I. INTRODUCTION

A stylized tree with obvious religious significance already occurs as an art motif in fourth-millennium Mesopotamia, and, by the second millennium B.C., it is found everywhere within the orbit of the ancient Near Eastern oikumene, including Egypt, Greece, and the Indus civilization. The meaning of the motif is not clear, but its overall composition strikingly recalls the Tree of Life of later Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist art. The question of whether the concept of the Tree of Life actually existed in ancient Mesopotamia has been debated, however, and thus many scholars today prefer the more neutral term “sacred tree” when referring to the Mesopotamian Tree.
**Fig. 1.** Structural elements of the Assyrian Tree Motif

- flanking figure
- volute
- winged disk
- tail
- streamer
- cone
- pomegranate
- palmette
- water bucket
- garland
- crown
- trunk
- fruit
- node
- base

**Fig. 2.** Triadic configurations of Nodes, Volutes, and Circles
About the middle of the second millennium, a new development in the iconography of the Tree becomes noticeable leading to the emergence of the so-called Late Assyrian Tree under Tukulti-Ninurta I. With the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, this form of the Tree spreads throughout the entire Near East and continues to be seen down to the end of the first millennium. Its importance for imperial ideology is borne out by its appearance on royal garments and jewelry, official seals, and the wall paintings and sculptures of royal palaces, as in the throneroom of Ashurnasirpal II in Calah, where it is the central motif.

The hundreds of available specimens of the Late Assyrian Tree exhibit a great deal of individual variation (see Appendix A, pp. 200–201 below) reflecting the fact that the motif and most of its iconography were inherited from earlier periods. Nevertheless,
its characteristic features\textsuperscript{15} stand out even in the crudest examples and make it generally easy to distinguish it from its predecessors. Essentially,\textsuperscript{16} it consists of a trunk\textsuperscript{17} with a palmette crown\textsuperscript{18} standing on the stone base\textsuperscript{19} and surrounded by a network of horizontal or intersecting lines\textsuperscript{20} fringed with palmettes, pinecones, or pomegranates (fig. 1).\textsuperscript{21} In more elaborate renditions, the trunk regularly has joints or nodes at its top, middle, and base\textsuperscript{22} and a corresponding number of small circles to the right and left of the trunk (fig. 2).\textsuperscript{23} Antithetically posed animal, human, or supernatural figures usually flank the

\textsuperscript{15} Apart from the surrounding network already referred to in n. 6 (see further n. 20 below), these include the winged disk hovering above the Tree (see n. 25) and significant changes in the inventory of the flanking figures (n. 24) and in the iconography of the winged disk and the trunk (n. 22). The systematic introduction of these features is clearly not a matter of style but, rather, indicates a profound change in the symbolism of the Tree (see also n. 66 below).

\textsuperscript{16} In view of the great number of variants, it is impossible to give a universally valid, compact description of the Tree; the one given here is an abstraction combining the most typical features of the Neo-Assyrian representations of the Tree.

\textsuperscript{17} In elaborate renderings, the trunk is occasionally divided by vertical striae into three parallel columns. This tripartite trunk may correspond to the three-stemmed tree of some representations (see Appendix A).

\textsuperscript{18} Occasionally the palmette crown can take the form of a flower, a disk, or a wheel; see Appendix A, and cf. fig. 6 with n. 63 on the significance of these variants.

\textsuperscript{19} The base is usually represented as a mountain, rock, or stone block. It can also be omitted altogether, but its place is then taken by the lowestmost joint of the trunk. On the symbolic meaning of the base (material world, netherworld), see pp. 180, 187 with n. 98, 192–93, and 198 below.

\textsuperscript{20} The number, direction, patterning, and rendition of the lines can vary considerably. In the reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II, they resemble streams of water, while in the reliefs of Sargon II and contemporary seals they resemble interlacing cords in a net; elsewhere, they recall rungs in a ladder (see n. 98). In each case, they effectively reduce the tree to an integral part of a larger whole. On the symbolism of the line network, see n. 55 below.

\textsuperscript{21} Hitherto commonly taken as fertility symbols (cf. \textit{RIA}, vol. 3, p. 626), but as Farouk al-Rawi informs me (oral communication), in Iraq pinecones and pomegranates are traditionally symbols of \textit{unity}. In Christian symbolism, the pomegranate represents “multiplicity in unity as the Church, with the seeds as its many members” and, secondarily, “regeneration and resurrection” (J. Baldock, \textit{The Elements of Christian Symbolism} [London, 1990], p. 108); see also A. de Vries, \textit{Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery} (Amsterdam, 1974), p. 371 (“unity in multiplicity; concord; fertility-growth and resurrection”). The fringe would thus have served to stress the underlying unity of the design enclosed by it. It may, however, have had other connotations as well. This is suggested by the fact that the position of the cones and pomegranates in the fringe could be taken by palmettes, a universal symbol of regeneration, self-renewal, and victory over death (see Baldock, \textit{Elements}, p. 105, and de Vries, \textit{Dictionary}, pp. 356 f.). Note that both pomegranate and pinecone carry similar symbolic meanings; see above and, for the latter, de Vries, \textit{Dictionary}, p. 367, s.v. pine (“immortality, longevity; victory”).

\textsuperscript{22} The standard number of nodes is three per trunk. They are usually depicted as three superimposed horizontal bands holding together the three-columned trunk (see n. 17 above); they could be reduced to mere lines, and, in some variants, the entire trunk could consist of three superimposed nodes only. In trees with an elaborate crown and base the top and bottom nodes could be omitted as superfluous, while the middle node was more consistently retained. For the four-noded trunk occurring as a variant of the standard three-noded trunk in the reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II, see n. 52 and pp. 188–89 below; note that trees flanked by the king never have four nodes and that the extra node may lack the customary volutes (see, for example, Paley, \textit{King of the World}, p. 96, fig. 12b, second node from top).

\textsuperscript{23} In the sculptures of Ashurnasirpal II, these circles are embedded in the loops of the volutes emerging from the nodes and thus are clearly associated with the latter in a triadic arrangement. There are normally two circles per node, one on each side of the tree (see J. Stearns, \textit{Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II}, AFO Beiheft 15 [Graz, 1961], pls. 40, 69, 70, 73, 78, 81, and 84 [three nodes, six circles]; pls. 11, 17, 18, 26, 31, 34, 75, and 80 [four nodes, eight circles]). In some representations, additional volute pairs appear in the empty spaces between the nodes (ibid., pls. 7, 9, 13, 28, 33, 57, 59, and 65, and see also fig. 2). These additional elements must not be confused with the volutes emerging from the nodes; note the different vertical alignment of their loops in Stearns, \textit{Reliefs}, pls. 13 and 59. On the meaning of the circles and volutes, see n. 25 below.
tree,\textsuperscript{24} while a winged disk hovers over the whole.\textsuperscript{25} Even the most schematic representations are executed with meticulous attention to overall symmetry and axial balance.

II. THE TREE: ITS SYMBOLISM AND CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE

THE BASIC SYMBOLISM OF THE TREE

What did this Tree stand for, and why was it chosen as an imperial symbol? There is considerable literature on this question, but despite the most painstaking analyses of the iconographic evidence, on the whole, little has been explained.\textsuperscript{26} This is largely due to the almost total lack of relevant textual evidence. The symbolism of the Tree is not discussed in cuneiform sources, and the few references to sacred trees or plants in Mesopotamian literature have proved too vague or obscure to be productive.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{24} The flanking animals consist of goats, ibexes, gazelles, and stags, all associated with sexual potency and animal instincts, but also with regeneration (the ibex specifically with Ea, the god of Wisdom and Life). While extremely common in earlier periods, they are rare in Late Assyrian representations, where their place is largely taken by various kinds of protective genies and/or the king, the latter often portrayed in a mirror image on both sides of the Tree (on private seals, the royal figure could be replaced by that of the private individual). The genies, mostly depicted in the act of sprinkling the king and/or the Tree with holy water, largely consist of mythical sages (apkallu) serving the god Ea (see F. A. M. Wiggermann, Mesopotamian Protective Spirits [Groningen, 1992], especially pp. 65 ff.). Neither the mirror-imaged king nor the mythical sages are attested as flanking figures before the emergence of the Lake Assyrian Tree, so they certainly represent genuine Assyrian innovations.

\textsuperscript{25} The association of disk and tree already occurs in Mitannian art, but the Assyrian representations differ significantly from their Mitannian counterparts both regarding the position of the disk and its iconography; see W. G. Lambert, “Trees, Snakes and Gods in Ancient Syria and Anatolia,” BSOAS 48 (1985): 438 ff. Iconographical innovations not found in the Mitannian disk include streamers hanging from the disk, often extended to enclose the tree; a feathered tail; a god riding in the disk; and a volute on its top, resembling those emerging from the nodes of the trunk (see Appendix B, pp. 201–2 below). The streamers may terminate in forked lightning bolts, circles, or palmettes. The god in the disk regularly raises his right hand in benediction and may hold a bow in his left hand; in some representations, he is accompanied by two smaller gods riding on the wings of the disk. As pointed out by G. Contenau, “Note d'iconographie religieuse assyrienne,” RA 37 (1940–41): 160, the blessing gesture recalls the symbolic representation of God the Father in early Christian iconography; see also de Vries, Dictionary, p. 235; Baldock, Elements p. 98; and n. 93 below.

It should be noted that the triad of gods and the volute on top of the disk are in complementary distribution: whenever the former appears, the latter is lacking. Hence the volute with its loops seems to be an icon for the gods accompanying the central figure. On some seals, the place of the accompanying gods is taken by two juxtaposed circles; on others, the whole trinity, including the central god, is replaced by three juxtaposed circles (see Appendix B, pp. 201–2 below). This strongly suggests that the triadic arrangements of circles, volutes, and nodes on the trunk (see n. 23 above) also stand for trinities of gods.

\textsuperscript{26} Revealingly, apodictic statements about the meaning of the Tree are carefully avoided in recent studies, though there appears to be a general consensus among experts that it was related to fertility. Cf. Reade, Assyrian Sculpture, p. 27: “Its exact meaning escapes us, but it could be taken as representing in some way the fertility of the earth, more especially the land of Ashur”; similarly York, RA, vol. 4, p. 279; Paley, King of the World, pp. 234 ff.; H. W. F. Saggs, The Might That Was Assyria (London, 1984), pp. 234 ff.; Lambert, “Trees, Snakes and Gods,” p. 438. Stearns (Reliefs, p. 71) suggests that “the meaning of the tree was as changed as its form and that its precise intent . . . had become, like other mystic symbols of all ages, obscured under the accumulation of religious experience.” M. Roaf, Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia (Oxford, 1990), p. 226, tersely states “the significance of the motif is not clear.” Kepinski’s voluminous study of second-millennium iconography of the Tree, L’Arbre stylisé, does not deal with the meaning of the motif.

\textsuperscript{27} A case in point is G. Widengren’s important study The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion (Uppsala, 1951). Widengren’s conclusions have not been accepted by Assyriologists.
Fig. 3.—Slab B-23 of the throneroom of Ashurnasirpal II. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

Fig. 4.—The King impersonating the Tree. After Meuszyński, *Rekonstruktion*, pl. 6
Two fundamentally important points have nevertheless been established concerning the function of the Tree in the throneroom of Ashurnasirpal's palace in Calah. Firstly, Irene Winter has convincingly demonstrated that the famous relief showing the king flanking the Tree under the winged disk (Slab B–23, fig. 3) corresponds to the epithet “vice-regent of Aššur” in the accompanying inscription.\(^{28}\) Clearly, the Tree here represents the divine world order\(^{29}\) maintained by the king as the representative of the god Aššur, embodied in the winged disk hovering above the Tree.\(^{30}\)

Secondly, it was observed some time ago that in some reliefs the king takes the place of the Tree between the winged genies (fig. 4).\(^{31}\) Whatever the precise implications of this fact, it is evident that in such scenes the king is portrayed as the human personification of the Tree.\(^{32}\) Thus if the Tree symbolized the divine world order, then the king because part of the textual evidence he quotes is not pertinent and none of it demonstrably pertains to a “Tree of Life.” See, however, n. 128 below.

\(^{28}\) Winter, “Program” (n. 13, pp. 26 ff.). As pointed out by M. T. Larsen, The Old Assyrian City State and Its Colonies (Copenhagen, 1976), p. 119, “vice-regent (iššakkû) of Aššur” was a traditional epithet specifically referring to the king as “intermediary between the god and the community.” On the spelling of the epithet with the SANG sign, see M.-J. Seux, “Remarques sur le titre royal assyrien iššakki Aššur.” RA 59 (1965): 103–4.

\(^{29}\) Cf. me-gal-gal an-ki-a = usurāt šāmē u erseti (GIS.HUR,MEŠ AN-e u KI-TIM), lit. “the designs (Sum. “the great designs”) of heaven and earth,” ACh Sin 1: 2 and 6, and Tablet V of Enûma elîš, where the words usurātu, “designs,” and parsû, “offices,” refer to the organization of the divine and the material world by Marduk (lines 1–5 and 65–67); note also the mystical work ı.NAM GIS.HUR AN.KI.A (see nn. 66, 87, 89, and 100 below) explaining the “designs” of the world by geomantic techniques (see n. 66 below).

\(^{30}\) Winter, “Program,” pp. 16 ff. In discussing the composition of Slab B-23 and its crucial position behind the royal throne, Winter makes a telling comparison to the Gothic tympanum: “Compositionally, the organizing principles are clear: axial symmetry governs the placement of the tree at the center; the repetition of figures on either side maintains the axial and absolute balance. The priority of figures moves into the center and then up: from the “genit” at the far sides, to the king in his role as maintainer, to the central tree, and then to the god in the winged disk, set precisely on the axis. It is no different from the organization apparent on the façade of a Gothic cathedral, for example, as a key to the theological structure of medieval Christianity (italics mine): basal quatrefoils, as at Amiens, containing earthly and didactic themes; apostles flanking the central door, as the aspiration of men; the figure of Christ on the trumeau at the middle of the central portal as the highest achievement of man; then, directly above all, the scene of the Last Judgment on the tympanum, leading ultimately to an elevating visual as well as religious experience. The theological priorities are as clear there, then, as one may suggest them to be on slab 23 of Assurnasirpal.” The overwhelming “sacramental” aspect of the throneroom reliefs is also stressed by Sages, The Might That Was Assyria, p. 234.

\(^{31}\) York, RA, vol. 4, p. 278, referring to J. Engnell, Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East (Uppsala, 1943), pp. 26 f.; A. Moortgat, Tam-muz (Berlin, 1949); and Widengren, The King and the Tree of Life, pp. 43 ff. Conversely, it could be argued that the Tree takes the place of the king in the scenes where it is being purified by the apkallu genies. The apkallus were the mythical equivalent of court scholars (ummānu), whose primary function was to protect the king and attend to his moral integrity, i.e., “purify” his soul. See my remarks in LAS, vol. 2, pp. xx f., xxiv f., 40 ff., and 335, and, in more detail, my article “Mesopotamian Astrology and Astronomy as Domains of the Mesopotamian ‘Wisdom,’” in H. Galter and B. Scholz, eds., Die Rolle der Astronomie in den Kulturen Mesopotamiens: Beiträge zum 3. Grazer Morgenländischen Symposium 23.–27.9.1991 (Graz, 1993).

\(^{32}\) The king is portrayed as a flourishing tree offering shelter to his subjects in a Neo-Assyrian letter written by a prominent court scholar (LAS 122:14; for many other examples of the verb samāhu referring to the growth of trees, see CAD, s.v., pp. 289 ff.). As pointed out in LAS, vol. 2, p. 108, this passage resembles Daniel 4, where the tree allegory is explicitly related to the moral conduct of the king:

In the Book of Daniel (ch. 4), King Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a great tree “in the midst of the earth” around which all the “beasts of the field” [see n. 24 above] and “birds of heaven” congregate. Then he sees “a watcher and an holy one” come down from heaven crying: “Hew down the tree, cut off his branches, shake off his leaves and scatter his fruit . . . and let his portions be with the grass in the earth. Let his heart be changed from a man’s and let a beast’s heart be given unto him.” Daniel interpreted this tree as representing the King himself who, in modern psychological terms, had identified his limited and personal self with the divine Selfhood which his kingship symbolized.

(Cook, Tree of Life, p. 109; note the illustration from the Bible of Rodan [sixth century] reproduced ibid., closely resembling the Assyrian Tree).
himself represented the realization of that order in man, in other words, a true image of God.\textsuperscript{33} the Perfect Man.\textsuperscript{34}

If this reasoning is correct, it follows that the Tree had a dual function in Assyrian imperial art. Basically, it symbolized the divine world order maintained by the Assyrian king, but inversely it could also be projected upon the king to portray him as the Perfect Man. This interpretation accounts for the prominence of the Tree as an imperial symbol\textsuperscript{35} because it not only provided a legitimation for Assyria’s rule over the world,\textsuperscript{36} but it also justified the king’s position as the absolute ruler of the empire.\textsuperscript{37}

The complete lack of references to such an important symbol in contemporary written sources can only mean that the doctrines relating to the Tree were never committed to writing by the scholarly elite who forged the imperial ideology but were circulated orally.\textsuperscript{38} The nature of the matter further implies that only the basic symbolism of the

\textsuperscript{33} References to the king as the image (\textit{salmu}) of God abound in the Neo-Assyrian royal correspondence; see, for example, “the father of the king my lord was the very image of Bel, and the king my lord is likewise the very image of Bel,” \textit{LAS} 125:18 ff.; “You, O king of the world, are an image of Marduk,” \textit{RMA} 170 = \textit{SAA} 8 no. 333 r. 2. Note especially \textit{LAS} 145: “The king, my lord, is the chosen of the great gods; the shadow of the king, my lord, is beneficial to all . . . . The king, my lord, is the perfect likeness of the god.” For the king as the image of Śamaš, see \textit{LAS} 143:17 ff. and the passages cited in the relevant commentary (\textit{LAS}, vol. 2, p. 130). The concept is first attested in the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic (\textit{AFO} 18, p. 50, late second millennium B.C.).\textsuperscript{34} “Perfect Man” (\textit{etlu gitmālu} is well attested as an Assyrian royal epithet; see Seux, \textit{Epithètes royales akkadiens et sumériens} (Paris, 1967), p. 92 and also p. 231 (\textit{qarrādāu gitmālu}, “perfect hero”); note \textit{SAA} 3 no. 25 ii 16 (\textit{sarru gitmālu}, “perfect king”), and cf. \textit{LAS} 144 r. 4 f.; “What the king said is as perfect as the word of god,” and \textit{ABL} 1221 r. 12: “The word of the king is as [perfect] as that of the gods.” The concept of “perfect king” goes back to the early second millennium (the time of Hammurabi); see Seux, \textit{Epithètes}, pp. 97 and 331; see also n. 138 below.\textsuperscript{35} The need of visual symbols to epitomize complex ideologies is too obvious for elaboration here; cf. the role of the cross as a symbol of Christianity or that of the sickle and hammer as the symbol of communism. A stylized rendition of the Tree of Life, the Menorah, was the symbol of Judaism in the first century A.D. and still functions (on, for example, the rostrum of the Knesset) as a state symbol in modern Israel. On the Menorah, see L. Yarden, \textit{The Tree of Light: A Study of the Menorah, the Seven-branched Lampstead} (Uppsala, 1972).\textsuperscript{36} Verbal justification of this claim is a regular feature of Assyrian royal inscriptions since the early thirteenth century B.C. See, for example, \textit{RIM} 1, p. 233 (“Tukulti-Ninurta, king of the universe . . . whose name Aššur and the great gods faithfully called, the one to whom they gave the four quarters to administer and the one to whom they entrusted their dominion”); for further examples, see \textit{CAD}, s.v. \textit{bēlātu}, p. 203.\textsuperscript{37} Note that pious and blameless moral conduct are the most prominent qualities justifying the king’s rule in Assyrian royal inscriptions; see Seux, \textit{Epithètes}, pp. 20 f. Cf., for example, the continuation of the inscription cited in the preceding footnote (“Tukulti-Ninurta . . . the attentive one, appointee of the gods, the one who gladdens the heart of Aššur, the one whose conduct is pleasing to the gods of heaven and earth”).\textsuperscript{38} That is to say, primarily the chief scribe (also called “the king’s scholar”) and his “department.” On this important state official, see O. Schroeder, “\textit{um-mānu = Chef der Staatskanzlei}?,” \textit{OLZ}, 1920, pp. 204–7; H. Tadmor in F. M. Fales, ed., \textit{Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons} (Rome, 1981), pp. 30 ff.; see also my article “The Forlorn Scholar,” in F. Rochberg-Halton, ed., \textit{Language, Literature, and History: Studies Presented to Erica Reiner} (New Haven, 1987), p. 257; S. J. Lieberman, “A Mesopotamian Background for the So-called Aggadic ‘Measures’ of Biblical Hermeneutics,” \textit{HUCA} 58 (1987): 212 ff., and idem, in T. Abusch et al., eds., \textit{Linger ing Over Words: Studies in Honor of W. L. Moran} (Atlanta, 1990), pp. 313 ff. While the duties of the chief scribe are not specified in Assyrian sources, it is extremely likely that they included the drafting and production of royal inscriptions; note the colophon of the Sargon’s letter to Aššur (\textit{TCL} 3), indicating that it was composed by the chief scribe himself, and see the note on \textit{LAS} 7 r. 10 in \textit{LAS}, vol. 2, p. 11. On the other hand, there is evidence that other prominent scholars too were involved in the composition of royal inscriptions and, more generally, in the formulation of the imperial policies; see
Tree was common knowledge, while the more sophisticated details of its interpretation were accessible to a few select initiates only. The existence of an extensive esoteric lore in first- and second-millennium Mesopotamia is amply documented, and the few extant written specimens of such lore prove that mystical exegesis of religious symbolism played a prominent part in it.

THE SEFIROTIC TREE

Mesopotamian esoteric lore has a remarkable parallel in Jewish Kabbalah, and, more importantly from the standpoint of the present topic, so does the Assyrian Tree. A


The evidence discussed in the above articles could be multiplied by including all the references to secret lore in second- and first-millennium texts (see CAD and AHw. s.vv. kitumtu, nisirtu, pirištî, and ikkibu). For the first millennium, note, above all, Assurbandipal’s famous self-description of his education: “I learnt the craft of the sage Adapa, the esoteric secrets of the entire scribal tradition; I observed celestial and terrestrial signs and discussed them in the meetings of scholars; I ponder with expert diviners the liver, the image of heaven . . . ” (Streck, Asb., p. 252 i 13 ff.). For the second millennium, note Gilg. XI 9 and 266: “I will disclose to you, Gilgames, things that are hidden, and I will relate to you the secrets of the gods.”

See the list in RIA, vol. 3, pp. 189 ff. (with additions in HKL 3, p. 119, and ZA 82, p. 110) and A. Livingstone, Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars (Oxford, 1986). The esoteric nature of these texts is made explicit by their colophons, for example, “Secret lore of the great gods/heaven and earth/sages/scholars; an initiate may show it to another initiate, the uninitiated may not see it; taboo of the great gods”; see also n. 42 below. Additional glimpses into the lore are provided by a multitude of random passages in scholarly texts, primarily commentaries and letters.

See, for example, Livingstone, Mystical Works, pp. 116 ff. (= SAA 3, nos. 37–39), and the commentary on Sakikku I recently edited by George in “Babylonian Texts,” pp. 146–63. Calling the kind of hermeneutics exemplified by these texts “mystical” is justified inasmuch as extracting “hidden” meanings from the literal wording of religious texts appears to have been its primary goal. The hermeneutic methods used in this process were virtually identical with those used in rabbinical exegesis, including mashal, “allegory”; remez, “paronomasia”; naad, “homonymy”; and, above all, gematria and notarikon, on which, see n. 66 below. It may not be merely a coincidence that the rules of Talmudic hermeneutics were laid down by Rabbi Hillel, a first-century (ca. A.D. 30) immigrant from Babylonia.

See again, provisionally, my article “Mesopotamian Astrology and Astronomy.” The strictly esoteric nature of Kabbalah and the fact that its secret doctrines were for centuries, and still are, transmitted almost exclusively orally are the principal reasons why next to nothing was known about it until the late Middle Ages (see below). The esotericism of Kabbalah and its fundamentally oral nature are stressed in every Kabbalist work, ancient and modern. See M. Idel, Kabbalah: New Perspectives (New Haven, 1988), p. 109; see also ibid., p. 21:
Fig. 5.—The Sefirotic Tree
schematic design known as the Sefirotic Tree of Life\textsuperscript{43} figures prominently in both practical and theoretical Kabbalah.\textsuperscript{44} In fact, it can be said that the entire doctrinal structure of Kabbalah revolves around this diagram (fig. 5),\textsuperscript{45} a form which strikingly resembles the Assyrian Tree.\textsuperscript{46}

The Sefirotic Tree derives its name from elements called Sefirot, literally “countings” or “numbers,”\textsuperscript{47} represented in the diagram by circles numbered from one to ten.\textsuperscript{48} They are defined as divine powers or attributes\textsuperscript{49} through which the transcendent God, not without reason.” On the function of the diagram as a mandala in Kabbalistic meditation, see ibid., pp. 90 and 112, and Poncè, \textit{Kabbalah}, p. 142.

\textsuperscript{46} Cf. fig. 2. The Sefirotic Tree, like the Assyrian one, is attested in several variant forms reflecting the various symbolic meanings of the diagram (see fig. 6 with n. 63); the diagram reproduced here represents the most common form of the Tree in current Kabbalistic literature and is attested in this form since the seventeenth century.

\textsuperscript{47} The normal meaning of the word in rabbinical Hebrew is “counting” (see Jastrow, \textit{Dictionary}, p. 1014a, s.v. \textit{sefira}), but in \textit{Sefer Yezirah} and the writings of Abraham Abulafia it clearly has the technical meaning “(primordial/ideal) number”; see G. Scholem, \textit{Origins of the Kabbalah} (Princeton, 1987), pp. 26 ff., and Idel, \textit{Kabbalah}, p. 349, n. 325, referring to a passage in Abulafia’s \textit{Mafteah ha-Sefirot}, where the source of the Sefirot, En Sof, is called “the One who Counts” (sofer). In Kabbalistic speculation, the Sefirot are also commonly associated, through homophony, with the words \textit{sappir}, “sapphire,” and \textit{sferah}, “sphere” (cf. Scholem, \textit{Origins}, p. 81). These associations are consonant with ideas about the nature of the Sefirot but have nothing to do with etymology or the original meaning of the word.

\textsuperscript{48} The numbers correspond to the order of emanation (cf. n. 55) of the Sefirot from the En Sof; in Kabbalistic literature, they are referred to by ordinal numbers and associated with the first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet. See Poncè, \textit{Kabbalah}, pp. 108 ff., and cf. the Abulafia passage referred to in n. 47 above: “The influx expanding from the one who counts is comprised in and passes through a[lep]h to y[od], from the first Sefirot to the tenth” (Idel, \textit{Kabbalah}, p. 148).

\textsuperscript{49} See Halevi, \textit{Kabbalah}, pp. 5 ff.; Scholem, \textit{Origins}, p. 82; and Idel, \textit{Kabbalah}, pp. 113 f. As noted by Scholem, an enumeration of ten divine attributes closely resembling the Kabbalistic one already occurs in a Talmudic passage from ca. 230, attributed to the Babylonian scholar Rav (\textit{BT Hagigah} 12a): “By ten things [lit. ‘words'] was the world created: by wisdom (hokhmah), by understanding (tevu\textit{nah}), by reason (\textit{da\textit{at}}), by strength (\textit{kah}), by rebuke (\textit{ga\textit{ar\textit{ah}}}), by might (\textit{gevurah}), by righteousness (\textit{z\textit{e\textit{d}ek}}), by judgment (\textit{mishp\textit{at}}), by compassion (\textit{hesed}), and by loving kindness (\textit{rahamim}).” Idel (\textit{Kabbalah}, pp. 113 f.) adduces further passages in...
shown in the diagram, manifests Himself. Each has a name associated with its number. The Tree has a central trunk and horizontal branches spreading to the right and left on which the Sefirot are arranged in the symmetrical fashion: three to the left, four on the trunk, and three to the right. The vertical alignments of the Sefirot on the right and left represent the polar opposites of masculine and feminine, positive and negative, active and passive, dark and light, etc. The balance of the Tree is maintained by the trunk, also called the Pillar of Equilibrium.

Like the Assyrian Tree, the Sefirotic Tree has a dual function. On the one hand, it is a picture of the macrocosm. It gives an account of the creation of the world, accompanied in three successive stages by the Sefirot emanating from the transcendent God. It also charts the cosmic harmony of the universe upheld by the Sefirot under the cosmic logos (see n. 49), While the Sefirotic Tree is similar to the Assyrian Tree discussed in n. 22 above.

The Zohar refers to this middle pillar as the perfect pillar. It serves as a mediating factor between the pillars of the right and the left. There is also some Kabbalistic speculation that the center pillar is the Tree of Life, and the remaining pillars the Tree of Good and Evil. When manate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil he did not draw any sustenance from the Tree of Life, which mediates between the opposites.

See further Scholem, “Kabbalah,” p. 575. In this context, note that some Assyrian seals combine two trees in the same scene, viz., one with the characteristic garland network and one generally consisting of trunk and crown only (see, for example, Danthine, Palmier-dattier, nos. 371, 379, 424, 479, 509, and 521; note especially no. 479 with an empty garland arch beside a palm tree ridden by a monkey and an eagle, and no. 509 showing a phoenix rising from a burning tree beside a tree with a nine-petalled fruit crown).

The creation of the world is envisaged as a threefold process taking place in the Divine Mind before the materialization of the physical world. It involves the expression of the idea by the Divine Will, its elaboration by the Divine Intellect, and its actual implementation by the Divine Emotion. The first phase is referred to as the World of Emanation and associated with the first Sefirah, Keter; the next two are referred to as the Worlds of Formation and Creation respectively and associated with the “Upper” and “Lower Faces” (see n. 52 above). In an alternative scheme, the Sefirot are distributed in the different worlds in a triadic arrangement, the first three in the World of Emanation, 4 to 6 in the World of Formation, and 7 to 9 in the World of Creation, while the last, Malkhut, is located in the material world, “the World of Making” (Ponce, Kabbalah, pp. 67 ff.; cf. Halevi, Way of Kabbalah, pp. 27 ff.). Compare this with the three-layered triadic structure of the Assyrian Tree discussed in n. 22 above.

The emanation of the Sefirot is conceived of as a
straining influence of the polar system of opposites. In short, it is a model of the divine world order, and in manifesting the invisible God through His attributes, it is also, in a way, an image of God.\footnote{See Idel, Kabbalah, pp. 136 ff. The Book of Bahir (twelfth century) refers to the Tree as an image of God by the term ha-male\'i, "fullness," a direct equivalent of Gnosticpleroma, "(divine) fullness"; on this concept, also referred to as "the All" (to pan, to holon), see Scholem, Origins, pp. 68 ff., quoting the Gospel of Thomas, where Jesus says of himself: "I am the All and the All proceeds from me"; cf. Paul's Letter to the Colossians, 1:15-19. In the anthropomorphic theosophy of ecstatic Kabbalah and Merkavah mysticism, the Sefirot are associated with the cosmic body of Adam Kadmon, the archetypal or perfect man, or God himself; see Ponc\'e, Kabbalah, pp. 134 ff.; Scholem, Origins, pp. 20 ff.; J. Dan, Three Types of Ancient Jewish Mysticism (Cincinnati, 1984), pp. 12 ff.

An early Assyrian (thirteenth century B.C.) precursor of the idea of the Sefirot as the Divinepleroma occurs in a prayer of Tukulti-Ninurta I, where the sungod is invoked as "the radiance" and the stormgod as "the voice" of the god A\={s}\={u}r (KAR 128 r. 12 f.). The idea of the cosmic anthropos is attested in KAR 102, a Neo-Assyrian hymn to Ninurta, where the various parts of this god's body are systematically identified with specific deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon.\footnote{See also P. Epstein, Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic (Garden City, New York, 1978), pp. 4 and 15 f.}

On the other hand, the Sefirotic Tree, like the Assyrian, can also refer to man as a microcosm, the ideal man created in the image of God. Interpreted in this way, it becomes a way of salvation for the mystic seeking deliverance from the bonds of flesh through the soul's union with God.\footnote{See also P. Epstein, Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic (Garden City, New York, 1978), pp. 4 and 15 f.}

The arrangement of the Sefirot from the bottom to the top of the diagram marks the path which he has to follow in order to attain the ultimate goal, the crown of heaven represented by the Sefirah number one, Keter.

Tradition has it that the doctrines about the Tree were originally revealed to the patriarch Abraham, who transmitted them orally to his son.\footnote{See also P. Epstein, Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic (Garden City, New York, 1978), pp. 4 and 15 f.}

In actual fact, the earliest surviving Kabbalistic manuscripts date from the tenth century A.D.\footnote{See Scholem, "Yezirah," Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 16, p. 786 (commentary on Sefer Yezirah}
however, that the “foundation stone” of Kabbalism, the *Sefer Yezirah*, was composed sometime between the third and sixth centuries, and the emergence of Kabbalah as a doctrinal structure can now be reliably traced to the first century A.D. The renowned rabbinical schools of Babylonia were the major centers from which the Kabbalistic doctrines spread to Europe during the high Middle Ages.

Altogether, the Sefirotic Tree displays a remarkable similarity to the Assyrian Tree in both its symbolic content and external appearance (see fig. 6). In addition, given the fact that it seems to have originated on Babylonian soil, the likelihood that it is based on a Mesopotamian model appears considerable. As a matter of fact, a number of central

from the Cairo Genizah, dated 955–56; the earliest extant manuscript of the book itself is from the eleventh (? century; see ibid., p. 782).


the various estimates of the date of its composition ... fluctuate between the second and the sixth centuries. This slender work is also designated in the oldest manuscripts as a collection of “*halakhoth on the Creation*” and it is not at all impossible that it is referred to by this name in the Talmud (*BT Sanhedrin* 65b, fourth century), and Dan, *Three Types of Ancient Jewish Mysticism*, p. 21 (ca. fourth century).

61 The connections of Kabbalah with Jewish apocalyptic esotericism and mysticism of the post-exilic period have never been questioned, and its affinities with Platonism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and Sufism were noted long ago and stressed by many scholars; the crucial question of the evolution of Kabbalistic doctrines, specifically their dependence on external influence(s), however, has remained a matter of controversy. While Kabbalists themselves have consistently stressed the antiquity of their tradition and vehemently denied the existence of any kind of historical development in Kabbalah (see Scholem, “Kabbalah,” p. 493; Halevi, *Way of Kabbalah*, pp. 16 ff.), modern scholarship has tended to see the emergence of historical Kabbalah as a gradual process heavily influenced by Neoplatonic and especially Gnostic thought.

Recent research has significantly altered this picture, however. It is now generally recognized that there is considerable Jewish influence on the emerging Gnostic literature, not the other way around; and that several doctrinal features of Kabbalah previously attributed to Gnosticism in fact belong to a genuine Jewish tradition reaching, through Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism, down to the first century A.D., if not earlier; see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 30 ff. for details. For an unmistakable reference to the Tree of Life diagram in Hekhalot Rabbati (third century A.D.), see Dan, *The Revelation of the Secret of the World: The Beginning of Jewish Mysticism in Late Antiquity*, Brown University Program in Judaic Studies, Occasional Papers, no. 2 (Providence, 1992), pp. 30 f.

62 The literature of practical Kabbalah was introduced to Italy in 870 by a Babylonian scholar, Aaron ben Samuel (alias Abu Aharon); see Scholem, *Jüdische Mystik*, p. 44; see idem, “Kabbalah,” p. 510; cf. Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 60. Several leading gaonic scholars (for example, Saadiah, Sherira b. Hanina, and Hai) are known to have occupied themselves with *Sefer Yezirah* in the following century; see Scholem, “Kabbalah,” pp. 511 f.

63 The multiplicity of attested Tree variants is related to the Kabbalistic view of the Sefirotic pleroma as a dynamic, constantly changing living organism, which could be contemplated upon but not properly captured in words or writing; this idea is expressed with metaphors such as light reflected by moving water (Idel, *Kabbalah*, p. 140), the movement of the planets and stars (ibid., p. 248), or flames emerging from a burning coal (ibid., p. 137). The different variants illustrate the dynamics of the Tree by stressing different aspects of its interpretation, such as the various interrelationships of the Sefirot (cf. Halevi, *Way of Kabbalah*, p. 142).

a. The Tree as Sunflower, with the 72 names of God inscribed on its petals. From Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegypticus* (Rome, 1652; Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 177).

b. Tree in the form of a Menorah. From *Or Nerot ha-Menorah* (Venice, 1548; Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 78).


d. Beauty as the Bearer of All the Powers (Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 104).

e. Tree of Meditation, using the central column alone (Poncé, ibid., p. 153).

f. Tree of Eternal Life (Poncé, ibid., pp. 105 and 148).


h. The expansion of the Shekhinah, the Tree of Perfection (Poncé, ibid., p. 152).

i. The Sefirotic Tree with En Sof hovering over it (Poncé, ibid., p. 152).

**Fig. 6.—Sefirotic and Assyrian Tree variants**
Kabbalistic doctrines, such as the location of the Throne of God in the Middle Heaven,\textsuperscript{65} are explicitly attested in Mesopotamian esoteric texts.\textsuperscript{66} The crucial question, however, is how the existence of the hypothetical Mesopotamian model can be proven, given the lack of directly relevant textual evidence. It must be admitted that a priori it is possible that the observed similarities are simply coincidental and due to a common cultural heritage rather than to a direct borrowing.

\textbf{THE ASSYRIAN TREE DIAGRAM}

For the above reasons, I had for years considered the identity of the Assyrian and Sefirotic Trees an attractive but probably unprovable hypothesis, until it finally occurred to me that there is a way of proving or rejecting it. For if the Sefirotic Tree really is but an adaptation of a Mesopotamian model, the adaptation process should be \textit{reversible}, that is, it should be possible to reconstruct the original model without difficulty.\textsuperscript{67} The basic


The Kabbalistic association of heaven with fire (Poncé, \textit{Kabbalah}, pp. 41 f.) is attested in the above-mentioned (see n. 56) prayer of Tukulti-Ninurta, \textit{KAR} 128 r. 32 ("fire of Anu"); see also \textit{RA} 62, p. 54:17. The doctrine associating the creation of the cosmos with the creation of language, the alphabet functioning as the instrument of creation itself (see Poncé, \textit{Kabbalah}, pp. 27 and 41; cf. Scholem, "Yezirah," p. 784, and the illustration in D. Maclagan, \textit{Creation Myths} [London, 1977], p. 30) has a counterpart in the Middle Assyrian "Silbenalphabet," \textit{KAR} 4, where mumbo-jumbo combinations of syllables are associated with the creation story culminating in the creation of man; this text is defined as "secret" in its colophon. Similarly, the creation of the "golem" by the recitation of incantations (Scholem, "Yezirah," p. 785) finds an exact parallel in the creation of the primeval man in the Atrahasis myth (see W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, \textit{Atra-Hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood} [Oxford, 1969], p. 61). In general, the Kabbalistic notion of the creation process (see n. 55 above) closely resembles the Mesopotamian one, which involved a decision by a deity (Anu or Enlil) and its elaboration and implementation by the God of Wisdom and/or a birth goddess (see Lambert and Millard, \textit{Atra-Hasis}, pp. 55 ff.; \textit{En. el. VI} 1–35; \textit{Gilg. I} ii 33 ff.; note the use of word \textit{zikru}, "utterance," in the sense of logos, "idea," in the last passage).

\textsuperscript{66} Note also the prominent role of interpretive techniques such as \textit{gematria} (use of the numerical value of the letters of a word) and \textit{notarikon} (taking certain words as abbreviations for complete phrases or letters or syllables as abbreviations for words) in both Kabbalah and Mesopotamian scholarly texts; see Poncé, \textit{Kabbalah}, pp. 168 ff. and Lieberman, "A Mesopotamian Background," pp. 157–225; Tigay, "Early Technique," pp. 176–81, adduces numerous examples of the two techniques from the Babylonian Talmud. As noted by Tigay (ibid., pp. 187 f.), the introduction of such interpretative techniques generally indicates a growing mismatch between the wording of traditional scripture and the prevailing world view. From this point of view, it seems significant that the emergence of these techniques in Mesopotamia neatly correlates with the rise of the Assyrian Empire and the appearance of the Assyrian Tree. Note that the esoteric text \texttt{I.NAM GIS.HUR AN.KI.A} (Livingstone, \textit{Mystical Works}, pp. 22 ff.), using these very techniques, associates different lunar phases with different gods and thus manages to explain all major gods of the pantheon as aspects of the moon god; see further n. 89 below.

\textsuperscript{67} The case of Christian Kabbalah, represented by outstanding scholars, philosophers, and theologians, such as Pico della Mirandola, Johannes Reuchlin, Egidio da Viterbo, and Jacob Boehme, is instructive. This form of Kabbalah was \textit{demonstrably} taken over from a pre-existing (Jewish) model with only minimal adjustments, such as the translation of the names of the Sefirot, the identification of Adam Kadmon and En Sof with Christ, or the reinterpretation of the three world ages as reigns of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; the essence of the system, including the tree diagram and other central Kabbalistic axioms, was not affected at all. This was possible because Christianity is rooted in both Judaism and Classical philosophy; the Christian Kabbalists "be-
elements of the Tree, the Sefirot, are crucial in this respect. Their names and definitions strongly recall the attributes and symbols of Mesopotamian gods, and their prominent association with numbers calls to mind the mystic numbers of the Mesopotamian gods. They are, in fact, represented as angelic beings in some Sefirotic schemes, which is consistent with their definition as divine powers.68 Accordingly, in the hypothetical Mesopotamian model they would have been gods, with functions and attributes coinciding with those of the Sefirot.

Consequently, I replaced the Sefirot with Mesopotamian gods sharing their functions and/or attributes (see fig. 7). Most gods fell into their place immediately and unequivocally. Assyriologists will need no justification for associating Ea with Wisdom,69 Sin with Understanding,70 Marduk with Mercy,71 Šamaš with Judgment,72 Ištar with Beauty,73 and
Nabû and Ninurta with Victory (Nezah). Crown (Keter) was the emblem of both Anu and Enlil, but since in the first millennium Enlil was commonly equated with Marduk

"Understanding, Intelligence" (Nahî, an exact semantic equivalent of Binah), is explicitly attested as a name of the moon god in Thamudic inscriptions; see D. Nielsen, "Über die nordarabischen Göttler," Mitteilungen der Vorderasiatisch-Aegyptischen Gesellschaft 21 (1917): 254 f. In Rav’s list of ten creative powers (see n. 49 above), Binah is represented by its synonym Tevunah.

Another frequent epithet, “maker of decisions,” refers to Sin as the Supreme Divine Arbiter; see Tallqvist, Götterepitheta, p. 447. This role agrees with the position of Binah on top of the Pillar of Judgment (see n. 53 above); cf. Poncé, Kabbalah, p. 144: “The Pillar of Judgment receives its name from the center Seferîah, Gevurah... the two [other] Sefirot [above and below] are integral components of the middle value.” Note that in Bahîr, the angel “presiding over all the holy forms on the left side of God” is identified with Gabriel, i.e., Moon (see Scholem, Origsins, pp. 147 f., and n. 68 above). In another section of Bahîr, Binah is explained as “superior justice” (Scholem, Origsins, p. 136).

Binah is “the Supernal Mother, within whose womb all that was contained in Wisdom finally becomes differentiated [and out of whom] the remaining sefirot proceed” (Poncé, Kabbalah, pp. 122); compare this with Sin’s epithets “birth-giving (àlîda) father,” “father of the great gods,” “procreator of all” (Tallqvist, Götterepitheta, pp. 446); on the epithet “fruit (enbu) giving birth to itself” (ibid., pp. 24), see also nn. 66 and 89.

71 Cf. Marduk’s epithets “merciful god/father/ lord, merciful and forgiving, the merciful one with forgiving heart, merciful to mankind”; for attestations, see Tallqvist, Götterepitheta, p. 371, and the dictionaries s.vv. rémênit and tajjûrû, and see also Enûma elîš VI 137 and VII 27 ff. While “merciful” occasionally occurs as an epithet of other gods, too, its prominence as an epithet of Marduk in first-millennium texts, as well as the fact that it is frequently applied to the king as the image of Marduk (see the discussion in LAS, vol. 2, p. 58), confirms that it represented a central characteristic of this god.

The other name of the Seferîah, Gedullah (Greatness), corresponds to Marduk’s ubiquitous epithet belû rabû, “great lord” (Tallqvist, Götterepitheta, p. 52). Note the co-occurrence of both “great lord” and “merciful god” in the incipits of prayers to Marduk (W. Mayer, Untersuchungen zur Formensprache der babylonischen “Gebetsbeschworungen” [Rome, 1976], p. 397, nos. 18 and 23).

72 Samaš was the divine judge par excellence; the name Din exactly corresponds to Samaš’s primary epithet bêl dîn, “lord of judgment,” not attached to any other god (see Tallqvist, Götterepitheta, p. 43; cf. ibid., pp. 456 ff.). The other common name of this Seferîah, Gevurah (Power of Might), corresponds to Samaš’s standard epithets etlu, “strong man” (CAD, s.v.) and qarûdu, “hero” (CAD, s.v.); note that the corresponding Hebrew words (gever, “man,” and gibbor, “hero”) are derived from the same root as Gevurah, and that Akkadian qurdu, “heroism, valor; mighty deeds” (CAD, s.v.) is an exact semantic equivalent of Hebrew gevurah, which in the Psalms (71:16, 106:2, 145:2, and 150:2) refers to the “mighty deeds (or acts, works)” of God.

In Rav’s list of ten creative powers (see n. 49), Din is replaced by its synonym Mishpat, “decision, judgment,” while Gevurah there corresponds to Nezah (see n. 74).

73 Note simply Istar’s well-known identification with Aphrodite and Venus and the epithet “lady/goddess of beauty and love,” which she shares with Nanaya/Tâšmûtu (Tallqvist, Götterepitheta, pp. 16 and 60; for Nanaya = Istar; see ibid., p. 385). In the Etana myth (see pp. 195 ff. below), Istar is portrayed as a beautiful virgin; see J. V. Kinnier Wilson, The Legend of Etana (Warminster, 1985), p. 110:10; cf. W. G. Lambert “The Problem of the Love Lyrics,” in H. Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts, eds., Unity and Diversity (Baltimore, 1975), pp. 123, 18 ff.: “You are the mother, Istar of Babylon, the beautiful one, the queen of the Babylonians. You are the mother, a palm of carnelian, the beautiful one, who is beautiful to a superlative degree.”

The alternative name of this Seferîah, Rahamim (Compassion or Love), corresponds to Istar’s epithets “lady of love, the loving one, the one who loves all mankind,” etc. (cf. above and Tallqvist, Götterepitheta, s.vv. bêlet ru’âami and râ’îmûtu). In her capacity as the goddess of love, Istar had a special relationship to the Assyrian king, who is repeatedly portrayed as her baby (see my discussion in the introduction of Asyrian Prophecies and cf. ibid., no. 1 iv 24, “I [Istar] have loved you [the king] very much”; see also n. 84 below). This correlates nicely with the primary connotation of the word rahamim (“motherly feeling, compassion”). Note, finally, that in contrast to the other Seferîot, the Seferîah of Tiferet was pictured as female; see n. 97 below, and cf. Poncé, Kabbalah, pp. 127 f.

74 Cf. Ninurta’s epithets “the warrior, the mighty son of Enlil, the victor who throws the foe but makes the righteous stand, who achieved victory for Enlil, whose strength is exalted, [possessor] of might, killer of Azûzi” in Lambart, “The Gula Hymn of Bullûtsa-rahi,“ Or. n.s. 36 (1967): 116 ff., lines 9–13; for Ninurta as the Mesopotamian victory god par excellence, see J. S. Cooper, The Return of Ninurta to Nippur (Rome, 1978), pp. 2 ff., and B. Hruška, Der Mythenadler Anzu (Budapest, 1975), pp. 116 ff. In the first millennium, Ninurta largely merged with Nabû (see F. Pomponio, Nabû [Rome, 1978], pp. 189 ff.); the latter figures as the vanquisher of Azûzi in Cooper, Return of Ninurta, p. 147, and Livingstone, SAA 3 no. 38:12 (see also ibid., nos. 34:57 f., 35:51 f., 39:24 ff. and r. 20, referring to Ninurta).
PILLAR OF EQUILIBRIUM

PILLAR OF JUDGMENT

3 SIN
Understanding

5 ŠAMAŠ
Judgment

8 ADAD GIRRU
NUSKU
Glory

9 NERGAL ŠAKKAN
Foundation
Strength

PILLAR OF MERCY

1 ANU
Crown

2 EA
Wisdom

4 MARDUK ENLIL
Mercy

6 IŠTAR
Beauty

7 NABÛ NINURTA
Victory

MUMMU
Knowledge

Fig. 7.—The reconstructed Tree
(just as his son Ninurta was equated with Nabû), the topmost Sefirah most naturally corresponds to Anu, the god of Heaven.  

Foundation (Yesod) corresponds to Nergal, lord of the underworld, whose primary characteristic, strength, is in Akkadian homonymous with a word for foundation, dunnu. For the identification of Daat with Mummu (Consciousness) and the number zero, see notes 111 and 125 below.
I had to resort to Tallqvist's *Akkadische Götterepitheta* to find that the only gods with epithets fitting the Sefirah of *Hod* (Splendor or Majesty) were the stormgod Adad, the firegod Girru, and Marduk, Nabû, and Ninurta.79 The last three of whom already had their place in the diagram. Accordingly, this Sefirah corresponds to Adad and Girru, who share the same mystic number.80 And it is noteworthy that in the Bible the word *hod* refers to Jahweh as a thundering and flashing storm.81

The last Sefirah, Kingdom (*Malkhut*), is defined as “the receptive potency which distributes the Divine stream to the lower worlds,”82 which in Mesopotamia can only apply to the king as the link between God and Man.83 The motif of the king as distributor of the Divine stream is repeatedly encountered on Assyrian seals, where he holds a streamer emanating from the winged disk above the sacred Tree (fig. 8).84 I have excluded this Sefirah from the reconstructed model because it breaks the compositional harmony of the Tree and because the king, though impersonating the Tree, clearly does not form part of it in Assyrian art.85

79 The Hebrew word *hod* means “glory, splendor, beauty, majesty” and in rabbinical Hebrew also “distinction, pride” (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, p. 337a); its closest semantic equivalent in Akkadian is the root *šr* with its derivatives *šarhu* and *šitraḫu*, “glorious, splendid, proud,” both of which are well attested as epithets of Adad, Girru, Nabû, Ninurta, and Marduk (see Tallqvist, *Götterepitheta*, p. 230); the same gods also share the epithet *gašru*, “mighty” (ibid., p. 77). When referring to Adad and Girru, such epithets were certainly associated with the continuous flashing and roaring of a violent thunderstorm.

80 See RIA, vol. 3, p. 499b (for Gibil = Girru, see ibid., pp. 383 f.). Besides Adad and Girru, the mystic number 10 was also assigned to Madanu (“Verdict”) and Nusku, the god of vigilance and hope (manifested in the lunar crescent, cock, and lamp); the equation Girru = Nusku = Madanu = Nuru (“Light”) is explicitly attested in Assyrian prayers; see Mayer, *Untersuchungen*, pp. 386 and 406 f. For Nusku-Girru’s epithets *gašru*, *šarhu*, *bukur/ilitti Anīm*, and *tappē Šamāš*, which this god shares with Adad, see ibid.

81 “Then the LORD will make his voice heard in majesty (hod) and show his arm sweeping down in fierce anger with devouring flames of fire, with cloudburst and tempests of rain and hailstones” (Isa. 30:30, translation of the *New English Bible* [Oxford, 1970]). The beginning of this passage literally reads “Yahweh will make the majesty of his voice heard” (*hēšmē* *yhw* “†-hwבד gwlw), to be compared with “Adad, the voice of your [Aššur’s] majesty” (*sīqīr illīlītātika Adadu*), KAR 128 r. 24.

82 The Standard Jewish Encyclopedia (Jerusalem, 1958–59), p. 1090. Cf. Halevi, *Kabbalah*, p. 7 (“The lowest Sefirah, the complement to Keter, the Crown, is Malkhut, the Kingdom. In it the Divine Light is earthed. It constitutes the Shekhinah, the Presence of God in Matter”), and Ponce, *Kabbalah*, p. 130 (“It is through her that the divine grace of En-Sof passes through into the lower world”).


84 Cf. nn. 25 and 55, and see, for further examples, Danthine, *Palmier-dattier*, figs. 163, 333, 371, 372, 379, 420, 424, 429, 430, 432, 435, 437, and 445. In Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 345, the streamers are exceptionally grasped not by the king but by a royal eunuch, probably the owner of the seal; the goddess Istar appears in the background. The appearance of the goddess in the scene is not fortuitous; it should be noted that in Kabbalah, God’s “Presence,” *Shekhinah*, is envisioned as a beautiful woman, “virgin of light,” with whom the mystic seeks to be united; see Idol, *Kabbalah*, pp. 83 ff., 229 ff., and 315, with many striking examples, and see n. 145 below. This notion of the *Shekhinah* agrees perfectly with the role played by Istar in Assyrian ecstatic prophecy, where she represents the Word of God manifested through prophetic spirit (to *pneuma*, “spiritus sanctus”); see my introduction in Assyrian Prophecies, and cf. n. 73 above. In a seal published by Lambert, “Near Eastern Seals in the Gulliverian Museum of Oriental Art, University of Durham,” *Iraq* 41 (1979); pl. 8:67, the streamers are held by Istar herself along with another, unidentified, god.

85 The secondary nature of the Sefirah *Malkhut* is also indicated by the fact that it is not included...
Once the gods had been placed in the diagram, which did not take longer than half an hour, I filled in their mystic numbers using as a guide W. Röllig’s article “Götterzahlen” in the Reallexikon der Assyriologie (see fig. 9). For the most part, this was a purely mechanical operation; in some cases, however, I had to choose between two or three alternative numbers. The numbers shown in figure 9 are those used in the spelling of divine names in the Middle and Neo-Assyrian standard orthography, and all of them are securely attested. I should point out that the number for Anu, 1, is erroneously given among the six Sefirot constituting the “Lower Face” (see n. 52 above) in Kabbalistic tradition, nor in Rav’s list of the ten creative divine powers (n. 49).

That is, there was generally only one number per god and only one god per number. Gods with the same number were taken as equated and assigned the same place in the diagram (see nn. 74, 76, and 80).

In Röllig’s list, Ea has three numbers, 40, 50(½), and 60; Adad has two numbers, 6 and 10; Šamaš has two numbers, 10 and 20; Ninurta has two numbers, 9(½) and 50. Actually, “9” for Ninurta, deduced only from the god’s association with the ninth day, remains unattested and is best ignored; “50” for Ea occurs only in šar-50 = mUL.dE.A (5R 44 iii 15), which certainly is a mistake for Ur-40 (Gilg. X ii 22 and passim). This still leaves 6 and 10 for Adad, 10 and 20 for Šamaš, and 40 and 60 for Ea. In addition, a passage overlooked by Röllig has 40 = Ninurta, so that this god too had two numbers, 40 and 50.

Adad’s number 6, which is the reciprocal of 10, plays a role only in the gemetric speculations of 1, nam GIS.HUR and the cultic calendar Inbu bel arhi, where it is used to derive days sacred to Adad from combinations of 6 and 10 (6, 6 + 10, 6 + 10 + 10 and 6 + 6 + 10); see Landsberger, Kult. Kalender, p. 114. For a similar play with a mystic number, see Livingstone, Mystical Works, p. 41, lines 20–24, where Šamaš is equated with Sin (30 = 3) through the reciprocal of his mystic number 20 (3 = 60/20). Šamaš’s number 10 has been derived from 20 by splitting the latter into two (cf. Livingstone, ibid., lines 18 f.); it is attested only once in a lexical passage (see n. 104 above) and is clearly secondary to 20, used passim for writing the god’s name. Ninurta’s number 50, attributed to him as son of Enlil, is well attested and possibly of great antiquity (note Gudea’s temple E-50 and the Ur III personal name i-Il-ha-an-ša, “My-God-is-50,” UET 3 1080 r. ii 3); unlike 40, it was, however, never used for writing the god’s name. For Ea’s numbers 40 and 60, see Excursus 1, pp. 203–4 below.

For numerous examples of Ea written with the sign 60 (dš), all but one of them Assyrian, see Galter, Enki/Ea, pp. 10, 228 (NB), 236, and 268, and note also BBR 26 iii 44; KAR 35 r. 15 and 37:8; 4 Ṟ 33 iii 43; Or. n.s. 22 39 r. 8; SAA 3 no. 37:17.23.32, 38:26.32, 39:35; STT 88 r. iv 16; and G. van Driel, The Cult of Aššur (Assen, 1969), p. 98:32. Ea was never spelled 40 in Assyrian texts; the two examples cited by Galter (Enki/Ea, pp. 230 and 248) are Neo-Babylonian or Late Babylonian, and ND 4358+ is (see I. Finkel, in E. Leichy et al., eds., A Scientific Humanist: Studies in Memory of Abraham Sachs [Philadelphia, 1988], pp. 148 f.) a copy of a Middle Babylonian original. For 50 = Enlil, see MSL 14, pp. 255 and 285 (Ea II 176 and Aa II/4:203 ff.). The equation 50 = Marduk is established by 50 = 4BE in CT 13 32 r. 12, commenting on the fifty names of Marduk in Enîma Âlī VII 144. For 40 = Ninurta see SAA 3 no. 47 r. 3 (Neo-Assyrian); the reading is ascertained through collation by A. K. Grayson, “Literary Letters from Deities and Diviners: More Fragments,” JAOS 103 (1983): 148; Borger, RIA, vol. 3, p. 576b; and HKL 1, p. 327. 30 = Sin was prolific in personal names from the Akkadian period on, see W. von Soden, Das akadische Syllabar, AnOr 42, [Rome, 1967], p. 55, Ranke, PN; Saporetti, Onomastica; and Tallqvist, APN and BTN, passim. For 15 = Ištar and 10 = Adad in Middle Assyrian/Neo-Assyrian names, see Saporetti, Onomastica, vol. 2, pp. 177 ff., 191, and Tallqvist, APN, passim; only sporadic examples (all NB) are known from Babylonia. For many examples of 20 = Šamaš in Neo-Assyrian/Neo-Babylonian astrological texts, see SAA 8, p. 352; the spelling was avoided in personal names for fear of confusion with 20 = šarru. For 14 = Nergal/Šakkan, s → 25 50:15 and cf. Landsberger, Kult. Kalender, p. 131, and von Weher, Nergal, pp. 52 f.; the accuracy of King’s copy (against Livingstone’s “11,” Mystical Works, pp. 32 f.) is ascertained through collations by M. Geller and W. G. Lambert.


In sum, it can be seen that the practice of writing divine names with numbers emerged under the Middle Assyrian Empire and represents a genuinely Assyrian innovation; previously only the name of the moon god had been written this way, and only
Fig. 8.—The King as distributor of the Divine Stream. Cylinder seal impression, courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 9.—The distribution of the mystic numbers
as 60 in Röllig’s article. Of course, the vertical wedge can also be read 60, but in the case of Anu, “the first god,” the only reading that makes sense is 1, as we shall see presently.  

The ease with which the gods and their numbers fitted into the diagram was almost too good to be true, and the insights obtained in the process were more than encouraging. Suddenly, not only the diagram itself but the perplexingly opaque Mesopotamian religion as well started to make sense; I felt on the verge of a major discovery.

**THE DISTRIBUTION OF GODS AND NUMBERS IN THE DIAGRAM**

Looking at the reconstructed diagram more closely, one observes that practically all the great gods of the Assyro-Babylonian pantheon figure in it, some occupying the same place because they were theologically equivalent. Only one major god is missing, Aššur, for whom no mystic number is attested. This strongly suggests that this impor-

sporadic examples of other numerically written god names are known from later Babylonia. This ortho-

graphical innovation can be securely dated to the early thirteenth century and thus coincides with the appearance of the Late Assyrian Tree (see n. 6).

89 See p. 188. The point is that the vertical wedge, in the absence of a symbol for zero in the Mesopotamian number system, stood for both 1 and 60, just as our number 1 (depending on its context) is a symbol for both 1 and 10; the value “1” is of course the primary one in both cases. As “One and Sixty,” Anu’s number comprised the mystic numbers of all other gods; he was the Alpha and the Omega (cf. above, n. 77). This point is made quite explicit in the esoteric work *I.NAM GIS.HUR*, where Anu is associated not only with the crescent (“Appearance on the first day: the crescent (is) Anu . . . . The first (rēšāt) god, father of the gods, 1 (is) Anu”), but, through a gromatic operation, also with the full moon: “15 times 4 is 60 [‘1’]; 60 (is) Anu; he called the ‘fruit’ [= full moon]” (see Livingstone, *Mythical Works*, pp. 23 and 30; for passages associating Anu with the first month and the first day, see B. Landsberger, *Der kultische Kalender der Babylonier und Assyrier* [1915; Leipzig, 1968], p. 105, and D. D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib*, OIP 2 [Chicago, 1924], p. 136).

90 In reducing the multitude of Mesopotamian gods to mere aspects of a few “great gods,” and these again to mere aspects or powers of a single universal God (see below), the diagram unfolds a sophisticated monotheistic system of thought sharply deviating from the current simplistic notion of Mesopotamian religion and philosophy. As in Kabbalah, the key to the system is the Tree diagram, which functions as a mandala defining the essentials of the system in the simplest possible visual terms. Without this key, it would be next to impossible to understand the system on the basis of the scattered, highly symbolic, and often seemingly contradictory evidence of the Mesopotamian religious texts. A case in point is the god Ninurta/Nabû, who is still commonly regarded as “the god of war or hunting” (cf., for example, Saggs, *The Might That Was Assyria*, p. 202) but is in fact a savior god comparable to Christ or Mithra; see Ex cursus 2, pp. 204–5 below.

91 See nn. 74, 76, 78, 80, and 97. The pattern of equations and interrelationships found in the diagram is already discernible in the late second-millennium god list An = Anum (see Lambert, *RIA*, vol. 3, pp. 275 f.), which surveys the whole pantheon as an extended royal family starting with the divine king, Anu, and then proceeding as follows: 2. Enlil, Ninurta, Bêlet-ili; 3. Ea, Marduk, Nabû; 4. Sin, Śamaš, Adad; 5. Istar; 6. gods equated with Nabû and Ninurta (Lugalmardia, Lugalbanda, Amurru, Tišpak, Inšušinak, Ištaran, Zababa, Urâš, Ningirsu); 7. Nergal and other chthonic deities. As can be seen, the structure of the list perfectly agrees with that of the diagram, bearing in mind that, for political reasons, the family of Enlil had to be presented as distinct from that of Marduk (see n. 76 above). In the diagram, which was esoteric, this requirement did not apply.

From the reign of Tiglath-Pileser I on (1114–1076), the gods found in the diagram appear as a group in Assyrian royal inscriptions, and by the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859), the composition of the group has become more or less standardized (cf. Grayson, *ARI*, vol. 2, §§ 8, 413, 486, 646; Tadmor, *SAA Bulletin* 3 [1989]: 26). Interestingly, transferring the Ashurnasirpal group into the diagram in the order in which the gods are enumerated, one obtains a complete outline of the Tree divided into the “Upper” and “Lower Faces” (see n. 52), with Ištar in the heart of the diagram as the terminal point (see fig. 10a); the same result is obtained when Rav’s list of the ten creative powers are transferred to the diagram (see fig. 10d). This seems more than a coincidence: do we have in figure 10b the Assyrian “sign of the cross” defining the body of the Divine anthropos (cf. Poncé, *Kabbalah*, p. 138)?

92 On the special status of Aššur within the pantheon, see also Lambert, “The God Aššur,” *Iraq* 45 (1983): 82–85, who points out, among other things, that this important god “lacks the family connections which are characteristic of all the major gods and
tant god has to be identified with the winged disk over the Assyrian Tree from which the Divine stream emanates\(^9\) and, accordingly, is identical with the transcendent God of Kabbalah, En Sof. As a matter of fact, the various spellings of Aššur's name can, without difficulty, be interpreted as expressing the idea of the One, Only, or Universal God.

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goddesses of the Babylonians and Sumerians, uniting them in one big clan. . . . One seeks in vain for his identity" (p. 82).

\(^9\) On the still open debate concerning the meaning of the winged disk, see Reade, "Shikafi Gulgu," pp. 38 f., with earlier literature; cf. idem, Assyrian Sculpture, pp. 26 f., and Lambert, "Trees, Snakes and Gods," p. 439. While the plain winged disk certainly was a symbol of the sun god, the anthropomorphic disk with streamers (see n. 25 above; hereafter "the Icon") must be interpreted differently. Of decisive importance here is the textual evidence discussed in n. 28, which unquestionably establishes this particular form of the disk as a symbol of Aššur (see also n. 56 for the sun as a manifestation of Aššur). This symbolism—and it alone—accounts for the role of the Icon in the Achaemenid Empire, where it (despite P. Calmeyer, "Das Zeichen der Herrschaft . . . ohne Šamaš wird es nicht gegeben,"

Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran 17 [1984]: 147) certainly symbolized Ahura Mazda, the "God of Heaven," equated with Jahweh in Ezra 1:2.

It should be stressed, however, that, according to the Assyrian(!) esoteric text SAA 3 no. 39 r. 4 f., the god riding in the disk was not Aššur but Marduk. This shows that the Icon represented a composite symbol consisting of several subordinate elements, each of which defined one aspect of Aššur. The figure of Marduk portrayed him as the creator, the winged disk, as the light of the world; the arrows shot by the god identified him as the conqueror of evil (see Excursus 2, pp. 204–5 below), the bow held by him represented Ištar, the power of love (cf. En. el. VI 84–91 and CAD, s.v. qaššu, pp. 149b and 152b). The streams emanating from the disk identified him as the source of wisdom (see nn. 55 and 69), their lightning ends underlined his might (see nn. 72 and 79); the Maltese Cross sometimes drawn inside the solar disk (Calmeyer, "Das Zeichen der Herrschaft," pp. 142 f.) portrayed him as the lord of the universe (see LAS, vol. 2, pp. 330 f., and note the Assyrian spelling of Ninurta with the sign of the cross, \(\text{š}m\)\(\text{n}\); see also n. 103 below).

Thus the Icon portrayed Aššur as the sum total of the entire divine pleroma (see n. 56). This is consistent with the fact that in some seal scenes (for example, Danthine, Palmier-dattier, figs. 444, 471, 476; Orthmann, Der alte Orient, no. 274; S. Herwoldt, SAA Studies 1, p. 99), the solar disk of the Icon is replaced or accompanied by the lunar crescent; for the moon as an embodiment of the divine pleroma, see nn. 66 and 89 above. In Collon, First Impressions, no. 346, the crescent replaces the Tree.

According to SAA 3 no. 39 r. 4 f., the divine figure inside the moon represented Nabû. Thus it may be hypothesized that in Icons showing two minor gods beside the central figure (see n. 25 above), the right-hand god likewise represented Nabû, occupying a place of honor beside his father comparable to that of Christ or Michael as "the archon of all the holy forms on the right side of God" (see Scholem, Origins, pp. 147 f. and Excursus 2 below). To complete the trinity with a female member, the left-hand god would then logically be Marduk's wife Zarpanitu, alias Bêlîtiya, "My Lady," the Babylonian Madonna (cf. SAA 3 no. 37 r. 24 ff. and SAA 9 no. 1 ii 16 ff., and see n. 97 below).

\(^9\) See nn. 50, 55, 56, and 113. In Kabbalistic theosophy, En Sof ("The Limitless") is defined as total unity beyond comprehension; his Will to manifest himself, which lies behind all existence, is called En Sof Or, "The Endless Light," and envisioned as a boundless ocean of light engulfing and pervading the physical world (see, for example, Halevi, Kabbalah, p. 5, and Tree of Life, pp. 28 f.; Poncé, Kabbalah, pp. 93 ff.; Idel, Kabbalah, pp. 67 f. and 307 with n. 72; for En Sof as "the circle," see ibid., p. 63). The relationship of the Will of En Sof (i.e., En Sof Or) to his first emanation (i.e., Keter) has been a matter of debate among Kabbalists, and many claim the identity of the two of them (see Scholem, "Kabbalah," pp. 560 f.). In the popular Kabbalah, En Sof is "merely a synonym for the traditional God of religion" (ibid., p. 559).

This accords well with the fact that Aššur is commonly referred to as "the God" in Assyrian cultic texts (e.g., KAR 215 r. ii 9; van Driel, Cult of Aššur, pp. 88:36 and 136:16 ff.; Ebeling, "Kultische Texte aus Assur," Or. n.s. 22 (1953): 36 r. 5 f. and 39 r. 4) and identified with Anu in god lists (see Lambert, "The Gula Hymn," p. 130, and see also n. 75 above and pp. 191 f. below). In Craig, ABRT I 83, Aššur is called "king of the totality of gods, creator of himself; father of the gods, who grew up in the Abyss; king of heaven and earth, lord of all gods, who emanated (lit., "poured out") the supernal and infernal gods and fashioned the vaults of heaven and earth"; in SAA 3 no. 34:53 ff. and 35:44 ff., he is said to be "dressed in water" (see n. 96 below) and have "come into being before heaven and earth existed." Note that the solar disk in Aššur's icon is sometimes replaced by two concentric circles with a point in the center (see Collon, First Impressions, no. 340; Danthine, Palmier-dattier, fig. 488), identical with the Kabbalistic diagram illustrating the manifestation of En Sof as the Universal Monad (Poncé, Kabbalah, p. 52). For the Apsû (Abyss) as ocean of light, see nn. 69 and 96.


c. KAR 25 (see Excursus 2). In this list, Adad exceptionally appears among gods of the Upper Face to make possible the clockwise round of the Lower Face.

d. Ray's list of creative powers (see nn. 49 and 70 ff.).

Fig. 10.—Enumerations of Gods and divine powers
as well as the various qualities of En Sof. The solar disk through which he was primarily represented implies that his essential nature was light, as in Kabbalah.

Of the gods found in the diagram, Anu, king of Heaven, occupies the crown; Ištar, his daughter, representing all female deities, occupies the middle; and Nergal, the lord of the underworld, the base of the trunk. The remaining gods are arranged to the right and left sides of the trunk in a corresponding way, with sons lined under their fathers. In other words, the tree is composed of three successive generations of gods appearing horizontally as interrelated trinities, to be compared with the triadic configuration of nodes, volutes, and circles of the Assyrian Tree (see fig. 2 and nn. 22–25 above). The

— See Excursus 3, pp. 205–8 below.
— The “garment of water” covering Aššur (n. 94) is a metaphor identifying him as “the ocean of divine light, to whom all returns”; cf. this Kabbalistic metaphor, also used in Christian, Muslim, and Indian mysticism, see Idel, Kabbalah, pp. 67 ff. On seals, the Icon is often abbreviated to a mere winged disk (see Appendix B, pp. 201–2 below).
— Cf. Landsberger, Kult. Kalender, pp. 105 and 131, on the “vereinfachung des weiblichen Pantheons” in the Assyrian cultic calendar, and note the equations Zarpanitu = Bēlet-ilī = Šērua = Erua = Ištar in Mayer, Untersuchungen, pp. 379 f. and 425, and Gula = Nintinugga = Nansē = Ninkarrak = Baba = Ninsun = Mullissu in Lambert, “The Gula Hymn,” p. 109; in KAR 109, Baba is addressed as “Mullissu of the gods” and equated with Ningal, Aya, Ištar, Erua, etc. In accordance with this, Assyrian texts frequently speak of “the gods and Ištar,” the singular implying that there was, in fact, only one, not several, “female” deities; see, for example, Ebeling, “Mittelassyrische Rezepte,” pl. 26 r. 9; TCL 3, p. 20: 115; SAA 3 no. 1: 16 (Aššur as the progenitor of “the gods and Ištar”). Such a usage of course perfectly agrees with the Tree diagram, where Ištar is surrounded by eight “male” deities; cf. the Kabbalistic parable in Bahir explaining the divine pleroma as a garden planted with nine male (palm) trees and one feminine tree (the ethrog), analyzed in Scholem, Originis, p. 172 (cf. n. 124 below).
— In this context, it is noteworthy that the plural ilānī, “gods,” is used as a divine name and construed as a singular noun in Middle and Neo-Assyrian personal names. Examples are Ishbi-ilānī “ilānī commanded (sg.)” (CTN 3 52 r. 9, VAS 1 99 r. 2, etc.) and Remanni-ilānī “ilānī, have (sg.) mercy on me!” (VAT 9693 r. 1), both seventh century, to be compared with Ishbi-Aššur/Ilu/Ištar, “Aššur/God/Ištar commanded,” and Remanni-Aššur/Ilu/Ištar; Ilani-erīš, “ilānī requested (sg.)” (AJO 10 39 no. 84:8, twelfth century); and Ilani-aha-iddina (TR 3016:6, thirteenth century), to be compared with Aššur/Ilu/Ištar-erīš and the royal name Aššur-ahu-iddina (Esarhaddon). The parallel names imply that ilānī here stands for the divine pleroma conceived as one god, and this conclusion is corroborated by such names as Gabbu-ilānī-sarru-usur, “All gods, protect (sg.) the king!” (Ass. 8890: 9 and r. 5) and Gabbu-ilānī-erīš, “All gods requested (sg.)” (Tallqvist, APN, p. 78). Note that the latter name was borne by the chief scribe and ideologist of Ashurnasirpal II; and see nn. 30, 31, and 38 above. This usage of ilānī, of course, has a well-known parallel in this biblical pluralis majestatis, elohim, “God” (lit. “gods”).

— On the triadic structure of the Sefirotic Tree, in general, see Halevi, Kabbalah, p. 204.

The second triad, representative of En Sof’s moral power and emotion, corresponds to the self-conscious soul Ruah located in the center Sefirah, Keter (head). It is the place where the individual perceives the ‘plan’ or meaning of being (Poncē, Kabbalah, p. 204).

The lowermost triad corresponds to the “animal soul,” Nefesh, located in the Sefirah Yesod (genitals). It is the world of instincts where “all conscious energies are concentrated in the sexual and instinctual sphere [and] the individual is conscious only of his own needs” (ibid.).

In contrast to the cosmological Tree, which is visualized as emanating from above (cf. the “inverted tree” in Cook, The Tree of Life, pl. 38), the psychological Tree is rooted in the netherworld, and its different layers are viewed in terms of a gradual progress towards a higher form of consciousness. In Hekhalot Rabbati, the Tree is likened to “a celestial ladder whose first edge is on the earth and second edge on the right leg of the throne of glory” (Dan, Revelation, p. 30; see also ibid., p. 22, where “the one who is worthy to observe the King and the throne” is likened to “a man who has a ladder in his house”). This imagery is reflected in the iconography of the Assyrian Tree (cf. nn. 20 and 22).
lines connecting the gods exactly render the divine genealogies known from late second- and early first-millennium texts.99

But that is not all. The distribution of the mystic numbers in the diagram (fig. 9) adds to it a dimension unknown in the Sefirotic Tree. Six of the numbers are full tens, all neatly arranged, in descending order, on the branches of the Tree: those higher than 30 to the right, the rest to the left side. The numbers on the trunk are not tens, and their arrangement is different: they begin with 1, as in the Sefirotic Tree, but the following two are not in numerical order. Does this distribution make any sense?

Initially, we note that the numbers on the trunk, when added together, yield 30, the median number of the sexagesimal system.100 From the standpoint of number harmony, this tallies beautifully with the medium position of the trunk and recalls its Kabbalistic designation, the Pillar of Equilibrium. The position of the number 15 in the center of the diagram is justifiable from the same point of view.101

On the surface, the numbers on the right and left of the trunk seem to upset the balance of the Tree because the numbers on the left are consistently smaller than those on the right. Yet, when one adds the numbers together, one obtains for each branch the same total (30) as for the trunk, the Pillar of Equilibrium. This is so because the numbers on the left side, according to the polar system of oppositions governing the Tree, are negative and thus have to be subtracted from those on the right side.102 The sum total of the branches and the trunk (4 x 30 = 120) added to the sum total of the individual numbers (1 + 10 + 14 + 15 + . . . + 60 = 240) yields 360, the number of days in the Assyrian cultic year and the circumference of the universe expressed in degrees.103

99 For Anu, Ea, Sin, Šamaš, Istar, Marduk, Nabû, Ninurta, and Nergal, see Tallqvist, Götterepitetha, pp. 251 ff. and see also n. 91 above. Adad, Girru, and Nusku are, because of their association with fire, addressed as sons of Anu (see nn. 65 and 79 f.). Note that Marduk and Istar are called “the brother” (talimu) and “sister” (talmu) of Šamaš, while Istar is “the daughter” of both Anu and Sin and “the daughter-in-law” of Ea. This fits Istar’s position in the diagram perfectly and recalls a passage in the Assyrian prophecies (SAA 9 no. 3 ii 35), where Istar invites her “divine fathers and brothers” to join the covenant she is concluding with the King. In this text, Istar is unquestionably identical with Aššur (cf. ibid. ii 27 with iii 14 f., and see Excursus 2, pp. 204–5 below).

100 For 30 as the median number, see the esoteric passage “bā = share, bā = half; half (bā) of Sin (30) is half of a half” (Livingstone, Mystical Works, p. 23:12 [L.NAM GIS.HUR]),

101 The position of Beauty in the middle of the Tree makes it “the central focus [which] joins and reconciles the flow of various paths that come through its junction station” (Halevi, Way of Kabbalalah, p. 31); in Sefer Yeẓirah, the Sefirot are said to be “knotted in unity in the middle,” as if the writer had the Assyrian Tree with its central node (see n. 22 above) before his eyes. A diagram in Poncé, Kabbalalah, p. 104, captioned “Beauty as the bearer of all powers,” represents the Sefirotic Tree in the form of an eight-pointed star, with Tiferet as its source of light. This, of course, immediately recalls the eight-pointed star attested as a symbol of Istar since the late second millennium B.C. (cf. Seidl, RIA, vol. 3, pp. 484 f.; Reade, “Shikaft-i Gulgul,” pp. 37 f.). The choice of 15 as the mystic number of Istar can actually be explained only with reference to the diagram; note that the emergence of this mystic number coincides with the emergence of the Assyrian Tree (see n. 88 above).

102 See n. 53 above.

103 The significance of this grand total can be appreciated when it is recalled that in the doctrinal system of Basilides (early second century), God is the union of the 365 days of the year, 365 being the gematric value of both His mystic name ABRASAX and its Greek appellation hagion onoma (“holy name”); see Contenau, “Notes d'iconographie,” p. 156, for many other examples of gematria (Greek: isopsephy) in early Christianity and Gnosticism. As noted by Contenau, the letters of Mithra (Greek Mithras) interpreted gematrically likewise yield the number 365. See also Poncé, Kabbalalah, pp. 170 f., for 358 as the number of the Messiah (Hebrew msyḥ = 40 + 300 + 10 + 8).

A schematic year of 360 days divided into twelve months of 30 days each is encountered not only in the Assyrian cultic calendar Inbu bel arhi (see n. 87 above) but also in the late second-millennium astronomical text Mul Apin (see Excursus 1, pp. 203–4 above); in the latter, it is correlated with a division of
In all, it can be said that the distribution of the mystic numbers in the diagram displays an internal logic and, remarkably, contributes to the overall symmetry, balance, and harmony of the Tree. All this numerical beauty is lost with the decimal numbering of the Sefirotic Tree, which only reflects the genealogical order of the gods.\textsuperscript{104} The fact that the numerical balance of the Tree can be maintained only on the condition that the left-side numbers are negative, as required by Kabbalistic theory, in my opinion amounts to \textit{mathematical proof} of the correctness of the reconstruction. Considering further the perfect match obtained with the placement of the gods, their grouping into meaningful triads and genealogies,\textsuperscript{105} and the identification of Assur with the winged disk, I feel very confident in concluding that the Sefirotic Tree \textit{did} have a direct Mesopotamian model and that this model was perfected in the Assyrian Empire, most probably in the early thirteenth century B.C.\textsuperscript{106}
III. The Tree and Mesopotamian Religion and Philosophy

The Birth of the Gods in Enûma Elîš

In Enûma elîš, the narrator, having related the birth of Anu, mysteriously continues: 
“And Anu generated Nudimmud (= Ea), his likeness.” This can only be a reference to the first attestation of the spelling Annāšu = Aššur likewise occurs in an inscription of this very Kurigalzu II (see Seux, *Epithètes*, p. 311).

Thus, already by the late fourteenth century, the Tree with its pinecone “garland” certainly connoted the idea of “unity in multiplicity” and may also have involved a numerical interpretation; note that the mystical numbers of Šamaš (20), Šin (30), Enlil (50) occur in the Middle Babylonian lexical text Ea (Tablet II, 164–76), tentatively assigned “to the middle of the Kassite period” by M. Civil, MSL 14, p. 169; cf. ibid., p. 156. The fact that the numbers of Adad (10) and Istar (15) are not included in Ea but appear only under Shalmaneser I and Tukulti-Ninurta I, however (see n. 88), strongly suggests that the final (mathematical) form of the Tree diagram was perfected no earlier than about 1250 B.C.

While the Tree diagram and the elaborate doctrinal system associated with it can thus be considered an Assyrian creation, the general symbolism of the Tree, including its psychological dimension, is much older and may well go back to the third millennium B.C., if not earlier; see p. 1 above with nn. 1 and 14, and nn. 109, 139, and 149 below.

As a point of departure, it should be understood that the Assyrian religion was not only imposed on vassals (see SAA 2 no. 6:393 f. and p. xxx), but also actively propagated throughout the empire (cf. SAA 3 no. 1:3–10 and r. 9–12). Thus the religious ideas connected with the Tree were, with time, bound to spread out and take root within the confines of the empire and even abroad. This process is amply documented by archaeological evidence (the most striking example being the direct transfer of Assyrian religious symbolism to Achaemenid imperial art [see n. 93 above]), and it is reflected in the sudden emergence of “new” religions and philosophies (Zoroastrism, Pythagoreanism, Orphism, Platonism, Jewish monotheism) in Assyria’s former dependencies after the collapse of the empire. It is well known that leading Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus and Porphyry (who as Orantels should have known!), believed that the teachings of Pythagoras, Plato, and the Orphics originated in the East (see, for example, D. O’Meara, *Pythagoras Revived: Mathematics and Philosophy in Late Antiquity* [Oxford, 1989], p. 27, and R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* [London, 1972], pp. 13 ff. and 104 ff.). This claim, which is perfectly consonant with what is known of the lives of Pythagoras and Plato, and has been repeated several times, though never “proven” (see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 256 f., and n. 67 above), is put in a totally new light by the evidence cited in this article.

As regards the birth of Jewish monotheism in particular, which has been taken as a “reaction” to syncretistic and polytheistic pressures from the outside world threatening the national and religious identity of the Jews, the evidence presented in this article shows that the truth is not so simple. During the seventh through fifth centuries B.C., the Jews did in fact face the threat of national extinction, but that threat was caused by Yehoiakim’s and Zedekiah’s adventurous foreign policies leading to the destruction of the Jewish state and the cult of Jahweh, not by foreign ideologies. Biblical passages such as Chron. 29:11, enumerating the Sephirot constituting the “Lower Face” in the very order gedullah-gevarah-tiferet-nezah-hod in David’s blessing to Solomon, or Prov. 3:19, presenting the triad hokhmah-tevunah-daat as God’s power of creation (see nn. 49, 52, and 55 above), are clear evidence that the backbone of Assyrian and Kabbalistic monotheism, the Tree diagram, was part and parcel of the Deuteronomistic religion as well. As soon as it is realized that the Biblical image of God, epitomized in the diagram, is but a copy of an Assyrian model, there is nothing unique in Jewish monotheism to differentiate it from its Assyrian predecessor (see also n. 97, on Biblical elohim = “God,” and nn. 68, 90, 93, and Excursus 3 below).

The same applies to Christianity with its doctrines of the Trinity, God the Father, the Holy Ghost, Unity of the Father with the Son, etc., all of which are derived from Assyrian religion and philosophy (see nn. 3, 21, 25, 56, 67, 84, 90, 93, 96, 103, and Excursus 2 below). The crucial significance of the Tree to early Christianity is made evident by the reference to it in Rev. 22, the last chapter of the Bible, mirroring the famous Tree passage in Gen. 2–3, at the very beginning of the Bible. This configuration makes the
the fact that the mystic numbers of these two gods, 1 and 60, were written with the same sign, and indicates that the composer of the epic conceived the birth of the gods as a mathematical process.

On the surface, of course, the theogony of Enûma elîš is presented in terms of human reproduction. As the example just quoted shows, however, it did involve more than just one level of meaning. In fact, the curious sequence of “births” presented in Tablet I 1–15 makes much better sense when it is rephrased “mathematically” as follows:

“When the primordial state of undifferentiated unity (Apsu + Mummu + Tiamat, “±0”), in which nothing existed, came to an end, nothingness was replaced by the binary system of opposites (Lahmu and Lahamu) and the infinite universe (Anû = Aššûr) with its negative counterpart (Kišar). Aššûr emanated Heaven (Anû) as his primary manifestation, to mirror his existence to the world.” Thus rephrased, the passage comes very close to Kabbalistic and Neoplatonic metaphysics.

Tree, which is Christ, the key to the theological structure of early Christianity, its “Alpha and Omega, [its] first and [its] last, [its] beginning and [its] end” (Rev. 22:13). See n. 89 above.

The metaphysical propositions of Tantra are stated in very similar terms, but the sexual allegory is taken much further. Reality in its primordial state is presented as consisting of two principles, male and female (= Apsu and Tiamat), so deeply joined in bliss that they are unaware of their differences and beyond time. Slowly, consciousness (= Mummu) awakens, and the pair become aware of their distinction (= Lahmu and Lahamu). The female “objective” (= Kišar) separates from the male “subject” (= Aššûr) and begins the sacred dance which “weaves” the fabric of the world (see P. Rawson, Tantra: The Indian Cult of Ecstasy [London, 1973], pp. 18 f.). It is clear that this allegory is strongly implicit in Enûma elîš, too, but the phrasing of the text is kept intentionally vague to allow other interpretations as well, including misinterpretations.

The idea of an inverted tree (see n. 98 above) representing a manifestation of the cosmos from a single transcendent source, Brahman, is already attested in the earliest Indian scriptures, the Vedas and Upanishads (ca. 900–500 B.C.). This inverted tree is not derived from the Assyrian Tree; its visualization as the fig tree (asvattha) links it with the Harappan sacred tree motif (see n. 1 above), suggesting that the basic doctrines of the Tree had already spread to India by the early third millennium B.C. via Proto-Elamite intermediaries.

Note the way in which the unity of Apsu, Mummu, and Tiamat is presented in the text: the waters of Apsu and Tiamat are said to mix with each other, and Mummu (lacking the divine determinative, in contrast to line 31 ff.) is not presented as a distinct being but directly attached (almost as an attribute) to Tiamat. For Mummu as the cosmic mind or consciousness “zeroed” in the primordial state see n. 109, and note that Damascius, Quaestiones de pri-
Lines 21–24 of Tablet I of *Enûma elîš* seem to describe the “birth” of the mystic number of Sin which can be derived from the number of Ea by simply dividing it by two.\(^{115}\) The irritation of Apsu caused by this play with numbers and the subsequent killing of Apsu and “leashing” of Mummu (lines 29–72) seem to be an etiology for the emanation of the third number and the establishment of the places of Ea and Mummu in the Tree diagram.\(^{116}\) The “birth” of Marduk, the next god in the diagram, is described in the following lines as expected. Marduk’s mystic number, like the numbers of all the remaining gods, can be derived from the preceding numbers by simple arithmetical operations.\(^{117}\)

The prominent part played by numbers both in *Enûma elîš* and the Assyrian Tree of course immediately recalls the central role of mathematics and divine numbers in Pythagorean philosophy.\(^{118}\)

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH\(^{119}\)

Looking at the Epic of Gilgamesh through Kabbalistic glasses, a new interpretation of the Epic can be proposed viewing it as a mystical path of spiritual growth culminating in the acquisition of superior esoteric knowledge (see fig. 12).\(^{120}\) The Path proceeds in stages through the Tree of Life, starting from its roots dominated by animal passions,

\(^{115}\) The passage tells that the gods (i.e., the numbers 1, 60, and 2 that had come into being thus far, 2 as the sequential number of Ea) “came together” and disturbed Apsu by their “playing.” This can be taken literally as referring to the “play with numbers” (see n. 87) by which all the mystic numbers in the Tree diagram can be derived from the previously “emanated” values (see also n. 117).

\(^{116}\) With the emergence of the number of Sin (30), the flow of emanation gets temporarily out of balance until Ea “establishes a universal pattern” (line 62, probably referring to the zigzagging pattern of the stream of emanation) and assumes a position “on top” of Apsu, the male principle (line 71; cf. Ea’s position on top of the right-hand male column, fig. 9). The “binding” of Mummu (line 70, referring to the Pillar of Equilibrium) restores balance by forming the symmetrical tetrad of the “Upper Face” (Anu-Ea-Sin-Mummu; see n. 52). The “leashing” of Mummu, with Ea holding the leash, certainly refers to the stabilization of the positional value 60 for Ea’s number, in contrast to the number of Anu, written with the same sign, which could be read both 1 and 60 (see n. 89). Incidentally, the fact that Ea’s number in *Enûma elîš* is the “Assyrian” 60, not the “Babylonian” 40 (cf. n. 88), confirms the late (Isin II) date assigned to the Epic by Lambert, in W. S. McCullough, ed., *The Seed of Wisdom* (Toronto, 1964), pp. 3 ff.

\(^{117}\) Marduk’s number 50 is derived from the numbers of Ea (60) and Sin (30) by the following equation: \(60 - 30 + 3 = 50\); the divisor 3 (representing Sin’s position in the order of emanation) is attested as a number of Sin in the mystical work *INAM GIS.HUR* (see n. 87). Note Ponce, *Kabbalah*, p. 125: “Hesed [Marduk] is produced by the union of Wisdom [Ea] and Understanding [Sin].”

The numbers of the other gods (in their order of emanation) can be derived as follows: Šamaš (6th): \(60 + 3 + 20\); Istar (7th): \(60 + 4 = 15\); Nabû/Ninurta (8th): \(60 - 60 + 3\) (or \(2 \times 20\)) = 40; Adad (9th): \(60 + 6 = 10\); Nergal (10th): \(15 - 1\) (or \(2 \times 7\)) = 14.

\(^{118}\) On the Babylonian background of Pythagorean mathematics and astronomy, see van der Waerden, *Die Pythagoreer* (Zurich and Munich, 1979), pp. 40 ff.

\(^{119}\) In the absence of an adequate critical edition, the following analysis is based on my own unpublished reconstruction of the Epic. The recent translations by M. Gallery Kovacs, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Palo Alto, 1985), and S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 50 ff., can be consulted for general orientation.

\(^{120}\) Gilgamesh is prominently marked as a mystic by the following features in the Epic:

1. the epithet “perfect” accorded to him in Tablet I (cf. n. 57) which qualifies him as a Zadek, “just or saintly man, not born but made, partly by the assistance of God and partly by his own effort” (see Halevi, *Way of Kabbalah*, pp. 74 ff.);

2. the special technique (pressing head between knees) he uses for attaining dreams (Tablet IV iii 6); on this “posture of Elijah,” see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 78 ff. and 90;

3. the technique of weeping, fasting, and praying (Tablet IX 1–14) he uses for achieving the paranormal state of consciousness and visions recounted in Tablets IX–XI; see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 75 ff.; Dan, *Three Types*, p. 29;

4. his role as revealer of hidden mystical knowledge (Tablet I 4–7); see ibid., p. 28, and *Revelation*, pp. 24 ff.;

5. the recurrent references to his ascetic appearance and behavior in Tablets I and IX–X (dress of skin, unkempt hair, roaming the desert), consonant with his prophetic role; see Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 234 ff.

6. the warnings he gives to Enkidu in Tablet XII; see n. 132 below.
the realm of Nergal (Tablet I); the names of the gods governing the individual stages are encoded in the contents of the tablets, and they follow the order in which they are found in the Tree, read from bottom to top.\textsuperscript{121} Tablet II, which has no counterpart in the Tree, deals with spiritual awakening;\textsuperscript{122} Tablet III outlines the Path;\textsuperscript{123} and Tablet IX describes the final breakthrough to the source of supernal knowledge.\textsuperscript{124}

The late version of the Epic consists of twelve tablets, the last of which is widely considered an “inorganic appendage break[ing] the formal completeness of the Epic, which had come full circle between the survey of Uruk in Tablet I and the same survey at the end of Tablet XI.”\textsuperscript{125} In reality, nothing could be farther from the truth. Without the

\textsuperscript{121} The codes for the individual gods are as follows:

- Tablet I (Nergal): the strength, animal drive, and sexual potency of Gilgamesh; the strength and animal characteristics of Enkidu, his life on the steppe (a synonym of the netherworld), his association with gazelles and the cattle god Šakkân, his instinctive behavior and instantaneous fall to temptation by the whore (cf. n. 78), as well as the length of the coitus (6 days and 7 nights), which ended only barely before it would have completed the number of Nergal (14).
- Tablet IV (Adad and Girru): the repeated dream oracles received by Gilgamesh; the thunderstorm, fire, lightning, and bull (Adad's sacred animal) seen in the dreams; the voice calling from heaven; the fear striking the travelers (see n. 79 ff.).
- Tablet V (Ninurta and Nabû): the slaying of Humbaba, described in terms resembling Ninurta’s battle with Anzû and referred to as “triumph” in Tablet II (see nn. 74 and 123).
- Tablet VI (Istar): the word dumqu “beauty” in line 6, Istar’s love affairs recounted, etc. (see n. 73).
- Tablet VII (Šamašt): the divine court of justice, the harsh judgment passed on Enkidu, Enkidu’s appeal to Šamašt (see n. 72).
- Tablet VIII (Marduk): Gilgamesh’s emotion and compassion for Enkidu, pervading the whole tablet; the magnificence of Enkidu’s funeral (see n. 71).
- Tablet IX (Mummu): penetration into the Garden of Knowledge (see n. 124).
- Tablet X (Sin): the counsels of wisdom given to Gilgamesh, the role of the boat (cf. moon’s barge), Utanapishtim’s reflection and pondering (see n. 70). Note also the assonance of Siduri to Sin; Siduri, “the Istar of Wisdom” (Šurpu II 173), is here portrayed, through her veiling, as the daughter-in-law of Ea, the god of wisdom (see n. 99).
- Tablet XI (Ea): the divine secrets revealed to Gilgamesh, the role of Ea in rescuing Utanapishtim and granting him eternal life, the plant of life fetched from the Apsu (see n. 69).
- Tablet XII (Anû): reunion with Enkidu (see n. 57 above and n. 132 below).

\textsuperscript{122} The process described in the tablet reads like an extract from a modern Kabbalistic textbook: the appearance of a maggid (Samhat, “who leads Enkidu like a god,” later Enkidu himself), the recognition of one’s state (Enkidu weeping), and the yearning for a higher purpose in life (the journey to the Cedar Forest being a metaphor for spiritual growth; cf. Halevi, \textit{Way of Kabbalah}, pp. 64 ff.).

\textsuperscript{123} The goal of the journey is explicitly defined in this tablet (ii 18) as \textit{the destruction of evil}, to be compared with the aspirant Kabbalist’s struggle with the dark side of his ego (Halevi, \textit{Way of Kabbalah}, pp. 153 ff.). In Assyrian glyptic, “Killing of Humbaba” occurs as a theme supplementing the Tree Motif in the same way as the “Killing of Anzû” or the “Killing of Asakku”; see, for example, Danthine, \textit{Palmier-dattier}, figs. 92 (Humbaba), 78–86 (Anzû), and 52 (Asakku).

\textsuperscript{124} Tablet XII corresponds to the Sefirah Daat (Knowledge), which in the psychological Tree represents the gate to supernal knowledge, “the point where identity vanishes in the void of Cosmic consciousness before union with Keter” (Halevi, \textit{Tree of Life}, p. 47; cf. ibid., pp. 42 and 158); passing through it is sometimes compared to spiritual death (Poncé, \textit{Kabbalah}, p. 206). The revelation of supernal knowledge, on the other hand, is described “in Jewish classical texts as a tremendous eschatological event, when the sun will shine with an overwhelming light. The act of acquiring supernal knowledge involves a change in both the known and the knower; it is presented as a active event, or penetration” (Idel, \textit{Kabbalah}, p. 228). Compare this with the penetration of Gilgamesh through the dark passage of the cosmic mountain guarded by the Scorpion man and woman and his emergence to the dazzling sunlight on the other side. The beautiful jewel garden he finds there is the Garden of Knowledge; it corresponds to the “garden of God” of Ezek. 28:12 ff. associated with wisdom, perfection, and blamelessness, and “adorned with gems of every kind: sardin and chrysolite and jade, topaz, carnelian and green jasper, sapphire, purple garnet and green felspar.” On the association of the Sefirot with jewels and translucent colored glass vessels, see nn. 47 and 55 above, and see also Poncé, \textit{Kabbalah}, p. 103, and Idel, \textit{Kabbalah}, pp. 104 ff.; for a Neo-Assyrian seal scene showing the scorpion man and woman as guardians of the Tree, see Danthine, \textit{Palmier-dattier}, fig. 354. See also n. 97 above on the passage in \textit{Bahir} comparing the Sefirotic \textit{pleroma} to a garden.

twelfth tablet, the Epic would be a torso because, as we shall see, it contains the ultimate wisdom that Gilgamesh brought back from his arduous search for life.

That wisdom was not meant for the vulgus, and it is therefore hidden in the text. But the Epic is full of clues to help the serious reader to penetrate its secret. The refrain at the end of Tablet XI is one of these. Far from signaling the end of the Epic, it takes the reader back to square one, the Prologue, where he is advised to examine the structure of “the walls of Uruk” until he finds the “gate to the secret,” a lapis lazuli tablet locked inside a box. “The walls of Uruk” is a metaphor for Tablets I–XI, “the tablet box” is the surface story, and “the lapis lazuli tablet” is the secret structural framework of the Epic, the Tree diagram.

Once it is realized that the Epic is structured after the Tree, the paramount importance of Tablet XII becomes obvious, for it corresponds to the Crown of the Tree, Anu (Heaven), which would otherwise have no correspondence in the Epic.

On the surface, there is no trace of Heaven in Tablet XII. On the contrary, it deals with death and the underworld, the word “heaven” (or the god Anu) not even being mentioned in it, and it seems to end on an utterly pessimistic and gloomy note. When considered in the light of the psychological Tree and the spiritual development outlined in the previous tablets, however, the message of the tablet changes character. We see Gilgamesh achieving reunion with his dead friend Enkidu, being able to converse with him and thus to acquire precious knowledge from him about life after death; and what is more, he achieves this reunion in exactly the same way as he did in Tablet IX, by prolonged weeping and praying. In other words, the unique mystical experience recounted in Tablets IX–XI, there presented as something totally new and unusual, has in

126 According to the Prologue, Gilgamesh brought back to Uruk the “ultimate sum of all wisdom,” which is said to be revealed in the Epic (referred to by the term narû, “stela,” in line 8). Note the emphasis placed on the word hidden in line 5.

127 This metaphorical significance of the “walls” (framing Tablets I–XI like brackets) is made clear by the parallelismus membrorum of lines 8–9, equating the building of the walls with the inscribing of the “stela.” The meaning of the metaphor is clarified by the epithet supuru (“fold”) attached to Uruk, elsewhere used to refer to the halo of the moon (see CAD, s.v., pp. 397 f.) and thus clearly connoting the idea of a return to the beginning (cf. nn. 89 and 103); compare the similar use of the Tree of Life motif as a framing device in the Bible, discussed in n. 107. The reference to the seven sages in lines 18–19 looks like the idea of the Tree of Life motif as a framing device in the Bible, discussed in n. 107. The reference to the seven sages in lines 18–19 looks like a metaphor stressing the antiquity and solid philosophical background of the Epic.

128 Note the lapis lazuli foliage of the Tree of Knowledge in Tablet IX (see n. 124 above) and the unique description of the Tree of Life in CT 16 46-183 ff.: “A black kiškanû tree grew up in Eridu, was created in a holy place; its sheen is pure lapis lazuli, drawing from the Apsu...” (for the continuation, see Widengren, King and the Tree, pp. 6 f.). In addition, the conspicuous omission of the halubpu-tree theme from Tablet XII (see A. Shaffer, “Sumerian Sources of Tablet XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh” [Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1963], pp. 99 ff.) is certainly also meant to direct the reader’s attention to the Tree; see the discussion on pp. 195 ff. below, and note that the felling of the halubpu is referred to as a feat comparable to the conquest of Anzu in Cooper, Return of Ninurta, p. 147 (see n. 123 and Excursus 2 below).

129 Cf. Idel, Kabbalah, p. 94, quoting an eighteenth-century Kabbalist, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer: “I performed an incantation for the ascent of the soul, known to you. And in that vision I saw... the souls of the living and of dead persons... ascending from one world to the other through the column known to adepts in esoteric matters.” See also ibid., p. 92, and cf. n. 57 above. On the death of Enkidu, attributed in Tablet XII to his ethical imperfections, see n. 132 below.

130 Cf. n. 120 and Idel, Kabbalah, p. 86, quoting Safrai’s commentary to the Zohar: “By much weeping, like a well, and suffering I became worthy to be transformed into a flowing stream, a fountain of wisdom; no secret was revealed to me, nor a wondrous apprehension, but afterward I became like dust and wept before the Creator of the universe like a spring, lest I should be rejected from the light of his face, and for the sake of gaining apprehensions out of the source of wisdom.” This passage illustrates the rationale behind the weeping technique, associating it, in Mesopotamian terms, with the ocean of wisdom, Apsu, and thereby with Ea (cf. n. 69); note that it is explicitly Ea, not Enlil, or Sin, who finally grants Gilgamesh his rendezvous with Enkidu.
The Assyrian Tree of Life

Tablet XII become a firmly established technique by which similar experiences can be sought at will.131

In Jewish mysticism, such experiences are referred to as “ascent to heaven” or “entering Paradise” and regarded as tremendous events reserved only to perfectly ethical, perfectly stable men.132 The evolution of Gilgamesh into such a man is described in detail in Tablets I–VIII.133 In the early (third century?) Jewish mystical text Hekhalot Rabbati, the very concept of mystical “ascent to heaven” is revealed to the Jewish community as a revolutionary “secret of the world.”134 There can be no doubt whatsoever that this very secret, revealing the way to Heaven, was the precious secret that Gilgamesh brought back from his journey to Utinapishtim.

The ETANA MYTH

The Mesopotamian myth of Etana is well known for its central motif, a man’s ascent to heaven on an eagle’s back. It has thus been classified as an “adventure story” or early

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131 On “weeping [and prayer] as a means of attaining revelations and/or a disclosure of secrets—a practice that can be traced back through all the major stages of Jewish mysticism over a period of more than two millennia,” see Idel, Kabbalah, pp. 75 ff.

132 Ibid., pp. 88 ff. and n. 124 above. The perilous nature of such experiences is constantly emphasized in Jewish mysticism, and the following Talmudic story (Epstein, Kabbalah, p. 3) is told to illustrate the point:

Legend relates that each of the four [sages] entered Pardes, that is, embraced the mystical life. Rabbi Akiva, the oldest and best prepared was first to achieve superconscious states. However, on his “return” to waking consciousness, he warned the other three not to succumb to the illusions their minds would create along the way. “When you enter near the pure stones of marble, do not say, ‘Water! Water!’ for the Psalms tell us, ‘He who speaks falsehoods will not be established before My Eyes.’”

The saintly Rabbi ben Azai “gazed and died,” for his soul so longed for its source that it instantly shed the physical body upon entering the light . . . Only Rabbi Akiva, the man of perfect equilibrium, entered and left in peace.

This story immediately recalls the warnings dealt by Gilgamesh to Enkidu in Tablet XII before the latter’s descent to the netherworld to retrieve the lost “hoop” and “driving stick.” And that is not all. The passage has other important affinities with Jewish mysticism too. The “hoop” and “driving stick” symbolize the syzygy of masculine and feminine, but especially the mystical reunion with the Divine (see Scholem, Origins, pp. 173 ff.). Setting out to retrieve them, Enkidu was attempting to restore the broken unity with the Divine, the very purpose of the mystical union (see Idel, Kabbalah, pp. 62 ff.); he succumbed because he, like the sages of the talmudic story, was not morally and ethically stable enough. Thus Enkidu’s “descent” is paradigmatic for a failed mystical ascent. Note that in the Hekhalot literature the practice of ascension is paradoxically called “de-

scension” (yeridah), an idiom that has not been satisfactorily explained (see Dan, Three Types, pp. 8 and 34 with n. 29).

133 The first phase in the process is the long journey into one’s self (Tablet IV), involving practice of religious duties and love of one’s neighbor; the goal, the subjugation of the dark side of the ego (Tablet V), is reached with divine guidance (Samas) and human help (Enkidu). The purity of one’s soul is put to test by major temptations (Tablet VI) and the severities of life (the death of Enkidu, Tablet VII); both tests have to be stood while still retaining a humble and compassionate heart (Tablet VIII). The overall goal of the program seems to be a stepwise control over all psychic powers operative in the human soul, represented by the gods for whom the tablets are encoded (cf. the bird’s nest metaphor of Moses Cordovero cited in Poncé, Kabbalah, p. 123). This certainly looks like a clearly defined program of spiritual growth resembling the Kabbalistic and Neoplatonic strategies of conquering the “vegetable” and “animal” levels of the soul (cf. Halevi, Way of Kabbalah, pp. 117 ff., and Wallis, Neoplatonism, pp. 72 ff.). Its prominently theurgic character is well in line with the professional background (exorcist) of Sin-leqen-unninni, the author of the Late Version.

134 See Dan, Revelation, pp. 24 ff., and note especially pp. 29 f.: The last paragraph of the above-quoted text defines, briefly, the rewards of the mystic. If the person successfully overcomes the earthly inclinations to sin, and observes the commandments as presented by Rabbi Nehunia, he will be rewarded by the opportunity to observe the beauty, the power, the magnificence and the secrets of the divine world . . . This passage does not leave any doubt in that the authors of this text realized completely the far-reaching historical and spiritual meaning of the[jr] mystical claim: [Rabbi Nehunia] is speaking about the most important, the most central subject that a man can know. This indeed is a gnosis of cosmic dimensions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tablet</th>
<th>Union with God</th>
<th>Eternal life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>XI</td>
<td>The Ultimate Wisdom</td>
<td>Accepting God’s Will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Understanding man’s fate and the purpose of life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>Altered states</td>
<td>Contact with the Divine Glimpse of Paradise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>Practice of magnanimity, compassion and mercy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>Exposure to trials and the severities of life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Withstanding major temptations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Victory over the ego</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Practice of honesty and virtues</td>
<td>Love of one’s neighbor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Discovery of the Path</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Awakening of consciousness</td>
<td>Sorrow over one’s condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Bestiality and animal instincts</td>
<td>Selfishness and Greed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 12.—Via Mystica in the Gilgamesh Epic
“science fiction” containing the first known account of “space travel.” The eagle-back ascent motif has been recognized to recur in Hellenistic, Jewish, and Islamic folk tales and legends and has also been connected with the Greek myth of Ganymede and the Alexander Romance. Much less attention has been paid to the tree inhabited by the eagle and the snake which figures so prominently in the second tablet of the myth.

Without going into unnecessary detail, it can be suggested here that the tree-eagle-serpent theme in Tablet II is an allegory for the fall of man and that the ascent to heaven described in Tablet III is to be understood as mystical ascent of the soul crowning an arduous program of spiritual restoration. Seen in this light, the myth becomes closely related to the Gilgamesh Epic in substance, and in presenting Etana as the first man to achieve the ascent, it forcefully contributes to the notion of the Mesopotamian king as the “Perfect Man.”

The tree of Tablet II is Etana himself, whose birth its sprouting marks. The eagle and the serpent are conflicting aspects of man’s soul, the one capable of carrying him to heaven, the other pulling him down to sin and death. The deal struck by the eagle with the serpent marks the beginning of Etana’s moral corruption as king. Ignoring the voice of his conscience, he becomes guilty of perfidy, greed, and murder for this, he is punished. The serpent attacks the eagle, cuts off its wings, and throws it into a bottomless pit. This is an allegory for spiritual death; the same idea is expressed by the childlessness of Etana, to whom the narrative now returns.


136 See S. Langdon, The Legend of Etana and the Eagle (Paris, 1932), pp. 3 f.; Aro, “Anzu and Simurgh,” p. 26; Dalley, Myths, p. 189. In addition, one may compare the story of Abu Muhammad al-Kaslan in the Arabian Nights, the Greek myth of Daidalos and Ikaros, and, above all, the Indian mythical bird Garuda as spiritual vehicle of the yogis (see below).

137 The recurrence of this theme in the Sumerian myth of Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld (see n. 128) has, of course, been noted, but the meaning of the theme in either myth has not been discussed at all.

138 In Christian symbolism, “The eagle holding a serpent in its talons or beak represents the triumph of Christ over the ‘dark forces’ of the world (see Serpent)” (Baldock, Elements, p. 92). In Indian mysticism, the bird Garuda likewise achieves its ascent to heaven in spite of the serpents coiling around its head, wings, and feet (see the illustration in Rawson, Tantra, pl. 67).

In the Etana myth, the eagle plays two roles. At first, it is “an evil eagle, the criminal Anzû (var.: criminal and sinner), who wronged his comrade”; as such, it parallels the eagle inhabiting the hulupp tree in the Sumerian Gilgamesh epic, which is explicitly called Anzu. Later, however, having suffered and been rescued by Etana, it carries the latter to heaven. The evil aspect of the bird corresponds to the natural state of man’s soul, which, despite its divine origin, is contaminated with sin (see Enûma elīš VI 1–33 and Lambert and Millard, Atra-hasis, p. 59: 208 ff.; cf. Poncé, Kabbalah, pp. 61 f. and 82 f.). The second aspect of the bird corresponds to the soul of a “purified” man (see below).

The “tree” itself is marked as sinful by its species (the poplar), associated with Nergal; see CAD s.v. šarbu, pp. 109 f., and note Bēl-šarbe “Lord of the Poplar” = Nergal. CT 25 37:16. This accords with Ebeling, Handerhebung, p. 114:9, which explicitly states that mankind is “entrusted to Nergal,” that is, under the power of sin.

140 Etana’s voice of conscience is the “small, especially wise fledgling” of II 45 and 97. Note that the theme of bird’s nest with the young (taken over from the Sumerian Lugalbanda epic; see Aro, “Anzu and Simurgh,” pp. 25 and 28) also plays a role in Kabbalah, where it is explicitly associated with self-discipline and wisdom; see Poncé, Kabbalah, pp. 123 f., and Scholem, Origins, p. 134.

141 Etana’s barren wife is the feminine, spiritual half of his soul, corresponding to the Shekhinah (cf. Poncé, Kabbalah, pp. 208 f.); the desired “son” is Etana’s “fruit,” the deeds by which he will be judged. For a similar allegory, see Matt. 21:19–25 (Jesus cursing the fruitless fig tree).
Etana's realization of his condition is the beginning of his salvation; from now on, he appears as a person referred to by his own name. Admitting his guilt and shame, he prays for a "plant of birth" (that is, a chance for spiritual rebirth) and is guided to the path that will take him there.142

The path leads him to the mountain where he finds the eagle lying in the pit with its wings cut, a metaphor for the imprisonment of the soul in the bonds of the material world. Complying with the wish of the eagle, his better self, he starts feeding it and teaching it to fly again, an allegory for spiritual training and self-discipline. It takes eight months to attempt the first ascent to heaven, which fails because Etana himself is not ready for it.143 The second ascent, better prepared, is successful and takes Etana into a celestial palace where he, having passed through several gates, finds a beautiful girl sitting on a throne guarded by lions.

All this is so reminiscent of the terminology and imagery relating to the ascent of the soul in Jewish mysticism that mere coincidence can be excluded. The several heavens and heavenly palaces through which Etana passes are commonplace in the Hekhalot texts and later mystical literature.144 The girl seen by Etana is the Shekhinah, the Presence or Beauty of God.145 Etana's fall from the heavens has ample parallels in Kabbalistic literature, where the ascent is considered a dangerous practice and the return to a normal state referred to as being "thrown down like a stone."146

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142 The spiritual meaning of the prayer (concealed under the "plant of birth" metaphor) is made clear by the preceding prayer of the eagle (II 121–23): "Am I to die in the pit? Who realizes that it is your punishment that I bear? Save my life, so that I may broadcast you fame for eternity!" In the late Turkish version of the myth, which survives in the folk-tale collection Billur Köşk (Aro, "Anzu and Simurgh," p. 28), the bird rescues the hero from the netherworld.

143 Note that the Old Babylonian version (Tablet I/E 8) at this point states that Etana wished to ascend to heaven "to disclose concealed things." Compare this with nn. 57 and 130 above, and note also Idel, Kabbalah, p. 91: "[He] asked questions, and his soul ascended to heaven in order to seek [answers to] his doubts."

144 For the Hekhalot texts, see Scholem, Origins, pp. 19 ff.; Dan, Three Types, pp. 5 ff., and idem, Revelation, pp. 14 ff.; the technical term used in these texts for the heavenly palaces, hekhalot, is a loan from Akkadian ekallu (pl. ekalldti), "palace." For later mysticism, see, for example, Idel, Kabbalah, p. 94, continuing the story of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer already cited in n. 129 above:

And I asked my teacher and master that he come with me, and it is a great danger to go and ascend to the supernal worlds, whence I have never ascended since I acquired awareness, and these were mighty ascents. So I ascended degree after degree, until I entered the palace of the Messiah.

145 See n. 84 above. Cf. the following vision of R. Isaac Yehudah Yehiel Safrin cited in Idel, Kabbalah, p. 83:

And I wept many times before the Lord of the world, out of the depth of the heart, for the suffering of the Shekhinah. And through my suffering and weeping, I fainted and I fell asleep for a while, and I saw a vision of light, splendor and great brightness, in the image of a young woman adorned with twenty-four ornaments. . . . And she said: "Be strong, my son."

146 See Idel, Kabbalah, p. 95. Incidentally, since the fall effectively marks the end of the "ascent," Tablet III is likely to represent the end of the myth;
The heavenward ascent of Etana is already attested on seals from the Akkadian period (ca. 2300 B.C.)\(^{147}\) and thus antedates the earliest Hekhalot texts by more than two and a half millennia, and the mystical experiences of nineteenth-century Kabbalists by more than four thousand years.\(^{148}\) In saying this, I do not want to stress the antiquity of the “ascent” phenomenon in Mesopotamia. The point I wish to make is that, against all appearances, Mesopotamian religion and philosophy are not dead but still very much alive in Jewish, Christian, and Oriental mysticism and philosophies. The Tree diagram provides the key which makes it possible to bridge these different traditions and to start recovering the forgotten *summa sapientia* of our cultural ancestors.

\(^{147}\) See R. Boehmer, *Die Entwicklung der Gyptik während der Akkad-Zeit* (Berlin, 1965), pp. 123, 190, and figs. 168, 192, and 693–703; all examples are “Akkadisch III,” i.e., Naram-Sin or later. The dogs barking at the ascending pair symbolize envy and other vices, while the earthly possessions (cattle, jugs of beer, butter, cheese, etc.) shown on these seals symbolize material values left behind by Etana. See n. 78 on the association of material values with Nergal, and note that in the Gilgamesh Epic, Utnapishtim is told to “leave the riches” and “hate possessions” (*muṣḥir mešrē makkāra zērna*) before embarking on the Ark. This parallel indicates that the deluge story in Gilgamesh too, as in the Bible, is an *allegory for the end of carnal men*, eternal life being the share of morally and ethically perfect, saintly men only. Note, in this context, the suffering of the Goddess at the fate of her creatures (Tablet XI 116–126), which provides a perfect parallel for the suffering of the Shekhinah because of the sins of the world (see n. 145 above).

\(^{148}\) For the date of the earliest Hekhalot texts (second through fourth centuries A.D.), see Scholem, *Origins*, p. 20, and Dan, *Three Types*, p. 16. The vision of Rabbi Isaac cited above (see n. 145) dates to 1845.
APPENDIX A. GLYPHIC VARIANTS OF THE ASSYRIAN TREE

428 431 426 429 422 435 430 421 433 522 436 449 425 437 424 379

448 450 458 451 447 453 456 455 454 452 457 443 445 446 461 463 465 469 470 468 471 474 457

439 440 442 444 438 476 464 500 434 506 423 491 348 349 350 460 362 441 354 352 804 336 338 346 341 335 339 347 355

342-4 345 336 338 346 341 335 339 f. 337 347 355 351 372 106 105 815 814 166 165 371 479
THE ASSYRIAN TREE OF LIFE

APPENDIX B. VARIANTS OF THE WINGED DISK ICON

Note: numbers refer to Danthine. *Palmier-dattier, Album. — a = *AfO* 8, pl. 5:1; b = Collon, *First Impressions*, no. 351; c = Orthmann, *Der alte Orient*, fig. 273g; d = ibid., 275e; e = ibid., 275b; f = *Iraq* 17, p. 125:3; g = Collon, ibid., no. 345; h = Orthmann, ibid. 274g; i = *Iraq* 17, pl. 23; j = AMI 17, p. 142; k = *Iraq* 24, p. 20; l = Parrot, *Nineveh and Babylon*, fig. 282; m = IrAnt 12, pl. 4; n = BM 130699 (traced from photograph); o = *Iraq* 17, pl. 23:2 and p. 115:6; p = Orthmann, ibid., 275b. No. 588* traced from Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*, p. 213.

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EXCURSUS 1: THE MYSTIC NUMBERS OF ANU, ENLIL, AND EA

Ea's number 40 was conceived as a sexagesimal fraction (40/60 = 2/3), as indicated by the name of Ea's boatman, Ur-šānabī/40 (see above), and by the entry "nimin/Ea/šānabī = 40 = forty/Ea/two-thirds" in Aa II/4: 193 ff. (MSL 14, p. 285). Its origin is hitherto unexplained, but it is very likely derived from the relative length of time of daylight at the winter solstice (associated with Ea), just as the mystic number of the moon was derived from the ideal length of the month; the required 2 : 3 ratio between the maximum variation of daylight is attested in both I.NAM GI9.HUR (see B. L. van der Waerden, Die Anfänge der Astronomie, Erwachende Wissenschaft, vol. 2 [Groningen, 1965], pp. 86 ff., and Livingstone, Mystical Works, p. 25: 26 f.) and the late second-millennium astronomical work Mul Apin (H. Hunger and D. Pingree, MULAPIN: An Astronomical Compendium in Cuneiform, AfO Beiheft 24 [Horn, 1988], p. 95). Taking 1 (= 60) as the length of the longest day (IV 15) and stating the length of day and night at the other turning points in sexagesimal fractions of this value, one obtains the following scheme for the year ("Path" refers to the sun's position on the horizon, expressed in terms of "paths" assigned to Anu, Enlil, and Ea; "total" is the length of the 24-hour day expressed sexagesimally; "notes" refers to Hunger and Pingree, MULAPIN, pp. 88 ff.):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Night</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I 15</td>
<td>Anu</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1,40</td>
<td>Spring, &quot;Winds&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV 15</td>
<td>Enlil</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1,40</td>
<td>Summer, &quot;Heat&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII 15</td>
<td>Anu</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1,40</td>
<td>Fall, &quot;Winds&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X 15</td>
<td>Ea</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>1,40</td>
<td>Winter, &quot;Cold&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This scheme perfectly explains the numbers of Ea, but the numbers of Anu (60) and Enlil (50) are not in the expected order. One is also surprised to note that the order of the "paths" does not follow the otherwise standard order Anu-Enlil-Ea; that Enlil, Sumerian "Lord Wind," is not associated with "winds"; and that the sky-god Anu is not associated with the summer solstice (see n. 65 above). All these difficulties disappear if the order of the paths is adjusted as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Night</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<td>40</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1,40</td>
<td>Fall, &quot;Winds&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X 15</td>
<td>Ea</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>1,40</td>
<td>Winter, &quot;Cold&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This emendation presupposes that the compiler of Mul Apin had reversed the order of the paths of Anu and Enlil in an attempt to mitigate the effect of the precession of the equinoxes, which had shifted constellations traditionally associated with Anu and Enlil to the wrong paths. Indeed, earlier star lists differ considerably from Mul Apin in this respect: out of the twelve constellations assigned to the Path of Anu in Astrolabe B (mid-second millennium?), six appear in the Path of Enlil in Mul Apin and vice versa; in the Path of Ea there are fewer differences (see van der Waerden, Anfänge der Astronomie, p. 70, and Pingree, in Enûma Anû Enlil, Tablets 50–51, BPO 2 [Malibu, 1981], p. 7 and tables 3 and 4). Thus the emendation seems perfectly justified. The pronouncedly
Sumerian character of the posited scheme points to the third millennium B.C., which would date the emergence of the mystic numbers of Anu, Enlil, and Ea to Sumerian or early Old Babylonian times. This agrees with the fact that 40 (= 40/60) as the number of Ea is already attested in the Old Babylonian period (in the name Su-ur-su-na-bu = Uršănabi, Gilg. M iv 7 ff.).

It is worth pointing out that the reconstructed scheme also agrees with the Kabbalistic scheme of the “three worlds” briefly discussed in n. 55. Compare Poncé, Kabbalah, pp. 41 f., citing Sefer Yezirah: “‘The heavens were created out of the substance of Fire [= Anu];’ the earth from Water [= Ea], and the Air from the Spirit [= Enlil] which mediates between the two’. In addition to being symbolic of the elements, the three mothers [= the letters Aleph, Mem, and Shin, functioning as instruments of creation] also define the temporal year: the element fire [= Anu] corresponds with the summer season; the element water [= Ea] corresponds with the winter season, and the element air [= Enlil] corresponds with the seasons of spring and autumn.”

EXCURSUS 2: THE EXALTATION OF THE VANQUISHER OF SIN

In a prayer to Marduk (KAR 25 ii 6 f.), both Nabû and Ninurta are presented as powers of Marduk, the former as his “victory” (lēʾātu), the latter as his “prowess” (ašarēdūtu), and it is certainly not by accident that in SAA 3 no. 2:15 Marduk himself is called “the smiter of the skull of Anzû.” Note Ninurta’s epithets “weapon” and “arrow” in Tallqvist, Götterepitheta, p. 424; in SAA 3 no. 37:11–15 it is by Marduk’s “arrows” that Anzû and Asakku are vanquished. Anzû and Asakku, on the other hand, personified evil and sin: in the Etana myth, Anzû alternates with anzillu, “abomination, sin” (see n. 139 above and CAD A/2 s.v. anzillu, pp. 153 f.). Thus Ninurta and Nabû basically represent the power to resist and prevail over evil and sin, recalling the roles of the archangel Michael in Judaism, Christ in Christianity, or Mithra in Mithraism (see n. 103 below). The concept of Ninurta/Nabû as “God’s weapon” is first attested in the Middle Assyrian royal name Ninurta-tukul-Aššur (Saporetti, Onomastica, p. 354, twelfth century B.C.).

For his triumph over Anzû, Ninurta/Nabû obtains the “Stylus” and the “Tablet of Fates” (see Pomponio, Nabû, p. 182; Finkel, Studies Sachs, p. 149:22; Hruška, Anzu, p. 168:21; W. Mayer, “Ein Hymnus auf Ninurta als Helfer in der Not,” Or. n.s. 61 [1992]: 29 v 9; for Nabû as the Recorder of Sins, see Finkel, “The Dream of Kurigalzu and the Tablet of Sins,” Anatolian Studies 33 (1983): 75–80 and ABL 545:7 ff.). His looks are changed; his eyes flame like fire, his [garments] glow like snow (E. Ebeling, “Mittelassyrische Rezepte zur Herstellung von wohlriechenden Salben (Taf. 1–49),” Or. n.s. 17 [1948]: pl. 26, r. 4 f.); casting numinous splendor and silence over god and man, he returns in his triumphal chariot to his father, who rejoices in his son, blesses him, and magnifies his kingship (ibid., r. 9 ff.; SAA 3 no. 37:24 ff.; Cooper, The Return of Ninurta, pp. 73 ff.; Hruška, Anzu, p. 174). In a Neo-Assyrian hymn glorifying Ninurta, his body is described as encompassing the whole universe, with different gods equated with his limbs, his face being the sun, etc. (see KAR 102, translated in A. Falkenstein and W. von Soden, Sumerische und akkadische Hymnen und Gebete [Zurich, 1953], pp. 258 f.); cf. the Jewish mystical text Shiur Qomah from the second century

1 My explanations appear within brackets.
THE ASSYRIAN TREE OF LIFE

A.D., on which see Scholem, Origins, pp. 21 ff., and Dan, Three Types, pp. 13 ff. (In line with his magnification, Nabû’s name could occasionally be spelled with the vertical wedge, “One and Sixty” = Alpha and Omega; see CT 53 151:5 and cf. n. 89 above.)

All this recalls the appearance of God on his Throne-Chariot of Glory in Ezekiel 1:26 ff. and Daniel 7:9 ff., that of resurrected and glorified Christ in the Revelation of John (1:14 ff.), as well as the role of Michael as the keeper of the celestial keys and “the archon on the right side of God” (Scholem, Origins, p. 147). It should be stressed that just as Christ and the Father are one, so is triumphant Ninurta/Nabû one with his Father: both Marduk and Enlil are included among Ninurta’s limbs in KAR 102. He is repeatedly addressed as Bêl in the text, an appellative otherwise reserved to Marduk/Enlil, and, as observed by Lambert, Ninurta’s triumphal chariot is identical with what is called Marduk’s Chariot in the Böhl festschrift, pp. 276 ff. (see n. 65 above). Against this background, it is not accidental that the throne of God in Ezek. 1 and Dan. 7 is known as the Chariot in Jewish tradition; the aspect of God on it is that of God triumphing over evil and sin (cf. Ezek. 7:1 ff., 11:14 ff.; Dan. 7: 11 ff.; Rev. 7:10 and 8:6 ff.).

According to the doctrine of the Tree, the power to combat evil also resided in man; the man who succeeded in conquering sin would become the Son of God himself and eventually triumph in Heaven. In Jewish mystical tradition, the patriarch Enoch (Gen. 5:23 f.) was, because of his piety, transformed in the heavens into a great divine power, second only to God, called Metatron, an angel with flesh of fire, eyelashes of lightning and eyes of flaming torches. “After overcoming the objection of the archangels to include Enoch among them, God gradually gave Enoch-Metatron divine powers of knowledge, and a body, a garment, and a chariot of fire. Step by step, Enoch loses all his human attributes, grows enormous wings, has one hundred eyes, and even acquires the divine name itself” (Dan, Three Types, pp. 15 f., paraphrasing Sefer Hekhalot, probably written in Babylonia in the fifth century A.D. or later).

The figure of Enoch/Metatron is based on Mesopotamian traditions about Adapa, the antediluvian sage who was taken to heaven after he had “broken the wings of the south wind,” a metaphor corresponding to the slaying of Anzû (cf. S. A. Picchioni, Il poema di Adapa [Budapest, 1981], pp. 74 f.); note Adapa’s common appellative Uanna “storm of Anu” and his representation as a winged eagle-headed genie in Neo-Assyrian sculpture (see nn. 24 and 31 above). The divine power Anafiel, responsible for bringing Enoch into the heavens, “who seems to have been a prototype of Metatron himself and connected with demiurgic elements” (Dan, Three Types, pp. 15 f.), corresponds to Adapa’s patron, the god Ea. It is noteworthy in this context that the Kabbalistic Book of True Unity explains Anafiel as the supreme luminary “whose power is ramified in seven lights that ‘stand before the place of the unity as a burning fire’ (see Scholem, Origins, p. 346). This agrees perfectly with Ea’s appellative “the Great Light of Apsu” (n. 69) and his position in the diagram before Sefirot 3 to 9, associated with the seven classical planets (see n. 68).

EXCURSUS 3: THE NAME OF AŠŠUR

Applying the technique used in the exegesis of the fifty names of Marduk in Enûma eliš (see n. 66 and J. Bottéro, “Les Noms de Marduk, l’écriture et la ‘logique’ en Méopotamie ancienne,” in M. deJong Ellis, ed., Essays on the Ancient Near East in Memory
of Jacob Joel Finkelstein [Hamden, Conn., 1977], pp. 5 ff.), the principal spellings of Aššur's name can be interpreted as follows:

1. Aš Dili išṭēn “The One”  
   dA “The Only One”  
   rû “Mystery”  

2. 4Aš DINGIR Aš DINGIR DILI ilu ištēn “God is One”  
   ilu ēdu “The Only God”  
   il pirištî “The Hidden God”  

3. aš-šur Aš Šur ištēn širhu “A Single Flash” (see n. 45)  
   “The First Flash” (see n. 55)  

4. 4a-šur A šur mē šarrūtî “Flowing Waters” (see n. 55)  
   “Flashing Water” (see n. 63)  

5. AN.Šâr AN Šâr DINGIR Šâr kiššat šamē “Totality of Heaven” (see n. 94)  
   kiššat ilâni “Totality of Gods”  
   il kiššati “Universal God”  
   ilu ma'âd “God is Many”  

It is true that no Assyrian text actually giving the above analysis is extant. But if the names of such gods as Marduk, Zarpanitu (Lieberman, “A Mesopotamian Background,” pp. 179 ff.), Zababa (Lambert, “A Late Babylonian Copy of an Expository Text,” JNES 48 [1989]: 217), and even Šulak (Hunger, Úruk, no. 47:4 ff.) could be subjected to mystical exegesis, one can be sure that the name of the highest god of the pantheon constituted no exception. The exegesis of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) plays a paramount role in Kabbalah, and “the secret knowledge of the great name” was considered in early Kabbalah tantamount to the highest wisdom and even a key to the attainment of superior divine powers (see Poncé, Kabbalah, pp. 174 ff.; Idel, Kabbalah, p. 236; Dan, Three Types, pp. 18 ff.). The highly esoteric nature of such knowledge accounts for the total lack of extant speculations concerning Aššur’s name.

For numerous examples of a similar exegesis of Mesopotamian temple names (extracting hidden significance from the names by playing with the readings of their component logograms), see A. R. George, Babylonian Topographical Texts, Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta 40 (Louvain, 1992), passim. The Mesopotamian scholars’ hermeneutical attitude to their (predominantly logographically spelled) canon has a striking parallel in the Kabbalistic attitude to the unvocalized text of the Bible, illustrated by the following statement in Rabbi Bahya ben Asher’s thirteenth-century Commentary on the Pentateuch, quoted by Idel, Kabbalah, p. 214: “The Scroll of the Torah is [written] without vowels, in order to enable man to interpret it however he wishes . . . . When it is vocalized it has but one single significance; but without vowels man may interpret it [extrapolating from it] several [different] things, many, marvellous and sublime . . . . The relationship between vocalization and consonants is like that between, respectively, soul, or form, and matter.” Cf. also Idel, Kabbalah, p. 227, citing the Zohar: “The Torah . . . is dressed in four, or perhaps even five, levels of meaning that must be penetrated by the perfect student of the Torah in order to reach its ultimate layer, the Kabbalistic meaning.”
Most of the logographic values included in the above analysis are so common that the meanings “hidden” in the spellings must have been obvious to almost any Assyrian scribe (regarding nos. 1–3, note that the sign AS did not have the phonetic value aš in Assyrian orthography, so the spellings concerned certainly were inherently logographic from the beginning). Incessant meditation on the name by generations of scholars and mystics must have produced an extensive, much more sophisticated oral lore relating to the name. A reconstruction of this lore cannot be attempted here, but two observations seem worth noting.

The graphic shape of the name should have attracted much attention, considering the role that syllables and numbers played in Assyrian cosmogonic speculations (see nn. 65 and 115–18); A and ŠUR were the first signs of the Assyrian syllabary (see MSL 3, pp. 5, 15, and 96), and the horizontal wedge AS not only represented the basic element of writing but also the basic number, equivalent to Diš (see n. 89 above). Now, if one considers the spelling aš-šur as consisting of AS (“One”) and ŠUR (“to flash, flow; to emanate”), one obtains a mantra capturing the basic symbolism of the Tree in two syllables: “[God] is One [in His Multiple] Emanation.” For the Tetragrammaton as a mantra, see Poncé, Kabbalah, pp. 181 ff.

Secondly, if one writes the elements of the word aš-šur vertically in their “order of emanation” (from above to below), one obtains a figure closely resembling the Kabbalistic “Tetragrammaton as Man” (see Poncé, Kabbalah, p. 179):

![Diagram](image-url)

FIG. 11.—a. The “Emanation” of aš-šur; b. The tetragrammaton as man

Not only is this figure produced in the same way as the Kabbalistic one (this, too, being obtained by writing the letters YHWH from above to below), but the specific symbolism of the Tetragrammaton works in it too: the topmost wedges (1 to 60) stand for Anu and Ea, just as the tittle and the body of Y stand for Keter and Hokhmah (see nn. 70, 90, and 108); the group of three wedges (3) stands for Sin, just as H stands for Binah (see n. 88 above); and the lowermost wedge stands for the entire “Lower Face” (cf. n. 52 above), just as W stands for the Sefirot 4 to 9. The Sefirah of Malkhut (the last letter of the Tetragrammaton) has no counterpart in the scheme; see n. 85 above. If all this is merely a coincidence; the coincidence certainly is a most striking one.
In conclusion, it may be pointed out that the name Aššur also provides an "etymology" for the name of the God of Kabbalah, En Sof. Applying the principle of notarikon (n. 66) to the alphabetic spelling of Aššur, one obtains

\[ \text{\textasciitilde}3s(w)r = \text{\textasciitilde}yn \text{swp} \text{\textasciitilde}wr, "En Sof Or." \]

En Sof Or would thus represent a Jewish reinterpretation of the mantra aš-šur just discussed, expressing the idea of transcendent God in his essential nature, "Endless Light" (cf. n. 94); correspondingly, En Sof would be a reinterpretation of the "holy syllable" aš referring to the Unmanifest God. Compare the Kabbalistic interpretation of "Amen" (\(\text{\textasciitilde}mn\)) as \(\text{\textasciitilde}l \text{mlk n}\text{\textasciitilde}mn\), "God, the faithful king" (Poncé, Kabbalah, p. 172, an allusion to Deut. 7:9), and the hidden meanings derived by notarikon from the Persian loanword Pardes "garden, paradise" (a metaphor for mystical life):

"Jewish sages warn all but the perfectly stable, perfectly ethical man away from this place. The letters of the Hebrew word Pardes, they say, contain the clue to the secret contained there: P represents Peshat, the simple, exterior meaning of the Torah; R stands for Remez, the homiletical meaning; D is Drush, the allegorical meaning; and S is Sod, its secret, or innermost, meaning" (Epstein, Kabbalah, p. 3; note, in this context, the title of Moses de Cordovero's famous sixteenth-century exposition of Kabbalah, Pardes Rimmonim, "The Pomegranate Garden," and cf. n. 21 above).