

## BOOK REVIEW

*Ea's Duplicity in the Gilgamesh Flood Story*. By MARTIN WORTHINGTON. The Ancient World. Abingdon, VA and New York, NY: Routledge, 2020. Pp. xxxii + 489. Hardback, \$140.00. ISBN: 978-1-138-38892-5.

Worthington's monograph focuses on Ea's message in book eleven of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It is of primary use to scholars in Assyriology and Classical studies, and it will also be of interest to those studying the flood story in the Hebrew Bible. Ambiguity in these lines allows for multiple interpretations, says the author, allowing for greater nuance and complexity as the remainder of the story unfolds.

Part I ("Preliminaries") is an explanation of terms, including a summary of the plot of the story (i.e., why Gilgamesh seeks the survivor of the flood), and the message that Ea, god of water and creation, conveys to Utnapishtim to build an ark. When the flood hero asks how he will persuade others to help him build an ark, Ea answers with, "In the morning he will rain down bread-cakes, in the evening, a torrent of wheat" (21). Or at least this is one translation and interpretation scholars might opt to use. The inherent ambiguity of the passage and the resulting subtlety of the work forms the crux of the author's argument. The utterance exhibits a "bitextual" quality. That is to say, just as in English the two phrases "I scream" and "ice cream" have different spellings and different meanings while having identical sounds, the original Akkadian can be taken in a number of different ways, all of which make some degree of sense in the context of the story.

Part II of the book contains the "meat" of the matter, dissecting, or rather interrogating the nine lines of Ea's message that are of central interest. Worthington begins with a discussion of "interrogation," concluding that it is the best word to use because the story is far from simple. While this may seem elementary to most academics who are accustomed to asking penetrating questions, it is a good reminder that when they find something that seems inscrutable in a text, they should not automatically attribute the lack of clarity to authorial mistake or degradation of the original work over time. Much of the vocabulary used is open to differences in translation, and thus differences in interpretation. Will the skies

literally rain wheat (providing a food source, and thus a good thing) or will the rain be as heads of wheat, closely bunched together (i.e., coming in torrents, and thus a bad thing)? Each word in the message is potentially ambiguous, making interpretation of the passage all the more challenging.

Worthington devotes Part III to conspicuous silences in the Gilgamesh flood story, asking questions such as *why* the flood happened. Because the ambiguity of Ea's message lends itself to such varied interpretations, it is possible that some hearers of the story may have at first anticipated some form of positive "raining down," i.e., not of water, but of wheat and grain. This lack of clarity may not be coincidental, but rather the purpose of the author of the epic. Worthington is careful to caution his readers against filling in the gaps, against clarifying the ambiguity, with other versions of a story of a universal flood that the original audience could have known, e.g., the Hebrew story of the flood as told in Genesis (257).

The final section of the book is devoted to other interconnections between *Gilgamesh* and narratives of a universal flood. Worthington notes that Ea's message in *Gilgamesh* is not unique, but that it is the most elaborate instance of this type of communication. He meticulously considers all aspects of how and by whom this message is communicated: we come to it only indirectly, as we rely on what the author says that Utnapishtim received from Ea in a dream, and then reported to Gilgamesh. There are further complications and ambiguities to be found in the vocabulary used in Ea's message when it is compared to other Mesopotamian omens. The message is so convoluted, says Worthington, that it may be the case that the oracle is not just ambiguous, but deceitful – yet this is hard to prove, the author admits. At most, we can conclude that the gods were capable of lying, whether they actually did or not (397). The question most likely to arise for those upon first learning of the flood story in *Gilgamesh* is whether or not the author of this epic took material from the book of Genesis, or vice-versa. Worthington concludes that *Gilgamesh* appears to pre-date Genesis, but like so many conclusions we might draw about the text, this is far from certain (405). However, he says we can use the two stories in juxtaposition to think more and differently about each one: what does each story tell us about human morality, and furthermore, what does each tell us about the morality of the divine?

Curious inclusions and practices worth noting, though not necessarily worthy of praise or blame, are numerous quotes from unrelated authors. Cicero, Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll all make appearances in passing. Readers will know that there are no fewer than 1,630 footnotes, because they are all numbered consecutively. There is a very thorough examination of previous scholarship on

*Gilgamesh*, and the author is to be commended for his mastery of Akkadian, Arabic, Hebrew, French, German and Italian. Most helpful is the summation at each chapter's end: readers can determine which portions merit more thorough study for their own purposes by skipping to a summary and then returning to the previous parts as necessary.

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