I. A Genre Is Born

The oldest known visionary journey to hell is found in a Neo-Assyrian text of the 7th century B.C.E. known as the “Underworld Vision of an Assyrian Crown Prince.”1 As a forerunner of the apocalyptic otherworldly journey and the visionary Tour of Hell, its lineage includes the books of Enoch, the Revelation of John, and Dante’s Inferno. Scholars have therefore agreed that the text has great significance for the history of religions and literature.2 But no one can agree on precisely what that significance is. The text’s interpretation has been hampered by its very distinctiveness: in 2,000 years of cuneiform literature, there are no other examples of the genre it represents, and its nearest relative is the Enochic Book of the Watchers, which first appears in Qumran Aramaic manuscripts of the second century B.C.E.

While the Underworld Vision has clear mythic and epic roots in the descents of Inanna/Ishtar and Gilgamesh, it is distinguished

1 Edited by Alasdair Livingstone Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea. State Archives of Assyria III (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1989). 68-76. This paper was first presented at the 2001 meeting of the American Oriental Society. I thank Tim Collins, Walter Farber, Jerrold Cooper and Gonzalo Rubio for comments on early versions, and am grateful to Bernard Levinson and the anonymous reviewer for JANER for detailed and thoughtful readings of the penultimate draft. All errors are my own.

2 “Formally the Akkadian vision is of great interest for the background of early Jewish apocalypses, but is more relevant to the otherworldly journeys of Enoch than to the symbolic vision of Daniel.” John J. Collins “Stirring up the Great Sea. The Religio-Historical Background of Daniel 7,” in A. S. van derWoude, ed., The Book of Daniel in the Light of New Findings (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1993) 121-36, reprinted in Collins, Seers, Sibyls and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism (Leiden: Brill, 1997); the assessment occurs on pp. 147-8 of the republication. Collins is responding to the more detailed arguments of Helge Kvanvig, which agree on the text’s interest but draw very different conclusions about what they are: Kvanvig sees the text as providing a background for the vision of Daniel 7. See Roots of Apocalyptic: the Mesopotamian Background of the Enoch Figure and of the Son of Man. WMANT 61 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988).
from its Sumerian and Akkadian ancestors in multiple ways. Its hero is a contemporary human being, not a god or demigod of the mythic past, who travels to the underworld not physically but in a dream or night-vision. There he experiences a revelation from an enthroned deity, before whom he collapses in fear. The revelation is couched in a distinctive style involving demonstrative pronouns, as if the god is explaining or interpreting something, but there is no prior description of what is being explained. The revelation concerns the protagonist’s ancestor, a great earthly king who now lies buried in the netherworld. The awe-inspiring glimpse of divine justice concludes with a message from the enthroned deity, chastening the protagonist into a conversion, a sweeping change in his personality and behavior when he returns to earthly life. These features make it both unique in the ancient Near East and intriguingly similar to a well-established genre of late antique literature, starting with the Jewish apocalypses of the Hellenistic period.  

With particular clarity and force, the Underworld Vision raises a fundamental question in the history of religions: to what should it be compared? Because of its apparent isolation in Mesopotamian culture and its potential relationship with Jewish and later materials, scholars have been tempted to decontextualize its contents, directly correlating its striking features across place and time. But analysis of the text without regard for cultural and historical context has yielded predictably unsatisfactory results. Can we take a different tack, seeing the Underworld Vision’s distinctive generic features in light of its richly documented historical context?

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3 The only comparable Egyptian tours of hell are Hellenistic and later. These include the story of Setne Khamwas and Si-Osire (Miriam Lichtheim Ancient Egyptian Literature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) v. 3: 138-51) and the brief reference in the Coptic Christian martyrdom of S. Shenoufe (119 R ii-V ii in E. Reymond and J. Barns, Four Martyrdoms from the Pierpont Morgan Coptic Codices. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973) 203. The story of Setne’s journey to Hell (139-142) appears in a Demotic papyrus of Roman date (Lichtheim 125) and displays Hellenistic conceptions such as the posthumous reward of the just, the graded suffering of sinners according to their sins, and the role of interpreting angel, played by the god Horus posing as Setne’s son. Thanks to F. P. Gaudard for this information.

4 It was the merit of Helge Kvanvig to provide the first detailed interpretation of the text in relationship to apocalyptic literature. But his work is just one instance of a widespread approach with serious drawbacks: Kvanvig was not the first to describe a set of general similarities between an isolated Near Eastern “background” text and a “foregrounded” Biblical or Jewish literary culture. What is needed are comparisons between equally contextualized literary cultures.