

Chapter Two

Mesopotamian Religion

"The Mesopotamian Religions"

Objectives:

1. Define polytheism
2. Identify two aspects of Sumerian and Akkadian religion
3. Identify correlations between Akkadian creation story and Christian creation story
4. Define oral tradition and be able to explain the transformation from oral tradition to written tradition.

The Mesopotamian Religions

Mircea Eliade, trans. by Willard R. Trask

"History begins at Sumer"

This is the well-known title of a book by S. N. Kramer. In it, the eminent American Orientalist showed that our earliest information concerning a number of religious institutions, techniques, and conceptions is preserved in Sumerian texts. That is, they represent the earliest *written* documents, whose originals go back to the third millennium. But these documents certainly reflect more archaic religious beliefs.

The origin and early history of Sumerian civilizations are still imperfectly known. It is supposed that a population speaking Sumerian, a language that is not Semitic and cannot be explained by any other known linguistic family, came down from the northern regions and settled in Lower Mesopotamia. Very probably the Sumerians conquered the autochthonous inhabitants, whose ethnic component is still unknown (culturally, they shared in the Obeid civilization; see § 13). Not long afterward, groups of nomads coming from the Syrian desert and speaking a Semitic language, Akkadian, began entering the territories north of Sumer, at the same time infiltrating the Sumerian cities in successive waves. Toward the middle of the third millennium, under a leader who became legendary, Sargon, the Akkadians imposed their supremacy on the Sumerian cities. Yet, even before the conquest, a Sumero-Akkadian symbiosis developed, which was greatly increased by the unification of the two countries. Thirty or forty years ago scholars referred to a single culture, the Babylonian, the result of the fusion of these two ethnic stocks. It is now generally agreed that the Sumerian and Akkadian contributions should be studied separately, for, despite the fact that the invaders

had assimilated the culture of the defeated people, the creative genius of the two was different.

It is especially in the religious domain that these differences are perceptible. From the most remote antiquity, the characteristic emblem of divine beings was a *horned* tiara. At Sumer, then, as everywhere in the Near East, the religious symbolism of the bull, documented from the Neolithic, had been handed down uninterrupted. In other words, the divine modality was defined by the power and the "transcendence" of *space*, i.e., the stormy sky in which thunder sounds (for thunder was assimilated to the bellowing of bulls). The "transcendent," celestial structure of divine beings is confirmed by the determinative sign that precedes their ideograms and that originally represented a star. According to the vocabularies, the proper meaning of this determinative is "sky." Hence every divinity was imagined as a celestial being; this is why the gods and goddesses radiated a very bright light.

The earliest Sumerian texts reflect the work of classification and systematization accomplished by the priests. First of all is the triad of the great gods, followed by the triad of the planetary gods. We have also been left lengthy lists of divinities of all kinds, concerning whom we very often know nothing but their names. At the dawn of its *history*, the Sumerian religion already proves to be ancient. To be sure, the texts so far discovered are fragmentary and peculiarly difficult to interpret. However, even on the basis of this sparse information, we can understand that certain religious traditions were in the course of losing their original meanings. The process is perceptible even in the triad of the great gods, made up of An, En-lil, and En-ki. As his name shows (*an* = sky), the first is a uranian god. He must have been the supreme sovereign god, the most important in the pantheon; but An already presents the syndrome of a *deus otiosus*. More active and more "actual" are En-lil, god of the atmosphere (also called the "Great Mount"), and En-ki, "Lord of the Earth," god of the "foundations," who has wrongly been taken by modern scholars to be the god of the primordial waters because, in the Sumerian view, the earth was supposed to rest on the ocean.

So far, no cosmogonic text properly speaking has been discovered, but some allusions permit us to reconstruct the decisive moments of creation, as the Sumerians conceived it. The goddess Nammu (whose name is written with the pictograph representing the primordial sea)

is presented as "the mother who gave birth to the Sky and the Earth" and the "ancestress who brought forth all the gods." The theme of the primordial waters, imagined as a totality at once cosmic and divine, is quite frequent in archaic cosmogonies. In this case too, the watery mass is identified with the original Mother, who, by parthenogenesis, gave birth to the first couple, the Sky (An) and the Earth (Ki), incarnating the male and female principles. This first couple was united, to the point of merging, in the *hieros gamos*. From their union was born En-lil, the god of the atmosphere. Another fragment informs us that the latter separated his parents: the god An carried the sky upward, and En-lil took his mother, the Earth, with him.¹ The cosmogonic theme of the separation of sky and earth is also widely disseminated. It is found, indeed, at different levels of culture. But probably the version recorded in the Near East and the Mediterranean derive, in the last analysis, from the Sumerian tradition.

Certain texts describe the perfection and bliss of the "beginnings": "the ancient days when each thing was created perfect," etc.² However, the true Paradise seems to be Dilmun, a country in which neither illness nor death exists. There "no lion kills, no wolf carries off a lamb. . . . No man with eye disease repeats: 'My eyes are sick.' . . . No night watchman walks about his post."³ Yet, all in all, this perfection was a stagnation. For the god En-ki, the Lord of Dilmun, lay asleep beside his wife, who was still a virgin, as the earth itself was virgin. When he woke, En-ki united with the goddess Nin-gur-sag, then with the daughter whom the latter bore, and finally with the daughter's daughter—for this is a theogony that must be completed in this paradisaical land. But an apparently insignificant incident occasions the first divine drama. The god eats certain plants that had just been created; but he was supposed to "determine their destiny," that is, to settle their mode of being and their function. Outraged by this senseless act, Nin-gur-sag declares that she will no longer look on En-ki with the "look of life," and thus he will die. And in fact

1. See S. N. Kramer, *From the Tablets of Sumer*, pp. 77 ff., and *The Sumerians*, p. 145.

2. See a new translation of the poem "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Underworld" in Giorgio R. Castellino, *Mitologia sumerico-accadia*, pp. 176-81. On the Egyptian conception of initial perfection, see § 25.

3. After the translation of Maurice Lambert, in *La Naissance du Monde*, p. 106.

unknown ills afflict the god, and his increasing weakness presages his speedy death. Finally, it is his wife who cures him.⁴

As it has been possible to reconstruct it, this myth shows instances of rehandling, the purpose of which cannot be determined. The paradisaical theme, completed by a theogony, ends in a drama that reveals the crime and punishment of a creator god, followed by an increasing weakness that portends his death. Certainly, a fatal fault is involved, for En-ki *did not behave in accordance with the principle that he incarnated*. This fault came near to compromising the structure of his own creation. Other texts have preserved the lamentations of the gods when they fall victims to fate. And we shall later see the risks run by Inanna in going beyond the frontiers of her sovereignty. What is surprising in the drama of En-ki is not the mortal nature of the gods but the mythological context in which it is proclaimed.

17. Man before his gods

There are at least four Sumerian narratives that explain the origin of man. They are so different that we must assume a plurality of traditions. One myth relates that the first human beings sprouted from the ground like the plants. According to another version, man was fashioned from clay by certain divine artisans; then the goddess Nammu modeled a heart for him, and En-ki gave him life. Other texts name the goddess Aruru as the creator of human beings. Finally, according to the fourth version, man was formed from the blood of two Lāgma gods immolated for the purpose. This last theme will be revived and reinterpreted in the famous Babylonian cosmogonic poem, *Enuma elish* (§ 21).

All these motifs, with numerous variants, are documented more or less throughout the world. According to two of the Sumerian versions, the primitive man shared in a way in the divine substance: in En-ki's vital breath or in the blood of the Lāgma gods. This means that there was no impassable distance between the divine mode of being and the human condition. It is true that man was created in order to serve the gods, who, first of all, needed to be fed and clothed.⁵

4. We follow the interpretation given by R. Jestin, "La religion sumérienne," p. 170.

5. On the cult, see Kramer, *The Sumerians*, pp. 140 ff.; A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, pp. 183 ff.

The cult was conceived of as service to the gods. However, if men are the gods' servants, they are not their slaves. The sacrifice consisted primarily in offerings and homage. As for the great collective festivals of the city—celebrated at the New Year or at the building of a temple—they have a cosmological structure.

Raymond Jestin emphasizes the fact that the notion of sin, the expiatory element, and the idea of the scapegoat are not documented in the texts.⁶ This implies that men are not only servants of the gods but are also their imitators and hence their collaborators. Since the gods are responsible for the cosmic order, men must obey their commands, for these are based on the norms—the "decrees," *me*—which insure the functioning both of the world and of human society.⁷ These decrees establish, that is, *determine*, the destiny of every being, of every form of life, of every divine or human enterprise. The determination of the decrees is accomplished by the act of *nam-tar*, which constitutes, and proclaims, the decision taken. At each New Year the gods fix the destiny of the following twelve months. This, to be sure, is an old idea, found elsewhere in the Near East; but the first strictly articulated expression of it is Sumerian and shows the deep work of investigation and systematization performed by the theologians.

The cosmic order is continually troubled, first of all by the Great Serpent, which threatens to reduce the world to chaos, and then by men's crimes, faults, and errors, which must be expiated and purged by the help of various rites. But the world is periodically regenerated, i.e., re-created, by the festival of the New Year. "The Sumerian name of this festival, *à-ki-til*, means 'power making the world live again' (*til* means 'live' and 'live again'; thus a sick man 'lives [again],' that is, is cured); the whole cycle of the law of eternal return is evoked."⁸ More or less similar mythico-ritual scenarios of the New Year are

6. Jestin, "La religion sumérienne," p. 184. "'Penitential psalms' appear in the late literature, but the increasing Semitic influence that is discernible in them no longer permits them to be considered genuine expressions of Sumerian consciousness" (ibid.).

7. On the *me* of the different trades, vocations, and institutions, see Kramer, *From the Tablets*, pp. 89 ff.; *The Sumerians*, pp. 117 ff. The term *me* has been translated by "being" (Jacobsen) or "divine power" (Landsberger and Falkenstein) and has been interpreted as a "divine immanence in dead and living matter, unchangeable, subsistent, but impersonal, to which only the gods have access" (J. van Dijk).

8. Jestin, "La religion sumérienne," p. 181.

documented in countless cultures. We shall have occasion to gauge their importance when we analyze the Babylonian festival *akitu* (§ 22). The scenario involves the *hieros gamos* between two patron divinities of the city, represented by their statues or by the sovereign (who received the title of husband of the goddess Inanna and incarnated Dumuzi)⁹ and a hierodule. This *hieros gamos* actualized the communion between the gods and men—a momentary communion, to be sure, but with considerable consequences. For the divine energy flowed directly upon the city (that is, upon the Earth), sanctified it, and insured its prosperity and happiness for the beginning year.

Still more important than the New Year festival was the one associated with the building of a temple. It was no less a reiteration of the cosmogony, for the temple—the “palace” of the god—represented the most perfect *imago mundi*. The idea is archaic and widely disseminated. (We shall find it in the myth of Baal, § 50.) According to the Sumerian tradition, after the creation of man, one of the gods founded the five cities; he built them “in pure places, called their names, apportioned them as cult centers.”¹⁰ Since that time the gods have contented themselves with imparting the plans of cities and sanctuaries directly to the sovereigns. In a dream King Gudea sees both the goddess Nidaba showing him a placard on which the beneficent stars are named and a god revealing the plan of the temple to him.¹¹ The models of the temple and the city are, we might say, “transcendental,” for they preexist in the sky. The Babylonian cities had their archetypes in the constellations: Sippar in Cancer, Niniveh in the Great Bear, Assur in Arcturus, etc.¹² This concept is general in the ancient East.

The institution of kingship was similarly “lowered from the sky,” together with its emblems, the tiara and the throne.¹³ After the flood, it was brought down to earth for the second time. The belief in the preexistence of words and institutions will have considerable importance for archaic ontology and will find its most famous

9. See S. N. Kramer, “Le Rite de Mariage sacré Dumuzi-Inanna,” p. 129, and his *The Sacred Marriage Rite*, pp. 49 ff.

10. See the text translated by Kramer, *From the Tablets*, p. 177.

11. E. Burrows, “Some Cosmological Patterns in Babylonian Religion,” pp. 65 ff.

12. See *ibid.*, pp. 60 ff.

13. See the “Sumerian King List,” translated by Kramer, *The Sumerians*, pp. 328 ff.

expression in the Platonic doctrine of Ideas. It is attested for the first time in Sumerian documents, but its roots presumably reach down into prehistory. Indeed, the theory of celestial models continues and develops the universally disseminated archaic conception that man's acts are only the repetition (imitation) of acts revealed by divine beings.

18. The first myth of the flood

Royalty had to be brought down from the sky again after the flood, for the diluvial catastrophe was equivalent to the end of the world. In fact, only a single human being, named Zisudra in the Sumerian version and Utnapishtim in the Akkadian, was saved. But, unlike Noah, he was not allowed to live on in the new earth that emerged from the waters. More or less divinized, but in any case enjoying immortality, the survivor is transported to the land of Dilmun (Zisudra) or to the "mouth of the rivers" (Utnapishtim). From the few fragments of the Sumerian version that have come down to us we learn that, despite the reluctance or the opposition of some members of the pantheon, the great gods decide to destroy humanity by the flood. Someone mentions the merits of King Zisudra, "humble, obedient, pious." Informed by his protector, Zisudra learns of the decision reached by An and En-lil. The text is here interrupted by a long lacuna. Probably Zisudra received exact instructions for building the ark. After seven days and seven nights the sun comes out again, and Zisudra prostrates himself before the sun god, Utu. In the last fragment that has been preserved, An and En-lil confer on him "the life of a god" and the "eternal breath" of the gods and send him to live in the fabulous land of Dilmun.¹⁴

The same theme of the Deluge is found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. This famous work, which has been fairly well preserved, casts still greater light on the similarities to the biblical narrative. In all probability, we may assume the existence of a common, and quite archaic, source. As has been well known since the compilations made by R. Andree, H. Usener, and J. G. Frazer, the deluge myth is almost universally disseminated; it is documented in all the continents

14. See Kramer, *From the Tablets*, pp. 177 ff.; Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, pp. 97 ff.; and G. R. Castellino, *Mitologia*, pp. 140-43.

(though very rarely in Africa) and on various cultural levels. A certain number of variants seem to be the result of dissemination, first from Mesopotamia and then from India. It is equally possible that one or several diluvial catastrophes gave rise to fabulous narratives. But it would be risky to explain so widespread a myth by phenomena of which no geological traces have been found. The majority of the flood myths seem in some sense to form part of the cosmic rhythm: the old world, peopled by a fallen humanity, is submerged under the waters, and some time later a new world emerges from the aquatic "chaos."¹⁵

In a large number of variants, the flood is the result of the sins (or ritual faults) of human beings: sometimes it results simply from the wish of a divine being to put an end to mankind. It is difficult to determine the cause of the flood in the Mesopotamian tradition. Some allusions suggest that the gods reached the decision because of "sinners." According to another, En-lil's anger was aroused by the intolerable "uproar" made by human beings.¹⁶ However, if we examine the myths that, in other cultures, announce the coming flood, we find that the chief causes lie *at once in the sins of men and the decrepitude of the world*. By the mere fact that it exists—that is, that it *lives* and *produces*—the cosmos gradually deteriorates and ends by falling into decay. This is the reason why it has to be re-created. In other words, the flood *realizes*, on the macrocosmic scale, what is symbolically effected during the New Year festival: the "end of the world" and the end of a sinful humanity in order to make a new creation possible.¹⁷

19. Descent to the underworld: Inanna and Dumuzi

The triad of Sumerian planetary gods was made up of Nanna-Suen (the Moon), Utu (the Sun), and Inanna, goddess of the planet Venus

15. On the symbolism implicit in certain flood myths, see Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 210 ff.

16. We shall see (§ 21) that it is always the "noise"—on this occasion, the uproar made by the young gods, preventing him from sleeping—that decides Apsu to exterminate them (see *Enuma elish*, tab. I, lines 21 ff.).

17. See *Myth and Reality*, pp. 54 ff. According to the version preserved in the *Epic of Atrahasis*, after the flood Ea decided to create seven men and seven women; see Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, pp. 259–60.

and of love. The gods of the Moon and the Sun will have their apogee during the Babylonian period. As for Inanna, homologized with the Akkadian Ishtar and later with Ashtarte, she will enjoy an "actuality" in both cult and mythology never approached by any other goddess of the Near East. At her apogee, Inanna-Ishtar was the goddess at once of love and of war, that is, she governed life and death; to indicate the fullness of her powers, she was called hermaphroditic (*Ishtar barbata*). Her personality was already fully outlined in the Sumerian period, and her central myth constitutes one of the most significant creations of the ancient world. The myth begins with a love story: Inanna, the tutelary goddess of Erech, marries the shepherd Dumuzi,¹⁸ who thus becomes sovereign of the city. Inanna proclaims her passion and her happiness aloud: "I, in joy I walk! . . . My Lord is seemly for the sacred lap." Yet she has a presentiment of the tragic fate that awaits her husband: "My beloved, my man of the heart . . . thee, I have brought about an evil for you . . . you have touched your mouth to mine, you have pressed my lips to your head, that is why you have been decreed an evil fate" (Kramer, "Le rite de mariage sacré," p. 141).

This "evil fate" was decided on the day when the ambitious Inanna determined to go down into the underworld to supplant her "elder sister," Ereshkigal. Sovereign of the Great Above, Inanna aspires also to reign over the World Below. She manages to enter Ereshkigal's palace, but, as she successively passes through the Seven Gates, the gatekeepers strip her of her clothes and ornaments. Inanna arrives stark naked—that is, stripped of all "power"—in her sister's presence. Ereshkigal fixes the "look of death" on her, and "her body became inert." After three days, her devoted friend Ninshubur, obeying the instructions that Inanna had given her before setting out, informs the gods En-lil and Nanna-Sin. But they decline to intervene, because Inanna, they say, by entering a domain—the Land of the Dead—which is governed by inviolable decrees, "sought to meddle with forbidden things." However, En-lil finds a solution: he creates two messengers and sends them to the underworld carrying "the

18. According to another version, she first preferred the farmer Enkimdu, but her brother, the sun god Utu, makes her change her mind; see Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite*, pp. 69 ff., and his "Le Rite de Mariage Sacré Dumuzi-Inanna," pp. 124 ff. Except where otherwise specified, we use the translations by Kramer published in the latter article.

food of life" and "the water of life." By a trick, they succeed in reviving "the corpse, which was hanging from a nail." Inanna was preparing to ascend, when the Seven Judges of the Underworld (the Anunaki) held her back, saying: "Who, having descended into the underworld, has ever ascended from the underworld again unharmed? If Inanna wishes to ascend out of the underworld, let her furnish a replacement!"¹⁹

Inanna returns to earth escorted by a troop of demons, the *gallas*; they are to bring her back if she does not furnish them with another divine being. The demons first try to seize Ninshubur, but Inanna stops them. Next they all go to the cities of Umma and Bad-Tibira; terrified, their tutelary divinities crawl in the dust at Inanna's feet, and the goddess pities them and decides to search elsewhere. Finally they arrive at Erech. In surprise and indignation, Inanna discovers that, instead of lamenting, Dumuzi was sitting on his throne, richly clad—satisfied, it almost seemed, to be sole sovereign of the city. "She fixed an eye on him: the eye of death! She spoke a word against him: the word of despair! She cried out against him: the cry of damnation! 'This one (she said to the demons), carry him away.'"²⁰

Dumuzi implores his brother-in-law, the sun god Utu, to change him into a snake, and flees to the house of his sister, Geshtinanna, then to his sheepfold. There the demons seize him, torture him, and lead him to the underworld. A lacuna in the text prevents us from reading the epilogue. "In all probability, it is Ereshkigal who, softened by Dumuzi's tears, lightens his sad fate by deciding that he should spend only half the year in the netherworld and that his sister, Geshtinanna, should replace him during the other half" (Kramer, "Le rite de mariage sacré," p. 144).

The same myth, but with some significant differences, is narrated in the Akkadian version of the *Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld*. Before the publication and translation of the Sumerian texts, it was possible to believe that the goddess journeyed to the "Land without return" after the "death" of Tammuz and precisely in order to bring him back. Certain elements that are absent in the Sumerian version

19. After the translation by Jean Bottéro, *Annuaire de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes*, sec. 4 (1971-72), p. 85.

20. After the translation by Bottéro, *ibid.*, p. 91. In another version, it is fear that seems to explain Inanna's action. When the demons seized her and were threatening to take her back, "Terrified, she abandons Dumuzi to them! 'This young man' (she says to them), 'chain his feet' " (*ibid.*).

seemed to support this interpretation—in the first place, the disastrous consequences of Ishtar's captivity, which are emphasized in the Akkadian version: human and animal reproduction ended entirely after the goddess's disappearance. This calamity was understandable as following upon the interruption of the *hieros gamos* between the goddess of love and fertility and Tammuz, her beloved husband. The catastrophe was of cosmic proportions, and, in the Akkadian version, it is the great gods who, terrified by the imminent disappearance of life, had to intervene to free Ishtar.

What is surprising in the Sumerian version is the "psychological," that is, human, justification for the condemnation of Dumuzi: everything seems to be explained by Inanna's anger at finding her husband proudly seated on his throne. This romantic explanation appears to overlie a more archaic idea: "death"—ritual and therefore reversible—inevitably follows every act of creation or procreation. The kings of Sumer, like the Akkadian kings later, incarnate Dumuzi in the *hieros gamos* with Inanna.²¹ This, to a greater or lesser degree, implies acceptance of the ritual "death" of the king. In this case, we must suppose, behind the story transmitted by the Sumerian text, a "mystery" established by Inanna to insure the cycle of universal fertility. It is possible to perceive an allusion to this "mystery" in Gilgamesh's scornful answer when Ishtar invites him to become her husband: he reminds her that it is she who decreed the yearly lamentations for Tammuz.²² But these lamentations were ritual: the young god's descent to the underworld was bewailed on the eighteenth of the month of Tammuz (June–July), though everyone knew that he would rise again six months later.

The cult of Tammuz is disseminated more or less everywhere in the Middle East. In the sixth century, Ezekiel (8:14) cried out against the women who wept for him even at the gates of the Temple. Tammuz ends by taking on the dramatic and elegiac figure of the young gods who die and are resurrected annually. But his Sumerian prototype probably had a more complex structure: the kings who incarnated him, and who therefore shared his fate, annually celebrated the re-creation of the world. But in order to be re-created

21. See Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite*, pp. 63 ff., and "Le Rite de Mariage Sacré," pp. 131 ff.

22. Tablet VI, lines 46–47. Bottéro (p. 83) renders: "Tammuz, thy first husband, it is thou who didst establish universal mourning for him."

anew, the world had to be annihilated; the precosmogonic chaos also implied the ritual death of the king, his descent to the underworld. In short, the two cosmic modalities—life/death, chaos/cosmos, sterility/fertility—constituted the two moments of a single process. This “mystery,” perceived after the discovery of agriculture, becomes the principle of a unified explanation of the world, of life, and of human existence; it transcends the vegetable drama, since it also governs the cosmic rhythms, human destiny, and relations with the gods. The myth relates *the defeat of the goddess of love and fertility* in her attempt to conquer the kingdom of Ereshkigal, that is, *to abolish death*. In consequence, men, as well as certain gods, have to accept the alternation life/death. Dumuzi-Tammuz disappears, to reappear six months later. This alternation—periodical presence and absence of the god—was able to institute “mysteries” concerning the salvation of men, their destiny after death. The role of Dumuzi-Tammuz, ritually incarnated by the Sumero-Akkadian kings, was considerable, for it effected a connection between the divine and human modalities. Eventually, every human being could hope to enjoy this privilege, previously reserved for kings.

20. The Sumero-Akkadian synthesis

The majority of the Sumerian city-temples were united by Lugal-zaggisi, the sovereign of Umma, about 2375 B.C. This is the first manifestation of the imperial idea of which we have any knowledge. A generation later the attempt was repeated, with greater success, by Sargon, king of Akkad. But Sumerian civilization preserved all its structures. The change concerned only the kings of the city-temples: they acknowledged themselves to be tributaries to the Akkadian conqueror. Sargon's empire collapsed after a century, as the result of attacks by the Gutians, barbarians who led a nomadic existence in the region of the Upper Tigris. Thereafter, the history of Mesopotamia seems to repeat itself: the political unity of Sumer and Akkad is destroyed by barbarians from without; in their turn, these are overthrown by internal revolts.

Thus, the domination of the Gutians lasted only a century, and was replaced, for another century (ca. 2050-1950 B.C.), by the kings of the

third dynasty of Ur. It is during this period that Sumerian civilization attained its culminating point. But it was also the last manifestation of Sumerian political power. Harassed by the Elamites on the east and, on the west, by the Amorites, who came from the Syro-Arabian desert, the empire fell. For more than two centuries Mesopotamia remained divided into several states. It was not until about 1700 B.C. that Hammurabi, the Amorite sovereign of Babylon, succeeded in imposing unity. He fixed the center of the empire farther north, in the city of which he was the sovereign. The dynasty founded by Hammurabi, which appeared to be all-powerful, reigned for less than a century. Other barbarians, the Kassites, come down from the north and begin to harass the Amorites. Finally, about 1525 B.C., they triumph. They will remain the masters of Mesopotamia for four centuries.

The transformation of the city-temples to city-states and then to the empire represents a phenomenon of considerable importance in the history of the Near East.²³ For our purpose, it is important to cite the fact that the Sumerian language, though it ceased to be spoken about 2000 B.C., retained its function as the liturgical language and, indeed, as the language of knowledge for fifteen more centuries. Other liturgical languages will have a similar destiny: Sanskrit, Hebrew, Latin, Old Slavic. Sumerian religious conservatism is carried on in the Akkadian structures. The supreme triad remained the same: An, En-lil, Ea (= En-ki). The astral triad partly takes over the Semitic names of the respective divinities: the Moon, Sin (which derives from the Sumerian Suen); the Sun, Shamash; the planet Venus, Ishtar (= Inanna). The underworld continued to be governed by Ereshkigal and her husband, Nergal. The few changes, imposed by the needs of the empire—for example, the transfer of religious primacy to Babylon and the replacement of En-lil by Marduk—“took centuries to come about.”²⁴ As for the temple, “nothing essential changed in its general plan . . . from the Sumerian phase on, except perhaps the size and number of buildings.”²⁵

Nevertheless, the contributions of the Semitic religious genius are added to the earlier structures. A first example is that of the two “national” gods—Marduk of Babylon and, later, the Assyrian

23. New institutions (such as the professional army and the bureaucracy) are first documented; in the course of time they will be adopted by other states.

24. Jean Nougayrol, “La religion babylonienne,” p. 217.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

Assur—who are raised to the rank of universal divinities. Equally significant is the importance assumed in the cult by personal prayers and penitential psalms. One of the most beautiful Babylonian prayers is addressed to all the gods, even to those whom the speaker of the prayer admits that he does not know: "O Lord, . . . great are my sins. O god whom I do not know, great are my sins. . . . O goddess whom I do not know, great are my sins. . . . Man knows nothing; whether he is committing sin or doing good, he does not even know. . . . O my Lord, do not cast thy servant down. My transgressions are seven times seven; remove my transgressions."²⁶ In the penitential psalms the speaker acknowledges his guilt and confesses his sins aloud. The confession is accompanied by precise liturgical gestures: kneeling, prostration, and "flattening the nose."

The great gods—An, En-lil, and Ea—gradually lose their supremacy in the cult. The worshipers address themselves rather to Marduk or to the astral divinities, Ishtar and especially Shamash. In the course of time the latter will become the unrivaled universal divinity. A hymn proclaims that the sun god is revered everywhere, even among foreigners; Shamash defends justice, he punishes the wrongdoer and rewards the just.²⁷ The numinous character of the gods increases: they inspire a holy fear, especially by their terrifying brightness. Light is considered to be the particular attribute of divinity, and, insofar as the king shares in the divine condition, he himself emanates rays of light.²⁸

Another creation of Akkadian religious thought is divination. We also note a multiplication of magical practices and the development of the occult disciplines (especially astrology), which will later become popular throughout the Asiatic and Mediterranean world.

In short, the Semitic contribution is characterized by the importance accorded to the personal element in religious experience and by the exaltation of certain divinities to a supreme rank. Yet this new and grandiose Mesopotamian synthesis presents a tragic view of human existence.

26. Translation condensed from F. J. Stevens, in *ANET*, pp. 391–92. The lines cited are 21–26, 51–53, and 59–60.

27. See the translation in *ANET*, pp. 387–89.

28. A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 176; E. Cassin, *La splendeur divine*, pp. 26 ff., 65 ff., and *passim*.

21. Creation of the world

The cosmogonic poem known as the *Enuma elish* (after its incipit: "When on high") constitutes, with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the most important creation of the Akkadian religion. Nothing comparable in greatness, in dramatic tension, in its effort to connect the theogony, the cosmogony, and the creation of man, is to be found in Sumerian literature. The *Enuma elish* narrates the origin of the world in order to exalt Marduk. Despite their being reinterpreted, the themes are ancient: first of all, the primordial image of an undifferentiated aquatic totality, in which the first couple, Apsu and Tiamat, can be discerned. (Other sources specify that Tiamat represents the sea, and Apsu the mass of fresh water on which the earth floats.) Like so many other original divinities, Tiamat is conceived of as at once woman and bisexual. From the mixture of fresh and salt waters other divine couples are born. Almost nothing is known about the second couple, Lakhmu and Lakhmu (according to one tradition they were sacrificed in order to create man). As for the third couple, Anshar and Kishar, their names in Sumerian mean "totality of the upper elements" and "totality of the lower elements."

Time passes ("the days stretched out, the years multiplied").²⁹ From the *hieros gamos* of these two complementary "totalities" is born the god of the sky, Anu, who in his turn engenders Nudimmud (= Ea).³⁰ By their play and their cries these young gods trouble Apsu's repose. He complains to Tiamat: "Unbearable to me is their behavior. By day, I cannot rest; by night, I cannot sleep. I want to annihilate them, in order to put an end to their doings. And let silence reign for us, at last we can sleep!" (tablet I, lines 37–39). We can read in these lines the nostalgia of matter (that is, of a mode of being corresponding to the inertia and unconsciousness of substance) for the primordial immobility, the resistance to all movement—the preliminary condition for the cosmogony. Tiamat "began to cry out against her husband. She gave a cry of pain . . . : 'What! We shall ourselves destroy what we have created! Painful, to be sure, is their

29. Tablet I, line 13. Unless otherwise indicated, we follow the translation by Paul Garelli and Marcel Lebowicz, "La naissance du monde selon Akkad," pp. 133–45. We have also used the translations by Labat, Heidel, Speiser, and Castellino.

30. Of the divinities of the great Sumerian triad, En-lil is missing; his place was taken by Marduk, son of Ea.

behavior, but let us be patient and mild'" (l. 41-46). But Apsu would not be persuaded.

When the young gods learned of their ancestor's decision, "they were left speechless" (58). But the "all-knowing Ea" set to work. With his magical incantations, he makes Apsu sink into a deep sleep, he takes away "his brightness and clothes himself in it," and, after binding him, kills him. Ea thus became the god of the Waters, which he thenceforth named *apsu*. It is in the depths of the *apsu*, "in the chamber of destinies, the sanctuary of archetypes" (79), that his wife, Damkina, gave birth to Marduk. The text exalts the gigantic majesty, the wisdom, and the omnipotence of this last-born of the gods. It is then that Anu resumes the attack on his ancestors. He caused the four winds to rise and "created the waves to trouble Tiamat" (108). The gods, deprived of rest, turn to their mother: "When they killed Apsu, thy spouse, far from walking at his side, thou didst remain apart without a word" (113-14).

This time, Tiamat decided to react. She formed monsters, snakes, the "great lion," "raging demons," and yet others, "pitiless bearers of arms, unafraid of battle" (144). And "among the gods, her first-born, . . . she exalted Kingu" (147 f.). Tiamat fastened to Kingu's chest the tablet of Destinies and bestowed the supreme power on him (144 ff.). Faced with these preparations, the young gods lose courage. Neither Anu nor Ea dares to confront Kingu. It is only Marduk who accepts the battle, but on condition that he should first be proclaimed supreme god, which the gods hasten to grant. The battle between the two troops is decided by a single combat between Tiamat and Marduk. "When Tiamat opened her maw to swallow him" (4. 97), Marduk hurled the raging winds, which "dilated her body. She was left with her belly swollen and her mouth gaping. He then loosed an arrow, which perforated her belly, tore her entrails, and pierced her heart. Having thus overcome her, he took her life, threw the corpse on the ground, and stood on it" (100-104). Tiamat's partisans tried to escape, but Marduk "bound them and broke their weapons" (111); he then chained Kingu, snatched the tablet of Destinies from him, and fastened it to his own chest (120 ff.). Finally, he returned to Tiamat, split her skull, and cut the corpse in two, "like a dried fish" (137); one half became the vault of the sky, the other half the earth. Marduk set up in the sky a replica of the palace of the *apsu* and fixed the courses of the stars. The fifth tablet reports the organization of

the planetary universe, the determination of time, and the configuration of the earth from Tiamat's organs (from her eyes flow the Euphrates and the Tigris, "from a loop of her tail he created the link between sky and earth" [5. 59]; etc.).

Finally, Marduk decides to create man, so that "on him shall rest the service of the gods, for their relief" (6. 8). The conquered and chained gods were still awaiting their punishment. Ea suggests that only one of them shall be sacrificed. Asked who "fomented war, incited Tiamat to revolt, and began the battle" (23-24), all give but one name: Kingu. His veins are cut, and from his blood Ea creates mankind (30).³¹ The poem then relates the building of a sanctuary (i.e., his palace) in honor of Marduk.

While using traditional mythological themes, the *Enuma elish* presents a rather somber cosmogony and a pessimistic anthropology. To exalt the young champion, Marduk, the gods of the primordial epoch, and most of all Tiamat, are charged with demonic values. Tiamat is no longer merely the primitive chaotic totality that precedes any cosmogony; she ends by proving to be the producer of countless monsters. Her "creativity" is thus wholly negative. As it is described in the *Enuma elish*, the creative process is very soon endangered by Apsu's wish to annihilate the young gods, that is, in the last analysis, to stop the creation of the universe in the bud. (A certain "world" already existed, since the gods were multiplying and had "dwellings"; but it was a purely formal mode of being.) The killing of Apsu opens the series of "creative murders," for Ea not only takes his place but also begins a first organization in the aquatic mass ("in this place he established his dwelling place . . . he determined the sanctuaries"). The cosmogony is the result of a conflict between two groups of gods, but Tiamat's troop also includes her monstrous and demonic creatures. In other words, "primordality" as such is presented as the source of "negative creations." It is from Tiamat's remains that Marduk forms the sky and the earth. This theme, which is also documented in other traditions, can be variously interpreted. The universe, made from the body of an original divinity, shares in its substance. But, after the "demonization" of Tiamat, can one still speak of a substance that is divine?

Hence the cosmos has a double nature; it consists of an ambivalent,

31. We will add that other parallel traditions concerning the cosmology and the creation of man also exist.

if not frankly demonic, matter and a divine form, for it is the work of Marduk. The celestial vault is formed from one half of Tiamat's body, but the stars and constellations become "dwellings" or images of the gods. The earth itself comprises the other half of Tiamat and her various organs, but it is sanctified by the cities and temples. In the last analysis, the world proves to be the result of a mingling of chaotic and demonic primordiality on the one hand with divine creativity, presence, and wisdom on the other. This is perhaps the most complex cosmogonic formula arrived at by Mesopotamian speculation, for it combines in a daring synthesis all the structures of a divine society, some of which had become incomprehensible or unusable.

As for the creation of man, it continues the Sumerian tradition (man is created to serve the gods), particularly the version that explains his origin from the two sacrificed Lāgma gods. But it adds this aggravating element: Kingu, despite his having been one of the first gods, became the archdemon, the leader of the troop of monsters and demons created by Tiamat. Hence man is made from a demonic substance: the blood of Kingu. The difference from the Sumerian versions is significant. We can speak of a tragic pessimism, for man seems to be already condemned by his own origin. His only hope lies in the fact that it is Ea who fashioned him; hence he possesses a form created by a great god. From this point of view, there is a symmetry between the creation of man and the origin of the world. In both cases, the raw material is constituted by the substance of a fallen primordial divinity, demonized and put to death by the victorious young gods.

22. Sacrality of the Mesopotamian sovereign

At Babylon the *Enūma elish* was recited in the temple on the fourth day of the New Year festival. This festival, named *zagmuk* ("beginning of the year") in Sumerian and *akitu* in Akkadian, took place during the first twelve days of the month of Nisan. It comprised several sequences, of which we will mention the most important: (1) a day of expiation for the king, corresponding to Marduk's "captivity"; (2) the freeing of Marduk; (3) ritual combats and a triumphal procession, led by the king, to the Bit Akitu (the house of the New Year festival), where a banquet was held; (4) the *hieros*

gamos of the king with a hierodule personifying the goddess; and (5) the determination of destinies by the gods.

The first sequence of this mythico-ritual scenario—the king's humiliation and Marduk's captivity—indicates the regression of the world to the precosmogonic chaos. In the sanctuary of Marduk the high priest stripped the king of his emblems (scepter, ring, scimitar, and crown) and struck him in the face. Then, on his knees, the king uttered a declaration of innocence: "I have not sinned, O lord of the lands, I have not been negligent regarding thy divinity." The high priest, speaking in Marduk's name, replied: "Do not fear. . . . Marduk will hear thy prayer. He will increase thy dominion."³²

During this time the people sought for Marduk, supposed to be "shut up in the mountain" (a formula indicating the "death" of a divinity). As we saw in the case of Inanna-Ishtar, this "death" was not final; yet she had to be redeemed from the lower world. Similarly, Marduk was made to descend "far from the sun and light."³³ Finally, he was delivered, and the gods assembled (that is, their statues were brought together) to determine the destinies. (This episode corresponds, in the *Enuma elish*, to Marduk's advancement to the rank of supreme god.) The king led the procession to the Bit Akitu, a building situated outside of the city. The procession represented the army of the gods advancing against Tiamat. According to an inscription of Sennacherib, we may suppose that the primordial battle was mimed, the king personifying Assur (the god who had replaced Marduk).³⁴ The *hieros gamos* took place after the return from the banquet at the Bit Akitu. The last act consisted in the determination of the destinies³⁵ for each month of the year. By "determining" it, the year was ritually *created*, that is, the good fortune, fertility, and richness of the new world that had just been born were insured.

The *akitu* represents the Mesopotamian version of a quite wide-

32. Texts cited by H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, p. 320.

33. The classic authors refer to the "tomb of Bel" (= Marduk) at Babylon. This was in all probability the ziggurat of the Etemenanki temple, considered the god's momentary burial place.

34. Some allusions imply that there were mimed combats between two groups of actors.

35. Just as, in the *Enuma elish*, Marduk had determined the laws governing the universe that he had just created.

spread mythico-ritual scenario, specifically of the New Year festival considered as a repetition of the cosmogony.³⁶ Since the periodic regeneration of the cosmos constitutes the great hope of traditional societies, we shall often refer to New Year festivals. We will mention at this point that various episodes of the *akitu* are found (to confine ourselves to the Near East) in Egypt, among the Hittites, at Ugarit, in Iran, and among the Mandaeans. Thus, for example, "chaos," ritually actualized during the last days of the year, was signified by orgiastic excesses of the Saturnalia type, by the reversal of all social order, by the extinguishing of fires, and by the return of the dead (represented by maskers). Combats between two groups of actors are documented in Egypt, among the Hittites, and at Ugarit. The custom of "fixing the fates" of the twelve months during the twelve intercalary days still persists in the Near East and in eastern Europe.³⁷

The role of the king in the *akitu* is inadequately known. His "humiliation" corresponds to the regression of the world to chaos and to Marduk's captivity in the mountain. The king personifies the god in the battle against Tiamat and in the *hieros gamos* with a hierodule. But identification with the god is not always indicated; as we have seen, during his "humiliation" the king addresses Marduk. Nevertheless, the sacrality of the Mesopotamian sovereign is amply documented. We have mentioned the sacred marriage of the Sumerian king, representing Dumuzi, to the goddess Inanna; this *hieros gamos* took place during the New Year festival (§ 19). For the Sumerians, royalty was held to have descended from the sky; its origin was divine, and this conception remained in force until the disappearance of the Assyro-Babylonian civilization.

The sovereign's sacrality was proclaimed in many ways. He was called "king of the land" (that is, of the world) or "of the four regions of the universe," titles originally appertaining to the gods alone.³⁸ Just as in the case of the gods, a supernatural light shone from his head.³⁹ Even before his birth, the gods had predestined him to sovereignty. Though the king recognized his earthly begetting, he was considered a "son of god" (Hammurabi declares that he was

36. See Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, pp. 49 ff.; *Myth and Reality*, pp. 41 ff.

37. See *Cosmos and History*, pp. 65 ff.

38. See Frankfort, *Kingship*, pp. 227 ff.

39. This light, named *melammû* in Akkadian, corresponds to the *xvarenah* of the Iranians; see Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 206; Cassin, *La splendeur divine*, pp. 65 ff.

begotten by Sin, and Lipitishar by En-lil). This twofold descent made him supremely the intermediary between gods and men. The sovereign represented the people before the gods, and it was he who expiated the sins of his subjects. Sometimes he had to suffer death for his people's crimes; this is why the Assyrians had a "substitute for the king."⁴⁰ The texts proclaim that the king had lived in fellowship with the gods in the fabulous garden that contains the Tree of Life and the Water of Life.⁴¹ (Actually, it is he and his courtiers who eat the food offered daily to the statues of the gods.) The king is the "envoy" of the gods, the "shepherd of the people," named by god to establish justice and peace on earth.⁴² "When Anu and En-lil called Lipit-Ishtar to the government of the land in order to establish justice in the land . . . , then I, Lipit-Ishtar, the humble shepherd of Nippur . . . , established justice in Sumer and Akkad, in accordance with the word of En-lil."⁴³

It could be said that the king shared in the divine modality, but without becoming a god. He *represented* the god, and this, on the archaic levels of culture, also implied that he *was* in a way he whom he personified. In any case, as mediator between the world of men and the world of the gods, the Mesopotamian king effected, in his own person, a ritual union between the two modalities of existence, the divine and the human. It was by virtue of this twofold nature that the king was considered, at least metaphorically, to be the creator of life and fertility. *But he was not a god, a new member of the pantheon* (as the Egyptian pharaoh was; cf. § 27). Prayers were not addressed to him; on the contrary, the gods were implored to protect him. For the sovereigns, despite their intimacy with the divine world, despite the *hieros gamos* with certain goddesses, did not reach the point of transmuting the human condition. In the last analysis, they remained mortals. It was never forgotten that even the fabled king of Uruk, Gilgamesh, failed in his attempt to gain immortality.

40. Labat, *Le caractère religieux de la royauté assyro-babylonienne*, pp. 352 ff.; Frankfort, *Kingship*, pp. 262 ff.

41. It is the king who, in the role of gardener, took care of the Tree of Life; see Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion*, esp. pp. 22 ff., 59 ff.

42. See the introduction to the "Code of Hammurabi" (I. 50), in *ANET*, p. 164.

43. Prologue to the "Lipit-Ishtar Lawcode," *ANET*, p. 159. See the texts cited and translated by J. Zandee, "Le Messie," pp. 13, 14, 16.

23. Gilgamesh in quest of immortality

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is certainly the best known and most popular of Babylonian creations. Its hero, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, was already famous in the archaic period, and the Sumerian version of several episodes from his legendary life has been found. Despite these antecedents, however, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a product of the Semitic genius. It is in the Akkadian version in which it was composed on the basis of various isolated episodes that we may read one of the most moving tales of the quest for immortality or, more precisely, of the final failure of an undertaking that seemed to have every possibility of succeeding. This saga, which begins with the erotic excesses of a hero who is at the same time a tyrant, reveals, in the last analysis, the inability of purely "heroic" virtues radically to transcend the human condition.

And yet Gilgamesh was two-thirds a divine being, son of the goddess Ninsun and a mortal.⁴⁴ At the outset the text praises his omniscience and the grandiose works of construction that he had undertaken. But immediately afterward we are presented with a tyrant who violates women and girls and wears men out in forced labor. The inhabitants pray to the gods, and the gods decide to create a being of gigantic size who can confront Gilgamesh. This half-savage creature, who receives the name of Enkidu, lives in peace with the wild beasts; they all drink together at the same springs. Gilgamesh obtains knowledge of his existence first in a dream and then from a hunter who had come upon him. He sends a courtesan to bewitch him by her charms and lead him to Uruk. As the gods had foreseen, the two champions compete as soon as they meet each other. Gilgamesh emerges victorious, but he conceives an affection for Enkidu and makes him his companion. In the last analysis, the gods' plan was not foiled; henceforth Gilgamesh will expend his strength on heroic adventures.

Accompanied by Enkidu, he sets out for the distant and fabulous forest of cedars, which is guarded by a monstrous and all-powerful being, Huwawa. After cutting down his sacred cedar, the two heroes kill him. On his way back to Uruk, Ishtar sees Gilgamesh. The goddess invites him to marry her, but he returns an insolent refusal.

44. A high priest of the city of Uruk, according to Sumerian tradition; see A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 4.

Humiliated, Ishtar begs her father, Anu, to create the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh and his city. Anu at first refuses, but he gives in when Ishtar threatens to bring the dead back from the underworld. The Bull of Heaven charges at Uruk, and its bellowings make the king's men drop dead by hundreds. However, Enkidu succeeds in catching it by the tail, and Gilgamesh thrusts his sword into its neck. Furious, Ishtar mounts the city walls and curses the king. Intoxicated by their victory, Enkidu tears a thigh from the Bull of Heaven and throws it at the goddess's feet, at the same time assailing her with insults. This is the culminating moment in the career of the two heroes, but it is also the prologue to a tragedy. That same night Enkidu dreams that he has been condemned by the gods. The next day he falls ill, and, twelve days later, he dies.

An unexpected change makes Gilgamesh unrecognizable. For seven days and seven nights he mourns for his friend and refuses to let him be buried. He hopes that his laments will finally bring him back to life. It is not until the body shows the first signs of decomposition that Gilgamesh yields, and Enkidu is given a magnificent funeral. The king leaves the city and wanders through the desert, complaining: "Shall not I, too, die like Enkidu?" (tablet 9, column 1, line 4).⁴⁵ He is terrified by the thought of death. Heroic exploits do not console him. Henceforth his only purpose is to escape from the human condition, to gain immortality. He knows that the famous Utnapishtim, survivor of the flood, is still alive, and he decides to search for him.

His journey is full of ordeals of the initiatory type. He comes to the mountains of Mashu and finds the gate through which the Sun passes daily. The gate is guarded by a scorpion-man and his wife, "whose glance is death" (9. 2. 7). The invincible hero is paralyzed by fear and prostrates himself humbly. But the scorpion-man and his wife recognize the divine part of Gilgamesh and allow him to enter the tunnel. After walking for twelve hours in darkness, Gilgamesh comes to a marvelous garden on the other side of the mountains. Some distance away, by the seaside, he meets the nymph Siduri and asks her where he can find Utnapishtim. Siduri tries to make him change his mind: "When the gods made men, they saw death for men; they kept life for themselves. Thou, Gilgamesh, fill thy belly and make merry

45. Except as otherwise indicated, we follow the translation by Contenau, *L'épopée de Gilgamesh*.

by day and night. On each day make a feast, and dance and play, day and night."⁴⁶

But Gilgamesh holds to his decision, and then Siduri sends him to Urshanabi, Utnapishtim's boatman, who happened to be nearby. They cross the Waters of Death and reach the shore on which Utnapishtim lived. Gilgamesh asks him how he had gained immortality. He thus learns the story of the flood and the gods' decision to make Utnapishtim and his wife their "kin," establishing them "at the mouths of the rivers." "But," Utnapishtim asks Gilgamesh, "as for thee, which of the gods will unite thee to their assembly, that thou mayest obtain the life that thou seekest?" (11. 198). However, what he goes on to say is unexpected: "Up, try not to sleep for six days and seven nights!" (199). What we have here is, undoubtedly, the most difficult of initiatory ordeals: conquering sleep, remaining "awake," is equivalent to a transmutation of the human condition.⁴⁷ Are we to take it that Utnapishtim, knowing that the gods will not grant Gilgamesh immortality, suggests that he conquer it by means of an initiation? The hero has already successfully gone through several ordeals: the journey through the tunnel, the "temptation" by Siduri, crossing the Waters of Death. These were in some sense ordeals of the heroic type. This time, however, the ordeal is "spiritual," for only an unusual power of concentration can enable a human being to remain awake for six days and seven nights. But Gilgamesh at once falls asleep, and Utnapishtim exclaims sarcastically: "Look at the strong man who desires immortality: sleep has come over him like a violent wind!" (203-4). He sleeps without a break for six days and seven nights; and, when Utnapishtim wakes him, Gilgamesh reproaches him for waking him when he had only just fallen asleep. However, he has to accept the evidence, and he falls to lamenting again: "What shall I do, Utnapishtim, where shall I go? a demon has taken possession of my body; in the room in which I sleep, death lives, and wherever I go, death is there!" (230-34).

Gilgamesh now makes ready to leave, but at the last moment Utnapishtim, at his wife's suggestion, reveals a "secret of the gods" to him: the place where he can find the plant that brings back youth.

46. Tablet X, column III, lines 6-9; after the translation by Jean Nougayrol, *Histoire des religions*, vol. 1, p. 222.

47. See Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth*, pp. 14 ff.

Gilgamesh goes down to the bottom of the sea, gathers it,⁴⁸ and starts back rejoicing. After traveling for a few days, he sees a spring of fresh water and hurries to bathe. Attracted by the odor of the plant, a snake comes out of the spring, carries off the plant, and sheds its skin.⁴⁹ Sobbing, Gilgamesh complains to Urshanabi of his bad fortune. This episode may be read as a failure in another initiatory ordeal: the hero failed to profit from an unexpected gift; in short, he was lacking in wisdom. The text ends abruptly: arrived at Uruk, Gilgamesh invites Urshanabi to go up on the city walls and admire its foundations.⁵⁰

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* has been seen as a dramatized illustration of the human condition, defined by the inevitability of death. Yet this first masterpiece of universal literature can also be understood as illustrating the belief that certain beings are capable, even without help from the gods, of obtaining immortality, on the condition that they successfully pass through a series of initiatory ordeals. Seen from this point of view, the story of Gilgamesh would prove to be the dramatized account of a failed initiation.

24. Destiny and the gods

Unfortunately, we do not know the ritual context of Mesopotamian initiation, always supposing that such a thing existed. The initiatory meaning of the quest for immortality can be deciphered in the particular structure of the ordeals undergone by Gilgamesh. The Arthurian romances present a similar situation; they, too, are filled with initiatory symbols and motifs, but it is impossible to decide whether these belong to a ritual scenario, represent recollections of Celtic mythology or Hermetic gnosticism, or are merely products of the imagination. In the case of the Arthurian romances, we at least know the initiatory traditions that preceded their composition, whereas we

48. We may wonder why Gilgamesh did not eat it as soon as he had gathered it, but he was saving it for later; see Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 62, n. 211.

49. This is a well-known folklore theme: by shedding its old skin, the snake renews its life.

50. Tablet XII, composed in Sumerian, was added later; the incidents narrated in it have no direct relation to the narrative we have summarized.

know nothing of the protohistory of the initiatory scenario possibly implied in Gilgamesh's adventures.

It has been emphasized, and rightly, that Akkadian religious thought puts the accent on man. In the last analysis, the story of Gilgamesh becomes paradigmatic: it proclaims the precariousness of the human condition, the impossibility—even for a hero—of gaining immortality. Man was created mortal, and he was created solely to serve the gods. This pessimistic anthropology was already formulated in the *Enuma elish*. It is also found in other important religious texts. The "Dialogue between Master and Servant" seems to be the product of nihilism exacerbated by a neurosis: the master does not even know what he wants. He is obsessed by the vanity of all human effort: "Climb the mounds of ancient ruins and walk about: look at these skulls of late and early men; who among them is an evildoer, who a public benefactor?"⁵¹

Another celebrated text, the "Dialogue about Human Misery," which has been called the "Babylonian Ecclesiastes," is even more despairing. "Does the fierce lion, who eats the best of meat, / Present his dough-and-incense offering to appease his goddess' displeasure? / . . . [As for me,] have I withheld the meal-oblation? [No], I have prayed to the gods, / I have presented the prescribed sacrifices to the goddess" (lines 50 ff.). From his childhood, this just man has striven to understand the god's thought, he has sought the goddess humbly and piously. Yet "the god brought me scarcity instead of wealth" (lines 71 ff.). On the contrary, it is the scoundrel, the godless, who has acquired wealth (line 236). People "extol the word of a prominent man, expert in murder, / But they abase the humble, who has committed no violence." The evildoer is justified, the righteous man is driven away. It is the bandit who receives gold, while the weak are left to hunger. The wicked man is strengthened, the feeble are cast down (lines 267 ff.).⁵²

This despair arises, not from a meditation on the vanity of human existence, but from the experience of general injustice: the wicked triumph, prayers are not answered; the gods seem indifferent to human affairs. From the second millennium, similar spiritual crises will make themselves felt elsewhere (Egypt, Israel, Iran, India,

51. "A Pessimistic Dialogue between Master and Servant," line 84; trans. R. H. Pfeiffer, *ANET*, p. 438.

52. "A Dialogue about Human Misery," trans. Pfeiffer, *ANET*, pp. 439-40.

Greece), with various consequences; for the responses to this type of nihilistic experience were made in accordance with the religious genius characteristic of each culture. But in the Mesopotamian wisdom literature the gods do not always prove to be indifferent. One text presents the physical and mental sufferings of an innocent man who has been compared to Job. He is the very pattern of the just man suffering, for no divinity seems to help him. Countless sicknesses have reduced him to being "soaked in his own excrement," and he is already bewailed as dead by his relatives when a series of dreams reveals to him that Marduk will save him. As in an ecstatic trance, he sees the god destroying the demons of sickness and then extracting his pains from his body as one uproots a plant. Finally, his health restored, the just man gives thanks to Marduk by ritually passing through the twelve gates of his temple at Babylon.⁵³

In the last analysis, by putting the accent on man, Akkadian religious thought brings out the limits of human possibilities. The distance between men and the gods proves to be impossible to cross. Yet man is not isolated in his own solitude. First of all, he shares in a spiritual element that can be regarded as divine: it is his "spirit," *ilu* (literally, "god").⁵⁴ Secondly, through rites and prayers he hopes to obtain the blessing of the gods. Above all, he knows that he forms part of a universe that is unified by homologies: he lives in a city that constitutes an *imago mundi* and whose temples and ziggurats represent "centers of the world" and, in consequence, insure communication with heaven and the gods. Babylon was a Bab-il-ani, a "Gate of the Gods," for it is there that the gods came down to earth. A number of cities and sanctuaries were named "Link between Heaven and Earth."⁵⁵ In other words, man does not live in a closed world, separated from the gods, completely isolated from the cosmic rhythms. In addition, a complex system of correspondences between heaven and earth made it possible for terrestrial realities to be understood and at the same time to be "influenced" by their respective celestial prototypes. An example: Since each planet had its corresponding metal and color, everything colored was under the

53. "I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom," trans. Pfeiffer, *ANET*, pp. 434-37.

54. The spirit (*ilu*) is the most important element of a personality. The others are *istaru* (its destiny), *lamassu* (its individuality; resembles a statue), and *šēdu* (comparable to Lat. *genius*); see A. L. Oppenheimer, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, pp. 198-206.

55. Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, pp. 14 ff.

influence of a planet. But each planet belonged to a god, who, by that fact, was represented by the respective metal.⁵⁶ In consequence, one who ritually manipulated a certain metallic object or a semiprecious stone of a particular color felt that he was under the protection of a god.

Finally, numerous techniques of divination, most of them developed during the Akkadian period, made it possible to know the future. So it was believed that certain misadventures could be avoided. The variety of techniques and the large number of written documents that have come down to us prove the high esteem in which the mantic art was held on all levels of society. The most elaborate method was extispicy, that is, examining the entrails of a victim; the least costly, lecanomancy, consisted in pouring a little oil on water, or vice versa, and interpreting the signs that could be read in the shapes produced by the two liquids. Astrology, developed later than the other techniques, was principally practiced by the royal entourage. As for the interpretation of dreams, it was complemented, from the beginning of the second millennium, by methods of offsetting unfavorable omens.⁵⁷

All the techniques of divination pursued the discovery of "signs," whose hidden meanings were interpreted in accordance with certain traditional rules. *The world, then, revealed itself to be structured and governed by laws.* If the signs were deciphered, the future could be known; in other words, *time was "mastered,"* for events that were to occur only after a certain interval of time were foreseen. The attention paid to signs led to discoveries of genuine scientific value. Some of these discoveries were later taken over and perfected by the Greeks. But Babylonian science remained a "traditional" science, in the sense that scientific knowledge preserved a totalitarian structure, that is, a structure that involved cosmological, ethical, and existential presuppositions.⁵⁸

Toward 1500 B.C. the creative period of Mesopotamian thought seems definitely to have ended. During the ten following centuries, intellectual activity appears to spend itself in erudition and compilation. But the influence of Mesopotamian culture, documented from

56. Gold corresponded to En-lil, silver to Anu, bronze to Ea. When Shamash took En-lil's place, he became the "patron" of gold; see B. Meissner, *Babylonien und Assyrien*, vol. 2, pp. 130 ff., 254.

57. J. Nougayrol, "La divination babylonienne," esp. pp. 39 ff.

58. As did, for example, medicine and alchemy in China.

the most ancient times, continues and increases. Ideas, beliefs, and techniques of Mesopotamian origin circulate from the western Mediterranean to the Hindu Kush. It is significant that the Babylonian discoveries that were destined to become popular imply, whether more or less directly, correspondences between heaven and earth, or macrocosm-microcosm.