

Systematisation in Ancient Mesopotamian Religion

Noel K. Weeks

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Abstract: Our Western religious context leads us to expect that ancient religions would tend to have a systematisation that incorporated all beliefs and practices. This expectation may be tested with Mesopotamian religion, which demonstrates many problems with this assumption. There was a weak systematisation with some procedures, leading to legitimation through a divine figure or an earlier stage of creation. However different legitimations were not connected. Extispicy, divination by means of inspecting the entrails of sacrificed animals, is a particular puzzle because different legitimations of the one procedure may not have been consistent. Myths may contradict the presuppositions of procedures. They may incorporate elements that have a purely literary role and do not reflect theological beliefs, or elements that have a theological role and do not reflect cosmological beliefs. Where there are systematic tendencies behind myths the driving force may be political, prompting the suggestion that lack of system is the normal state.

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Introduction

The thesis of this essay is easier to state than to demonstrate. I believe that we have tended to read Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) myths in terms of expectations arising from modern experience with religious systems, which have systematic tendencies; that is a drive to incorporate all aspects within the one system. Whether we are influenced by monotheistic religions or by a philosophical system that tries to be ‘the theory of everything’, it seems natural to us that an attempt would be made to connect the various aspects of religion into a system. Against that background we have tried to read a system out of ANE myths. Whether our conjectured system has been for an individual culture or it was supposed to encompass the whole ANE is less important than the fact that we expected elements to interconnect. I am not claiming that the true character of ANE culture has not been recognized but that the implications of its character have not been thought through.¹

A consequence of my proposal is that, since it is not possible to find a connected religious system for any given culture, proposals for an ANE wide religious synthesis are even more dubious. Thus, the test case is whether attempts at systematisation can be shown in one particular culture. If there is no internal system in a particular culture, area wide systems are even less likely. My general explication will focus on Mesopotamia. Other cultures must be assessed on their own merits.

It follows that examples of systemisation, or lack thereof, will be my principal concern. Some might opine that no religion can ever be consistent, but I am not concerned about that argument here. What I am concerned about is the attempt to interconnect the different parts of the religion. One can see two tendencies in modern surveys of Mesopotamian religion. One is to attempt to weave aspects of various myths together to create what seems to us to be the system of thought holding the religion

together.² The weakness of this approach is that religion consists of deeds as well as thoughts. The lack of connection between procedures (rituals and the divination techniques) and literary texts (myths) is not highlighted. The other approach takes one or a few myths, usually including *Enūma eliš*, and makes it or them definitive.³ This not only ignores major parts of the religion, but also ignores the idiosyncratic aspects of the chosen myth(s).

I suggest that religious phenomena consisted of two levels. The basic level is of things that were done and procedures that were followed because they were believed to work. Small-scale attempts may have been made to justify that belief, but these attempts were not systematic and there was no attempt to make the justification for one system to cohere with the justification for another system. In this category are the various methods of divination and rituals of various sorts.

Another level is illustrated by the myths, though the essential motivation of many of these myths is lost to us. There seem to be clear cases of politically motivated myths but attempts to explain them all politically are not plausible. Some may have been diverting stories that served a function in the training of scribes. Postulates that these written forms represent a deeper and more widespread folk culture are no more than postulates. We simply have no way of knowing. Even if some represent popular culture, some may not have.

Since there was no drive for a consistent system, the details in myths could be driven by literary considerations. However, we have tended to read the myths as part of systematisation. Hence anything mentioned must have been determined by the needs of the theological system or are in the story because of the general beliefs of the time. Whether we take those things as theological or cultural data, they are being seen as dependable data. My suggestion is that a myth, being a story, may be making a point, but some elements of the story may reflect literary and

not theological or cultural necessity. I suggest we need to read myths as more akin to modern science fiction or fantasy literature. The crucial thing about a detail in such literature is that it is conceivable within the imagination of the reader. The modern reader of imaginary stories accepts speeds beyond the speed of light and doors into other worlds, while knowing they contradict reality.

How does one prove that this is a better model for considering the reality of ANE polytheistic religions? Nobody within the culture left for us a description of how they thought. The argument for my suggestion has the disadvantage that it must appeal to the lack of an overall system. Thus, it is an argument from silence and all such arguments are inherently weak. One part of the argument has to appeal to the lack of systematic attempts to root procedures in the performance of rituals and divination in an overall theological system.

Procedures

Most ritual texts are simply a description of procedures to be followed. As has been argued previously, the expectation of the ‘myth and ritual’ position that ritual should be connected to myth is not supported by the vast majority of cases (Weeks 2015). Yet there are examples where a procedure is given a mythic background. That background is sometimes an abbreviated creation account. On other occasions it is the Ea-Marduk (or Asalluḫi) connection (Geller 1985).⁴

The use of Ea to justify a procedure for healing does fit with his role as god of wisdom and magic and Asalluḫi/Marduk as his son. To that extent a system has been built. The various procedures prescribed by Ea, be they ritual, or be they ‘pharmaceutical’, are not justified in themselves. We could probably not expect that they would be. The word of the divine expert would be considered sufficient. It might be objected that texts, which connect a ritual to creation or to Ea, are attempts at systematic justification. I readily grant that, because my contention is not that Mesopotamians were incapable of systematisation. It is rather that we assume that the systematisation will be similar to ours, when there are appreciable differences. One of those crucial differences is the ‘vertical’ nature of systematisation in Mesopotamia, where the thing justified is taken back to an origin, a primordial physical origin or an authoritative origin such as Ea or another significant figure of old.

We would expect that ‘vertical’ systematisation would be accompanied by ‘horizontal’ systematisation. Since any authoritative human figure will be ultimately authenticated by means of connection to the divine, that horizontal systematisation must work by interconnecting the divine figures. Conceivably that could have been done since Ea is both the god who prescribes remedies for various maladies and a god involved in various creation accounts. Yet to my knowledge a connection, between the Ea of creation accounts and the Ea who provides ritual information, is not made explicit. Since systematisation is so natural to

us, we supply it implicitly as we study the religion. I am suggesting that the lack of Mesopotamian attempts to do so is a significant concept that we overlook.

Another way in which we would expect systematisation to work would be further ‘downstream’. The remedy prescribed by Ea, whether in its ritual aspect or its ‘pharmaceutical’ aspect, might interconnect with other remedies. To my knowledge this does not happen.⁵ Implicitly there might be similarities, but the overt exploration of those similarities is lacking. Thus, elements of a potential system may be there but they are not developed. Where a connection is made in a ritual to creation we see again the ‘vertical’ tendency. For example, the connected, non-branching, line leads from worm to Anu or from the complaint to Earth (Cunningham 1997: 106–107; and Lambert 2013: 399–400).

It may be objected that these features are to be expected in a situation where the absolute authority of the relevant divine figure is a crucial premise. I grant that. My point is that we should not read other aspects of the religious culture expecting them to have a systematic connection.

Divination is an even more perplexing phenomenon. Why does extispicy or astrology work? We may answer that the common belief was that the gods placed the signs there for humanity’s benefit. Some statements indicate that belief but the most explicit text traces the chain of authority from a divine authority to a human authority (Enmeduranki, king of Sippar) and then to those viewed as authorised by that early figure (Lambert 1967 and 1998). Once again, the vertical chain of authority is the significant feature. There are several interesting features of this story. The context is divine support of a particular king, probably Nebuchadnezzar I, by connecting him by descent to the earlier royal figure, who was the recipient of divine instruction. The original royal figure is also cited as the origin of the lines of practitioners of the mentioned divination techniques. We might expect a line of descent with royalty, but here divination has a parallel line from the one original figure. It seems certain, as indicated by the references to Elamite devastation and the raising up of a king to counter them, that the patron god of the contemporary king is Marduk and the legitimated king is Nebuchadnezzar but the original king is from Sippar and the gods enlightening him in divination technique are Šamaš and Adad. The choice of these gods is explicable in that Šamaš is god of Sippar and Šamaš and Adad are the gods regularly connected to extispicy. Unexplained is the fact that divination by oil on water takes precedence over extispicy, but that may reflect something of the times of either the original or the later royal figure. No need is felt to connect the legitimating god of the later king, namely Marduk, and the legitimating gods of the earlier king and the techniques he was taught, namely Šamaš and Adad. Thus, the vertical lines connecting the legitimaters and the legitimated do not need to relate to each other.

Extispicy forms a grey area because there are hints of a theological structure around it. Yet that structure is

enigmatic and not explicated. The fact that there is a prayer to the ‘gods of the night’ and also an involvement of Šamaš and Adad has led to speculation that there may be two somewhat different rituals. Of course, it may be that there were two different conceptions with no attempt to harmonise or combine them. The language speaks of the sign being the execution of a legal decision (Starr 1983: 58–59; and Goetze 1968: 25). In the Old Babylonian prayer of the divination priest it seems clear that the gods, who are called to be present, primarily Šamaš and Adad, come to the place of divination, there sit in judgement and make the decision (Goetze 1968: 26, ll. 36–39).⁶ Other gods are mentioned later in the prayer as seated with them (Goetze 1968: 27, ll. 60–65). Yet other texts seem to point to a decision made in the Underworld. Piotr Steinkeller (2005) argues for a decision made in the Underworld and brought up with Šamaš at dawn. That would point to a connected and systematic theological structure, but the role given to the Underworld gods in that conjectured scheme does not seem to fit the rest of what we know of Mesopotamian theology. What then is the role of Adad, given that he seems a relatively minor god in Mesopotamia?⁷ Does the morning wind of Adad bring the message from Šamaš to the sheep? I know of no text which says so. What role do the gods of the night play? The prayer of the diviner asks the stars to place reliable signs in the entrails of the sacrificed animal. If these star gods were seen as passing into the Underworld in their regular movement, perhaps they played a role in that assembly. Yet Old Babylonian prayers to the gods of the night give a very different impression (Dossin 1935; von Soden 1936; Oppenheim 1959; Horowitz and Wasserman 1996).⁸ There the major celestial gods, Šamaš, Šin, Adad and Ištar have gone off to sleep and will not be performing judicial functions. Hence the prayer for the placement of the significant signs in the sacrificed animal is directed to the star gods of night.

We may try to reconcile these different perspectives into a grand picture or suggest that different conceptions prevailed at different times (see Cryer 1994: 173–175; and Maul 2013). A simpler suggestion is that what was important was a connection to legitimating gods, and that different gods could play that role. That different gods were chosen at different times is possible but I suspect unprovable.

Even if some theological understanding of extispicy could be found, what of astrology and what of the huge collection of *Šumma ālu* and other omens?⁹ We will be swayed by our conceptions of fundamental human nature. Are humans intrinsically system builders? If so, the occasional instances of attempts to give theoretical foundations to procedures are explained. What has to be explained is the failure to carry them through. If we say we are not naturally system builders, then we moderns must be explained. The most likely explanations of blaming either Hebrew monotheism or Greek philosophy (or both) root our tendency back close to the period where

there seems to be a lack of system. Did some cultures systematise while others did not?

Such musings aside, I am suggesting that the data before us shows something unexpected: a failure to system build around the procedures of religious life. True, it was not totally absent, but it was far less attested than we might expect. If the suggested explanation comes from gaps in our sources, then what has to be explained is why we are so well supplied with evidence for procedures and so poorly provided with explanations and justifications of those procedures.

It might be suggested that there is nothing surprising in this set of circumstances. Since different city centres had different principal gods, it is not surprising that different circles of belief and practice existed.¹⁰ However the process was obviously not as simple as that. A concept of an assembly of great gods, each with particular roles, existed.¹¹ Techniques, such as specific forms of divination, spread through the whole land. The rise to prominence of Marduk can be correlated with political events, but most of these other widespread concepts and practices do not clearly correlate with known political events. It is plausible that what I am describing is connected to different regional centres.

However, there are unifying factors, which at this stage cannot be given political explanation. The crucial fact is that, whereas we would expect a tendency to systematise and to further connect, that there seems to be no deliberate intention to do so. They might have perceived more interconnection than they express, but the data before us is a relative lack of that, and we must take that data into account when we interpret the myths.

Myths

The argument in the case of myths has to take a different form that there are elements in the myths that fit no system that we can attribute to the time and therefore the best understanding of them is that they are literary embellishments of the story. That authors could do that to religious stories flows from the fact that there was no normative system of understanding. It is not my intention to consider every myth. My argument must be more illustrative than conclusive. The crucial test is not whether the elements are conceivable. An element that escapes the imaginative abilities of the readers is useless in any story. What is important is whether that element coheres with other things we know of their religious systems.

There are three incidents in the standard version of the *Epic of Gilgameš* that serve as examples. The first is when Ninsun pleads with Šamaš for her son Gilgameš, she recites his future destiny (Gilg. III: 102–106):¹²

ul itti(ki)-ka šamē(an)^e i-za-ʿaz ʿ-za
ul itti(ki) ^dšîn(30) ʿiz-za-zu ʿḥatṭaʿ²(nīg.gidru)
ul itti(ki) ^dea(idim) apsi(abzu) ʿi ʿ-me-eq
ul itti(ki) ^dir-ni-ni nišī(ùg)^{mes} šal-mat ʿqaqqadi(sag.
du) i ʿ-b[e-e]l



*Figure 1: The Gilgamesh Epic tablet IX.
From cdli.ucla.edu:
Courtesy Trustees of the
British Museum.*

*ul itti(ki) ^anin-giš-zi-da ina māt-lā-tāri(kur.nu. ^rgi.
aⁿ) [uš-š]ab*

Will he not be present with you in the heavens?
Will he not share² the sceptre with Sîn?
Will he not be wise with Ea of the Apsu?
Will he not rule the black headed with Irnina?
Will he not live in the Land-of No-Return with
Ningišzida?

That Gilgamesh was to play an Underworld role is well supported. However, his celestial role after death is not attested elsewhere to my knowledge.¹³ It does not fit what we otherwise know of Mesopotamian views of the afterlife. If this were Egypt, there would be no such problem, but even there the celestial and the chthonic are never reconciled (Jansen 1971: 406). What is this lack of reconciliation doing here? My question is not the role it plays in the plot, where we might conjecture that his posthumous celestial role, like his prominent role in the Underworld, is something of a compensation for him. My question rather concerns its coherence with usual Mesopotamian views. I suggest an element introduced for literary rather than religious reasons. An alternate explanation would be that some knowledge of Egyptian ideas has crept through. However, they are unrelated to existing Mesopotamian ideas and the lack of connection of celestial and chthonic afterlife in Egypt is an example of the situation I am attempting to highlight.

My second example occurs in Gilgamesh's journey on the way to find Ūta-napišti. It has generally been assumed that the dark passage that Gilgamesh goes through corresponds to something in the Babylonian understanding of cosmic geography (Horowitz 1998: 96–106). While we cannot expect that their image of the world was the same as our present one, we can ask whether what is present in the story accords with what seems to have been their understanding.

George (2003, I: 490–498) struggles with the problem of bringing together the details in the story and ancient conceptions of geography. Our expectation, which seems to be confirmed by the text, is that Gilgamesh is travelling east.¹⁴ The text repeatedly says that he could not see what was behind him (Gilg. IX: 139–170). That seems to imply that something coming from behind him was a concern. Since he was traveling 'the path of the sun', the sun itself may have been that concern. This possibility seems strengthened by the fact that his emergence is stated to be 'before the sun' (Gilg. IX: 170).¹⁵ Our attention is also directed towards the sun by the fact that the mountain where he begins his journey has a connection to the sunrise (George 2003: 492–493).

The problem is that, if he is travelling towards the east he should meet the sun coming towards him and not behind him. There are further details that do not cohere. We might expect the 'path of the sun' to take him into the Underworld, but there is no suggestion of that here. Heimpel (1986: 141) rejects the explanation that, since Gilgamesh travelled through darkness, he was going through a tunnel through which sun travelled at night. Conflicting with that explanation are statements elsewhere of the sun's role in the Underworld and the houses of various gods in the Underworld. Yet Heimpel has to conclude that he cannot make all the references to what the sun does at night come together. Wayne Horowitz (1998: 100) suggests that may be because Gilgamesh has gone into the northern darkness where the sun does not shine. That does not fit with the fact that he was going east, or with the nature of the territory into which he emerged. Though there are fantastic elements of the world into which he emerged, such as gems growing on trees, there is the familiar Babylonian item of an alewife. Further on, it would seem, was Dilmun where Ūta-napišti dwelt. This further territory does not seem to fit an expectation that Gilgamesh had reached the eastern edge of the world. There are various other possible solutions, such as suggesting that Gilgamesh had actually

entered at the place of sunset and not sunrise. I suggest that the more obvious solution is that the story contains imaginative elements, which would not have bothered a Babylonian reader because he would not have expected that a story must correspond to the popular understanding of geographical reality. Accepting that we should not expect coherence of different pictures also relieves us of the problem of trying to make the different versions of the sun's evening activities be compatible.

My third example is the oft-discussed crux of Enkidu's problem with the foreshadowed marriage, which led to his confrontation with Gilgameš. The simple solution is that we have missed the joke that the text is developing at the expense of the country bumpkin, Enkidu. What Enkidu does not realise is that there were actually two weddings. One is between the goddess Išhara and Gilgameš. The other is the wedding of the mortal bride and groom. Whether this first wedding reflects actual practice at mortal weddings is a question. I know of no evidence it did.¹⁶ However we need not assume that there was such a normal practice. All we need to assume is that the literate population had enough knowledge of the fact that 'sacred marriages' once happened between a goddess and a king, to find it plausible that they were included by some means in a normal wedding ceremony. Knowledge that the original sacred marriage had fertility as its object would make it imaginable that it would be a suitable accompaniment of any wedding in the distant past.

We face the difficulty that part of the crucial text is missing in the late version of the epic. Hence, my explanation depends upon assuming that the text in the late version was similar to that in the Old Babylonian version (OB II: 159–163). Further such jokes depend upon ambiguity. The speech of the man hurrying to the wedding is so phrased that it can be interpreted two different ways. One way is how Enkidu obviously took it and how modern scholarship has interpreted it. That is that there was one female participant and two males. Yet the wording seems sufficiently vague to yield another meaning, if one understands the joke.

aš-ša-at ši-ma-tim i-ra-aḥ-ḥi'
šu-ú pa-na-nu-um-ma mu-tum wa-ar-ka-nu
i-na mi-il-ki ša ilim(dingir) qá-bi-ma
i-na bi-ti-iq a-bu-un-na-ti-šu ši-mas-súm
 He will have sexual relations with the ordained wife
 He first, the husband afterwards
 In the counsel of the god, it was pronounced
 At the cutting of his umbilical cord she was ordained for him.

It certainly can be read as Enkidu read it. Only with the knowledge of a different ceremony can the ambiguity be seen. Though the later version is also incomplete there is crucial information. In Gilg. II: 109 it states *ana Išhara mayyāl [...]*, 'For Išhara a bed...' (or the bed).

Even if the earlier text left original readers perplexed, we would expect that the subsequent mention of preparation for a 'sacred marriage' would have made them aware of what was actually to happen. Thus, the author has achieved a number of things. He has contrived a situation in which Gilgameš and Enkidu can meet in a trial of strength. He has enlivened the tale with a joke at the expense of the outsider Enkidu.¹⁷ The narrative, which earlier told of his unfamiliarity with bread, beer and clothes, prepares the reader for such ignorance. There may also be a deliberate contrast of his sexual athleticism with the prostitute and his prudery with respect to marriage. The assumption is made that the reader does not need the irrelevant detail of how Enkidu was eventually enlightened.

If the suggested explanation is granted, this is an excellent example of our mistaking a literary element for a reflection of practices of the time. I suggest it goes with our expectation that Gilgameš' journey through the dark reflects their geographical reality and that his post-mortem roles must correspond to their theological views. I suggest we are reading the text in terms of our expectations of a text and it does not fit. That does not mean that the text has no objective. The main message is very clear and it actually coheres with what we find in other stories. That message is that the human situation has unpleasant realities because of the decisions of the gods and we must make the best of it. Meaning and significance for kings is to be found in their building achievements. For ordinary people, it is to be found in the compensations of ordinary married and family life. Details used to make that into a story are not to be taken as though they are part of a modern systematic theology or a treatise on cosmology.

It may be objected that, despite my arguing there is no overall system, I have postulated an overarching understanding: our problems are due to the gods. I grant that we can read that out of a number of myths. The problem remains that taken by itself it is incompatible with the acts of religious practice that I have already mentioned: therapeutic and prophylactic ritual and divination. At this point it might make sense to compare the Mesopotamian situation to what we find in the Hebrew Bible where the system building tendencies of monotheism are at work. There legislation and ritual are enmeshed in the story. That is true both in the structural sense of the placement of legal and ritual elements within the story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt and in the thematic sense of presentation of these elements as what Israel owes to its saviour. Compare that with a literary theme just mentioned of the responsibility of the gods for humanity's misfortunes. It is not surprising that that literary theme is not employed to motivate religious ritual. It also agrees poorly with the divine benevolence shown in warning signs and therapeutic remedies.

Thus, I am not saying that there are no tendencies towards system. I am saying that those tendencies are partial and sometimes contradictory.

Enūma eliš has often been used as the key to Mesopotamian theology. That ignores the idiosyncratic parts of the story and in particular the role of Tiamat. Nevertheless, the story of itself has a fair amount of coherence. We may suspect that that is because of its political motivation: giving legitimacy to Babylon as the controlling city and an equivalent position to Marduk and his temple. Yet once again there are features in the story which cannot be reconciled with even Babylonian practice. In declaring the temple Esagil to be a place of rest for the gods and the place at which the crucial divine assembly that determines the fates will be held, it is said that the celestial gods will come down to it and the Underworld gods will come up to it (V: 125–128). This implies that the other gods have no earthly residences. We know that other views were held about the residences of the gods and at the New Year Festival the gods travelled from their resident city to Babylon.

Of course, it can be argued that gods are conceptualised as residing somehow in different places and an approach to divine residence existed, which is not contradicted by this statement. Nevertheless, the clear import and intent of the statement is to give Marduk, and consequently his temple, a unique position. Marduk is the god who has a primary earthly residence. One suspects that the story at other local sanctuaries was not in agreement with that.

I have mentioned the cosmological problems provided by the *Epic of Gilgameš*. Problems of a similar sort arise in *Enūma eliš*. Marduk's dividing of Tiamat's body is often cited as evidence of a simple physical model of the universe, but is that actually correct? By etymology and by the apparent connection of one half of her body with heavenly water, we know that she was seen as connected to water, specifically as the 'sea'. It should stand to reason that her other half would also be watery. If we suggest that the watery bottom half is ground water, what then of the Apsu? It certainly was held to continue in existence because it was the site of Ea's dwelling.

I will have more to say about this problem, but allow me to make a suggestion, which I think will be borne out in the subsequent discussion. In the same way that we have expected the ancient myths to reflect a rational theology, when that was not their purpose, we have expected them to be trying to construct a consistent physical and geometric model of the world. That is because we have been shaped by Euclid and Newton and we unconsciously think everybody is like us. May I suggest that they could talk about individual parts of the world without being bothered with the interconnection of those parts?

Reading the text that way removes other things that strike us as logical inconsistencies. I have suggested, as is common opinion, that Tiamat is sea water. However, the Tigris and Euphrates come out of her eyes. Did they not know that river water was fresh and seawater salty? Of course, the same problem arises if the upper part of Tiamat is now the source of rain. I suspect they knew, but did not see it as significant.

We do not know how the body of the Tiamat 'monster' was conceptualised. After death her body was split in two so that one half became the heavens (IV: 137–138). After order had been given to the heavens, the organisation of earth was described. Mountains were placed on her breasts (V: 57), the Tigris and Euphrates flowed out of her eyes (V: 59) and her tail seems to function as what holds the various parts of the universe together and prevents their drifting apart (V: 59; see also Horowitz 1998: 120). The other cosmic need, that of separation, was provided by her crotch holding up the heavens (V: 61). It seems from V: 62 that this is to be seen as Marduk arranging the half of her body that formed the Earth.¹⁸ Part of this fits with a physical creature, which has breasts, eyes, tail and crotch. That water comes out of her eyes fits with the fact that this creature is also a watery mass. Can all the details be integrated into the one imagined physical picture of this creature? With some difficulty it might be accomplished. Further details make one wonder if that was the intent of the narrator.

My thesis is not that it is impossible to see consistency within a particular story. It is rather that shaping a consistent story was not an overriding motivation. That applies particularly when we compare one story or picture with another. Wayne Horowitz (1998: 113) has shown that many aspects of the cosmology of *Enūma eliš* can be inter-related. There is a number of cosmic regions named and it would seem that several names are used for the one region or that a name is given to part of a larger region, without specification of the precise part of the region. On that basis Ašrata is connected to Anu's domain, the heavens; Ešgalla is a name for Ea's Apsu and the remaining term, Ešarra, must refer to the gap between these two, which was assigned to Enlil. I leave the exact area somewhat vague because it seems uncertain if the reference is to the Earth's surface, or above it or both of these.

The complicating element is that Ešarra was also a temple name (George 1993: 145). Therefore, in any given context are we to see a cosmic region, or a temple or was the attempt being made to blur or combine the two possibilities? That question becomes acute when we turn to the description of how the gods built the temple Esagil for Marduk: VI 61–66:

*šá-ni-tu šattu(mu.an.na) ina ka-šá-di
šá é-sag-il mé-eḫ-ret apsi(abzu) ul-lu-u re-ši-šú
ib-nu-ú-ma ziq-qur-rat apsi(abzu) e-li-te
a-na ^da-nim ^den-lil ^dé-a u šá-a-šú
ina tar-ba-a-ti ma-ḫar-šú-nu ú-ši-ba-am-ma
šur-šiš é-šár-ra i-na-aṭ-ṭa-lu qar-na-a-šú*

When the second year came

They raised the head of Esagil, the equivalent of the Apsu.

They built the high temple tower of the Apsu

For Anu, Enlil, Ea and [?] they established a dwelling



Figure 2: Tablet no. III from the *Enūma eliš* myth.
 Photo: From cdli.ucla.edu: Courtesy the Trustees of the British Museum

In magnificence it sat before them

Its horns looked towards the base of Ešarra (Or
 ‘They looked from the base of Ešarra to its horns’).

The conceptual framework behind the words and the translation are difficult. We are not helped by differences as to the reading of the cuneiform text. Any translation must be in accord with the intent of the text to exalt Marduk and to place him above other gods. In VI: 62 Marduk’s temple, Esagil, is declared the ‘equivalent’ or ‘counterpart’ (*meḥertu*) of the Apsu. Immediately the question arises of whether the Apsu is here conceptualised as the cosmic realm or as the temple (Eabzu), which is the domain of Ea, or indeed, whether we are to make a distinction between those two notions. In VI: 71, after Apsu had been killed, Ea established his dwelling upon Apsu. That seems to imply a separation between the temple/dwelling of Ea and the cosmic domain, Apsu. However, in I: 81 Marduk was born in Apsu. In IV: 142

the Apsu is called Ea’s dwelling. It seems that an effective equation is being made between the god’s dwelling place and the cosmic domain. To complicate matters the god’s dwelling place is also his temple.

In VI: 62 Esagil is the equivalent of the Apsu and the next line refers to the temple tower of the Apsu. Since the context is the building of Marduk’s temple, not Ea’s temple, we must assume that a step has been made from calling Esagil the ‘equivalent of the Apsu’ to calling it the Apsu. VI: 64 states that a dwelling has been made for, at least, the former great gods Anu, Enlil and Ea. If Marduk’s temple can be called the Apsu, then it is logical that the former dweller in the Apsu, Ea, will now find his abode in Marduk’s temple. Of course, the same will apply to other great gods. Marduk and his temple have taken over their former territory.¹⁹

There is a textual problem in VI: 64. Lambert (2013: 113) and Talon (2005: 24) place, after the naming of the three great gods, Anu, Enlil and Ea, a *šāsu* ‘him’, taken to be a reference to Marduk. Horowitz (1998: 123) has an unexplained and untranslated alternative.²⁰ The difference is important because the verb in VI: 65 is singular, whereas the verbs in the surrounding lines are plural referring to the divine workmen. Who could be the subject of the singular verb? If Marduk is mentioned in the previous line, then he is a possibility. It seems to me that that reading is against the logic of the text. The point is to exalt Marduk over the other gods. It is unlikely that he would appear as the last item in a list of formerly great gods now reduced to guests of Marduk.

Is there an alternate subject? Since the temple itself is the broader subject it follows that the temple might be the subject. However, it must be admitted that impersonal subjects are not common with (*w*)*ašābu* (for examples see CAD A/II: 403–404).

There are also variant readings in VI: 66 between *inaṭṭalū* and *inaṭṭalā*. W. von Soden (1941:4) prefers the latter and claims it makes the horns the subject of the verb translating, ‘nach den Fundamenten von Ešarra ‘schauen’ seine Hörner: his horns ‘look’ for the foundations of Ešarra’. Horowitz (1998: 123) transliterates *inaṭṭalū* but appears to think Marduk is the subject. His translation of the finite verb by an English gerund may indicate his struggle with the grammar: ‘Gazing towards to (sic) roots of Ešarra at its (Esagil’s) horns.’ Lambert (2013: 115) also transliterates *inaṭṭalū* and his struggle with the line force him to lean towards paraphrase: ‘surveying its horns, which were level with the base of Ešarra.’ He resolves the problem by saying that Marduk is the subject, pictured as looking up to the horns, placed on top of the temple, and seeing them as level with the base of Ešarra, which is the lower heavens (Lambert 2013: 479). The line is admittedly difficult but there are two problems with this translation: the verb is plural and the *-iš* adverbial ending on *šuršiš* does not favour a construct formation with Ešarra, which seems to lie behind Lambert’s rendering. I will suggest

below that an adverbial substitute for a prepositional phrase is more likely.

W. Moran (1959) had earlier applied himself to the problem of these lines. He adopted Von Soden's transliteration and translation of VI: 66.²¹ However he interpreted Ešarra as Enlil's temple in Nippur. Thus, the line states that the horns of Marduk's ziqqurat were level with the base of Ešarra at Nippur, meaning 'the summit of the ziqqurat plunges into Ešarra, which thus becomes an extension of Marduk's ziqqurat and by implication the Ešarra of Nippur, in its existence and inner reality, is transplanted like the Apsu of Eridu, to Babylon.'

What then is the meaning of Ešarra in this context? A prior question may be the location of Ešarra as cosmic domain. If Marduk, or somebody else, is at the base of the temple and looking up towards the temple summit, and seeing that summit as being in some relationship to the cosmic domain, Ešarra, then Ešarra is far above the level of the Earth's surface. That implication of the imagined picture would seem to influence Lambert's understanding of Ešarra as the lower heavens. I suggest that, aside from this interpretation of a difficult line, we have no basis for making the cosmic Ešarra anything but the whole space between the heavens and the Apsu (see Horowitz 1998: 113). That makes some of the suggested interpretations of VI: 66 problematic.

Whatever the problems, the advantage of Moran's approach was the attempt to put the passage in the context of the obvious intention of promoting Marduk at the expense of the previous great gods. The equation of Marduk's temple with the Apsu and, by implication, the relocation of Ea to Esagil are in accord with that intention. Let us take that a step further. Esagil must also take over the role of Enlil's temple. I suggest that is what VI: 66 is about. Ešarra in that context is Marduk's temple. If we may take the crucial verb as a masculine plural, its subject is the same as the subject of the plural verbs in the previous lines: the divine workforce. Making sense of that means taking the previous line, as suggested above, as about the temple itself. VI: 66 is the compliment, reverting to the gods standing in awe of the height of the majestic building,

In magnificence it sat before them From/at the foundation of Ešarra they were gazing at its horns.

I dare to suggest that we have been misled by trying to reconstruct the Babylonians' physical picture of the universe, because that is our natural picture, when they were more concerned with a theological picture, even if it was hard to conceptualise physically. Was it only the temples of Enlil and Ea that are absorbed into Esagil, along with the divine occupants? Could it be that the cosmic domains were also absorbed? What that meant for them I do not know, but it would fit with picturing the god as located in his temple and also in a specified region of the universe. Possibly they were using a conceptual model to solve a practical problem. If a god dwelt in a

part of the physical universe, how was it possible to have access to that god? The answer was through his temple. The implication is that the temple and the cosmic domain are the same. However, that fits no possible physical picture. We assume they must be striving for a physical picture because that is what we do. Then we find parts of the texts inexplicable. Yet I suspect that just as the text could imply that all gods beside Marduk were located in heaven or the Apsu, while their earthly temples continued to be inhabited, Esagil's incorporation of the temples of the great gods did not mean that the former temples ceased to have physical existence or cult. Parallel realities existed for the Babylonians.²²

Problematic Systematisations

It may be objected that I have ignored texts, which have a clear purpose of systematisation, even if the result may seem rather bizarre to us. A number of such texts have been treated by A. Livingstone (1986 and 1989).

This material is quite diverse but in that diversity is material that forces the addition of nuances to my thesis. It includes material, which places the question in Assyrian rather than Babylonian perspective, namely the *Marduk Ordeal* text (von Soden 1955; Livingstone 1989: 82–91; and Vanstiphout 2005; cf. Frymer-Kensky 1983). When we look at Babylonian versions of the gods in conflict, such as in the Ninurta stories (Annus 2002) and *Enūma eliš*, one of the interesting features is that the antagonists of the major gods fall into a broader category. The description 'Monsters' rather than gods would apply to many of them and those treated as gods are not major gods. I suspect this reflects the situation where different city-states had different major gods, and there was a reluctance to picture a major god as an enemy.²³ The same applies to the Assyrian royal inscriptions where there is avoidance of depicting the god of an enemy as the supporter of the enemy and thus an enemy of the Assyrians. However, there were some texts that show some explored a different route. On the most plausible interpretation, the *Marduk Ordeal* text sees not a real conflict between Aššur and Marduk, but a need to deal with Marduk as a criminal. Whereas other texts in this group take the form of cult commentary and 'explain' certain cult actions and features, the *Marduk Ordeal* expands slightly so as to make the wrong of Marduk clearer. We see in *Enūma eliš* the placing of Marduk over the previous great gods. In the *Marduk Ordeal* we have the placing of Aššur over Marduk. In a certain sense this is systematisation, but it is significant that it is in response to political necessities.

That raises the question of the ancient systematization in which the great gods were organized into a pantheon with Anu and Enlil in leadership positions. The intriguing item in this picture is the role of Nippur as Enlil's city. Uruk, Anu's city, had a long and obvious prominent position, not so Nippur. Canberra, as Australia's capital, was chosen in order to avoid the controversy and jealousy that would have resulted from giving the priority to an already exist-

ing major city. Was Nippur chosen for a similar reason but with the consequence that the overwhelming prominence of Uruk meant that its god could not be simply made subservient to Enlil?²⁴

In earlier texts there are clear indications of the precedence of various combinations of the great three, Enlil, Anu and Ea, over the other great gods. However, we have no extant account of the reason for this. Marduk's supremacy and Aššur's supremacy are explicated in stories. Does the change reflect the age of imperialism, when hegemony could not be assumed but must be won? Even if that were so, the significant thing was that the gods, who were now subordinated, whether Enlil, Anu and Ea to Marduk, or Marduk to Aššur, were not destroyed. They were subservient, but active.

Some enigmatic texts go further. The defeated gods, including formerly great ones, were sent to the Underworld. Is this a progression to reflect a move assertive imperialism? One might compare the contrast between making a defeated royal family into vassals and killing defeated royals. Yet the crucial thing is that the 'killing' was purely literary. The cults of these gods survived and even flourished. One might compare the earlier situation where the myths blamed the gods for human woes but ritual procedures thankfully invoked the techniques they bestowed.

It needs to be made clear that in depicting these texts as a step further I am not postulating a chronological progression. The 'advance' is conceptual. They do this by utilising the notion of superseded gods, 'the dead gods', who were relegated to the Underworld. Once again major gods are brought into association. In *Enūma eliš*, Marduk succeeds the older generation of great gods by being superior to them. In a cult commentary (K 3476) in this group of texts, Marduk and Nabû are depicted as destroying the older great gods and assigning them to the Underworld (Livingstone 1986: 120–125, 142–145; and 1989: 92–95). Thus, what could be done to primordial beings, which were seen as so primordial that they were scarcely divine, is here being done to those who were once the great gods. We might suggest that *Enūma eliš* is a 'polite' version of the triumph of Marduk over the former great gods. Those former ruling gods are placed in a subservient position but not destroyed. In these other texts the triumph of Marduk is depicted more violently. If the generation of Anu and Enlil has been usurped by the later god, Marduk, it is logical that divine figures prior to the Anu-Enlil layer must also go. Hence, we find Emešarra amongst the victims (Livingstone 1989: 101).²⁵

Certainly there is something systematic in the way that the victory of Babylon and hence Marduk had impacted upon religious speculation, just as there is in the counter position from Assyria. However, the significant thing is that this was driven by politics. When the political winds shifted the religious scene changed. Later Assyrian kings endorsed Marduk and Anu returned as the major god of

Uruk, when Babylon lost political power (Beaulieu 1992: 54–57). It looks as though systemisation in Mesopotamian religion was not a natural part of religious thinking, but rather was driven by political considerations.

Other works take the speculation in a different direction. Early theogonies tend to derive the gods from earlier primordial material, which was not itself divine. These later works equate gods or parts of gods with other aspects of the world (Livingstone 1986: 71–112). Certainly, this is system, but it is not the personalising systematics that would relate the lives and connections of the gods to each other or to religious procedures. It is more an abstract and depersonalising systematics.

Thus, I would affirm that the situation was undoubtedly complex. There were drives to connect things and to establish in some respects interconnections between gods or parts of religious life. Nevertheless I contend that my generalisation is valid. Circles of belief and practice were left with little, if any, attempt to connect them.

Noel K. Weeks

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Endnotes

- 1 Note the contrast of Greece and Mesopotamia in Veldhuis 1998: 83.
- 2 A good example is Bottéro 1992, but he has to admit that the various versions cannot be reconciled. Schneider 2011 is similar, but tends to use postulates of developmental change to integrate the various conceptions.
- 3 For example, *Enūma eliš* is combined with the *Epic of Gilgameš* in Læssøe 1971: 497–525.
- 4 Other gods can play the role of divine informants (Cunningham 1997: 24 and 31).
- 5 Every generalization in this complex area has potential exceptions. Different techniques of divination may have been used to confirm each other. For interrelations of astrology and extispicy see Reiner 1985: 591. For extispicy as a check on other messages or signs at Mari see Durand 1988.
- 6 A structurally similar call to gods to judge occurs in invocations against witchcraft (Abusch 1987: x). One wonders if similar understandings of divine activity underlie various procedures. What seems lacking is the conscious explication of these tendencies. Abusch assumes the material was originally coherent and explains apparent lack of coherence as due to a complex history of combination and development of the rituals. Was this another area where procedures with different conceptual

- frameworks were brought together without a felt need to systematize?
- 7 Attestations of Šamaš and Adad collected by Lambert (2007) point to a tendency to use them together in judicial and oath contexts. Given that the decision in extispicy is couched in judicial terms, this is a possible explanation of the appearance of these gods in connection with omens thus conceptualized. However it drives the question one stage further back. Šamaš' judicial connections are well known. It still leaves Adad unexplained. Steinkeller (2005: 43–45) suggests that Adad functions as the wind that carries various things including human souls, dreams and messages. He may also be seen as the wind that fans into flame the divine luminaries. Though the logic is not, to our knowledge, spelt out, there is a possible parallel with the conceptualization of dreams. The dream god Zaḳīqu was seen as part of the entourage of Šamaš and the god's name itself had a meaning of 'breeze' (Oppenheim 1956: 232–236). Perhaps there were similarities in the conceptions of the transmission of omen decisions and the transmission of dreams, see Koch-Westenholz 2002: 144. Daniel Schwemer (2001: 222–225 and 2007: 149–150) has added that Adad became a god of divination due to his celestial nature and the fact that his manifestations in storms and lightening are themselves ominous signs.
 - 8 Since gods could be conceived of as having a stellar form, various gods could be included e.g. Mayer 2005.
 - 9 Just as with extispicy there is evidence of general statements giving credit to the gods (Koch-Westenholz, 1995: 48 and 77). The great astrological series *Enūma Anu Enlil* is ascribed to Ea (along with other omen series and ritual texts) in a literary catalogue, K 2248, ll. 1–5 (Lambert 1962: 64). However, it is also ascribed to Šamaš in the text about Emeduranki (Lambert 1967 and 1998).
 - 10 For differences between rites of release through incantations conceived as a legal acquittal and involving Utu, as contrasted with release through washing and involving Enki, Nanše and Ningirim see Cunningham 1997: 50–55, 161.
 - 11 The god lists present an interesting picture. There was the attempt to collect large numbers of gods together, but they are primarily organised in households. The initial order of the lists reflects the common understanding that there is a hierarchy among the gods. What tends to be lacking is the attempt to link one god family to another (Litke 1998).
 - 12 I have accepted George's (2003 I, 580) restorations, but even without them enough of the text is preserved to make my point. The presence of the verb *izuzzu* in ll. 102 and 103 creates difficulties for translation. Yet it seems clear that both are giving Gilgameš a celestial location.
 - 13 See George 2003, II: 814. There is a possible parallel of gods usually resident in the Underworld, who appear in a heavenly context, in the presence of Dumuzi and Gizzida at Anu's court in the Adapa story. Yet this just adds another anomaly. Does the violation of the expected in this detail somehow combine with the unexpected failure of the wisdom of Ea? If so, is the intent to show that Ea is not always the helper of mortals and thus to confirm the negative portrayal of gods in literary texts? For other attempts to interpret this story see Izre'el 1998 and 2001; Jacobsen 1930; Komorócky 1964: 31–37; Kienast 1973; Bing 1984 and 1986; Foster 1974; Buccellati 1973; Burrows 1928. For other evidence of a heavenly role for Dumuzi see Foxvog 1993; Krebernik 2003: 153–156. Even if a heavenly form of Dumuzi and/or Gilgameš is to be expected because all gods have an astral form or gods have multiple places of origin, and therefore of conceptualization, there seems to be a lack of attempts to interconnect the various forms.
 - 14 The state of the text does not help. The crucial textual evidence is a broken sign yielding the meaning 'sunrise', Gilg. IX: 39 *a-š[e-e^dšamši(utu)^š]*. However Gilg. I: 40 confirms that his journey was to the east. For confirmation from other versions of the epic see George 2003, I: 495–496.
 - 15 George (2003, I: 495, n. 177), stresses that the preposition *lām*, 'before,' in this context is an adverb of time and not place, an opinion that is confirmed by the examples in CAD.
 - 16 I thank Dr Louise Pryke for confirming my impression. For a survey of the evidence of 'Sacred Marriage' see Cooper 1993.
 - 17 For the problems of discerning humour in ancient Mesopotamian texts see Foster 1974b.
 - 18 Labat (1959: 208) claimed that the poem did not refer to the creation of the earth. It would seem that he was partly influenced by trying to reconcile this version with another Mesopotamian account, where Marduk creates the Earth by piling dirt on a raft (see *The Founding of Eridu*, ll. 17–18, in Lambert 2013: 372). I suggest that attempts to harmonize different stories are futile.
 - 19 For a history of Eridu and Nippur and their replacement by Babylon see George 1997; and Seri 2012: 14 and 17.
 - 20 It seems from her translation that Dalley (1989) also had a different text.
 - 21 Note that he has a significantly different reading of VI: 64: *ana Marduk Enlil Ea bītašu ukinnū šubta*. The differences in understanding that arise from that are not my concern here.
 - 22 Numerous examples of virtual equations of cities, temples and cosmic regions appear in other texts, particularly in the lists that combine topography and theology: see George 1992: 252–253, 296–297, 301. An unsolved puzzle is the exact nuance of *miḫirtu/meḫertu* in the contexts where Marduk's temple is declared to be the *miḫirtu* of the temple/cosmic region of a great god. In commercial contexts the word has the sense of an equivalent value (CAD M/II: 51). If we translate 'equivalent', then the sense seems to be that it duplicates the other region/structure. Yet one suspects that in some contexts more is intended.
 - 23 This is a general characteristic of ANE polytheistic states. The modern popular accounts, which depict inter-state conflict in the ANE as a conflict of gods, just because Homer's *Iliad* does, are a nuisance.
 - 24 For a compilation of relevant data pertaining to Nippur and Enlil see Sallaberger 1997; and Selz 1992.
 - 25 For an exploration into the murky world of the earliest figures see Wiggermann 1992.