

Linguistic Origin of Mesopotamian Legends and Myths

John Noack

This work was given as a presentation to Melbourne Agnostics on 8/11/25. When I lived in Melbourne (1990-2003), I was a regular at such meetings. Noack kindly made this piece available to me in print form. It is of course possible that he clarified or expanded upon some points while speaking on the day, but he was at liberty to include such exegesis in the written form of the piece, and a reviewer must rely upon that version.

Noack is evidently knowledgeable in the relevant domains. Here he commences with the well-known distinction between mythical and legendary narratives, and he expresses concern that mythical narratives in particular have given rise to much controversy, especially ‘between literalistic fundamentalists and liberal-minded free-thinkers’. (MN: This seems to apply especially where currently-followed religions are in question.)

Noack announces: ‘Within the context of this continuing intellectual and cognitive chaos, my task in this Talk is {1} to adopt and to apply an academic, higher-critical, scientific and naturalistic approach, and {2} to adopt and apply a positive attitude towards the imaginary and literary mythical realm and to its allegorical, metaphorical, poetical, anagogical and psychical personal appropriations. This approach therefore includes the use of both prose and poetry’. This proposal appears rather grand; one might doubt if it could ever be fulfilled in a single presentation. But maybe such a presentation could lead thinkers in an advantageous direction. On the other hand, Noack is not here explicit about the decidedly unorthodox nature of his specific proposals,

Noack commences in earnest with a schema involving ‘Three Realms as Contexts for Myths’: mental, mythological and physical. Like many presentations of conceptual schemata in this kind of context, this analysis is unargued. Having said that, the search for useful schemata is itself a worthy one; genuinely useful schemata are of great help in such studies. But in this case it is not clear to me that the mental realm **necessarily** involves archetypes (this is a matter of psychological theory), nor that mythological notions are **necessarily** allegorical in character (that too is a matter of theory, there having been many opposed theories of such matters). Neither will all analysts accept the dichotomy which this analysis forces between ‘mostly supernatural and theistic explanations of the features, events and beings in [people’s] known and imagined World [on the one hand] and their imagined **mythical** and legendary narratives [on the other]’. Etc.

It must be acknowledged that Noack is ‘upfront’ about his schemata, unlike some writers such as the Tasmanian amateur skeptical philosopher of my acquaintance who merely **used** novel schemata without explanation as if readers would a) understand and b) accept them.

Noack goes on to introduce a further three-way schema involving Positivistic, Psychical and Practical perspectives/rationales. He sets these out in one column (‘Historical-Critical’) of a two-column array. This column, he claims ‘has been the methodology for the liberal, academic and free-thinking scholars and students, including [him]self’. Eleven specific items are listed in this column under five groupings; the relation between these entries and the three listed above is not made explicit. In the second column of the array, there are eight items opposed to ‘the eleven’, in the same five groupings. These items are attributed to the ‘Grammatical-Historical’ methodology which Noack sets up in opposition to the ‘academic and non-theological’ ‘Historical-Critical’ methodology.

The notion of a ‘Grammatical-Historical’ methodology is familiar to me mainly in the context of biblical scholarship/theology, where it involves a hermeneutic method that seeks to discover the original intended meaning in the text as composed by the supposedly authoritative biblical authors – in contrast with more critical and less religiously-committed methods of exegesis which are not so focused upon the authors’ intentions. Although, as will be seen, he does have a specific interest in the Hebrew Bible and its antecedent texts, Noack seems here to be using the term ‘Grammatical-

Historical' in a wider sense, referring to an approach to mythological studies generally which involves acceptance of the supernatural, divine inspiration, miracles as veridical facts, etc. – all of which are rejected in the Historical-Critical approach where an essentially materialist view is taken of the physical world. For Noack, 'Grammatical-Historical' also involves a focus upon historical context which is surely **shared** with the Historical-Critical approach (Noack's categorising appears odd at this point).

In both the narrow theological sense of the term 'Grammatical-Historical' and its wider sense as employed by Noack, the presence here of the word *grammatical* strikes a linguist as odd, not to say misleading. In linguistics this word applies to the structural forms of spoken or written languages at the word-and-morpheme level, as opposed to phonology (speech-sounds), semantics (meaning), etc. (The presence of grammar is one of the main general features distinguishing human language from all other known communication systems.) The word can be applied to other kinds of structure, e.g. the structure of argumentation, belief-systems, art, music, etc. only by way of (imperfect) analogy; linguists themselves generally avoid such usage. I confess that I myself do not understand what Noack means by the term *grammatical* in this kind of context.

Noack goes on to introduce further numbered sets of contrasting or associated aspects of human existence/experience. He suggests that the physical and the 'psychical' need to be 'balanced' in human beings (though this seems to clash with his disapprobation of the notions listed in his 'Grammatical-Historical' column). He also introduces and analyses the four-way schema for human mental functions developed by the 'Depth-Psychologist' Carl Jung, then a schema involving 'Four Levels of Meaning, Understanding And Application', then a diagrammatic analysis of the 'logical' versus the 'mythological' mind. And as the paper progresses Noack presents, again in an array of columns, the conceptual systems allegedly characteristic of various cultures and historical phases (with particular emphasis on the Hebrew Bible), then (with less obvious relevance) two schematic presentations of the history of Earth and of humanity (all species; not especially *Homo sapiens*), then the conflict between 'Young Earth Creationism' and the prevailing 'Old Earth/Universe' evolutionary account of deep-time history, presented as an example of the cognitive dissonance involving the two columns of Noack's first array, Etc., etc.

In my view, by this relatively early stage Noack's ever richer and at times very difficult multi-stage schematisation is running the risk of alienating those thinkers who work with rival schemata or who do not find the need for such complex schemata in respect of at least some such matters – or who disagree with, for instance, the schema proposed by Jung or with Noack's interpretation of same. As a linguist I am accustomed to theoretical diversity, which is often entrenched by the tendency for scholars to be uninterested in unfamiliar alternative theories and unwilling to spend time and effort becoming familiar with them. In some cases where the unfamiliar theories are over-complex and inadequately justified and explained, this reluctance may in fact itself appear justified. Indeed, Noack's own approach arguably illustrates the tendency which I mentioned in a specifically linguistic context at the start of my paper on 'ontolophemes' towards what might be called '**over**-theorising' – without adequate justification for the schemata presented. Unless and until I am persuaded that these matters can be usefully treated by taking Noack's various schemata as given and as valid/veridical, I myself would see little point in trying to assess his ideas in detail

Having said this, it may still be worthwhile to discuss the Mesopotamian focus which is mentioned in Noack's title. In a section dealing with the more directly empirical question of the ultimate origins of myth, Noack first introduces this topic: 'The early Mesopotamian Sumerians and the later linguistically-Semitic Akkadians became skilled at understanding the stellar and zodiacal cycles and at naming and creating stories about these sky bodies, patterns and cycles'. But Noack's discussion of this period and especially of the preceding periods (and of developments along these lines in other early cultures with lower-level literacy or with none) is of course (like any such discourse) somewhat tendentious and speculative, e.g. with respect to the clearly much earlier origins of spoken language and its upshots, and the initial development of the rudiments of theoretical

astronomy and of star-lore. In the absence of writing (not currently known from before 3000 BCE), contemporary explicatory material is not available. Noack's reference to the mythical and almost certainly apocryphal figure of Hermes Trismegistus will be regarded with especial suspicion by skeptics; it hardly seems to fit in with his Historical-Critical approach as discussed above. We can only observe (and try to interpret) the cosmological ideas of Mesopotamian and other early cultures as expressed in their texts (where these are available) and in the relevant surviving artefacts.

Noack has much to say about Mesopotamian thought, including their now familiar belief in the 'Anunnaki' – which provides a link with the Hebrew book of *Genesis*, where similar beings are called Nephilim. (Recent fringe writers have interpreted these cycles of myth as referring to alien beings from a planet called Nibiru. Reasonably, Noack does not take these notions seriously.) Other links with *Genesis* include the events reported in the Sumerian and Akkadian versions of the Epic of Gilgamesh, which transparently correspond with the story of Noah. Noack refers to these links. (But such links do not furnish a close connection between the matters now under discussion and biblical scholarship as discussed above, the relevance of which remains rather obscure.)

Noack introduces here the specifically linguistic element which gives him his title. It involves verbal puns, either written or spoken. For him, it is (not unreasonably) alphabetic letters and the phonemes represented by same which are in question here. Puns are not infrequent in ancient writings. It is likely that St Jerome's novel specific identification of Eve's forbidden fruit as an apple involves a written pun in Latin (which would not work in spoken Latin). Various writers of various degrees of expertise have advanced proposals involving puns. R.A. Strong and Bernard Macklin, in *The Real Birth of Aphrodite: Multiple Proofs of the Secret Amarna Presence in Greek Mythology*, propose supposed puns as evidence (largely unpersuasive) of linguistic (and cultural) influence between Egyptian and Greek. In his misleadingly-titled work *An Introduction to Language and Cuneiforms* Peter Linaker, a student of Sumerian (see below) determinedly seeking covert systems which would explain apparently unsystematic features of language in synchronic ways, unreasonably regards as mysterious the (in fact not uncommon) mixture of logographs and phonological spelling which characterizes the Sumerian cuneiform script, and goes on to argue that some features of the Sumerian script which are generally interpreted as phonological can be interpreted only by ignoring Sumerian phonology and focusing instead upon hitherto unrecognized semantic properties of the characters. Linaker develops a theory involving the existence of covert, highly coherent systems of cuneiform characters, involving double-entendres after the manner of written puns.

Noack refers specifically to John McHugh, who has an academic background in archaeology but is now described as an 'independent scholar'. McHugh claims in *The Celestial Code of Scripture* that he has discovered a literary code which was used by 'myth-makers' or 'Magi' for their early Mesopotamian 'productions'. These writers are said to have called this coded language 'lumasi-writing' (the word *lumasi* is actually an Akkadian word for a certain mythological creature) and to have used individual sounds, syllables and words to describe and to reveal to humans 'the beings, objects, places and events in the sky' and parallel terrestrial entities. In cases where these sounds and words had more than one meaning (homonymy; but see below), the Magi could use verbal puns – though it is not entirely clear that this method, rather than disambiguation, would be the best course of action, or even that subterfuge of this kind would be desirable in the first place. (Linaker holds that Sumerian culture was characterised by the total avoidance of direct reference to sexual themes, which if true would provide a motive for indirectness in places; but this does not seem to be relevant to Noack's discourse.) Of course, all known examples of punning (if so they be; see further below) were produced by human writers, but Noack holds that they were regarded as implicated in divine revelations from various sources.

Noack exemplifies the use of puns by means of homonyms and other such words in contemporary English. He uses the form *bow*, which in fact illustrates polysemy (a range of distinct but **related** meanings for a word) as well as genuine homonymy (unconnected words with different meanings which **happen** to have arrived at the same spelling and pronunciation) – and also homography, where

unconnected and phonologically distinct words have the same spelling and where puns work only in writing (as with Jerome's apple), and indeed homophony, where unconnected words have the same pronunciation but not the same spelling and where puns work only in speech (in the case of *bow*, an relevant example of homophony is *bough*). Noack writes as if he is unfamiliar with linguistic terminology and conceptualisation such as I have used here and is 're-inventing the wheel' at this stage. He is not actually wrong at any point but he appears unsophisticated and given his linguistic focus as announced in his title he might have undertaken some reading in the discipline in advance of writing.

This issue is more serious where the Mesopotamian languages themselves and their non-alphabetic and complex cuneiform script are involved. The two main Mesopotamian languages are both written in cuneiform script: Sumerian and Akkadian. They are 'genetically' unrelated (Sumerian is a 'language isolate' with **no** known genetical relatives) but experienced influential contact, e.g. there are, as noted above, both Sumerian and Akkadian versions of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Neither language (nor indeed the script *per se*) could be read by modern scholars until the 19th Century. And neither has a structure similar to those of familiar European languages. Work on these languages is challenging to say the least.

Noack does not himself rehearse persuasively the puns which he regards as having been identified in the cuneiform material. He invokes the work of other scholars, notably the drawings of the elusive Elizabeth Hardy as presented by McHugh. These findings themselves are not always perspicuously presented here. As with Linaker's proposals, it might be held that at least some of these 'puns' are in fact chance homonyms and that no esoteric (or other) connection is to be identified.

Noack's source McHugh refers by way of background to the structure of Sumerian, in which root words are mainly mono-syllabic and combine to form longer composite words, each of which can have more than one meaning. Noack also reads McHugh as holding that the language's individual 'sounds' can also have various different meanings, but it is not clear whether he is referring here to the mono-syllabic roots or to the phonemes (sounds) out of which these in turn are composed. If the latter, conceptual confusion is involved, as phonemes have no meanings of their own; if the former, the matter is uncontroversial, involving only homonymy, which as noted need not involve punning.

It must be noted that very short forms (mono-syllabic, etc.) in one specific language or in a range of languages can very easily come to have the same or very similar forms by chance. Examples from languages with known histories are legion. For example, German *habe(n)* and Latin *habe(re)*, both meaning 'have' and found in familiar, related languages, are **unrelated** forms. Where linguistic histories are uncertain, non-chance relationships cannot be assumed to be correct in such cases.

McHugh's especial focus, given his ideas as referenced above about the origins of Mesopotamian writing, is upon puns involving astronomical ideas. He also finds many other examples of punning in Mesopotamian myth and legend, for example in names such as those which later appear in the Hebrew Old Testament, such as *Adam*. But these specific proposals do not appear *prima facie* to be at all certain. And it is unclear how far such Sumerian origins, even if real, would be relevant when a character or name appeared in a later culture with a different language.

It may be that my own expertise is insufficient for me to give Noack's notions a fair appraisal. I welcome comment from anyone better qualified. But I am not altogether ill-informed on these matters, especially where linguistics is concerned. Pending correction, I stand by my observations above.