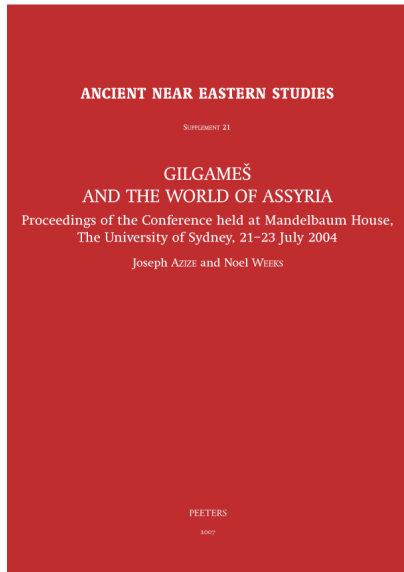


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Azize, Joseph, and Noel Weeks, eds.

Gilgamesh and the World of Assyria: Proceedings of the Conference Held at the Mandelbaum House, The University of Sydney, 21–23 July 2004

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This well-written, comprehensive anthology brings together a number of essays, many contributed by thoughtful Australian scholars, in order to demonstrate how difficult it is to “extinguish the desire and need to pursue ‘old’ questions” even in a “‘young’ country” (vii). Like many academic anthologies, the umbrella opened up by the title only generally overshadows all the essays huddling beneath it. Still, each of these essays is exceptionally well-written. The book as a whole is organized into three parts: “Gilgamesh and the World of Assyria”; “Gilgamesh and the Hebrew Bible”; and “Phoenician and Assyrian Studies.”

Part 1 begins with a suggestive opening essay entitled “An Anti-imperialist Twist to ‘The Gilgamesh Epic’” (1–23) in which Tracy Davenport examines the “oppression episode,” the journey to the cedar forest, and the Gilgamesh-Ishtar episode in order to ask whether this poem, in addition to its focus on the “fear of death, Gilgamesh’s reluctance to accept his lot, his pursuit of immortality” and “the proper duties of kingship,” might not also be intended to address a “politically dangerous” issue: the problem of “imperialism” (1). To test this possibility, Davenport reads the Standard Babylonian (SB) poem through a structuralist lens sensitized to the existence of “binary opposites” and “polar oppositions,” especially those involving “societal institutions and expectations” (3). Thus, when Enkidu “pales in anger” before Gilgamesh’s interaction with the women of Uruk, he does so *not*

because he wants to have the king all to himself (*contra* N. Walls, *Desire, Discord and Death: Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Myth* [Boston: ASOR, 2001], 13–17) but because he sees “the abomination of Gilgamesh’s actions in his own” (6). That is, he sees Gilgamesh doing to the women of Uruk (I 91–92) what he himself does to the prostitute Shamhat (I 193). This reading suggests that one of the poet’s primary goals is to critique the ethos of a culture in which “expansion and imperialism are viewed as a source of fame and immortality” (21).

Jean-Daniel Forest draws from his recent book, *L’Épopée de Gilgamesh et sa postérité* (Paris: Paris-Méditerranée, 2002), to contribute an essay entitled “L’Épopée de Gilgamesh, ses origines et sa postérité” (25–36). Like other interpreters, Forest believes that the poem is designed, at least partially, to critique the “problem” of kingship, but in this essay he goes on to subcategorize this view into three “rules”: (1) Mesopotamian kingship rests on a divine-human alliance that must constantly be renewed (via a matrimonial alliance between the king and Ishtar); (2) the king’s primary task is to protect the welfare of his people by combating evil in all its forms; and (3) to accomplish the first two rules the king must learn how to maintain some sort of equilibrium between two internal “tendencies” competing for his attention: “force” and “wisdom” (26). These insights are suggestive, but the author’s insistence on trying to anchor them to the “rhythms of the solar-lunar cycle” (36) seems more than a little outdated.

In the third essay, “The Epic of Gilgamesh: Thoughts on Genre and Meaning” (37–65), keynote speaker Andrew George surveys a list of secondary studies on ancient Near Eastern genre and taxonomy (esp. those of T. Longman and H. Vanstiphout) and concludes that “myth” and “epic” should be segregated into different genre-types. Nevertheless, even though the “typical Babylonian” would probably call Gilgamesh a *zamāru* or a *šīru*—terms for “song” that “signify a poem whose origins lay in performance” (43)—he concedes that it is probably best to interpret Gilgamesh as a “literary construct” comprised of a creative mixture of “myth, legend, and folktale” (51).

In the next essay, “Finding New Life in Old Words: Word Play in the Gilgamesh Epic” (67–77), Victor Hurowitz plows familiar ground, examining several examples of wordplay in Gilgamesh in terms of (1) *symbolic names* (e.g., the relationship between the verb *šamāhu* (“to be lusty”) and the proper noun *Šamhat* (“prostitute”); the play on the noun *napištu* (“life”) and the proper noun *Ūta-napišti* (“He who finds life”); (2) *incantational metaphor* (e.g., the wordplay in the “rain of wheat” omen signaling the beginning of the flood); (3) *associative magic* (e.g., semantic wordplay on the terms for “dream” and “wind” in Gilgamesh’s oneiromantic episode on the road to the cedar forest); and (4) *puns*.

In “Assyrian Imperialism and the Walls of Uruk” (79–90), Noel Weeks concludes part 1 by noting that since SB Gilgamesh begins and ends with references to the walls of Uruk, this inclusio suggests that the SB poet (Sin-lēqi-unnini) wants the reader to make a connection between the mythical literary tradition and the Assyrian annalistic tradition because monumental inscriptions are embedded into city walls to display “the king’s military glory ... to the future and thus his name as a conqueror ... to future generations” (82). Where M. Liverani “sees the king as securing support from the Assyrian elite by depicting himself as the barrier between Assyria and the threatening chaos” (“The Ideology of the Assyrian Empire,” in *Power and Propaganda* [ed. M. Larsen; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1979], 297–317), Weeks argues that the king is probably simply more interested in “promoting his own image” in order to eliminate any vestige of “seriousness to the enemy threat” (84).

Part 2 begins with another article by J.-D. Forest, entitled “L’Épopée de Gilgamesh et la Genèse” (91–105). Building on the approach laid out in his earlier essay, he attempts here to interpret the book of Genesis through the same kind of astrological grid through which he earlier tries to interpret Gilgamesh. Focusing on the Jacob-Leah-Rachel triad, for example, he argues that “the phase of Capricorn is translated by the tension introduced between the two sisters...; the phase of Aquarius, bound to the process of fecundity, is marked by the union of Jacob and Leah...; the phase of Pisces is bound to the gestation which is permitted by Jacob’s ruse” (93–94). In addition to the solar cycle, he also tries to draw parallels in Genesis to the lunar cycle (97–99)—but again, this approach resonates too much with the antiquated ad hoc methods of James Frazer than the lens provided by contemporary anthropologists of religion (see my “Review of *Anthropological Studies in Religion: An Introductory Text*, by B. Morris,” *CBQ* 51 [1989]: 530–32).

David Jackson’s “Demonising Gilgamesh” (107–14) seeks to explain why Gilgamesh’s name appears in 4Q530 2.2 (גלגמיס) and 4Q531 17.12 (גלגמיש), two Aramaic texts identified by J. Milik as belonging to the “Book of Giants” preserved in the book of Enoch. Arguing that the “Enochian paradigm” focuses on God as a creator of symmetry and order, Jackson posits that “anything disturbing this order and symmetry” must therefore be “perceived to be by definition a contradiction of the character of God and so a manifestation of sin and evil” (109). He sees this illustrated in 1 Enoch 1–36 (the Book of Watchers), where two hundred angels come down to earth, mate with human women, and spawn giant offspring. Trying to find enough food to feed themselves, these giants quickly turn to eating whole animals and humans, blood and all. This evil behavior causes the archangel Gabriel to give them weapons with which they can destroy each other. Yet even as their bodies die, their spirits live on in the Netherworld as demonic spirits. Gilgamesh is one of these demonic spirits, and the character he represents eventually

comes to “function in this literature as an agent of forbidden knowledge and wisdom” (112).

Gary Rendsburg’s “The Biblical Flood Story in the Light of the Gilgamesh Flood Account” (115–27) methodically demolishes any vestige of the Wellhausenian source-critical hypothesis that would attempt to divide the Genesis flood narrative into separate documents deriving from separate sources (J and P). In fact, “if one reads the two stories as separate entities, one will find that elements of a whole story are missing from either the J or the P version. Only when read as a whole does Gen 6–8 read as a complete story, and—here is the most important point I wish to make—not only as a complete story, but as a narrative paralleling perfectly the Babylonian flood story tradition recorded in Gilgamesh Tablet XI, point by point, and in the same order” (115).

Martin Shields, in “To Seek but Not to Find: Old Meanings for Qohelet and Gilgamesh” (129–40), examines the significance of the motif of *failure* in these documents, particularly how it must have been interpreted in the literary-historical contexts out of which each text is born, concluding that “although their quests are distinct, both quests are defeated by death” and that “in both cases failure prompts common advice: make the most of life as you live it now; do not hold out hope for a better future” (144). Shields thinks that the original audience understands Gilgamesh to be a judge/ruler in the Netherworld and that “this history allows the audience to find in him a figure who can empathize with their own predicament as they face their own entry into the Netherworld” (144).

The next essay, “Asking Questions of the Divine Announcement in the Flood Stories from Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel” (147–72), affords Todd Stanton an opportunity to ask probing questions about the revelatory ways in which God/the gods communicate to ancient heroes, concluding, even though the biblical text does not specify what kind of revelation Noah receives, that the centerpiece of the Pentateuch is the theophany on Sinai and that Noah is the “new Adam,” Abraham is the “new Noah,” and Moses is the “new Abraham.” Thus even though the Hebrew text is silent and the Mesopotamian evidence ambivalent, “the evidence strongly suggests [to Stanton] that the text does indeed mean that God spoke to Noah ‘face to face’ in a theophany” (165).

In “Textual Stability in Gilgamesh and the Dead Sea Scrolls” (173–84), Ian Young asks whether the stabilization of SB Gilgamesh might be able to tell us anything about the stabilization of the Hebrew Bible text. Focusing on the eight manuscripts attesting to Gilgamesh XI (four from Nineveh; two from Assur; one from Numrud; one from Babylon), Young concludes that, “whereas the Gilgamesh manuscripts have achieved the first of the three features of the Hebrew textual stabilization—i.e, the end of edition scale

variants—they have not achieved stability in relation to lesser level variants” (180). Presuming that SB Gilgamesh actually shows what a relatively stabilized first-millennium text might look like, he asks what light, if any, this might shed on our understanding of the textual transmission of the Hebrew Bible. He answers this question with the following words: “the scribal transmission of Gilgamesh adds to the case that the transmission of Biblical Hebrew was subject to high fluidity” (183).

Part 3 consists of three essays—“Was There Regular Child Sacrifice in Phoenicia and Carthage?” by Joseph Azize (185–205); “Phoenicians and Assyrians versus the Roving Nomad: Western Imperialism, Western Scholarship, and Modern Identity,” by Samuel Jackson (207–223); and “A Reexamination of the Title *ša reši* in the Neo-Assyrian Period,” by Luis Siddall (225–240)—but since none of these essays sits beneath the shade of the umbrella opened up in the volume’s title, the present review will not seek to engage them. That having been said, let it also be said that all the essays here are very well written and very well edited, making this anthology a valuable contribution to contemporary research on the Gilgamesh Epic.