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PROJECT

A Philosophical Reformation? Biblical Demythologization of Mesopotamian Myth and Its Implications

My project concerns some central mythic texts and traditions from Mesopotamia – both on their own and in their reformation in the Hebrew Bible – and how these may be understood. Specifically, the question I will try to answer is whether these materials qualify as examples of philosophical expression – of philosophy. In the case of Mesopotamia, the answer to this question has been, for nearly a century, a flat no, owing to a perceived inability of this literature to “emancipate” itself from mythic language and forms taken as fundamental to the thinking underlying it. Yet great strides made of late in thinking about the possibility of philosophical and scientific thinking in Mesopotamia with respect to related literatures have challenged previous thinking. The finding of systematic expressions, formal logic, and epistemology in Mesopotamian scholarly texts has led to proposals to understand those texts as reflective of Mesopotamian philosophy and science. For reasons noted, the same has not been true for the mythic texts, though a new way of looking at things may challenge this conception as well.

Specifically, I propose to approach the question from a partly comparative perspective, informed by important new findings on a deeper knowledge of these traditions in the Hebrew Bible. These findings, moreover, shed better light on the manner by which mythic imagery, forms, and thought in these traditions are replaced by naturalistic and even abstract ways of presentation in their biblical reformations. My project aims to put these cases together so as to investigate their collective significance. I shall inquire whether the biblical adaptation of Mesopotamian mythology can be explained as a process of demythologization, or the removal of mythic elements in favor of non-mythic representations and understandings of the same traditions. I will also weigh in on the question of whether such a program would mark a radical turn in human intellectual development, perhaps even the beginnings of rationalism worthy of the designation of philosophy? Finally, I will return to the Mesopotamian texts and traditions and reevaluate them in light of the preceding. As a conclusion to the project, I will strive to answer whether mythic parallels to later demythologized counterparts may simply be discounted as philosophy solely on account of the imagery, language, and forms by which they are conveyed.

Recommended Reading

Winitzer, Abraham. “Etana in Eden: New Light on the Mesopotamian and Biblical Tales in Their Semitic Context.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 133, no. 3 (2013): 441–465.

–. “World Literature as a Source for Israelite History: Gilgamesh in Ezekiel 16.” In *Writing and Rewriting History in Ancient Israel and Near Eastern Cultures*, edited by Isaac Kalimi, 103–120. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2020.

–. “Atrahasis, behind the First Sin that Cried to Heaven and Related Matters.” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 23, no. 1 (2023): 69–106.