

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA – Philosophy

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview In *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Henri Frankfort discusses the thought process of the great early civilizations of the Fertile Crescent, and of Egypt. He argues effectively that the thinking of those cultures, from their origins in the sixth millennium B.C., was mythopoetic, that is, thought in terms of myths, stories of the gods, and of human experience as shaped by the presence of the gods--of whom, for example, there were more than a thousand, just in Mesopotamia. Logical reasoning and empirical observation were relatively underdeveloped, although education was highly valued, and Mesopotamia was renowned for its profusion of teaching academies, which in number exceeded that of temples.

Mythopoetic literature Both the story of Adapa (14th century B.C.E.) and the epic of *Gilgamesh* (2150-1400 B.C.E.) deal with man's destiny on earth, and the 'issue of death.' In both of these poems the central question is 'why is man born only to die? What is the meaning of our life on earth?' The exposition of these tales pits inquiring man against fate or godly deception, though the turn taken by imagination is different in the two works.

The story of Adapa In the story of Adapa the king of that name is tricked by the god Ea, into refusing the offer of immortality. The chief issue here is whether Adapa is an innocent victim or an example of the mortal who is unworthy of more than the fate he gets.

Gilgamesh Gilgamesh is a robust and lusty young king who sets off, with his friend Enkidu, to find the meaning of mortal life, but who is saddened and wisened by his discourse with the ancient sage, Utnapishtim, who convinces him that he has no choice but to accept mortality. Both of these accounts--*Adapa* and *Gilgamesh*-- could be considered 'philosophical,' although they are so by the way they present rather than argue philosophical positions. (That difference is the mythopoetic dimension of the great Mesopotamian creators.) In the way in which they handle man's fall, they open the discourse about man's 'disobedience,' which forms the center of their sister epic, the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible.

Wisdom literature as philosophy Two texts from Mesopotamian literature embrace the theme of the vanity of human life from the view point of dark pessimism: *The Dialogue of Pessimism* (1000 B.C.E.) and the second millennium B.C.E. *Hymn to the Rightful Sufferer*. In both these cuneiform texts the emphasis is on theodicy--the justification of the ways of god to man--more than on the question of the thwarted human desire for immortality. Obviously, though, all the above literatures are philosophical in the sense that Job or Ecclesiastes are philosophical: ruminating darkly on the human condition.

A central philosophical theme in Mesopotamian thinking Pervasive, throughout Mesopotamian culture--literature, myth, and art--is the implication that the gods, while founders of the universe, are at the same time offering it to human beings as a field for co-operation. That is, men and the gods have the responsibility for 'enriching,' 'completing' the universe, a task in which humanity attempts to contribute by his worship, praise, and prayer toward the gods. Our own contemporary thought--as In the philosophy of Samuel Alexander or Nikos Kazantzakis--has widened that same argument, both through cosmology and through ethics

Readings

Frankfort, Henri, *et. al.*, *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Chicago, 1977.

Segal, Robert, *Myth: a very short introduction*, Oxford, 2004.

Discussion questions

How do you explain the connection between Mesopotamian philosophy and that of many books of the Hebrew Old Testament? Can you track the path of this connection, either through geopolitical or intellectual currents?

The dialogue form of certain Mesopotamian philosophical texts, like *The Dialogue of Pessimism*, is significantly different from that of a Platonic dialogue. Please explain how these two kinds of philosophical dialogue differ from each other.

Is religious thought inherently related to philosophical thought? Do they overlap each other? Have the religious texts of the contemporary Abrahamic religions a pronounced philosophical element?