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THE SACRIFICED GOD AND MAN'S CREATION:  
NONAGGRESSIVE VIOLENCE IN THE  
MESOPOTAMIAN *ATRAḤASIS*

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Ritual sacrifice, according to René Girard, is a community-sponsored, public act of violence designed to serve as an outlet for built-up aggression. His studies have given rise to other theories that likewise attempt to explain the purpose and origin of sacrifice, but that continue to be largely based on Girard's original ideas. All of these models have propagated the same foundational understanding of violence, which I will hereafter refer to as *aggressive violence*. In Girardian terms, this refers to human aggressive impulses that drive violent acts. These acts, and the endless cycle of violence they lead to, are precisely what ritual sacrifice is intended to prevent. Yet by making this hypothesis of aggressive violence such a foundational part of his theory, Girard's conclusions oversimplify the complex nature of ritual slaughter and overlook cases that lack the aggressive emotion on which he relies so heavily.

As a case study for the theory of aggressive violence in ritual sacrifice, the Mesopotamian motif of creation through divine blood serves to provide a counterexample. Tracing the theme and its evolution, as well as clearly identifying the event's nature as a ritual sacrifice, will set the groundwork for understanding the contemporary Mesopotamian perception of the ritual and the implications of this particular worldview. Specifically, the theme's earliest appearance in the corpus—found in the myth of *Atraḥasis*—exemplifies what I argue is nonaggressive sacrifice. Rather than serving as an outlet for aggression, the sacrificial event in *Atraḥasis* was understood by its audience to be a purely positive one—in turn showing the inadequacy of basing a universal understanding of ritual sacrifice on Girard's idea of aggressive violence.

## Why *Atrahasis*

The motif of creating mankind using a slain god's blood appears in more than one Mesopotamian text. By taking into account their likely time frames of composition, along with the evidences for direct borrowing, it becomes possible to see the way the theme evolved within the Mesopotamian literary tradition. My particular focus on *Atrahasis* is related to its chronological primacy. As will be shown, it is arguably the oldest extant text that deals with the motif, and it is the influential predecessor from which the later accounts borrowed the theme.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest version of the *Atrahasis* epic discovered to date is the Old Babylonian or Classical Version, dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Unless otherwise specified, I will quote from Tzvi Abusch's translation of this very text.<sup>2</sup> As far as the passage that reports the creation of mankind, the later accounts—the Middle Babylonian, Late Assyrian, and Late Babylonian versions—are very fragmentary and have no new insights to offer.

It is near the end of the first tablet of *Atrahasis* that we find the account of the creation of man. The myth includes the older Sumerian idea of creation out of clay, but with the addition of the flesh and blood of a god. The slain god is none other than the leader of a rebellion of the Igigi, or junior gods, against the Anunnaki, or senior gods.<sup>3</sup> The rebellion is the result of the heavy corvée labor imposed upon the Igigi—labor that they declare to be unjust and too physically straining. Enki (the god of freshwater who is often associated with wisdom) devises a plan whereby mankind can be created to perform the labors previously imposed on the junior gods. As decreed by Enki, We-ila (or We, the god) is slain so that his flesh and blood, mixed with clay, can be used as the material out of which to mold man. The reason, manner, and nonaggressive nature of this sacrifice—along with its implications for Mesopotamian thought and sacrifice in general—will be explored more in depth below.

Another important text to take into account is the *Enûma Eliš*. Commonly known as the "Babylonian Epic of Creation," it is believed to have borrowed many of its themes from the older *Atrahasis*. Generally dated to the latter part

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1. Note that I am referring specifically to the motif of the sacrificed god and subsequent creation by blood. I am not dealing with cosmogonies in general.

2. Tzvi Abusch, "Ghost and God: Some Observations On a Babylonian Understanding of Human Nature," in *Self, Soul and Body in Religious Experience* (ed. Albert Baumgarten; Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1998), 363–83.

3. I support here the view expressed by Moran that "leader-god" is the right interpretation of line 208. We-ilu, he argues, is the god who "had the scheme" to overthrow Enlil. See William L. Moran, "The Creation of Man in *Atrahasis* I 192–248," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no. 200 (1970): 51–52.

of the second millennium B.C.E.,<sup>4</sup> it borrows from older traditions in order to legitimize the new place of Marduk (the city god of Babylon) as the chief of the gods. Tablet VI of the epic is where the creation of mankind is described. Here is a case where Qingu, the leader on the losing side of a massive primordial war, is slain by order of Ea (the Akkadian name for Enki) and his blood used to create man. Blood alone is the substance from which humanity is made—no longer a tripartite mixture of clay, flesh, and blood as in *Atraḥasis*.

Note also the way in which Qingu is specifically said to be punished for his deeds—his guilty sentence, the way he is bound, and his imposed punishment.

“It was Qingu who made war,  
Suborned Tiamat and drew up for battle.”  
They bound and held him before Ea,  
They imposed the punishment on him and shed his blood.  
(29–32)<sup>5</sup>

This is a subtle but important variation from the way We-ila is slaughtered without indication of antagonism or aggression in *Atraḥasis*.

A third text worth mentioning is the Sumerian *Enki and Ninmah*. Far more problematic than the previous two, this is an account that is generally not interpreted as involving the use of divine blood in the process of creation. However, W. G. Lambert has argued otherwise.

The tale begins with an account of the genesis of the gods and once again tells of the rebellion of the laboring junior gods. Enki again provides a wise solution by planning the creation of mankind. Lambert's subtle but important changes to the traditional interpretation of some of the lines are the result of his studies on a bilingual version of the text.<sup>6</sup> His altered translation of line 30 contains the most striking variation:

My mother, there is my/the blood which you set aside, impose on  
it the corvée of the gods.(30)

What Lambert here translates as “blood” (line 30) is the Sumerian word *mud*. The clause has variously been translated as “the creature on whom you

4. Lambert argues against W. von Soden's Cassite-period dating, instead placing it during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I; see W. G. Lambert, “Studies in Marduk,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 47 (1984), 4.

5. All quotations from the *Enûma Eliš* are from the translation by Benjamin R. Foster in *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 1996).

6. W. G. Lambert, “The Relationship of Sumerian and Babylonian Myth as Seen in Accounts of Creation,” in *La circulation des biens, des personnes et des idées dans le Proche-Orient ancien, XXXVIII<sup>e</sup> R.A.I.* (Paris, 1992), 129–35.

have set (your mind),”<sup>7</sup> “the creature whose name you fixed,”<sup>8</sup> “au résultat de ce que tu auras créé,”<sup>9</sup> and “the sire (who was once) provided with heir by you.”<sup>10</sup> Though Lambert identifies the blood as being that of either Enki or Namma, he ultimately suggests that it is Enki’s.<sup>11</sup>

Although his argument is convincing, caution is advised until further advances in Sumerian lexicology are made. Lambert readily admits that his translation is guided by what he sees as the timeless Mesopotamian tradition of divine blood in creation. Starting off with such an assumption ignores other Mesopotamian creation traditions that do not mention blood at all.<sup>12</sup>

In this vein it must also be pointed out that the dating of *Enki and Ninmah* is widely debated. Though written in Sumerian (along with Akkadian in the later bilingual version), there is linguistic evidence to indicate its origin as an adaptation of an Akkadian narrative.<sup>13</sup> This would not be surprising, given the Babylonian and Assyrian fascination with the language of their predecessors. The text’s obvious parallels to *Atrahasis*, readily apparent in the borrowed Akkadian lexicon, suggest the same conclusion. Frymer-Kensky has proposed, based on these anomalies, that “‘Enki and Ninmah’ may have been written with *Atrahasis* in mind.”<sup>14</sup>

What are we to make of these accounts?<sup>15</sup> The translation and dating of *Enki and Ninmah* is critical to an understanding of the history of the motif

7. C. A. Benito.

8. S. N. Kramer/J. Maier.

9. J. J. A. van Dijk.

10. Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

11. Lambert, “The Relationship of Sumerian and Babylonian Myth,” 134.

12. In fact, aside from *Enki and Ninmah*, all other Sumerian texts ascribe creation to different processes. For example, the Sumerian *Song of the Hoe* and the *Eridu Genesis* describe mankind as having been created out of mud or as sprouting up from the ground. Even the creation of Enkidu in the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh* omits any mention of divine blood.

13. See Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, “The *Atrahasis* Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Genesis 1–9,” *BA* 40, no. 4 (1977): 155.

14. Frymer-Kensky, “The *Atrahasis* Epic,” 155.

15. Aside from these three texts, there are other less significant references to the motif, such as the document referred to in scholarly literature as *KAR 4*, also known as *The Creation of Humankind*. It tells of the slaughtering of the Alla-gods and the use of their blood for the creation of mankind and dates to the Middle Assyrian period. (G. B. D’Alessio, “Textual Fluctuations and Cosmic Streams: Ocean and Acheloius,” *JHS* 124 [2004]: 16–37, n. 36.)

There is also an interesting image found on a small Old Akkadian cylinder seal, identified by Wiggermann as a visual depiction of the rebellion and creation in *Atrahasis*. F. A. M. Wiggermann, “Extensions of and Contradictions to Dr. Porada’s Lecture,” in *Man and Images in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Edith Porada; Wakefield: Moyer Bell, 1996), 78–79. The image depicts figures (junior gods?) laboring to build a temple, while one kneeling figure is slaughtered by a god as another stands with his arms in a raised position. H. Frankfort has

of creation through divine blood. Though I agree with Lambert's assessment of it, the fact that it is written in Sumerian is not a convincing indication of its antiquity. In fact, Frymer-Kensky's statement—based on linguistic anomalies and borrowings from the Akkadian—seems to be the best explanation of it: namely, that much of the mythology in it was based on the events in *Atrahasis*.<sup>16</sup> It therefore seems most compatible with the present evidence that *Atrahasis* is the oldest instance of the motif—the myth from which the later texts took their inspiration.<sup>17</sup>

### The Case for Sacrifice

I argue that the slaying of We-ila in *Atrahasis* was understood as an act of sacrifice by the Mesopotamians. Even without some of the characteristic elements of sacrifice—such as the explicit dedication of the victim to some higher deity or the burning of the corpse—there is sufficient evidence within the text to suggest that this is so. A brief overview of the way sacrifice has been defined in recent decades will be helpful in understanding what the text itself has to say about the event.

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instead associated the scene with the final episode of the *Enûma Eliš*. H. Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals: A Documentary Essay on the Art and Religion of the Ancient Near East* (London, 1939), 131–32, plate XXIIk. If this does in fact depict the sacrifice of a god and the subsequent creation of man, however, then it will be by far our oldest recorded instance of the motif. It is impossible to tell at present.

Lastly, there is the mythological narrative given by Berossus, the Babylonian historian of the Hellenistic age. This is essentially a much later retelling of the *Enûma Eliš* with some variations.

16. See note 14 above. Also note that other themes found in *Enki and Ninmah* place it more within Akkadian mythological tradition rather than Sumerian. For example, the purpose for which mankind is created is strictly to relieve the junior gods of their labors—almost the exclusive reasoning found in Akkadian texts—as opposed to the purposes suggested in the Sumerian *Song of the Hoe* and the so-called *Eridu Genesis*.

17. Note that this particular creation motif is completely absent from pre-Sargonic literature. If it did not in fact enter general Mesopotamian mythology until the rise of Akkadian dominance, it is possible that the theme came from an older Semitic tradition. Frymer-Kensky has suggested that it may have “entered Mesopotamian mythology with the coming of the West Semites.” Frymer-Kensky, “The Atrahasis Epic,” 155.

It has also been proposed that the settling of the Amorite tribes in Mesopotamia was the possible point of transmission for the motif. Tzvi Abusch, “Sacrifice in Mesopotamia,” in *Sacrifice in Religious Experience* (ed. Albert Baumgarten; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 39–48. Abusch provides an intriguing interpretation of the motif that suggests it was the tribal and semi-nomadic nature of the West Semites that caused them to emphasize blood in their sacrifices and mythologies. See Tzvi Abusch, “Ghost and God,” 363–83. See also Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 156, for an explanation of Abusch's idea of a “personal god.”

On the general idea of West Semitic “blood consciousness,” see A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977), 192.

Hubert and Mauss's ambitious work on the nature and function of sacrifice is an obvious place to look. Their research in the field—primarily in regards to Hebrew and Vedic sacrifice—led them to define it as “a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned.”<sup>18</sup> *Consecration* of a victim is here the important action, though certainly much more is implied. Sacrifice is expected to affect both the “sacrificer” (the person performing the physical sacrifice) and the “sacrifier” (the one who offers up the object to be sacrificed). In other words, the focus is primarily on the well-being or sanctification of the parties performing the action, through the offered object upon which the action is performed.<sup>19</sup>

Also indicative of the way Hubert and Mauss understand sacrifice—and perhaps more in line with common use—they designate as sacrifice “any oblation . . . whenever the offering or part of it is destroyed, although usage seems to limit the word sacrifice to designate only sacrifices where blood is shed.”<sup>20</sup> Along these lines, Baal offers further clarification by defining an offering as “any act of presenting something to a supernatural being,” and a sacrifice as a subset of an offering, which includes the ritual killing of the offered object.<sup>21</sup>

Returning to *Atrahasis*, it is clear that We-ila is killed in what appears to be a ritual process consisting of various stages. I identify these as selection, acknowledgment, preparation, slaying, washing, and participation. Though the process can be partitioned in different ways, the important thing is that there is a strict order of events characteristic of ritual sacrifice.

The selection process is simply the declaration by Enki that “the leader-god let them slaughter” (line 208), with a later exposition as to why the leader-god is the best candidate.<sup>22</sup> Careful selection of the victim is an important aspect indicative of sacrifice. By acknowledgment I refer to Enki's command that “to the living creature [We-ila], let it make known its sign” (line 216). Moran's

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18. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), 13.

19. As Nancy Jay put it, it seeks to mediate between the sacred and the profane. See Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 134.

20. Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, 13.

21. J. van Baal, “Offering, Sacrifice and Gift,” *Numen* 23, no. 3 (1976): 161.

22. Lines 223–24: “We-ila (or We, the god) who has intelligence they slaughtered in their assembly.” Abusch has suggested that the text's ancient audience understood We-ila's “intelligence” to have been transferred to mankind through his flesh and blood. He arrives at this conclusion through an examination of what appears to be a wordplay in the text, linking the Akkadian words for intelligence (*tēmu*) and blood (*damu*). If he is correct in this assertion, it sheds further light on the reason for choosing We-ila as the sacrificial victim. More on this point below. See Abusch, “Ghost and God,” 378–83.

translation is instructive here, as it renders the line (and similarly the parallel line 229) thus: “let her [Nintu] inform him [We-ila] while alive of his token.”<sup>23</sup> The manner in which his place in the great plan is explained to him—while in the middle of a declaration for the rationale behind the use of *his* blood (the blood of a god possessing “intelligence” or “planning”) and the continuation of a “ghost” through his flesh and thereby the flesh of mankind—makes it an honor for him to be the instrument of such an undertaking.<sup>24</sup> The preparation is the selection of a specific date and Enki’s establishment of a ritual cleansing bath: “A purification let me institute—a bath” (line 207). The killing then takes place, followed by the purification of all the gods “by immersion” (line 209), and after the mixing of the flesh and blood with clay, participation—akin to *communion* as identified by anthropologists—by the rest of the Igigi gods when they “spat upon the clay” (line 234). This clear order of events that is first outlined in Enki’s speech (lines 206–17) and then in action (lines 221–34) is indicative of a ritual act, in this case sacrifice.

As for the important characteristic that identifies this event as an offering, We-ila is indeed offered up for a greater cause—the creation of mankind and subsequent liberation of the gods from their labors. However, there is no explicit mention of being offered to any specific deity. In lieu of this absent, defining trait of the ritual, a case could be made for his implicitly being offered up to certain gods or groups. He is in a small sense being offered to the Igigi gods, for whose benefit mankind will be created and assigned the workload. Conversely—and more convincingly—We-ila could be said to be a sacrifice offered *by* the Igigi gods, since they are the ones who demand a radical change in the status quo. They are therefore acting the role of the “sacrifiers” as defined by Hubert and Mauss, which fits well with the fact that their condition is clearly modified—improved—by the sacrificial act.

This compelling explanation has been overlooked in the past. It is indicative of the outcome expected by any party offering a sacrifice, and of the essential purpose for which the Mesopotamians performed their ritual duty: to obtain an improved condition in life. If the gods themselves offered a sacrifice to achieve their desires, how much more does mortal man need to do the same? But then, if the Igigi gods were in fact seen as the sacrifiers, *to whom* is the sacrifice being offered?

It could potentially be said that the victim is an offering to Enlil, for whose deliverance the sacrifice is also carried out, since he has been threatened by

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23. Moran, “Creation of Man,” 50.

24. Note how this evokes a different sense than if We-ila’s execution was a means of punishment. This important point is addressed below.



the rebellious gods: “Come, let us remove (him) from his dwelling!” (line 44). Perhaps most convincingly, however, the text goes on to suggest that the most inconspicuous beneficiary of all—but certainly the most important to the Babylonian keepers of the tradition—is mankind. Since man in this case is neither sacrificer nor sacrificer, but a beneficiary nonetheless, he could potentially become the personage to whom the sacrifice is offered. The idea of a sacrifice offered by the gods, for the benefit of man, emphasizes the intended impact of the motif on the Mesopotamian religious outlook.

Though these are only theories that serve to illustrate ways in which the myth could have been interpreted by its Mesopotamian audience, the evidence is clear in identifying the execution of We-ila as an instance of sacrifice. Using this specific instance of the ritual, I will now show how Girard’s notion of aggressive violence fails to make sense of the event in *Atraḥasis*.

### Nonaggressive Violence

René Girard’s ambitious work on ritual sacrifice, founded loosely on Freud’s version of totemism,<sup>25</sup> has attracted much attention as well as criticism. He suggests that mimetic desire, in which all of one’s desires arise from the observed aspirations of others, leads to antagonism and the build-up of violent tension. This inevitably ends in an act of aggressive violence. The cycle repeats itself until a third party—a scapegoat victim—is found, and the two original parties’ aggressive impulses are taken out in its destruction. The release of tension and sense of peace that follows is then seen as the scapegoat’s doing, which leads to its elevation in status and eventual apotheosis. This, believes Girard, is the point of genesis for sacrifice, religion, and even society. From that point on, the ritualized slaughtering of a victim serves to recreate the original act, and to continually release built-up tensions created by mimetic desire. In this way, that society succeeds in preventing acts of vengeance<sup>26</sup> and self-destruction.<sup>27</sup>

Girard’s work on mimetic desire is intriguing in two ways: it is a human characteristic that in many cases can be observed, and it professes to explain

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25. See Sigmund Freud, *Totem und Tabu: Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker* (Leipzig: H. Heller, 1913). Girard often quotes from this work. He uses a similar concept of cultural taboos and of the ritualized murder of an original victim, though he believes it originated under different circumstances.

26. The fact that a third party serves as proxy sacrificial victim—chosen for that very purpose—avoids blood-guilt and the consequent seeking of vengeance by clan or tribe members. Without an outside party to act as the victim, the cycle of vengeance is inevitable since the built-up aggression must then find a release in one of the original parties involved.

27. For his most comprehensive explanation of the theory, see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979).

the origin not only of sacrifice, but of god and religion as a whole. Though the first few conclusions of the theory are sound in describing an essential aspect of human nature, the use of those conclusions as premises for what comes next requires too much of a leap.<sup>28</sup> By simplifying complex rituals and the many different cultural understandings of sacrificial practice, Girard arrives at reductive conclusions that leave no room for the multifaceted nature of the very event he is trying to describe.

Most important, Girard's theory of sacrifice necessarily labels it as an act of aggression. The release of aggressive impulses through the slaughtering of the victim is central to his understanding of the ritual.<sup>29</sup>

John Dunnill's categorical distinction between violence and aggression is useful here, as it speaks directly to Girardian notions of sacrifice. A violent act is one that involves the use of physical force with the intent of harming, damaging, or destroying a victim. Aggression, as I am defining it, is the hateful, vengeful, or otherwise antagonistic emotion tied to an act of violence. A violent act can be carried out for purposes other than those classified under aggression. Dunnill gives an illustrative example of just such an event: cooking is an act that involves violence—the destruction of life, either vegetable or animal—but without necessarily a sense of aggression.<sup>30</sup> Specifically talking about the emotions that do generally accompany ritual sacrifice, he explains how “there is, in the conduct of sacrifices culminating in a whole offering or a joyful feast, no hint of the aggression which Girard asserts as operative in all sacrifice.”<sup>31</sup>

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28. Where is the evidence for the apotheosis of the victim actually having occurred in historical times? What about the multiplicity of observable sacrifices that never lead to this event? Girard avoids this, and many other questions, by making claims that are “unobservable,” i.e. speculative. On his search for a universal theory of origin—reminiscent of older, outdated attempts—his methodology proves to be as faulty as that which sought to prove totemism: taking only the desired pieces from a wide variety of cultures and religions, before combining them in ways that fit theories already laid out as the “logical” result of mimetic desire.

See also the chapter titled “The Victimized Body: A Dialogue with René Girard” in John Dunnill, *Sacrifice and the Body: Biblical Anthropology and Christian Self-Understanding* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 148.

29. “The rites of sacrifice serve to polarize the community's *aggressive impulses* and redirect them toward victims that may be actual or figurative, animate or inanimate, but that are always incapable of propagating further vengeance.” Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 18; emphasis added.

30. Dunnill, *Sacrifice and the Body*, 154.

31. Dunnill, *Sacrifice and the Body*, 153. A similar point is taken up by Walter Burkert in his influential publication of 1983. This scholar of Greek mythology has explored the practice of sacrifice as found in various societies (while still basing the majority of his observations on Greek practice), and has concluded that the treatment of the victims did not always include aggression. While agreeing with Girard on the unavoidable tendencies

Girardian theories of sacrifice place heavy emphasis on human aggression because they are based on the idea of a “primitive” mindset—one that requires an outlet for such aggression. They set this in direct contrast with what they see as the superior Christian tradition and its ability to overcome the need for the shedding of blood. Mesopotamian mythology has previously been used as a case study for aggressive violence<sup>32</sup>—of which there is certainly plenty—but the opposite possibility has yet to be explored. In fact, the primary reason that so many have interpreted We-ila’s sacrifice as an act of aggression and punishment has nothing to do with the text of *Atraḥasis*, but rather with the *Enûma Eliš*. By the time this latter text was composed, some important differences had been incorporated into the creation-of-mankind motif. In the *Enûma Eliš* we do find clear reference to the sense of guilt and punishment imposed on the sacrificial victim, in this case Qingu. Unlike We-ila in *Atraḥasis*, who leads a justified rebellion for what Ea (Sumerian form of Enki) sees as a righteous cause,<sup>33</sup> Qingu in the *Enûma Eliš* is Tiamat’s appointed general for a massive war of vengeance that can only be stopped by Marduk’s might. Likewise, in *Atraḥasis* there is no actual bloodshed to punish anyone for, whereas in the *Enûma Eliš* there is plenty.<sup>34</sup> And so the gods in the *Enûma Eliš* agree that “it was Qingu who made war, suborned Tiamat and drew up for battle” (lines 29–30). The result? “They bound and held him before Ea, they imposed the punishment on him and shed his blood” (lines 31–32).

Simply because much of the *Enûma Eliš* was influenced by *Atraḥasis* does not mean that they share in common all the motives, methods, and outcomes

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of human aggression, he sees games of competition and contest—not sacrifice—as their outlet. For Burkert, sacrifice is only the natural result of a species that after thousands of years of hunting moved in the direction of becoming a herding society. He has most notably expounded on this theory in his book *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley: University of California, 1983).

32. Walter Wink has used the *Enûma Eliš* as a way to illustrate his “myth of redemptive violence”—the idea of a perpetually repeating theme in classic stories that has forever served as a way of justifying acts of sociopolitical violence and domination. See Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

33. The term “rebellion” here may be misleading, as it tends to imply bloodshed. Though the Igigi do in fact call for battle as part of their uprising (lines 61–62), immediately when their case is presented before the Anunnaki, Ea proposes that their petition is justified and devises a way to free them of their undeserved, heavy labors (lines 177–91).

34. Pierre François suggests that the shedding of Qingu’s blood was a way of cleansing the heavenly sphere of the war guilt created by these events. Through the use of his blood for the creation of mankind, the sin and guilt was transferred to mortals where it remains: “The *Enuma Elish* does not ascribe man’s lapsarian nature to an act committed *in illo tempore* by our remotest ancestors. It suggests that the Fall was, so to speak, built into human nature in the wake of the cosmogonic events related in the myth.” Pierre François, *Inlets of the Soul: Contemporary Fiction in English and the Myth of the Fall* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), 24.

of the divine sacrifice described. The myth of *Atrahasis*—as evidenced by the later texts that were based upon it—shaped much of the Mesopotamian worldview for centuries before the *Enûma Eliš* was composed. The sense of punishment that many choose to focus on—along with its implication of aggressive violence—only appears in the *Enûma Eliš* and its derivatives, but it is often anachronistically carried over into interpretations of *Atrahasis*.

Yet even when studied on its own terms, a superficial reading of *Atrahasis* has led some to assume various aggressive reasons for the slaying of We-ila: either as punishment, as an act of revenge, or as a scapegoat for the crimes of the gods. Note that all of these conclusions stem from the fact that We-ila is the leader of the Igigi rebellion. While this is true, there are other convincing explanations for the selection of We-ila as victim—ones that suggest the sacrifice lacks any sense of punishment, vengeance, or indignation.

Particular details in the implementation of the ritual bath that follows We-ila's execution suggest that the sacrifice was not a punishment for his role in the rebellion. A ritual washing at this point in the narrative is certainly indicative of a sense of impurity, but impurity from what? If the Igigi rebellion truly was a sinful action—unapproved and condemnable—it could be the cause of the impurity. Other possibilities include impurity brought on by the act of killing itself or by association with a corpse and its blood. It could also be interpreted as related to creation—whether the gods are rendered impure by creating impure creatures, or they are simply in need of cleansing before being able to create mankind.

To complicate matters, the text leaves unclear the timing of the bath in relation to the slaying of We-ila. Enki instructs for the institution of the bath, then the killing, and then the immersion. However, when the execution of the plan is actually reported, the passage leaves out the immersion entirely.<sup>35</sup> The parties participating in the bath become the most important factor here. It appears that all the gods need to be cleansed, even though only Nintu/Mami perform the mixing and molding of man. This indicates that the ritual cleansing was associated with the act of killing rather than of creation. It also shows that—since it includes more than just the junior gods—it is not a matter of being unclean through their rebellion. As Moran explains, “the pollution must be the defilement resulting from the common association with, and responsibility for, death.”<sup>36</sup> This then allows for the rebellion to be considered a righteous

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35. Enki first commands the institution of the bath in line 207, the slaughtering in the next line, and the cleansing by immersion in line 209. The bath is established in line 222, and that is the last mention of it.

36. Moran, “Creation of Man,” 51.

cause—as explained earlier—and thereby supports the notion that We-ila’s execution was not a form of punishment.

Why then was We-ila chosen as the sacrificial victim? As proposed by Abusch, We-ila is chosen because of the trait that allowed him to lead a rebellion in the first place: his intelligence (*tēmu*). He explains that, “in the context of *Atraḫasīs*, the use of *tēmu* is the act of deliberation about the slave condition of the worker gods in an irrigation economy, the formulation of a plan of rebellion, and its execution.”<sup>37</sup>

This intelligence makes We-ila the perfect candidate to provide the blood from which mankind is to obtain his intelligence and creativity. Early Mesopotamian men would have more likely seen this heavenly ancestor as a capable leader—a creative thinker—rather than an executed criminal. And as mentioned earlier, the manner in which We-ila is informed of his selection to be the sacrificial victim is evidence of his honor. That the sacrifice passage is silent in reference to punishment, forceful action, or complaint from We-ila further illustrates the point.

### Conclusion

The fact that the killing of We-ila was likely understood by the text’s Mesopotamian audience as a sacrifice devoid of aggression shows that *Atraḫasīs* does not fit into Girardian notions of sacrifice. By trying to fit complex varieties of the ritual into a single, universal mold, Girard’s theory falls into a procrustean trap. It becomes too simplistic and ultimately unable to provide a satisfactory explanation when the “aggressive impulses” that he sees as inevitable no longer necessarily find an outlet in sacrifice. Though the sacrifice motif in other Mesopotamian myths does often carry the sense of aggressive violence, *Atraḫasīs* serves to show that caution should be practiced in attempting to apply Girard’s explanation to all ritual sacrifice.

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37. Abusch, “Ghost and God,” 378. For more on the wordplay in *Atraḫasīs* with the Akkadian terms for “intelligence” and “blood,” see note 23 above.