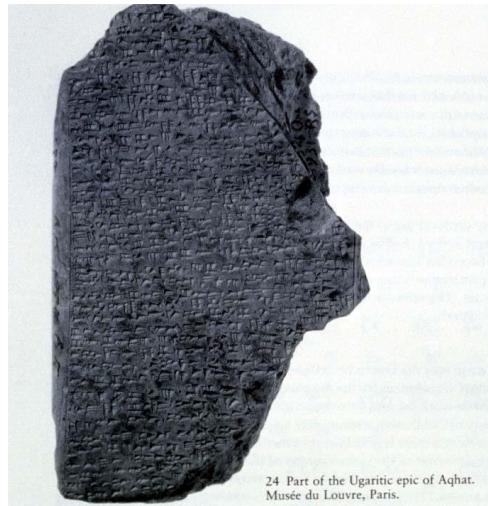


Section 10.1: Mesopotamian Literature, Part 1 (*Enuma Elish*)



Scholars today are unsure about what exactly differentiated poetry from prose in the ancient Near East. One thing is certain. Rhyme and meter, linguistic features which are traditionally used in many cultures to shape words into verse, were *not* determining factors. Instead, Mesopotamian poetry seems to entail only a heightened sense of language, a loftiness of expression, and perhaps also musical accompaniment which, of course, isn't apparent in cuneiform texts.

But there were also other more obvious factors at work in sculpting the poetic language of the ancient Near East, features of discourse which readers today may not associate with verse but the Mesopotamians almost surely did. One of those is repetition, technically termed “repetitive parallelism,” a characteristic of poetry visible as far back in time as the Sumerians. In its simplest form, this involves speaking the same words twice. It’s eminently visible in the following lines of the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian New Year's hymn, a paeon to their central god Marduk:

You are the most important among the great gods;
Your destiny is unequalled, your command is Anu.
Marduk, you are the most important among the great gods,
Your destiny is unequalled, your command is Anu. (*Enuma Elish* 4.3-6)

Originally, this repetition may have arisen from the oral nature of this poetry, which is to say that it was designed to be performed in public where refrain and recapitulation would be a natural feature. But such bald repetition as seen above is actually rather rare in ancient Near Eastern literature. More often, repetitive parallelism involves changes and additions in the second half of the verse, what scholars call “progressive specification,” such as in these, the opening line of the same work:

When above, the heaven had not been named,
Below, the earth had not yet been called by name, . . . (EE 1.1-2)

This pair of lines says essentially the same thing twice, "when the universe had as yet no name," but the poet has broken the thought into two halves: the anonymity of heaven in the first line and

that of earth in the second. In much the same way, Mesopotamian poets often used the second line to add a further pertinent detail, a type of redundancy termed “incremental repetition,” for example:

<Tiamat> was angry and cried out to her husband;
She cried out and raged furiously, she alone. (EE 1.42-3)

In the surviving poetic documents of the ancient Near East, these repetitional devices occur frequently and can assume a wide range of shapes and sizes. For instance, though they most often take the form of couplets, sometimes repetitive pairs stretch out over a full quatrain (four lines) or are collapsed into two half-lines. Quite a few statements go without any parallel at all. Thus, there was no firm or consistent principle guiding the creation of poetry in Mesopotamia. All in all, the only consistent feature of this sort of ancient verse is a sense of elevated language suitable for the grand occasions at and about which the verse was sung, and while there is a loose sense of rhythm — each line encompasses usually one thought — there's no discernible meter as such.



[Before proceeding, please read the summary of the plot of the *Enuma Elish* poem on p. 160 in the course textbook.]

The *Enuma Elish* is not a creation myth as such. It's a hymn to Marduk, the principal god of Babylon. Its main purpose is to glorify him and justify his hegemony over all other gods, clearly a metaphor for the city's sense of its righteous domination over Mesopotamia. That is why most scholars assume it was composed during the reign of Hammurabi, at least in the form we have it, because that's the only period in which Babylonians could have realistically defended any such claim before the time of Nebuchadnezzar.

But in making the case for Marduk's preeminence, the hymn incorporates elements of the Babylonians' creation myth which are highly informative about their view of the universe. Indeed, the poem opens at the beginning of the world, then narrates a war among the gods, all of

which leads to the rise of Marduk who constructs the pieces of the world as the Babylonians knew it, and it all ends with his installation as the supreme deity who maintains order and peace in the universe. But how quickly the creation part of the work unfolds shows that that was never intended to be the central theme. The same is true for the creation of humankind in the later part of the *Enuma Elish* which reads like a summary, not a fully fleshed out narrative. It's likely there were other literary works in Babylon that told those stories in greater depth and with which the public was quite familiar.

But this allusive narrative is all we have of their vision of creation and that makes it inordinately valuable. It also means we need to be careful when comparing the *Enuma Elish* with other pieces of true creation literature like the Greek author Hesiod's *Theogony* ("The Birth of the Gods") or the Book of Genesis. The opening lines of the *Enuma Elish* may read like the beginning of a creation tale, but what follows is not. Here are the original Akkadian words of the first two lines, with the English translation of each below:

<i>Enuma</i>	<i>elish</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>nabu</i>	<i>shamamu</i>	
When	on high	not	were named	the heavens	
	<i>Shaplish</i>	<i>ammatum</i>	<i>shumam</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>zakrat</i>
	when below	the earth	its name	not	was pronounced

Note how it opens: "When ... when ..." The Bible does the same at the start of the second version of creation (Genesis 2:4):

These are the generations of heavens and of the earth *when* they were created, *in the day that* the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

That second clause ("in the day that") could just as easily be rendered "when." Moreover, some scholars argue that the first creation story, the one that opens Genesis, is better translated "In the beginning (*when*) God created the heaven and the earth ..." Note also the focus on naming the sky and the land. The assumption that things don't exist until they have a label is also seen in the first chapter of Genesis where God calls the light day and the darkness night (Gen. 1:5). This pattern is evidenced throughout the Bible, as in the Book of Isaiah 49:1: "The Lord called me before I was born, While I was in my mother's womb, he named me." Naming is clearly part of the first stages in the creation process, and thus the association of nomenclature with origin stories is a venerable and well-attested tradition in Mesopotamia.

A few lines later, the *Enuma Elish* continues:

When not one of the gods had been formed
 Or had come into being, when no destinies had been decreed,
 The gods were created within them:
 Lahmu and Lahamu were formed and came into being.
 While they grew and increased in stature
 Anshar and Kishar, who excelled them, were created. (EE 1.7-12)

There are many interesting things to note about this passage. For instance, the names of the gods Anshar (“Heaven”) and Kishar (“Earth”) contains Sumerian verbal roots: *an* (“up”) and *ki* (“down”). It’s a hint at the extreme antiquity of the story. Also, while the names Lahmu and Lahamu do not mean anything explicitly in Akkadian — they’re often referred to as “nonsense names” — they are clearly built on the same verbal root which produces the term for “silt.” Alluvial deposition makes a natural metaphor in this part of the world where flooding and irrigation are so central. But silt is more than just murky water. It marks the margin between what’s transparent (clear water) and what’s not (muddy water), the horizontal boundary between light and dark. An Egyptian would have called it the *akhet* (“horizon”) of being. Compare Genesis 1:4:

And God divided the light from the darkness.

It’s notable that the Mesopotamian tradition focuses on the concrete world (mud, silt and water), while the Bible translates the same distinction into abstract terms (light and darkness). In any case, talking about silt would have been largely meaningless to Hebrews who did not inhabit a river delta, and there can be little doubt that’s why the metaphor got edited out of their version of creation.

Note also how the Bible never says explicitly where these primordial waters came from, only that “the earth was without form (*tohu*) and void (*vohu*).” Like Lahmu and Lahamu in the *Enuma Elish*, the Hebrew of Genesis 2:1 also contains a jingling pair, *tohu* (“chaos”) and *vohu*, the second of which is a nonsense word. The most obvious reason for this choice of phrasing is that including a construction of this sort was a traditional feature of creation stories in the ancient Near East. That is, the Hebrews said *tohu* and *vohu* at this point in the story because that’s the type of thing everyone did.

But *tohu* is actually the more interesting of the pair. Though it’s often translated “without form,” it means literally “the deep,” and it’s cognate with — that is, linguistically related to — the Babylonian name Tiamat used later in the poem for the goddess of aboriginal waters. In other words, *tohu* and Tiamat are not other words. They’re the same word essentially, yet another habit the Hebrews picked up from their neighbors. And one more thing, there’s no article (“the”) in front of *tehom* in the Hebrew which suggests it was meant to be heard as a name, i.e. a proper noun, not a thing, which is perhaps yet another remnant of Mesopotamian polytheistic tradition preserved in the Bible.

And yet one more feature worth noting here is the general negative tone seen in the opening verses of the *Enuma Elish*: “When on high the heavens were *not* named, when below the name of the earth was *not* pronounced, ... When *not* one of the gods had been formed, Or had come into being, when *no* destinies had been decreed, ...” “Not ... not ... not ... not” four times! Compare Genesis 2:5:

And <when> *no* plant of the field was yet in the earth, and *no* herb of the field had yet grown, for the Lord God had *not* caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was *not* a man to till the ground, ...

Four “nots”! In both texts, aboriginal chaos, that is, what existed before existence, is defined not by what it is but what it isn’t.

A sixth Mesopotamian custom could be added to this list.

They set a constellation in the middle
And addressed Marduk, their son,
"Your destiny, Bel, is superior to that of all the gods,
Command and bring about annihilation and re-creation.
Let the constellation disappear at your utterance,
With a second command let the constellation reappear."
He gave the command and the constellation disappeared,
With a second command the constellation came into being again. (EE 4.19-26)

Midway through the poem, the gods test Marduk’s powers by asking him to perform a feat of magic, making something disappear and reappear again, in this case, a whole constellation in the sky. He passes the test with flying colors. God does the same in the Book of Judges 6:36-40 where Gideon tests Him twice by asking Him to create wet fleece on dry ground, and dry fleece on wet ground, which He does. Moses also witnesses much the same twice in Exodus 4.1-9, when he protests that he hasn’t the power to do God’s will, and God replies by showing him His power. He turns his Moses’ staff into a snake and then back, makes his hand leprous and then healthy again, and then promises to turn the waters of the Nile to blood — and presumably back again, though he doesn’t say that. Metamorphosis in Mesopotamia is clearly the proving ground for gods.



He took up his club and held it in his right hand,
His bow and quiver he hung at his side.
He placed lightning before him,
And filled his body with tongues of flame.
He made a net to enmesh the entrails of Tiamat,
And stationed the four winds that no part of her escape. (EE 4.37-42)

At the climax of the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk and Tiamat meet in battle. As he advances, he brandishes his weapons: a club, a bow with arrows, and a net. Like Jupiter and Thor, he is clearly a storm-god who rides the clouds, makes thunder (his club), throws lightning (his arrows) and rouses the winds (his net). God in the Old Testament wields the very same armament. He has arrows that move like lightning: “Then the Lord will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning; ...” (Zechariah 9.14).

But note that God’s arrows are only *like* lightning. They are not actual lightning, because if He were the lightning itself, He would be merely a storm god and that would delimit Him to weather. He would resemble a polytheistic deity who may be powerful in one or two ways, but whose authority is directed to only certain aspects of the world. Osiris, as the god of the dead, may be a mighty force in the Egyptian mythiverse, but in being so, his power is limited elsewhere, in the sky, for instance, or in the world of the living. To the contrary, a monotheistic divinity like the Hebrew God must be equally present and powerful in all things at all times and thus cannot be offered a statue to inhabit like an Egyptian god because He cannot be localized in some piece of rock. Remember the second commandment: “Thou shalt not make graven images,” the point of which is not just to stave off idolatry but to curb the polytheistic tendency

to quarantine deities. If God is a storm, He must simultaneously also be the part of the sky that is not the storm. So, the Hebrews took what were the attributes and powers of conventional polytheistic gods and turned them into similes of God's power in the Bible where He carries a "lightning-swift sword" and His voice thunders (Psalms 29:3), but He is only like those things. He is not those actual attributes themselves, because He's more than lightning or thunder. He's more than any single thing. He's everything all the time.

However, there's a telling moment in the Bible where the text comes very close to the standard Mesopotamian way of restricting deities by giving them powers and attributes. It's found in one of the Old Testament's oldest verses, and one of its most troubled passages. The Book of Job is a mishmash of texts, some very ancient, almost as far back as Hebrew culture can be traced, and newer texts written during or even after the Babylonian Captivity. These were roughly quilted together, leaving visible joins in the text. For instance, the outer chapters, which contain a simple parable about a good man who is the object of arbitrary misfortune but in the end is rewarded for his enduring piety, stands in sharp contrast to the interior parts of the book where Job is anything but patient. This inner, newer Job is a character who is the creation of someone who had experienced real devastation, who had actually lost everything, who had sat on the ash heap of Jerusalem and lived in Babylon as a captive. To that author whoever he was, simple happy endings can only be tolerated after real exploration of suffering. And in addition, amidst this conglomeration of Jobs 1.0 and 2.0 are inserted snippets of very ancient songs which were composed, no doubt, prior to the time when Hebrew was a written language. They were the remnants of hymns sung to a Jahweh before monotheism had been fully worked out.

And one of those songs comes in the middle of the book. As he is acknowledging the awesome might of God and recounting His wondrous acts, Job says "By His wind the heavens were made fair; His hand slew the slant serpent" (Job 26:13). Fine enough in translation, but the literal Hebrew is a mess. So is the meaning of the line. One moment there are sunny skies, the next an evil snake is attacking. Granted, it's poetry so a sudden change of tone and subject is forgivable, but it looks very disjointed and screams for closer attention to the text itself, which is in the original Hebrew:

<i>brwh.w</i>	<i>shmym</i>	<i>shprh</i>
with His wind	the heavens	beauty

Hebrew, as you know, is written only with consonants, no vowels. This is because it's a Semitic language, where the sounds of a, e, i, o and u can be understood in context. It's not that vowels aren't used or don't matter in Hebrew. They just can be easily supplied by the listener, so there's usually no need to write them. Eventually, however, the Hebrews started adding vowels to clarify texts, especially ones where there could be uncertainty in the interpretation of the meaning. These vowel sounds were noted not by inventing new letters — adding anything like that would constitute rewriting the Bible and that was absolutely forbidden! — but by using little diacritical marks like dots or dashes inserted around the consonants. That gave later editors considerable power. If a reading was displeasing for some reason, they could change the sense of a line merely by re-punctuating it and changing the vowels, which would then alter its meaning. And that appears to be what's happened in this line of the Book of Job. "Beauty" and "heavens" are only one way to interpret the wording here. If re-punctuated, they can also be read as

<i>brwh.w</i>	<i>shm</i>	<i>ym</i>	<i>shprh</i>
with his wind	he put	the sea	in a net

The reconfiguration of *shmym* (“beauty”) as *shm ym* (“he put the sea”) is easy, but reinterpreting *shprh* as “in a net” depended on knowledge which was not available until the nineteenth century after Akkadian texts had been dug up and read. [The *-h* on the end of *shprh* is a locative marker which indicates “in (the net).”]



Among catalogues of hunting equipment found in cuneiform word-lists was the Akkadian term *sapparu* which denoted a type of hunting net. This word had been long forgotten until it showed up out of the blue on a cuneiform tablet. It provided the answer to the puzzle of the troubled line in Job. God doesn't make the sky shine beautifully; rather, he uses the wind to put the sea in a hunting net, the same way the god Ningirsu on the Stele of the Vultures holds the enemies of Lagash trapped in a net (see above). But the Hebrew God using some high-tech weapon of war to capture a divine foe? That smacks of polytheism. How can a deity who is the only deity fight any other deity? The only combat he could ever have in heaven would be with himself. Apparently, a later Hebrew scribe displeased with this part of the ancient song decided to re-punctuate the text of Job and inserted different vowels to give the line a new sense — note that he did not break the rules and add a single letter, not one consonant! — and never mind the fact that his re-punctuation produced utter nonsense. Better that than to retain a suspiciously heretical text!

This discovery so shocked the scholarly world when it was first announced in the nineteenth century that the scholar Tur-Sinai who suggested it was branded by some of his colleagues as “the worst of the misfortunes that befell Job.” But the conclusion is inescapable: in an earlier version of the song God was said to have a *sapparu*, a hunting net, just like Marduk when he

goes off to fight Tiamat. There, the Babylonian master-god “made a net to enmesh the entrails of Tiamat, And stationed the four winds that no part of her escape.”

Then he split her into two like a dried fish:

One half of her he set up and stretched out as the heavens. (EE 4.137-138)

Since the Babylonians imagined that the sky is made of water, Marduk corrals it and puts it way up high so it won't flood the world. In the Bible, God also masters the waters.

. . . the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. The Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters, than the mighty waves of the sea.”

(Psalms 93:3-4)

And just as Marduk splits the waters of Tiamat in half “like a dried fish” — or it could be read as a clam — God also divides the waters.

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide water from water. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. (Genesis 1:6-7)

In fact, the *Enuma Elish* envisions a universe virtually identical to the Hebrew conception of what is above and below the earth. There is a “firmament” (the land) sandwiched between two great bodies of water above and below it. That explains why water both rains from the sky and seeps down into the ground. It's supposed to be above and below us. That's its divinely ordained place. And to keep those great oceans from crashing together and destroying all creation, Marduk erects a floodgate of sorts.

He stretched the skin [of Tiamat] and appointed a watch

With the instruction not to let her waters escape.

(EE 4.139-140)

God reminds Job that he did much the same.

Or who shut up the sea with doors, . . . and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed?

(Job 38:8-11)

But there are also some glaring differences between the biblical narratives recounting creation and the *Enuma Elish*. A principal one is that the Babylonian hymn is full of combat between Marduk and the forces of Tiamat. Indeed, the narration of that war consumes a good part of the text, and it's very exciting.

Tiamat and Marduk, the sage of the gods, came together,

Joining in strife, drawing near to battle.

Be-l spread out his net and enmeshed her;

He let loose the Evil Wind, the rear guard, in her face.

Tiamat opened her mouth to swallow it,

She let the Evil Wind in so that she could not close her lips.
 The fierce winds weighed down her belly,
 Her inwards were distended and she opened her mouth wide.
 He let fly an arrow and pierced her belly,
 He tore open her entrails and slit her inwards,
 He bound her and extinguished her life,
 He threw down her corpse and stood on it...
 After he had killed Tiamat, the leader,
 Her assembly dispersed, her host scattered.
 Her divine aides, who went beside her,
 In trembling and fear beat a retreat.
 . . . to save their lives,
 But they were completely surrounded, unable to escape.
 He bound them and broke their weapons,
 And they lay enmeshed, sitting in a snare,
 Hiding in corners, filled with grief,
 Bearing his punishment, held in a prison.
 The eleven creatures who were laden with fearfulness,
 The throng of devils who went as grooms at her right hand,
 He put ropes upon them and bound their arms,
 Together with their warfare he trampled them beneath him. (E.E. 4.92-118)

There's nothing comparable in the biblical version of creation because the Hebrew god has no one to fight. Instead, God produces heaven and earth at the snap of his fingers, no cutting up some primordial Titaness to make the contours of the land, no rounding up and slaughtering her henchgods to craft a new world. Instead, the universe complacently conforms to the Hebrew God's will, which is appropriate to a monotheistic view. It makes for a grand and awesome but hardly thrilling narrative, which explains why creation takes up so little space in the Bible, and its counterpart so much in the *Enuma Elish*. If any ancient Babylonian had ever come across the first chapter of Genesis, he would almost certainly have laughed at how feeble it looked compared to the exploits of his Marduk. For what it's worth, Hollywood, I think, would agree.

Another difference between these works, arguably the greatest, is the way they deal with humanity. It's not until the next-to-last tablet that mankind is even mentioned in the *Enuma Elish*. Everything before is about gods and warfare in heaven and laying out the universe with stars and rivers and mountains and even the foundation of Babylon itself which is created as a site where the gods can be celebrated every new year. Only as an afterthought does it occur to Marduk that he'll need some servants to provide them him and the rest of heaven with food, so the gods tell him to kill one of Tiamat's co-conspirators and create servants, i.e. mankind:

"Qingu is the one who instigated warfare,
 Who made Tia-mat rebel and set battle in motion."
 They bound Qingu, holding him before Ea (the god of wisdom),
 They inflicted the penalty on him and severed his blood-vessels.
 From his blood Ea created mankind,
 On whom he imposed the service of the gods, and set the gods free. (EE 29-34)

So then, according to Babylonian tradition, we humans are made of recycled bad-god blood, which would explain our tendency to be disobedient, I suppose. Humanity, however, plays a very different, much more central role in the biblical creation. If it isn't possible to fill a narrative with god-on-god violence, then it's best to get that over with fast and move to what *can* be discussed, the next phase of the story, the creation of humankind.

There the Bible thrives. Adam, the first man, is made not out of leftover demon bits but from the dust of the earth brought to life through God's spirit, a considerably nobler beginning. To the Hebrews, man exists to serve the Lord, yes, but not in some servile or demeaning way. Rather, he is given dominion over the earth and sovereignty among the animals. It's true, like Marduk, God wants food to be produced — “And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to till it and to keep it.” (Gen. 2:15) — but it isn't so that humans could feed Him but themselves. In the Bible, people are given a notable dignity and value, very different from their status in the *Enuma Elish* where they're portrayed as lower beings made of reused carnage. This dark vision of humanity's role on earth reflects the deep despondency and pessimism that characterizes much of Mesopotamian thought. Thus, the Hebrews opened the door to the light and hope of humanism. At the same time, far across the sea, the Greeks were doing much the same. Indeed, in that day the glory of man was dawning across the Mediterranean.

Finally, that raises a question which has dominated scholarly discourse about these works. How much of this is it right to call “borrowing”? And it's important to note one thing before proceeding. The vast majority of parallels to Mesopotamian literature visible in the Bible come in those passages that are written in verse, not prose, which is to be expected. It's natural that poetry and symbolic song would be more conducive to a passage across time and space, as the similarities between the Hymn to the Aten and Psalm 104 show. Music is a universal language, prose not so much. In the Bible, non-verse passages are reserved for the serious business of recording history and ritual and laws and genealogies and theology, the sometimes tedious but very important business of life, things that would interest few but their target audience.

Yet even the poetic passages discussed above are no mere copies of other cultures' texts. They are inventive reapplications of tried-and-true narrative techniques and features. It's also true of every culture in Mesopotamia. All of them shopped at the same supermarket of literary tropes and phrases, but no one went home and cooked the same meal. This common culture created uncommon works, where originality was both impossible and inevitable. So, the question is not whether the Hebrew Bible is derivative — of course it is, name one thing on earth that isn't — the question is: how is it unique and what does that tell us about the very special ancient culture they wrote it. As one historian says, “The ancient Israelites were clever enough not to throw out the beauty of other ancient Near Eastern poetry along with the polytheistic and amoral content of those narratives.”

The Hebrews were clearly focused on taking the sacred literature they had inherited from the world around them and doing three things: demythologize it, historicize it and moralize it.

- First, they removed the mythological components, all the quarrels and battles between gods, any of the action sequences which involve narrative unsuitable to a monotheistic view of heaven. So God's weapons can be mentioned but he can't be shown using them against other gods. They are only demonstrations of his might, often reduced to symbols and similes. His sword is like lightning, but it's not the actual thing.
- Next, these demythologized narratives were put into a historical context. Creation happened once long ago in the past. It doesn't keep reoccurring each year at the time of some festival. Time is not cyclical the way the Egyptians saw. It's linear. This view means the festival doesn't have to be held every year or creation won't take place and the world will dissolve into nothingness. The ritual is there to remind people of what God did, and why. The past is history, not an endless loop of recurring patterns.
- Finally, celebrating the gods, bringing them offerings, following the proper protocol, that's not the point. The goal is to seek the moral lessons in the past and adjust your behavior in the future. Learn from what happened during creation about how God wants you to behave. He separated the land from the sky for a reason. That means you shouldn't confuse them. Take the myths around your world, like the Canaanite story of Ba'al fighting the sea — all very exciting but there's no morality there — and look instead for the moral truth behind these tales. These things happened because God was happy or angry. Why? What does He want people to do? When Abraham almost killed Isaac or Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt, those aren't stories meant for us to constantly live and relive but lessons to learn and relearn. They happened once and now they're done. but they live on in our ethical memory.

It was a massive reformulation of religion itself, but one that redeployed the same building blocks that had been used to create Egyptian, Canaanite and Babylonian belief systems. It paralleled many of the words and tales heard all across the Near East, but it took them off in a wholly new direction. It looked at the same world everyone saw but through new eyes and re-envisioned the heavens. If you borrow a friend's lawnmower but return a tractor, is that stealing someone else's tools or empowering a new world? As Andrew George, a noted Assyriologist and translator, says about a different piece of Mesopotamian literature, "the story of Gilgamesh was more about what it is to be a man than what it is to serve the gods." And there is where we'll pick up in the next lecture, the last one of this class.