A Reception History of Gilgamesh as Myth

Nicholas R. Newell
Georgia State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/rs_theses

Recommended Citation
http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/rs_theses/41

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Religious Studies at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.
ABSTRACT

The story of *Gilgamesh* has been viewed as an example of several different narrative genres. This thesis establishes how scholarship in English published between 1872 and 1967 has described *Gilgamesh* as a myth, or denied *Gilgamesh* status as a myth and discusses new the meanings that the context of myth brings to the story. This thesis represents preliminary work on a larger project of exploring present day artistic meaning making efforts that revolve around *Gilgamesh*.
A RECEPTION HISTORY OF GILGAMESH AS MYTH

by

NICHOLAS NEWELL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013
A RECEPTION HISTORY OF GILGAMESH AS MYTH

by

NICHOLAS NEWELL

Committee Chair: Louis A. Ruprecht

Committee: Molly Bassett

Sandra Blakely

Electronic Version Approved

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2013
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express intense appreciation for the mentorship and guidance of Louis Arthur Ruprecht in this project, and through my entire academic career. No one has presented me with pathways to pursue my questions that have been so attuned to the peculiarities of my own nature as has Dr. Ruprecht. The time and thought that Dr. Ruprecht has put into this project is inestimably valuable to me, as is his friendship.

I am also thankful for the open reception that Dr. Sandra Blakely and Dr. Molly Bassett offered to this project. Their reflections upon my work have helped me to improve it and given me important intellectual tools for my continuing studies and endeavors.

I must also thank my children, Lari Pascimi Taro and Ouroboros Pneuma Ereunetze for their tolerance of a father frequently weary with staring at computer screens and books smelling of ancient libraries.

Many thanks for all of my friends who had the consideration to ask questions about this thesis as it was in production, for both their personal attention to me, and for allowing me to work my thoughts out in conversation with them.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS........................................................................................................................................ iv

LIST OF TABLES...................................................................................................................................................... vi

1. WHAT IS *GILGAMESH*?........................................................................................................................................ 1

2. 1872: PAY DIRT IN THE LIBRARY AND IN THE MUSEUM ................................................................. 8

3. 1901 – 1908: OUT OF MYTH, HISTORY?............................................................................................... 11

4. 1916 – 1934: BREAKDOWN OF THE HISTORICIST PARADIGM.......................................................... 18

5. 1934 – 1946: *GILGAMESH* FREED FROM TEXTUALITY................................................................. 27

6. GILGAMESH AND NOAH.......................................................................................................................... 38


CONCLUSION: *GILGAMESH* ALIVE IN THE MODERN WORLD ...................................................... 52

WORKS CITED.................................................................................................................................................... 52
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: E.O. James’ History of Religion in the Ancient Near East 44
1. WHAT IS *GILGAMESH*?

*Gilgamesh*¹ has been treated to book length reception histories in the past decade. This project investigates how *Gilgamesh* has been historically received within the various conversations about myth during the early to mid-twentieth centuries, showing that the theoretical shifts in myth relate directly to the potential that *Gilgamesh* has to inspire its English reading audience. *Gilgamesh* is read as literature by high school students in most Anglophone countries. Translated into English, it is presented in most literary contexts as the oldest epic in existence. It may seem simplest to think about *Gilgamesh* as literature and as an example of epic; these categories offer the story a certain air of antiquity sure to spark young imaginations. The historical question of what *Gilgamesh* has been called in the form that most people know today is more complicated than such simple categorizations suggest. The story of *Gilgamesh* has been discussed as a legend, and an epic, and it has been frequently related to the term myth, though rarely called a myth in its entirety. Due to the unique history behind the presence of *Gilgamesh* in the modern world, this story can be read as a myth rich with potential meanings for modern people.

The *Gilgamesh* account that we know today has passed through countless hands from 2400 BCE to the present. The oldest Sumerian cuneiform sources of *Gilgamesh* available date from the mid-2nd millennium, but none of these sources tell the complete story in a format we normally associate with epic (Fleming, Table 2). At roughly the same time, speakers of Akkadian recorded their own versions of shorter stories involving Enkidu and Humbaba/Huwawa that would eventually be incorporated into the *Gilgamesh* narrative (Fleming, Table 2). This suggests that elements of *Gilgamesh* began as the subject for oral storytelling that spread throughout the Ancient Near East at a remarkably early date. The first example of the *Gilgamesh*-cycle conceived as a longer, unified narrative also appears to have come from the early second millennium, and people continued telling and writing stories about Gilgamesh for over two thousand years (Fraser, Vol ii 440). The modern world received *Gilgamesh* in an ancient form, over a millennium after the last mention of the story in late antiquity.

¹ For the sake of clarity, when discussing *Gilgamesh* as a story, the word will appear in italics. When I discuss the character that the story is named after, his name will appear in normal type.
We have greater access to and understanding of the entire complex of *Gilgamesh*-traditions today thanks to the excavating efforts of George Henry Layard and Hormuzd Rassam who brought a haul of tablets inscribed with Babylonian, Akkadian, and Sumerian cuneiform text from the ancient library of Ninevah to the British Museum in the 1840s (Damrosch 3). The archaeology of Ancient Mesopotamia was still in its infancy, and those ancient languages were understood by only a handful of people around the world. Though scholars understood the importance of accessing those texts, there were not enough translators to go around. So the tablets sat in the Museum for decades, encrusted with lime and mystery. George Smith, who was searching for evidence that might historically confirm the narratives in Genesis and the other Hebrew scriptures, discovered *Gilgamesh* amidst those clay tablets in 1873 (Damrosch 31-32). Because *Gilgamesh* contains a flood narrative, scholars working in the field of Biblical Studies immediately worked to incorporate this new data into their understanding of Biblical historicity. In the succeeding century and a half, a wide variety of scholars and artists have taken interest in *Gilgamesh*, fitting it into their own visions of knowledge and meaning making.

The history of the reception of *Gilgamesh* is uncanny and romantic aside from the drama of the narrative itself. The closest reconstruction we can make of the origins of *Gilgamesh* starts with ancient people in Sumeria telling stories to each other, around fires, on long journeys, and during tedious manual labor. According to *Gilgamesh* scholar Andrew George, the stories moved from mouth to mouth, and region to region, and at some point a single poet pieced many of those stories together, and this longer, comprehensive rendition of the narrative displayed such remarkable durability that by the time scribes began writing *Gilgamesh* stories down, multiple versions were recorded simultaneously in several languages and cultures (22). The scribal cultures in some palaces are believed to have used *Gilgamesh* as a literary primer, such that young scribes copied the story to learn how to form the letters of their native language, the scribal language of the court, and the languages of other states (George xx, xxi). Conversations about *Gilgamesh* dwindled significantly at a later date. The latest recorded *Gilgamesh* story of which I am aware of appears in

---

2 It is theorized that during roughly the same time period, the same process was occurring within Greek culture, as orally circulated stories came to be knitted into the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Walter J. Ong discusses the implications of this shift from oral composition to literary composition in his *Orality and Literacy*. 
the work of the Roman writer Aelian who lived on the Italian Peninsula at the end of the second century CE and the beginning of the third (Fraser, Vol ii 440).

It seems that *Gilgamesh* vanished from history after the second century. During the following 1300 years we have no literary evidence that anyone knew of *Gilgamesh*. Most of the classical literature that influences English literary culture was preserved by Christian monks. Evidence indicates that early Christians did not see much value in *Gilgamesh*. But within a hundred years of *Gilgamesh*'s modern rediscovery, it was known literally all over the world. Theodore Ziolkowski discusses the modern distribution of *Gilgamesh* in a wide variety of genres - both performative and literary - in *Gilgamesh Among Us*. But why would this happen to *Gilgamesh* among the enormous body of ancient stories that we have access to? There are plenty of compelling stories from the past: *The Alexander Epic* or *The Dionyiaca* to name just two. Like Gilgamesh, they both have epic-like structures, and they come from cultures that have been widely romanticized in popular culture. But in contrast with Gilgamesh, neither of those stories (nor many other stories from the ancient world) are a part of modern day popular culture, and whereas a reader would need to go to a university library to find copies of either of those texts, most bookstores carry multiple English versions of *Gilgamesh*.

What we have in Gilgamesh may be considered colloquially as the oldest comic book character in history. The narratives contained in *Gilgamesh* have been represented in many forms of visual art, and literary text. The characters of *Gilgamesh* have been historically situated, described, and explained in a number of ways. Anyone engaging in a quest for the original version of *Gilgamesh* will be as frustrated as someone

---

3 c. 170-235 CE, a Roman author who participated in the Greek literary revival known as the Second Sophistic (Wilson). This quote appears in his *De Natura Animalium*.

4 A story about Egypt’s greatest sorcerer who is also a descent of Alexander of Macedon saving Egypt through powerful magic.

5 Written by Nonnus, who also wrote a paraphrase of the *Gospel of John*, *The Dionyiaca* is the last pagan epic written in the Roman period. It tells the story of Dionysus’ adventures during his process of earning his way to Olympus.

6 I offer this genre-crossing metaphor partly on the grounds that comic books are beginning to receive scholarly attention as both art and literature. The book *Classics and Comics* edited by George Kovacs and C. W. Marshall is a collection of scholarly articles discussing comic writers’ and artists’ use of tropes found in Greek and Roman literature. It is also valuable to note that many bas-relief carvings have been found that portray scenes from Gilgamesh, adding a visual dimension to the *Gilgamesh* storytelling tradition. Ancient artists produced visual versions of *Gilgamesh*, displayed as a narrative progression in panels much like modern day comic books.
searching for the real Bruce Wayne. And yet, for a great many human beings, both Batman and Gilgamesh appear to be characters with stories worth retelling in various ways. Stories about them carry certain powerful meanings only because they continue a tradition of telling stories about the mythic worlds and characters evoked by characters such as a Batman or a Gilgamesh. The stories about Gilgamesh do not all agree with one another, and they do not need to agree, in part because they appear to exist to expand the cluster of meanings that Gilgamesh and the narratives circulated in his name might evoke.

Growing out of my own deep resonance with the story of Gilgamesh, and my desire to respond to Nietzsche’s concern for the relatively narrow and unimaginative historical use to which mythic narratives have been put in the modern North American and European academic contexts, this project lays the foundation for an explanation of what changes when we look at the Gilgamesh cycle as mythology rather than as epic or literature. Gilgamesh entered the modern EuroAmerican world at a time when conversations about the nature and use of narratives were influential and quite prominent. Questions about religion were a central feature in many of these conversations. As mentioned above, George Smith actively searched the cuneiform documents he studied for evidence of Biblical historicity. He brought to this study the interests circulating in the writings of his contemporaries in myth, folklore, the epic genre, and history. The question of a text’s historical truth began to matter much more intensely after the “science” of academic history emerged in scholarly circles at the end of the 18th century, and the Bible was not excluded from the practices of critical investigation current within those circles. The similarity between the flood narrative in Gilgamesh and the flood narrative in the Hebrew Scriptures immediately made it a popular topic for scholarly and historical investigation. It seemed to many that this new flood narrative presented a new perspective on the Hebrew Bible, intensifying the question of whether the Hebrew scriptures should be read as history or as myth. As scholars worked to prove or disprove the historicity of the various Biblical accounts, they asked similar questions of this newly discovered text: How strongly could scholars claim that Gilgamesh, the man as well as the stories about the man, are genuinely historical?

7 I am thinking particularly about Nietzsche’s insights in the 10th section of The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music.
The similarities of theme and narrative structure between *Gilgamesh* and the widely read Greek and Roman epics - the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid* - led many scholars to think of *Gilgamesh* as an epic. It certainly seems to fit neatly into this category considering its length, its presumed origins as an oral composition, and its focus on the tale of a hero who was widely heralded in his own culture (Fleming 2). This name has stuck with the story of *Gilgamesh* in most of its English language renditions. Epics are often thought of as works of literature that have official acceptance for a long period of time within a particular people’s upper class and educational circles. While some versions of *Gilgamesh* share stylistic qualities with some classical epics, it would be difficult if not impossible to know what people from the ancient world might claim about it. Today, *Gilgamesh* has been reproduced in comic books, the theatre, musical forms, poetry and prose. The *Gilgamesh* story was constructed from many once-independent stories circulating in the Ancient Near East. This story has been around too long, and has been used in too many different ways for it to be understood within the confines of a single literary genre.

I think of *Gilgamesh* as a long standing story-telling tradition. The category of myth covers both individual stories, and storytelling traditions; myth also provokes a multitude of reproductions and interpretations in just the way that *Gilgamesh* has done. The way that this story-telling tradition polarizes rural and urban experiences, treats the harshness of political abuses, presents the value of friendship, and the power of intimate experiences of death and the desire for immortality - to name but a few of its central themes – has made it captivating to the human imagination. Unlike the *Odyssey*, which is a pillar specifically of Greek culture, no one people can lay claim to *Gilgamesh*. It is so captivating that it can be argued that no single genre or culture can contain it. *Gilgamesh* moved from the campfire to the worktables of scribes in all of the cultures of the Ancient Near East, and was collected in several forms in the great library of Ninevah. Modern English archaeologists brought *Gilgamesh* to the British Museum and inserted it into an international conversation by modern scribe/scholars. Since its discovery, modern artists have found ways to retell

---

8 I use “people” here as opposed to “ethnic groups” out of a desire neither to reify the modern concept of ethnicity nor to suggest that ancient peoples thought about their identities as modern people do.
Gilgamesh in any genre with which they care to create. Gilgamesh has been popularly received as an epic, and that epithet has stuck with it more than any other in modern English discussions.\(^9\)

Gilgamesh has also been considered a “legend” by some scholars, a term which has its own technical application to narratives as these have been categorized by folklorists. The brothers Grimm initiated the project of giving collective cultural narratives a taxonomy, and they used ‘Legend’ as the term specific to stories that had roots in very specific cultures and were received as loosely historical by those cultures (Von Hendy 63). It is very difficult for us to know exactly how the Gilgamesh cycle was received in the various ancient cultures in which it circulated, and almost certain that those cultures received the story in different ways. The fact that a variety of cultures employed the figure of Gilgamesh in their story-telling and story-writing traditions seems to preclude it from a category suggesting roots in a particular culture. It is clear that the Gilgamesh narrative circulated widely through many ancient Near Eastern cultures. For reasons I will develop in this essay I am inclined to view Gilgamesh as a myth rather than as an epic or legend.

For the Brothers Grimm, at least, “Myths” are highly imaginative tales that have authority within the cultures that circulate them, and they take place in familiar landscapes (Von Hendy 63). For the Grimms, myth differs from legend in that myth lacks the component of loose historicity. Upon its Modern rediscovery, many scholars noted that Gilgamesh possessed such mythological qualities, but establishing exactly what made the Gilgamesh-cycle a myth (or not at all like a myth) was hotly contested, partly because so little was known about it, and also because it was closely tied to scholarly conversation about Biblical history (if Gilgamesh is merely a myth, then why wouldn’t the Hebrew Bible also best be viewed as a mere collection of myths?). Some scholars instead attempted to locate the history in stories from the cultures surrounding Biblical Israel in order to prove the Bible’s historicity. The purpose of this paper is to lay bare chronologically the many ways in which Gilgamesh was considered to be a history or myth within the overlapping fields of Anthropology,

---

Archaeology, Folklore Studies, History, Psychology, and Religious Studies in order to show how the differing conceptions of myth in these scholarly circles produce very different perspectives on *Gilgamesh*. In some cases, I will discuss theories of mythology that mention *Gilgamesh*, but as a different kind of narrative, in order to make clear what the stakes about what to call *Gilgamesh* in these debates were thought to be at the time.

I will be restricting this study to writing about *Gilgamesh* originally published in English, the first modern language into which *Gilgamesh* was translated. This choice also highlights my particular position as a scholar and a person who has been personally impacted by retellings of the story in English. This project attempts to describe the various ways in which *Gilgamesh* has been positioned in the English speaking world, and is inspired by my own passion for poetry and mythology. While I do not believe that my sources are completely exhaustive, they represent the major ideas about myth in circulation during the late 19th century and the early to mid-20th century.

This is mainly a reception history, but it touches on the power of literature to evoke meaning as well. It is a study of how the early, scholarly meanings found in *Gilgamesh* changed when it was considered a myth, or epic, or legend. This question of what ancient literature can mean for modern readers is particularly salient in the case of *Gilgamesh* due to the wide popularity the story has enjoyed in the last two decades. Artists continue to present *Gilgamesh* as a narrative that allows them to make new meaning. I begin my investigation with George Smith’s first publication concerning the implications of the flood narrative that he translated from the *Gilgamesh* tablets, and I will end in 1967 with a text for a college course on this history of religion by Cornelius Leow. I conclude this study just before the current discussion of *Gilgamesh* as literature and text began to emerge as a central concern for historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists, which will be a topic in my future work on *Gilgamesh*. 
2. 1872: PAY DIRT IN THE LIBRARY AND IN THE MUSEUM

George Henry Layard went to Mosul, an ancient city in modern-day Iraq, in 1840 looking for the ruins of ancient Ninevah, the capital of the Assyrian empire and, according to Biblical accounts, the city that Jonah was sent to save (Damrosch 1). In the course of the two archaeological excavations that Layard directed, his Iraqi assistant Hormuzd Rassam uncovered an enormous library assembled by King Assurbanipal during his reign from 668-627 BCE (Damrosch 3). Not knowing exactly what they had found, the archaeologists sent crates of clay tablets covered in cuneiform writing to the British Museum (Damrosch 3). Decoding the ancient languages on those tablets and translating them took years, and required the attention of new linguists with the motivation and the historical imagination to reconstruct some aspects of the Assyrian imperial world.

Enter amateur Assyriologist George Smith, who searched the cuneiform tablets in the British Museum for evidence that might confirm the historicity of certain narratives in the Hebrew scriptures, at first as a personal pursuit during his lunch hours (Damrosch 11). From this rather unlikely beginning, George Smith developed himself into an impressive scholar, not only for his extensive accomplishments in the field of Assyriology within a very brief ten-year career, but also because he was an autodidact who taught himself to read the difficult Akkadian script without formal training (Damrosch 12). In 1872, Smith engaged one tablet among the many encrusted with lime; he discovered within the portions that he could read a description of a Noah-like figure, and an ark (Damrosch 12). After further restoration, Smith excitedly found that he was holding an ancient Akkadian story eerily similar to the flood narrative contained in the book of Genesis (Damrosch 12).

---

10 As reported in both Damrosch and Ziolkowski’s reception histories of *Gilgamesh*, Smith was drawn to an interest in the study of Ancient Mesopotamia through his interest in Biblical Studies, which was not an uncommon way for a scholar to gravitate toward the young field of Assyriology (Ziolkowski 9).
11 After months of delay in receiving permission to dig, George Smith died in 1877 of dysentery in Aleppo while traveling to an excavation site (Damrosch 65-70).
12 The British Museum kept an expert restorer by the name of Robert Ready on contract to remove lime deposits from the clay tablets. However, he would not be at the Museum until several days after Smith identified this tablet. Ready used a process to restore these tablets that he guarded as a trade secret (Damrosch 11).
Smith immediately described *Gilgamesh* as “mythological and mythical,” and quite sensibly so, since that was the category that the tablets were organized under in the museum after they were translated (Smith 31). Trained in the tradition of considering ancient texts comparatively, Smith read the epic as a product of “the Mythical Period” of human history, and related *Gilgamesh* to the characters of Nimrod from *Genesis* and Herakles from Greek mythology (32). He related Utnapishtim, the immortalized flood survivor, to Xisuthrus, a character from Berosus’ version of the Chaldean Account of the Deluge, who was also granted immortality by the gods (Smith 34). Berosus was a Babylonian priest/scribe who wrote an extensive history of Babylonia in the 3rd century BCE. Smith drew on Berosus’ identification of the Babylonian Enlil as the same deity as the Greek Cronos (44). By referencing this ancient text that is already mediating between deities in various ancient religious traditions, Smith took license for his own attempt to mediate between the characters of *Gilgamesh* and other stories that he knew. Where he made comparisons between similar characters and tropes in *Gilgamesh* and *Genesis*, Smith used these mythical comparisons to help him locate historical information within *Genesis*. When Smith was thinking about myth, Greek narratives offered the prominent framework that the category suggested to him as a comparative baseline; the absence of an official canon, their strong polytheistic elements and the quote from Berosus indicate to Smith that he should place the world of *Gilgamesh* alongside the world of Greek mythology. Though Smith made sense of *Gilgamesh*, and raised interest in it mainly by showing the intersections between this newly translated story and the classical cultures that the scholarly world of his time knew well, *Gilgamesh* has sustained its interest due to the story’s own compelling charm.

This first report on *Gilgamesh* includes some speculation about the sort of society that produced it. Smith took the description of the ark and its pilot as evidence that *Gilgamesh* originated with a maritime people, not a Near Eastern people (Smith 47). Smith supposed that the historical Gilgamesh may have been the historical model of the Biblical Nimrod, basing this conclusion on the ages of the first cities that must have been built very early after a historical deluge (Smith 33). These moves show that Smith was thinking of mythology not only as somehow related to Greek stories identified as myths, but he also believed that myths

---

13 Smith transliterated the cuneiform name “Gilgamesh” as “Izdubar” on his initial attempt.
can be investigated to discover details about the circumstances under which they were disseminated, and that there are historical facts buried in them. He attributed the historical Gilgamesh to the “Mythic Age” (Smith 33). Smith thought of the mythic age as a time period just after the flood, and he strongly indicates that this was the time when all of the historical models for myths lived (Smith 34). For Smith then, some degree of historical reality was transmitted in these stories alongside features such as an herb that grants immortality and fantastically dangerous monsters like the Bull of Heaven, which do not strike the modern reader as realistic.

Smith’s conclusion betrayed some ambivalence about his concern for Biblical inerrancy. Smith speculated that *Gilgamesh* was compiled from older materials, which was later verified by the discovery of tablets containing earlier, shorter versions of parts of *Gilgamesh* (47). He then ended with a series of questions: “What is the origin of the accounts of the antidiluvians, with their long lives so many times greater than the longest span of human life? Where was paradise, the abode of the first parents of mankind? From whence comes the story of the ark, of the birds?” (Smith 47). Interest in the history behind the story seems to drive Smith, both in the case of *Gilgamesh* and in the case of the narratives found in *Genesis*. Questions about how much, and what kind of history can be found in myth became the main interest of scholars discussing *Gilgamesh* and myth. Though historical interests inform the way that Smith reads *Gilgamesh* and the Bible, he did not consider how the presence of *Gilgamesh* might have influenced the history of the Greek epics. He discussed the ages of characters in *Genesis* who lived hundreds of years as “accounts” with “origins,” implying that since people do not actually live that long these stories must have fictional sources and are not factual reports. He also wanted to know where the common details in the flood narratives within *Genesis* and *Gilgamesh* originated, rejecting the possibility that these stories might just be stories. Indeed, even the Paradise in *Genesis* was presented as a real place with a real location.

While *Gilgamesh* is categorized as myth by Smith, he does not directly speculate that the Bible is mythic in the same way, though he is comfortable comparing *Gilgamesh* and *Genesis*. Drawing conclusions

---

14 This is particularly possible since Hegel and many scholars after him considered the Greeks as a young people in comparison with the Egyptian and Semetic cultures.
from his essay alone, myth appears to have meant something similar to classical Greek stories to Smith, though he does not define what he means by “myth.” At this point, rather than a technical category, Smith seems to be using myth as a self-evident one: *Gilgamesh* contains material that Smith recognizes as “mythical,” and so the story must be a “myth.” What Smith appears to want to do with myth is to discover its historical and literary origins. This discussion of origins was a major preoccupation throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Archaeology is an obvious case in point: The new science of digging up the past offered the hope that humans would soon discover the true beginnings of humanity, providing a narrative to human prehistory that would be acceptable to Enlightenment sensibilities. Smith placed *Gilgamesh*, and myth in general, within that conversation about human origins. He ended his essay by hypothesizing a common origin for the mythologies circulating in the Plain of Chaldea, believing that place to be the cradle of civilization where all arts and sciences were born. Not only did Smith believe that *Gilgamesh* offered a clue to the site where mythology originated, but this same site was also speculated to be the place where all of the forms of knowledge that he valued had originated.

3. 1901 – 1908: OUT OF MYTH, HISTORY?

The discussion of *Gilgamesh* moved quickly through scholarly culture after Smith’s initial translation. A great deal of linguistic work and discoveries of other fragmentary texts went into deepening the modern understanding of the narrative as archaeologists and Biblical scholars attempted to understand *Gilgamesh* and put it into a new context. Inspired German scholars initiated the international scholarly conversation about *Gilgamesh*. That is not to say that people in the English-speaking world weren’t interested in *Gilgamesh*. The

---

15 This is evident in Hegel’s lectures on *The Philosophy of History*, Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, Frederick Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, and Émile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* to name a few hallmark works on origins. Interestingly, Roberto Calasso’s *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* makes the argument that Greek myth is inherently circular, offering no path back to an origin-moment.
16 Thus arche-ology: “Arche” is the Greek word for beginning, so the very name suggests a “science of beginnings.”
17 For instance, twenty five years passed before Theophilus G. Pinches corrected the transliteration of the main character from “Izdubar” to “Gilgamesh” (Damrosch 29).
British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, was present for Smith’s presentation of his translation of *Gilgamesh* to the Biblical Archaeology Society and gave extensive congratulatory remarks which were published in the *Times* (Damrosch 33). Gladstone instantly connected *Gilgamesh* to the works of Homer, and waxed sentimental about his relationship to the *Iliad*, and *The Odyssey* (Damrosch 33). People were thinking about *Gilgamesh* in England, and in 1901 thoughts about *Gilgamesh* and mythology were published by a British officer stationed in India; before the first scholar working in English would respond to German scholarship in 1908.

James Francis Katherinus Hewett served as commissioner of a large region of Eastern India on the Chutia Nagpur plain. He had a large stake in the argument that myths were a type of historical document, and was deeply informed in his views by Indian stories and culture. In *History and Chronology in the Myth Making Age*, published in 1901, Hewett argues that “myths in their original form are surviving relics of the genuine ancient history of the earliest ages of human culture” and that by reclaiming the interpretive methods which were lost after the Aryan invasion, modern people can come to an understanding of myths as historical (Hewett x). His book describes various ages of chronological thinking by comparing the symbols and tropes within a wide range of stories. In much the same way that James Fraser would use any story as a potential interpretive tool for any other story’s meaning, Hewett uses any story as a tool for understanding how all ancient people organized time and presented their myths as historical. He describes the early mythological epochs in terms of the dominant form of worship that he believed he could discern found in various myths, such as “pole-star worship,” and “lunar worship,” culminating in “solar worship” (Hewett iii - vi). This extremely complex weaving of narratives and their relationship to interpreting astrological cycles appears somewhat mind-boggling to us today, but like Fraser’s work, it displays an impressive degree of research and systematization.

*Gilgamesh* appears twice in Hewett’s monograph. In the chapter titled “The Diffusion Throughout the World of the Five Day Week,” a paragraph beginning with a discussion of the constellations represented by characters in *Legends of King Arthur* contains this sentence: “The former of these stars is that called in

---

18 This refers to the presently debunked theory that invaders from Northern Europe went on an extended warpath that swept the landscape from Europe to India. This theory emerged from linguistic studies that wished to account for the shared roots of European language and Sanskrit with an Indo-European historical narrative.
the Akkadian Epic of Gilgamesh, the sun-giant, Lig Ia the dog (lig) of Ia, who embarked with Gilgamesh on
the ship Ma, the constellation Argo, to cross the sea of Samas, the sun stream flowing down the Milky Way”
(Hewett 73). I am not familiar with any version of Gilgamesh in which he takes a dog with him when he
crosses the sea of Shamash – but I do not claim to have an exhaustive grasp on how all of the versions of
Gilgamesh have been translated at various times. Hewett takes Gilgamesh to be a “sun-giant,” and his
crossing of the sea of Shamash to represent mythologically the place where the sun began its yearly journey at
the winter solstice. The dog-companion of Gilgamesh is important because Hewett refers to a second dog-
star called Procyon and locates the beginning of the sun’s journey between these two dogs (Hewett 73). The
idea that myths were specifically related to astrological phenomena, particularly to the sun, was a major point
of interpretation for Max Müller, a contemporary of Hewett who also used Indian narratives to support many
of his more general conclusions about mythology.

The second reference Hewett makes to Gilgamesh comes in the chapter entitled “Substitution of
Orion for Canopus as the Leading Star-God”:

The twelve days of sleep of Archal is also recorded in the Akkadian epic of Gilgamesh, which
tells of how [Enkidu], the comrade of Gilgames, was wounded by Istar, and how he died
after lingering for twelve days, and how Gilgames implored the gods of the lower world to
restore him to life. He rose again as the sun of the new year in the twelfth book of the poem,
to be the antelope or gazelle sun-god, the Assyrian form of the Hindu black antelope-god
Krishānu. (102)

Scholars today understand the twelfth tablet of the Babylonian Gilgamesh to be an unrelated addition to the
longer story that the other tablets tell (Heidel 15). By contrast, Hewett reads the twelfth tablet as a
resurrection narrative, which allows him to relate it to the story about the death and rebirth of Archal, the
Phoenician sun-god, and the presence of the antelope relates this story to Orion, the hunter who is the
thematic centerpiece to the chapter (Hewett 102). Again, Hewett relates Gilgamesh to a vast body of
mythology from various parts of the world, and the characters of Gilgamesh are read as symbols for astrological phenomena.

In Hewett’s style of mythography, myths are taken to represent real things, usually common parts of the natural world, and especially moving features of the sky. In this view, any story that could be said to relate in some way to the movement of astrological bodies would be a myth; also, any story that contains symbols in common with another story of that type is also a myth. Hewett accepted Gilgamesh as a myth because it contains elements of a solar myth, as well as other symbols that Hewett could read astrologically. His conclusions were not about Gilgamesh directly, but rather about how Gilgamesh fit into the shattered remains of ancient myth-history for which Hewett wished to argue. Hewett’s was an argument about the history of chronological organization, and he argues for myth as a type of historical document developed in a lost system of historical recording. Although it would seem that “genuine” myth could only have been created during that lost age, he implicitly argues for an enduring mythological capacity that allows him to connect reference to the Arthurian cycle which came into being long after the Aryan invasion to myths he understands as pre-Aryan.

By 1908, a critical English response to German interpretations emerged, followed by a conversation about how to fit Gilgamesh into the theoretical frameworks then current. This early conversation continued to investigate how to understand the history surrounding Gilgamesh. Unlike Hewett, these German scholars did not assume that mythological texts were historical in themselves, but rather quite the opposite. Literature that can be seen as mythological was assumed to be completely ahistorical, in the view of the German scholars writing about Gilgamesh. A religion scholar responded with a critique of their methods of interpretation, as well as a corrective that offers us some ideas about his take on the proper way to view mythology.

In 1908, a minister in the Society of Friends, George A. Barton published an article in The Biblical World entitled “The Astro-Mythological School of Biblical Interpretation.” He argued against the premises of Biblical interpretation current in Germany which asserted that Babylonian influence was responsible for every narrative contained in the Bible (Barton 442). One of these scholars, Peter Jensen, wrote Das Gilgamesch-Epos
in der Weltliteratur which interpreted Gilgamesh as a solar myth, but also attempted to prove that every Biblical narrative is based on some part of Gilgamesh (Barton 439). One of the most renowned Gilgamesh scholars at the time, Jensen continues the interpretation of tablet twelve of the Babylonian narrative as the conclusion of the story written on the rest of the tablets (Barton 439). Barton provides a strong argument against this method of Biblical interpretation, informed by scientific theories current at the time and insightful historical arguments.

Barton laid out Jensen’s comparative methodology as a matter of laying segments of Gilgamesh and Biblical narratives side by side and emphasizing the parallels of the actions or items mentioned in the stories, with particular attention to narrative structure (Barton 440). Jensen argued that any narrative in the Bible that could be derived from Gilgamesh could not be historical in any way: they are merely stories reclaimed from Babylonian culture for Hebrew purposes (Barton 440). Not only are characters from the Hebrew Bible taken to be shadows of Gilgamesh, but even the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus were found to be modeled on Gilgamesh (Barton 441). Jensen directly opposes mythological theories like Hewett’s. Not only were myths themselves not historical in any way for Jensen, but any story modeled on such a myth had no elements of history either. Hewett asserted that mythology was a kind of history, but that one must read it correctly in order to see the historical elements in it. Jensen followed Müller more strictly by interpreting myth as always symbolizing the sun and its movement. Hewett expanded this method of interpretation to include more elements in the same category of astral phenomena: some myths had solar elements as their primary focus, but they may also portray a temporal lunar organization, or a temporal organization based on certain stars.

Two elements of the Astro-Mythological school were accepted by Barton: The claim that Babylonian civilization exerted a great influence on the peoples around them; and that some stories were “heightened” by incorporating some astral elements in their plots (Barton 442). Barton drew on a wide variety of academic disciplines to argue against the method of interpretation as he saw Jensen developing it. He claimed that anthropologists had found many myths to have terrestrial events as their initial source, so they could not all be sun myths (Barton 442). In relation to this, he surmised that Gilgamesh has some kind of historical basis in
an actual king named Gilgamesh based on Sumerian king lists (Barton 442). Second, since he assumed that psychological processes of people around the world are similar, if a story did incorporate some astral element, it does not necessarily follow that it was borrowed from Babylonia (Barton 443). Next he pointed out that the Semitic people lived in a desert and oasis environment before they went to Babylon, and that stories set in such a landscape couldn’t simply be traced back to Babylonian influence that these Semitic people experienced after they settled in a desert environment (Barton 442). Insightfully, Barton noted that it is highly unlikely for a written work of literature to exert totalizing influence over stories transmitted in an oral culture; instead he imagined that folklore probably exerted more influence on literature than vice versa (Barton 443). Finally, he called Jensen’s treatment of Jesus “ludicrous” on the grounds that Jensen ignored the difference between documents removed several centuries from the historical events they describe, such as the Hebrew history recorded in the Bible, and documents written roughly contemporaneously with the events they describe such as the gospels (Barton 443). Barton argued that it was unthinkable that myth could distort accounts of narratives written contemporaneously with the events they describe (Barton 443).

Barton saw mythology as rooted in history, but not in the same way that Hewett did. Rather than finding transmissions of ancient systems of understanding in myth, Barton located remnants of historical events that may have incorporated metaphors for natural cycles as they developed (Barton 444). He was also invested in an historical consideration of myth that looks for the origins of stories by relating the features of each story to the features of the world a culture encountered regularly in its home environment (Barton 444). Barton showed a concern for origins that also interested George Smith, and he was calling for a careful historical study that refused to privilege one story over another, but considered the conditions under which they must have emerged. More about what Gilgamesh was not can be found in Barton’s work than any positive argument for what it was if it was a myth. Gilgamesh was not the proto-literary text that Jensen imagined, and it certainly did not single-handedly disprove the historicity of the Bible. Barton argued with Jensen about our sources to gain access to the ancient world. While Jensen argued that similarities between texts alone were enough to make historical claims, Barton responded with a call for a more nuanced view that considers more data than texts alone could provide.
We can construct something of a positive argument about how to understand *Gilgamesh* as a myth in Barton’s argument against the Astro-mythological school of interpretation. Myths have terrestrial *and* astral elements as their inspirations; they refer to things that have happened between people and refer to their attempt to understand the phenomena around them. Myths result from the similar psychological processes that are processing relatively similar experiences. Barton takes the similarities in stories from disparate places as evidence for these universal circumstances. Both the physical environment, and the conditions under which a myth was transmitted need to be taken into account when making arguments about the history of myths. Stories transmitted orally probably precede those that were written down. Finally, a story is less likely to be a myth if it is recorded soon after the events that it describes. Placing *Gilgamesh* into this context implies that it emerged from universal human experiences, and that it can tell us a great deal about the environment of the people who wrote it down. Barton’s view on myth strengthens George Smith’s suggestion that *Gilgamesh* grew out of other myths, and adds the possibility that they may have been orally transmitted.

The debate over the historical position of myths continued in many other contexts – and remains a difficult topic to adjudicate fully. We now understand narratives as offering very different understandings of history and myth, so there does not seem to be any single way to understand the historicity of a narrative without an intimate understanding of the culture that produced the narrative. This work on *Gilgamesh* represents early attempts to untangle this ambiguity. Hewett argued that a single, astrological, method of reading myths will reveal the historical data hidden inside the symbols within each myth. In Germany, Jensen suggested that *Gilgamesh* is both a key to reading the Bible, and proof that all Biblical narratives were myths – and therefore non-historical. Barton countered Jensen’s conclusions by arguing for a more nuanced view – one that understood how not only texts, but also the circumstances that produced those texts, must be taken into account when attempting to establish what sort of historical evidence a text can provide.
4. 1916 – 1934: BREAKDOWN OF THE HISTORICIST PARADIGM

The eighteen years of *Gilgamesh* scholarship involving mythology from the middle of the First World War to the rise of the National Socialist Party in Germany complicates the distinction between history and myth that prevailed before. While previous scholars were comfortable discussing *Gilgamesh* with the language of mythology, the technical terms a new generation of scholars employed placed *Gilgamesh* outside of mythology altogether. These scholars denied *Gilgamesh* the status of myth for reasons based on the categories for narratives suggested by the Brothers Grimm in the field of folklore studies. This ceased to be the framework for discussing mythology for younger scholars who produced ways of thinking about myth as a category that can accommodate *Gilgamesh*. As we shall see in coming sections, this period of increased complication in cross cultural studies, world history, and theories of myth prepared the ground later for creative breakthroughs in the study of *Gilgamesh*.

In 1916, Leonard W. King, who was Assistant Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities in the British Museum, published a series of lectures entitled *Legends of Babylon and Egypt in Relation to Hebrew Tradition*. His work is of interest because he emphatically denied *Gilgamesh* the status of myth, and instead consistently referred to the story as an “Epic” (King 39, 41, 63, 70, 78, 82, 133). He was so adamant about this category-choice that he frequently invoked *Gilgamesh* as “the Epic” since it is the only source he uses that he discusses as an epic. Tablets in Sumerian cuneiform describing a flood story were excavated in Nippur by a team from the University of Pennsylvania sometime between 1888 and 1900. King delivered these lectures in order to incorporate this newly discovered narrative into the body of literature about the origins of the Hebrew flood narrative (King 1). King’s comparison of this Sumerian material with Semitic texts gives us some idea of the stakes involved in categorizing *Gilgamesh* as an epic rather than a myth.

King defined myth narrowly as “stories exclusively about the gods,” offering creation stories as a prime example of a myth as opposed to a legend (King 102). Since *Gilgamesh* deals primarily with the exploits

---

19 King was certainly aware of other epics, unquestionably he was familiar with those attributed to Homer and Virgil. He represents *Gilgamesh* as the epic of Babylonia, and discusses it as if it were the only epic of importance to the Babylonian people.
of human characters, it could not fall under this category of myth for King. He made the point that Babylonian visual culture contained elements of *Gilgamesh* “during all periods of Babylonian history,” and he always connected *Gilgamesh* with Babylonian culture, which is curious since the version of the story housed in the British Museum while King wrote had been excavated from a city he knew full well to be Assyrian (King 43). King used *Gilgamesh* to represent the Babylonian position on the deluge narrative, particularly as he performed a textual analysis between the Sumerian flood narrative and the flood narrative in the Old Babylonian version of *Gilgamesh* (King 63, 70). These distinctions between ancient peoples were important to King, because a significant amount of his argument aimed at showing that the Babylonians inherited their civilization from the Sumerians, and that while the Hebrew tradition was heavily influenced by Babylonian ideas, it displayed an elegant moral progress over the Babylonian world-view (King 2, 4, 43). His argument was designed both to offer an understanding of the origins of Hebrew literature, as well as to defend its superiority – even if it was not “original.” As he wrote: “viewed from a purely literary standpoint, we are now enabled to trace back to a primitive age the ancestry of the traditions which […] found their way into Hebrew literature. […] The result of such literary analysis and comparison, so far from discrediting the narratives in Genesis, throws into still stronger relief the moral grandeur of the Hebrew text” (131). King wanted to differentiate between the texts that appear in Hebrew literature from the texts produced by the cultures surrounding the Hebrew people in order to show that the Hebrew narratives were the superior ones, but he had to reconcile the similarities between the texts that show evidence of cultural borrowing. Whereas Smith and Barton discuss shared concerns about the origins of texts and stories, King uses the term “primitive” to present the Hebrew traditions as products of progressive moral development. Therefore, *Gilgamesh* must be an epic, safely understood as an artifact of Babylonian culture that contains a flood narrative that the Hebrew

---

20 This choice may place King in the contemporary school of thought critical of the process of uncovering forms of ancient texts (particularly the Bible) before they were redacted. King may have preferred the method of textual analysis which accepts and analyzes texts in their received forms, rather than attempting to reconstruct the older versions hidden within those texts. He may be comfortable accepting the state of texts as the Babylonian Torah, the Babylonian Talmud, and Babylonian *Gilgamesh*.

21 King always refers to the Hebrew narratives as representative of a “tradition,” they are never described as legends or myths. It makes sense that as a representative of a public, government funded institution, King would wish “to indicate solutions which will probably appeal to those who view the subject from more conservative standpoints” (4). In no way does he want to alarm religious conservatives who may worry that the British Museum has undertaken the project of disproving the Bible.
tradition drew upon. In summary, King uses “epic” to confine *Gilgamesh* to a particular time period, and a particular people whose influence cannot compete with the “moral grandeur” of Hebrew literature.

Three years later, in 1919, Sir James George Fraser published his three volume opus entitled *Folklore in the Old Testament* where he applied his encyclopedic methods of folkloric comparisons to the Hebrew scriptures. The similarities between Fraser’s method and Hewett’s have already been noted: they both drew meaning from comparing any story with stories from any other culture or time period that could be interpreted as sharing common symbols. He did not bother to offer an introduction to his three ponderous volumes explaining what he meant by folklore or how he intended to locate it within the Old Testament – or indeed, if the Old Testament stories qualify as folklore themselves – he simply dove right in to the creation narratives at the beginning of *Genesis* (Fraser, Vol I, 3). The most significant clue we have to the way Fraser envisioned the categories suited to the stories he considered was in the subtitle: *Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend, and Law*. The Hebrew narratives – or rather, the Torah - fit variously into those three categories, and the way that he performed his comparisons shows that he was locating evidence for other peoples’ folklore traditions in the religion, legends, and laws in the Old Testament. A portion of his project in this book was to establish which narrative elements of the Old Testament were merely folklore, and which were historical (Fraser, Vol ii, 439) Fraser understood the progression of history as an improvement in human understanding: the first system humans used to understand the world was magic, this system was superseded by religion, and in his own time Fraser predicted that religion would soon be replaced by science. A significant part of his project was to identify where a story or a culture (like Greece) fit into that progression, and attempt to peel back the layers of narratives to identify the original story upon which later narratives were built. Fraser is best known for *The Golden Bough*, in which he used this same methodology to investigate Greco-Roman traditions. In *Folklore and the Old Testament*, he employed this same technique while analyzing the Hebrew Bible and its relationship to *Gilgamesh*.

Fraser described *Gilgamesh* as one of many “savage stories” that blames a serpent as the creature which stole immortality from man (Fraser, Vol I, 49 - 50). He also described the *Gilgamesh* story as an epic,
and as “one of the oldest literary monuments of the Semitic race” (Fraser, Vol I, 50). But these conventions of distinguishing types of narratives from each other did not change the way that Fraser applied his method to them. What was important to Fraser about *Gilgamesh*, like the other stories in this section of his book, is that it contains a serpent which steals immortality from mankind, much like the story in *Genesis*. He suggested that both *Gilgamesh* and the *Genesis* narratives were distortions of an older story in which the serpent is given the power of speech by the creator to bring humankind the instructions to attain immortality but that he perverted the message and tricked mankind (Fraser, Vol I, 51). Fraser does not seem to care very much about how to categorize *Gilgamesh* in this instance; his discussion displays an interest in the comparative content of narratives, not in their taxonomies.

Secondly, Fraser performed a comparison of the flood narratives in *Genesis* and *Gilgamesh*. In this section, Fraser betrayed his fascination with the discovery of *Gilgamesh* as he reviewed the dramatic conditions under which the text was translated by George Smith, and provides a summary of the entire Babylonian version (Fraser, Vol I, 110 - 118). He also reviewed the discovery of other ancient versions of flood narratives in the Ancient Near East: the tablet written in Sumerian previously discussed by King, as well as a flood narrative in the *Atrahasis* tablet which was found, like the Babylonian *Gilgamesh*, in Assurbanipal’s library at Ninevah (Fraser, Vol I, 118 - 121). From this evidence Fraser concluded that both *Genesis* and *Gilgamesh* must have been drawn from narratives developed by older civilizations when they were composed, thus confirming King’s historical conclusions (Fraser, Vol I, 124). Fraser used these older flood accounts only to establish that the *Genesis* flood account came from somewhere, he did not compare these stories with the Biblical flood narrative at all. In no way was this choice explained, but he approached the conversation about deluge narratives in much the same way that scholars like King did. That is to say, he preferred to acknowledge the presence of flood narratives that predate the record of Hebrew scripture, but without claiming that those stories and the stories in the Hebrew scriptures were of the same kind.

---

*22 Atrahasis* is another flood account incorporated into an “epic” similar in form to *Gilgamesh*. The tablets on which this story was found were severely damaged so that only a few lines are legible.
There is a third reference to *Gilgamesh* in volume 2 of Fraser’s work that comes from a very different *Gilgamesh* story than the one with which we are familiar today. This reference was introduced with a summary of the story of Moses. Fraser’s discussion placed the main comparative focus on the beginning of Moses’ life, when he was floated down the Nile in a reed basket. Frazer compared this episode with stories that tell of a protagonist who was exposed at birth, but survived to do great deeds. Fraser drew from Aelian’s *De Naturum Animalium* to identify a Greek story about Gilgamesh that shares commonalities with Moses’ story. In this tale, Seuchorus, a king of Babylon, locks his daughter up in a tower so that she cannot bear the son prophesied to overthrow him (Fraser, Vol ii, 440). Somehow she has a child anyway, and her guardians throw the child from the parapet of the castle, but as the child falls an eagle swoops down and catches it, bringing it to safety in a garden, where the gardener rears the child who would one day be Gilgamesh (Fraser, Folklore in the Old Testament Vol ii 441). The characters that Fraser presented in this section not only have exposure at birth in common, but they were also mostly characters who begin dynasties or unify people, much like Moses (Fraser, Folklore in the Old Testament Vol ii 439 - 455). More than anything else, the difference between this story and the text found in Ninevah leads us to speculate about what other stories about Gilgamesh the Greeks and Romans told. Fraser did not offer any direct analysis of this story in its relation to Moses, he simply recorded it and moved on to other stories that feature exposed children who lived to experience dramatic destinies.

Fraser was not very particular about the kinds of stories he drew on to make his comparisons. His work betrays a strong thread of encyclopedic thought: he was at least as interested in having all of the material he compares collected in the same document as he was interested in establishing meaningful connections in the material he worked with. Since Fraser thought of human history as progressive, he could see the Babylonian story of *Gilgamesh* as a contribution to what would be a more sophisticated narrative later in Hebrew writing. He devoted less space to discussing ancient civilizations and more space to the stories of “younger” civilizations like Rome and Greece, medieval folklore, and stories from anthropological reports on indigenous communities. Though Fraser was interested in the origins of such stories, he was forward looking in his orientation: he believed that the science of comparative folklore would reveal data within these
narratives that might help him to understand the history of his own civilization’s progress. In this light, the archaeological drama surrounding the discovery of *Gilgamesh* fascinated him, but his treatment of the narrative itself was much less in depth than his interpretation of many “classical” stories providing strong evidence that his interests were not focused on *Gilgamesh* and the ancient cultures that (re)produced it.

In 1920, forty-seven years after George Smith first translated *Gilgamesh* into English, E.A. Wallis Budge wrote a catalogue report entitled *The Babylonian Story of the Deluge and the Epic of Gilgamesh* for the British Museum. Most of this text focuses on the excavation history of their collection of tablets as well as the challenges and nuances of translating the cuneiform script. Like King, Budge was consistent in viewing *Gilgamesh* as an epic, but he also used the epithet of legend (Budge 24-25). While he did not explain his intention in this choice of terminology, he used the term in the context of the Grimm Brothers’ understanding of the distinction between myth and legend, which described legend as rooted in some historical events and specific to a single culture, as opposed to myth, which was seen as a story that was not read as a link to actual history. Budge was not explicit about this, but his discussion positioned *Gilgamesh* within Babylonian culture and literature and so he thought of it as a Babylonian legend written in the literary form of an epic. The historical feature Budge found described in *Gilgamesh*—as legend was the flood itself: he knew of the Sumerian account as well, and he described both of these deluge accounts as attempts “to commemorate an appalling disaster of unparalleled magnitude” (Budge 26-27). He further defended the historicity of the flood by theorizing that it may have been caused by “a cyclone coupled with a tidal wave” (Budge 28). If the Sumerian and Babylonian literature only “commemorates” the flood, then a Christian reader could assume that the account in the Bible was the true story behind the disaster, and he does not challenge this assumption by discussing other possible origins of the story itself. It appears that Budge, like King, wanted to characterize the Ancient Near Eastern collection at the British Museum as relevant to Biblical narratives, but in no way a threat to their superiority. In King’s case, he argued for the moral superiority of Hebrew texts, in Budge’s the historicity of the Hebrew narratives are supported by texts like *Gilgamesh*.

---

23 This text is attributed to the Museum itself; Budge’s name appears only at the end of the manuscript.
Seven years later, we see the paradigm of discussing the origins and historicity of the flood story breaking down and shifting focus. Joseph Poplicha, an American scholar associated with the University of Pennsylvania, where the Sumerian Nippur tablets were brought and studied, drew his own conclusion about the origin of the flood story. While he was peeling away layers of narrative to reveal material that points to the origin of the flood narrative, he focused on what that story must have meant to the people who told it and shows that historically, the meaning of the story changed and adapted to the cultural atmosphere of the time. This was the first time a scholar published work on *Gilgamesh* that attempted to elucidate how shifts in the way the story was told represented conceptual shifts in the minds of the people who told it. After this essay was published, meaning became gradually more central to the discussion about myth and *Gilgamesh*, allowing for new perspectives on both topics to emerge.

In 1927, Poplicha produced the last interpretation of Gilgamesh that followed Max Müller’s definition of mythology as narratives that present metaphors for solar phenomena. He began *A Sun Myth in the Babylonian Deluge Story* with the assertion that the mention of the sun god in the 11th tablet of the *Gilgamesh* epic can allow scholars to uncover “a vestige of some peculiar deluge version,” and that his article would locate that earlier, vestigial version (Poplicha 289). Poplicha’s method lay in comparing the deluge story in the *Gilgamesh* epic with those found in the Sumerian deluge narrative, as well as the *Atrahasis* epic, but with more attention paid to linguistic variations than Fraser’s methodology allowed (Poplicha 290). Note that the stories themselves were not defined as myths, but that Poplicha asserted that he will find a myth within them. It is the presence of the sun god that offers the possibility that there may be a solar story (rendering it a “myth” by Müller’s standards) buried within *Gilgamesh*, but since Poplica did not wish to identify the entirety of *Gilgamesh* as a story about the exploits of a sun god, he could not call the entire narrative a myth. This early piece of American scholarship on *Gilgamesh* shifted the focus from the flood and the Bible, to a discussion of myth as a universal solar symbol-system, but presented the *Gilgamesh* narrative as a way to understand the historical particularities of Sumerian culture.
Poplich ā pointed out the disagreements about which god gave the deluge hero immortality in the three stories that he considered and, after a discussion of the discrepancies in each text about which god (or gods) gave the hero his ultimate boon, supposed that originally the sun god “entered the deluge boat, elevated the hero, made him immortal, and let him reach his eternal abode” (Poplich ā 295). He then compared the narrative of the deluge hero as a type, with the narratives of other characters mentioned in Babylonian texts as enjoying the company of the gods (Poplich ā 297). He found that there were no common elements between those other Babylonian stories and the story of Utnapishtim (the deluge hero in *Gilgamesh*), and concluded that there must have been another source for his story – he located this source in the stories of the Egyptian journey of the soul to the sun god’s realm (Poplich ā 297). Poplich ā argued that both Gilgamesh’s crossing of the waters of death and Utnapishtim’s boat floating amidst the deluge combined Babylonian and Egyptian ideas to reflect three disconnected thoughts about human potential to achieve immortality in the Babylonian world view: (1) “the journey of the sun god is very difficult;” (2) “that the journey across the waters of death is very difficult” and (3) that “man cannot obtain eternal life even by making these difficult journeys” (Poplich ā 301). The conclusion to this discussion was that at one time the people of Uruk believed that a posthumous journey that ended in immortality was possible, but that by the time the people of Uruk were telling the stories we have access to on clay tablets, they no longer believed that such a journey could happen. He then went on to claim that the older myth behind these stories was produced by some influence that came upon Uruk and civilized it (Poplich ā 301). A very different conception of myth emerges from this American take on Müller’s theoretical framework.

As was the case with the other scholars writing in this period, Poplich ā does not describe *Gilgamesh* as a myth, but unlike the other scholars, he located a “primitive” myth as an older source of *Gilgamesh* (Poplich ā 301). To find this myth, he compared stories that have similar themes - in one instance the theme of a deluge, in another the theme of human association with the gods - and investigated the differences in the features of those stories. He used mainly literary analysis to draw his conclusions. And while these conclusions were about what happens in stories and how these stories developed historically, he also made a claim about a shift in the culture of Uruk’s concept of the afterlife. This is the first scholar I have found
writing about both the historical position of *Gilgamesh* in its own context, as well as the existential meanings that the people who retold the story might have invested in it, placing meaning on the table as a legitimate topic of scholarly discussion. While this conversation about meaning was certainly being applied to ancient narratives in Poplicha’s time, this is the first instance in which the meaning of *Gilgamesh* was discussed in its ancient context.

Though none of the previous scholars describe *Gilgamesh* as a myth outright, the concerns that drove the man who came closest (Poplicha) were most prominent in the minds of future scholarship on *Gilgamesh* and mythology. While the other scholars in this section discussed *Gilgamesh* in terms of the question of whether the Bible is historical in the light of an alternate deluge narrative, Poplicha entered the conversation wondering what *Gilgamesh* and its sources can tell us about how people understood their hope for immortality or an afterlife. Poplicha was silent about the implications of these Sumerian beliefs for the people who would later write the Hebrew Scriptures. After Poplicha, the Bible became less and less prominent as the primary comparative material to associate with *Gilgamesh*. It is possible that Poplicha decided to keep the Bible out of his discussion of *Gilgamesh* based on frustrations with American prohibition laws, rooted in Protestant interpretations of Biblical scriptures. Following frustrating legal dictates that emerged from integrating Biblical interpretations with American law, Poplicha may have wished to distance himself from the Bible in his scholarship.

As my argument progresses I will show that the question of meaning became more and more important to the discussion of both mythology and *Gilgamesh*. The next section presents several scholars who stepped away from discussing myth as a type of story that reflects either purely natural, or purely divine phenomena and instead presented myths as stories that hold a special kind of meaning for the people who tell them.
5. 1934 – 1946: *GILGAMESH FREED FROM TEXTUALITY*

Not only do scholars from this period make the meaning of *Gilgamesh* for the people who retold the story an important feature of their scholarship, they also investigate how rituals and *Gilgamesh* must have influenced each other. The school of thought that located all mythological data as having roots in ritual activities was popular among theorists of this time, leading some to look at the details of *Gilgamesh* intending to identify what aspects of the story were reproduced ritualistically in ancient Mesopotamian cultures. The methods of interpretation crafted by depth psychologists universalizes *Gilgamesh*, turning the story into a representation of universal psychological features that can offer us a clear view of our own hidden psychological processes. This psychological factor assumes that ancient people and modern people had similar psychological processes and concerns as reflected in myth. The focus of scholars in this period moves from comparisons of texts themselves to texts as one tool that can be used to reconstruct both how to understand the realities of the ancient world, and how modern people can understand themselves.

While the authors discussed in this section steer the scholarship on *Gilgamesh* and mythology in a new direction, they continue to utilize many of the methods upon which their predecessors relied. British scholar S. H. Hooke wrote extensively on the relationship between myth and ritual. He worked to locate details in myths that indicated the performance of some kind of ritual corresponding to the myth. While he did not claim that all myths contain some ritual aspect, he did argue that all of the original myths described ritual, or magical performances (Hooke, “Myth, Ritual and History” 139). He published two articles that discuss *Gilgamesh*, the first argues that *Gilgamesh* contains features that would have been used in Babylonian funerary rituals. Like the British writers before him, Hooke specifically associated *Gilgamesh* with Babylonian culture by concluding that the story offers information about Babylonian rituals (Hooke, “Some Parallels with the Gilgamesh Story” 209). The second article presented a list of basic myths and Hooke’s methods for locating the ritual aspects of a myth. I have decided to reverse the chronological order of these articles in my discussion in order to make very clear the way that *Gilgamesh* influenced Hooke’s contribution to the conversation about mythology. First I will lay out his theory of myth, since it differs significantly from
previous theorists I have discussed, and then I will turn to a discussion of how Hooke fit *Gilgamesh* into his understanding of mythology.

Myth offered a glimpse of what religious rituals looked like for ancient peoples in Hooke’s view: It might well contain information that can be read as history, but it was most valuable for offering an understanding of how people carried out rituals in ancient civilizations (Hooke, “Myth, Ritual and History” 137). When a myth did not present a model for ritual activity, it could be read as aetiological, meaning that it describes the origin or cause for some aspect of natural conditions; in Hooke’s understanding, before people began telling aetiological myths, they were creating myths that were “magical in character” and provided models for rituals “directed to certain fundamental needs of an early society” (Hooke, “Myth, Ritual and History” 139). Hooke argued that there are three “basic” myths which offer the models for all other myths:

1. First, Hooke discusses the myth of Tammuz and Ishtar, modeling the death of the god-king, imprisonment in the underworld, his consort’s journey to the underworld to rescue him, and his triumphal return (Hooke, “Myth Ritual and History,” 137).

2. Second, Hooke discusses the creation myth, which for Hooke was modeled after the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* as the most basic form of the myth in our “culture area” (Hooke, “Myth, Ritual and History,” 137 - 138). The creation story involved the conquest of the powers of chaos, fixing of the heavenly bodies in the sky, and the creation of man out of the blood of a slain god (Hooke, “Myth, Ritual and History,” 138).

3. The third and final type is the deluge myth which Hooke claimed presents problems due to its wide dispersion and the blend of aetiological, historical and ritual elements that could be found within these myths (Hooke, “Myth, Ritual and History,” 138 - 139).

These types of myth did not correspond to specific types of rituals; in their wide dispersion and variation they could be used for differing purposes by the cultures that incorporated them into their religious activities (Hooke, “Myth, Ritual and History,” 138 - 139). For Hooke, the truest myths contained ritual
information that makes them magical, and central to the strategies a society developed for satisfying their needs.

To locate borrowing from the basic myths he identifies, Hooke investigated “semi-mythical, semi-historical texts which raise the question of the relation between ritual situations as embodied in the myths, and the beginnings of history” like *Gilgamesh* (Hooke, “Myth, Ritual and History,” 137). This hinted at Hooke’s questioning of the categories of narrative as he understood them in the conclusion of “Myth, Ritual and History”: While he realized that the conversation about myth in Britain relied on an understanding of myth that only permitted ahistorical stories about gods into the category, he argued that many stories, like *Gilgamesh*, present historical figures, but also contain ritual elements (Hooke, “Myth, Ritual and History,” 144 - 145). Citing other texts from the Ancient Near East, Hooke claimed that particularly where the actions of kings were involved, many stories displayed “a mixture of well-attested historical material and myths with generally seem to have ritual intention” (Hooke, “Myth, Ritual and History,” 146). He went so far as to suggest that “one of the sources for written history may […] be the sense of the magical importance of certain ritual situations in which the king is involved” (Hooke, “Myth, Ritual and History,” 146). Hooke’s historical argument established ritual myth as the original type of narrative: these myths preserved the details of rituals that people needed in order to struggle successfully against the challenges of survival. When kings became involved in rituals, their names and personal power became important to the ritual process, so a rudimentary historical form emerged, portraying events as they happen in the human world correlating with the effects of ritual activity. At some point, stories about the gods took on an aetiological purpose, but Hooke did not offer an opinion as to whether these semi-histories emerged before or after the aetiological myth.

Hooke published “Some Parallels with the Gilgamesh Story” five years before presenting his broader theory of ritual and myth, suggesting that some stories can be both mythological and historical. In this earlier article, he performed a reading of *Gilgamesh* much like Poplichia’s: he recognized *Gilgamesh* as a saga,24 but a

---

24 It is based on historical material, as evidenced by the Sumerian king lists which include Gilgamesh, so Hooke concludes that it cannot be a myth (Hooke, “Some Parallels with the Gilgamesh Story,” 196 - 197). However, even here he goes on to claim that *Gilgamesh* “belongs to the border line between pure myth and the beginnings of historical tradition” (Hooke, “Some Parallels with the Gilgamesh Story,” 197).
saga that had ritual – and therefore myth – hidden within it (Hooke, “Some Parallels with the Gilgamesh Story,” 206). To locate the myth-ritual material within *Gilgamesh*, Hooke compared it to two other stories that he claimed contain the details of funerary rituals. The first was a comparison with the story of Elijah’s ascent into heaven found in 1 Kings 19 and 2 Kings 2, and the second, more surprising comparison, was with a Melanesian account of the journey of the dead to the land of ghosts. After reviewing details from these stories, Hooke identified nine common features between the three stories that he argued indicate a common origin for the funerary rituals of Babylon, the Hebrews, and the Melanesians (Hooke, “Some Parallels with the Gilgamesh Story,” 207-208). Hooke concluded that these nine common elements must be related to funerary ritual, since Elijah’s story was about the departure of the prophet from this world, and the Melanesian information explicitly described the journey of the dead. Since the other stories share such striking parallels with *Gilgamesh*, *Gilgamesh* must have related to the details of a funerary ritual – therefore *Gilgamesh* contained both mythic and historical material (Hooke, “Some Parallels with the Gilgamesh Story,” 209). When he revisited *Gilgamesh* in “Myth, Ritual and History,” Hooke made even stronger conclusions about the ambiguity of how to characterize *Gilgamesh*. The presence of Gilgamesh on king-lists gave it elements of history, his conclusion that *Gilgamesh* contained details of a Babylonian funerary ritual placed parts of the story in the realm of myth, and the aetiology of a great flood put *Gilgamesh* partly in all of the categories that Hooke dealt with: saga, ritual myth, aetiological myth, and history (Hooke, “Myth, Ritual and History,” 144-145).

Hooke made use of *Gilgamesh* to question the placement of stories within singular narrative categories. He saw more in *Gilgamesh* than only one story to be told; in his view, there were many layers to the narrative that suggest a wide variety of categories might be used by modern readers to understand it. Since Hooke initially understood myths as stories about deities rather than historical figures, he questioned the category of myth as it had been passed down to him. He finally concluded that stories must be understood as potentially containing a mixture of the elements which once seemed to make them distinct. A story could

---

25 Hooke’s observations about the common elements in these stories are interesting, but rehearsing their content here would neither clarify my description of Hooke’s methods, nor strengthen my argument, so I leave it to the curious reader to seek out his work if interested in these details.
contain historical information, a model for ritual, as well as stories about the activities of the gods. This bold move by Hooke suggested that ancient literature still contained much information to be gleaned by investigating it from a wide variety of perspectives, and that this information would be ignored if these stories were placed in rigid categories based upon the story’s supposed source.

The next theorist who identified the mythological qualities of *Gilgamesh* was psychoanalyst and folklorist, Geza Roheim, who published “The Garden of Eden” in 1940 to discuss the folkloric relationships, and psychological analysis of the story of humanity’s departure from Eden in *Genesis*. Roheim lost no time in identifying *Gilgamesh* as a myth. Much like Hooke, Roheim located a ritual embedded in the story of *Gilgamesh*, related directly to the position of kingship in ancient Uruk. Roheim claimed that if Uruk was the city of Ishtar, then the king must have been ritually married to Ishtar each year (Roheim, 8 - 9). From this perspective, the story of *Gilgamesh* became a consideration of what happens if a king avoided or was distracted from his ritualized sacred marriage (Roheim, 9). Viewing *Gilgamesh* as mythology in this sense allowed Roheim to unify similar things within the story to represent certain typologies: Enkidu and the Bull of Heaven were both bulls that Gilgamesh must fight instead of marrying Ishtar, and all of the women in the story were reinterpreted as figures of Ishtar (Roheim, 8 - 9). *Gilgamesh* was also a myth for Roheim due to its similarities with other stories he understood to be myth; he compared it most vigorously with the story of Fall of Adam and Eve found in *Genesis*, and with African stories that establish the symbols and rituals of sacred kingship (Roheim, 8, 12 - 13). Roheim followed Fraser very closely in his methodology: he compared stories from a wide variety of geographical and historical contexts based on similar actions or symbols contained within them. He was obviously very familiar with Fraser’s work, as he used evidence from both *The Golden Bough* and *Folklore in the Old Testament* (Roheim, 13, 15). But he went a step farther than Fraser, using methods from depth psychology, as established by Freud. If *Gilgamesh* was a myth, then it must have had latent content that emerged from the unconscious, and by comparing *Gilgamesh* to more “primitive” myths, this latent, purely psychological content could be separated from elements that were later added to the story (Roheim, 15, 183).
Roheim placed *Gilgamesh* into this scheme as a highly developed narrative that should be understood as a corrupted model for ancient rituals that reveal truths about human sexual anxieties.\(^\text{26}\)

Like Hewett and Fraser before him, Roheim took myth to be universal, and therefore a ripe field from which to draw universal conclusions about humanity. Writing only one year after Hooke, Roheim takes it as self-evident that the idea that myths can present historical information about how kings were established and how they renewed their kingship. This idea had become accepted in some circles as a useful way to understand ancient stories.\(^\text{27}\) Reading myths in a way that assumes that they have roots in the most foundational, hidden strata of the human mind significantly changed the conversation about how to read and understand them. While Roheim continued to incorporate historical data into his method for interpreting *Gilgamesh*, the payoffs of his arguments were not historical in the same way; they intended to get to the historically original myth that was most closely related to the most essential realms of the unconscious mind. This means that *Gilgamesh* as a story could do more than just tell us about how people lived a long time ago. In this light, *Gilgamesh* and any myth can tell people about the secrets in their own thoughts, and serve as models for how we understand our own frustrations with ourselves and each other. In the psychoanalytic understanding, myths as texts existed as artifacts that could be analyzed to find the myths beyond text that are located within the human mind.

The conversation appears to be shifting from the historical and psychological implications of myth, to the moral insights embedded within myth. Hans Kelsen identified divine retribution as the universal cause for the deluge in every flood myth found around the world in his 1943 article “Retribution in the Flood and Catastrophe Myths.” Kelsen claimed that myths are a universal framework for narratives that evidence the workings of “the primitive mind” (149). From this idea, we can surmise that Kelsen thought of myths in much the same way that Fraser did: as vestiges of ways of thinking and understanding the world which were

---

\(^{26}\) Roheim theorized in his 1952 article entitled “The Flood Myth as a Vesicle Dream” that all flood stories are born through the process of dreams had during the light sleep just before waking while the dreamer also experiences an urgent need to urinate; he cited the version of the flood story in which Ea sends information to Utnapishtim about the flood in a dream as evidence for this conclusion (152, 165).

\(^{27}\) Some theorists of myth, such as Robert Graves, would essentialize this interpretive method, claiming that the only real myths described rituals related to kingship.
less reliable than science. He placed *Gilgamesh* alongside the *Atrahasis* epic, and the Sumerian flood story tablets, to conclude that since the piety of Utnapishtim saved him from the flood, those killed by the flood must have died for their impiety (Kelsen, 126 - 127). This theoretical understanding made the Hebrew flood narrative the baseline by which all other flood narratives are to be understood. It is directly stated in *Genesis* 6:5 that the flood was brought on due to the wickedness of humanity, and this is a more direct indication of divine retribution than the evidence Kelsen provided to make retribution the cause in all of the flood stories he reviewed. Kelsen even argued that when a flood story does not appear to have an element of divine retribution in it, the explorer (Kelsen’s term) who learned the story must not have known to look for retribution as the clear cause of the deluge (149). This argument seems to imply that you need to hear a story in a certain way in order to make it mesh with Kelsen’s theory – an explorer who was not thinking about a flood narrative in terms of the Hebrew narrative would probably not directly seek to understand divine retribution was the cause for a flood. Kelsen described divine revenge as “one of the oldest elements of mythical thinking” in a footnote (149). All of the scholars of myth I discuss bring their own view to the table and transform it into a theory, but only Kelsen is so bold as to say that anyone presenting myths in a way that contradicts his theory isn’t equipped to get meaning out of those myths. He found fear to be one of the essential elements of the relationship between “primitive” man and nature, and therefore all stories about natural catastrophes must have been related to the explicit or implicit fear of the divine (Kelsen, 149).

Kelsen’s work fits *Gilgamesh* into the anthropology of morality by placing it in conversation with an extensive range of other flood stories. Like Roheim, he was interested in the ways that *Gilgamesh* offered scholars clues about the function of the human mind, but instead of making conclusions about how individuals could understand their personal mental processes through *Gilgamesh*, Kelsen focused on how *Gilgamesh* portrayed a common feature of the minds of people who created myths.

The final project I will consider that directly compared *Gilgamesh* and the Bible was published by Alexander Heidel in 1946 with the title: *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*. Heidel had already published a book in 1943 comparing the creation story in *Genesis* with the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, which
describes the god Marduk creating the world from the body of his mother, Tiamat. The opening of the 1946 text evidences Heidel’s great respect for the story he goes on to analyze:

Though rich in mythological material of great significance for the study of comparative religion, it abounds with episodes of deepest human interest, in distinct contrast to the Babylonian creation versions; and although composed thousands of years before our time, the Gilgamesh Epic will, owing to the universal appeal of the problems with which it is concerned and the manner in which these are treated, continue to move the hearts of men for ages to come (1).

We see here not only how meaningful Heidel thought Gilgamesh could be for modern readers, but also a concern with distancing that meaning from the mythological material that he engaged comparatively. He found the story moving, but the impact that the story has does not make it a myth, and he never called Gilgamesh a myth directly, but instead described the story as an epic composed of a “wreath of myths and legends” (Heidel 16). Though Heidel was not explicit in establishing what counts as myth and what doesn’t, he did refer to the story of Ishtar’s descent into the underworld as a myth (Heidel 14). The tale of Ishtar’s journey through the underworld meets some of the criteria that other scholars I have discussed hold for myth: it is only about the gods; and there does not seem to be any relationship between this story and historical characters, distancing it from the category of legend. From this evidence, we can glean a high probability that Heidel was working with the same categories for narratives that Hooke questioned a little over a decade before. Like Hooke and Poplicha, Heidel did not find Gilgamesh to be a myth in itself, but he could find the stuff of myth within the story he thought of as an epic.

Heidel’s book begins with a discussion of the history of Gilgamesh’s modern discovery, as well as comparisons with mentions of Gilgamesh in other ancient sources. Gilgamesh was not only an epic for Heidel, but also a tragedy, and he put more focus on the message related by the story than scholars before him (Heidel 10). Heidel identified the central message of Gilgamesh early in his discussion as the hard fact that immortality cannot be achieved (Heidel 11). This positioning was important since he compared the attitudes
portrayed in Sumerian and Babylonian texts with those portrayed in the Hebrew Bible regarding the nature of death, before concluding his book with a comparison of the deluge narratives in those texts. The book provides a full reconstruction of the text of *Gilgamesh* that mainly follows the Old Babylonian version, but uses the Assyrian version to fill in the gaps where the Babylonian tablets are damaged. Heidel’s purpose in presenting this material was to settle the question of whether the information about the nature of death as well as the deluge narrative in the Hebrew Bible was drawn from “Mesopotamian” ideas or whether it developed independently. He attacked this question by comparing both archeological evidence and textual evidence to establish the Mesopotamian ideas on death and the afterlife, then compared this evidence with Hebrew scriptures to conclude that “differences set the eschatology of the Mesopotamians and those of the Hebrews as far apart as the east is from the west” (Heidel 223). Heidel was inconclusive in his discussion of how the Mesopotamian and Hebrew flood narratives are historically related to each other (267). He offered the three common possibilities that scholars had concluded with: that the Sumerian story was derived from the Hebrew; that the Hebrew story was derived from the Sumerian; and that the two stories shared an older, common source. Heidel concluded that definitive evidence for all three possibilities was lacking (Heidel 261 - 267).

Heidel never directly identified what the mythological material within *Gilgamesh* was; he was less interested in discussing myth than in establishing the distance between the Hebrew scriptures and ideas from Mesopotamia. Much like Barton, who saw far less *Gilgamesh* in the Hebrew Bible than Jensen would like to see, Heidel wanted his reader to rest assured that the Hebrews believed things that separated them from the cultures around them – specifically they had hope for an afterlife whereas the cultures around them did not28 (Heidel 222 - 223). In the case of the flood stories, he used a striking bodily metaphor to describe the distance between the Sumerian and Hebrew narratives: “The skeleton is the same in both cases but the flesh and blood, and above all, the animating spirit are different” (Heidel 268). The “animating spirit” that differs in these stories was theological. Heidel agreed with Biblical translator Dillman that the Babylonian flood story is

---

28 This claim remains uncertain, but it is a prominent method of reading the Old Testament within many Christian circles.
“steeped in the silliest polytheism,” and argued that the Babylonian gods had no coherent sense of morality in their decision to send a flood to Earth, and that they did so more out of capriciousness than a desire for justice (Heidel 268). With a somewhat soft rejection of Kelsen’s view, Heidel shows that the reasoning of the gods in the Sumerian flood narratives was that they had to get rid of humanity because people had become so numerous that their clamor was keeping the gods from sleeping\(^29\) (Heidel 268). This is not a moral decision, and Heidel paints it as an uninformed, unwise action on the part of Enlil (Heidel 268). On the other hand, the Hebrew flood was “unmistakably a moral judgment,” and Heidel ended by pointing out that while the sins of man were so great that the Hebrew god regretted having created them, the Babylonian gods regretted destroying humanity, bringing their moral status into question (Heidel 269). He drew on an extensive body of scholarly material, but ultimately, Heidel’s aim seems to be theological, for the last sentence of his book declared: “Irrespective of whether or not the Hebrew account is to some degree dependent on Babylonian material, also this piece of biblical literature was ‘written for our learning’ (Rom 15:4), in order to rouse the conscience of the world and to give hope and comfort to the God-fearing” (Heidel 269).

Heidel wrote a careful argument about not only the history of texts related to *Gilgamesh*, but also about the behavior and expectations of ancient people based on their beliefs. He ends on a theological note, hoping that his reader will take *Gilgamesh* as a moving and inspiring story that does not present any threat to the consciences of the “God-fearing” who are now equipped to adhere to the moral narratives of the Bible not matter how similar they are to “silly” polytheistic narratives. It is clear that Heidel enjoyed scholarship in Assyriology, but he was distinctive for wanting to bring the stories of the ancient world to Christians\(^30\) in a way that not only strengthens their faith, but allows them to be moved by ancient stories without questioning the historical basis for their faith. Though his argument relied extensively on textual material, Heidel was concerned about what people believe, and how they ought to incorporate stories into their lives. He saw value

---


\(^30\) Note that his final exhortation is from *Romans* in the New Testament, a Christian text rather than a Hebrew one – and a Christian text that significantly reinterpreted the arc of the Hebrew Bible.
in stories from the cultures surrounding the Hebrew population, and he secured those stories in a context that would confirm rather than shake confidence in the Christian worldview.

The period after World War II is distinguished by a significant difference in the questions that scholars brought to *Gilgamesh*. Rather than asking “how does *Gilgamesh* fit into Hebrew Bible studies,” or “how does it fit into the categories of stories as we understand them,” scholars began asking “what did *Gilgamesh* mean for the people who retold and recorded it?” Using many of the same methods of the predecessors to develop answers to this question, the focus of research shifts from concerns about how to establish the genealogy of deluge stories to an attempt to understand the moral and ritual atmosphere that inspired *Gilgamesh*. The arguments in this period trend toward universalism as well, and we see scholars expanding the cultural range of their conclusions. All of the scholars discussed in this section display this tendency: Hooke presents categories for myths that he argues can be applied to all myth and ritual studies; Roheim is seeking universal psychological principals by comparing myths from a variety of times and cultures; Kelsen argues that all deluge stories involve the retribution of the gods; and Heidel discusses *Gilgamesh* as a Mesopotamian phenomenon, expanding the cultural sphere of influence that *Gilgamesh* affected beyond Babylonia. This period pushes the discussion of *Gilgamesh* beyond textual comparison and presents ideas about what the people who incorporated *Gilgamesh* into their lives thought about how they should approach the deities and what was right and wrong. Changing the discussion in this way opens a different approach to *Gilgamesh* for modern audiences: it encourages people to compare the world-view described in *Gilgamesh* to their own sense of how to relate to the world, giving them an opportunity to investigate their own understanding of right relationships between the humanity and the world around us. This paper will trace a final investigation into the historicity of the flood and the increasing sophistication of the search for *Gilgamesh*’s meaning in its final section. Before I move to the last chronological period of scholarship I will discuss here, I offer some observations about common moral themes in *Genesis* and *Gilgamesh*. 
6. GILGAMESH AND NOAH

The scholars who have made textual comparisons of Gilgamesh and Genesis have mainly compared the flood narrative, describing Utnapishtim as the Babylonian version of the Hebrew Noah. Instead of thinking of the flood as a potentially historical event that should be separated from the rest of the narratives in which it appears, we may instead look at it as a narrative with similar themes: The flood suggests that the relationship between humanity and the highest power over humanity can become untenable, and that the powers over humanity no longer wish to sustain humankind. The audience is positioned as still insignificant in the face of the power over humanity. Members of the audience can view their own lives as evidence that divinity already decided to do away with humanity, but found some part of it worth preserving. The moral question of how to avoid angering the source of divine power comes into sharp relief in this context. The comparison of moral themes in the two stories is more fruitful when we consider these two narratives in their entirety, looking less intently at the flood narrative itself, instead comparing the events that surround it and the positive or negative effects that these events have in the lives of Gilgamesh and Noah. Nakedness and alcohol show up in both narratives in very different ways: Genesis soundly condemns both nudity and the use of alcohol, while Gilgamesh presents alcohol and sexual nudity as paths to alleviating the anxiety of the mortal condition and Gilgamesh’s obsession with death.

Unlike any of the other flood narratives found from the Ancient Near East, Noah’s story ends with him making wine and getting drunk.31 After this, his son Ham sees him naked, and tells his brothers who cover Noah up. Noah then pronounces a curse of servitude on Ham and his son, Cana’an. This detail historically justifies the conquest of the land of Cana’an by the Hebrews by showing that the progenitor of everyone on earth had determined that the sons of Shem would dominate the sons of Ham.32 To end the story this way suggests a glimmer of the promise of land to the people of Israel. Together alcohol and nudity bring this condemnation about. It is not even the use of alcohol by Ham himself, but by his father that gets

31 See Heskett, Randall and Joel Butler’s Divine Vintage: Following the Wine Trail from Genesis to the Modern Age (Palgrave Macmillian 2012), pages 4-6 deal with Noah, 10 – 11 with Gilgamesh and 95 discusses Siduri, the ale wife who appears near the end of Gilgamesh.

32 This scriptural curse was later used as a racial justification for slavery in the American South. For more on this, see Tom Peterson’s Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South (Scarecrow Press, 1978).
him cursed, and there is no clear indication of why seeing his father’s nakedness results in a curse for Ham and his descendants. It is taken for granted that there is justice in Noah’s proclamation. The implication here is that one man’s use of alcohol can condemn some of his descendants to generations of servitude, and that a person who has seen the nudity of his father deserves retribution.

The contrast of the treatment of these themes in *Gilgamesh* is sharp. The revelation of the temple harlot’s nudity to Enkidu is what allows him to cross from wildness into civilization. After he is clothed, he doesn’t really resemble a human until he has drunk seven cups of ale. After Enkidu’s death, Gilgamesh meets Siduri, the ale wife, in between the land of the scorpion people and the sea of death he must cross to reach Utnapishtim. As she recounts the good things in life that Gilgamesh should be attending to instead of seeking for immortality, she lists both ale, and women at his bosom. Nudity and alcohol produce positive transformations for Enkidu, who in turn inspires positive transformations in Gilgamesh, who must gain wisdom through his friend’s death. The positivity in Enkidu’s relationship with nudity and alcohol may seem questionable, since these experiences result in Enkidu’s death. This occurs to Enkidu too, and he curses the harlot for ever having met him, as well as everything he has experienced in Uruk. However, the sun god Shamash appears to him and shows him the value in the experiences he has had to the extent that Enkidu changes his curses into blessings. In *Gilgamesh*, nudity and alcohol are features of civilization that have a positive effect on human life. In Noah’s case, both nudity and alcohol are presented as dangerous to one’s progeny; their position in these two plots is completely opposite to one another. Whereas alcohol and nudity enter the plot of *Gilgamesh* sustaining features of the project of civilization, they are seen as powerful dangers for Noah’s progeny (that is, everyone on Earth) in *Genesis*.

I offer these comparisons as a clear example of the kind of meaning-making that became possible as “myth” took on new existential meanings in the 1950s and 1960s, the next period of scholarship I will discuss. The story of *Gilgamesh* supports certain norms and activities around subjects that are still hotly debated. The conversation in America about how to be appropriately naked with another person (or people)

---

33 Robert Graves and Raphael Patai suggest that Ham may have castrated his father in an older version of the myth and that this was the reason for the curse on pages 120-121 in *The Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (Greenwich House, 1983).
has been an important one with many stakeholders, and continues unabated among political and religious communities. The same is true of alcohol use. There are obviously more than two possibilities in these debates; in no way do I want to suggest that either you are on Gilgamesh’s side or Noah’s side on these issues, since there are many perspectives from which to consider them. My purpose in presenting these stories is to highlight the implicit moral relationships of cause and effect describing how nudity and alcohol affect human interactions in society. To accept either of them as a myth with meaning can have a profound effect on what a person finds appropriate, what actions have moral weight and which do not, as well as the kinds of communities with which one associates. Bringing the challenge of meaning-making to these stories asks us to reflect on our own lives and the decisions we have made and continue to make about values, right action, and retribution for wrongs. As my investigation continues through the final section of scholarship I will cover, the relationship between myth, meaning, and life as it is lived will become more prominent in theory.


This final historical period in Gilgamesh and mythology scholarship involves the gradual shift in focus from issues of historicity and proof for the Bible to questions of meaning that emerge from myths and Gilgamesh specifically. The question for scholars was no longer: “How do I understand the existence of fictional myths that seem very similar to Biblical stories I accept as true?” Rather, scholars in this period use Gilgamesh as a way to investigate the self-understandings of ancient people. This question of self-understanding revolves around the question of how the cultures that reproduced Gilgamesh established relationships between that narrative and their ways of conceptualizing features of the world. Scholars remained interested in history; we will discuss one archaeologist excavating the city of Ur in this period in an attempt to verify the deluge narrative with material evidence. But the other scholars working with Gilgamesh at this time diverge significantly from discussions about the historicity of such narratives, instead focusing on
what they meant for ancient peoples and what they could potentially mean for modern people. The later scholars in this time frame all agree that myth has profound relevance for modern people, though they offer varying theories about how myth functions for modern people and how we ought to engage it.

Sir Leonard Wolley led the excavation of the ancient city of Ur and used *Gilgamesh* to argue that the flood stories from the Mesopotamia and the Bible were historical and that the creation stories from the same area were myths (Wolley 91). The article in which he laid out his evidence for this argument was published in 1956, at the end of a career in archaeology that began in 1906 and just four years before Wolley’s death. Its title is “Iraq’s Ancient Past: Rediscovering Ur’s Royal Cemetary.” Wolley worked extensively with the British Museum, so he can be considered an heir to the conversation about *Gilgamesh* in which George Smith, Leonard King, and Wallis Budge participated. He categorized the creation stories of *Genesis* and the *Enuma Elish* as myths because each one “deals with times and events prior to the appearance of man upon the earth. [They] therefore cannot be based on human memory” (Wolley 91). Reminiscent of the conceptions of myth found in the work of Hewett, Poplicha, and Fraser; Wolley found these creation stories to be works of “cosmological speculation whereby man attempts to explain the universe” (92). By describing myths as stories that speculate about the origins of the natural world and that explain the existence of cosmological bodies, Wolley allied himself with the perspective on myth that sees it as a way of understanding the world that is inferior to science (like Fraser). He combined this with the perspective informed by Müller that understands myth as a narrative that describes phenomena visible in the sky.

*Gilgamesh* enters Wolley’s argument to show the close similarity between Sumerian flood stories and the flood story in *Genesis*, and he claims this point as evidence of historical facts in these texts (93). He also cites the presence of genealogies of the characters in the flood narratives, *Gilgamesh*, Utnapishtim, and Noah as evidence that Sumerian people would have accepted the flood story as historical (Wolley 91, 94). According to Wolley, the geographical lack of large bodies of water in Judea, central Arabia, the Caucasus Mountains and the Syrian Plateau, in tandem with the amazing fertility of the Sumer river valley indicates that the *Genesis* creation story must have been borrowed from Sumer (Wolley 92 - 93). He asserts that “The
Genesis account is precisely what a Sumerian would have written, and it could not have been written by an inhabitant of any other country where physical conditions were different. Therefore the Hebrews borrowed it from Sumer” (Wolley 93). His own archaeological findings conclude that there was a 25 foot deep flood in Ur during the al Ubaid period. Wolley marveled at the sense of purity and miraculous historical preservation of original texts in the Bible, assuming that Hebrew redactors writing in Babylon during the Babylonian exile would not have allowed any text to be affected by Babylonian influence (Wolley 96). To make the purity and historicity of Biblical writers more evident, Wolley speculated that there must have been a fragmentary version of the deluge narrative from the Haran district north of Babylon, and that this story would feature a protagonist with a name like “Noah” (Wolley 97). Wolley relies on textual, geographical, and archaeological data to establish the conclusion that the flood stories were history, not myth. This was the last time the question of whether the flood was historical or not emerged in the materials that this paper considers. It should come as no surprise that this discussion came from a man who worked in the British Museum within a tradition that viewed *Gilgamesh* as an opportunity to understand the historical potential surrounding the Biblical flood story.

Just two years later, in 1958, E.O. James, Professor Emeritus in the History of Religion at the University of London published *Myth and Ritual in the Ancient Near East*, and argued for a paradigm of understanding mythology that investigates ancient myth historically as an expression of how cultures grappled with the challenges of the natural world. James’ primary research question is one of describing the history of religions in the Ancient Near East along themes that appear in all of the major culture areas spanning from Egypt to Greece. The overarching scheme of the book is reflected in a table (see Table 1) which describes the changes in religious symbols and features that James tracked through the book (James, Table 1). Each chapter considers how literature and archaeological data found in these regions expressed common mythological motifs of the Ancient Near East such as the seasonal cult drama, sacred kingship, and good and evil. James positioned *Gilgamesh* the result of a “long and complicated literary process” combining a *rite de

---

34 These issues also appear in the discussion of the two creation stories at the beginning of *Genesis* in *The Hebrew Myths* by Graves and Patai (21 – 28).
35 Ca. 6500 – 3800 B.C.E.
passage through the waters of death, nature myths, necromancy and the cult of the dead into a “heroic tale of profound human interest” (James 43). While he did not make *Gilgamesh* the source for the bulk of the material he discusses on Mesopotamia, he identifies it as a strong model for the sense of frustration and despair characterizing Mesopotamian myth and ritual (James 43-44). James agreed with many of the scholars I have discussed that *Gilgamesh* contained mythological material, but that the story as a whole was best characterized as an epic rather than a myth (James 43).

The book begins with a swift rejection of Müller’s model of myth as a “disease of language” and Fraser’s model which views myth as a step in the evolution of intellectual understanding of the natural world (James 15-17). He found alternatives for these models in the works of philosopher Ernst Cassirer and the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski who take up a “functional standpoint” which asserts that “myth and ritual can and often do perform their functions as the expression of the ways in which members of a community have adjusted themselves to society and to their own total experience quite apart from the truth or falsity of the beliefs they enshrine, but only so long as they carry conviction to those who adhere to them” (James 17, 19). He traced the way that Malinowski came to his conclusions as an anthropologist by comparing the ways that the indigenous people he studied incorporate myths into their lives with the ways that Christians incorporated myth into their lives (James 19). James discusses these models and carefully concludes that “neither a purely functional nor a wholly symbolical and existential approach suffices, because so much of the fundamental importance in the evaluation of myth and ritual depends on what lies behind and beyond the existing religious and social structure, and its relationships” (James 20). Like the majority of the scholars discussed in the previous section, James wanted to use myth to understand how people were living their lives. As an historian of religion, he described how mythology and ritual informed each other to produce religious practices and religious understandings of the world.

Where James used *Gilgamesh* in his project, he was careful to compare the evidence in the longer, composite story with older sources relating similar ideas. For instance, one of James’ first uses of *Gilgamesh* occurs in a discussion of flood myths of Mesopotamia within a chapter on Good and Evil. Utnapishtim's
story in *Gilgamesh* was arranged alongside other flood stories from Sumeria to show that the only reason given in any of these stories for the flood is the noisiness of humanity in the *Atrahasis* epic (James 190). In the same chapter he compares the moral reasoning behind the Hebrew deluge with the lack of moral cause for the Mesopotamian flood (James 203 - 204). James referenced Heidel’s work to establish that the loss of immortality by humankind could have been averted; there was no moral issue in the loss of immorality by Adapa\(^3\) or Gilgamesh, but he does not mention Heidel’s work describing moral conclusions about the Mesopotamian and Hebrew flood narratives (James 185 - 186). *Gilgamesh* appeared briefly in the chapter entitled “Eschatological Mythology” for the description of the dreary Mesopotamian netherworld in Tablet XII (James 220). In the same chapter, James described zodiacal symbolism as powerfully influential on Babylonian myth, ritual and eschatology, referencing “the division of Gilgamesh into twelve episodes […] each related to the constellations and their divine figures” (James 225). Where he discussed aetiological myths,

\(^3\) Another semi-divine being who could have gained immortality for humankind, but lost it due only to a misunderstanding among the gods who gave him advice.
James argued that myths that offered explanations for natural phenomena have other functions as well (James 248). He used the early Sumerian version of the deluge story to suggest that the recital of this myth may have been thought to bring “deliverance in times of distress” (James 253). He emphasized this element of distress by considering how Gilgamesh lost the magic plant that restored youth immediately after he found it and surmises that despite the hopeless view on death maintained by the Mesopotamians, sacrifice may have been seen to offer a supernatural extension of life; he quoted inscriptions attributed to Sargon of Assyria and Ashurdan I that seem to confirm this idea (James 253). James’ final observation on Gilgamesh
discusses it alongside other “literary legends” from Greek culture as narratives that were once connected to
the practice of specific rites, but as they were disseminated and translated through the ancient world they
“ceased to be cultic in any real sense at all” (James 302). Wherever he felt he had evidence for it, James
showed that *Gilgamesh* once connected to specific rituals and ideologies maintained for some period of time in
the Mesopotamian world. The epic, literary version of *Gilgamesh* is described by James as disconnected with
rites by the time of its composition, but the mythological material incorporated into *Gilgamesh* still offered
James some insights into the religious sensibilities of the ancient Mesopotamian world, based on its
relationship with older stories.

James concluded his book with a discussion of the difficulty in establishing historical facts from
mythological data, claiming that “the function of myth and ritual, however, is not to chronicle past events so
much as to enable a community to deal effectively with the practical issues which press upon it daily in the
serious business of living” (James 305). Myth for James does not relate historical information, but it can
inform us as to what sorts of concerns the people who retold this myth shared, and how they attempted to
mitigate those concerns. Myth does more than describe historical circumstances, it offers modern readers an
opportunity to connect with the practical minds of the ancient world. He makes a stronger claim in his final
sentence:

Myth and ritual give verbal and symbolic form and meaning to the emotional urge and
rhythmic relations of life as a living reality, recounting and enacting events on which the very
existence of mankind has been believed to depend, and proclaiming and making efficacious
an aspect and an apprehension of truth and reality transcending historical occurrences and
empirical reasoning and cosmological and eschatological speculations. (James 309)

The second half of that sentence refutes most of the models of understanding mythology that I have
discussed so far. Instead, James asserted that mythology and its practical extension, ritual, give “form and
meaning” to emotions and relationships in life as it is lived. While James was comfortable discussing myth as
something that people of all times and cultures make active use of to understand their lives, *Gilgamesh* was not such a myth in his eyes (James 307 - 308).

The next scholar we will consider brings mythology and *Gilgamesh* to feminist and popular culture concerns of the mid-1960s claiming that *Gilgamesh* and other ancient myths have a profound effect on the relationships of his time. Poet H.R. Hays, concerned with the continuing mischaracterization of women, wrote *The Dangerous Sex: The Myth of Feminine Evil* in 1964. This book analyzes literature from an historical and critical perspective to show that, not only is a great deal of mythology filled with ideas that demonize women, but that those ideas systematically affect contemporary male minds. The main theme of the book is that men have disguised their fear of women and their ambivalence toward sexuality in the form of stories and practices that deny women equality and agency (Hays 269). Though Hays did not perform an extensive discussion of what myth meant to him in this book, his conception of myth is easily connected to the definition that Fraser sponsored. Hays asserted in his first chapter that “we are gradually beginning to realize that human beings are still primitives in the mask of modern technology” and in his conclusion that “it is time the male abandoned his magical approach to the second sex. It is time he learned to accept his existential anguish” (Hays 14, 283). This language relates to Frasers' understanding of myth in that it assumes that people can (and should) move beyond mythological/magical thinking; Hays views myths and rituals as part of a complex of magic-making practices that allow men to avoid dealing with the sexual issues that depth psychology reveals (Hays 15 - 19). Relating mythology with the discipline of depth psychology also connects this view of myth with E.O. James’ idea that “myth and ritual derive their validity from their own order of reality, and it is in this sphere that they have to justify their claims” (James 307 - 308). For James, myths construct their own order of reality, in conjunction with ritual practice. In Hays’ eyes, myths and rituals have constructed a misogynistic world order, and he intended to expose this misogyny and confront other men with its irrational roots.

*Gilgamesh* appears in Hays’ discussion as a slightly contradictory counterpoint to *Genesis*. First, Hays discussed the relationship between sexuality, divine punishment, and the burden of responsibility for
civilization evident in the story of the fall of man in *Genesis* (Hays 78 - 82). He then turned to the story of how Enkidu was civilized by coupling with a sacred courtesan for six days and seven nights, and describes this as an instance of good mana proceeding from the love goddess (Hays 82). The episode of Ishtar's proposition of marriage to Gilgamesh and his rejection of her characterizes “the fertility goddess as lascivious and evil,” and Hays reads this as evidence of ambivalence toward femininity in Mesopotamian civilization (Hays 82). Even in this light Hays valorizes the way that Mesopotamian mythology and ritual positioned male-female relationships in their fertility rites celebrating the sacred marriage of Tammuz and practices of sacred prostitution (Hays 82). Compared to the frequent crusades against fertility cults recorded in the Hebrew scriptures, Hays finds much less sexual neurosis in Mesopotamian mythology (Hays 82 - 83). Again, we see *Gilgamesh* compared with *Genesis*, but with very different stakes involved. In the majority of the comparisons between these texts previously mentioned, *Gilgamesh* was held up as either morally inferior to the Hebrew scriptures, or as evidence that there was an historical flood in the Mesopotamian river basin. Hays used *Gilgamesh* as evidence that there have been mythologies in our own literary history that do not agree completely with the myth of feminine evil that modern people continued to incorporate into their personal narratives. In Hays’ work, myth becomes a set of broadly applied cultural assumptions that informs irrational magical practices, allowing people to avoid an accurate perception of their feelings. I suspect that Hays characterizes myth (and magic) in these terms to show a popular audience composed of people who wanted to see themselves as rational rather than magical that continuing to treat women as nonparticipants in politics and culture was irrational and even pathological.

The final author I will investigate describes a similar relationship between narratives and the way that people live their lives and develop self-understandings, but with different technical terms. Cornelius Loew wrote *Myth, Sacred History, and Philosophy* as “a way of introducing students to the religious heritage of the West” (Loew v). He offered this religious heritage through the stories that were told in three culture areas, distinguishing those types of narrative in separate categories: the Egyptians and Mesopotamians told myths, the Hebrews kept a sacred history, and the Greeks practiced philosophy (Loew 5 - 6). Loew held up these three different genres as the sources of each cultures convictions, which he defined as “those persuasions
about the meaning, purpose, and proper ordering of life that are so fundamental and so widely shared that they function as comprehensive orienting and integrating factors in a culture or in communities of faith within a culture” (Loew 3). Conveniently, Loew located both of the subjects that interest me within the purview of Mesopotamia. He defined myth as stories about “a sacred cosmic order, an encompassing framework and an ever flowing process in which man and his human world of problems, fears, meanings, hopes, purposes, and absurdities were not alien but had their allotted place” (Loew 13 - 14). Loew identified five major convictions that the myths of the Mesopotamian “culture area” expressed:

1. There is a cosmic order that permeates every level of reality;
2. This cosmic order is the divine society of the gods;
3. The structures and dynamics of this society can be discerned in the movements and patterned juxtapositions of the heavenly bodies;
4. Human society should be a microcosm of the divine society – it should be organized and governed like the macrocosm; and
5. The chief responsibility of priests and kings is to attune human order to the divine order. (Loew 13)

The majority of the first section of Loew’s book is an analysis of Mesopotamian myths and how they relate to these convictions. Like James, Loew referenced Malinowski to describe myths as an expression not just of a story, but of reality as it is lived; however, he did not include *Gilgamesh* in this category (Loew 43).

Instead, Loew describes *Gilgamesh* as a text ahead of its time, written with the goal of questioning the Mesopotamian convictions and rearranging them into potentially new religious forms that never became incorporated into the religious system of its time. He includes a summary of *Gilgamesh* surrounded by the analysis that this late addition to Mesopotamian literature that deals mainly with the question of how to respond to death (Loew 53). Loew claimed that “without doubt the protest against death was what made the *Gilgamesh* Epic probably the most widely known and most influential literary work in the Near East by 1500 B.C.” (Loew 58). *Gilgamesh* was characterized as an implicit attack on the cosmological conviction of its day and a “significant form of religious criticism,” but a failed criticism nonetheless (Loew 59). Thematically, Loew linked *Gilgamesh* with the Zoroastrian reforms of the Persian religious tradition, since he saw no serious
challenge to the cosmological conviction held by the Mesopotamians until that period (Loew 59). *Gilgamesh* was thus characterized by Loew as a piece of literature hundreds of years ahead of its time, expressing the criticisms of a few against a widespread cultural system.

Returning briefly to Loew’s discussion of myth, he draws on the work of anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner to bring myth into the modern context. Warner describes the American social system as relying on “the American Dream: the vision, hope, and expectation that every person and his family will be able to rise in social status” (Loew 44). Loew divides this ideal into two contradictory convictions: That every American is equal, and that every American deserves some kind of status – which implies inequality (Loew 44). He then discusses the rags-to-riches story model as a type of myth to which Americans cling dearly – exemplified powerfully in the story of Abraham Lincoln’s ascent to the presidency from humble beginnings as a log-splitting cabin dweller (Loew 45 - 46). He provided this example to help his readers understand the powerful nature of the Mesopotamian myths, as foreign as it may seem for modern Americans to accept them as representations of reality (Loew 46). While *Gilgamesh* was not a myth for the ancient Mesopotamians because it did not ultimately inform their cultural convictions, Loew is comfortable reclaiming myth as something by which modern people are profoundly affected, and as a human phenomenon that help us understand the thinking of ancient peoples.

Wolley, the archaeologist who directed the dig at Ur, the city of Gilgamesh, inherited the debate about the flood narrative’s historicity which was important to scholars at the British Museum. Scholars from the 1930s and 1940s shifted the discussion of myth away from viewing individual myths as texts only to be compared with each other into a discussion of what the complex of information about narrative and ritual practices meant to the ancient peoples who performed them. Wolley entered into that discussion by not only interpreting archaeological evidence from Ur as proof for a Biblically styled flood, but also by stating that the people of Sumeria and Judah would not have thought of the deluge narrative as a myth, but as history. This interpretation assumes that certain genre-related features of an ancient narrative indicate how ancient peoples would have understood and engaged it. While Wolley worked with the questions and concerns that George
Smith raised after he found *Gilgamesh* in the British Museum, he participated in moving the discussion of mythology away from strict textual analysis to the anthropological questions of what meanings texts were invested with by the people who used them.

The other scholars considered here - James, Hays, and Loew - had very different goals but they all agreed that mythology is a living genre of narrative in the modern world, not a dead or irrelevant genre. James and Loew relied primarily on anthropological data to make their case, citing Malinowski’s studies on how myth functions in indigenous and modern cultures to make meaning in people’s lives. Roheim is one among many depth psychologists on whom Hays drew on to interpret mythology as a method for dealing with male fears and establishing rituals that enforce female inferiority. The goals of James and Loew were similar; both wished to describe a trajectory of narratives in the Ancient Near East that historically informed one another and established how those narratives represent meaning and ritual in the ancient world. They both took the step of describing myths as they functioned in the ancient world and asserted that myths continue to influence modern lives. The major difference between the anthropological approach that James and Loew took and the approach that Hays took is that Hays argued that the same myths that influenced ancient peoples continue to influence modern peoples, whereas both James and Loew described modern people as using very different myths to structure their meaning making process. While scholars in anthropology, archaeology, philosophy, psychology, literary studies, and history were looking at myth as a powerful force in the modern world by the 1950s, only a few of them thought of *Gilgamesh* as potentially meaningful to modern people in this way. Scholars entering into conversations about the technical definitions of myth and legend did not define *Gilgamesh* as a myth; they saw it as a composite of mythological materials incorporated into a (frequently universally) compelling story. However, these discussions were occurring during the period that Theodore Ziolkowski discusses as popularizing *Gilgamesh*, so scholars could not assume that people knew the story of *Gilgamesh* at all (Ziolkowski 77 - 108). Only several decades later would enough people know *Gilgamesh* for it to be a relevant source for cultural meaning making in the modern world. The popular acceptance of *Gilgamesh* in the modern world has no effect on its status as myth in the ancient world, but it offers mythological possibilities to modern readers.
CONCLUSION: GILGAMESH ALIVE IN THE MODERN WORLD

Gilgamesh presumably began as a scattered collection of popular stories about a legendary king or about a monster slaying hero in the ancient world. At some point, these stories were combined into a single narrative meditating on the grandiose themes of death, friendship, existential disruption, and the relationship between humans and the forces more powerful than humans. This story enjoyed incredible popularity in a wide range of cultures and was reproduced by scribes in many forms and languages from Babylonian, to Akkadian, to Hittite, to Greek, to Latin. And yet it appears that at some point the story was forgotten. No one told the story of Gilgamesh for over a thousand years. But in 1872 a British scholar located a tablet in Old Babylonian, from an Assyrian library, inscribed with the story of Gilgamesh. Thanks to growing interest in the history of the world that generated the Hebrew scriptures, and a growing interest in ancient literature, scholars began discussing Gilgamesh again. Later still, as poets and artists of all sorts read this story from the ancient world, they found it meaningful, and powerful enough to translate into the genres in which they worked, to try to make meaning out of Gilgamesh for themselves and for modern audiences. World-wide popularity has caused Gilgamesh to become a name that most people know today, even if they do not know all of the details of the story.

I am not a scholar invested in establishing the correct categorization for narratives, or much of anything. My interests lie in exploring how viewing subjects of study from varying perspectives alters the terms of their possible use and meaning. Gilgamesh was translated from the cuneiform and immediately compared to the Hebrew Bible by George Smith, which is no surprise since many people sincerely interested in the historical conditions surrounding the composition of the Hebrew Scriptures were working in the then
nascent field of Assyriology. For some scholars, locating texts from the ancient past was a central practice in understanding the cultures that produced them, for others it was a way to confirm Biblical history. Realizing this, the archaeologists and translators working with the British Museum leaned on the side of those who hoped to confirm the value of the Hebrew Scriptures by focusing on the flood narrative in *Gilgamesh* and asserting that deluge stories from the Ancient Near East were based on an historical event. In the tradition that passed through George Smith, Leonard King, Wallis Budge, and Leonard Wolley, *Gilgamesh* would consistently be compared with the Bible, as evidence for how distinct the Hebrew people were from the cultures surrounding them.

Using archaeological and textual information, other scholars incorporated anthropological theories and methods into their perspective on *Gilgamesh*, revealing information about how the people who transmitted the ancient story thought about themselves metaphysically. These anthropologists argued that they could use source information about ancient peoples’ self-understandings, and frequently aimed at reconstructing the rituals and practices to which *Gilgamesh* was related. This made *Gilgamesh* much more than a text to compare with the Bible, but took it up as a narrative on its own terms, from its own world. In this context, it mattered much more which people recorded which version of *Gilgamesh*, and why they made the choices to re-tell the story as they did. A shift to anthropological methods brought the distinct cultures that retold and recorded their own iterations of *Gilgamesh* into the conversation, rather than regarding them en masse as contrasting to the homogeneous culture that produced the Bible.

The introduction of depth psychology brought the meaning of *Gilgamesh* out of the ancient world and into the modern mind. Rather than investigating what *Gilgamesh* meant to ancient people, depth psychologists used the story to help people understand the framework behind their own thoughts. In this light, stories become more than historical artifacts, or mere texts; they express universal truths about the workings of the human mind. This perspective encourages encounters with *Gilgamesh* that bring the imagination away from what the story once meant, or what it tells us about other people, to questioning what it could mean to all people, and what it means to each living individual today.
Though the concept of myth dances around *Gilgamesh* in all of these discussions, it is rare that a scholar directly identifies the *Gilgamesh* story as a myth. Usually it is seen as a carrier of myth, or composed of myths without actually being a myth itself, unless a scholar is using the Grimm Brothers’ method of classification, which sees it as a legend. But by the final period of scholarship I discuss here, we see that James was willing to say that modern people have myths of their own which are analogous to anyone else’s myths. He was perfectly comfortable placing any of the meaning making complexes of the modern world and the narratives that support them in the context of myth, as ways of mentally and emotionally coping with the challenges of the world. Cornelius Loew hinted that *Gilgamesh* represented an alternate interpretation of ancient mythology that did not have an effect on the convictions of its time period, and that seems to be the main reason that he cannot consider *Gilgamesh* a myth. But the poet H. R. Hays was willing to go farther. He saw many stories from all over the world producing a conviction in men that they are entitled to treat women as inferior, and together these stories propagated a living myth in the real world. By this period, myths have ceased to be just a particular kind of story; they are described as drifting somewhere between narratives and normative convictions. In this light, we retell myths to support our convictions, and we appreciate myths that confirm the convictions we already hold. Myths also provide a method to help us investigate our convictions critically, as we hold them up against various situations and the actions of hypothetical characters to reflect on what we believe ought to happen in a real situation.

A variety of definitions of myth appear in scholarship about *Gilgamesh* and mythology. The model of the Grimm Brothers emerging out of studies of folk tales, dominates the early interpretations of the story, in which myths must be unhistorical but should be set in familiar, geographical places. The philological idea of myth that understands the journey of the sun through the sky as the primary narrative of all myths is another framework that scholars used to interpret *Gilgamesh*. Another conception of mythology from the field of anthropology also makes an appearance in the study of *Gilgamesh*, viewing mythology as an unscientific way of understanding the world informed by magical and religious thinking. In the field of ritual studies, myth was seen as the earliest form of narrative which developed simultaneously with ritual practices and the details of both ritual and myth affected the growth of each other. The Freudian psychological understanding of myth
views it as a form of narrative expressing unconscious, usually universal, concerns within the mind. The poet, H.R. Hays characterizes myth as a form of narrative that all people inherit and reinscribe on each other with social consequences in the world as lived. Finally, Leow’s textbook definition of myth regards it as the primary record of the moral and cosmological convictions of ancient peoples. I consider myself more sympathetic with poets than any other “type” of person, and that sympathy directs my choices here as well. Rather than thinking of myths as bounded documents that should be investigated as texts, I see mythology as actively part of the exchange of meaning-making. I see myths as both a potential frame of reference for meaning making, as well as the site where meanings can be revisited and altered. A myth that changes in this way can maintain its identity, and it becomes richer and full of more possibility as it is reinscribed with new meanings. Hays points out how myths have an influence on social practices and cultural structures, and this interaction between myth and life as it is lived is the foundation for my claim that myths we accept matter, and that some myths are alive in societies no matter how old they are or how many people consciously see them at work.

In this context, and in the light of the incredible propagation of recent retellings of *Gilgamesh*, *Gilgamesh* becomes a myth, and one with special potential. Like the authors of *Gilgamesh*, we moderns are convinced that we ought to continue acting and living despite the sense of loss that surrounds everything we do. Though we live in a world where the relationships and pleasures that we hold dear could end at any moment, we look to the things that we accomplish and their potential outside ourselves as beneficial to society, like the walls of Uruk that are extolled at the beginning and end of *Gilgamesh*. Modern people tend to believe that political power needs to be checked, and a crisis of uncontrollable political power is what leads to the creation of Enkidu, and the quest that affords Gilgamesh the title of “One Who Has Seen the Depths.” We tend to hold that there is something significant about the way that we use our bodies with each other, and much of the action that moves the plot of *Gilgamesh* forward revolves around experiences of touch and sexuality: the sacred harlot’s lovemaking civilizes Enkidu; it is through wrestling that Gilgamesh and Enkidu become friends; Enkidu dies because Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar’s advances. Labor, politics, and sexuality are
hot topics in both *Gilgamesh* and our own society, making retellings of *Gilgamesh* powerful tools in further investigating our convictions in our own context.

*Gilgamesh* has been told and retold in so many ways, times, and places that it cannot be said to belong to any one culture. Even if Andrew George was correct in arguing that a single author composed *Gilgamesh*, that person’s name has been lost to history, and the iterations of the story itself have expanded far beyond the scope of a single human life or mind. Though *Gilgamesh* ends in Uruk, unlike the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Hebrew Scriptures or the Aeneid, it does not belong to a single cultural sphere, but has bled from people to people since before any version of it was written down. The stories written above have been incorporated into many cultures, but nevertheless Iliad and the Odyssey are recognized as specifically Greek, linguistically and culturally, the Hebrew Scriptures belong to the Hebrew tradition and language, and the Aeneid is a Latin, Roman text. Gilgamesh cannot be associated in the same way with any single culture or language. At least until the themes that it presents become irrelevant to human beings, *Gilgamesh* can be claimed by anyone as a meaningful story. Its reception history invites readers from anywhere to retell it, to make it their own myth. The absence of a single historical origin for *Gilgamesh* outside of our own cultures, invites us to make it our own and continue the *Gilgamesh* story-telling, and meaning-making traditions.
WORKS CITED


—. "Some Parallels with the Gilgamesh Story." Folklore, Vol. 45:3 (1934): 195-211.


