

The Dispatch of the Reconnaissance Birds in Gilgamesh XI

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Of all the Mesopotamian parallels to the Bible, one of the closest is the dispatch by the Deluge hero of a raven and a dove to ascertain whether the flood waters have abated sufficiently to allow disembarking from the ark. Professor T. H. Gaster is the most recent to deal with the dispatch of the birds motif, in his *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament*.¹ On pages 129-30 he writes:

The familiar incident of the dispatch of the raven and dove occurs, in slightly different form, in the more ancient Babylonian story of the Deluge.

It will be observed that in this earlier version not only are there *three* distinct birds, as against the Bible's two, but also the roles of the dove and the raven are reversed. Comparative Folklore suggests that this preserves a motif of the original folktale which the later biblical variation has obscured.

He continues his analysis with the following three points:

- 1.) The raven was used by mariners in classical texts to guide their ships, and by mariners of various ages and climes to ascertain the proximity of land.
- 2.) Moreover, the raven is commonly considered to be a prophetic bird, usually betokening evil, although it occasionally tokened weal—notably in Mesopotamia.
- 3.) The biblical interchange of the dove and the raven may be illuminated by Plutarch's observation that doves come home when a storm is brewing, but fly away when fair weather seems promised.

Gaster's point of view about the relationship between the Bible and Gilgamesh XI is common; his point (1) has been noted before.² But aside from the ancient commentators,³

1 (New York, 1969). Hereafter, *MLC*.

2 Andree, *Die Flutsagen* (Braunschweig, 1891), 131-32; Barnett, "Early Shipping in the Near East," *Antiquity* 32 (1958), 230; Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem, 1964), 106-9; David, "Le Récit du Déluge et l'épopée de Gilgameš," apud Garelli, ed., *Gilgameš et sa Légende* (Paris, 1960 [hereafter, *GaGilg*]), 157-59; idem, "L' Episode des Oiseaux dans les Récits du Déluge," *VT* 7 (1957), 189-90; Heidel, *Gilgamesh Epic*, 2nd ed. (Reprint: Chicago, 1965), 264; and other sources as indicated in these works.

3 Philo Judaeus, *Questions in Genesis*, 2:35; Zohar Hadash 22b.

Gaster seems to be the only one to relate the prophetic ability of the raven to our case. From his very evidence, however, we are inclined to reach different conclusions: the Hebrew version of the incident seems to be more authentic, and the reverse of the roles of the dove and the raven may be due to the Mesopotamian characterization of the raven.

Of the sources cited by Gaster, those that specify what bird is being sent to scout land, name the raven only.⁴ When mariners use doves, it is to guide them through straits,⁵ or to gauge the weather,⁶ not to scout for land. Since both Noah and Utnapishtim are scouting for land—albeit not to determine in what direction to navigate—the bird that nautical custom dictates sending first is the raven. To find if land is habitable, the dove would be a good choice, for its domesticity is famed.⁷ The order of the biblical version, therefore, is in complete accord with maritime practice, whereas the Akkadian mention of dove—swallow!⁸—raven obscures the original motif.

We expect that the Israelites, with a minimum of their own navigational experience and close ties with the sea-faring Phoenicians, would have better knowledge of maritime customs than the landlocked Assyrians.⁹ This expectation is confirmed in the boat-building scenes of the Deluge stories. The use in the Hebrew account of *gōfēr* wood, of *qinnîm*, of *šohar*, and of the plural forms *taḥtiyyîm*, *šēniyyîm*, and *šē ḥšîm* all probably hark back to nautical terminology. On the other hand, the Akkadian Deluge stories all betray ignorance¹⁰ of proper nauti-

4 MLC, 359, n. 6, 8. (Note that Pliny, *Natural History*, vi:24, 83, uses *volucres* 'birds', and that Gaster's identification as "crows," MLC, 130, is too strong. One would expect either *cornix* or *corvus*.) The raven also guides mariners to land: Callimachus, *Hymns*, ii:66; Strabo, *Geography*, xvii, i:43; Scholiast to Aristophanes' "Clouds," no. 134, to line 123.

5 Appollonius Rhodius, *Argonauticae*, ii:317-407, 528-610. Note that the dove guided them through the rocks not to land, but to open sea!

6 Plutarch, *Moralia de Sollertia Animalium*: 13. Since according to Genesis 8:1-2, the storm is over, one doubts the relevance of Plutarch's observation to Noah's sending the dove last. Aelian notes that crows foretell the weather by their cawing (*De Nat. An.* 7, 7).

7 It flies directly to its home (Isaiah 60: 8, Psalm 55: 7-9); it will next even in absurd places (Jeremiah 48: 28; Canticles 2: 14; Lambert, "Divine Love Lyrics from Babylon," JSS 4 [1959], 9:6-7); and it is monagomous (TB *Erubin* 100b, bottom third; Aelian, *De Nat. An.* 3, 44).

8 Perhaps the following will help illuminate the use of the swallow (if it is not merely the result of scribal error), although I cannot locate a tradition connecting swallows with mariners. According to Aelian (*De Nat. An.*, as indicated), the swallow is a sign that the best season of the year is at hand (1: 52), and is otherwise prophetic (10:34). The swallow is so keen sighted that if it is blinded, it will regain its sight (2: 3, 17: 20; cf. Aristotle, *Gener. Anim.* 774b, 28, *Hist. Anim.* 508b, 5 and 563a, 13). Aristotle reports that swallows are strong-winged (*HA* 487b, 27) and migrate to fixed abodes in warmer climates when the winter comes (*HA* 600a, 12). If we also keep in mind the annual return of the swallows to Capistrano, we can appreciate that Utnapishtim is using the swallow as Noah did the dove, to find if the land was habitable.

9 Jacobsen maintains that the Sea was not within the real experience of the Mesopotamians in "The Battle Between Marduk and Tiamat," *JAOS* 88 (1968), 107b.

10 Thus, for example, in Gilgamesh XI *ruggubu* (60) and *šullulu* (31) are used inaccurately; *parāsu* (61 and again in 62!) is much too vague; and *kibir muḥḫi* (59) is made up. In the OB *Atrahasis* (Lambert and Millard, *Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* [Oxford, 1969], 88: 31, hereafter, *Atr.*), *lū šullulat eliṣ u šapliš* is an unfortunate idiom that is tenaciously obscure. As a matter of fact, only one text, CBS

cal terminology,¹¹ and in one version¹² of Atrahasis, the poet makes the reason quite clear when he has Atrahasis exclaim:

matīma elippa ul ēpuš . . .
ina qaqqari ešir ušur[taša]¹³
ušurta lūmurma elippa lūpuš

I never built a boat . . .
Draw a picture of it on the ground.
Let me see a picture so I can build the boat.

Thus, an Assyrian writing about something he was ignorant of has changed the customary order of the birds used as navigational aids.

Coupled with the poet's ignorance of nautical practices is a complex of Mesopotamian traditions about the raven that could well have confused him about the roles of the dove and the raven when he inserted this episode into the Deluge story.¹⁴ In contrast to the domestic dove, the raven is famous for flying away and not returning. Thus, one prays that his headache will leave him and stay away like a raven:¹⁵

murus qaqqadi [kīma s]ummati ana apti kīma āribi ana
šamē kīma iṣṣūri <ana>ašri rapši littapraš ana qātē damqāti
ša ilišu lippaqid

May the headache fly to the window like a dove, to the
sky like a raven, like a bird to the 'wide place' (the desert);
may it be entrusted to the gracious hands of his god.

13532:8 (*Atr.* I, p. 126), uses a word for "ship" (*maququrru*) besides the generic term *elippu*. The author of Gilg XI even goes so far as to call the structure an *ēkallu* (95)!

11 We doubt the value of the description of this fabulous boat as a source for the technical terms of Mesopotamian navigation. Contrast Salonen, *Die Wasserfahrzeuge in Babylonien*, *StOr* 8/4 (Helsinki, 1939), 96, 97, 151, 153, and 154; idem, *Nautica Babylonaica*, *StOr* 9/1, (Helsinki, 1942), 26 and 85; and David, *GaGilg*, 159.

12 DT 42:13-15 (*Atr.W.*, 128).

13 After Held, oral communication, and CAD E, 347b, as opposed to Lambert's [-tú] (*Atr.*, 128).

14 The episode with the birds is so far attested only in Gilg XI. The Sumerian Deluge Story does not have the episode (it would have come between 207 and 211). The OB Atrahasis has a gap at the crucial point. Lambert wrote (*Atr.*, 12) that while there is enough room for the incident there, there is no assurance that other matters did not fill the space. While in New York in May 1972, Professor Lambert said that he doubted that the line beginnings preserved are appropriate to the episode. The Berossus account is of dubious transmission—and, indeed, is different from the Gilgamesh version—so that it is not relevant here.

With regard to the insertion of the passage, it does not seem unreasonable to attribute this passage of Gilg XI (and others as well) to a later hand than the rest of the Deluge Story. Combined with the idea of *topoi* in Akkadian literature so well demonstrated by Oppenheim ("A New Prayer to the 'Gods of the Night,'" *AnBi* 12 [1959], 290-99) and by Hallo ("New Viewpoints on Cuneiform Literature," *IEJ* 12 [1962], 18-19, with further references), Jacobsen's theory about the origins of the central motif of the Enuma Elish (*JAOs* 88 [1968], 104-8) would tend to provide support for our contention that the bird episode is a late interpolation into the Deluge Story text grafted onto the Gilgamesh Epic by Sin-leqe-unninni (?). So Landsberger, "Einleitung in das Gilgameš-epos," *GaGilg*, 34.

15 CT 17, 22:140-46. Only the Akkadian lines of this bilingual passage are quoted here.

So unsettled is the raven that marriage with a settled species is impossible.¹⁶ And what appears to be the exception to the rule of the raven's unsettled nature only proves the rule:

ḥaḥḥuru muttapraššidi iqannun qinnašu¹⁷

Even the roving raven¹⁹ builds a nest for himself.

ša ḥaḥḥuri muttapraššidi ina . . . dūri bišsu¹⁸

As for the roving raven, its nest is . . . of the wall.

So we see that the raven's flying away and staying away in both Genesis and Gilgamesh XI is in keeping with his character.

What makes the Akkadian poet able to make this a good sign for Utnapishtim is the fact that the raven, as Gaster points out,²⁰ is not always a negative symbol,²¹ and is even styled as

16 Jeremiah, "Die Sogenannten Kerdorlaomer-Texte," *MVAG* 21 (1916), 92:11. Compare Philo Judaeus, *Questions in Genesis*, 2:38: "The raven has no house, nor habitation, nor city, being an insolent and unsociable bird."

17 The juxtaposition of a dog with a nesting raven in these lines of the Dialogue are paralleled by *CT* 15, 38 (81-7-14, 294), ii:1-7 and *LKA* 92, i:11'-17' (cf. Lambert, *JSS* 4 [1959], 9-10):

ana zumriki ša taklāte kalbi ušerrib bāba arakkas . . .
ḥaḥḥura ušerrib qinna iqannan itti ašiya itti erēbiya
ḥaḥḥurētiya tēma ašakkan addanika ḥaḥḥurtiya (sic) ina
muḥḥi kamūni lā teqerrub. KI.MIN ša suḥāti nipissu.

Into your body, in which you trust, I shall put dogs
and seal the opening. I shall put in a raven and it
will build a nest. When I go and when I come, I
shall order my (female) ravens, "Please, O my raven,
do not approach the mushroom. Ditto of armpit odor."

18 *BWL*, 144:21, 27.

19 Lambert (*BWL*, 324-25) errs in taking *muttapraššidi* as a substantive ("hunter") instead of as a modifier of *ḥaḥḥuru* in lines 21 and 27 (and of *amēli* in line 19). His identification of the *ḥaḥḥuru* as a bird of prey seems based on Speiser ("The Case of the Obliging Servant," *JCS* 8 [1954], 98-105; reprinted in Finkelstein and Greenberg, eds., *Oriental and Biblical Studies* [Philadelphia, 1967], 344-66), who identifies the *ḥaḥḥuru* as a hawk because of its color (reprint, 353). But the lexical equations (*MSL* 8/2, 168:259, 170:301; cf. *ZA* 6, 244:44) of *urballu*: *ḥaḥḥuru sāmu* call the *urballu* red/brown, not the *ḥaḥḥuru*. There are, moreover, brownish species of ravens; and the word for "hunter's falcon" is *kassūsu*.

That *ḥaḥḥuru* is a species of raven is clear from (1) lexical equations of *āribu* with *ḥaḥḥuru* (*MSL* 8/2, 167:246a-b, 172:20, 176:347, 350); (2) the shared epithet *qārib maḥḥāti* (for *āribu*, *STT* 403:7; for *ḥaḥḥuru*, *MSL* 8/2, 170:301, 172:23, which last, by the way, show that *urballu* is a species of raven); (3) association of *āribu* with *ḥaḥḥuru* in *KAR* 381, ii:3': *šumma āribu ḥaḥḥuru* . . .; (4) the cocky walk of the *ḥaḥḥuru* (attributed to the 'oreb/āribu in Jewish sources; cf. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* [Philadelphia, 1961], I, 39; V: 56).

N. B. Landsberger, "Eine unerkannte gebliebene oder verkannte Nomina des Akkadischen," *WO* 3/3 (1966), 249, n. 16, identifies *ḥaḥḥuru* as the true raven and *urballu* and *āribu* as crows of the alluvial plains. Since this is not a treatise in natural history, we have been lax in distinguishing the species.

20 *MLC*, 130.

21 Rab Berachia, quoting R. Abba bar Kahana, has God bid Noah to take the raven back into the ark because ravens were, in the future, to feed Elijah [1 Kings 17: 6] (*Beresit Rabba*, 33: 5). *Pesabim* 113b, bottom third, and *Ketubot* 49b, middle, show the raven as loving. Cf. Aelian, *De Nat. Anim.*, 3: 9, where ravens are described as so strictly monogamous that they live as widow(er)s if their spouses die.

nāgir ilī, "the herald of the gods."²²

Moreover, the raven is endowed with prophetic²³ ability.²⁴ Its ominous behavior does not always portend evil,²⁵ and can even be lucky,²⁶ as the Appendix shows. The Assyrian poet, when he lets the raven serve as the herald for Utnapishtim's good by flying away never to return is quite in keeping with Mesopotamian traditions, but not with maritime customs.

In view of the more accurate Western tradition and the less accurate Mesopotamian tradition, it seems that what has been obscured by the Akkadian poets is a Western motif. Since our only truly Western source for the Deluge story is Genesis—there are no native or classical reports of a Canaanite Deluge story—one is tempted to suggest that the Assyrian poet borrowed a Hebrew *topos*. Be that as it may, the current view of the relationship of the bird episodes seems to need revision, regardless of the relationship of the Deluge stories to one another.

22 CT 16, 28: 64, a parallel to the source (IVR², 30* 3, obv:6) given by Gaster, and to Meek, "Cuneiform Bilingual Hymns, Prayers, and Penitential Psalms," BA 10/1 (1913), 48, no. 29 (copy, p. 112). Note also that the *urballu* species of raven is called *ḥaḥḥur ilī*, 'raven/spy (?) of the gods', MSL 8/2 170: 301, 172:23; cf. CAD H, 30. It is probably in this connection that we should interpret the raven on the boat in Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* (London, 1939; reprint, 1965), pl. XI, m. Note also that the raven is sacred to Apollo (Aelian, *De Nat. Anim.* 1:48).

23 In *Gittin* 45a, bottom third, R. Illish ignores the warning of a raven, but he heeds the same warning from a dove. The cawing of a raven is an evil omen that can be averted if the bird will turn its tail towards the one who hears it, TB *Shabbat* 67b, top third; Tosefta *Shabbat*, 7:3. Cf. Philo, *Questions in Genesis*, 2: 35, and Aelian, *De Nat. An.* 1: 48.

24 Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago, 1964), 209, notes that the preference for birds as oracular animals was shared by Asia Minor, Syria, and Palestine with Assyria, but not Babylonia. Thus, we should not be too surprised that the NA Deluge Story has the bird incident, but not the earlier Babylonian versions.

25 Note that the listing in KAR 387, ii: 10-16 makes both the dove and the raven portents of evil:

ina lemutti (lumun?) summati [ša ina (?)] bītiya . . .
 ina lemutti summatī-ūmi ša ina bītiya u āliya izzaz . . .
 ina lemutti sukaninni ša ina bītiya . . .
 ina lemutti āribi ša ina bītiya . . .
 ina lemutti uruballi . . .
 ina lemutti surdī . . .

One could further document a negative attitude towards the dove species in Akkadian literature by pointing out that the dove is a portent of evil requiring a *namburbi* ritual eight times as opposed to the raven's three in Caplice, "Namburbi Texts in the British Museum," Part 1 (*Orientalia* 34 [1965]), 109, r: 3'; 111: 7', rev: 3; 112: 5'; 114: 7', 9', 11'; Part 2 (*Orientalia* NS 36 [1967]), 34: 1; Part 3 (ibid.), 278-9: 1-3; 282: 5' (restored). Cf. Part 5 (*Orientalia* 40 [1971]), 179, to Texts 24-30. The fragmentary *namburbi* text CT 41, 24 lists two dove/pigeon species (7b and 13a) as portents of evil, but no crow/raven species. Cf. also Oppenheim, *AnBi* 12 (1959), 285: 68, where the dove is listed as presaging evil, but not the raven.

26 Note, however, the following raven omens that are negative but do not correspond to any of the positive omens in the appendix: CT 39, 25(= Notscher, "Die Omen-Serie *šumma ālu* . . .," OrSP 51-54 [1930], 154, hereafter, N): line 4; CT 39:25 (N, 155):7, 8, 10; CT 40, 48 (N, 177):7-8; CT 41, 7:46 (cf. line 53, where a dove portends similar evil). These raven omens are broken: CT 39, 28 (N, 168): 11; CT 39, 30 (N, 170): 38; CT 41, 1 (80-7-19, 161)-23 omens; CT 41, 1 (K 6791)-9 omens; CT 41, 5 (K10823): 9-10-1 omen. These omens have been gathered here to document the true ambivalence in Akkadian omen literature towards the raven.

APPENDIX

Positive Raven Omens

Of the omens involving ravens, the following are positive. Corresponding negative omens are referred to in the footnotes to each positive omen.

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| 1) <i>šumma āribu mimma ana bīt
amēli ušerib amelu šū
mimma lā šātu qaṣṣu
ikaššad</i> ²⁷ | If a raven brings something
into a man's house, as for
that man, he will acquire
something not his own. |
| 2) <i>šumma surdû lu āribu mimma
ša našû ana bīt amēli—
šaniš: ina pān amēli—iddi
bītu šī iṣḏihu irasši
(iṣḏihu: nēmelu)</i> ²⁸ | If a falcon or a raven drops
what it was carrying onto a man's
house—or: in front of a man—that
house will acquire profit (<i>iṣḏihu</i> :
'profit'). |
| 3) <i>šumma ummānu ḥarrāna illikma
āribu ana pān ummāni
iṣtanassi qaqqara unaššak
ummānu ina ḥarrān illiku
zitta ikkal</i> ²⁹ | If when an army is on a
campaign, a raven keeps
cawing in front of them and
pecking at the ground, the
army will take booty during
its campaign. |
| 4) <i>šumma ummānu ḥarrāna
illikma āribu ina pān ummāni
qaqqara unaššak ummānu ašar
illiku zitta ikkal</i> ³⁰ | If when an army is on a
campaign, a raven pecks at
the ground repeatedly in front
of the army, the army will take
booty where it is going. |
| 5) <i>šumma ummānu ḥarrāna illikma
āribu ana pān ummāni ina
šašišu iḥarrur (var: iṣrur)
ummānu ina ḥarrān illiku
iṣallim</i> ³¹ | If when an army is on a
campaign a raven croaks
(var: shrieks) while it is
cawing, the army will fare
well during its campaign. |
| 6) [<i>šumma amēlu ḥarrāna illikma
āribu ina muḥḥi amēli iḥrur
amēlu ina ḥarrān illiku iṣallim</i>] ³² | If when a man is on a
journey a raven croaks
above him, the man will
fare well on his journey. |

27 *ABL* 353: 7-10. This reference has been badly treated by the printers of *MLC*. On p. 359, n. 12 calls this no. 253; Pfeiffer no. 334 = *ABL* 353, not an additional source; Klauber, 71, has the second half of the letter, but not the omens. On p. 553, n. 1n calls Pfeiffer no. 334 "3334." On p. 130 this omen and the next are given as lucky, whereas on p. 500 they are referred to as evil.

28 *ABL* 353: 11-16.

29 *CT* 39, 25 (*N*, 154): 2; contrast line 1.

30 *Ibid.* (*N*, 155): 6; contrast line 12.

31 *Ibid.*: 5; contrast line 3.

32 *Ibid.*: 9; contrast lines 11 and 13.

7) šumma šarru ummānātīšu
upahhīramma ana māt nakrišu
harrāna iṣbatma ittalak
surdū u āribu ana pān šarri
šalta ēpušūma surdū āriba
idūk kakkī šarri eli kakkī
nakrišu imarrirū āl dannati
nakri iṣabbatma šubta nēhta
uṣṣab³³

If when the king has brought
his troops together to go on a
campaign against his enemy's
land and they've set out, a
falcon and a raven fight in
front of the king, and the
falcon kills the raven, then the
king will be victorious and
capture the enemy's fortress
and dwell securely.

8) šumma surdū u āribu itti
aḥāmeš šalta ēpušūma surdū
āriba idūk kakkī šarri eli
kakkī nakrišu imarrirū³⁴

If a falcon and a raven fight
with one another and the falcon
kills the raven, the king will
be victorious over his enemy.

9) šumma surdū u āribu itti
aḥāmeš mimma īkulū salīm
damqāti ana māti ibašši³⁵

If a falcon and a raven eat
something together, there will
be an agreeable accord for the
land.

10) šumma surdū u āribu itti
aḥāmeš imtanahḥaḥū tašmū
salīmi ina māti ibašši³⁶

If a falcon and a raven
constantly dig together,
there will be obedience to an
accord in the land.

11) šumma amēlu ana šibūtišu
itbīma āribu izzizma <ina>
šumēli amēli issi amēlu
šuātu ašar pānāšu iškunu
illakma zitta ikkal³⁷

If when a man is about to
start an enterprise a raven
stands and caws on the man's
left, as for that man, he will
go where he had intended, and
he will make a profit.

12) šumma amēlu zēra ušēšīma
āribu ina muḥḥišu izzizma
ina šumēli amēli issi
šir'u bilassu uttar³⁸

If when a man has had a
seminal emission a raven stands
above him and caws at the man's
left, grain: he will increase
his yield.

33 CT 39, 28 (N, 168): 9; contrast line 10.

34 CT 39, 30 (N, 170): 35; contrast line 36.

35 Ibid.: 32; contrast 37.

36 Ibid.: 33; contrast line 34.

37 CT 40, 48 (N, 176-77): 3.

38 Ibid.: 38.