

FREE LOVE IN BABYLONIA?

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Résumé

Cet article tente d'approfondir la notion de l'« amour libre » selon Jean Bottéro.

Mots-clés : sexualité, prostitution, amour libre.

Abstract

This essay attempts to understand Bottéro's notion of "free love."

Key words : sexuality, prostitution, free love.

In 1980 the mail brought an offprint from my dear friend and colleague, Jean Bottéro, with the "catchy" (in the author's own words) title "L' 'amour libre' à Babylone et ses 'servitudes'."¹ Above the title, Jean penned a note: "Voilà que je marche sur tes brisées!" He was thinking, no doubt, of my earlier contribution to the *Reallexikon* on erotic imagery in the Ancient Near East.² His 1980 essay reappeared seven years later, slightly reworked as "L' 'amour libre' et ses désavantages" in *Mésopotamie: L'écriture, la raison et les dieux*, and five years later as "'Free Love' and its Disadvantages" in the excellent translation of that volume, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*.³ A more popular, somewhat different and differently titled version of Bottéro's take on carnal pleasures in ancient Mesopotamia appeared in a special 1984 issue of *L'Histoire* on love and sexuality, and was subsequently included in *Initiation à l'Orient ancien* (English: *Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, "Love and Sex in Babylon"), as well as in a 2004 collection of his essays, but this time under the title "L' 'amour libre' à Babylone."⁴

The scare quotes around "free love" (omitted in the 2004 volume) indicate that the author knows that what he is about to describe is not free love as it is commonly understood – consensual sexual activity unrestricted by marriage or other legal constraints.⁵ Nevertheless, the title might appear more whacky than catchy to a reader familiar with ancient Mesopotamia. A free Mesopotamian man in the 18th century BC could have sex with his wife, with a prostitute, or a slave, much as could, say, a French or American man

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¹ BOTTÉRO 1980.

² COOPER 1975.

³ BOTTÉRO 1987, 1992a. This remains, in my opinion, unsurpassed as an introduction to ancient Mesopotamia, worthy of standing alongside the magisterial work of Oppenheim (OPPENHEIM 1964).

⁴ BOTTÉRO 1984a, 1992b, 2001, 2004.

⁵ See the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* ("free love,") or http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_love.

of the 18th century AD.⁶ What could Bottéro have meant by “free love?” The Mesopotamian man, we know, could not have intercourse with another man’s wife or unmarried daughter, or even another man’s virgin slave, without suffering severe legal penalties. However, these restrictions on male sexuality, Bottéro maintained, were not imposed for morality’s sake, but rather to maintain social order. Sexual activity *per se*, he claimed, was morally unobjectionable.

Thus, Bottéro continued, the women who were given over to “free love,” i.e. prostitutes,⁷ were untainted by moral sanction. The pejorative descriptions of prostitutes’ lives found in Mesopotamian literature were not caused by moral disapproval of their activity. To the contrary, “to give oneself to free love in whatever form was a wholesome, elevated, and enriching activity.”⁸ Those negative views of prostitution as a career, he insisted, were based on the fact that a prostitute was lonely and vulnerable, and that she was not fulfilling a woman’s normal destiny, to marry and raise children within a patriarchal family. But, for most readers, the well documented pejorative references to prostitutes and prostitution in Mesopotamian texts imply what we would consider to be moral opprobrium.⁹ And his argument from destiny is weak, since prostitution *was* a legitimate institution, one of the “norms” (Sumerian *me*) of civilization stolen by Inana from Enki, as Bottéro himself related.¹⁰

A final argument brought forward by Bottéro was that “the officiants of free love” had “a type of paroxysmal life,” and “all that is paroxysmal is ambivalent ... admirable and desirable ... as well as dangerous, alarming, and to be avoided as much as possible, for its force that is too great.”¹¹ The author’s own ambivalence comes clearly to the fore in the very next sentence, which concludes his essay. We are told that “in spite of the contempt in which its qualified representatives were held ... we can rediscover the eminent dignity of free love ... in the minds of the ancient Babylonians.”¹² Is paroxysm ever dignified?

Bottéro’s improbable idea of the Babylonians’ esteem for prostitutes was based on his conception of “free love.” If, as we have seen, and as Bottéro knew, the average Babylonian male’s potential sexual partners were limited, in what sense was love “free?” First, Bottéro did not seem to take the draconian legal sanctions against adulterers very seriously. Men, he insisted, were “entirely free to visit periodically other married ... women,” and women, “in spite of these prohibitions and harsh penalties ... followed their own desires as much as they do now.”¹³ But most importantly, he believed that morality for the Mesopotamians was merely a roadmap to achieving success and avoiding legal or supernatural punishment. There was no sense of punishment in the afterlife for sins committed in this life, and violating religious or moral prohibitions did not necessarily lead to divine punishment.¹⁴

⁶ I am restricting my discussion to heterosexual intercourse, although Bottéro discusses homosexuality as well. For homosexuality in ancient Mesopotamia, see COOPER 2002, NISSINEN 1998.

⁷ See COOPER 2006.

⁸ BOTTÉRO 1992a: 193.

⁹ COOPER 2006: 13-14.

¹⁰ BOTTÉRO 1992a: 192-193.

¹¹ BOTTÉRO 1992a: 198. For more along this same line, see BOTTÉRO 1987.

¹² BOTTÉRO 1992a, p. 198.

¹³ BOTTÉRO 1992a: 186-187.

¹⁴ BOTTÉRO 1992a: 187-188.

One could, and really should, dispute Bottéro's interpretation of Mesopotamian moral and religious sentiment, but that remains to be done elsewhere.

The key to understanding why Bottéro thought that love in Babylonia was "free," can be found in the following passage: "They did not develop any conception resembling the one given to us by Christianity, i.e. that of *sin*, which would have involved some type of conscience in one's innermost heart ... we have not yet found the slightest trace of any ascetic or mystical ideal ... that would have urged someone to renounce something profitable that others commonly used."¹⁵ A similar sentiment can be found in his discussion of Adam and Eve, where he told us that the ancient Hebrews, like their Babylonian contemporaries,¹⁶ "n'avaient pas du tout, de la sexualité et de son exercice, les mêmes appréhensions et censures que nous, héritiers du discrédit et du soupçon dans lesquels le christianisme pastoral traditionnel nous a durablement appris à les tenir." For Bottéro, then, "free" love was love without guilt, especially the guilt inculcated by certain strains of Christianity (and, we might add, certain strains of Judaism and Islam as well). In his own words,¹⁷ "Why on earth should one feel demeaned or diminished, or guilty in the eyes of the gods, practising it in whatever way one pleased, always provided ... that no third party was harmed or that one was not infringing any of the customary prohibitions which controlled daily life." To which one can only add one's enthusiastic assent!

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I will forever be grateful for the affection, friendship, and hospitality that Jean Bottéro extended to me. My days and weeks *chez lui* were among the most pleasurable of my entire life. Reading one of his warm, earthy, wide-ranging letters always transported me back to Gif, leaving me suffused with a sense of calm and good will. Our work together on *Textes culinaires Mésopotamiens* (BOTTÉRO 1995) was a rewarding affirmation of our friendship. The present brief exercise is an attempt to comprehend one of the only serious Assyriological quarrels I had with him.¹⁸

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¹⁵ BOTTÉRO 1992a: 187.

¹⁶ BOTTÉRO 1984b: 40.

¹⁷ BOTTÉRO 2001: 97.

¹⁸ Another, the most serious, had to do with his unfortunate remarks in several places about Semites, ancient and modern (e.g. BOTTÉRO 2001: 112: "When it comes to feminism, the ancient Semites . . . and their descendants have a rather poor reputation."). That such sentiments were expressed with an amused and almost approving air, and not with the slightest malicious or racist intent, leads me, in retrospect, to write them off to a difference in generational perspective, which surely accounts, as well, for his understanding of "free love."

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