Sumerian Paradise Lost

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All conventions and beliefs surrounding the location of Paradise and the Hereafter are clouded by a confusing array of contradictions, as one might expect about a place from which no one has ever returned, except in literature. The same is true for the very earliest of accounts regarding these mysterious places, from third millennium BCE Sumer and from slightly later accounts from Semitic (Akkadian) sources from the subsequent millennium. The problem is that many of these contradicitons have escaped modern notice.

The first and perhaps most obvious contradiction is between the locations of Paradise and the Hereafter, the latter term referring to the place where the departed go after death. There are two basic problems which immediately catch our attention:

1) Paradise and the Hereafter may or may not be the same place, and 2) the Hereafter may not always be the same as the Netherworld or Underworld, although these terms are traditionally used as clichés for the world of the dead. In fact, the entire question of the location of the Hereafter relates to ancient notions of cosmology and perceptions of universe geography.

Let us first consider the question of Paradise, best known from the Bible as the Garden of Eden, and in fact later Jewish (post-biblical) sources equated the Garden of Eden (Gan Eden) as the residence of the righteous departed, whereas the wicked would descend to Gehenom, which in actual fact was the *wadi* which extended below the walls of Jerusalem. Neither term is satisfactory as descriptions for the Hereafter, and the Bible itself is equally vague; the dead descend to a dark abyss or Sheol, and Underworld, from whence the prophet Samuel's ghost was brought up by the Witch of Endor in a necromantic ritual, while the righteous patriarchs are simply 'gathered' unto their fathers, at no known location. However, Genesis 2: 19-14 appears to locate the Eden in Mesopotamia, as a garden watered by four rivers, two of which being the Tigris and Euphrates,

To resolve some of these terminological dilemmas, it is useful to reach back into literary records for earliest references to the world of the dead, namely from Sumerian sources, where we find a clear distinction between 'paradise' and the Hereafter. The Sumerian view, however, is far from what we might expect: paradise was to be found in an island in the Persian Gulf called Dilmun, firmly identificd as Bahrain (Alster 1983: 44), which in ancient times was thought to be an emporium which was specially fed by underground channels of sweet waters. A popular Sumerian myth, Enki and Ninhursag, describes Dilmun as the place suitable for a union between the god Enki and his daughter Ninsikila; Dilmun is transformed in this story from virgin territory into a great emporium, watered by a special underground channel provided by Enki.

> Dilmun drank water, aplenty from them
> her pools of salt water became pools of sweet water only,
> her fields and glebe, the plowlands, [produced] grain for her,
> her city became (an emporium), a (store)house on the quay for the country's
> produce. [Jacobsen 1987: 190]

Dilmun was also the place with the immortal Ziusudra, hero of the Sumerian flood story, was to reside, although described as 'toward the east over the mountains' [ibid. 150]. The Gilgamesh Epic, in its later Akkadian form, reiterates this identification of the 'remote, mythical east' (Woods 2009: 2000), where the hero of the Flood spends his immortality at the 'mouth of the rivers' (Gilgamesh XI 205f.), reminiscent of the four rivers emanating from a single source forming biblical Eden. Katz (2007: 580-581) finds it decisive that Dilmun is not mentioned in this passage of Gilgamesh, and she is right to question whether Dilmun was indeed a 'paradise' or not, comparable to biblical Eden (Katz 207: 580-581); Katz argues that biblical paradise represented a place where man need not work, and this paradigm has no parallel within Mesopotamian mythology. Nevertheless, there is more than one definition of paradise, for which the biblical example serves as only one model; in Mesopotamian terms, in Alster's sober view,

> the unique position of Dilmun as a prosperous trade centre gave the island as unique place in Sumerian literature, one comparable to Delos, the sacred birthplace of Apollo and Artemis, and the 'islands of the blessed along the shore of deep swirling Ocean', where, according to Hesiod, the selected sons of the fourth generation of mankind live untouched by sorrow.
> [Alster 1983: 59f-60]

Futhermore, there is also little doubt in Sumerian literature that Dilmun represented neither the Hereafter or world of the dead,[1] hence hardly 'Gan-Eden', but what we can infer is that Dilmun, like Eden, was a distant ideal place located on the earth (rather than in heaven), and was originally the habitation of immortals, not dead spirits.

We turn now to the location of the Hereafter, which turns out to be difficult because of our own cultural preconceptions and prejudices, since we are immediately inclined to speak of the 'Netherworld' or 'Underworld', which immediately rules out other possible locations within the cosmos. The Sumerian Hereafter is particularly difficult to assess within the framework.[2] One one hand, it may be logical to consider the concept of a Netherworld because of common burial practices, suggesting the the dead descend into a subterranean afterlife, but the idea of the Hereafter is often more closely related to cosmology in general and how the universe was conceived. The location of the land of the dead needed to be placed within a more general scheme of the cosmos, much as the way medieval maps often found a place for paradise within a mappa mundi [see Scafi].

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[1] despite the presence of some 150,000 burial mounds, which are not easily explained, see Alster 1983: 52.

There are two basic cosmological schemes from the ancient world, which turn out to be either a 'flat-earth' universe or a layer cake, depending upon various seemingly contradictory propositions. Essentially, a 'flat-earth' scheme differentiated only between heaven and earth; some gods resided in heaven, others (usually associated with nature) resided on earth; men inhabited the earth, as did demons, and the dead resided in a distant place, also on earth. In the more multi-dimensional layer cake cosmology, described by W. G. Lambert, the heavens above were differentiated from both the Earth and a subterranean Netherworld, which also somehow shared its space with the subterranean ocean of sweet water (Lambert 1975). As it happens, Lambert's description of the cosmos works well for the Semitic world but is less convincing for Sumer.

The core problem is how to interpret cosmological terminology which relates to the Hereafter, and this problem occupied Assyrian and Babylonian scholars as well.

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[2] The title of the useful book by Dina Katz (2003) encounters just this problem, since her discussion of the image of the 'Nether World' within Sumerian sources offers a rather confusing picture of the location of the dead.

The most significant terms are Sumerian terms, kur and ki, both of which can refer to the place of the dead, both both of which have primary meanings which do note relate to the dead. The word **kur** meant 'mountain', and it came to be used generally for 'land' with the sense of foreign territory, since regions surrounding Mesopotamia were often mountainous (e.g. the Iranian plateau); Sumer itself was known as the 'kalam', the alluvial plain. The term **kur** as applied to the dead was built into a common turn of phrase, **kur-nu-gi**, 'the mountain of no return', since the journey to the Hereafter was a single direction only. The word **ki**, on the other hand, was a generic term for 'place', which was translated by Akkadian scribes as *erṣetu*, 'earth',[3] and then by extension, 'underworld'; the term could apply to the habitation of both living and dead; there was not specific Akkadian term meaning 'Netherworld' or 'Underworld', with any clear geographical subterranean designation. At the same time, Akkadian scholars also translate **kur** as *erṣetu*, by simply ignoring the basic meaning of 'mountain'. The lack of clarity in these terms was obviously unsatisfactory, so that more focused vocabulary referring to the land of the dead developed: Sumerian used the terms **ki.gal** 'large place' and **urugal / irigal** 'large city', as designations for the Hereafter, and both terms were then loaned into Akkadian (*kigallu, irkallu*), with the latter term **urugal** being adopted by Akkadian scribes as a logogram for the 'grave' (*qabru*), but the underlying meaning was that the habitation of dead was a great city, reflecting the highly urbanised culture of Mesopotamia. Other terms were associated with this place, such as the **arali**-steppe which one had to transverse to arrive there (being distant), and the fact that the place of the dead had a palace (called **ganzir**) at its entrance, and a series of gates. All of these terms have been previously studied in detail (cf. Katz 2003, 63ff., Geller 1999).

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[3] Cognate to the Hebrew term used in the biblical creation account for 'earth'.

In the end, however, where is it? There is nothing here to suggest a subterranean place, since the main geographical designations are 1) a mountain, 2) a 'great city', and 3) that it is distant (across the steppe); arriving might also involve crossing water, since according to one idiom one 'sails' (u_5)[4] to the this place.

The crux in deciding this matter is the well-known opening line of the myth relating to the goddess Inanna's journey to the world of the dead, to rival her sister Ereshkigal, the queen of the Hereafter (**ki-gal**). In the opening lines of the myth, we are told that Innana 'went up/down to the Kur' (kur-ra ba-e-a-e_{11}); the verbal root $\mathbf{e_{11}}$ indicates motion either upwards or downwards. A parallel text also referring to Inanna, gives the identifical phrase with a slight variation (kur-ra ba-e-a-íl), in which the verb **íl** implies 'raising, lifting up'; in this second instance Inanna 'raises herself' up to the Kur(-mountain). Katz's treatment of these lines (2003: 251-254) is confusing; she acknowledges that the second text clearly shows Inanna going up to the Kur, but she does not carry the argument to its logical conclusion, that the land of the dead was located in the mountains, to which Inanna ascended. This idea conforms nicely with the flat-earth cosmology outlined above, in which gods (like Dumuzi) and mankind live on earth, while demons and the dead inhabit the Kur, a dangerous place.

There is a logical problem with this flat-earth cosmology, namely how one explains the path of the sun through the heavens: it rises in the East, sets in the West, and then returns to the East; how is this accomplished? A flat-earth scenario would suggest a two-tiered world in which the heaven (and its divine bureaucracy) more-or-less mirrors the earth, but no dimension is specified for a subterranean space; the sweet waters of the Abzu (abyss) belong to the earth.

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[4] See for example, the cxample cited by Katz 2003: 40, from Inanna's lament over Dumuzi, [mu-l]u-zu alim-e kur-šè ba-u_5, 'the bison has sailed your man to the "mountain"'.

Despite any possible contradictions, the mountains -- probably to the East of Mesopotamia -- served as the most likely location for the Sumerian land of the dead, but this idea was not shared by Akkadian scribes, who intentionally translated Inanna's journey to Ereshkigal with the term *urid*, 'descend', clearly indicating that in their view Inanna was descending to a Netherworld. This changes the cosmology considerably, since it reflects a universe that has to accommodate heaven, earth, and netherworld on three distinct levels, which this leads to another possible contradiction.

Central to the netherworld or layer-cake scheme is the fact that sun makes a full orbit, emerging from the horizon in the East, entering the horizon in the West, and traversing the netherworld during the night in order to return to the East by morning. There is, however, a problem here, namely the contradiction of the sun's orbit including a passage through the netherworld, which was by its very nature defined as a dark place (see Woods 2009: 224). It is difficult to imagine how the sun can travel anywhere without lighting it up. This contradiction, in fact, can already be found within the terminology associated with the solar passage through day and night; see Geller 1999: 47. Sumerian and Akkadian expressions referring to the sun are as follows:

Sum. utu-è = Akk. *ṣīt šamši* 'sunrise' (lit. 'coming out of sun')
Sum. utu-šú = Akk. *erēb šamši* 'sunset' (lit. 'entering of the sun')

The terms describe the sun's relations to the horizon, exiting from below the horizon at dawn and entering the horizon again at sunset, only to travel through the netherworld to return to the eastern horizon. Although oft repeated in bilingual literature, these correspondences do not actually reflect the basic meanings of the Sumerian words. Sumerian **šú**, for example, never actually means 'enter' (in contrast to 'exit'), since in this particular context referring to the passage of the sun, the word **šuš** means 'to darken' (Akk. *erēpu*); in other contexts it means to 'cover' or 'overwhelm' a place. In fact, a better Akkadian translation for the expression **utu-šú** would no doubt be *erēp šamši*, but the concept of *erebu* 'entering, sunset'[5] became fixed within the language, corresponding to *erev* 'evening' in Hebrew and other Semitic languages as well. The image of sunset as the time when the sun 'enters' the horizon dominated Semitic thinking, but is not represented in the Sumerian expression; it is a re-interpretation of Sumerian terms to conform to a fixed idea stemming from a preconceived cosmology.

The same type of re-interprestation of the Sumerian by Akkadian speakers can be seen in the complimentary expression for sunrise, **utu-è**, which was certainly understood by Semitic speakers as the sun breaking out of the horizon; in iconography the sun god is accompanied by his saw, probably instrumental in cutting his way to the early morning sky. Nevertheless, Sumerian offers consistent lexical and bilingual evidence for the verb **è** corresponding to Akkadian *napāhu*, 'to light a fire' , such as the hymnic phrase, ^{d}utu an-šà-ta è, translated by the Akkadian as *šamaš ina išid šamê tappuha*, 'O Sun(-god), you are kindled on the horizon' (cf. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* N/1 263). The sun is treated in these expressions as a lamp to be lit every morning in the East, and 'darkened' or extinguished in the West, without either exiting or entering the horizon at all. This shows the fundamental difference between the 'flat-earth' cosmology and that of the orbiting sun in a layer-cake cosmos.

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[5] corresponding to Sum. ku_4 'enter'.

Is there any way of resolving any of these contradictions? how, for instance, does the sun as a lamp return from West to East every day? We are never told. Perhaps this unresolved problem was one reason for Akkadian scribes to reject this cosmology. What about the alternative proposition, in which the orbiting sun must traverse the netherworld in order to return to the East? It may be that Egyptian cosmology offers a solution which was never realised in Mesopotamia.

From a Mesopotamian perspective, things in Egypt appear to be somewhat upside down, especially the concept of Mother Sky (Nut) and Father Earth (Geb), see Forman and Quirke 1996: 9. The Amduat, the Egyptian 'Book of the Hidden Chamber' of the netherworld, describes the nocturnal travels of Re, the son god, through the netherworld on his journey from West to East, describing every hour of Re's nightly voyage. The descriptions evoke a desert landscape full of serpents, but also of darkness, a place of the damned, beyond the fields of the more blessed dead. Egyptian funerary literature, however, has a unique resolution to the conundrum of the sun visiting the darkness of the netherworld: the sun is reborn daily on his journey, which is described as a daily resurrection of the Sun-god; in the text of Amduat, the dead king was identified with the Sun-god in his resurrection (Forman and Quirke 117). This offers a brilliant solution to the cosmic contradiction which was never resolved in Mesopotamia: the sun actually dies every day in the West, and hence his light is extinguished, only to be reborn when arriving at the East. The transfiguration of Re in the Amduat, however, still resembles the orbiting sun of Mesopotamia, while at the same time reflecting the lamp-like nature of the sun in Sumerian cosmology.

In any case, in retrospect we see that the orbiting sun and netherworld eventually carried the day, whether in biblical Sheol or Classical Hades. Still, it is worth bearing in mind that alternative world views existed but had to be literally interpreted out of the literary record.

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