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REST 499

Gods Behaving Badly:

Differences in Perceptions of Divine Violence in Mythologies of the Ancient Near East

Most people who follow one of the major contemporary religions, particularly in the Abrahamic traditions, adhere to a very specific set of beliefs concerning the types of behavior expected from a deity or divine power. The Bible portrays a God who “delights to show mercy” (Mic. 7:18) and encourages followers to “sanctify yourselves... and be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44). God’s character is often thought to be perfect, utterly above negative qualities such as evil, deceit, wrong doing and pettiness.¹ By this standard, then, some of the acts committed by the gods and goddesses of the ancient Near and Middle East would be seen by modern audiences as bordering on blasphemous and obscene. For example, texts from ancient Sumerian, Babylonian, Akkadian, and Ugaritic cultures, detail episodes of parricide (the killing of one’s children) and patricide (the killing of one’s parents) on the part of the members of their respective divine pantheons. These portrayals of violence feature elements that are uncomfortable for some modern readers, largely because these scenes use anthropomorphic depictions of multiple deities and mix “secular” and “religious” realms. By addressing historical flaws in the study of myths, then noting contemporary issues with certain mythological themes, and finally analyzing specific violent elements of stories from the ancient Near Eastern world, this paper will explain why the behaviors of these divine figures might be misunderstood by a

¹ From “Article I” of the “Confession of Faith of the Evangelical Brethren Church: “We believe in the one true, holy and living God, Eternal Spirit, who is Creator, Sovereign and Preserver of all things visible and invisible. He is infinite in power, wisdom, justice, goodness and love, and rules with gracious regard for the well-being and salvation of men, to the glory of his name. We believe the one God reveals himself as the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, distinct but inseparable, eternally one in essence and power.” *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. Nashville, TN; United Methodist Publishing House, 2004.

modern, western audience and how these misconceptions might be the byproduct of nineteenth and twentieth century approaches to mythology, “religious violence,” and the ancient Near East that remain influential, even today.

A Brief History of Analysis of Myth

First, however, it is important to address some of the problems that have plagued the study of mythology in the modern period. Scholarship of myth began in earnest during the Renaissance, prompted by the re-discovery of ancient texts containing the stories of gods and goddesses from ages past. Before this reawakening, the characters and themes of mythic stories had lost their authoritative status with western audiences and had fallen into categories of “folklore” and “fairytales.” Bruce Lincoln notes that “When they bothered to engage these materials at all, the later Greeks and Romans showed condescension toward the amusing, but unserious, tales they designated as *mythoi* and *fabulae*, while Christians set them in stark opposition to the one story they judged authoritative, but emphatically nonmythic: that of the Bible, and above all, Christ’s passion.”²

After the Renaissance, however, the surge of interest in Classical themes and culture created new interest in analysis of mythic characters, narratives, and themes.³ As exciting and beneficial as this enthusiasm for the study of myth was, however, the applications for which it was appropriated during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries were frequently non-objective and occasionally dangerous. For example, discussions debating the origins of society as “a diffusion of ideas via population movement and contact rather than independent evolution” cited mythic material as a primary source, and then used comparison to highlight

²Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Theology, and Scholarship*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999. 47

³ *ibid.*, 48-52

comparative differences or similarities.⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche used mythic narratives not just to stereotype ancient peoples but also to erect “a discriminatory structure of interlocking binary oppositions that conflated categories of race, gender, religion, and morality” when comparing and categorizing his categories of “Aryan” and its (created) opposite “Semitic.”⁵

Scholars such as Max Müller and Andrew Lang categorized peoples and even entire civilizations based on their relation to myth through its (frequently assumed) relation to language or cultural evolution.⁶ Sir Edward Burnett Tylor’s model of social evolution (animism to polytheism to monotheism) and Sir James Frazer’s parallel analyses on the stratification of magic, religion and science further attempted to present mythic themes and practices as inherently inferior to contemporary secular notions of science and monotheism.⁷ Focus was put on the differing social roles of magic and religion, the psychological implications of each, and the application of both.⁸ In short, myth was frequently treated as a means to an end, and was used either to oppress entire races of people seen as “inferior” and “undesirable” or deify others (typically, those performing the analysis) based on an assumed grand mythic past. At the same time distinctions drawn between an earlier “prelogical” and “prescientific” worldview and modern logical and scientific ones argue that ancient peoples viewed the world as “mystical,” explained in supernatural rather than scientific terms.⁹ These and similar ideologies stood to justify subsequent acts of violence as moral or necessary, such as the Nazi attempt to purge those who did not fall into their strict categories of Aryan perfection. Thankfully, the state of

⁴ Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion. An Introduction*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006. 14

⁵ Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 65

⁶ *ibid.* 70

⁷ Bowie, *Anthropology of Religion*, 13-14

⁸ Joanne K. Kuemmerlin-McLean, “Magic.” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992. 470

⁹ *ibid.* 470

scholarship on myth has improved markedly since the mid-twentieth century, which will be addressed below.

Why This is Problematic

Obviously, this method of categorizing contemporary groups of peoples based on the stories which predate the conversation by thousands of years is extremely problematic, and has been identified as such by modern scholars looking back on these flawed methods. On one hand, some misunderstandings seem to arise when we forget that ancient society differed markedly from the modern European context that gave rise to the study of myth. For example, we cannot assume that the authors of *The Iliad* or the *Epic of Gilgamesh* separated religious and secular spheres as scholars such as Nietzsche and Müller did. On the other hand, these differences should not be used to denigrate ancient authors, as happened when modern scholars interpreted this lack of separation as evidence of social evolution (naturally with the ancients on the lower end). Müller, for example, considered mythology as a “disease of language,” which ancient peoples used to transform concepts into beings, and stories that, while present in older cultures, would be naturally eradicated the further evolved a civilization became.¹⁰ Therefore, mythological elements (such as violent characterizations of deities) naturally dissipate as societies evolve. In this way, early scholars were acutely aware of the fact that ancient peoples and modern Europeans were different. What they did not realize is that European ways were not higher on the evolutionary scale than ancient societies.

Since the atrocities of the Second World War, scholarship has largely adopted a more objective approach to mythic material.¹¹ Many contemporary communities and individuals, however, still approach mythology and mythological themes with assumptions reminiscent of

¹⁰ Bowie, *Anthropology of Religion*, 270-271

¹¹ For examples, see the works of Bruce Lincoln and J.Z. Smith

nineteenth-century scholarship, especially in comparison to similar literature in the Hebrew Bible.¹² This is as problematic an approach today as it was half a century ago. It encourages a categorization of cultural values (if not an “ancient vs. modern” dichotomy) built on a faulty foundation.

Modern struggles to understand ancient mythologies are exemplified by contemporary attitudes toward “religious violence” both in ancient text and modern conflict. In fact, this problem continues to resonate across the global landscape. Many Americans, for example, have asserted that the acts orchestrated and overseen by Osama bin Laden on September 11th, 2001 and beyond are worse than the subsequent deaths of many Iraqi and Afghani citizens during the subsequent American “liberation” invasion. Why is this? It cannot be solely based on the death toll of these events (3,000 vs. an estimated 460,000, respectively).¹³ Much of this sentiment must be due to our modern desire to separate the “religious” sphere from a “secular” one, thus keeping “justifiable” violence in a more neutral sphere than the emotionally-charged realm of religion. Author William T. Cavanaugh expounds on this notion of America’s (and the West’s) assumed superiority: in separating these two spheres, we have achieved a level of understanding about the dangerous situation of leaving religion and government intertwined that other, “backwards” cultures have yet to realize. He quotes Princeton scholar Bernard Lewis, who argues in his paper *The Roots of Muslim Rage* that “a unity of government is best preserved by allowing a diversity of religious expressions to flourish, separated from the state,” which the (in

¹² From *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts* by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, citing Phyllis Trible, (2001, Feb. 4) “God’s Ghostwriters.” *The New York Times*. 18.

¹³ “Our household survey produced death rates that, when multiplied by the population count for each year, produced an estimate of 405,000 total deaths. Our migration adjustment would add an additional 55,805 deaths to that total. Our total excess death estimate for the wartime period, then, is 461,000, just under half a million people.” Hagopian et. al., “Mortality in Iraq Associated with the 2003-2011 War and Occupation: Findings from a National Cluster Survey by the University Collaborative Iraq Mortality Study.” *PLOS Medicine*. 2013. Web.

this case) Muslim world as of this moment lacks.¹⁴ Therefore, according to this rhetoric the relationship between the terrorism of 9/11 and the religiously-associated ideology behind it gives modern American audiences a reason to define it as “worse” than the deaths of soldiers and civilians alike in the Middle East invasion and occupation, which is an act of the secular government of the United States (and therefore neutral and based on a “higher” notion of morality).

This distinction, however, may not always be as solid as some Americans may believe it to be. In his book *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, scholar of religion Bruce Lincoln compares the rhetoric of Osama bin Laden’s address after the attacks to the subsequent speeches of President George W. Bush, noting key similarities in their views about the coming conflict. While bin Laden’s speeches are overt in their reliance on religious language (“the camp of the faithful,” “the wind of faith is blowing,” “May God shield you from us and them,” etc.), President Bush’s remarks appear to be rooted in a secular authority, “grounded in elections, laws, and the Constitution of a nation-state.”¹⁵ In reality, however, both of these men offered narratives “in which the speakers, as defenders of righteousness, rallied an aggrieved people to strike back at aggressors who had done them terrible wrongs.”¹⁶ For his part, President Bush offered phrases such as “the terrorists may burrow deeper into caves and into other entrenched hiding places” that held dual meanings.¹⁷

¹⁴ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*. Oxford: Oxford University, 2009. 195

¹⁵ In fact, Lincoln points out, President Bush kept religious language to a minimum and took special pains to assure this was not a latter-day Crusade. Rather, “he represented himself and America and both well-disposed to Muslims.” Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. Second Edition. University of Chicago Press, 2006. 24

¹⁶ *ibid.* 27

¹⁷ *ibid.* 30

On the one hand, Lincoln argues, it reduces the enemy to “hunted animals;” on the other hand, however, this alludes to apocalyptic imagery in the Biblical book of Revelation¹⁸ of “evildoers hiding in caves and trying to escape God’s judgment,” associating the terrorists with enemies of God and assigning America the role of God’s instrument.¹⁹ In short, the speeches written for President Bush were full of religious undertones and imagery, albeit much more subtly inserted. This ambiguity between content and style suggests that while the American public may fail to actualize the separation between sacred and secular realms, this remains an ideal that distinguishes modern western conceptions of violence and prevents westerners from understanding cultures with different ideological suppositions.

This same problem affects the study of violence in the mythologies of the past. Noted social philosopher Charles Taylor argues that the problem lies mainly in that contemporary “secularist regimes” are conceived primarily as “bulwarks against religion,” which encourage shaping institutional arrangements to simply remain true to hallowed traditions instead of maximizing the basic goals of liberty and equality between basic beliefs.²⁰ In the context of ancient mythological texts, this bulwark is strengthened when modern people fail to attribute even the category “real religion” to ancient societies, instead reverting back to pre-Renaissance methodology of labeling ancient stories as unworthy *fabulae*.²¹ If these societies still occupy the

¹⁸ “Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Labm; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?” NIV, Rev. 6:15-17

¹⁹ Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 30

²⁰ Charles Taylor, “Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism.” *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 56

²¹ For example, here is an excerpt from a piece by noted Christian apologist Rich Deem comparing the Flood narratives of the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Bible: “There are a couple possible explanations for the existence of multiple ancient flood accounts. One - that Genesis was a copy of Gilgamesh - has already been discussed and does not seem to fit the available data. The other possible explanation is that the flood was a real event in the history of mankind that was passed down through the generations of different cultures. If so, the Gilgamesh account seems

place of “prelogical” and “prescientific” in the public mind, then the idea that their worldview is more preoccupied with fantastical explanations puts them at odds with “real” world that this audience inhabits; to them, these cultures are unable to see the distinction between the material and the spiritual to their detriment.²²

The trend to ostracize Near Eastern mythologies is still present in some forms of biblical scholarship, especially among conservative scholars.²³ Scholars of the Hebrew Bible have often attempted to distinguish Israelite religion from other forms of ancient Near Eastern religion by using comparative models and contexts coupled with early tendencies to distinguish sharply between “magic” and “religion.”²⁴ This is largely due to the inherited status of the biblical text (i.e., “the Old Testament of the Bible,” not “an ancient Near Eastern/Israelite text”). Even when material in the Hebrew Bible appears similar to aspects of ancient Near Eastern religion, scholars have sometimes argued that these aspects of the Hebrew Bible can be dismissed as primitive survivals. This has consequences for the study of other traditions and mythologies of the time and area, for if such “magical” aspects of Israelite religion can be divorced from the Biblical material as unnecessary or flawed, those cultures which are seen as wholly embodying these aspects are immediately dismissed as more primitive.²⁵

Putting differing restrictions on the categories of mono- and polytheism also hinders the study of ancient Near Eastern myth by unfairly categorizing the two as opposites instead of

to have undergone some rather radical transformations. The story is a rather silly myth that bears little resemblance to reality. In contrast, the Genesis account is a logical, seemingly factual account of a historical event. It lacks the obvious mythological aspects of the Gilgamesh epic.” Rich Deem, “Is the Biblical Flood Account a Modified Copy of the Epic of Gilgamesh?” *God and Science*. 8 Oct. 2008. Web.

²² Kuemmerlin-McLean, “Magic,” 471

²³ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, see note 12

²⁴ Kuemmerlin-McLean, “Magic,” 470

²⁵ *ibid.* 471

presenting them as potentially sharing defining characteristics.²⁶ In his book *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, New York University Biblical scholar Mark S. Smith notes

“differences...between biblical and extra-biblical literatures seem to exalt Israelite monotheism and to denigrate non-Israelite polytheism and to ignore or at least minimize Israelite polytheism as well.”²⁷ While this is exactly what the editors of the Hebrew Bible intended, the bias against polytheism in modern society further serves to separate and even obfuscate ancient Near Eastern mythology, especially where violence is propagated by one deity against another.

In fact, historically there has certainly been a difference in contemporary approaches to violence in the Bible versus violence in mythology of the ancient Near East. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, a special relationship was said to exist between the covenant and holy war that does not extend to other nations or their gods; indeed, it is explicitly against them!²⁸ Any problems with the role of the Israelites in carrying out God’s divine wrath in the Bible was and is frequently justified either by the unknowable nature of God’s will²⁹ or by attempting to separate God’s “moral being” from his “will and activity.”³⁰ Christian apologists making claims such as

²⁶ “A more sophisticated analysis saddles polytheism with an order to which the gods themselves are subject, in contrast to the monotheistic deity’s control over all.” Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 12

²⁷ *ibid.* 12

²⁸ In his review of Dr. Eugene Merrill’s essay “The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” Tremper Longman III praises Merrill’s comments “it was only after Israel had been constituted as a nation following that revelation that Yahweh war became not just a display of God’s redemptive power and grace on behalf of his people but a constant part of the covenant relationship itself.” *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003. 107

²⁹ “Is God sometimes genocidal? Absolutely! But if we learn to see this from his perspective, we will find that, as strange as it may seem, love is at the core of his actions even when he has to be genocidal.” This is just one example of apologetic rhetoric and reasoning seemingly concerned with defending God from more objective literary or theological critique. Charlie Webster, *Revitalizing Christianity*. Fort St. Victoria, Canada: FriesenPress, 2011. 42.

³⁰ According to Peter Craigie in *The Problem with War in the Old Testament*: “The participation of God in human history...does not primarily afford us a glimpse of his moral *being*; it demonstrates rather his will and *activity*.” C. S. Cowles responds by asking how one is to distinguish the “moral being” of God from his “will and activity.” “is not the one who steals a thief?... The one who kills a killer?” C. S. Cowles, “The Case for Radical Discontinuity.” *Show Them No Mercy* 18

“[God] destroys a culture when that culture is so evil that no one born into that culture has any hope of finding God” ignore useful literary or theological critique about the nature of such genocidal episodes in the Hebrew Bible.³¹ These apologists would most likely not extend the same sort of pardon to the similar violent acts of the gods of Mesopotamia.

Part of the problem lies in the difference between approaches to violence in the ancient Near East by religiously-minded writers versus archaeologically- or historically-minded scholars. There is a difference, for example, between ancient and modern definitions and purposes of warfare. The primary function of war for contemporary audiences would appear to be to exert physical strength to subdue an enemy, as was surely also a function in the ancient world. However, war for the ancient Near Eastern peoples was primarily “the means by which the gods restored cosmic order through organized violence undertaken in their name by divinely ordained kings.”³² This definition is almost incomprehensible to the modern mind, particularly in the wake of the rise of terrorism; violence is seen as something abhorrent to God, not a furthering of his power. Nevertheless, it remains the fact that, for those who lack any training in the ancient contexts of violence and warfare, both the modern predispositions against “religious violence” and the idealization of the biblical text often lead to serious misunderstandings of ancient Near Eastern myth and the place of violence therein.

In sum, there have certainly been issues with the way in which myths have been approached and studied, namely the tendency to selectively denigrate ancient cultures, including their approach to violence, in an attempt to establish modern Western culture as superior. While scholarship concerning mythology has improved in recent years, some communities still

³¹ Webster, *Revitalizing Christianity*, 43

³² William J. Hamblin. *Warfare in the Ancient Near East to 1600 B.C.: Holy Warriors at the Dawn of History*. London: Routledge, 2006. 13

approach mythological texts with an air of derision, most notably in direct cross-textual comparison to biblical themes, resulting in inherently flawed methods of study and conclusions.

Summary and Analysis of Themes of Violence in Texts

I have attempted to briefly take on the enormous task of addressing the historical flaws of the scholarship of myth and how some of these misconceptions have persisted in certain areas of religious study, specifically Biblical scholarship. With the understanding that these flaws have been noted and addressed as problematic in the hope that my analysis can avoid them, we can now move on to the four texts that portray violence between gods: the Akkadian Flood-narrative of “Atra-Hasis;” the Babylonian epic of creation “Enuma Elish;” the Ugaritic “Ba’lu” myth; and finally the Sumerian “Epic of Gilgamesh;”. Each of these primary sources from the traditions of the ancient Near East contains episodes in which gods or goddesses raise their hands against another of their divine family. The monotheistic Judeo-Christian tradition is not generally inclusive of tales such as these found in polytheistic cultures, and as has been shown above they are more often used to validate “superior” biblical ideologies than for honest scholarship.³³ The following analysis will explore the prevalence of such episodes in their respective cultures’ mythologies, as well as investigate contemporary hindrances to understanding the texts.

It should be noted that individual sections may compare important themes in these myths to relevant texts in the Bible. This is not because one is better than the other, but because in an analysis of contemporary views of ancient texts, the Bible is frequently the most familiar example for the widest range of people and therefore the most useful for easy comparison.

“Atra-Hasis” Myth

³³ Daniel Boyarin, “The Christian Invention of Judaism: The Theodosian Empire and the Rabbinic Refusal of Religion.” *Religion: Beyond a Concept*. Ed. Hent de Vries. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009. 144-145

The myth of Atra-Hasis is an Akkadian text featuring characters inspired by Sumerian rulers dating to the early third millennium B.C.E., and parallels the Biblical Flood narrative.³⁴

The event leading up to the adventures of the titular human character, however, detail the creation of man to ease the gods' physical responsibilities. The theme of inter-familial violence features three times in the narrative; twice in direct confrontations between the gods themselves and once in the nature of the divine flood to destroy the gods' creation.

The first occurrence of this theme of killing "family members" takes place near the beginning of the narrative. The gods, tired of the heavy labor they must endure, decide to overthrow their foreman, the chief god Enlil, saying:

"Come, let us remove (him) from his dwelling;
Enlil, counsellor of the gods, the warrior,
Come, let us remove (him) from his dwelling!"

...

'Now then, call for battle!
Battle let us join, warfare!'" (44-46, 61-62)³⁵

This immediate turn to violence by the younger gods seems rather extreme to a contemporary reader, given their relationship to Enlil, their father and creator. They bypass any thoughts of simply speaking to Enlil; he is the one who pursues diplomacy with the rebels after their attempt on his life. The second instance comes during the actual subsequent creation of man, when Enlil call for the god Nintu to create humans by mixing the flesh and blood of one of the gods, Aw-ilu (also called Ilawela³⁶) with clay:

"Let one god be slaughtered,
Then let the gods be cleansed by immersion.
Let Nintu mix clay with his flesh and blood.

³⁴ Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*. Ed. And trans. Stephanie Dalley. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. 1

³⁵ "Atra-Hasis." *The Context of Scripture Vol. I: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*. Ed. Hallo, William W. and K. Lawson Younger. Brill, 2002. 450.

³⁶ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 15

Let that same god and man be thoroughly mixed with the clay.” (208-211)³⁷

For this ritual sacrifice, the unlucky god Aw-ilu is chosen simply due to the fact that he “had intelligence”³⁸ Though the text asserts that an aspect of Aw-ilu survives in the creation of man (his spirit), the fact remains that this time the gods not only were willing to do harm against one of their own but actually carry out the act of killing another god simply to help in the process of alleviating their physical work load.

The third and final occurrence of potential inter-familial killing is less overt than the previous two but perhaps just as poignant. After some time, the gods decide that man is making too much noise in his labor, and decide to kill all humans in one cataclysmic event. The gods’ decision to drown the world and eliminate their noisy creation seems to be an act of prolicide, the killing of one’s progeny. It might be argued that the gods do not see humans as their actual children in the way Enlil might think of the gods he created. Rather, they might see humans as slaves or possessions, which would not inspire any sort of qualms with their destruction.

Given the similar flood episode in the biblical narrative, contemporary audiences might be more willing to accept this divine act of genocide, although the reasons the respective deities give for their actions differ widely. Yahweh wishes to wipe the world clean of those he considers evil and wicked (Gen. 6:11-14), while Enlil and the other gods simply wish to rid themselves of the noise created by man’s labors, despite the fact that those noises stem from the very task for which they were created. There is also an issue concerning the cultural issues present in the two flood stories that seem to be conflicting. By analyzing the events around the flood in both stories rather than the actual act itself, the justification for the worldwide cataclysm becomes clearly different between Yahweh and Enlil. Yahweh is concerned with the wickedness

³⁷ “Atra-Hasis,” *The Context of Scripture*, Vol. I, ed. Benjamin R. Foster, 451

³⁸ *ibid.* 451

of Man, while Enlil is concerned with the sheer number of humans and the noise which they create.³⁹ Again, the reasoning behind the Akkadian gods' actions seems petty when considering their divine status; they do not behave like we expect gods should. Several factors may be to blame, including a misunderstanding about the nature of polytheism and its ability to provide a literary medium through which the human drama can be played.

Enuma Elish Myth

The second text I would like to briefly introduce is the "Enuma Elish" ("When on High"). The narrative is recorded on seven extant tablets dating from at least the twelfth century B. C. E.,⁴⁰ though some scholars prefer a date as far back as the twenty-first century B.C.E.⁴¹ This relatively well-known Babylonian creation myth features a wide variety of instances in which the themes of violence in the divine family play a central role in the plot. The most obvious example is the pivotal battle between the embodiment of divine values, the warrior god Marduk and the primordial forces of Tiamat, from whom all the younger gods came. Marduk's murder of the divine matriarch is precipitated by the death of Tiamat's consort, Apsu, at the hands of his divine children, an act itself perpetrated by the younger gods because of a plot hatched by Apsu to

³⁹ In her article "The Atrahasis Epic and its Significance for our Understanding of Genesis 1-9," Near Eastern scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky argues that the reason for Enlil's Flood in the Atrahasis myth (because the Akkadian gods are worried about overpopulation) can be determined from the subsequent prerequisites for the continued existence of Man on the earth after the Flood. "The myth tells us that such social phenomena as non-marrying women, and personal tragedies as barrenness and stillbirth (and perhaps miscarriage and infant mortality) are in fact essential to the very continuation of man's existence, for humanity was almost destroyed when the population got out of control." The initial attempts to destroy Man through lesser means (plague, drought, etc.) were thwarted when men simply appeased the gods of those respective disasters with offerings. The Flood, therefore, was a "final solution" to the overpopulation problem. This, she continues, is clearly not the purpose of the Biblical Flood based on Yahweh's commandment to "be fruitful and multiply" to Noah and his family after the Flood. *Biblical Archaeologist* 60.4. Dec. 1997. 151

⁴⁰ Bernard F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1992.

⁴¹ Leonard W. King, *Enuma Elish: The Seven Tablets of Creation*. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010. LXXX

exterminate his children for their excessive, drunken clamor. Apsu delights in the counsel of his servant, who encourages him to murder his children:

“It was Mummu who answered, counselling Apsu...
 ‘Put an end here and now, father, to their troublesome ways!
 By day you should have rest, at night you should sleep.’
 Apsu was delighted with him...” (Tablet I, 47-51)⁴²

Tiamat, on the other hand, is at first indignant toward her consort:

“(For) he had urged evil upon her.
 ‘What? Shall we put an end to what we created?
 Their behavior may be most noisome,
 But we should bear it in good part.’” (44-46)⁴³

The conflicting opinions of the two supreme deities in relation to their children’s behavior aides in identifying the roles of violence and retribution in the myth and subsequently the culture that created it. In contrast to Apsu, the superior force (Tiamat) is willing to withstand the noise of the younger gods and only resort to violence and evil as a result of being forced by the death of Apsu at the hands of those she was defending. The betrayal is also precipitated by a similar deception between Apsu and his children. Only once they discover his plans to do away with them do the younger gods rise up in rebellion, taking away Apsu’s physical signs of his symbolic power before killing him:

“[They] untied his sash, he was stripped of his tiara,
 He took away his aura, he himself put it on.
 He tied up Apsu, he killed him” (67-70)⁴⁴

Tiamat, here the dominant figure in the divine relationship, attempts to dissuade her consort from an action not equal to the “crime.” Though the gods carry out a similarly disproportionate crime in their murder of their father over a rumor, they are almost utterly destroyed as a result. If anything, it seems these reactions discourage such wanton violence in favor of cosmic balance.

⁴² “*Enuma Elish*.” *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I*. Ed. and trans. Benjamin R. Foster, 391

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

The conquest of Tiamat by Marduk and subsequent creation of the world from her corpse again may speak to the presence of divine aspects within creation as a whole for the Babylonian people. The direct metaphorical parallel, of course, lies in the story's role in asserting the superiority of Marduk as the patron deity of Babylon, the emerging economic center of the Mesopotamian area, over every other god (who in turn represent the other cities and city-states of the area) who in their frightened desperation beg Marduk, the best of all the gods, for help. Indeed, Marduk's rise to power in the area is directly connected with the ascension of the Amorite Dynasty in Babylon, which reached its peak in the reign of Hammurabi, circa 1792-1750 B. C. E., and continued to be inextricably bound with the fortunes of Babylon until the Seleucid era beginning in 312 B. C. E.⁴⁵ The short but graphic passage describing the cataclysmic battle continues the analogy of Babylon's rise to power:

“Tiamat opened her mouth to swallow,
He [Marduk] thrust in the ill wind so she could not close her lips.
The raging wind bloated her belly,
Her insides were stopped up, she gaped her mouth wide.
He shot off the arrow, it broke open her belly,
It cut to her innards, it pierced the heart.
He subdued her and snuffed out her life,
He flung down her carcass, he took his stand upon it.” (Tablet IV, 97-104)⁴⁶

Even in this capacity as a metaphor used in propaganda, Tiamat's act of betraying the trust of her children as well as their search for a champion are again important in understanding the placement of violence and justice in Babylonian culture and cosmology.

A contemporary reader might certainly find such extreme methods of dealing with issues (especially those inside one's family) disturbing and unnecessary. This is most likely due in part to their experience of inter-deity interactions through the lens of Yahweh in the Hebrew

⁴⁵ M. E. L. Mallowan, “Marduk.” *Man, Myth and Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion and the Unknown*. Ed. Richard Cavendish. Vol. 12. New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1995. 1633

⁴⁶ “Enuma Elish.” *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I*. ed. and trans. Benjamin R. Foster, 398

tradition. Though there are certainly times in which Yahweh is at odds with the gods of other lands, there is rarely an episode detailing a direct confrontation between divine powers; rather, the conflict which has been commanded by Yahweh actually takes place between the human representatives and priests of that particular god. The conflict between Moses and Pharaoh directly parallel an unseen, cosmic battle between the God of the Israelites and the gods of the Egyptians (Exo. 3-14), and though there is some divine involvement in the conflict on Mount Carmel the main actions are carried about by Elijah and the priests of Ba'al (1 Kings 18:20-46). The primary players, however, are not the deities themselves but their emissaries. The stories in the myths of Mesopotamia, on the other hand, feature their gods causing conflict against each other with humans as marginal characters if they are present at all.

The Ba'lu Myth

The Ba'lu myth comes from the Ugaritic seaport culture located in modern day Syria, dating from the mid-1550s to the 1200s B C. E.⁴⁷ The very premise of the Ba'lu myth showcases the themes of inter-familial violence among gods and goddesses. Two battles between Ba'lu and Yammu, and Ba'lu and Motu, respectively, constitute the main episodes of violence, though a particularly vicious scene between Motu and Anatu, Ba'lu's sister/consort, more than qualifies as inter-familial violence. One could argue that the shifting favoritism on the part of Ilu, the head of the Ugaritic pantheon, is itself a malicious act against the other gods under his power as it allows them to kill and be killed by each other.

This text is notable in its unique depiction of violence during the battles between Ba'lu and his divine relatives. While vivid descriptions of battles are not uncommon in the literature of

⁴⁷ King, Justin. "Ugarit." *The Ancient History Encyclopedia*. 22 March 2012. Ancient History Encyclopedia Limited. www.ancient.eu.com/ugarit. Web. 22 May 22, 2014.

the area,⁴⁸ even the cataclysmic battle between Marduk and Tiamat in the *Enuma Elish* is not as structured as those between Ba’lu and his adversaries. The confrontation between Ba’lu and Yammu, for example, is told by describing the forging of the maces Ba’lu uses in the fight; as their craftsman Kotaru names them while giving them specific tasks to complete in their battle, such as:

“[Yagrusu or Ayyamurru], drive out Yammu,
Drive Yammu from his throne,
Naharu from his seat of sovereignty...
You’ll whirl like a hawk in Ba’lu’s hand,
Strike Prince Yammu on the [shoulder or head],
Ruler Naharu on the [chest or forehead].” (CTA 2, 11-18, 18-23)⁴⁹

The maces complete their intended actions and force Yammu into submission. This scene seems to be structured more poetically than others even in the same text. This is not unusual for this text (after all, the *Ba’lu Myth* is written in a poetic form), yet this section seems to employ more metaphorical devices in its description than, say, the poem’s climatic battle between Ba’lu and Motu, or the vivid retribution visited upon Motu by Anatu, Ba’lu’s consort, following Ba’lu’s death. Seeing as the two episodes mentioned above feature violent conflicts between deities in very straightforward description, it seems unique that this battle should be presented so metaphorically.

The battle between Ba’lu and Motu, the god of death, for instance, is relatively short and more to the point compared to Yammu’s:

“They eye each other like finished (warriors),
Motu is strong, Ba’lu is strong;
They butt each other like wild bulls,
Motu is strong, Ba’lu is strong;
They bite each other like snakes,

⁴⁸ Andrew George, “The Poem of Erra and Ishum: A Babylonian poet’s view of war.” *Warfare and Poetry in the Middle East*. Ed. Hugh Kennedy. London: I. B. Tauris, 2013. 42

⁴⁹ “The Ba’lu Myth.” *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I*. Ed. and trans. Denis Pardee. 249

Motu is strong, Ba'lu is strong;
They trample each other like running (animals),
Motu falls, Ba'lu falls.” (15-22)⁵⁰

Or the similar brusqueness of the retributive murder of Motu's sons at the hands of Ba'lu after his revival:

“Ba'lu seizes the sons of Atiaratu,
Numerous (as they are) he smites them with the sword,
Crushers (as they are) he smites them with the mace;” (1-3)⁵¹

Perhaps the reason is that the storytellers or scribes wished to add some literary sophistication to the myth and chose this episode in which to do so.

None of these, however, are as malicious the punishment which Anatu, the consort and sister of Ba'lu, inflicts upon Motu upon learning of his role in Ba'lu's death. Anatu's response is not to mourn Ba'lu with tears or indeed any grief at all but with violent rage:

“She seizes Motu, son of Ilu:
with knife she splits him,
with a winnowing-fork she winnows him,
with fire she burns him,
with grindstones she pulverizes him,
in the field she sows him;
The birds eat his flesh,
The fowl finish off his body parts,
Flesh(-eaters) grow fat on flesh,” (30-37)⁵²

An interesting distinction between the Yammu/Ba'lu's and Motu/Anatu's battle scenes lies in the different weapons associated with each character. Ba'lu brandishes two maces in his subduing of Yammu, tools obviously intended for male use in war. Anatu, on the other hand, absolutely destroys Motu with tools more often associated with daily housework (fire, winnowing-fork, grindstones, etc.), the realm of the female.

⁵⁰ *ibid.* 272

⁵¹ *ibid.* 271-72

⁵² *ibid.* 270

In any case, both this battle and the final confrontation of Ba'lu and Motu present conflict as the proper type of resolution to problems between deities; Ba'lu defends himself in battle after Yammu threatens him (which is encouraged by his father Ilu), and Motu attacks Ba'lu after his sons are killed by the latter. Diplomacy is never really pursued except in the form of heralds and messengers conveying threats to prepare for the inevitable physical confrontation; the only option is violence. All these indicate that the gods hold no qualms about killing members of their family or their divine "species," as it were, which compared to the variety and number of humans is extremely limited.

Whether or not this carried over off the clay "page" into actual practice becomes difficult to determine. While of course members of both royal and other families certainly would try to kill each other from time to time in various coup d'états,⁵³ many cultures have and still do discourage such behavior, instead praising familial bonds as superseding national or cultural ones.⁵⁴ Indeed, the specific narration and variations of the characters therein are present in

⁵³ "Only one Syrian-type tablet was excavated from the Area A "Palace" ... This text is important for understanding the history of the royal family in Emar, since it documents a thwarted coup d'état... The purpose of the text appears to be to bestow a royal grant on the individuals who were loyal to the king. It is the only excavated tablet of its kind, but other examples from the Emar corpus were looted from the site..." Here the presence of the tablet rewarding those loyal to the king bolsters the claim that royal coup d'états were common enough to be represented as a legitimate concern in a mythic context. Ba'lu and his divine ("royal") family represent this reality in their inter-familial struggle. Matthew Rutz, *Bodies of Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Diviners of the Late Bronze Age Emar and the Tablet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 141

⁵⁴ In a 2013 study "Family Ties and Underground Economy," authors Mauro Mare, Antonello Motroni and Francesco Porcelli argue that frequently familial bonds supersede national or economic ones in cultures worldwide. Of Italians, for example, the authors assert "The first source of power is the family...[and] in fact, the law, the State and society function only if they do not directly interfere with the family's supreme interests." They go on to cite Francis Fukuyama (1995) in his comparison of Italian and Confucian-cultural Hong Kong and Taiwan as saying "family bonds [in both] tend to be stronger than other kinds of social bonds not based on kinship, while the strength and number of intermediate associations between state and individual has been relatively low." They conclude after much elaboration that "cultural transmission and the evolution and persistence of ethnic and religious traits as dynamic properties of cultural transmission and socialization mechanism... is strongly centered on the role of the family." *Aule Storiche dell'Università, Pavia, Italy*. 24-25 September 2012. Web. 22 May 2014. 2, 11, 12

several different cultures, speaking to a wide diffusion of these ideas.⁵⁵ Perhaps the presence of such violent episodes in the mythology, then, speak to the ability of polytheistic mythologies to provide a metaphorical stage for worldly dramas to be played out; that is, it may be considered taboo to kill one's brother or father in reality, but through the literature the gods can be made to have experienced and dealt with any situation pertinent to the culture, including inter-familial killing.⁵⁶ The fact remains, however, that interfamilial violence between royal family members did occur.⁵⁷ This function of polytheistic mythological stories, then, may be even more poignant due to the relationship between royal authority and its frequent mythological justification.⁵⁸

Still, given the detailed and evocative descriptions of the divine violence in the Baal cycle, audiences may experience discomfort with the idea that divine beings can have such human-like characteristics. The most blatant example of biblical anthropomorphism is in the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, where Yahweh performs more "human" actions such as walking with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3-8) or haggling directly with Abraham for the

⁵⁵ The part of the Ba'lu myth dealing with his death and Motu and Anat's conflict is directly paralleled in Egyptian and Phoenician mythologies, albeit with different characters (Osiris/Isis/Set and Ba'al/Anat/Mot, respectively), that literarily convey the agricultural cycle of death and fertility. Interestingly, Anatu's Babylonian counterpart, Anat, was later incorporated into Egyptian mythology as a warrior goddess daughter of Ra, speaking to the cross-cultural nature of the story arcs present as well as perhaps the views on the role of violence in the context of families. (*The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Mythology*, "Anat" p. 264-271).]

⁵⁶ From "Religion, Religions Religious" by J. Z. Smith: "There is a universal tendency amongst mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious...No wonder, then, that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being at the same time so anxious concerning their future fortunes, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers, posses [sic.] of sentiment and intelligence. The *unknown causes*, which continually employ their thought, appearing always in the same aspect, are all apprehended to be of the same kind or species [as themselves]. Nor is it long before we ascribe to them thought, and reason, and passion, and sometimes even the limbs and figures of men, in order to bring them nearer to a resemblance with ourselves." 274

⁵⁷ See note 48

⁵⁸ "The nation/state's higher authority over all social relations, however, does not emerge naturally. Rather, it has to be indicated by, for example, the creation myth as well as by history fashioned from the myth... The state attempts to monopolize the production of myth as well as history, institutionalizing a mechanism to symbolically link the sacred and profane." Sakurai Yoshiro. "The Myth of Royal Authority and *Shinbutsu-Shugo* (Kami-Buddha Amalgamation)." *Cahiers d'Extreme-Asia* 13.13. (2002):85-99. 88

lives of the Sodomites (Gen. 18:16-33). Some scholars have hypothesized that, the further into the biblical canon we proceed, the less emphasis is placed on God's ability to physically perform feats, instead focusing on the state of the people of Israel and their accomplishments and failures, albeit sometimes with divine inspiration or help.⁵⁹ According to biblical scholar Richard Elliot Friedman, the instances in which Yahweh takes personal action become fewer and fewer as the canonical narrative goes on; he notes "Among God's last words to Moses, the deity says, 'I shall hide my face from them. I shall see what their end will be.' (Deuteronomy 31:17, 18; 32:20). By the end of the story God does just that."⁶⁰ The idea that such violence as found in the Ba'lu myth could be enacted by gods against each other is unfamiliar to contemporary audiences, more reminiscent of *fabulae* than meriting serious scholarship like the Bible.

Epic of Gilgamesh

The well-known *Epic of Gilgamesh* recounts the "adventures of the semimythical Sumerian king and his ultimately futile quest for immortality," dating from the fourteenth century B. C. E.⁶¹ Tablet fragments containing portions of the story, however, date as early as 1700 B. C. E.⁶² While this Old Babylonian epic deals with a variety of issues concerning the human experience (at least in the viewpoint of the people), themes concerning violence between divine players do not feature as prominently as in the other three texts. However, the threat of

⁵⁹ "But regarding the *apparent, manifest* presence of God, as conveyed in the particular terms and descriptions of the earlier biblical episodes: that ceases by this point in the story." Richard Elliot Friedman. *The Hidden Face of God*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995. 28.

⁶⁰ *ibid.* 7.

⁶¹ Theodore Ziolkowski, *Gilgamesh Among Us: Modern Encounters with the Ancient Epic*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1996. xii

⁶² "The Babylonians believed this poem to be the responsibility of a man called Sin-liqe-unninni, a learned scholar of Uruk whom modern scholars consider to have lived sometime between 1300-1000 B. C. However, we now know that 'He who saw the Deep' is a revision of one or more earlier versions of the epic. The oldest surviving fragments of the epic are the work of an anonymous Babylonian poet writing more than 3700 years ago." *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Ed. Andrew George. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1999. ii.

upsetting the cosmic balance as evidenced in “Gilgamesh” contains enough of the same kind of “danger” and “un-godlike” behavior present in the myths above; therefore, though most of my analysis will actually focus on one small section of this text, its value in the overall analysis of these themes of divine violence should not be diminished.

It can be argued that the violence between the semi-divine hero Gilgamesh and certain deities could be analyzed in the same way as struggles between gods themselves. Author Rivkah Kluger notes that, while Gilgamesh is considered two-thirds divine, this description “is typical of a mythological hero,” and seems “to point to the fact that the hero is an intuitive anticipation of the development towards human consciousness of the divine in man” and not a wholly divine being.⁶³ While this is certainly an interesting avenue of investigation, it is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will continue to limit my analysis to those figures who are explicitly identified as “divine,” i.e., being gods or goddesses.

Uta-napishtim survives the wrath of the gods when they decide to destroy humankind, and upon discovering a patch of reemerging dry land, he immediately sets up an offering to the gods to thank them. The divine inter-familial conflict arises immediately after this sacrifice is made. All of the gods immediately flock to the offering, “gathered [sic.] like flies around the man.”⁶⁴ This is not surprising when considering that the gods rely on mortals for such sacrifices to sustain them; after all, what good is a god if no one believes in or worships him? In their rush to obey the decree given by the chief god Enlil to wipe out humanity with the Flood, they neglected to take into consideration that no humanity would mean no more offerings. The survival of Uta-napishtim and his family, then, must have been an enormous relief to them. The

⁶³ Rivkah Scharf Kluger, *The Archetypal Significance of Gilgamesh: A Modern Ancient Hero*. Einsiedeln: Daimon, 191. 23

⁶⁴ *ibid.* Book XI, 163

gods even go so far as to suggest that Enlil should not be able to enjoy this miracle for his part in endangering their existence:

‘ “All the gods shall come to the incense,
but to the incense let Enlil not come,
because he lacked counsel and brought on the Deluge,
and delivered my people into destruction.” (XI, 168-171)⁶⁵

Immediately, however, Enlil appears and begins to rage at the gods:

“...he saw the boat, he was seized with anger,
Filled with rage at the divine Igigi [gods]:
“[From when escaped this living being?
No man was meant to survive the destruction!” (XI, 172-176)⁶⁶

In response to this anger, Ea, the god who revealed the plan to flood the Earth to Uta-napishtim, berates the father of the gods for not taking the danger to the gods into consideration or even ignoring it. According to Ea, Enlil’s punishment is in gross violation of the accepted form of judgment in which the punishment is equivalent to the crime:

‘ “On him who transgresses, inflict his crime!
On him who does wrong, inflict his wrongdoing!
Slack off, lest it snap! Pull tighter, lest it [slacken]!” (XI, 185-187)⁶⁷

Ea goes on to list other ways in which Enlil could have sufficiently trimmed humanity without restoring to the extreme of the Deluge (a lion, a wolf, a famine, and a Plague God). The other gods rally behind these words, and though the text does not implicitly say so, the implication of this reprimand is clear: the members the pantheon are not happy with the choices Enlil has been making which endanger their existence. What is to stop them from violently overthrowing him and choosing a new leader? Seeing this danger, Enlil relents and even rewards Uta-napishtim with eternal life.

⁶⁵ *ibid.* 94

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.* 95

While this episode is much less explicit than the other texts in its portrayal of violence, this confrontation nevertheless similarly speaks to the choice to immediately turn to violence whenever situations become unfavorable. The gods' first inclination is to not allow Enlil to partake of the sacrifice, effectively condemning him to fade into obscurity and death, instead of first giving him a chance to repent from his actions. Granted, Enlil's initial response is to threaten to finish destroying all humans and punish the god Ea for his part in Uta-nipishtim's survival, and he only gives in to the collective pressure of the divine assembly for fear of his life.

The immediate response of violence seems unnecessary, and indeed almost barbaric, to most who read this text because of the Bible's relationship with Yahweh. The decisions of Yahweh in any situation are almost always final, and even the instances in which he changes his mind (sparing Sodom and Gomorrah, sparing the unruly Hebrews at Mount Sinai) he does so not out of fear for his position but seemingly out of compassion for those for whom he is "bargaining" (Gen. 18:20-33). The immutability of Yahweh is held in high regard. These gods' act of turning on their leader Enlil, then, speaks against this idea of their immutability, portraying them as fickle and less in control of their situation than the God of the Bible. Again, this is in part due to a lack of understanding about the functions of a polytheistic pantheon analyzed above in the "The Ba'lu Myth."

Analysis of Themes in Myth

Now that we are more familiar with some of the violent episodes in these mythologies, a comparison and contrast will reveal important themes. First, the characters who die and their status in their respective myths may influence the vivid portrayal of violence. All of these characters are gods, of course, but some occupy higher places in their pantheons than others,

paralleling the model of political hierarchy employed by their earthly worshipers.⁶⁸ In “the Atra-Hasis myth,” for instance, the Akkadian god Awi-ilu (who is sacrificed to allow for the creation of humans) is a relatively minor deity, though he plays a crucial role in this story’s plot.

Tiamat’s consorts Apsu and Qingu in the “Enuma Elish” could be seen as secondary characters with roles similar to Awi-ilu’s. The deaths of these gods in these two stories share ritualistic elements; both processes involve some contribution from a birth-goddess or one associated with life (such as the trampling of Tiamat’s body or Mami’s role in “Atra-Hasis), and the purpose for creating man in both stories is to alleviate the workload of the gods.⁶⁹ The roles these secondary and expendable deities play in the mythologies help forward the plot, while playing an important part in the ritual foundation of creation.

In contrast, some of the most dramatic portrayals are reserved for important figures of their respective pantheons, such as Tiamat is in the “Enuma Elish.” She is simultaneously the creatrix of the universe and an embodiment of primeval chaos.⁷⁰ The characters who are defeated in the “Ba’lu Myth” are also central figures in their Ugaritic pantheon, and significant portions of the narrative’s beginning involve the establishment of Ba’lu’s position in this hierarchy.⁷¹ Though Yammu, differs from Tiamat in his role as antagonist and “is not a primordial adversary, and his defeat does not usher in a new epoch;”⁷² the importance of Ba’lu and Yammu in the Ugaritic pantheon might explain the literary qualities used to describe the maces that would eventually kill Yammu. So, too, the importance of Anat and Ba’lu in the

⁶⁸ At the same time, however, the positions of gods in these cultures is fluid, as one or another god gains or lose power over others, making it difficult to arrange some of these pantheons in a systematic way exactly similar to an earthly one or in some cases assign permanent identifications. Glenn Stanfield Holland. *Gods in the Desert: Religions of the Ancient Near East*. Maryland, US: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2010. 114.

⁶⁹ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 4

⁷⁰ *ibid.* 329

⁷¹ As expounded by translator Denis Pardee in his introduction and footnotes to “The Ba’lu Myth.” 241-242

⁷² Aaron Tugenhoft. “Unsettling Sovereignty: Politics and Poetics in the Ba’al Cycle.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. 132.3 (2012): 367-384. Web. 368

pantheon might help account for the evocative imagery used to describe Anat's retribution for Ba'lu's death at the hands of Motu. Ultimately, the lack of understanding about the ancient pantheons and the relative importance of deities within might mislead modern audiences who lack contextual knowledge of each myth and its theological background.

The social context of these myths, such as the degree to which they combined political issues with mythic ones, is also important. The "Enuma Elish," for example, is especially poignant in this regard. As we have seen, the myth itself acts as an explanation for the physical order of the universe as the result of cosmological warfare. Much has been written concerning its recitation at the annual Akitu festival, when it is believed to have been used to represent a descent into chaos that was ultimately reestablished by giving this power back to the king to the "re-establishment of cosmic, theological, and political order."⁷³ Other theories have portrayed it as functioning as a native response to foreign domination.⁷⁴ Whatever the reasoning behind the use of the text, the fact remains that its annual recitation was directly tied to the role of the leadership of that society. As an earthly representation of the divine ruler Marduk, the king of the time, was expected to fulfill a similar role in subduing the chaos of the universe, represented

⁷³ Benjamin D. Sommer, "The Babylonian Akitu Festival: Rectifying the King or Renewing the Cosmos?" *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 27 (2000). 81-82

⁷⁴ The historian of religion J. Z. Smith has argued that the festival functioned mainly as a piece of nationalist propaganda as opposed to "an alleged abolition of time or re-anchoring of cosmic order. He bolsters this claim by citing three distinct factors of the ceremony: the late date of the Akitu program contained on cuneiform tablets dating to the Seleucid period, denoting a presence of a "foreign power" with which to be at odds; a call for a precise use of sources in light of the current consensus picture of the Akitu festival mixing evidence from specific Seleucid tablet with data taken "from many different periods and several Mesopotamian cities; and what he sees as a flawed reliance on archetypal interpretation of religion associated with Eliade. Smith agrees that the evident religious mentality in the festival "exemplifies a worldview that valorizes the center," but disagrees that mentality can be portrayed as archaic, i.e. the "original" intent for the ceremony and therefore influenced by later interactions with foreign powers. (Sommer, "The Babylonian Akitu Festival," 81-82, 95)

in the world outside the empire. The ritual allowed a more direct association between the mythic and political situations.⁷⁵

The episode in “Gilgamesh,” too, reflects the social and political views of the culture which penned it. The reason the Igigi gods (the “divine assembly”) are angry with their leader Enlil after the Flood is because he had evidently overlooked the gods’ dependence on the sacrifices of humankind to maintain their well-being in his fervor to silence the cacophony of humans with a flood. The god Ea goes so far as to scold Enlil for sending a disproportionate punishment to annihilate mankind.⁷⁶ This chastisement seems to speak in favor of the idea of proportionality of punishments in relation to their crimes, a concept best famously exemplified in the Code of Hammurabi. Though the rule of the historical Kings Gilgamesh and Hammurabi was separated by close to one thousand years,⁷⁷ the relationship of their cultures as well as the emphasis on this issue in the epic makes it difficult not to compare these two influential rulers. While the Sumerian people, such as Gilgamesh, did help lay the foundations of Mesopotamian civilization by codifying and writing down laws, their eventual decline and conquest was tied to their leaders’ lust for more power and wealth at the expense of his people.⁷⁸ Compared to the law code of the Sumerians, the Hammurabi’s Code was both farther-reaching and better

⁷⁵ Kitts draws a parallel between the “cosmogonic feats” of Marduk and the king, who “mimics the god’s subduing of chaos by manipulating iconic codes for disorder.” Margo Kitts. “Religion and Violence from Literary Perspectives.” *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 411

⁷⁶ “On him who transgresses, inflict his crime!/ On him who does wrong, inflict his wrongdoing!/ Slack off, lest it snap! Pull tighter, lest it [slacken]!/ Instead of your causing the Deluge, a lion could have risen, and diminished the people!/ Instead of your causing the Deluge, a wolf could have risen, and diminished the people!/ Instead of your causing the Deluge, a famine could have happened, and slaughtered the land!/ Instead of your causing the Deluge, a Plague God could have risen, and slaughtered the land!” *Epic of Gilgamesh* Tablet XI, 185-195.

⁷⁷ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Time Chart. p. lx-lxi

⁷⁸ This theme is addressed in “Gilgamesh.” Gilgamesh is disliked by the people of his city, Uruk, because he is a tyrant, a similar problem for the historical Sumerian people. Furthermore, Gilgamesh is explicitly told by the gods not to abuse his power: “deal justly with your servants, deal justly before Shamash (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Trans. N. K. Sanders. New York: Penguin Classics, 1960. 16). The Gilgamesh of the epic, then, is seemingly used by the Babylonian authors to address this problem of these historical leaders.

internalized by the Babylonian people over time.⁷⁹ Therefore, the presence of issues concerning the proportionality of justice in a Babylonian epic featuring Sumerian characters functions to stress this concept by negative association, (i.e., showing how the issue is *not* to be dealt with). The motivation of the Igigi gods to do harm to Enlil is not simply a result of their fear concerning their well-being; it is a chastisement of Enlil's failure to uphold a balanced model of law, in direct contrast with Hammurabi's self-assessment as the one who upholds justice in the land.

There are definite similarities between the motivations of Marduk in the "Enuma Elish" and Ba'lu in his myth, especially during his fight with the sea god Yammu. Unlike the role of Tiamat's defeat in the "Enuma Elish," however, the role of Yammu's defeat is not tied to an establishment of political order from primordial chaos. Rather, the "Ba'lu Myth" speaks more to the uncertainty of earthly politics as well as the fluid roles of master and servant.⁸⁰ In his article "Unsettling Sovereignty: Politics and Poetics in the Ba'al Cycle," author Aaron Tugendhaft argues that the Ba'lu Myth not only parallels the earthly political situation of ancient Ugarit but also comments on foundational claims of the institutions of the time "by calling into question the hierarchical principle that justifies them."⁸¹ As a vassal of Yammu, Ba'al (the patron deity of Ugarit) paralleled the situation of Ugarit itself as a vassal of different Near Eastern powers. Yet there is never the assertion that chaos ran rampant before this conflict between the gods of sky and sea as there is in the "Enuma Elish." Instead, "one finds both order

⁷⁹ *ibid.* xii

⁸⁰ "The relationships among the Ba'al Cycle's divine protagonists run parallel to earthly political relationships... The Ba'al Cycle's non-cosmogonic employment of the *topos* of divine battle against the sea is consistent with the poem's representation of political rank as unstable and ambiguous." Aaron Tugendhaft, "Unsettling Sovereignty: Politics and Poetics in the Ba'al Cycle." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. 132.3 (2012): 367-384. Web. 23 May 2014. 368

⁸¹ *ibid.* 368-69

(Ba'al's [sic.] reign) and disorder (Ba'al's struggles) occurring in the same temporal epoch,"⁸² tying it more to a political struggle than an establishment of kingship among the gods. In addition, Ba'lu's victory also questions the "hierarchical principle" by having Ba'lu challenge a god that the chief god, Ilu, has himself crowned. Ba'lu fights Yammu against Ilu's specific command not to, and yet still manages to persuade Ilu to grant him kingship after the fight. "In other words," according to Trugendhaft, "Baal [sic.] is a regicide who yet succeeds in his ambitions."⁸³ The Ba'lu Cycle, therefore, depicts a situation "in which the rise (and fall) of kings is not rooted in the foundations of the cosmos" but rather is a "changeable product of force and intrigue played out in the present era."⁸⁴

The motivation of Ba'lu in his myth to defeat his enemies in order to restore order out of chaos is found not only in the actions of Marduk in the "Enuma Elish" but also in the description of creation in the Bible. The similarities between the Israelite and Ugaritic stories simultaneously connect and distinguish them from each other. Yahweh is referred to several times throughout the Bible as a "storm god,"⁸⁵ a moniker associated more with Ba'lu (Ba'al), and both are involved in stories during which they "asserted [their] authority by defeating the sea, becoming ruler of the skies."⁸⁶ The "sea," in these cases, include forces of chaos who are represented by Yām (Hebrew for "sea") and Yammu, respectively,⁸⁷ already indicating a etymological similarity between the two traditions. There are similarities in the circumstances of the battle itself. Both Yām and Yammu are aided in their struggles against the storm god by

⁸² "Accordingly, in the Baal Cycle political rule and eradication of disorder do not necessarily go hand-in-hand." Aaron Tugendhaft, "Politics and Time in the Baal Cycle." *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 12 (2012): 145-157. Web. 153

⁸³ *ibid.* 154

⁸⁴ *ibid.* 156

⁸⁵ Ps. 18:7-15; Ps. 68:4, 7-9, 32-34

⁸⁶ Daniel Sarlo "The Storm God versus the Sea: An Examination of the myth in the Bible and elsewhere in the Ancient Near East." Web. http://www.academia.edu/2942573/The_Storm_God_Versus_The_Sea. 1

⁸⁷ *ibid.* 2

many creatures, including a dragon-like or serpent-like creature.⁸⁸ The most famous of these, Leviathan, is paralleled in the Ugaritic figure “Lītan.”⁸⁹

Yet, differences emerge when analyzing the actions of the two deities, Yahweh and Ba’lu, in response to this threat. The “Ba’lu” text indicates that the position of Yammu in the Ugarit myth is equal to that of Ba’lu prior to their fight, given that the assembly at a feast early in the myth bows down when Yammu’s heralds arrive to issue the challenge to Ba’lu.⁹⁰ The relationship of Yahweh and the sea is not always so clear, however; its position varies from being a creation of Yahweh to one who exists prior to Yahweh.⁹¹ Additionally, the story of Yahweh’s struggle against chaos (primarily in Gen. 1) is for the purpose of the creation of the universe, while Ba’lu’s narrative (though describing the subduing of similar chaos) is presented as a tale from the “mythic past” when the universe and the earth already exist. For all their similarities, the “Ba’lu Myth” serves a different purpose than the biblical version while helping to contextualize similar themes between the two. Again, without a proper understanding of the myths’ cultures or the historical and political contexts of the myths themselves, modern readers can encounter problems in a cursory analysis of the text which leads to misunderstandings about its intent and function.

⁸⁸ “In several passages, [the name Tannin] is used as a clear reference to a mythological serpent (dragon) who lives in the sea and who Yahweh defeated along with Yām... The same word is used in the Ugaritic texts to describe one of Baal’s enemies.” Ibid. 3

⁸⁹ Ibid. 3

⁹⁰ “Ba’lu Myth” 19-29. *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I.* ed. and trans. Denis Pardee, 246

⁹¹ According to Genesis 1:2, “the waters existed from the beginning, though the word Yām is not used specifically.” This is probably intentional for two reasons: first, it avoids accidentally implying that Yahweh created another deity, “Yam”; and second, Genesis 1 is more in conversation with the Enuma Elish, where Tiamat and “tehom” provide a more direct comparison. This is one of the reasons Genesis 1 is generally dated to the postexilic period. However, in Proverbs 8:24, “a time when there was no Tēhōmôt (depths) is described.” Elsewhere, “we read that Yām was restrained by Yahweh when he came out of the womb (Gen. 38:8), suggesting that Yahweh was present at his birth but did not initially have control of him.” Sarlo 3

Finally, the genre of the individual myths also speaks to the portrayal of violence. For example, “Gilgamesh” is the oldest literary epic in human history, narrating “a heroic quest for fame and immortality, pursued by a man” as opposed to a god.⁹² While entertaining, it is a very different sort of text in contrast to the “Enuma Elish,” as is the sort of violence contained within. In her study of both ancient texts, Oxford scholar Stephanie Dalley writes, “Here [in the Enuma Elish] there is no struggle against fate, no mortal heroes, no sense of suspense over the outcome of events” as there is in the “Epic of Gilgamesh.”⁹³ Dalley even cites the opening lines of the texts as indicating an important distinction between their genres, which convey different themes to the audience. On the one hand, the “Enuma Elish” begins with the word “When...” (as does “Atra-Hasis”), indicating its content is mythic in nature⁹⁴; “Gilgamesh,” on the other hand, begins “I shall sing...”, introducing an oral narrative.⁹⁵ In the former the importance for the audience lies in the eventual outcome of the story’s action; in the latter it lies in the details of the action itself as the story unfolds. Therefore, while the portrayal of violence between Gilgamesh and his various adversaries enralls the reader and enhances the narrative, the graphic end of the battle between Marduk and Tiamat functions as a vehicle to *get to* the outcome (the creation of the universe from Tiamat’s body). The ritual aspect that accompanies the “Enuma Elish” therefore warrants a different (and more extreme) portrayal of violence based on its function “to

⁹² Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 39

⁹³ *ibid.* 228

⁹⁴ See alternate translations of Genesis 1:1 – “When God began to create the heaven and the earth...” “[This] translation follows Rashi, who said that the text would have been written “בְּרֵאשִׁית” if its *primary* purpose had been to teach the order in which creation took place. Later scholars used the translation “In the beginning” as proof that God created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), but it is not likely that the biblical author was concerned with this problem. Gunter Plaut. “Bereshit.” *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*. Ed. Gunter Plaut. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregants, 1981. 18.

⁹⁵ *ibid.* 231

impress rather than to entertain.”⁹⁶ Certainly the authors of the Bible utilized this method in presenting the Biblical creation as a “mythic” account to assert that Yahweh was more powerful than Marduk, or any other god for that matter, by presenting Yahweh with the same imagery as other gods but as far superior in his sovereignty and actions.⁹⁷ The fact that archaeologists have uncovered many copies of the “Enuma Elish” spanning a wide swath of time would indicate that it was widely read, which may denote an agenda on the part of the writers to convey their idea about the superiority of their gods.⁹⁸

Certain elements of the “Ba’lu Myth,” too, distinguish it from these other myths. Aaron Turgendhaft describes the structural choices that differentiate it from the “Enuma Elish,” namely the language portraying the conflict as a political commentary without cosmogonic proportions, as outlined above. He writes at length about the challenges of the role of “vassal” and suzerain (master) depicted in Ba’lu’s speeches to Yammu and his heralds, namely that by refusing to bow down to Yammu’s messengers and to Yammu himself (despite Ba’lu’s status as Yammu’s

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ The biblical creation account begins with a description of Yahweh’s mastery over the void of the world (Gen. 1:2). Later, this is echoed in Psalm 74: “You divided the sea by your might;/ You broke the heads of the dragon in the waters./ You crushed the heads of the Leviathan;/ you gave him as food to the creatures of the wilderness...” (Ps. 74:13-15). These episodes are meant not only to parallel the Marduk/Tiamat conflict but also to assert that Yahweh is superior to Marduk in his ability to defeat the primordial sea monster by trivializing the Leviathan as Yahweh’s “plaything,” a creature that could never pose a real threat to him (Ps. 104:26, Job 41:5). This is in contrast to the struggle Marduk is shown to have against his progenitor, Tiamat, in their epic battle complete with weapons and weaponized natural forces. Yahweh is also credited with having created all facets of the universe including the Leviathan, as opposed to Marduk having been the result of a divine line beginning with Tiamat. (Jeremiah Unterman, “Leviathan.” *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*. Ed. Paul J. Achtermeier. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996. 602)

⁹⁸ Dalley notes that there is “a surprising lack of textual variation” between the tablets containing the “Enuma Elish,” which “came from a variety of sites and periods.” She then speculates that this may be due in part to the text’s canonization “if it was used for a particular ritual, as this epic was.” This would indicate that one version of the events was generally accepted as “canon,” as were the characters purported to have acted out the story’s events, and that therefore variations on the text would be seen as exactly that (variations on an existing, canonical account). Dalley does mention the similarities between the “Enuma Elish” and another Old Babylonian text, the “Epic of Anzu,” by noting parallels between the two; however, she attributes most of these similarities to “stock phrases, epithets, and similes... [from] a huge range of folk-tales [that] must have existed in oral narrative.” Dalley *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 231.

vassal), the narrative attempts to challenge the conventional aspects of these roles.⁹⁹ The verbal conflict between Ba'lu and Yammu, for example, repeatedly plays on the dichotomy between “up” and “down” in Yammu’s commands to “bow” and Ba’lu’s orders to his servants to “rise up” and not bow to Yammu’s messengers in order to “unsettle any absolute notion of above and below,” reflecting the political instability of the situation.¹⁰⁰ This asserts that the status of real-world leaders and their vassals, then, is not based in “cosmic grounding,” as one might think (or hope).¹⁰¹ The “Enuma Elish” further differentiates itself by its use of “cosmic” terminology, as discussed above. The language of the “Ba’lu Myth,” on the other hand, attempts to convey a concern with incessant political power struggles rather than a battle of cosmic proportions.¹⁰² The rebellion of Ba’lu against the conventional authority is less concerned with the ritual of how divine mandate legitimizes political power than is the “Enuma Elish.” Instead, it focuses on dispelling the fiction that politics was based on a natural hierarchy.

Certain literary elements of this myth, too, differentiate the “Ba’lu Myth” from other “creation epics” like the “Enuma Elish.” Tugendhaft describes in great detail differences in the language used by the messengers in these two myths. Both sets of messengers use a formula for issuing demands typically used by rulers for extraditing escaped vassals: a “demander” addresses a “demandee” for the return or surrender of a “demanded object.”¹⁰³ In the “Enuma Elish,” for example, Marduk demands that the assembly of gods recognize him as king after defeating Tiamat, addressing the group from whom he will receive his reward.¹⁰⁴ The “Ba’lu Myth”

⁹⁹ “The passage does not ascribe sovereign authority to an enduring order; on the contrary, it works to unsettle any absolute notion of above and below.” Aaron Tugendhaft, “Politics and Poetics in the Baal Cycle,” 383

¹⁰⁰ “If Baal eventually acquires the right to rule, it is not because his kingship is a constituent element of an ordered universe.” *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *ibid.* 384

¹⁰² Such as the repetition of Yammu’s demands, the gods’ reaction, and Ba’lu’s response “The Ba’lu Myth,” 11-46, *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I*, ed. and trans. Denis Pardee, 246

¹⁰³ *ibid.* 375

¹⁰⁴ “Enuma Elish” 115-121, *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I*, ed. and trans. Benjamin R. Foster, 396

differs slightly from this formula, however, in that Yammu demands the return and supplication of Ba'lu not from Ba'lu himself but from the chief god El, who presides over the conflict.¹⁰⁵ By issuing the demand to a higher authority than the accused, then, Ba'lu's subsequent defiance of this edict is not presented as the act of a justified, chosen hero embodying the law, but as the actions of a rebellious fugitive who is avoiding just punishment.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the situation is not resolved by Yammu's demand to a higher authority but is exacerbated by it, leading to the physical conflict between the gods, very unlike the situation in the "Enuma Elish," where "all the gods endorse the rule of the victor by handing over the criminal."¹⁰⁷ Rather than reinforcing Yammu's sovereignty, the scene destabilizes the accepted model of the divine power structure by allowing the rebel to question where true authority lies.

Conclusions

Based on my analysis of the characteristics of these myths, I have drawn several conclusions as to why a modern Western audience seems so adverse to accepting the level and types of violence found in these myths as proper for deities.

Degree of and Ways in Which Violence Portrayed

Modern sensitivities towards death and death's role in contemporary Western society have shifted from that of the cultures of these mythologies. The ancient world suffered from a much higher early mortality rate than most major Western societies do today, meaning that early death and the possibility of violent death was much more present in the lives of these peoples. Possibilities of death in battle and the nearness of wartime violence kept death close at hand, as well as public executions or modern methods of dealing with disease. Comparatively speaking,

¹⁰⁵ "The Ba'lu Myth," 30-35, ed. trans. Denis Pardee, *ibid.*, 246

¹⁰⁶ Turgendhaft, "Politics and Poetics in the Baal Cycle," 382

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

contemporary views about death are very sterilized and kept almost at arm's length for the majority of the time due largely in part to the advances modern societies have made in lowering early mortality rates. The shift in western culture of the location of death and of the preparation of the corpse for burial from the home to more public places (such as hospitals and funeral homes) as well as a growing reluctance of adults to discuss the topic of death with children also factors in distancing modern Western audiences from the experience of death.¹⁰⁸ The presence of themes concerning death in these stories, which are seen as at least somewhat "religious" in their inclusion of gods, then, seem similarly uncomfortable to a modern audience reading these texts.

It would follow that such discomfort with death would lead to discomfort with the degree of violence as portrayed in these texts, as well as with the ways in which that violence is performed and by whom it is enacted in the story. Contemporary audiences are strangely much more comfortable with specific acts of physical violence, such as dismemberment or mutilation, being carried out by other humans or by fictional monsters, whether through viewing others perform these violent acts in film or by performing these acts themselves through playing video games. It disturbs us, however, to think that deities (in our expectations of them) could possibly be guilty of similar atrocities. Granted, the idea that deities could perform acts of violence similar to those of humans is important to the study of their development through literature; indeed, "a distinctive feature of our earliest Western representations of religious violence is its association with natural power" as presented in these myths.¹⁰⁹ However, violence becomes expected of characters grouped into categories of entertainment media (film, comics, video games), i.e., "not real." The deities in these myths, therefore, fall into these categories as a result

¹⁰⁸ "Grief, Death, and Funerals." *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*. Ed. Paula S. Fass. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004. Web.

¹⁰⁹ Kitts, "Religion and Violence from Literary Perspectives." 411

of their violent actions. For example, the physical battles of Marduk or Ba'lu are easily equated with those of the Marvel superheroes, but certainly not (for some) of Yahweh. Even though there are certainly biblical instances where Yahweh commits acts just as heinous as those carried out by these other gods (transforming Lot's wife into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26), striking down Ananias then Sapphira for not giving fully to the church (Acts 4:32-5:11)), contemporary audiences rarely equate these actions with the similar acts committed by Marduk and Ba'lu. This is partly because they have a preconceived notion about the nature of God: God/Yahweh is viewed as an "actual" god who "actually" exists above and beyond the universe. The older gods of antiquity, on the other hand, are seen as never really having existed in the first place, and their actions are therefore just part of ancient myth, in the common (mis)understanding of the term.

For many, even when Yahweh is violent his actions are justified by notions about the sinful nature of man or the necessity of their destruction for the perfection of God's creation. God's representation in the Bible corroborates this. Yahweh's famous declaration "I am who/that I am" (Exod. 3:14) distinguishes him from comparison with these other gods by placing himself above them. Instead of implying "I am thunder" or "I am the ocean," God presents himself as a tautological power stemming from and of himself; "the cosmological link between god and world, and god and gods, is categorically broken."¹¹⁰ The Hebrew tradition, then, has passed down the belief that Yahweh is a superior, transcendent being above these other "nature gods". Israel's god is viewed as having good reason to commit atrocities in the method of his choosing, whereas the mythic gods are simply petulant and ill-behaved. It disturbs us to classify the direct methods of inflicting harm practiced by the Mesopotamian gods as being the same kind of violence as the more indirect methods employed by Yahweh. For example, Ba'lu's and

¹¹⁰ Boyarin, "The Christian Invention of Judaism," 145

Yammu's battle with maces and Marduk's act of shooting Tiamat full of arrows are vilified as savage and base, but Yahweh's ordering the Angel of Death to kill the Egyptian firstborns (Exodus 12:29-30) is considered necessary and better than if he had simply descended on the Egyptians to slaughter them with sword in hand.

Ancient and Modern Religious Violence

According to noted author and religious scholar William Cavanaugh, contemporary Westerners have developed what he calls "the myth of religious violence," "the idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life...which has a particularly dangerous inclination to promote violence."¹¹¹ Especially after September 11, 2001, the idea of the "violence-prone nature of religion" has been scrutinized and analyzed with a renewed fervor to support this notion. While it is true that violent acts have been committed in the name of religion or religious ideology, Cavanaugh argues that this violence is always tied to the culture in which it is enacted as well as the religious tradition with which it is associated.¹¹² This has been just as true for violence in the past as is for similar violence today, especially in the context of religion and contemporary religious terrorism.

The "Emuna Elish," for example, exists not only as a creation myth with a religious application but also in the social/political sphere in the context of the annual Akitu festival, during which the king would be ceremonially stripped of his power and then reendowed to parallel the events of the story. Chaos would briefly be allowed to reign, then order would be restored, re-codifying the king's power for another year.¹¹³ So too, according to noted scholar

¹¹¹ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 3

¹¹² *ibid.* 34

¹¹³ See "Benjamin D. Sommer, "The Babylonian Akitu Festival: Rectifying the King or Renewing the Cosmos?" note 60 above

Mark Juergensmeyer, do contemporary religious zealots attempt to exploit religious and social images of ritual and power to assert themselves as worthy standard-bearers of order in the face of the chaos of the universe as they perceive it. They attempt to legitimize this role through committing acts of terror intended to convey symbolic meaning to their audience, relying on the association they hope will be drawn between existing religious rituals and these actions.¹¹⁴

“Terrorist acts have a symbolic side,” Juergensmeyer argues, “and in that sense mimic religious rites.”¹¹⁵ In other words, the motivation behind the two groups’ use of violence in the context of religion would seem to coincide: to establish themselves as the light of reason in the darkness of the disorderly universe by appealing to a higher authority than any created by humans.

Additionally, Juergensmeyer argues that a motivating factor behind terrorism is ironically to ensure peace. In order to promote an image of the group’s harmonious goal, however, religion has to both emphasize the current deplorable state of disharmony and the ability of religion to contain it.¹¹⁶ This sounds very similar to the purpose of the *Enuma Elish*’s recitation at the Akitu ceremony: to portray chaos in order to emphasize order. From this perspective, it is easy to see how modern audiences might misunderstand violence in ancient texts like the “*Enuma Elish*.”

A closer analysis of the way the ancient Babylonians and modern religious terrorists apply the violence in their religions, however, may reveal that this is not the case. Juergemeyer points out that one notable way in which religiously-motivated violence differs from violence labeled explicitly “secular” in nature is the seeming unconcern of its enactors with their struggle’s timeline; that is, they tend to see their struggle in cosmic terms rather than earthly

¹¹⁴ Juergensmeyer asserts that the purpose of “performance violence” is to link it to other symbolic performances carried out by the state which convey a similar kind of power and authority, such as public speeches or marriage ceremonies. He argues that this is because “public ritual has traditionally been the province of religion,” and therefore “comes naturally to activists from a religious background.” *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. University of California Press, 2000. 125

¹¹⁵ *ibid.* 125

¹¹⁶ *ibid.* 159

ones, and accept the reality (for them) that the culmination of their group's efforts may not come about during their lifetime.¹¹⁷ The portrayal of the conflict as "cosmic" as opposed to "earthly" allows them to eschew the laws and limitations of society because they are obeying a higher authority.¹¹⁸ Conversely, the intent of the Akitu ceremony was not to encourage an abandonment of society's laws in favor of those of a "higher power," but in fact to establish a reason to follow the laws of society *because* of the "higher power's" endorsement in the personification of those laws, the king.¹¹⁹ As shown above, the same might be said for the Ba'lu cycle, the Gilgamesh Epic, and parts of the biblical text. In addition, the fact that these texts were codified by societal elites and royal houses further undergirds their purpose in conferring authority on society's rulers.

Furthermore, William Cavanaugh challenges certain of Juergensmeyer's arguments here, chief among them the latter's treatment of "religion" as a "transhistorical and transcultural" entity that Cavanaugh finds problematic.¹²⁰ In relation to the role of symbolism in religion and secular society and its exploitation by terrorists, Cavanaugh criticizes Juergensmeyer's inability to clearly define and separate categories which Juergensmeyer attempts to distinguish between, such as "cosmic" and "ordinary political" war or "religious" and "secular" violence.¹²¹ This might actually strengthen the case that religious violence occupied a different role for the audience of the "Emuna Elish" than it does for religious extremists today. To say that Juergensmeyer fails to address religion's modern characteristics and context when discussing its relation to violence acknowledges that the function of violence in these two cultures serves

¹¹⁷ "There is no need, therefore, to compromise one's goals in a struggle that has been waged in divine time and with the promise of heaven's reward." *ibid.* 217

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ See note 81

¹²⁰ "He [Juergensmeyer] continues to treat religion not as a modern construct but as a given feature of human societies in all times and places." Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 34

¹²¹ *ibid.* 30-31

conflicting purposes; while both rely on religion to reaffirm the primacy of order over chaos, modern terrorists attempt to do so by *rejecting* the laws of the state *in favor of* a divine mandate, while the violence in Near Eastern mythology emphasizes *embracing* said laws *due to* a divine endorsement.

Bruce Lincoln also appears to agree with Cavanaugh that religion is not “a system of pure ideas utterly divorced from any social, political or historical context.”¹²² According to Lincoln, religion is only one factor in the development of culture.¹²³ He argues that a culture’s path to social stability is directly related to its preferences being encompassed in the religious. “We can now recognize,” he states, “that it involves the desire for the other aspects of culture – specifically, a group’s distinctive ethical and aesthetical preferences – to secure themselves by grounding themselves in religion.”¹²⁴ Indeed, Juergensmeyer’s analysis acknowledges that the context of religious terrorism itself is often tied to the perceived position of the terrorist’s group in the dominant culture. A marginalized group is much more likely to turn to radical methods to achieve their goals than the dominant one, often because they feel they have more at stake in the outcome.¹²⁵ The Babylonians, on the other hand, *were* the dominant culture, and though the characters in the “Enuma Elish” are certainly portrayed as a disempowered group threatened with annihilation by the dominant divine power, the use of the violence in the myth does not

¹²² Lincoln, Bruce. *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11*. University of Chicago Press, 2006. 77

¹²³ Cultural stability, according to Lincoln, is reached through the cooperation of aesthetics and ethics, “the domains in which groups articulate and enact their characteristic and defining preferences” (representing “taste” and “morality,” respectfully), and religion, “a third component...which invests specific human preferences with transcendent status by constituting them as revealed truths, ancestral traditions, divine commandments, and property inheritance.” Without this third component, Lincoln argues, the definitions of “good” and “pleasing” as represented by the first two “would constantly be revised in the course of incessant debate” without the stability religion affords. *ibid.* p. 35

¹²⁴ *ibid.* 56

¹²⁵ Juergensmeyer gives three reasons outlining “When Confrontation is Likely to be Characterized as Cosmic War.” Namely: 1) The struggle is perceived as a defense of basic identity and dignity; 2) Losing the struggle would be unthinkable; and 3) The struggle is blocked and cannot be won in real time or in real terms. 161-62.

have the same motivation behind it. Ultimately, both Lincoln and Cavanaugh suggest that any analysis of religion or religious violence must take into account the larger social, political, and cultural contexts responsible for religious ideology, which proves to be the best method for understanding ancient violence in mythology as well.

“Secular” versus “Religious”

Finally, an important distinction between modern notions about these myths and the historical setting for the myths themselves involves the desire of contemporary readers to divide these cultures into “religious” and “secular” spheres as we divide our own. This is often asserted with the idea that such a separation will ensure the stability of the society, and is seen as an inherent advantage of the modern state compared to the contrary.¹²⁶ The act of doing so however, clouds the analysis of the texts by placing a modern constriction on them. Simply, the “church/state” divide which we so advocate did not exist in these cultures. Such a realization usually leads modern readers to wrongly place these texts in a category of “inferior” literature, as mentioned above, without realizing the benefits of this characteristic. In his analysis of the emperor’s role in the culture of the Achaemenian Persians, Bruce Lincoln speaks to a similar issue concerning this divide. In relying on direct royal association with mythological themes, the act of mixing roles which we would see inherently fraudulent in fact speaks to “a capacity to coordinate even the most questionable practices with [an] animating discourse to produce results

¹²⁶ Bruce Lincoln describes this desire succinctly: “Even in nations where the population is relatively homogenous with regard to its religious affiliation states designed along the Enlightenment model still tend to define themselves as secular; that is, officially neutral and benevolently disinterested in questions pertaining to religion. The initial appearance of homogeneity may be deceptive, however, since broad variation often exists regarding the nature and intensity of the religious commitments held by different factions of the nation. (Bruce Lincoln, “Conflict.” *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Ed. Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998. 57

that are read as confirmation of its loftiest principles.”¹²⁷ In other words, blending these two seemingly opposing fields actually helps maintain cohesive and lasting social networks in these cultures directly tied to the myths and the leader’s role in relation to them. As we suggested above, the same might be said for the role that ambiguous religious language plays in securing American political power, as exemplified during the Bush presidency.

Too often, however, such crucial and beneficial aspects of these stories in their social contexts is either ignored or vilified by contemporary audiences in informal analyses of these and similar texts. Their characteristics are treated with an air of contempt befitting a social order in which (to a modern mindset) two facets of society which should be separated unfortunately intertwine in a dangerous and harmful way. By doing so, objective analysis is lost.

Afterword

In his influential book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, scholar of mythology Joseph Campbell remarks that there is no final system for the interpretation of myths, and there will never be such thing. “Mythology,” he asserts “is like the god Proteus,” in that the student, wishing to be taught by Proteus, must “grasp him steadfastly” in order to finally force the truth from him; even then, however, “this wily god never discloses even to the skillfull questioner the whole content of his wisdom.”¹²⁸ The mythologies of the ancient Near East feature unique themes, values and characters that are not only entertaining thousands of years after their authorship but also beneficial to a contemporary analysis of a biblical literary heritage and open to much debate. If modern audiences are able to overcome socially-ingrained ideas about the assumed nature of these stories and their relationship to contemporary religion, perhaps they will eventually be seen as more than simple stories from a more primitive time in human history.

¹²⁷ Bruce Lincoln, *Religion, Empire, and Torture: The Case of Achaemenian Persia*. Chicago: University Press, 2007.

¹²⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. San Francisco: New World Library, 1949.

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