JEAN BOTTERO, "MESOPOTAMIA: WRITING, REASONING, AND THE GODS"

KAREL VAN DER TOORN

Review article


This translation of fifteen essays by Jean Bottero is to be welcomed as an important service to an English-speaking audience with an interest in the culture and religion of ancient Mesopotamia. Bottero is one of the masters of French Assyriology. Yet he is more than a decipherer of clay tablets. Though an eminent philologist, his interests go beyond the problems of grammar and the editing of texts. With Wilfred Lambert and Johannes van Dijk, Bottero ranks as one of the European specialists on Mesopotamian religion. The width of his vision, his profound knowledge of Mesopotamian culture, his humor and wit make him one of the few who are capable to entertain a general audience about subjects that are ordinarily looked upon as dull and dry.

Until recently, English-speaking students of religion depended on other writers for their knowledge about Mesopotamian religion. One thinks of the works by Thorkild Jacobsen (The Treasures of Darkness [New Haven & London, 1976], Towards the Image of Tammuz [ed. William L. Moran; Cambridge, 1970], or his contribution to Henri Frankfort's The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man [Chicago & London, 1946]) and A. Leo Oppenheim (such as the section on religion in his Ancient Mesopotamia. Portrait of a Dead Civilization [Chicago & London, 1964; Rev. Ed. 1977]), or Willem H. Ph. Römer's chapter on 'Religion of Ancient Mesopotamia' in Bleeker & Widengren, Historia Religionum, I; Religions of the Past (Leiden, 1969). It is fortunate that Bottero can now be added to this selective list.

Bottero writes a superb French; translating such French into English is no small accomplishment, and the translators are to be congratulated with their performance. Not being a native speaker of English (nor of French, for that matter), I am poorly equipped to savor the finesses of the transla-
tion. Most readers will probably be able to see some French idiom through the English. This effect may have been deliberate, though, as it lends a certain charm to the book. In some cases, however, the translators have not been free of a certain naivety. What is the use of telling an anglophone audience that they have to pronounce the ‘u’ in transcriptions as ‘ou,’ thus pronouncing Uruk as Ourouk (p. ix)? And since we are dealing with transcriptions, why was the French custom of using the circumflex adopted, irrespective of whether a vowel is contracted or simply long? It would have been easy to conform to the transcriptions of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary. In some places the choice of an English term is not entirely felicitous. Thus the word gâchis is better rendered as ‘waste’ than as ‘mess’ (p. 17; French edition p. 32). But such are minor points in view of the overall success of the translation.

The book is a collection of essays, most of them published separately before. Though written over a period of some twenty years, they display a remarkable unity in style and orientation. The fifteen essays are divided over four sections: Assyriology, Writing, Institutions and Mentality, and Religion. For the readership of this journal the latter two sections are of particular interest. They contain contributions on Oneiromancy (pp. 105-124; see now Jean-Marie Durant, ‘Les rêves’, Archives Épistolaires de Mari I/1 [Paris, 1988], 453-482), Divination and the Scientific Spirit (pp. 125-137), The Substitute King and His Fate (pp. 138-155), The ‘Code’ of Hammurabi (pp. 156-184), ‘Free Love’ and Its Disadvantages (pp. 185-198), The Religious System (pp. 201-231), Intelligence and the Technical Function of Power: Enki/Ea (pp. 232-250), The Dialogue of Pessimism and Transcendence (pp. 251-267; with a new translation of the ‘Dialogue of Pessimism’ that departs form the one proposed by Lambert. Note for instance the phrase ‘To wash one’s hands [in preparation of dining, KvdT] makes the time pass’ instead of the too literal rendering ‘Šamaš accompanies washed hand’), and The Mythology of Death (pp. 268-286).

The juxtaposition of these fifteen essays produces an effect they do not have by themselves. Taken together, they give an insight into some of Bottéro’s central ideas; the latter recur throughout these various essays. Instead of listing a catalogue of corrections and additions, it seems more profitable to discuss here two of these leading concepts. The one concerns the role of Mesopotamia as the cradle of Western civilization; the other is about divination being a science and, in a sense, the precursor of modern science.

One of the questions most frequently put to the Assyriologist by a lay audience concerns the use of his specialism. Why bother to do Assyriology at all? There seems little profit in the study of a dead civilization. Bottéro