Vanstiphout, Herman

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Epics of Sumerian Kings: The Matter of Aratta

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The ancient Sumerian city of Unug (Akkadian Uruk, modern Warka discovered by Loftus in 1849 and excavated continuously by German expeditions since 19021) occurs in Gen 10:10 as one of the cities in Babylonia (Shinar) ruled by the legendary heroic King Nimrod. According to the Sumerian King List Unug was the second center of kingship after the deluge.2 Its holy precinct Eanna was first ruled by mythological Mes-kiag-gasher and then built into Unug by Enmerkar, who was succeeded by Lugalbanda, Dumuzi, and Gilgamesh, all of whom were considered partially divine. Gilgamesh became the subject of numerous Sumerian and Akkadian compositions and remained an important character in Mesopotamian literature and religion, even surviving the death of cuneiform writing at the beginning of the Christian era. He was eventually rediscovered by modern Assyriologists and has entered the canon of world literature and is known even outside scholarly circles.3 Dumuzi, too, is the main character in many

1. For brief summary and bibliography, see http://www.dainst.org/index_2895_de.html.
texts, especially love poetry, and is even alluded to in the Bible as “the Tammuz” (Ezek 8:14).

Such lasting fame was not the lot of Enmerkar and Lugalbanda. To be sure, legends about them originating in the Ur III and Isin-Larsa periods around the beginning of the second millennium B.C.E. were copied in the Old Babylonian period, and bilingual abstracts and one edition of “The Return of Lugalbanda” were found in the libraries of Nineveh from the Neo-Assyrian period (135). Modern scholarly editions and translations of complete compositions or significant portions thereof have been prepared over the years by eminent Sumerologists, including Adele Berlin, Sol Cohen, Samuel Noah Kramer, Thorkild Jacobsen, Yaakov Klein, and Claus Wilcke, and much has been written about various aspects of them by Herman Vanstiphout. The texts are also available in electronic form over the internet in the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature. Nonetheless, these characters and the works about them were rare in later periods of cuneiform civilization and are hardly known nowadays by anyone but professional Assyriologists. Ignorance of these legends and their relevance for the Hebrew Bible seems to extend to biblical scholars as well.

Herman Vanstiphout’s small volume, handsomely published in the SBL’s Writings from the Ancient World series, should hopefully rectify this situation and call the attention of biblical scholars and others to these fascinating and important jewels of Sumerian literature, one of which is “probably the finest piece of poetic storytelling ever produced by the Old Babylonian authors” (49, concerning Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta).

The heart of the book includes composite, eclectic (not scores) transliterations and fluent English translations of four compositions: “Enmerkar and Ensuhgirana” (EE), “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta” (ELA), “Lugalbanda in the Wilderness” (LB I), and “The Return of Lugalbanda” (135). Modern scholarly editions and translations of complete compositions or significant portions thereof have been prepared over the years by eminent Sumerologists, including Adele Berlin, Sol Cohen, Samuel Noah Kramer, Thorkild Jacobsen, Yaakov Klein, and Claus Wilcke, and much has been written about various aspects of them by Herman Vanstiphout. The texts are also available in electronic form over the internet in the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature. Nonetheless, these characters and the works about them were rare in later periods of cuneiform civilization and are hardly known nowadays by anyone but professional Assyriologists. Ignorance of these legends and their relevance for the Hebrew Bible seems to extend to biblical scholars as well.

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11. For the ETCSL, see http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/index.html.
of Lugalbanda” (LB II). The last two display a unity of theme and continuity of narrative structure, taken by Vanstiphout as indicating that they may actually constitute a single work (97–99). Each text is prefaced by an introduction relating to its theme and structure and followed by brief but illuminating literary and exegetical comments. The general introduction to the volume relates mainly to literary questions such as plot, chronological and spatial setting and dimensions of the narratives, dramatis personae, aim, structure and style, relations with other works of Sumerian literature, and the people involved in producing, transmitting, and reading or hearing the works. The book concludes with a useful bibliography and glossary to proper nouns and selected Sumerian terms.

Several dozen tablets of each of the texts have been recovered, making possible nearly complete reconstructions of the compositions, and permitting relatively smooth reading and meaningful literary analysis. It is in fact the literary analysis rather than an exhaustive text edition and painstaking philological analysis of the compositions that is Vanstiphout’s central interest. This tendency is not only a nod to nonspecialists but a sign of the maturity Sumerology has achieved, able to rise above intricacies of textual reconstruction, lexicography, and grammar so as to view the complete works as a whole and within their ancient and broader contexts.

Although there are four separate works at hand, they can and should be studied together because they share the same participants (Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and a king of Aratta named in EE as Ensuhtigirana), location (Unug, Aratta, and the way between), and topic (the ongoing rivalry between the two cities, both vying for the good graces of the goddess Inana). Each story tells of hostilities between the two cities nearly leading to armed confrontation, but each conflict is settled ultimately not by military means but by some sort of contest or subterfuge. Unug always prevails and gets the goddess.

The texts presented here are essentially an exaltation of Unug and its great monarchs and can certainly be characterized as Unug-centric. Nonetheless, as Vanstiphout takes trouble to explain:

For all their cultural pretensions and their avowed aspiration to world domination, there is hardly any sign of xenophobia in these tales. Military glory is spurned and even somewhat ridiculed in at least two of the poems. Instead, the emphasis is on cultural and technical prowess, expressed as the highest form of intelligence, and, of course, including writing. Furthermore, they overtly prefer their dominant

13. It should be noted that textual restorations, few as they are, are indicated only in the transliteration, while only unrestorable lacunae appear as square brackets in the translation.
position to be based on peaceful coexistence, even friendly relations with the 
outer world, to brute strength. (15)

Clearly these wonderful stories express a human aspiration with contemporary resonance 
even four millennia after their creation.

It is only fitting that a review in a biblical journal of a volume in an SBL series relate 
now to several points of biblical interest to be culled from the compositions in the 
volume. It should be emphasized at the outset that the parallels pointed out below are 
hardly signs of dependence of any particular biblical author on the specific compositions 
at hand but, rather, indications of a longstanding and widespread common ancient Near 
Eastern literary tradition drawn upon by authors from different lands and various times.

On the most general level, we find types of stories and characters that are not entirely 
strange to readers of the Bible. Some of the compositions display cultural interest in the 
form of etiological tales about the invention of writing, letters, fire from flint, and 
sacrifice, among others. We also encounter speaking animals (cf. the snake in the Garden 
of Eden and Balaam’s ass) and semidivine heroes (cf. the biblical Nephilim of Gen 6:1– 
4). Parallelism abounds, as do other poetic and structural devices familiar to biblical 
scholars. There is also ubiquitous use of seven as a number and as a literary structural 
device. But there are more specific thematic similarities that will be discussed now in the 
order of their appearance in the volume.

1. In Enmerkar and Ensuhgirana lines 27–38, 58–69, 78–81 the ruler of Aratta boasts 
about his superiority over the king of Unug in the eyes of Inanna, comparing her 
relationship to the two of them. One of the five signs is “He (Enmerkar) may meet with 
Inana in his dream at night, but I shall converse with Inana between her gleaming legs!” 
(lines 30–31, 62–63). Berlin had rendered these lines slightly differently—“He may see 
Inanna in a dream; (But) I will commune with Inanna ‘face to face’ ”—and comments, 
“The contrast in our text between a dream vision and a direct manifestation brings to 
mind the difference between God’s revelation to other prophets and two Moses described 
in Num. 12:6–8.”

2. In EE 135–273 a sorcerer (maš-maš) from Hamazi offers to curse Unug for Aratta. His 
proposal is brought to the king by an advisor, who is offered by the king sumptuous 

14. The blurb on the back cover mentions the tower of Babel parallel and asserts that the book will be of 
interest to biblical scholars, but references to the Bible inside are minimal.
15. For a detailed analysis of poetic structure and technique in EE, including familiar devices such as 
parallelism, repetition, chiasm, and imagery, see Berlin, Enmerkar and Ensuhkešdanna, 9–31.
reward if the plan succeeds. The sorcerer is hired and then curses the cattle and flock, first making a cow and a goat speak so he can determine how to apply his black magic. The sorcerer is defeated in a magic contest by a wise woman, and although he begs the wise woman for forgiveness and acknowledges her superiority she punishes him for his witchcraft by having his vital force removed from him (zi nam-til-la ba-da-an-kar).

This incident, essentially the heart of EE, bears certain comparison with Israel’s encounter with Balak, king of Moab, and the diviner (qōsēm) Balaam in Num 22–24. In both cases, a king hires a foreign practitioner of magic to curse his enemy as a prelude to hopefully defeating them militarily. The king also offers a large reward for successful performance of the required services. Both stories contain talking animals, a cow and sheep in EE and an ass in Numbers. Both the sorcerer and Balaam are defeated by more powerful forces, one by a wise woman and the other by God, and both meet death (cf. Num 31:8).

There are obviously great differences between the stories, even in the way these particular points appear, but even so they indicate a tradition of how a certain kind of “nonconventional warfare” (fighting by magic rather than by weapons) was conceived of in the ancient Near East. Interestingly, comparing the talking animals adds an element of sarcasm to the biblical story. It has been recognized that the ass incident in which Balaam cannot see the angel while the animal can is a late insertion that spoofs his claim to be able to see visions of the Almighty (Num 24:4). In light of the Sumerian story, the fact that YHWH opens the mouth of the ass so that it can speak may be taken as an antisorcery polemic ridiculing the sorcerers’ assumed ability to make animals speak. Contrary to popular belief, sorcerers cannot make animals speak, but God can.

3. Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta contains the most well known biblical parallel in this corpus. In line 135–155 we find the so-called “spell of Nudimmud,” which describes an idyllic world in which there is no wild animal threatening humanity and in which the various lands speak a single language. S. N. Kramer was the first to compare this world with the situation that prevailed before building the tower of Babel when God punished humans by confusing their tongues so that one could not understand the language of the other (Gen 10:1–9). Both were supposedly past events. Vanstiphout, on the other hand, sees the spell passage as describing the future world rather than the world of the past; but given the fact that eschatology recapitulates primeval history, there may be no essential difference between the two. In any case, we can add to the comparison Zeph 3:9, which

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prophesies: “For then I will turn to the people a שפライ, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent.” The term שפライ has been interpreted as “pure tongue,” but we should certainly understand it, following traditional exegetes, as a single tongue (cf. Song 6:9, where ברה appears parallel to ברה).

4. The background of the specific conflict described in ELA is Enmerkar’s desire to embellish Eanna, Inanna’s temple in Unug, but to do so he needs precious metals and stone that he can acquire by subjugating Aratta, where such materials are available (lines 38–95). As such, this story has its place in the numerous accounts of temple building found in Mesopotamian writings as well as the Bible. In particular, in my book on this subject I have viewed the ensuing contest as a form of barter and compared acquisition of building materials by means of trade rather than by means of conquest, plunder, and tribute with 1 Kgs 5:15–26 (cf. 2 Chr 2:2–16), where Solomon bargains with Hiram, king of Tyre, in order to purchase wood for the Jerusalem temple.18

5. Lugalbanda in the Wilderness lines 59–74 reports that serving as officers in Enmerkar’s army were seven brothers who were “heroes, the handsomest in Sumer, and princely in their prime.” They had an eighth brother, Lugalbanda, who “went forward in modest silence” and who “loosened the giš tag.ga of the king, and marched out with the troops” (lines 73–74). Lugalbanda is to become the hero of the story and will eventually replace Enmerkar as king of Unug. This can be compared with David, who had seven older brothers who seem to have been handsome (see 1 Sam 16:6), and three of whom were in Saul’s army (17:13–14).19 David also is appointed as Saul’s arms bearer (1 Sam 16:21) and eventually replaces him as king.

6. Half way to Aratta, Lugalbanda falls seriously ill and can neither be brought back to Unug nor continue on the journey. He is supplied with all sorts of foodstuffs and utensils that, according to Vanstiphout can be used either as provisions for continuing the journey if he recovers or grave goods for the trip to the netherworld if he dies, and abandoned in a manner befitting a corpse. His axe is planted at his head, resembling the kings in Sheol as described in Ezek 32:27, whose swords are at their heads (lines 110–115). Lugalbanda languishes in the cave for two and a half days, but toward evening at the end of the third day he prays fervently to the Sun god Inanna and the moon god Nanna and recovers from

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19. This parallel was pointed out by Cyrus Gordon in a publication that I am unable locate. For the idea of the eighth son in the Bible and the Ugaritic legend of Kirta, see C. H. Gordon, JAOS 72 (1952): 181. Vanstiphout (4 and 17 n. 10) compares Lugalbanda with Joseph as a younger brother who becomes savior-hero of his people.
his illness. Vanstiphout comments (17 n. 7): “As far as I am aware, this is the first time in
the history of literature that someone who is doomed to die reappears on the third day in
order to effectively to manifest himself as the savior of his people,” obviously comparing
this sequence of events to Jesus’ resurrection. My colleague Ms. Daliah Amara has
suggested (orally) that the miraculous recovery also parallels Hezekiah’s prayer and
miraculous recovery after three days (2 Kgs 20:1–11). Mention may be made as well of
Hos 6:2: “After two days he will revive us: on the third day he will raise us up, and we
shall live in his sight.”

7. After leaving the cave Lugalbanda resumes the journey, but first he partakes of “a
plant of life” (ú nam-tìk-la) and “water of life” (a nam-tìl-la; lines 265–270). These items
are parallel to the food of life (akal balātī) and water of life (mû balātī) mentioned in the
Adapa myth as having been offered to him but declined because of Ea’s warning that he
would be offered water and food of death.20 Scholars have compared these substances to
the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. If there is indeed some similarity between the
Mesopotamian and biblical concepts, they could shed light on how the tree of life
worked, especially the question whether one who eats from it becomes immortal or is
simply rejuvenated (Gen 3:22 can be interpreted in both ways). Lugalbanda is the only
person ever said to have partaken of such food and drink, and he eventually dies, showing
that the plant only rejuvenates and does not grant permanently eternal life. The plant of
life and water of life seem to resemble, therefore, the plant called “the Old Man has
Grown Young” (šību īṣṣāhir amēlu) that Gilgamesh recovers from the depths only to
have it snatched from him by a serpent (Gilgamesh XI 299). It too would reverse aging,
but not permanently and would be retaken as required.

8. After leaving the cave, Lugalbanda must eat so he traps some animals, but before
slaughtering and eating them he has a dream in which Zaqara, god of dreams,21 reveals to
him how to properly do so. Upon awaking, Lugalbanda not only follows the instructions
but invites the four great gods—An, Enlil, Enki, and Ninhursag—to a banquet. W. W.
Hallo has identified this scene as an etiology of animal sacrifice and has shown that the
Sumerian view of this important cultic institution and how it originated resembles the
biblical notion.22 As in the Bible, where eating animals is prohibited before the flood and

20. See S. Izre’el, Adapa and the South Wind: Language Has the Power of Life and Death (Mesopotamian
Civilizations 10; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 18–21, reverse 60’–63’.
21. This god’s name is usually spelled AN.ZA.GAR and means “God Pillar.” Raphael Kutscher has
associated this deity with the pillar in Bethel where Jacob performed dream incubation. See R. Kutscher,
22. See W. W. Hallo, “The Origins of the Sacrificial Cult: New Evidence from Mesopotamia and Israel,” in
Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross (ed. P. D. Miller, P. D. Hanson, and
then, at least in Israelite religion, must be accompanied by sacrifice, so in LB I man was originally a vegetarian, and eating meat was introduced only after receiving divine sanction, and it was accompanied by ritual sacrifice.

9. In The Return of Lugalbanda (LB II), the hero cares for the fledglings of the Anzud bird, and as a reward the bird offers to determine his fate and presents several options: to be like a ship laden with wealth (134–141); to have effective weapons (142–148); to be victorious in battle (149–154); and agricultural bounty (155–158). Lugalbanda turns down all these tempting possibilities and asks for speed, which is granted him. It is this speed that enables him to return immediately to his brothers and the army and eventually to return swiftly to Unug, deliver Enmerkar’s message to the goddess, and learn from her how to finally vanquish Aratta. This is a “make a wish” tale reminding us of Solomon’s dream at Gibeon (1 Kgs 3:5–14), in which God offers to give him what he asks, grants his wish for wisdom to judge his people, and praises him for not asking longevity, wealth, or the lives of his enemies. Both stories are of the “make a wish” variety well known from folklore, in which a person demonstrates fitness for a role by wishing for just that quality needed for fulfilling the role even when offered otherwise desirable material benefits. In the end the person enjoys both the wise wish and the other things as well.

10. Throughout the works contained in this volume there are expressions and turns of speech with parallels in biblical diction, but they must remain for further study.

Herman Vanstiphout is to be congratulated for contributing to the scholarly and general community a competent and readable corpus of entertaining texts of high literary merit. His editions, translations, and comments help these compositions speak across the millennia to an audience of broad humanistic interest and invite further inquiry by specialists in the various disciplines making up ancient Near Eastern studies, of which comparative study of the Bible occupies a place of honor. He deserves the praise of the ancient people of Unug for his efforts in bringing their cultural accomplishments to the attention of their modern heirs.

23. This mythological creature that appears here in a quite positive role is the demonic character in the later Akkadian Anzu myth. For possible identification of this bird with biblical יַיְדָעַת יִזְזָז (Pss 50:11; 80:14) and postbiblical יִזְזָז, see N. Wazana, “Anzu and Ziz: Traces of a Mythological Bird in the Ancient Near East, the Bible and Rabbinical Traditions,” *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 14 (2004): 161–91 [Hebrew].