SOME ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN TRADITIONS
CONCERNING MEN AND SOCIETY.¹

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MANY have taken in hand to set forth the central beliefs of the peoples of ancient Mesopotamia, concerning man and his "city-going ways". Why then this present undertaking? For two of many reasons. First: every serious student of the ancient literature, in the Sumerian and Akkadian Languages, at first hand, must make the attempt for himself under the impulse of his own questionings formulated after his own fashion. Second: new data, and better understanding of data long familiar, correct not a little of earlier reconstructions of ancient Mesopotamian questionings and answers.

The question to be answered here is this: what did the pre-Christian folk in Babylonia and Assyria say they knew about the world and about man? How came he to be? What was his first native condition? Whence the world of things for his use? How came he to know his way about the world of things so that he might live well? His last end?

Quite early after the rise of the curtain on the Mesopotamian scene—say c. 2900 B.C.—the modern reader of cuneiform tablets is led into courts of petty kings, temples of many gods, fields for innumerable herds and flocks and for many labourers. He moves, with clay-tablets as guide-books, over a landscape, flat, broken by patches of wall-girt settlements out of which reared up temple-towers, and criss-crossed by few rivers and numerous canals through palm-belt and cornfields and pastures. He learns of a calendar, of feasts, of sacrifices. He finds society organised, law in action, wages standardised, public works attempted and performed, the traffic of contract, the crafts of architecture, metallurgy, and husbandry, and, for us at least, most important of all, the discipline of letters to which not only the "administration" texts, but also the "school-texts" bear witness. Here is

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday the 9th of January, 1946.
one of the earliest properly historical texts extant written c. 2600 B.C. It reads:

Ur-Nanše, King of Lagas, son of Gunidu, son of Gursar, built the temple of (the goddess) Nanše, sculpted the statue of Nanše, dug (a) canal and dedicated it to Nanše . . . and chose by omens Ursanabi, as husband of Nanše.1

Brief, but arousing endless curiosity. A curtain rises, and there, on this small-town stage, is Nanše, goddess of canals and of all water courses, the inspiration of this kinglet, who bears her name as part of his own, and, for her name’s sake, builds, sculpts, digs, and employs the mechanisms of omens, apparently to find her a husband among the men of Lagash.

Here, in Ur-Nanše, we have no savage, but a king, a man with a point of view, which, as Ortega has suggested, is a circumstance which connotes culture and is the negation of the savage state. Here, too, is evidence of cultural institutions: religion, kingship, and husband-and-wife relationship.

There are those of to-day who claim to know how and from what beginnings, the world and men of that old time had “arrived”: under what compulsions men had devised the tools, the social forms, and the view of the world, of which the extant clay tablets are records. But this claim to know “the secret concealed” was made also by some in ancient Mesopotamia. That claim rested on “the tradition relating to things pre-deluvian” which, it was said, the hero Gilgamesh, a sort of Mesopotamian Odysseus for his travels, handed down to men.

How old is that tradition? To this no sure answer can be given. What we have, and it is almost2 all that we have, are myths and legends as written. But these are always older than is the writing of them which does but perpetuate what already exists, and has long existed, of myth and legend.

The two myths with which the general public is acquainted, from ancient Mesopotamia, are the “Creation Story” and the “Epic of Gilgamesh”. It must, however, never be forgotten that the versions of these, from which modern translations are made, are the latest extant forms of a long tradition. For not myths only, but also the writing of myths has a history. Hence

1 SAK., S. 2, a); cf. JNES., vol. ii (1943), p. 117.
2 “Almost all”, because, e.g., ritual texts provide relevant material.
it is that some would trace the latest, first millennium B.C. texts to sources, Akkadian or Sumerian, so much earlier, say, the second, or even the third millennium B.C. But such efforts have doubtful claim to success, and are premature.

For example, we have material, in the Sumerian language, which belongs to the story of the hero Gilgamesh. It is estimated that the Sumerian version consisted of a series of four or five double-column tablets of about two hundred lines each, in much unlike the later Semitic versions. It seems likely that the Gilgamesh story was current in ancient Mesopotamia at a time when Sumerian kings ruled the land, and Sumerian language was the speech of the population. But it is not certain that the Sumerian version is the original version.

In respect of the "Creation" story, we are, in one important matter, still less fortunate. There has not been discovered, as yet, any true prototype of the story. What we have are traditions, already existing in old Babylonian times, i.e. soon after 2000 B.C., about world-making. These traditions do not always agree, either with each other or with the later composite form, of the first millennium B.C., which translations in English, French, German and Italian have made familiar.

All this means that there is not, as yet, sufficient evidence to warrant a confident statement as to the general belief in respect of the origins of the world, man and society at any particular period of Sumerian and Akkadian civilisation, except, perhaps towards its close from the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C. We must be content with such fragments of the learning of the past which have been found at various sites from Ur in the south, to Nineveh in the north, by scribes not all of one time and not all of one "school". By asking questions of these fragments, we can obtain some of the answers we seek.

The first question: who made the world and man, and from what? From the extant records of the third millennium no answer to this question can be extracted. And yet, men of that age may have posed the question and given an answer to it. They have already speculated on the relations between the gods.

1 JRAS., 1932, iv, p. 912.
2 Cf. S. A. Kramer, Gilgamesh and the Hulupp Tree (1940).
For example, the god Enlil is called the father of the gods in pre-Agade times.\textsuperscript{1} And the god of heaven, AN, is called “the King of the gods”\textsuperscript{2} in post-Agade times. But the texts never say or hint that gods or the world or man owe their origin to any particular agency, or being, or to any action which may be described as “making”. Nevertheless, it is tempting to go outside that class of evidence to this other: already in the first half of the third millennium B.C., natives were writing what are known as “School-Texts”. These are classified lists of objects, and may be cited as evidence that they had already begun to sort things out, according to some principle. This fact may, perhaps, create an antecedent probability that the Sumerians were of a temper disposed to order in the mind, even in respect of what we call “ultimate” questions. It remains, however, that if they were, they have left no record of the fact on the documents of their day. In all such matters they were, in contrast to their successors in power, the Semites, a secret people.

A text, in Sumerian and Akkadian, found at Abu Habb'h, ancient Sippar, published by Dr. L. W King in 1901,\textsuperscript{3} purports to describe conditions before our land-world was.

\begin{verbatim}
Not yet had holy house, house of the gods in a holy place been made,
Nor had reed sprung up, nor tree been made,
Nor had brick been laid, nor brick-mould been fashioned.
No house had been made, no city been built.
No city had been made, no creeping thing been formed.
The city of Nippur had not been made, E-kur had not been built;
The city of Erech had not been made, E-anna had not been built;
Apsu had not been made, the city of Eridu had not been built.
For the holy house, the house of the gods, a site had not been made.
All lands were sea.
\end{verbatim}

That text may be a thousand years older than the text Enûma Eliš, the copy of the poem of Creation made for Ashurbanipal in the seventh century B.C. It embodies a tradition which appears in the late version to the effect that the source of all being, of gods, and earth and heaven, and all living creatures was water: Apsu, the subterranean ocean of sweet water, emerging in fountains, rivers and lakes, and Tiāmту, the ocean of bitter, sea-water which encircles the earth. These two, mingled together, “held all in intrinsic potence.”

\textsuperscript{1} SAK., 36, n. 1 : 3. \textsuperscript{2} SAK., 186 f.). \textsuperscript{3} CT., vol. xiii, pl. 35-38.
If importance attaches to the background of national myths and legends, it may here be observed that the background of old Mesopotamian story is not simple: sea, as in the Creation story, cities in the story of the hero Gilgamesh, and forests amidst the hills as in the story of Enkidu within the Gilgamesh story. But the legendary primordial background of all things was the sea, whence came "the multitudinous birth of mortal things". It was a belief born of experience: the experience of the Euphrates nourishing civilisation on its banks. Hence the notion, in a Semitic Incantation, that of all things the Euphrates water is the creator,1 expressed the accumulated experience of generations of natives of the south country who witnessed the slow but measurable retreat of the waters of the Gulf called Persian, leaving as though by gift of will, fertile land for men; and their experience of near-by islands, such as Dilmun, surpassing rich in foods, upheld by the waters out of which it rose to view.

It is consonant with this reconstruction of background that there is an ancient theology which names, as the creator of man, Ea, the special god of Ziudsudra, the hero of the deluge story. And this may well be the most ancient belief, at least in the marshy lands around the head of the Persian Gulf. For Ea was, apparently, the god of the men of the marsh-land, but, in the later pantheon of all Babylonia, he was not supreme.² And in the earliest written traditions of the creation of man, not only Ea, but also Enlil, national god of the Sumerians, and An, the heaven-god, and even a goddess, Ninhursag, are said to have made man. Of these Enlil, like Ea, is associated with waters in the late Sumerian age, and, at a later time, the creating deity, Ninhursag, is named as his consort. But An, unmentioned in Sumerian texts of the first half of the third-millennium, is a late-comer amongst the great gods, perhaps, as Thureau-Dangin has suggested, a pale invention of the theologians of Uruk.³

The tradition is firm—that out of the toil of waters, sweet and bitter waters, were born the gods, and by the gods came man. The making of man, as described, and variously, in old

1 King, Seven Tales of the Creation, vol. i, pp. 128 f.
Mesopotamian traditions, was the work of a "craftsman" whether the god Marduk who, according to one account solidified (his own?) blood, and formed bone, and made thereof Man; or, according to another, mixed dirt (eperu) with a rush mat, and so created man; or Ea, who from the blood of Kingu, the instigator of the primordial strife, fashioned mankind.¹

The latest written source relevant here is a quotation from Berossus, a priest of Bel, in the third century B.C.: "The whole universe, consisting of moisture, and animals being generated therein, the deity above mentioned (i.e. Bel) took off his own head; upon which the other gods mixed the blood as it gushed out, with earth, and from whence were formed men. On this account it is that they are rational and partake of divine knowledge".²

Berossus attributes man's rationality to his having been constituted in part, of the blood of the head of a god. And for our part we may note that the Enûma Eliš account says expressly that the god whose blood contributed to the making of man, was an evil doer. For it was Kingu who had stirred Tiamat to revolt and the horrors that followed. The implication is, to us at least, clear: the life of men depended, in a real sense, on a death. Also, the blood of which man was formed, was the blood of a sinner. Berossus is witness that with the blood was transmitted intelligence. Would he have agreed that with the blood was also transmitted sinfulness? Lack of evidence forbids further speculation. Perhaps we are far from Genesis!

Why did the gods make man? "In order to settle the gods in dwellings in which their hearts delighted" says the King text.⁴ Elsewhere: the dwellings are to be "in a clean place within the cities he shall build". But there must be for the gods not only dwellings but food also, for one text, in Sumerian and perhaps written soon after 2000 B.C., relates how the gods, though they ate well and drank well in their heavenly DU.KU, were not sated. Whereat, "for the good of their sacred sheep-

¹ Enûma Eliš, Tab. vi, 1.
² Cp. Enûma Eliš, Tablet vi, 5 f.; CT., xii, pl. 36, l. 17 f.; Enûma Eliš, Tablet VI, 29 f. (cp. AfO., xi, 72-74). In Rituals, "Ea formed you of clay".
⁴ line 19.
fold, they put the breath of life into mankind”, and, in their own interest, they baled out from their holy dwelling, livestock and cereals and herbage, and the plough and the yoke. Thereafter there was abundance from heaven!¹

The matter is expressed differently in *Enûma Eliš*: After Ea, the wise one, had created mankind, and had imposed upon them the cult (*dullu*) of the gods”; and in the Babylonian account: “... let us create mankind, the cult of the gods be their portion”. And this latter text goes on to detail the acts of that cult: to establish the boundary ditch, to make shrines fit for the gods, to divide field from field, to irrigate the land, to rear plants, to increase food production, and live stock, fish and fowl, and keep the festivals of the gods.³

In the eighth century B.C., the Greek Hesiod was preaching the dignity of work: “There is no shame in toil; idleness is shame”. But to Hesiod, toil was, by the dispensation of the gods, a path to human excellence. To the Mesopotamian, toil was an imposition on man by the gods for their special benefit: “to till the ground and provide habitations for the gods”;⁴ or, “that the service of the gods might be established; that their shrines might be built”.⁵ The difference between the two philosophies of work is immeasurable.

Nor is there here anything comparable to the Biblical “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread”. For if punishment is intended, it is the innocent who must toil and so render cult. The word *dullu*, rendered *service, cult*, also means *subservience* and *praise*. Kingu, and perhaps the Lamga deities, had refused *dullu*. Those made of the blood of these must render it, for so had the triumphant god decreed.

Perhaps many will feel that the element in the Mesopotamian Myth of man’s making most unlike anything in the Biblical Myth is this: man was made “to liberate” the rebel gods upon whom Marduk had “put a yoke”, according to Tablet vii of the *Enûma*

¹ *RA.,* xxvi (1929), pp. 33-38. ² *Tab. VI*, 25 f. ³ *KAR.,* 4, Obv. 26 ff. ⁴ According to this text, Obv. 1-15, heaven and earth, ditch and canal, banks of Euphrates and Tigris, were in being before man was made. ⁵ *King, Seven Tablets of Creation*, vol. i, Tab. VI, 6-10.
Earlier, in Tablet iv, the matter is put thus: the god Ea communicates to Marduk his plan that "one of the brethren" gods be delivered up and man be fashioned. Marduk agrees: "I will punish Kingu but ye (i.e. the rebel gods) shall live in peace." He imposed the worship of the gods on man and "set free the gods". But need we, as some do, see in this "scapegoat"-ism?

Traditions concerning the creation of man, vary in an important detail. Besides the tradition that the gods, or some particular god, fashioned "man", or "mankind", there is a tradition, on a fragment of the Babylonian Creation Epics, preserved at Istanbul, that the ancestors of man were four, not one as in the Bible. And these four were blackheaded. Another text found at Ashur, in the Sumerian and Akkadian languages, has it that from the blood of two craftsmen deities, slain by order of the gods, sprang two men: (AN)UL.LI.GAR.RA and (AN)NI.GAR.RA. But the interpretation of the Mesopotamian tradition, most commonly accepted by those interested to compare and connect Biblical traditions, as in Genesis, with the Mesopotamian, is that there was a first man (singular). And attempts have been made to identify that first man in Mesopotamian story, as Adapha, the hero of the legend of Adapa. Thus, a distinguished Old Testament scholar, argues that inasmuch as the Adapa story is about a man who was "wise and, deceived by a god, refuses the food and drink offered to him by another god" it resembles the biblical myth of Paradise lost.

But it is certain that the Adapa story is not the Biblical story, and Adapa, in the Mesopotamian account, is not the first man. The phrase *Adapa zēr amēlāti*, sometimes translated "Adapa progenitor of mankind", ought not to be used to prove such opinions. For, in the present condition of the extant text it is doubtful whether the words *zēr amēlāti* refer to Adapa; and, even if they do, the words can, and elsewhere do, mean merely

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3. Cp. hymn to Marduk, maker of men; his word shall not be forgotten "in the mouth of the black-headed ones whom his hands have made", quoted by King, *Babylonian Religion and Mythology*, p. 82.
4. *KAR. 4*, Rev. 11, 12.
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"men"—"humankind". Doubt of the accuracy of the translation, "progenitor of mankind", often given, is increased by the circumstance that the comparable phrase *zēr ilāti* 1 means "offspring of divinity" and cannot mean "progenitor of divinity". That the hero of the myth was especially raised up by a god signifies nothing to the purpose. Ancient Mesopotamian story records other instances of the same god, Ea, and of other gods, raising up men for their purposes.

It remains then, that to our present knowledge, the only names given to the first men by ancient Mesopotamian tradition, are (AN)UL.LI.GAR.RA and (AN)NI.GAR.RA.

What was the condition of the first men? What their earliest physical and cultural circumstance? Here, and summarily, let it be said that no text has yet been found in Mesopotamia which can be safely considered a "Fall of Man" story, and there is no substantial ground for an alleged "Paradise" of first man, in any important respect comparable with the *Genesis* Paradise story.

But a fairly early text, perhaps of old Babylonian times, written in the Sumerian language, has this to say of man's first condition:

Men, when they were formed (?)(ri)
knew not foods and fermented drink
nor knew they clothing wherewith to be clothed;
folk went on their great members (i.e. on all fours);
like sheep, with their mouth they ate grass,
the waters of brooks they drank. 2

Clearly, a primitive condition. Like to that of Enkidu, the god-sent companion of Gilgamesh. 3 It is said that Amru, the goddess,

"fingered some clay, on the desert she moulded (it): thus on the desert
Enkidu made she, a warrior, born and begotten,
Of Ninurta the double, and put forth the whole of his body
Hair: in the way of a woman he snooded his locks (in a fillet)
Sprouted luxuriant growth of his hair like (the awns) of barley,

1 *JRAS.*, 1929, iv, p. 972, l. 9.
2 Most recent study of this text in *RA.*, xxvi, pp. 35-36.
3 The late R. C. Campbell Thompson's translation is used in this lecture as a tribute both to a great scholar and to a zestful rendering; cp.: *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a New Translation, 1928, pp. 10, 11.
Nor knew he people nor land; he was clad in a garb like Sumuqan
E'en with gazelles did he pasture on herbage, along with the cattle
Drank he his fill, with the beasts did his heart delight at the water.

Later he dallied with a courtesan girl who schooled him in
"manners and human comfort"

"He (in the past) of the milk of the wild things to suck was accustom'd.
Bread which she set before him he broke; but he gazed and he stared:
Enkidu bread did not know how to eat, nor had he knowledge
Mead how to quaff!

(Then) the woman made answer, to Enkidu speaking

'Enkidu, taste of the bread, (for) of life 'tis, (forsooth), the essential,
Drink thou, (too), of the mead, 'tis the wonted use of the country'.

Endiku ate of the bread, aye, ate until he was gorged.
Drank of the mead seven bumpers; his spirits rose, (and), exultant,
Clad was his heart, and cheerful his face: himself(?) was he rubbing,
Oil on the hair of his body anointed: and (thus) became human" 1

To go back to a line already quoted from a Sumerian text
in connection with man's earliest condition: "mankind, when
they were formed(?)." But later in the same text we read that
the gods "put life-breath into mankind". It is tempting, but
not necessary, to see here an implication of a notion which, so
far as I am aware, has not been remarked by others. First, man
was "formed". Now the Sumerian word used here is ri,
for which a known Semitic equivalent is emèdu, to come together,
to be set up, constituted. The word in the later line is zi-ša-gál.
Semitic šakānu napišta, i.e. "to put life-breath" into someone,
Is the idea that in the life-history of man there were two stages:
first, an animal-man existence, and later, a human-man existence
due to the addition, by divine action, of the napištu, or that which
makes man other than mere animals?

To proceed, the evidence, thus far adduced, amounts to
this: man was made by the gods, but the condition of the first
man was a sorry one. How then did he rise to those "city-going
ways" which we call civilisation? The late tradition preserved
by Berossus will serve here, though it would be possible to cite
earlier but disjointed evidence relating to a few particulars of
civilisation which the natives assigned to divine beneficence as
cause.

1 Thompson, p. 17.
“At Babylon there was a great resort of people of various nations, who inhabited Chaldaea, and lived in a lawless manner like the beasts of the field.

“In the first year there appeared, from that part of the Erythraean sea which borders upon Babylonia, an animal destitute (emend to endowed with) reason, by name Oannes, whose whole body (according to the account of Apollodorus) was that of a fish; that under the fish’s head he had another head, with feet also below, similar to those of a man, subjoined to the fish’s tail. His voice too, and language, was articulate and human; and a representation of him is preserved even to this day.

“This Being was accustomed to pass the day among men; but took no food at that season; and he gave them an insight into letters and sciences, and arts of every kind. He taught them to construct cities, to found temples, to compile laws, to and explained to them the principles of geometrical knowledge. He made them distinguish the seeds of the earth, and showed them how to collect the fruits; in short, he instructed them in every thing which could tend to soften manners and humanize their lives. From that time, nothing material has been added by way of improvement to his instructions. . . . Moreover, Oannes wrote concerning the generation of mankind; and of their civil polity.”

It would appear that the local tradition represented man as a well-user of things because taught by the gods how to use them. And in this connection it is perhaps worthy of remark that just as the function of things made by the gods was to subserve the use of the gods, so the general attitude of Mesopotamian men towards physical, and even human nature, was that of user towards things for use. There is no evidence that they imagined any other bond or relation between themselves and animals, plants and stones. Certainly nothing comparable to the traditional ancient Indian conception. And perhaps for the obvious reason that the world of their experience revealed no continuity, no con-substantiality. The surrounding landscape included fertile, arid and semi-arid land in such proportions that fertility, whether of earth, man

1 Cory, Ancient Fragments, pp. 22-23; cp. comments of G. J. Cadd in his History and Monuments of Ur, pp. 7 ff.
or beast, must have seemed odd. The area of death far exceeded the area of life, and life must have appeared an accident impossible to account for from within the earth itself. There is nothing to suggest that the ancient Mesopotamian folk had a conception of a soul of the universe, or indeed, of any unity. Even their gods, though arranged hierarchically by theological speculation, are separate deities, and no attempt appears to have been made to devise a formula which could establish them in unity. Even after death, mortals retain their separateness in the great rendezvous of mankind.

Of all the works of the gods, human kind was, on earth, the highest. But among humans there were degrees of worth, measured by likeness to deity. Because man was first fashioned wholly of the blood of god(s), or of a mixture of a god’s blood and clay, he was said to be an image or counterpart of god. But there were men and men: there was man, and a special kind of man, the king, and an inferior kind of man, the slave. The distinction is expressed in a late saying: “Man is the shadow of god, the slave is the shadow of man, but the king is like unto god.” In what this likeness of king to god consists is not further explained, but early Sumerian royal inscriptions describe the reigning king as specially nurtured by divine persons and endowed with wisdom and strength of this or that god or goddess. Later it was said that like the god, the king possessed the good breath (šāru ṭābu) as a special endowment from the hands of the gods.

All the evidence throughout the centuries of ancient Mesopotamian history shows that the institution of kingship was a ubiquitous and continuous element in the life of the land and essential to it. By the beginning of the second millennium B.C. speculation had invented the formula: Kingship descended from heaven. It has been suggested that a document of later date, known as the Myth of Etana, purports to tell, in story-form, the source and the civilising purpose of kingship. But beyond the details that the story begins with the time when there was not, as yet, on earth, tiara, or crown, or sceptre, for they were still “in heaven before Anu”, and that the goddess Ishtar was “seeking a shepherd”, the Myth of Etana adds little to our knowledge on this matter. More explicit is the statement elsewhere
that "the god Ea created the king to be the maintainer (of shrines?).\(^1\)

The Mesopotamian belief that kingship was not a human invention but an institution of heavenly origin, has suggested to some the idea that, other sources failing, kingship as it was conceived to function in heaven might throw light on kinship as it functioned among the Mesopotamians on earth. Accordingly, it has recently \(^2\) been suggested that the early kings of ancient Mesopotamia ruled "democratically" and not, as did the later Assyrian kings, autocratically.\(^3\) The evidence adduced will hardly bear the conclusion desired. Early historical documents of the Sumerian age being of no help here, we may find some measure of support for the "democracy" of the ancient society in a text concerning Gilgamesh, ruler of Uruk, who is said to have laid before the city fathers his plan: "Let us not submit to the palace of Kish, but let us smite it with weapons" and the city-fathers concur with their king's proposal. And later, in the Epic of Gilgamesh, it is said that "Gilgamesh gave ear to the words of his counsellors". But such evidence is not evidence of "democratic" rule. It need imply no more than an oligarchy which, on occasion, even on every state occasion, took counsel together, in assembly, under the primacy of the king. It does not imply the direct government by the people in assembly which alone is democracy.

If the procedure in the heavenly courts is described after the practice in the earthly courts, then the deliberations of the king and his elders must often have been merry occasions. For in heaven the assembly of the deities was an occasion for a feast. the eating of bread, the quaffing of strong drink in quantity beyond the body's capacity to hold, and music withal.\(^4\) After which the gods proceeded to business. It may be remarked here that neither in heaven nor in earth was there "politics" as we have understood the term since the Greeks. Society in both spheres was static, and controlled by tradition, from which there was no appeal. In earthly states, dogma, in the literal

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\(^1\) Text: F. H. Weisbach, *Babylonische Miscellen* (Leipzig, 1903), pl. 12, 37.
\(^3\) But, Assyrian Kings also were warned, "If (the King) does not heed the wise men, his land shall revolt against him", cp. *Cun. Inscriptions, W. Asia*, iv, pl. 48.
sense, reigned. The only question was: what does "seem good" to the gods? And that only the gods themselves knew, and, on occasion, declared it to men through omens, dreams and the like.

Whatever the difference in degrees of worth or of kinds of responsibility amongst men, all were under the same curse, as it was written: "the goddess Ninharsag uttered a curse by the name of the god Enki: when a man dies he shall not see the face of life again".1 This applied to kings, men and slaves. Already in the third millennium B.C., Sumerian rulers made length of days the burden of their prayers to the gods. In the letters of the old Babylonian period, correspondents wished their friends long life by the gods. To all, at every period, life was the sum-mum bonum, in a land where life was precarious in the literal sense, as contingent upon answer to prayer. The ancient Mesopotamian does not seem ever to have come to terms with the relativity of man and of all life. Only the gods are thought of as being at home in the world which they had made, whereas their mortal creatures know that "The gods when they created mortals, allotted death to man; life they kept for themselves", as the wine-maker said to Gilgamesh, the man who would escape death if he could. Accordingly, Gilgamesh would have done well to heed the advice of the wine-maker.

Gilgamesh, full be thy belly.
Each day and night be thou merry (and) daily keep holiday revel.
Each day and night do thou dance and rejoice; (and) fresh be thy raiment;
Let thy head be clean washed, bathe thyself in the water;
Cherish the little one holding thy hand: be thy spouse in thy bosom
Happy—for this is the dower of man.2

From the Sumerian age proper we lack texts which reveal the contemporary beliefs concerning the nature of life after death. But the Sumerian conception of the underworld lived on in the vocabulary which their Semitic successors employed. For the majority of the Semitic Mesopotamian names for the world of the dead are Semiticised forms of Sumerian words. Arallu, that lower part of the "mountain of the lands" of which our earth is the upper part: ekurru, the house of the mountain: kigallu, the great land.

1 Nippur Text: En-e-ba-am, iii, 37-38.
2 Thompson, Epic of Gilgamish, p. 46.
The underworld is vast (iršitu rapaštu): it is a steppe land (sēru), a ruin (ḥarbu), devastation (namu), a house of dust (bīt ipri), a prison house (bīt mēsiri), for the dead men, the men below. It is a world subject to its own deities, served by a hierarchy of functionaries. And from it there is no return.¹

We are not, as yet, able to describe life down there in any detail. Perhaps the ancient living themselves wrote little of it. That it was a fearsome existence is conveyed in the twelfth tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh. The dead Enkidu is permitted by Nergal, the god of the underworld, to return to earth, and is there questioned by his friend Gilgamesh.

Tell, O my friend, tell, o my friend, tell me—
What thou hast seen of the laws of the underworld?

To whom Enkidu answers:

I will not tell thee, I will not tell thee—(for) were I to tell thee
What I have seen of the laws of the underworld—sit thee down weeping.
(Then) let me sit me down weeping.²

But were all the dead treated alike in the world below? Was there no distinction of lot, no discrimination? In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu reports that down there some were “at rest upon a couch”. More illuminating is a Sumerian text which says: “The just enjoy their rest(?), the wicked are cast into the deep abyss”, for, as the same text has it, the queen of the kingdom of the dead avers: “I have in my hand the breath of life; the good man shall have enjoyment, the wicked shall not escape from my power”.

We get more information from a report of a dream on an eighth century text. A king in his dream goes down to hell. The god of pestilence, Namtar, is there, having a sword in his right hand. And Mu-u-(tu), the divine personification of death, having the head and hands of a man, but the feet of a serpent. Other monsters also. And, of course, the Lord of All, Nergal, enthroned, armed, and wearing the royal tiara. About him are his court of six-hundred great gods, prostrate to his right and to his left. The dreamer dreams that Nergal questions him, and

² Thompson, p. 59.
that he is befriended by Ishum, the fire deity, counsellor of Nergal, and life-saver and lover of justice. His appeal to his lord: “Do not bring death upon the man, O King of the Earth” (i.e. of the Underworld), is granted. Nergal informs the dreamer: “Because thou hast not neglected me, I will not give sentence of perdition”. And he goes on to point out that the fate of kings after death is decided by their deeds during life. After hearing Nergal’s command: “Go back to the high places” (the upper-world), the dreamer awakes.¹

To end: it is clear that from the scattered evidence, in myth, legend, and ritual, we can frame the substance of ancient Mesopotamian answers to the classic catechism questions such as: Who made you? Why did God make you? To whose image and likeness did God make you? Is this likeness in your body or in your soul? What must I do to save my soul? How must I worship God?

The burden of it all? Perhaps this:

Considerate la vostra semenza;
Fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
Ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.²

But what would the ancient Mesopotamian have meant by such words of Catechism or of Dante by which we moderns translate the ancient texts?

¹ Cp. E. Ebeling, Tod und Leben, S. 1-9; von Soden; ZA., 1936, April, S. 1-31.
² Dante, Inferno, xxvi, 118.