makes use of it: for the soul descends by the acquisition of irrational principles of life; and ascends by putting off all those faculties tending to temporal process with which it was invested in its descent, and becoming clean and bare of all such faculties as serve the uses of the process.[24]

In all the cosmologies of late antiquity the material world was acknowledged to be inferior to the realm of gods, so each system had to deal with the question of why human beings lived in an inferior condition. There existed plentiful attitudes toward genesis and the world, ranging from the most positive Platonic celebrations of the cosmos' beauty to the most negative rejections of the world as the prison and the torture chamber of evil archons (Edmonds 2004, 282). For example, in the *Pistis Sophia* (131) each of the planetary archons contributes to the binding of the soul with its counterfeit spirit, causing it to become bound up in forgetfulness and the passions of the world (Edmonds 2004, 280). Therefore the "qualities" obtained by the soul during its descent into the material world were not clothes or powers, but rags and vices (Culianu 1983, 51).[25] The hostile

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[23] Corpus Hermeticum I 24–26, translation according to Copenhaver 1992, 5–6, slightly modified. There is a partly parallel vision in the Nag Hammadi tractate *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*: "For the entire eighth, my son, and the souls that are in it, and the angels, sing a hymn in silence" (Robinson 1996, 325).

[24] Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, proposition 209, from Culianu 1983, 12, translation by Dodds. See also Proclus, *In Tim.* 3.355.13; Servius, *In Aen*. 6.714, 11.51.

[25] Concerning the teachings of Basilides and his son Isidorus, see Alexandrian Clement *Strom.* 2.20.112–113. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.30.9 reports the doctrine of Ophites that from Seth and Norea were begotten multitude of people and driven into every wickedness by the lower Hebdomad—that is, the seven stars or planets. Cf. Origenes, *Ccels* 6.31. So far I know only one Old Mesopotamian incantation text, where various

attitude towards planetary powers and the material world comes in my view from the dominant position that astrology had in the contemporary science and religion, which justified the current world order by astrological fate, exemplified in the words of Vettius Valens (5.9), "no one is free; all are slaves of Destiny (Heimarmene)" (Edmonds 2004, 291).

If one looks, for example, at how much space the Father Ephrem dedicates to refusal of astrology in his "Hymns against Heresies", the scope of popularity of the celestial sciences among the general population becomes evident.[26] Ephrem's *Prose Refutations* also contain an intermediate form of the ancient Mesopotamian and Neoplatonic versions of soul's incarnation myth. According to the heretic Bardaisan, Ephrem says, "the soul was mixed and set up of seven parts" (Mitchell 1912, xxxii). This is confirmed by Bardaisan's own words in *The Book of the Laws of Countries*:

> For that which is called Fate, is really the fixed course determined by God for the Rulers and Guiding Signs. According to this course and order the spirits undergo changes while descending to the soul, and the souls while descending to the bodies. That which causes these changes is called Fate and native horoscope of that mixture which was mixed and is being purified to the help of that which, by the grace and goodness of God, was and will be helped till the termination of all (Drijvers 1966, 86).

In Ephrem's *Prose Refutations* we find a different version—the followers of Mani and Bardaisan assumed that the human body received its "arrangement" from the Archons through female agency:

> [T]hey suppose that its nature is from evil, and its workmanship from the Archons, and the cause of its arrangement is from wisdom, (saying:) "And she (= Wisdom) showed an image of her own beauty to the Archons, and to the Governors, and she deceived them thereby so that when they were stirred up they effected (something) according to what they saw. Each of them gave from his treasure whatever he had; and for that reason their treasures were emptied of what they had snatched away" (Mitchell 1912, xc).

In another place we learn more of this female being and her actions. Ephrem asks: "Can it have been that Virgin of the Light about whom they say that she manifested her beauty to the Archons, so that they were ravished to run after her?" (Mitchell 1912, lxii.) Here the qualities derived from the planetary forces

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diseases are described as descending upon people "from the ziggurat of heaven" (*ištu ziggurat šamê urdūni*). In a parallel text, the diseases descend from the "nose-rope of heaven" ([*iš*]*tu ṣerret* [*š*]*amê urdūni*). I think that there is no need to emend the word "ziggurat" into anything else. See A. Goetze, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 9 (1955), p. 8–9.

[26] See E. Beck *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra Haereses*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vol. 170 (Louvain, 1957). Cf. also Plotinus 2.3.1.

are not mechanically attached to the soul under genesis, but are acquired through the female intermediary from the planetary Archons. Although there is no mention of descent or ascent in the *Prose Refutations*, the passage cited is entirely parallel to the ascent motif in Mesopotamian myth where the goddess gains back her clothes, which were "snatched away" during her descent. The motif of ascent is removed by Ephrem, thus making his account quite illogical.[27] In Neoplatonic accounts cited above the female intermediary figure was eliminated, but she is silently present in the descending soul itself. In summary, we can find similar concepts of soul's fate, clothing, and composition throughout the late antique world. Under these circumstances it is not surprising to find the teaching of soul's ascent and descent as currents in many late antique doctrines, including in the branches of Gnosticism and Neoplatonism:

> in much of their respective cosmologies, anthropologies and soteriologies Neopythagoreanism and Neoplatonism on the one side and the Mysteries of Mithras of the other *converged*. There is no reason why the doctrine on the soul's celestial voyage should not have been *both* Neoplatonic *and* Mithraic. (Beck 1988, 81–82)

The Grade Systems and Sun's Crossing-Place

The Mithraic grade system is essentially comparable to the hierarchy of contemporary Christian Church, which also sought to correlate its hierarchy with the celestial one, in words of Alexandrian Clement (*Strom* 6.13.107): "the advancements pertaining to the Church here below, namely those of bishops, presbyters and deacons, are imitations of the angelic glory." The first level of cosmic hierarchy in Clement's system constituted of the seven celestial entities *prōtoktistoi*, "first created", whose subordinates were the angels and archangels. They are the bearers of divine name and are called "gods", but have no association with planets. The promotion from one level of the hierarchy to the next reflects the spiritual progress, and the church hierarchy is an imitation of the celestial hierarchy (see Bucur 2006). These "first created beings" in Clement's system are certainly remnants of underlying polytheistic system, which may well have been Babylonian. In the poetry of Ephrem the Syrian, even Paradise consists of different levels. He pictures the mountain of paradise with terraced levels, which he relates to different states of life in the Church. It is most probably the ziggurat image that is behind that picture:

> When He made this intricate design He varied its beauties, so that some levels were far more glorious than others. To the degree that one level is

[27] One more corrupted variant report of Bardaisan's teaching comes from Michael Syrus: "he who spoke with Moses and the prophets was an archangel and not God himself. Our Lord was clothed with the body of an angel, and Mary clothed a soul from the world of light, who enveloped himself in the shape of a body. The rulers (shaped) the man: the superior gave him his soul and the inferior his limbs." (Drijvers 1966, 189).

> higher than another, so too is its glory the more sublime. In this way He allots the foothills to the most lowly, the slopes to those in between and the heights to the exalted. When the just ascend its various levels to receive their inheritance, with justice He raises up each one to the degree that accords with his labors; each is stopped at the level whereof he is worthy, there being sufficient levels in Paradise for everyone: the lowest parts for the repentant, the middle for the righteous, the heights for those victorious, while the summit is reserved for God's Presence (= Shekhinah).[28]

The Mithraic grade system gives an opportunity for some comments from the point of view of its Babylonian sediment. The grade Nymphus, which is sacred to Venus, is a paradoxical term with the meaning "male bride," and is associated primarily with marriage and light, but with a paradoxical association to androgyny and the assimilation of the female in an assertively masculine system (Beck 1984, 2092). This fits with the description of the Mesopotamian goddess Inanna/Ištar as androgyne, often described as wearing a beard in the texts and iconography (Groneberg 1986). Both for the ancient Mesopotamians and Gnostics, androgyny or bisexuality was an expression of perfection (see Parpola 1997, lxxxix, n. 97).

Additionally, the highest grade in the Mithraic mysteries, the Father, is associated with Saturn, while the cult of Mithras is a manifestly solar cult of the invincible Sun, who occupies only the sixth place in Mithras' hierarchy. The most likely and convincing answer to this seeming paradox is:

> Saturn can be set at the head and the Sun relegated to second (or penultimate) place *because Saturn is the Sun.* Therefore, where we see Saturn we also see the Sun (and vice versa): and so, arcanely and by paradox and enigma, it is still the Sun that we find at the head. (Beck 1984, 2049)

It was widely attested in Mesopotamian astronomy and astrology that Saturn was the star of the Sun, and this association may be the prototype of Mithraic concept of "two Suns".[29] According to Hunger and Pingree (1989, 147) the name "Star of the Sun" arose from the fact that the Sun's *hypsoma* sets as Saturn's rises (see *Mul Apin* II I 19–21). According to Parpola, Saturn's association with the Sun probably had its basis in the planet's slow and steady motion, but it was also forcefully backed by linguistic and mythological speculation. The as-

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[28] Translation by S. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, Introduction and Translation* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), Hymn II 10–11, pp. 88–89. In the following passages (II 12–13), Ephrem also says that the ark of Noah had the same threefold structure. Ephrem is thus continuing the ancient Mesopotamian intellectual traditions, which viewed the ziggurat and Utnapištim's ark as having exactly the same physical dimensions, see J.-J. Glassner, *L'Etemenanki, armature du cosmos*, NABU 2002, no. 32.

[29] *Mul Apin* II I 39,64: MUL.^{d}UTU "(Saturn is) the star of the Sun".

sociation of the two heavenly bodies was explained by two puns, one based on homophony of Akkadian *ṣalmu* "black" and *ṣalmu* "statue". Šamaš was called "statue" because the Sumerian epithet of the Sun-god in Sumerian was *an-dùl*, meaning both "statue" and "protection"—as a judge, the sun was looked upon as the protection of gods and men. The other pun was a play with the meanings of the verb *kwn*—"to be steady". Saturn's name *kajjamānu* "the steady one", derived from this root, is also once attested as the epithet of the Sun-god (4 R 28, 1:8), and also provided an etymological connection with *kittu* "truth, justice" (< **kintu*), the principal attribute of Šamaš. A further link between Saturn and the sun, according to Parpola, was provided by the fact that Saturn had its hypsoma or house in the constellation Libra, the cosmic scales of life and death where the sun stayed during the autumnal equinox (Parpola 1983, 343). The observation of Saturn and Sun had a special relevance for the state of affairs of the king, as attested in a letter to an Assyrian king: "Tonight Saturn approached the moon. Saturn is the star of the sun, the relevant interpretation is as follows: it is good for the king. The sun is the star of the king." (Hunger 1992, text 95, rev.)

The association of Saturn with the Sun was also known to Greek and Roman authors.[30] Besides, Saturn was identified as Lord of Sabbath and the demiurge Sabaoth, based on etymological speculations on the Hebrew words "hosts" (*s^{e}ba'ōt*) and "seven" (*šeba^{ʿ}*), see Tacitus, *Histories* 5.4. Diodorus' account on the Chaldean priests that they consider Saturn "the most conspicuous and it presages more events and such as are of greater importance than the others" (2.30.3) has a parallel in Mandean texts, where Kewan is sometimes considered as the leader of planets (Fauth 1973, 101–3). Very important testimony comes from Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* 2.3.64, which explicitly equates Mithra with Saturn (Beck 1984, 2049):

> Of the second quarter, which embraces the southern part of Greater Asia, the other parts, including India, Arriana, Gedrosia, Parthia, Media, Persia, Babylonia, Mesopotamia, and Assyria, which are situated in the south-east of the whole inhabited world, are, as we might presume, familiar to the south-eastern triangle, Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn, and are governed by Venus and Saturn, in oriental aspect. Therefore one would find that the natures of their inhabitants conform with the temperaments governed by such rulers; for they revere the star of Venus under the name of Isis, and that of Saturn, as Mithras Helios. Many of them likewise foretell future events; and they consecrate to the gods some of their bodily members, to which superstition they are induced by the nature of the figuration of the planets before mentioned (translation by Robbins, Loeb edition).

[30] For Saturn as the star of the Sun, see in Epinomis 987c; Eudoxus Papyrus (col. 5); Diodorus 2.30.3; Hyginus, *De astron.* 2.42, 4.18; Servius *In Aen.* 1.729; Simplicius *De Caelo* p. 495.28–29 (ed. Heiberg).

Thus we have strong evidence suggesting Mesopotamian ancestry of Saturn's association with the Sun.[31] More importantly, the omens of Saturn were related to the king, who was an incarnation of the Sun-god, expressed in the cuneiform writing by occasional use of the sign MAN for writing the word "king" (Akkadian *šarru*), with the sacred number of the Sun, 20. The Roman Mithras was also the solar god, but the fact is contradictory to the nature of Persian Mithra, who was no solar deity. Some have assumed that the solar elements of Mithra may derive from Mesopotamian Šamaš:

> non-solar god of contract familiar from the Avesta may have acquired the solar features apparent in the Western Mithraism through Mesopotamian influence. But if this were so, it is difficult to understand why the god of that cult bears the Avestan Mithra's name, with whom he otherwise shares as little, instead of being called, say, Samas (Gnoli 1979, 731).

The most probable solution to that problem is that Mithras of the Roman Mysteries owes quite much to a kind of widespread Irano-Mesopotamian syncretism that must have emerged during the Achaemenid empire and later. This period, the fifth century BCE, was a formative period in the history of Babylonian celestial science when also the horoscopes emerged. The celestial divination expanded to a new branch of astrology whose concern was the individual rather than the king and state, and the astronomical data were regularly recorded in the horoscopes (Rochberg 2004, 100–101).

Some scholars have pointed to the similarity of the iconographical motif of Mithra born from a rock attended by his *paredroi* with the Mesopotamian motif of Šamaš rising over the mountains likewise attended by attendants.[32] We have also textual evidence of Šamaš rising from the great mountains, attended by the Anunna-gods, which comes from the incantation in the third house of the series concerning purification magic, called *Bīt rimki*, "The house of cleansing":

> O Šamaš, when you come forth from the great mountain, when you come forth from the great mountain, the mountain of the deep, when you come forth from the holy hill where destinies are ordained, when you [come forth] from the back of heaven to the junction point of heaven and earth, the great gods attend upon you for judgement, the Anunna-gods attend upon you to render verdicts (lines 1–5).[33]

In the Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft magic series *Maqlû*, the mountain of the same function appears as the city Zabban, which has two gates—one for the

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[31] Saturn as "star of the Sun" is also reflected in the Indian conception of Saturn as the "son of the Sun". In Indian mythology also Mercury is the son of the Moon. The Sun is associated with Saturn and the Moon with Mercury also in a Mesopotamian text K. 148 r. 27–28 (Hunger and Pingree 1989, 147).

[32] See Beck 1984: 2071, n. 103; Gnoli 1979, 733–734; Will 1955, 206f.

[33] For the edition of this text, see Borger 1967; translation is from Foster 1996, 644.

rising of the sun and the second for the setting of the sun. The name of the city can also be read Sappān, and be connected with Northwest Semitic Sapān, biblical Ṣāphôn, the cosmic abode of the deities El and Baal in Ugaritic texts (Abusch 2002, 263–264). In this cosmic locality on the horizon are the cosmic gates through which the sun and other heavenly bodies pass when they enter and leave the sky and return to the netherworld. It is situated on a cosmic shore where its quay and pass (*nēbiru*) serve as entry points through which cosmic travellers and ghosts pass without hindrance from the netherworld into the heavens, and where witches may be temporarily imprisoned (Abusch 2002, 275). This crossing-place of the souls is also found among Bardaisan's christianized doctrines, called in Syriac *maʿbartâ*, thus exactly matching the Akkadian *nēberu*. According to Ephrem's *Prose Refutations* Bardaisan believed that Christ was the first to cross that place:

> According to the doctrine of Bardaisan the death that Adam brought in was a hindrance to souls—in that they were hindered at the crossing-place, because the sin of Adam hindered them. "And the life," he (says), "that our Lord brought in, is that he taught verity and ascended, and brought them across into the kingdom. Therefore," he says, our Lord taught us that "every one that keeps my word, he shall not taste death for ever", that his soul is not hindered when it crosses at the crossing-place like the hindrance of old, wherewith the souls were hindered, before our Saviour had come. (Drijvers 1966, 155)

In the opening incantation of *Maqlû*, the speaker stands on a rooftop and invokes the gods of the night sky to assist in the judgement and render decisions. The "rooftop" probably corresponded to the top of the ziggurat, at least when the king performed the ritual. He sprinkles water towards heaven and asks them to purify him in turn. This is a preparation for assuming the identity of an astral body and for entering the world of gods so that he may be incorporated into the court of the gods of the night sky. Now the speaker is stationed in a cosmic locale or area that connects heaven and the netherworld, he can ascend from Zabban into heaven and descend to the netherworld. He becomes a member of the company of the stars, the heavenly host of the gods of heaven (Abusch 2002, 276). The task of this main actor in the ritual is to make harmless the witches both in heaven and netherworld. Thus we find the motif of heavenly journey also in the Mesopotamian magic, where the participant joins the company of the stars.

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the mountain "which daily guards the rising [of the sun]" (IX, 39) is specified as the Mount Māšu, "the Twin (mountains)," whose tops [abut] the fabric of heavens and whose bases (lit. 'their breast') reach down to Hades (*arallû*). There are scorpion-man and the scorpion-female guarding its gate and the sun at both sunrise and sunset (IX, 37–45, George 2003, 669). Twin-mountains' gate and their guards, the scorpion-men, may have had an astrological interpretation in ancient Mesopotamia corresponding to the con-

stellation Scorpius. This double mountain is also attested in Mandean mythology as the birth-place of the Sun (see Lidzbarski 1925, 116 n. 4).

The Rite of Bull-Killing

The mysteries of Mithras were one of the greatest mystery cults of late antiquity, with enormous popularity and spread all over the Roman Empire. Mithra of the ancient Iranian mythology is much different from the Mithras of the Roman mystery cult. Much speaks in favour of a reinvention of the cult in the West rather than continuity of ancient Persian, that is, Avestan doctrines. As was shown above, some elements in Mithraic Mysteries and other mystery cults as well as in Neoplatonic philosophy may still derive from the East in their original form, if a phenomenon I term Irano-Mesopotamian syncretism will be accepted. By assuming power in the Near East, the Achaemenid empire took over much of ancient Mesopotamian doctrines and religion, gave to them a Persian overlay and propagated them with a lasting impact in the Empire (see Panaino 2001). At the same time, the locus of astronomical activity shifted from the palace to the temple (Rochberg 2004, 117–118). The invention of horoscopy can be seen as the fabrication of a new staple by Babylonian priests under this new economical situation. Accordingly, it was during the Persian Empire that a priestly class of professional astrologers emerged.

Without assuming such a syncretism and its long-lasting influence, it would be difficult to explain, why the originally ethnic term "Chaldeans" survived in the Roman Empire as denoting "astrologers" and "soothsayers" (see Cumont 1949, 144f.). In a fourth-century AD Latin inscription (V 522) we even find a reference to "Babylonian priest of Mithras" in Rome:

> High-born descendant of an ancient house, pontifex for whom the blessed Regia, with the sacred fire of Vesta, does service, augur too, worshipper of reverend Threefold Diana, Chaldean priest of the temple of Persian Mithras (*Persidiciq(ue) Mithrae antistes Babilonie templi*), and at the same time leader of the mysteries of the mighty, holy taurobolium (Clauss 2001, 30).

A young man killing a bull was the central icon of Mithraism, scattered across the territory of the Roman Empire from England to Syria in hundreds of underground temples. Mithras killing the bull is his primary act, and it is depicted in the most prominent location in virtually every Mithraic temple. It is clear that this icon holds the key to the central secret of the Mysteries, but in the absence of any written explanation, deciphering it has proved a notoriously difficult task. F. Cumont argued that deciphering the tauroctony was a matter of finding parallels to its symbolic elements in ancient Iranian mythology. But there is no known Iranian myth in which Mithra has anything to do with killing a bull (Ulansey 1989, 131). In Beck's words:

> It is a somewhat embarrassing fact that the Eastern Mitra/Mithra kills no bulls (though in his Iranian form he is the god of herds and pastures). The Vedic Mitra participates (reluctantly) in a killing—the killing of Soma, the personification of the life-giving drink (Iranian *haoma*); and in the Iranian tradition (at least in that of the 'Bundahišn', ch. 6 ed. Anklesaria) a bull is killed—the primal bull from whose marrow sprang the useful plants and from whose sperm, purified in the Moon, sprang the useful beasts—but it is killed not by Mithra but by the evil Ahriman. Also in the Iranian tradition (Bd. 34), in the final days a second bull is to be killed—this time by a saviour figure, Sōšyant—and from its fat mixed with *hōm* (i. e. *haoma*) a drink of corporal immortality will be prepared. Most would agree that some of this material lies behind the bull-killing Mithras of the Mysteries, but in fitting the god to the act it has clearly undergone a sea change. Cumont's view was a rather inclusive one: somewhere in the transmission Mithras as bull-killer has been substituted for Ahriman as the perpetrator of a necessary evil in the process of creation; at the same time, he has assimilated the function of Sōšyant in an act which is also eschatological … This view at least accepts at face value the differences between Eastern and Western forms. (Beck 1984, 2068–2069)

It seems reasonable to try to find in other parts of the Orient a divine person who fits to the act of bull-killing without a "sea change". I propose that the famous episode in the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh (tablet VI), where the hero with his friend Enkidu kills the Bull of Heaven, is to be seen as a more suitable model for the Mithraic icon. The story has a long history in Mesopotamia, the bull-killing episode in the standard Babylonian version derives from the more ancient Sumerian tale "Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven". The sixth tablet of the standard Babylonian version begins with the scene of Gilgamesh's return from his expedition to the Cedar Forest, cleaning himself and putting on his kingly attire. The lady Ištar looks covetously on the hero's beauty and asks him for her husband. Gilgamesh insults her by enumerating the goddess' previous lovers, each of whom has had a miserable destiny as a result of having dealt with the goddess. Ištar becomes deeply offended by Gilgamesh's speech, then goes to heaven to ask her father Anu to give her the Bull of Heaven:

> O father, give me, please, the Bull of Heaven, that I may slay Gilgameš in his dwelling. If you will not give me the Bull of Heaven, I shall smash the underworld together with its dwelling place, I shall raze the nether regions to the ground. I shall bring up the dead to consume the living, I shall make the dead outnumber the living. (VII 94–100, George 2003, 625)

This speech of Ištar is intertextually related to a passage in the Akkadian version of Ištar's Descent. At the gate of the Netherworld, Ištar says to the gatekeeper:

> Gatekeeper! Open your gate for me! Open your gate for me that I may enter, if you will not open the gate that I may enter, I will break down the

> door, I will smash the bolt, I will break down the frame, I will topple the doors, I will raise up the dead to devour the living, the dead shall outnumber the living! (lines 14–20, Foster 1996, 403)

It is clear from this comparison that Ištar's descent can bring the dead to life. When we study the older Sumerian version of these lines, we find again a Bull of Heaven in connection with the goddess' entering into the Netherworld. Inanna says that the reason of her travel to the Netherworld is the death of Ereškigal's husband, the Great Bull of Heaven (*gud-gal-an-na*).

> Lines 78–89: Neti, the chief doorman of the underworld, answered holy Inanna: "Who are you?"— "I am Inanna going to the east."—"If you are Inanna going to the east, why have you travelled to the land of no return? How did you set your heart on the road whose traveller never returns?" Holy Inanna answered him: "Because lord Gud-gal-ana, the husband of my elder sister holy Ereškigala, has died; in order to have his funeral rites observed, she offers generous libations at his wake—that is the reason."

In other words, the death of the Bull of Heaven initiates the descent of the soul. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, this process is represented by the illness and death of Enkidu, which ensues directly after the victory over the Bull of Heaven and subsequent assembly of the gods. Inanna says that her journey is directed "toward where the sun rises", that is, to the east. Neti's answer suggests that she is actually not going to the east, but rather that Inanna's journey represents descent to the Netherworld. Also in the *Mithras Liturgy* (694–704), whose connection with Mithraism may be doubted, the god is depicted as *descending* with a part of a bull on his shoulder, that he had probably slain:

> Now when they (= the seven gods) take their place, here and there, in order, look in the air and you will see lightning-bolts going down, and lights flashing, and the earth shaking, and a god descending, a god immensely great, having a bright appearance, youhful, golden-haired, with a white tunic and a golden crown and trousers, and *holding in his right hand a golden shoulder of a young bull*: this is the Bear which moves and turns heaven around, moving upward and downward in accordance with the hour. Then you will see lightning-bolts leaping from his eyes and stars from his body (Meyer 1987, 218, emphasis added).

The tauroctony in the Mithraic iconography was certainly related—directly or indirectly—to the contemporary ritual practice called taurobolium. Taurobolium was a ritual, mostly in honour of the Phrygian Great Goddess, in which a bull was sacrificed over a pit containing the initiand; through whose blood he was reborn for eternity (*in aeternum renatus* CIL VI 510, Clauss 2001, 31). According to Latin inscriptions, "dedicators desired to be purified by receiving the *taurobolium*" (Duthoy 1969, 72). Prudentius in the 4th century AD described the taurobolium in his poem *On the Martyrs' Crowns* (10, 1011–1050), where the high priest (*summus sacerdos*) descended into the pit in order to receive the

consecration (*consecrandus*). In Vermaseren's words:

> He is in full ceremonials, his head and temples are decorated with woollen fillets and ribbons, in his hair he wears a gold crown and he is attired in a silken toga. Over the pit a wooden platform has been constructed. The blood of the bull, which has been killed by means of a sacred spear (*sacrato venabulo*), drips down through holes, drilled in the boards. The priest lifts his face, and even licks up the blood (*linguam rigat*). When the animal has been dragged away the priest comes out, a gruesome sight (*pontifex visu horridus*), and he is hailed and saluted by the crowd, and worshipped from a distance (*adorant eminus*). (Vermaseren 1977, 103)

Also in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the pits open in the ground when the Bull of Heaven arrives Uruk on the nose-rope of Ištar:

> At the snort of the Bull of Heaven a pit opened up, a hundred men of Uruk all fell into it. At its second snort a pit opened up, two hundred men of Uruk all fell into it. At its third snort a pit opened up, Enkidu fell in up to [his] waist. Enkidu sprang out and seized the Bull of Heaven by [its] horns; the Bull of Heaven spat slaver at his face, with the tuft of its tail […] … […]. (VI, 119–127, George 2003, 627)

A number of altars related to the taurobolium inform us that during the rite the powers (*vires*) of the bull were removed (*excipere*), dedicated (*consecrare*), and finally buried (*considere*)—this last probably in the spot where the memorial stone was afterwards erected (Duthoy 1969, 74). The "might" (*dunnu*) and "strength" (*emūqu*) of the Bull of Heaven are also mentioned by Enkidu in his speech to Gilgameš:

> My friend, we vaunted ourselves [… in our] city, how shall we answer the dense-gathered people? My friend, I have experienced the might of the Bull of Heaven, [… its] strength [and] learning [its] mission. I will once again [experience] the might of the Bull of [Heaven,] behind [the Bull] of Heaven I shall […,] I will seize [it by the tuft of its tail.] (VI, 130–136, George 2003, 627)

Many scholars interpret the sacred powers (*vires*) in the taurobolium as referring to the bull's genitals, basing the assumption on a myth related by Clement of Alexandria, who was once himself an initiate of Phrygian mysteries. Clement says that the myth was associated with Attis' passion for Cybele (*Protreptikos Logos* 2.15.2):

> The mysteries of Demeter commemorate the amorous embraces of Zeus with his mother Demeter, and the wrath of Demeter … on account of which she is said to have received the name Brimo (= the Grim one); also the supplication of Zeus, the drink of bile, the tearing out the heart of the victims, and unspeakable obscenities. The same rites are performed in honour of Attis and Cybele and the Corybantes by the Phrygians, who have spread it abroad how that Zeus tore off the testicles of a ram, and

> then brought and flung them into the midst of Demeter's lap, thus paying a sham penalty for his violent embrace by pretending that he had mutilated himself (translation by Butterworth, Loeb edition).

In the emasculation rite, the offer of the substitute genitals of bull or ram forms the enactment of the myth. Thus one identifies oneself with Attis and enters into a firm alliance with the Goddess. By offering procreative organs to the Goddess one hoped to obtain from her a similar power and special protection.[34] Bearing this in mind, one can understand the following passage from the Gilgamesh Epic, where the heroes offer the heart of the bull to Šamaš, and Enkidu throws a "haunch" (Akkadian *imittu*) of the Bull to enraged Ištar:

> Then Gilgameš like a butcher [(…)], brave and skilful, [pressed home] his knife between the yoke of the horns and the slaughter-spot. After they had slain the Bull of Heaven, they took up its heart and set it before Šamaš. They stepped back and prostrated themselves before Šamaš, both of them (then) sat down together. Ištar went up on the wall of Uruk-the-Sheepfold, she hopped and stamped, she uttered a woeful wail: "Woe to Gilgameš, who vilified me, (who) killed the Bull of Heaven!" Enkidu heard this speech of Ištar, he tore a haunch off the Bull of Heaven and threw it down before her. "You too, had I caught you, I would have treated you like it! I would have draped its guts on your arms!" (VI, 145–157, George 2003, 627–629)

The tauroctony is almost always accompanied by a banquet scene in Mithraic iconography. The banquet is second in importance to the tauroctony, to which it is the complement, and it takes place on the bull's hide (Beck 1984, 2081). In the S. Prisca Mithraeum there is a depiction of Sol and Mithras banqueting together in a cave, attended by two servants, one of whom has a raven's head and claws for feet (*ibid.*, 2028). In other depictions, we find the torchbearers as attendants, and raven- and lion-headed servitors. The mythic feast is somehow repeated in the actual festivities of the cult (*ibid.*, 2083). A banquet scene is also described in the Epic of Gilgamesh, following the killing of the Bull of Heaven and prostration before Šamaš. After Gilgamesh has given the horns of the Bull to the craftsmen, the Babylonian version says laconically: "Gilgameš made merry in his palace" (VI, 179, George 2003, 631). The Sumerian version of "Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven" from Me-Turan describes in its final lines the wealth of bull's raw stuff, including its hide:

> As he (= Gilgameš) spoke, he consigned its hide to the streets, he consigned its intestines to the broad square, and the widows' sons of his city each took their share of its meat in baskets. He consigned its carcass to the knacker's, and turned its two horns into flasks for pouring fine oil to Inanna in Eanna. For the death of the Bull of Heaven: holy Inanna, it is

[34] Vermaseren 1977, 105–106; see also Parpola 1997, xlvii n. 140.

sweet to praise you![35]

Given the centrality of the bull-killing episode in the Mithraic representation, it must have been supremely relevant to the lives of the initiates. The tauroctony itself can be interpreted as an act of creation, or an act of salvation, or an eschatological act of consummation at the world's end—it may even be two or all three of these (Beck 1984, 2080–81). The S. Prisca Mithraeum has a couple of painted texts in verse which may be the openings of liturgical hymns or self-contained *symbola*. One of these may refer to the salvific act of bull-killing by Mithras: "us too you have saved by blood eternally shed" (*et nos servasti eternali sanguine fuso*), but the reading of the first part of the line is quite uncertain (*ibid.*, 2029).

The episode in the epic of Gilgamesh, where the hero kills the Bull of Heaven is reflected in the royal bull hunt descriptions in the royal inscriptions of ancient Mesopotamia. Already the king Šulgi killed "the big wild bull, the Bull of Heaven" (Šulgi B 85) during his hunting expedition. The prey of the royal hunt is called the 'Bull of Heaven' which places Šulgi's hunt in a cosmological context. As a deified ruler of the Ur III dynasty, his account of the bull hunt thus deliberately alludes to the episode in the Gilgamesh epic (Watanabe 2002, 74–75). Similar accounts of the royal bull hunting are attested also in the Assyrian royal inscriptions (see Watanabe 2002, 72–75). Theologically, the Assyrian king is acting as the counterpart of a divine saviour during the royal bull or lion hunt, saving his people and cattle (see Annus 2002, 102–108).

The Mithraic icon of tauroctony contains some standard elements, which include the metamorphosis of the tip of the bull's tail into an ear or ears of wheat, the presence of moon and torchbearers, a crater; and several animals: dog and snake, who are precisely on a par; a scorpion, a lion, and a raven (Beck 1984, 2080). Some prominent scholars of Mithraism would like to see the icon of tauroctony as a map of the heavens, the composite elements corresponding to a particular set of constellations—bull to Taurus, dog to Canis Major and/or Canis Minor, snake to Hydra, lion to Leo, crater to Crater, raven to Corvus, scorpion to Scorpius, and the wheat-ear at the tip of the bull's tail to the star Spica (*ibid.*, 2081, Ulansey 1989a, 24). This view is quite speculative, but can be supported by comparative data, including the Mesopotamian sources that are not taken into account by Roger Beck.

It may be relevant that the Bull of Heaven, Sumerian *gud-an-na* and Akkadian *alû*, was also the name of the constellation Taurus in Sumero-Babylonian astronomy. According to a Sumerian version of the tale, the Bull of Heaven grazed where the sun rises before the battle with Gilgamesh:

> Great An replied to holy Inanna: "My child, the Bull of Heaven would not have any pasture (on the earth), as its pasture is on the horizon. Maiden Inanna, the Bull of Heaven can only graze where the sun rises. So

[35] See ETCSL (as in fn. 3), section 1.8.1.2.

I cannot give the Bull of Heaven to you!" (Version B 46–49)

If the epic tale(s) of Gilgamesh served as a model or some kind of source for creative Mithraic reinterpretations under the circumstances of a Irano-Mesopotamian synthesis, then it may also be relevant that we have a nearly full set of animals occurring in the Epic of Gilgamesh that also appear on the Mithraic icon. A raven (*aribu*) occurs in the story of the Deluge as the last bird brought out by Utnapištim from his ark (XI, 154–156, George 2003, 713). The snake has an important role to play by stealing the wondrous herb given by Utnapištim to Gilgameš (XI, 305–307, George 2003, 723). The bull is present as the Bull of Heaven, and the tip of its tail is also mentioned in the passages quoted above. The scorpion-men occur in the epic as the guardians of the gate, whence the sun rises (tablet VII). A lion is mentioned as a lover of Ištar (VI, 51) to which the goddess dug "seven and seven pits"; and a set of lions is frequently mentioned as an epithet of Gilgameš, "who killed lions in the mountain passes". The dogs are mentioned in VI, 63 and XI, 116. Even if these parallels cannot help to better understand the Mithraic icon, it is still possible that there are historical links between the two traditions by means of later astrological interpretation.

Mithras is attended on the icon of the tauroctony, and sometimes also in other scenes, by two figures similar in dress to himself. Most likely they are twins, and are usually differentiated by the carrying of a raised torch by one and a lowered torch by the other. Their names are known from dedications—Cautes (raised torch) and Cautopates (lowered torch), and they were represented separately on pairs of statues. There is general agreement that they represent opposites to each other (Beck 1984, 2084). The kindling of lights was associated in standard Mesopotamian calendar with the time of festivals for the dead during the fifth month Abu. This month is described by the Assyrian Astrolabe B as follows: "The month Abu, arrow of Ninurta, braziers are kindled, a torch is raised to the Anunna-gods, Girra comes down from the sky and rivals the sun, the month of Gilgameš, for nine days men contest in wrestling and athletics in their city quarters." The torches were rised in Abu to help the deceased to find their way from the netherworld and the fire-god Girra to burn the witches and to convey them to the netherworld (Abusch 2002, 70). The traffic of souls in the month of Abu was intense, and the ritual series *Maqlû* was performed in order to ensure its safety to mortals.[36] *Maqlû* incantations contained the motif of heavenly journey of the soul, which is also the background Mithraic torch-bearing figures, as is shown below.

In the icon of tauroctony Cautes and Cautopates flank symmetrically the bull-killing Mithras on both sides, in some ways reminiscent of Mesopotamian depictions of Enkidu and Gilgameš killing the Bull of Heaven, with the difference being that Cautes and Cautopates do not kill the bull in the Mithraic icons. In Italy Cautes is usually on the left flank and Cautopates on the right from the

[36] See M. E. Cohen, *Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda: CDL Press 1993), pp. 319–321.

spectator's point of view, but *vice versa* on the Rhine and Danube. According to Roger Beck the distinction relates to the torchbearers' different celestial associations (1984, 2084):

> The icon is aligned as a south-facing *templum* with east to the left and west to the right. Consequently, when the torchbearers represent the rising and setting of the Sun Cautes is on the left and Cautopates on the right. However, the torchbearers are also associated, through their occasional attributes, with the constellation Taurus (Cautes) and Scorpius (Cautepates). With these associations their position will be reversed, for in the celestial map of which the tauroctony is an expression Taurus is on the right (west) and Scorpius of the left (east). (Beck 1984, 2084–2085)

Cautes with raised torch is associated with the east, the rising sun, day, summer and the constellation Taurus. Cautopates with lowered torch signifies the west, the setting sun, night, winter and the constellation Scorpius (*ibid.*). The associations of the torchbearers certainly extended beyond the natural phenomena and encompassed the concerns inherent in the Mysteries as a religion of salvation. Porphyry, *De antro* 24, if read with an important emendation of the text (Beck 1984, 2053), links the torchbearers also

> … to the mechanisms and routes of genesis and apogenesis for the human soul, the processes which are ultimately controlled by Mithras in his median position whithin the cosmos, his "seat of the equinoxes." Significantly, it is Cautopates who is placed at the gate of genesis (north and cold) and Cautes at the gate of apogenesis (south and hot). With Cautopates one enters life, with Cautes one leaves it. (Beck 1984, 2085)

The gates of souls, according to Porphyry's account (21–24) are situated in Cancer and Capricorn. According to Beck, this was justified by the logic of planetary houses. Cancer was the gate of descent because the Moon has Cancer as her house. Moon, as a manifestly genetic power, is the closest to the earth, the locus of our mortality. Capricorn was the gate of ascent and apogenesis because it is the house of Saturn, the most remote of the planets in the cosmology of late antiquity. The god Saturnus also presides over the Roman feast of liberation, the Saturnalia, celebrated in the season of Capricorn (Beck 1988, 96). Cautopates also became associated with Cancer and Cautes with Capricorn, the constellations which rose on the summer and winter solstices respectively. Thus the full set of associations in the Mithraic mysteries is: Cautopates—Moon—Cancer—Scorpius—cold—descent—mortality; and Cautes—Sun—Capricorn—Taurus—heat—ascent—immortality (Beck 1988, 94). The descent and ascent of souls through the gates in Cancer and Capricorn was described by Macrobius as follows (1.12):

> 1. At this point we shall discuss the order of the steps by which the soul descends from the sky to the infernal regions of this life. The Milky Way girdles the zodiac, its great circle meeting it obliquely so that it crosses it at the two tropical signs, Capricorn and Cancer. Natural philosophers

> named these the "portals of the sun" because the solstices lie athwart the sun's path on either side, checking farther progress and causing it to retrace its course across the belt beyond whose limits it never trespasses. 2. Souls are believed to pass through these portals when going from the sky to the earth and returning from the earth to the sky. For this reason one is called the portal of men and the other the portal of gods: Cancer, the portal of men, because through it descent is made to the infernal regions; Capricorn, the portal of gods, because through it souls return to their rightful abode of immortality, to be reckoned among the gods. (Stahl 1952, 133–134)

Thus based on the previous discussion I assert that the Mithraic associations of Cautes and Cautopates with Taurus and Scorpius derive from an astrological interpretation of the Epic of Gilgamesh. The Bull of Heaven episode corresponds to the symbolism of the constellations Taurus and Cancer in Mithraism—it is the "portal of men" through which "descent is made to the infernal regions". The death of the Bull of Heaven also brings about the death of Enkidu, a mortal. In the Sumerian version of the goddess' descent, the reason of her descent is similarly the death of the Great Bull of Heaven. Thus the death of the Bull in both systems sends the soul down the path of mortality, eventually leading to immortality. In the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, Ištar does not descend, but assembles the courtesans and harlots, and institutes a mourning over the Bull of Heaven's haunch (VI, 158–159, George 2003, 629).

The turning-point on the path of mortality, which eventually leads to immortality in the Epic of Gilgamesh is the mountain Māšu, which is guarded by the scorpion-men. After entering their gate, it is said of Gilgameš that "he [took] the path of the sun" towards the east (IX, 138 George 2003, 671) and enters the land of darkness, consisting of twelve double-hours. In Babylonian witchcraft series *Maqlû* this crossing place (*nēbiru*) was called Zabban, and corresponds to Bardaisan's "hindrance of souls" (see above). The association of the fate of the departing spirit and the fate of Gilgamesh is already Babylonian, because Gilgamesh had a double role in Mesopotamian religion and literature. He is the hero of the epic, but simultaneously he is one of the rulers of the Netherworld, sometimes a senior chthonic deity, 'king of the Netherworld' (George 2003, 127). He sits in judgement in the Netherworld, passes judgements and hands down verdicts (George 2003, 128). In Mesopotamian incantations, Gilgamesh is also attested as the ferryman of the dead, and once he controls the shades' crossing of the Hubur river and perhaps receives from them payment (George 2003: 130). Gilgamesh was present at rites of burial, because his prominent function was to convey the dead safely into the Netherworld's custody (George 2003, 131). The Epic of Gilgamesh describes man's quest for immortality, but on his way the hero crosses several boundaries between the life and death, and after his own death becomes a ruler and judge of the Netherworld. Accordingly, every departing spirit undertook a journey similar to that of Gilgamesh after death in

order to reach the Netherworld and encounter him there as judge.[37]

The guardians of the gate, the scorpion-men are still seen in the presence of constellation Scorpius (or Capricorn) in the Mithraic and Neoplatonic systems, where according to Macrobius situates "the portal of gods, because through it souls return to their rightful abode of immortality, to be reckoned among the gods". The gate of Scorpius is, according to Mithraic mysteries, the gate of the night, the west, winter and genesis of the soul. From the point of view of the Mithraic mysteries:

> Now Taurus and Scorpius occupy diametrically opposite positions on the celestial sphere and on the zodiac, and part of the purpose of assigning their symbols to Cautes and Cautopates is to signify that the scene whose margins the torchbearers define corresponds to that semicircle of the zodiac, that half of the heavens, which lies between those two signs … the tauroctony is celestially aligned, corresponding to a view of the heavens by a south-facing observer, so that west is to the right of the scene and east to the left (Beck 1988, 20).

The Moon and Goddess

From Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* (18, 29), we learn that the moon was a gate of the descending soul: "the theologians make the gates of souls the sun and the moon, the ascent taking place through the sun and the descent through the moon". The ascent through the sun's rays is well attested not only in classical antiquity, but also in ancient Mesopotamia. The Pythagoreans believed that the glittering particles of dust which moved themselves in a sunbeam (*xýsmata*) were souls descending from ether, borne on wings of light. They added that this beam, passing through the air and through water down to its depths, gave life to all things here below (Cumont 1912, 188). The idea is also found in the Hermetic Corpus (16, 16): "if by way of the sun anyone has a ray shining upon him in his rational part … the demons' effect on him is nullified. For none—neither demons nor gods—can do anything against a single ray of god" (Copenhaver 1992, 60–61). Recently R. Edmonds has argued that this apogenetic function of the sun's ray had also a place in Mithraism (Edmonds 2001). And a similar idea is already present in the Akkadian great hymn to Šamaš, where the Sun-god lifts up the fallen soul: "You lift up him who goes down to the deep, you provide him with wings" (*tušelli ārid anzanunzê tušaškan kappa*, l. 70).[38] The Sun's

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[37] It is highly interesting to note that the Yazidi mythological story of soul's voyage to Paradise after death has many parallels with Gilgameš's journey to Utnapištim in the Babylonian Epic. See M. Dietrich, "Die ‚Teufelsanbeter' in Nord-Iraq und ihre historischen und religionsgeschichtlichen Beziehungen zum Alten Orient." *Jahrbuch für Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte*, Band 2 (1974), pp. 139–168, esp. 158–161.

[38] See *Assyrian Dictionary of the University of Chicago*, A/2, 153. The word *anzanunzû* means "subterranean water, abyss, deep water". Note that descent of the soul is asso-

association with ascent in Mesopotamia is also reflected on Tablet VII of the Gilgamesh Epic, where the dying Enkidu enters into a dialogue with Šamaš.

The moon is related to the genesis of the soul, and as a female being she was called the "Mistress of genesis" in some mystery religions. The Moon, as the latest sphere and the lowest boundary before the earth, was held to be responsible for birth and reproduction. The lunar phenomena were also of paramount importance in Babylonian horoscopy. The first astronomical datum provided in a horoscope was the position of the moon on the date of the birth, and significant moments in the lunar cycle occurring in proximity to the birth were viewed as having an impact on the birth (Rochberg 2004, 105–115). In the Neoplatonic descent theories, the lunar sphere is of prominent importance, for example according to Macrobius 1.12.15:

> This last function, being the farthest removed from the gods, is the first in us and all the earthly creation; inasmuch as our body represents the dregs of what is divine, it is therefore the first substance of the creature. (translation from Stahl 1952)

The doctrine of the moon's association with "life" also helps to explain some passages in the Epic of Gilgamesh. When the hero has duly buried his friend, in the beginning of tablet IX, he is said to pray to the moon-god Sîn and having a revelatory dream from him:

> I arrived one night at the mountain passes, I saw some lions and grew afraid. I lifted my head, praying to Sîn, to […, the] light of the gods, my supplication went: "O [Sîn and …,] keep me safe!" [Gilgameš] arose, he awoke with a start: it was a dream! [… in the] presence of the moon he grew happy to be alive. (IX 8–14, George 2003, 667)

Gilgameš is here approaching the gate of the scorpion-men, and one can see here two powerful symbols of genesis: night, and the moon granting life to the hero. Usually it is Šamaš who assists Gilgameš and Enkidu during their travels and marches with them, he has a leading role in the epic. He even says a word of favour for Enkidu in the divine assembly, a scene which is preserved only in the Hittite translation.[39] When Enlil says that Enkidu must die,

> Celestial Šamaš began to reply to the hero Enlil: "Was it not at your word that they slew him, the Bull of Heaven—and also Humbaba? Now shall innocent Enkidu die?" Enlil was wroth at celestial Šamaš: "How like a comrade you marched with them daily!"

The descending Ištar in the Akkadian version is called "daughter of the Moon" (lines 2–3), and is relevant to the story. Calling Ištar with such epithet refers to her as descending into genesis. Since the Mesopotamian goddess was the

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ciated with water also in the Mystery religions (cf. Lapinkivi 2004, 153).

[39] Text: *KUB* VIII 48; see the edition by E. Laroche, *Revue hittite et asianique* 26 (1968) 17.

daughter of the moon, the full moon with its perfect shining disc became one of her symbols: the full moon symbolized Ištar, as indicated by her mystic number 15 that coincides with the number of days in the lunar cycle, while the moon god was symbolized with the number 30 (Lapinkivi 2004, 155). The Moon was associated with the topmost stage of the Mesopotamian ziggurat, the first "gate" in the descent of the goddess, and there the sacred marriage rite took place. As some passages from the Sumerian hymn *Iddin-Dagan A* show, Inanna is associated with the phases of the moon, and the bed is set up for sacred marriage on the day of its disappearance (Lapinkivi 2004, 120):

> Monthly, at the new moon, the gods of the land gather around her so that the divine powers are perfected (l. 27f.) … At the New Year, on the day of the rites, in order for her to determine the fate of all the countries, so that during the day (?) the faithful servants can be inspected, so that on the day of the disappearance of the moon the divine powers can be perfected, a bed is set up for my lady (l. 173–177).

Parpola asserts that the loss of purity of the waning moon symbolized the gradual defilement, and descent of the Mesopotamian goddess, and its total disappearance symbolized corruption, or spiritual death. The waxing of the moon symbolized increasing purity, and after the conjunction, ascent and return to the original state (1997, xc–xci n. 111). A similar view is found in the teachings of Bardaisan who regarded moon as the Mother of Life, who had sexual union with the Father "on the top of the building". He also associated this sexual communion with the new moon, as do the Sumerian sources. The biography of Bardaisan, as transmitted by Agapius of Mabbug and Bar Hebraeus mentions that

> … according to Bardaisan the Mother of Life every month discards her clothing and goes in to the Father of Life, who has communion with her. She then bears seven sons. All the authors state, that this happens by analogy with the moon, who every month 'discards' her light and goes to the sun. The idea is, therefore, that the moon is impregnated by the sun. Bar Hebraeus in the Chronicon ecclesiasticum goes even further, and says that the Moon is the Mother of Life and the Sun the Father of Life. The Moon receives from the Sun the 'spirit of preservation', which she sends into the world. (Drijvers 1966, 149)

No doubt that the goddess descended and ascended in the Mesopotamian myth for mankind's sake. She descended "to us," and from the point of view of mortals, her descent means "birth" or "life". From the point of view of divinity, her descent means "death". The ascent of the goddess means death to a mortal and his physical body, but "rebirth" to the goddess and her luminous body. This truth is expressed in the Mesopotamian dream omen series *ziqīqu*, Tablet IX, col. I, which says "If (a man) ascends to heaven: his days will be short" and "If he descends to the netherworld: his days will be long" (Rochberg 2004, 57). As was put by Macrobius,

> The difference between terrestrial and supernal bodies (I am speaking of

> the sky and stars and the other components) lies in this, that the latter have been summoned upwards to the abode of the soul and have gained immortality by the very nature of that region and by copying the perfection of their high estate; but to our terrestrial bodies the soul is drawn downwards, and here it is believed to be dead while it is shut up in a perishable region and the abode of mortality. Be not disturbed that the reference to the soul, which we say is immortal, we so often use the term 'death.' In truth, the soul is not destroyed by its death but is overwhelmed for a time; nor does it surrender the privilege of immortality because of its lowly sojourn, for when it has rid itself completely of all taint of evil and has deserved to be sublimated, it again leaves the body and, fully recovering its former state, returns to the splendor of everlasting life. (1.12.16–17, Stahl 1952, 136–137)

As we can see, the generative power brought forth by the descending goddess was viewed positively in ancient Mesopotamia. In the Greek world, the positive reasons for the descent of the soul were primarily derived from Plato's *Timaeus* 39e and 41b. Some argued that the soul descends into genesis to fill out the cosmos, bringing all possible entities into existence or bringing divine benefits to the lower realms. The benefits of the upper realms may be viewed as the care and administration, or the soul's purpose may be described as the purification, perfection, and salvation of the lower realms (Edmonds 2004, 283).[40] This was also the Mesopotamian view. Accordingly, in the philosophical doctrines of late antiquity, the moon was viewed either positively or negatively depending of the evaluation of genesis in that particular doctrine or school. If the physical world was regarded as an abode of evil, as in many philosophical doctrines of late antiquity, the moon was regarded as a dangerous entity. In the *Mithras Liturgy*, the magician times the ritual preparations carefully to avoid the presence of the moon in the sky, and he does not see the moon during the ascent to a meeting with the supreme god (Edmonds 2004, 275):

> The theurgists, however, are not the only testimony to the moon's terrifying face. Clement relates [*Strom.* 5.49] that Orpheus called the moon Gorgonian because of its terrifying face, a face like that which Odysseus feared Persephone would send up to him in the underworld when he was consulting the shades. Plutarch too knows of this frightening face [*Fac.* 944bc], which terrifies souls coming out of incarnation, although he rationalizes it as merely a cliff formation on the surface of the moon (Edmonds 2004, 276).

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[40] See *Asclepius* 1.8, and Iamblichus quoted in Stobaeus 1.49.40.22–27, cf. Plotinus 4.8.5. Concerning the various reasons of soul's descent, see J. Dillon, "The Descent of the Soul in Middle Platonic and Gnostic Theory." In *The golden chain. Studies in the development of Platonism and Christianity*. London: Variorum 1990.

According to Xenocrates and Plutarch (*Obsolescence of Oracles* 416c–f) the moon was the proper home of the demons. These demons, which occupied the middle world of the moon and the lunar air, acted as mediators between the two worlds of gods and humans. Due to their position, demons were similar to both gods and humans. Hekate, who was both an earthly and a heavenly goddess, was also the goddess of the moon (Seneca, *Medea* 790), and subsequently she was the queen of demons, both good and bad, who occupied the moon (Lapinkivi 2004, 178). Hekate was also associated with evil chthonic demons, called "dogs."

> Since the Chaldean system depicted Hekate as a savior figure, helping the theurgist, she had to be disassociated from these dogs. In order to achieve this, the Chaldean doctrine followed the Middle Platonic view of the double Soul: the upper part of the Soul that remained secluded from the Sensible World (Cosmos) became Hekate, whereas the lower part of the Soul that was involved with men and the matters of the material world became known as Physis. Physis was not evil but simply hylic, but because the dog-demons lived in her sublunar sphere, it was she that became their controller. Physis was closely related to Hekate since Physis was derived from her. (Lapinkivi 2004, 178)

As Lapinkivi shows, the Mesopotamian goddess in her earthly form was also associated with dogs, and the conception of higher and lower souls can be compared with the sororal relationship of Ištar with Ereškigal. While the former is more involved in heavenly matters, the latter is involved in the matters of "down below," or with the matters of the material world. If Physis in the *Chaldean Oracles* originated from Hekate, the Soul, so also the netherworld queen Ereškigal can be seen deriving from the queen of heaven, Inanna/Ištar as a different hypostasis, the sinful soul versus the purified soul. In fact, a Middle Assyrian version of the first eleven lines of Descent of Ištar identifies Ereškigal as "Ištar (*ištaru*) who resides in the midst of Irkalla" (Lapinkivi 2004, 178–179).

There are very many intermediary principles between the higher powers and the realms below in the cosmological doctrines of the late antiquity, and they are all feminine. There is also a tendency to separate the two functions—one of giving and joining together (positive) and the other of division (negative). This tendency to separate leads to the multiplication of mediating principles, who may be imagined either as personifications of abstract principles or identified with divine figures from the mythic tradition (Edmonds 2004, 286–287). The higher, maternal aspect of this feminine principle was often called Sophia, Pronoia, Isis etc; and the lower and demonic aspect called Physis, Heimarmene, Anagke, among others.

> Systems with an optimistic view of genesis emphasize the higher principles that convey the benefits of the divine to the world below, whereas more pessimistic systems may multiply the entities that separate mortals from the divine and emphasize their absolute domination of human life.

> … Indeed, philosophers and theologians meditating on the problems of fate and free will devised a vast number of different configurations of the relations of Physis and Pronoia, Anagke, Tyche, Heimarmene, and the Moirae, but all these powers are feminine principles that impose order on the lower world from their intermediary position. Although divine Providence is generally positively evaluated, Necessity, Fortune, the Fates, and Destiny are more often negatively viewed by the mortals whose fates they determine. In particular, the lowest level of fate (whether called Heimarmene, Anagke, or another name) becomes, in a cosmology with a pessimistic view of genesis, the power responsible for keeping souls imprisoned and miserable in matter. (Edmonds 2004, 287, 288–289)

This intermediary feminine power in the Mesopotamian religion was Ištar, the goddess *par excellence*. Previously in this paper I have explained the myth of the goddess' descent as relating to the destiny of the soul, and it was believed in ancient Mesopotamia that the natural processes of birth and death were mediated through her. Through her association with the moon, the Mesopotamian goddess can be viewed as a model for the feminine intermediary figure in these late antique doctrines. The goddess is frequently seen in the Mesopotamian texts as acting for determining the king's power and well-being, and consequently the well-being of his subjects. In this function she corresponds to what the Greeks called the Tyche of the king (see Drijvers 1980, 69–70). Thus the system of continuities in the Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds appears to be highly complex, but the impression that various late antique schools received and developed the religious ideas of Mesopotamian origin seems more and more likely.[41]

Conclusion

Are these proposals concerning the "Babylonian sediment" in late antique religious doctrines simply a new manifestation of the much-feared pan-Babylonism, allegedly an obsolete approach and a totally disproved theory? This paper asserts that some of the interpretations presented above stand on more solid ground, whereas some others are nothing more than proposals. Given a notoriously complicated subject with a lack of written sources as Mithraism, at present it appears quite inconceivable to offer a universally accepted theory. Scholars of different background may be more or less convinced of various aspects of the theories offered, but there is often more than one plausible explanation.

The approach of this paper has been to try to make a case for continuity

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[41] In this sense I would agree with J. Cooper's criticism of Parpola 1997 that "A more cautious reader would explain the similarities in the myths as the persistence of old Near Eastern patterns of myth into the Hellenistic period, and the similarities Parpola adduces between the figures of Ištar and Sophia can likewise be understood as the persistence of ancient aspects of the great goddess of the Orient" (JAOS 120 [2000] 440).

rather than invention in the formation of the Mithraic and other prominent religious doctrines of Late Antiquity. There is a continuity of narratives and motifs, but the context of these Babylonian sediments in the religious systems Late Antique can only be recognized as motifs. This paper does not deny the invention, and indeed, the rich symbolism of the mystery religions, and Gnosticism can not be reduced to derive from only one part of the ancient world. Given the syncretic and mobile character of religious literature and imagery in the ancient Mediterranean world, it is not helpful to insist that the religious concepts and texts originate from one and only one tradition. As Karen King rightly notes: "Instead, we ought to be exploring the field of late antique cultural hybridity in order to illuminate their overlapping themes, strategies, and discourses, as well as their distinctive practices" (2003, 169). Thus, this paper asserts that we must acknowledge that ancient Mesopotamian sources played a part in the formation of many these Late Antiquity religious movements. Assyrian and Babylonian sources must be returned their honour of being in some sense the ancestors of the West. But not in the naïvely categorical manner as it was propagated by the pan-Babylonian school, but as one of many resources of the developments of Late Antiquity. R. Beck wrote a quarter of century ago:

> It is perhaps no coincidence that as credence in the thoroughly Iranian structure of the Mysteries has been weakened over the past decade, so a new theory which postulates a doctrinal content drawn in very cosiderable part from astronomy and astrology of antiquity has come into play. A certain vacuum has been filled. However, whether this represents altogether a shift from Eastern to Western data … is in fact still an open question. For Babylon had of course its astronomy, and it may be that certain elements in the astronomy of the Mysteries derive from Mesopotamian sources, though I believe that its framework can be shown to be essentially Graeco-Roman. (Beck 1984, 2061–262)

In addition to astrological doctrines, one also finds a concept of the soul's ascent and descent in mystery religions and in Neoplatonic schools very similar to the ancient Mesopotamian one. The metaphor of stripping and redressing of the soul as the means of salvation appears in the doctrines of the Syrian Church, Neoplatonists, Mithraism and Hermetic literature. Despite the divergencies and the richness of images that can be seen in various treatments of the clothing metaphor, the Mesopotamian heritage can definitively be seen as one source. In addition, the Epic of Gilgamesh can be shown to have been an ancient resource for the reinterpretation of the mystery religions of Late Antiquity (see also Dalley 1994). This thus establishes that the mythological and epic texts of ancient Mesopotamia were not simply stories of gods and heroes without any particular "philosophy", but also had spiritual dimensions, even if by means of later reinterpretation, as the Homeric cave of nymphs became a source of inspiration for Porphyry.

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