



CONTEMPLATING DEAD CIVILIZATIONS
AND THE SOUNDS OF LIFE
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Abraham Winitzer teaches ancient Near Eastern Studies at Notre Dame in the US, with an emphasis on Assyriology and related disciplines. In particular, he works on matters of intellectual history and has in that context written about the significance of Mesopotamian divination and mythic literature. He has recently completed a 2-volume intellectual biography of the Assyriologist A. Leo Oppenheim and his conception of ancient Mesopotamia. Another (edited) volume by him to come out soon concerns the work of Catholic priests in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who broke ground in various branches of ancient Near Eastern studies. In addition to the project begun at Wiko, another one, whose thinking began in his time in Berlin, will take on the question of revelation in pre-monotheistic Mesopotamia. – Address: Department of Theology, The University of Notre Dame, 130 Malloy Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA.
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My time at the Wissenschaftskolleg lived up to expectations on many fronts, and even exceeded a few. The range of tempting events—from lectures and panels to cultural outings, trips, clubs, and of course, German classes—were at times almost overwhelming (no easy feat for a Germanophile like myself). Fortunately, I heeded the advice of a former Fellow who had described her own Wiko experience and prepared me for this embarrassment of riches. As I sought to strike a balance between social, or social-intellectual, engagements and my own focused research, I found Wiko completely relaxed, understanding, and welcoming. In the following I offer a brief overview of the latter.

As a first order of business, my year at Wiko gave me the precious time to finish odds and ends of a book I had been working on for over a decade. That project is an intellectual biography of the Viennese-born and later American Assyriologist A. Leo Oppenheim (1904–1974). Oppenheim’s ideas about key aspects of ancient Mesopotamia remain foundational in Assyriology. But it was his sustained, pessimistic conception of this world as a “dead civilization”—ultimately beyond our abilities for meaningful retrieval—that had first piqued my curiosity about him. This interest deepened when I discovered a large cache of family letters that revealed much about his personal side and the extent of his losses during the Second World War. It was this discovery that led me to undertake the study. The biography explores the intersection between Oppenheim’s personal tragedy and the possibility that it left a lasting, unresolved imprint on his later intellectual life. The book will go off to press in the fall, upon my return to the US. The library staff was typically superb in these final stretches, tracking down, for instance, the granddaughter of someone discussed in the biography and receiving from her valuable family photos along with permission for their publication. Inevitably, the subject of the Holocaust also pressed upon my work. The many Colloquia that explored its history, commemoration, and legacy, or that drew novel comparisons to it—along with my own strolls among Grunewald’s beautiful homes and scattered *Stolpersteine*, and the stories of Fellows who found themselves unexpectedly reconnecting with severed family histories—only deepened my impression of the vast, seemingly unending shadow which that event continues to cast and the protean ways in which it insinuates itself into other matters—some, like ancient Mesopotamia, wholly unrelated. That one “dead civilization” might be brought into relation with another by Oppenheim—however tentatively—lends fresh weight to the biographical study I have undertaken and to the subjective historiography it seeks to illuminate.

Yet it was the project for which I received the fellowship that remained foremost in my mind while in Berlin. Tentatively still titled *Mesopotamian Myth in Biblical Demythologization* (although a learned Fellow questioned the suitability of the latter term), the project set out to revisit enduring questions about the relationship between Mesopotamian mythological traditions and biblical narratives of origins; these include, most prominently, the so-called Primeval History (Genesis 1–11), but also extend to other biblical texts. Comparative studies in this area have almost invariably focused on how biblical texts were shaped by earlier Mesopotamian sources. My approach, remaining Assyriological in orientation, sought to invert that perspective. Rather than asking how Mesopotamian myths informed the Bible, I wanted to explore whether the Bible’s reception and

reinterpretation of these myths might, in turn, shed light on the Mesopotamian material itself. These texts are appreciated today primarily for their literary artistry and theological genius, but are excluded from discussions of Mesopotamian science and philosophy specifically on account of their symbolic forms—and, of course, their unvarying appeal to the gods in accounts of the perceived and conceived world. What I aimed to ask, in other words, was whether the Bible's less mythological, more naturalized reformulations of these traditions might help us better appreciate the conceptual and intellectual world underlying Mesopotamian mythmaking.

The project is organized around a series of case studies. Several of these—on the Mesopotamian myths or epics of *Atraḥasīs*, *Gilgamesh*, *Etana*, and *Nergal and Ereshkigal* and their reception and reformulation in some celebrated Biblical narratives—I had previously examined individually. In this new context, however, I began to revisit these cases with the goal of integrating them into a more cohesive analytical framework, one that could advance our understanding of Mesopotamian myth and the possibility of its inclusion in broader considerations of Mesopotamian thought. Alongside this reassessment of earlier work, my time in Berlin also allowed me to explore new, related instances of such mythic interaction. These included potential Mesopotamian antecedents to the creation of the firmament and the rainbow in *Genesis* 1 and 9, respectively, as well as the striking portrayal of the flood hero as preeminent not in righteousness, but in knowledge—a curious detail for a tradition that allegedly does not prioritize thinking.

One particularly intriguing new example I pursued at Wiko concerns the rationale for the flood in both Mesopotamian and Biblical traditions. In each narrative, the turning point hinges on an elusive term that appears at the moment of crisis—seemingly central to understanding the divine response. In the *Atraḥasīs* epic—the earliest known Akkadian version of the flood story—the gods unleash the deluge in response to *rigmu*, a “noise” generated by humanity and perceived as disruptive to the divine order. The biblical account in *Genesis* 6–9 offers a striking contrast: there, the cataclysm is attributed to *ḥāmās* (6:11, 13), usually translated “violence,” but more precisely connoting large-scale bloodshed. The precise connotation of *rigmu* in *Atraḥasīs*'s run up to the flood has long puzzled scholars, who cannot agree on what lies behind the intolerable din that is said to disturb the chief god's sleep.

Through an analysis of the relevant passage in *Atraḥasīs* within its broader context, alongside the Biblical account considered within its own textual framework, I was able to highlight a shared structural logic as well as a common underlying concern about human

proliferation (*Atraḫasīs* II 1–2; *Genesis* 6:1) that frames both traditions and links one to the other. This comparative approach, I found, clarifies the meaning of *rigmu* in *Atraḫasīs* and also offers new insight on the understanding of *ḥāmās* in *Genesis*. In each case, the term in question extends a related, more literal motif that appears earlier in the respective narratives, in both instances marking the upending of a primitive earthly order. In *Atraḫasīs* this *rigmu* refers initially to the ruckus of a localized rebellion by minor deities; in the Primeval History, a scene of bloodshed, or *dāmîm*, punctuates Cain’s murder of Abel before the Flood episode.

It is precisely through the comparison with this biblical development—from *dāmîm* to *ḥāmās*, a shift from concrete to symbolic disorder—that the more metaphorical usage of *rigmu* in *Atraḫasīs* becomes clearer. (The significance of bloodshed in the Primeval History and the shift in terminology from the more standard to the more metaphorical was also investigated and will be addressed in a forthcoming study.) Both traditions trace a similar conceptual trajectory: they begin with an initial, more tangible act of disruption and evolve toward a more abstract representation of disorder, each shaped by concerns over human excess. Yet their resolutions diverge in revealing ways. Whereas the biblical flood ends with an encouragement of human fertility—this is the famous “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 9:1)—*Atraḫasīs* responds to the same problem by limiting human reproduction through various means (Tablet III, final lines). In this light, the nature of the noise that so disturbs the gods becomes clear: this must refer to human copulation and/or birth: the generative sounds of life itself. Additional evidence from native Mesopotamian sources furthers this hypothesis.

This reading, I suggested, not only offers insight into a mytheme that has so far proved fanciful but impenetrable. With the aid of this comparative perspective, an improved sense of one of *Atraḫasīs*’s chief concerns is also afforded to us. To wit, this is the tension between the perceived need for human labor and the destabilizing consequences of unchecked population growth. In *Atraḫasīs* this issue is set in mythical time and framed in mythological terms, rather than through discussions of politics, law, or their underlying philosophical reasoning. Still, it becomes difficult to argue that the author is not aware of some of these issues. It is also hard to ignore how closely this myth anticipates core issues in today’s political discourse. In this manner, I noted, a nearly 4,000-year-old Mesopotamian text speaks powerfully to contemporary social and political debates—a timeless reflection of enduring human concerns.

The method I exemplify here helped to resolve other, comparable cruxes and further confirmed the viability of the project as a whole. What emerges as most promising—indeed, even innovative—is the recognition that, contrary to prevailing tendencies in Assyriology, it is at times by looking beyond Mesopotamia that we can most effectively illuminate the internal logic of its traditions. Biblical adaptations, precisely because they stand closer to the Mesopotamian worldview than the vantage point of modern scholarship, can serve as a mirror, refracting ancient concerns in ways that render their deeper structures newly intelligible.

Indeed, even more valuable than the specific progress I made on individual cases in the project was the rare opportunity to explore its broader theoretical implications, particularly its relevance to ongoing debates about what qualifies as scientific or philosophical thinking in Mesopotamia. A year-long reading group on the history and philosophy of science, led by Co-Fellows Jutta Schickore and Kärin Nickelsen, was especially helpful in this regard—and also genuinely enjoyable. Discussions of other Fellows' work on topics such as scientific models, hypotheses, empiricism, the qualification of sources, etc. were both fascinating and illuminating. In that setting, I also had the chance to present some of my own work and receive invaluable criticism in areas well outside my expertise. Equally important were many conversations with Fellows from other fields. The historians Hartmut Leppin and David Edgerton were delightful interlocutors, encouraging me to refine, for example, my critique of the insistence on the inner ("emic") philological approach—the so-called *Eigenbegrifflichkeit*—dominant in Assyriology, and to think more critically about the benefit of my drive to argue for a Mesopotamian canon. These intra-historian exchanges were nicely counterbalanced by discussions with philosophers Cheryl Misak, David Owens, and Herlinde Pauer-Studer, who—at times subtly, at times more directly—reminded me of the enduring value of intellectual inquiries that are pursued apart from historical framing.

This year at Wiko stands among the most formative of my academic and personal journey. It was a time in which ideas for several future projects were hatched, and which I shall joyfully acknowledge. The friendships and memories forged here, I expect, will remain with me indefinitely. To remain in contact with Wiko will be a pleasure; to count myself among its good-will ambassadors, an honor.