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Surrendering Death to Pain:

Comparing Mortal Theomachy in the *Iliad* and Near Eastern Religions

EVEN TREMENDOUS HADES
HAD TO ENDURE THAT FLYING SHAFT LIKE ALL THE REST,
WHEN THE SAME MAN, THE SON OF THUNDER-SHIELDED ZEUS,
SHOT HIM IN PYLOS—THERE WITH THE TROOPS OF BATTLE DEAD—
AND SURRENDERED DEATH TO PAIN.

(Homer, *Iliad*, 5.449-453)

While its status as a cornerstone of the Western canon is undeniable and its themes of fate, honor, and yearning for peace are as relevant as ever, the *Iliad* has bewildered its audience with its theology for centuries. The gods in Homer's epic not only feel and express the full range of human emotions, but are quite literally down to earth in their actions--conversing, procreating, and battling with mere mortals. While the anthropomorphism of nature and the metaphysical is not rare in world religions, the extent to which Iliadic gods act for and against humans, especially on a

physical basis, seems jarring especially to today's western audience who are strongly influenced by Abrahamic or secular traditions.

However, would Homer's contemporaries in other cultures find such relationships between gods and mortals equally shocking? Religion, after all, diffuses and evolves across neighboring societies as they communicate, trade, and compete with each other. It is worth examining, then, whether the exceedingly human qualities of Homeric deities can be found elsewhere in the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age, and in turn whether Homer was perhaps inspired by these foreign influences.

Among traditions in Bronze Age civilizations, Mesopotamian religion offers the most obvious comparison to Greek mythos. Both Mesopotamian and Greek religions encompass a pantheon of anthropomorphized and hierarchical gods who created mortals and continue to intervene in human affairs. And like Greek and later Roman traditions, despite the movements of various peoples--the Sumerians, Akkadians, Gutians, Kassites, Hurrians, Aramaeans, and Chaldeans--into and throughout the region, ancient Mesopotamian religion "was a consistent and coherent tradition... over millennia of development." (Britannica, Section 4) This offers a wealth of texts and traditions through which we can examine and compare the two coeval religions.

Eastern Connections. Besides the breadth of material and longevity of tradition, ancient Mesopotamian religion is an excellent comparator to Homeric epics because Greek and

Mesopotamian societies have come into contact and exerted influence over each other long before Homer.

Eastern influence on Greek culture is evident in the latter's language. As early as the Mycenaean period (2000-1200 BCE), the Greek language had already adopted a number of Near Eastern words, from Phoenician to Hittite to Hebrew, many of which were also used by Homer in his epics (Feldman, 1996, pg. 14).

Of course, linguistic influence does not directly correspond to a high enough degree of cultural exchange for literary and theological influence, but the Greeks likely had access to Mesopotamian literature as well. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the most well known work of Mesopotamian tradition and the text most akin to Homer, has been found at least in fragmentary form "in Asia Minor and in Palestine and... was translated into Hurrian and Hittite." (Feldman, 1996, pg. 13) And we know from Hittite sources that a plethora of people from the Levant and Mycenaean Greece traveled "along the coast of Asia Minor" (Aslaksen, 2015, pg. 4). The obvious language barrier poses a problem, but has likely been overcome as well--there existed bilingual populations among Near East settlers, both Greek-Hittite and Hittite-Akkadian (Feldman, 1996, pg. 14)

Therefore, while Homer did not mention Mesopotamian texts directly in his works, he was at least aware of Mesopotamia, and might even have had access to entire stories from that tradition. This Eastern connection of Homer's Greece, then, makes our choice of Mesopotamian religion as a

comparator to Homeric descriptions of gods especially worthwhile, as the possibility of influence is very much legitimate.

The Humanness of Mesopotamian Gods. Homer's gods are characterized by physical, humanoid bodies, and the fleshly desires and shortcomings associated with them. Thus was Hera able to "dress in all her glory and go to Ida", overwhelm Zeus with "old desire", and put him in "oblivious, soft and warm sleep" (Homer, Iliad, 14.199-202). Such want and need for bodily functions are similarly exhibited in Mesopotamian gods who, "having humanoid form... often acted like humans, requiring food and drink, as well as drinking alcohol and subsequently suffering the effects of drunkenness" (Bottéro, 2001, 64-66).

The corporeality of Mesopotamian gods may extend even beyond Greek ones in some respects. According to the creation myth of *Enki and Ninmah*, the gods "originally had to toil for their food, dig irrigation canals, and perform other menial tasks until... the birth of humans" (Britannica, Section 4). From then on, human beings "toil in order to provide food, clothing, housing, and service for the gods" (Britannica, Section 11). Therefore even the creation of mankind in Mesopotamian ethos is partly fueled by a simple need for machinery--a reason modern readers might see as base and unbecoming for divine beings--but this desire to be a "governing upper class" relieved of the need for labor is quintessentially human.

Not all divine beings in Mesopotamian mythology are so humanlike, however. One of the most emblematic characteristics of Mesopotamian religion is the "personal god," a deity that vests

interest in a specific individual and provides help and protection. The personal god is so important to the Mesopotamian person that “without his personal god a man eats not”. The personal god, however, has “little or no personality of its own”, more akin to Lady Luck than the clearly articulated gods we have so far discussed (Muffs, 1978, pg. 3). This dynamic of dehumanized gods so closely associated and involved with human beings is undoubtedly fascinating, and may play an important role in the phenomenon we discuss below.

The Glaring Lack of Mortal Theomachy. The *Iliad* is a war epic, and its anthropomorphism of gods is unsurprisingly and most prominently established through warfare. The Homeric gods are willing and eager to not only meddle in human conflict from afar, but strap on armor and step on the battlefield themselves.

This direct wrestling between man and god, however, seems to be missing in Mesopotamian (Sumerian or Akkadian) religion, in all its surviving myths, hymns, laments, omen texts, incantations, and epics.

This curious omission is clearly seen in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, a text that is otherwise similar to Homer in numerous regards. Gilgamesh, like Odysseus, had “achieved a long journey, weary and worn,” and like Achilles, was a demigod who had a dear friend dying in the protagonist's place (Hallo, 1991, pg. 173-181) Particularly strikingly, the mourning of both Gilgamesh and Achilles for their companions are compared to lions (which were not common in Greece) grieving over lost cubs (Feldman, 1996, pg. 17).

These shared motifs extend to the two tales' descriptions of gods as well. In both the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh* the world was "split in three ways," each given to a god when they "shook the lots" -- rather than through inheritance or warfare (Homer, *Iliad*, 15.226-229). And of course, in both the Homeric and the Akkadian epic, the gods are exceedingly engaged in the affairs of the mortal heroes, with Ishtar, the goddess of love, going so far as to unfruitfully propose marriage to Gilgamesh.

The extent of divine intervention in the *Gilgamesh* epic, however, never reached mortal theomachy as in the *Iliad*. For example, in two almost parallel scenes, both Aphrodite and Ishtar complain to their parents (Zeus and Dione for the former, Anu and Antum for the latter) and receive mild rebuke from their father; but while Aphrodite does so after being physically injured by Diomedes, her Mesopotamian counterpart's wound was only emotional (Feldman, 1996, 17).

Even when the gods intend for Gilgamesh's destruction, they do so through intermediaries, who seem to have their own agency. Enkidu, created by Anu to curb Gilgamesh's rule, quickly became the latter's dearest companion.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu do engage in combat with and in fact slaughter a metaphysical being in the Bull of Heaven (sent by an enraged Ishtar after her failed marriage proposal), but the latter is merely a mythical beast rather than a *god*, lacking humanoid form and humanlike conscience and emotions (*Gilgamesh*, Tablet VI; pg. 24). The case with the duo's other foe, Humbaba, is more complicated, since Humbaba not only wields metaphysical power but is also capable of human emotions and speech. However, Humbaba is still more monstrous than humanoid in his form;

Enkidu describes him as “a terror to human beings” whose “roar is a Flood, his mouth is Fire, and his breath is Death.” (Tablet II; pg. 10). Enkidu also makes a clear distinction between Humbaba and the gods when he persuades Gilgamesh to kill the former-- “Humbaba, Guardian of the Forest... destroy him! Before... the gods be filled with rage against us” (Tablet V; pg. 20).

Therefore, while it abounds in highly anthropomorphized gods who do not shy away from intervening in human affairs, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* lacks an instance of deities engaging in physical combat with humans (and thereby exhibiting the ability to suffer bodily harm) as in the *Iliad*. This phenomenon is also true for other Sumerian and Akkadian myths and epics.

Possible Explanations. So why is it that Mesopotamian religion seems to exhibit all the hallmarks of Homeric anthropomorphism, except for mortal theomachy?

Of course, there is no direct record from which we can learn the motivation for the lack of such occurrence in Mesopotamian religion--and the inclusion of it in Homer. One thing to be sure, though, is that physically combating humans is not an emblem of power for the gods. It is an exceedingly inefficient way to attack humans when, as in the case of Enkidu, the Mesopotamian gods could simply cause mortals to fall ill and die (Gilgamesh, Tablet VII; pg. 29). Physical struggle implies not only animosity (or bloodthirst), but also a degree of parity. The absence of accounts of mortal theomachy in Mesopotamian belief, then, can be ascribed to 1) the unwillingness of direct battle from either gods or humans or 2) a wider gap between mortal and divine power than in Greek theology.

Let us consider the unwillingness explanation first. Evidence for this hypothesis is the symbiotic relationship between gods and humans in the Mesopotamian mythos. Just as Zeus and the younger gods overthrew their ancestral titans, Mesopotamian gods also defeated their forebear, the primeval being Tiamtu (Andrea). However, in Mesopotamian religion, the forces of chaos Tiamtu once weaponized are still a looming threat. In the words of historian D. B. Nagle:

Despite the gods' apparent victory, there was no guarantee that the forces of chaos might not recover their strength and overturn the orderly creation of the gods. Gods and humans alike were involved in the perpetual struggle to restrain the powers of chaos, and they each had their own role to play in this dramatic battle. The responsibility of the dwellers of Mesopotamian cities was to provide the gods with everything they needed to run the world.

This perspective is further corroborated by the personal god dynamic we have mentioned before, and this explanation seems valid -- how can the ancient Mesopotamians, especially the heroes lauded in myths and epics, take arms against their very own protectors, both immediate and in the long term?

However, this explanation is still not fully satisfying--after all, if humans and gods were merely symbiotic and harmonious, there would not be so much divinely administered violence and pain in *Gilgamesh*, where pride and animosity from both sides are very much at play.

The alternative explanation for the absence of mortal theomachy, then, is that the gods are simply too exalted and powerful to physically fight humans--which is the rule

rather than the exception in world religions. The lack of stories about god-fighting men, then, stems not from the love and harmony of a symbiotic pact, but merely a practical subserviency due to force. In the words of French historian Jean Bottéro, “gods were not viewed mystically, but were instead seen as high-up masters who had to be obeyed and feared, as opposed to loved and adored.” (2001, pg. 37)

The Wrestling of Jacob. Quite interestingly, an instance of mortal theomachy can be found in a Near Eastern religion distinguished by its monotheism and the transcendence of its deity--the Hebrew tradition. As recorded in Genesis 32:24-30:

“So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’

But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’

The man asked him, ‘What is your name?’

‘Jacob,’ he answered.

Then the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.’

Jacob said, ‘Please tell me your name.’

But he replied, ‘Why do you ask my name?’ Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.’ (The Bible)

Whether Jacob wrestled with God or an angel remains a topic of theological contention, but either way Jacob had physically grappled (and matched in strength) with a fully anthropomorphized divine being.

This case of divine theomachy, however, can be differentiated from Diomedes' battleground rampage in several ways. The word "wrestling" suggests that Jacob's struggle with the "man" is not only unarmed but also competitive--rather than hostile--in nature. While Diomedes "thrusts his sharp spear" at Aphrodite to prevent her from saving her mortal son, and "mocked... as the goddess fled the front," Jacob beseeches the divine being to stay and bestow blessings on him--something he has sought throughout his story and even cheated his brother out of. Rather paradoxically, through his physical struggle with God Jacob exhibits an affinity instead of aggression toward the divine. It is also worth noting that the divine being was the one who initiated the fight, indicating a "coming down," so to speak, reinforcing the disparate status of God and men. Jacob's wrestling with the divine, then, is not a truly combative event but a ritualistic one, one that completes his arc of seeking and receiving God's blessings and culminating in him receiving the title of Israel.

Slaughter in the Plain. Looking elsewhere in the Near East, however, one might identify a case where gods do attack humans under a martial context. In fact, it is found in a tradition that Hebrew religion abhorred and eventually superseded--Canaanite, or ancient

Ugaritic/Levantine religion. Found in the myth of *Baal*, Anatu, the earth queen and Baal's non-cohabiting wife, clearly engages in battle with humans:

*Anatu fought in the plain, she slaughtered between the two cities.
 She smote the people of the sea-shore, silenced the men of the east.
 Heads were under her (feet) like clods of earth, on her were hands like locusts,
 like scales of a plane-tree the hands of the warriors...
 ...With a staff she chased the old men,
 with the stave of her bow the veterans...
 as she plunged (her) knees in the blood of the guards.
 (her) buttocks in the gore of the warriors.
 until she was sated with fighting in the house, slaughtering between the tables.*

(Moor, Baal I.ii.6-30)

Many facets of this account are reminiscent of Homer's in the *Iliad*: vast armies, clashing weapons, brutal deaths. At the same time, this excerpt is also drastically different from Diomedes' rampage; rather than a mortal so angry and powerful as to injure a god, here a god is so bloodthirsty and merciless as to slaughter humans. And a *slaughter* it is--this account is one-sided not only in its perspective but also in its power dynamic. While her methods may be physical, the description of Anatu's battle has no signs of any sort of resistance, and she is absolutely unscathed after killing so many as to bathe in her victims' blood (whereas in the *Iliad* Aphrodite was injured while Diomedes was unharmed). This is

not so much a battle as it is an execution, and it is purely terrifying while Diomedes' rampage might be better described as exciting.

This effect is no accident--the gory account of Anatu's merciless nature serves as a warning for those who are disobedient to the deity. This description is especially terrifying and therefore effective as admonition because while her action might be justified in the text, Anatu's motive is not to just deliver a judgment but to revel in her killing--"her liver shook with laughter, her heart was filled with joy" (Baal I.ii.26). This literary choice is also found in later Greek stories of a similar objective, such as Euripides' *The Bacchae*.

At this point, however, while her method might be physical and therefore exhibits a high degree of anthropomorphism, Anatu's actions are otherwise not so different from acts of divine punishment in other religious traditions, whether Hebrew or Mesopotamian. There exists a stark distinction to Diomedes' battle with the gods, which was initiated by a human and exhibits a degree of parity entirely absent in the myth of Baal. In other words, while the records of Anatu accentuate the power difference between the divine and mortals, Diomedes' theomachy minimizes it. In this respect, for a work so often criticized for the intimate involvement of the divine, the *Iliad* is strangely humanist. The divine theomachy of Diomedes highlights the individual strength of him and the heroic era he was in, a bygone epoch for which Homer mourns--"Just as Diomedes hefted a boulder in his hands, a tremendous feat-no two men could hoist it. weak as men are now" (Homer, *Iliad*, 5.336-338).

CONCLUSION

The anthropomorphism of gods is emblematic of both Homeric epics and older Mesopotamian mythos. The cultures have likely come into frequent contact before Homer and many parallels can be found between Homer and Mesopotamian texts like *Gilgamesh*, particularly their motifs and descriptions of gods. However, mortal theomachy is not found in well-known Mesopotamian texts. Accounts of physical struggle with divine beings are present in the Hebrew tradition and Ugaritic literature, but in the former it is more ritualistic than combative, and in the latter there lacks any degree of parity or resistance. The mortal theomachy as described in the *Iliad*, then, is a Homeric or at least a Greek innovation, and is distinctive in its objective to glorify the mortal rather than the divine.

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