

Divine Commerce:
Near Eastern Influence on Greek Mythology

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Precis

My paper examines the origin of Greek mythology from Near Eastern sources. While there are parallels, it is necessary to establish a connection between the east and west in order to demonstrate how one culture influenced the other. This thesis is that the early Greeks, namely Homer and Hesiod, adopted three primary elements from Near Eastern sources, presentation, characterization, and paradigm, but they also introduced abstract deities. I will prove this by showing that the Greeks interacted with the Near East, and thereby examining the relevant mythological literature. This thesis relies on both Greek and Near Eastern sources, including the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Theogony*, *Works and Days*, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, *Enuma Elish*, Baal cycle, and *Atra-Hasis*.

Introduction

Myths often provide a path for modern scholars to identify the values and psychology of ancient societies. Within these systems, there are certain myths that appear so unique that they do not entertain the possibility of existing in another culture. The mythology of the Greeks, arguably one of the most widely known systems, presents a wealth of divine and heroic literature that is ultimately reflective of the ancient culture. Take the Hesiodic version of the birth of Aphrodite as an example. In the *Theogony*, Kronos, the Titan son of Ouranos, usurped his father's throne and castrated him. When he tossed the severed genitals into the sea, the water began to foam. From this arose a girl, riding upon a clam, named Aphrodite. When the blood dripped upon Gaia, three other divine beings were born: the Giants, the Furies, and the Meliai, or tree nymphs. As odd as it seems, this motif was not an original creation for Hesiod. A story much like this existed in Hurrian mythology in the *Song of Kumarbi*. The god Kumarbi bit off the genitals of Anu, his father, in his attempt to assume control over the gods. As he did this, he became pregnant with three gods, Tešub, Tigris, and Tašmišu, spitting out the latter two. The third, Tešub, was cut out of his body and became the storm-deity, according to Hurrian myth.

While the flagrant similarities suggest an association between the two stories, scholars have debated whether Greek mythology, as well as other mythologies, actually derived from Near Eastern¹ sources. The argument cannot be made simply based on parallel examples. The subtle changes to the tale could be explained as a variation in cultural taste or the desire to put a different spin on the story. However, it might also be that the latter mythology did not stem from the earlier at all, instead relying on a shared archetype or the physical movement of Near Eastern cultures into the Aegean. Truly, this subject opens the door for a great deal of

¹ "Near Eastern" refers to Eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamian cultures. Specifically for this thesis, it refers to Babylonians, Hurrians, and Canaanites.

conjecture and speculation, whether Greek myth is eclectic, original, or the next phase of Near Eastern myth. Therefore, instead of guessing how the ancients developed or adapted their mythological systems, the reasonable approach would be to examine the physical evidence between Greece and the Near East. A careful dissection of the literature will give a clear idea of whether the Near East had an actual effect on the Greek system, or these parallel myths are only conveniently coincidental.

If the Greeks assumed the characteristics of another mythological system, how were they able to accomplish this? It may be supposed that the Greeks, in their contact with Near Eastern societies in Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Egypt, were privy to the customs of these cultures, including their oral and written stories. Before the Homeric era, the modern belief is that the majority of the Greek mainland lost their previous writing systems and was thus illiterate. However, this was a problem unique to the Greeks. While only small populations of Near Eastern cultures were literate, they nevertheless had developed writing systems. Therefore, when the Greeks came into contact with these societies in the age before Homer, it is possible that they encountered these advanced writing techniques. The Phoenician alphabet was not introduced in the Peloponnesus until roughly 800 BC, but it is possible that it gradually developed in the years prior, when the Greeks were becoming a more commercial society in the Mediterranean. Writing was a crucial innovation in Greece following the Dark Ages, particularly for the preservation of the long-standing oral traditions, such as Homer and the Trojan Cycle. In fact, there is a recent scholarly opinion based on the formal complexity of the Homeric epics that even if the poems were composed orally, Homer himself may have dictated them while he was still alive.²

² Powell p. 2.

Why is writing so important to the origins of Greek mythology? Written literature is the clearest path for comparing two foreign traditions. Since the earliest comprehensive mythology comes from Homer and Hesiod, centuries after the disappearance of Linear B, they are the best sources for examination. Fortunately, the epics of Homer and Hesiod share a number of qualities with existing Near Eastern works. If the Greeks came into contact with the Near Eastern cultures for a significant period of time, then they must have had the opportunity able to adopt and alter the mythology and the presentation of the stories to suit their own unique tastes and needs. In this paper, my thesis is that the Greeks implemented the three important elements of Near Eastern mythological systems through their extensive commercial contact, but they added their own touch, separating Greek mythology from its origins. The elements that passed over from the Near Eastern societies are form, characterizations of the deities, and paradigms or motifs. The Greeks themselves, stemming from Homer and Hesiod, emphasized the existence of abstract deities, allowing the stories to take a more humanistic³ approach than the earlier Near Eastern examples.

In order to present this argument, there are a number of questions that must first be addressed. Modern scholars have opened debate as to the location of the commerce between the east and west, challenging the notion that Homer or the earlier oral poets directly interacted with foreign influences. Another possibility is the theory of archetype or religious evolution, suggesting that the similarities are based on a natural inclination. This thesis focuses on the similarities coming from derivation as opposed to an archetypal source. Finally, an integral caveat is in the danger of drawing conclusions from parallels alone. Parallels can be arbitrarily drawn between two systems that share certain elements in common. However, evidence, which

³ Humanism, in this regard, means that the stories accentuate the role of humans in the world rather than focusing entirely on the role of the divine.

shows inter-cultural commerce, would increase the probability that the parallels between Greece and the Near East are based on historical circumstances. Once these issues are addressed in chapter 1, it is possible to examine that relationship between Greek and Near Eastern mythologies through the three main elements.

Chapter 2 deals with the three elements. The first of these elements, form, refers mainly to the means of expressing the stories. For the Near Eastern societies as well as the early Greeks, epic poetry⁴ was a rather common way to carefully detail these myths. Long before the prose narrative, epic poetry allowed the author to recite lines rhythmically to tell tales of heroes and gods. Some of the most famous ancient works are labeled epic in the orderly account of the narrative. Homer and Hesiod were epic poets, but poems such as the Babylonian *Gilgamesh*, *Atra-Hasis*, and *Enuma Elish* were composed in a similar narrative form. The modern label is not enough to make a sure connection, but certain grammatical components provide hints for the comparison. Characterization of the gods is another important factor in looking for congruency. While this category has the greatest risk of archetype, specific traits of deities may not be easily wrought from different imaginations. The powers of gods, their behaviors, and their relationships to mankind and one another aid in determining the closeness of Greek and Near Eastern mythology. The use of deities to explain natural phenomena is not a difficult concept to develop, but the hierarchy of gods reveals the legitimacy of comparing the east and the west. Finally, the various motifs, or paradigms, provide a number of possible connections. The use of cosmogonies or theogonies was a key development and a meticulous approach to organizing a cultural pantheon. Hesiod's *Theogony* provides one of the most comprehensive examples of the Greek hierarchy, but it is not the original example of such a progression.

⁴ While the metrical structure of N.E. epic does not follow the dactylic hexameter standard, this term refers to a narrative poem that details a story of gods or heroes.

Inherent in these cosmogonies is the concept of a *theomachy*. The gods did not always exist, but they were born and ultimately challenged one another for supremacy of the heavens. This type of succession myth was key to both Greek and Near Eastern traditions. After showing the transmission of these elements from the east to the west, it is possible to look at specific examples of parallel myths, helping to show the veracity of the Near Eastern foundation.

Chapter 3 examines specific parallels between the myths. Even though it is dangerous to draw conclusions from parallels alone, as long as there is historical evidence supporting interaction, certain similarities show the level of influence the Near East had over Greek epic literature. The figure of Aphrodite is an important conduit between Greek and Mesopotamian cultures, relating closely to the Assyrian goddess Ishtar. The myth of Aphrodite's birth suggests that, apart from the other Olympians, she was from a different tradition. The concept of a *nekuia*, appearing clearly in *Odyssey* 11, was a common motif in early mythological literature. *Nekuia*, signifying a journey to or contact with the world of the dead, was prevalent in Near Eastern heroic epics, such as *Gilgamesh*. The connection between the living and the dead seems like a natural aspect of any religion or mythology, but the specific manner of the Homeric *nekuia* resonates with earlier examples. The story of Kumarbi from Hurrian lore reflects motifs and themes relevant to Hesiod's *Theogony*. Both epics are succession myths, like the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, and they share unique characteristics, including the Kronos/Ouranos plot. Along with these concrete examples, there are a number of small details such as names and epithets that hint to cultural commerce. The particular parallels show the extent of the Near East's influence over Greek mythology, but there is a significant difference that separates the Greek system.

The concept of abstract deities in Greek mythology will be discussed in chapter 4. The standard motive behind ancient mythology focuses on deities as the personification of natural phenomena, such as weather patterns, astronomy, or human physiology, such as medicine and death. But the Greeks take it a step further, especially in Hesiod. Homer and Hesiod describe particular ideas and abstract concepts as divine entities. This included themes such as discord, fate, and justice. By adding abstract deities, the Greeks were able to humanize mythology to a greater extent than earlier examples. There remained a hierarchy of gods, but even they were subject to these *daimones*. The adherence to certain rules and matters of justice separated mankind from the gods, lessening the significance of the divine in favor of a higher place for humans. Hesiod reflected this notion in his *Works and Days*, describing the progression of man through the Five Ages. This motif appeared elsewhere in Persian and Egyptian literature, but Hesiod adds a critical component. One of the ages is called the age of heroes, likely referring to the time of the Trojan War. While mankind squandered their power and gifts in the previous three ages, the heroes were noble and just. This provides a counter to the idea that mankind's progression is entirely downward. Hesiod's motive was to exalt the value of justice as a necessity for mankind. Thus, the inclusion of abstract ideas created an almost philosophical aspect of Greek mythology through the application of humanism.

By this course, I intend to show that Greek mythological literature utilized Near Eastern influences. But borrowing motifs and deities was merely the beginning. The early Greeks, Homer and Hesiod, redefined the elements of mythology. They decreased the strictly religious purpose of mythology and engendered it with applicable lessons on humanity. Yet before the evidence can be ascertained, it is necessary to examine a few questions underlying the thesis. These will be examined in the following chapter.

Chapter 1: Alternative Possibilities

The origin of Greek mythology has encouraged a variety of debates among scholars. While the apparent similarities suggest that the pre-Homeric societies of the Aegean had extensive contact with the Near East, particularly Anatolia and the Levant, a number of questions have arisen as to the legitimacy of the theory that Greek myth is derivative of Near Eastern material. One theory offers that the commerce between the eastern Mediterranean societies, mainly the Levant and Egypt, made contact with the Aegean peoples through Cyprus and ultimately the island of Euboea. Another criticism of the notion of creative exchange between Greece and the Near East is the theory of a religious archetype, such as was proposed by Carl Jung. Along the lines of archetype is the suggestion of religious evolution, or a natural progression of religious complexity. The texts of Homer and Hesiod themselves have garnered attention with regard to the oral tradition, whether the commonly held belief that the Homeric Greeks were illiterate or literate through their contact with the Near East. Finally, scholars have noted that there is a danger in drawing conclusions from parallels alone. Each of these discussions has relevance to the topic of the origin of Greek mythology, since they challenge the proposal that the Greeks developed their own mythology based on Near Eastern cultures through an oral tradition. These approaches are not false or disprovable, but my thesis contends that they are the less likely to be the cause.

The source of contact between the east and west is a relevant subject for debate, since the region of interaction may determine how much the early Greeks assimilated for their own purposes. The traditional view holds that the two epic poets, Homer and Hesiod, formulated their poems based on the local oral traditions in Anatolia. However, certain scholars, such as Martin West, disagree with this established view. West supposes that Euboea was the crucible

for the composition of these elaborate mythologies instead of Anatolia. During the Dark Age of Greece, archaeological evidence supports that Euboea prospered in trade with the eastern Mediterranean nations, such as Egypt and the people of the Levant.⁵ The influence of eastern cultures thrived in the commercial environment of Euboea, transferring not only substantial goods, like pottery, but also creative paradigms. West asserts that the epic poets most likely found the sources for their material in Euboea as opposed to Anatolia or Mycenae, especially Hesiod.⁶ The problem in this issue is not where Homer and Hesiod learned the traditions for their poems, but rather the extent to which the traditions were changed in the centuries before they composed. The literate Mycenaean culture vanished in the Dark Ages, but traces of this persisted through the period. Bards retained their tradition and carried it forward to Euboea, where it likely meshed with the imported ideas of the east.⁷ If that is so, as West posits, then the source material at Euboea contained a developed mix of Greek and eastern influences. This challenges the theory that Homer and Hesiod found their influence directly from the Near East, if West is correct. The modern scholar is unable to divide Mycenaean and Near Eastern traditions simply because substantial evidence from the Mycenaean Greece has been lost over time. For this paper, the assumption is that Homer and Hesiod may have used this Euboean source material, but they themselves also applied Near Eastern influence to the existing oral tradition in Anatolia.

On a more abstract level, the theory of religious or mythological archetype poses a potential obstacle for the theory that Greek mythology derives influence from the Near East. During the Dark Ages, the small Greek societies struggled to regain the same prominence they had during

⁵ West p. 170.

⁶ West p. 171.

⁷ West p. 167.

the Mycenaean period. At this time, they retained elements of their earlier religious tendencies, even though religious practice reduced to primitive means. Carl Jung's conception of religious archetype argues that humans are naturally endowed with typical experiences that are passed down through the generations.⁸ These vague conceptions in the psyche are merely "pathways" for individuals to find meaning in experience or myth. Religion and myth, therefore, are compensations of the imagination that solidify these unclear conceptions of the psyche.⁹ In this view, similarities in religion or myth can be explained as an innate attraction of the human imagination to certain experiences. Simply put, human beings naturally form myths as a way to express universal human experience. If this is the case, then it follows that Greek myths may not have any relation to Near Eastern myths. Instead, both stem from the same archetypes, and the parallels are mere compensations of the imagination. The Greeks would not have derived the stories from the Near East, but rather they formed similar paradigms on their own. Jung calls these creative extensions of archetype, namely myths, the "metaphorical language of the soul."¹⁰ Again, this theory cannot be disproved with regard to the Greeks because it involves human psychology. It is a matter of personal belief for the modern scholar, whether these stories were derivative or based on a shared, innate notion. It is possible that Jung's notion of archetype may help explain how the Greeks could easily otherwise assimilate alien customs into their own culture, but a positive or negative proof is improbable. Jung helps explain how humans naturally tend toward the mythical or divine, but he also leaves the door open for cultural interaction. So, although Archetype is a possible alternative to the theory of the Near Eastern influence on Greek mythology, it may only go so far as to indicate the natural

⁸ Forsyth p. 62.

⁹ Forsyth p. 62.

¹⁰ Forsyth p. 94.

tendencies of human beings to personify their experiences. These experiences, if indeed common, would merely facilitate inter-cultural interaction. This thesis allows for the realistic possibility of Jung's theory, but derivation is the consideration in this paper.

Along the same lines as archetype, the concept of religious evolution is yet another possible obstacle to the theory of Near Eastern derivation. Though it is similar to Jung's theory, religious evolution has less of an impact on the topic at hand. In a general sense, religious evolution follows the trends of "social Darwinism," applying Darwin's scientific theory to social institutions. Religious evolution, as a theory, posits that religions begin simplistically in primitive societies, but they become more complex as those societies reach new levels of progress or civilization.¹¹ According to Robert Bellah, the system of myth during the Dark Ages of Greece would be classified under primitive religion, since the symbols of the age were highly worldly and simplistic.¹² Yet as the society becomes more developed, so do the religious institutions. Therefore, in archaic religions, such as the Greeks' around Homer's time, the focus shifts from mere natural phenomena to the connection between mankind and the natural world.¹³ This creates two possible problems for the idea that Greek mythology originated in the Near East. The first problem is that, like Jung's archetype, the Greeks may have developed their mythology on their own during the Dark Ages. However, this would not explain how the Greek manifestations of certain divinities share striking resemblances to Near Eastern conceptions. But the second problem is that this theory suggests the possibility that Greek mythology is simply an evolved formulation of Near Eastern cosmologies. This would mean that Greek mythology is not different at all from the Near East, but rather a branch of the larger spectrum.

¹¹ Bellah p. 358.

¹² Bellah p. 362.

¹³ Bellah p. 365.

However unlikely this may seem, it is feasible under the theory of religious evolution that the complexity of Greek mythology may reflect the shift from primitive to archaic thought within Near Eastern myth without garnering any alien influence. While there is only a subtle difference between this and my thesis, the paper argues that the Greeks had their own tradition and expanded it through outside influence. Still, the distant chance that Greek mythology is the product of social evolution provides a worthy argument against its origin in Near Eastern culture.

The theories of archetype and evolution each create significant difficulties for the theory of the foreign derivation of Greek mythology, but neither can be proven true or false with the existing evidence. Despite the lack of substantial evidence, scholars have debated the reality of an oral tradition. Based solely on the complexity of epic poetry, scholars have offered that perhaps these works could only have been composed in a literate society. As G.S. Kirk illustrates, the Dark Age Greeks existed in an international arena that included many literate cultures.¹⁴ If that was so, then it is entirely likely that intellectual commerce occurred, even before writing was supposed to arise in Greece. Kirk notes that the intricate order used in Hesiod's *Theogony* suggests an established literary tradition, even if there was no formal literacy yet.¹⁵ Much of this debate on the oral tradition comes from the theory that was first established by Milman Parry, and later elaborated by A.B. Lord. Parry proposed that Homer's poems were orally composed, while Lord adapted this idea arguing that the epics were possibly dictated.¹⁶ Based on the Parry/Lord experiments, it was speculated that instead of many versions of the oral poem existing for two centuries after their composition, they were written

¹⁴ Kirk p. 78.

¹⁵ Kirk p. 77.

¹⁶ Powell p. 2.

down at that time of their composition, placing the introduction of writing in Greece much earlier than is commonly thought.¹⁷ This discrepancy between oral and written composition forces a debate about the source of Homer's material. If he were indeed literate when he composed his poems, then it is possible that he had a great deal of contact with Near Eastern cultures through their literature. But if his poems were solely oral, then the years between composition and recording would see a number of adjustments made by the Greeks as it was passed down. The traditional belief that Homer did not have writing at his disposal allows for the possibility of Near Eastern influence. However, the traces of this influence would have been well covered by the later Greeks through the oral tradition until it was finally written down.

A final problem with a partial Near Eastern derivation is the danger of drawing conclusions from parallels. Modern scholars have the luxury of thousands of years' worth of texts from all over the world at their disposal. It is easy to read material from two cultures and find parallels. Making absolute assertions, however, that connect two different cultures based merely on parallels is a scholarly fallacy. Charles Penglase observes that while parallels are often striking, it is difficult to assess how much influence one system had over the other, in this case Greece and the Near East.¹⁸ His solution is a simple, two-step method. There must first be evidence of substantial and relevant cultural interaction, and second the parallels must be weighed by strict criteria, such as the closeness of description.¹⁹ In this way, the parallels in the literature of two cultures may be judged as realistically connected. However, the danger of citing parallels remains an appropriate objection, particularly in the situation of Near Eastern myths. Since there was not one system of Near Eastern mythology, but rather numerous traditions that

¹⁷ Powell p. 15.

¹⁸ Penglase p. 2.

¹⁹ Penglase p. 5.

existed and changed over a period of thousands of years, it is crucial that the myths, which inspired the Greeks, came from cultures that had contact with the Greeks. That way, the parallels are drawn from realistic possibilities as opposed to simply vague similarities.

These are the most significant arguments against the possible Near Eastern effect on Greek mythology. The rest of this paper is based on the original thesis that the primary aspects of Greek mythology, namely form, characterization, and motifs, came from Near Eastern influence and developed through an oral tradition. The theories of archetype or evolution remain realistic proposals. However, they are not relevant to the argument of this thesis. As for the ambiguity of parallels, they can be justified through historically attested interaction. The parallels used to show Near Eastern derivation must come from actual situations of cultural commerce. Finally, this discourse is not attempting to support or deny recent claims, such as West's postulation of Euboea as a source or Lord's proof of a writing system in Homer's time. These conjectures detract from the textual evidence that supports the original thesis. Before detailing the specific parallels between Greek and Near Eastern mythology, it is necessary to examine the primary elements that the early poets adopted from the Near East for their cosmologies.

Chapter 2: Three Elements of Influence

Since I have identified a number of peripheral issues at hand, I may now proceed to test the main argument of the thesis. But before the thesis itself can be examined, it is necessary to define the main terms. This examination relies heavily on the word "myth," but such a general term can have various meanings. There are two definitions posed by Classical scholars, one according to the Parry/Lord theory and the other stated by Walter Burkert. The Parry/Lord identification of "myth" is that it is a traditional tale, generally passed down from one generation to the next.²⁰ Burkert, on the other hand, builds upon the Parry/Lord model, adding a crucial extension. He claims that "myth" is "a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance."²¹ Burkert attests that myths are not the same as fables, in that myths have a great deal of influence and application in reality. By both definitions, Homer's epic would be labeled "myths," but under Burkert's classification they contain an appeal to social concerns.²² For the purposes here, the term "myth" will refer to Burkert's identification for both Greek, namely Homeric and Hesiodic, and Near Eastern systems.

Another important concern is the specific Near Eastern mythologies that influenced Homer and Hesiod. The broad heading "Near East" is somewhat misleading, since it encompasses many of cultures over thousands of years. These various cultures underwent a number of changes through commerce, war, and migration. Therefore, the focus here is on the Babylonians, Hurrians, and Canaanites. Analytical comparison of the extant literature shows that the early Greeks likely came into contact with these examples. The Akkadian epic *Gilgamesh* existed in a number of forms including Aramaic, possibly the means by which the

²⁰ Powell p. 18.

²¹ Powell p. 19.

²² Powell p. 19.

Greeks were able to learn the myth.²³ The *Baal Cycle* from the Canaanite city of Ugarit provides a number of direct relations to Greek myth. The Hurrian *Song of Kumarbi*, though not an epic, contains motifs similar to the succession myths in Hesiod. The Babylonian epic *Atrahasis* appeared long before the Greeks developed their mythology, but the story was well known throughout the Near East.²⁴ *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation story, was likely circulating widely during the time of Homer, though composition of the epic is argued between the 15th and 11th centuries BC.²⁵ These stories, spanning a millennium, are the best possible extant sources for Near Eastern elements in Greek mythology.

From here, I may begin to look at the three elements designated in the thesis. The Greeks welcomed influence in three areas: form, characterization, and motif. Form refers to the formal means of transmitting myth. The common thread between the east and the west in this regard is the use of epic poetry. The term "epic" has a distorted array of meanings today, but in the Classical sense, it refers to an extensive, metrical narrative. J. Vansina separates oral messages into three genres: poetry, epic, and narrative. Epic here differs from poetry in so far as the exact words used are more important to the meaning in poems than in epic.²⁶ The story would remain the same in general, but the words could be different. Thus, copies of epics often exhibit major variations of exact wording, though the story itself remains constant. It is useful to regard the epics here as deliberate works, even if the actual copies have variations. "Epic" also does not simply encompass legends of heroes, such as the *Iliad* or *Gilgamesh*.²⁷ Hesiod's *Works and Days*, an epic on the topic of justice, follows the same rules as Homer, but the subject matter is

²³ Burkert p. 32.

²⁴ Burkert p. 95.

²⁵ Heidel p. 13.

²⁶ Powell p. 16.

²⁷ West p. 154.

different. Therefore, epic is not merely a tale of individual heroism, as it is often coined in modern culture, but it generally involved a connection between men and gods in Classical examples.

One of the earliest extant examples of epic poetry is *Gilgamesh*, elements of which date as far back as the 3rd millennium BC. Several stories about Gilgamesh were linked together in the early 2nd millennium BC. The epic, as it exists in its so-called "standard" form, appeared toward the end of the 2nd millennium BC.²⁸ Even though the standard form likely saw the addition and omission of numerous events from the original separate stories, it retained the principle theme of the struggle between men and gods.²⁹ This theme persisted through other epic poems, though there was no standard of emphasis. Some epics focus on the dominion of gods over men, while others try to forge a relation between the mortal and the divine. *Gilgamesh*, like both Homeric works, reveals the division of men and gods through a heroic adventure. This style of presentation endured throughout Mesopotamia. The Babylonians in the 2nd millennium refashioned ancient Sumerian works. At the same time, they created their own epics, such as the *Atra-Hasis*. The epic is mainly a creation myth, although it includes a flood story nearly identical to the excerpt from *Gilgamesh*.³⁰ Though these are long and complicated stories, the use of rhythm and possibly musical accompaniment made it easier for the bard to recount the story as well as a larger audience to hear it.³¹ Ultimately, it was essential that these stories were written down, even if the majority of the population was unable to read.

Epic literature is thus well attested in the Near East. How then did the epic form transmit from the east to the west? West posits that the Mycenaeans, before the Dark Age, had an epic

²⁸ Ferry p. x.

²⁹ Gresseth p. 14.

³⁰ Burkert p. 89.

³¹ Powell p. 4.

form that was written down with Linear B. More interesting, he argues, that the few fragments that do exist reveal the use of hexameter.³² The Mesopotamian epics use meters that were different than the standard dactylic hexameter of Greek epics. The *Atra-Hasis*, for example, employs a very basic melody, emphasizing semantic parallelism rather than metrical rhythm.³³ In terms of meter, Greek epic, then, may have retained the metrical style used by the Mycenaeans, since here it more closely relates to that of Homer than the Near Eastern sources. However, it is exceedingly difficult to demonstrate whether the ninth century Greeks were able to read Linear B or Akkadian tablets for that matter. West continues to argue that a great deal of Homer's language and material derived from an earlier style of Aeolic epic, severing a direct link between Mycenaean and Ionic epic.³⁴ The basis of West's proposal comes almost entirely from the language itself. However, even though his observations are apt, they do not prove nor deny influence from Near Eastern cultures for the initial development of epic. Whether the epic form came to Homer through the oral tradition or from direct contact with the Near East is impossible to prove, since his poems include elements from both. It makes sense that the Greeks borrowed the form of a metered, narrative poem from the Mesopotamian examples.

Once the Greeks developed a formal means of transmitting myth through epic, they attributed unique characteristics to each of the deities. While many of the names come from the Greek language, specific traits seem to refer to Near Eastern gods. The appearance of storm-gods in the Near Eastern mythologies provides a direct relation to the primary deity in Greek mythology, Zeus. The name "Zeus" was not native to the Greeks, but rather an Indo-European word referring to a storm deity. Near Eastern systems employ a storm deity as one of their

³² West p. 158.

³³ Lambert p. 6.

³⁴ West p. 162.

significant gods: Teshub in Hurrian, Baal in Canaanite, and Adad Akkadian myth. These deities held the highest positions among the gods, whether they were called king or not. Likewise, *Zeus terpikeraunos* ("delighting in thunder") assumed the title "king of gods and men" after usurping the throne from his father Kronos. Perhaps the closest parallels to Zeus comes from the West Semitic region of Ugarit. Ugarit, a port city in Syria, was easily accessible by any ancient Mediterranean traveler. Serving as the main port of entry into Syria, Ugarit was a remarkably cosmopolitan city.³⁵ Therefore, the Canaanite story of the god Baal has some relevance to the argument, since there is ample archaeological evidence of contact with the Aegean. Like Zeus, Baal is a storm-deity who eventually assumed power over gods and men. His name "Baal" literally means "lord," which was transferred from an epithet to a proper name. In the *Baal Cycle*, he is referred to as "Prince Baal, Rider on the Clouds."³⁶ Similarly, Zeus is called *anax* ("lord") and *nephelegereta* ("cloud-gatherer") in Homer.³⁷ Both are father to gods, and each one has struggles with his divine kin. This does not prove that the Greeks were influenced by Ugarit, but the relation is too close to relegate to mere coincidence.

Storm deities are common throughout the Near East and Greece and serve many religious functions, as well as reflect agricultural concerns. But the pantheon of gods includes a number of similar types of natural phenomena. If Baal was the god of storms, who was the god of the sun? For the Canaanites, this was Shamash, and for the Greeks, it was Apollo. Each of these mythological systems had a god for specific natural features, including the sun, the moon, the seas and even a personification of death. For the Greeks, following the series of circumstances leading the Zeus' kingship, the three primary gods in the pantheon were Zeus, god of the sky,

³⁵ Powell p. 34.

³⁶ Coogan p. 88.

³⁷ Homer, Lattimore p. 72 (l. 511).

Poseidon, god of the sea, and Hades, god of the underworld. Similarly, the *Baal Cycle* includes an account of three Canaanite deities battling with one another, Baal, Yammu (the sea deity), and Mot (the god of death).³⁸ In the Ugartic text, Yammu challenges the gods to give up Baal for death.³⁹ This motif may have come from a Western Semitic story similar to *Enuma Elish*. In *Enuma Elish*, the two water gods, Tiamat and her husband Apsu, try to destroy the younger generation of gods. When Apsu tried to carry out his quest, Ea lulled him into sleep and killed him.⁴⁰ This enraged Tiamat, so she challenged the other gods to fight against Ea. But Ea volunteered his son, Marduk, to counter Tiamat, ultimately killing the goddess and assuming kingship over the gods.⁴¹

This motif of gods hostile to one another flourishes in Greek mythology, particularly in Hesiod's *Theogony*. These variant theomachies are used to explain why certain natural phenomena occur, but more importantly establish domain. The Greek model follows a similar patten. Zeus gains his power by defeating the Titans, but he ultimately becomes lord of the sky by drawing lots with his two brothers, Poseidon and Hades.

All was divided among us three ways, each given his domain. I when the lots were shaken drew the grey sea to live in forever; Hades drew the lot of the mists and the darkness, and Zeus was allotted the wide sky, in the cloud and the bright air. But earth and high Olympos are common to all three.⁴²

This practice of drawing lots has been a point of debate, since the Greeks may have borrowed the practice from the Near East. In *Atra-Hasis*, the gods use lots to divide up the domains of the earth. "The gods had clasped hands together, had cast lots and had divided."⁴³ It

³⁸ Powell p. 34.

³⁹ Coogan p. 75.

⁴⁰ Heidel p. 4.

⁴¹ Heidel p. 8.

⁴² Homer, Lattimore p. 314 (l. 189-193).

⁴³ Lambert p. 43. Tablet I, l. 11-12.

is by chance that a figure like Zeus is the most powerful deity, creating a certain tension between him and his fellow gods. Therefore, it appears commonplace in Near Eastern and Greek mythology that the sky and earth have a relation to one another, but they are also conflicting.

Other deities have realistic functions in mythology as well. Aphrodite, a curious figure in Greek mythology, is the goddess of love and fertility. In the ancient Near East, fertility was a pragmatic concern, both for men and women, as well as for agriculture. One of the closest comparisons for Aphrodite is the goddess Ishtar, who was also a fertility deity, as well as a war goddess. In *Gilgamesh*, Ishtar is overcome with love for the hero, but he rejects her.⁴⁴ In turn, she sends the Bull of Heaven to wreak havoc upon the city of Uruk.⁴⁵ This may be a heroic myth, but the episode with Ishtar has implications of fertility and the opponent of fertility, death. Aphrodite is often associated with Ishtar in comparisons, as well as the Western Semitic goddess Astarte. Both Astarte and Ishtar are war goddesses, unlike Aphrodite, though all three are connected with love, fertility, and sexuality. Another significant characterization is a deity of war. In Greek mythology, this was personified by Ares or Athena. Athena closely relates to the Canaanite goddess Anat, who appears as Baal's sister and wife (a motif common in Greek and Near Eastern mythology), as well as the martial aspects of Ishtar and Astarte. In the *Baal Cycle*, Anat assists Baal in defeating his enemies with her gruesome violence. When Baal battled Mot, and ultimately died, it was Anat who used her abilities to bring him back from the dead.⁴⁶ Like Athena, Anat was a virgin goddess. However, the birth of Athena, as told in Hesiod's *Theogony*, relates closer to that of the god Tešub, the storm god of Hurrian myth. As

⁴⁴ Ferry p. 30. Tab. VI, sec. i.

⁴⁵ Ferry p. 32. Tab. VI, sec. ii.

⁴⁶ Coogan p. 84.

stated above, Tešub was one of the three gods that appeared from the severed genitals of Anu, cut out from Kumarbi instead of being spat out like the other two.⁴⁷ These traits of love and war are only a few characteristics of deities common both to Greece and the Near East.

However closely related the gods are in Greek and Near Eastern myth characteristically, they fail to connect on a particular literary level. The epics of *Gilgamesh* and the *Atra-Hasis* are close to Homer, in that they are stories of heroes, but Homer adds a dimension that separates Greek myth from the Mesopotamian tradition. Homer intended his epics to extol human beings more than the gods with whom they interact. Throughout the *Iliad*, the heroes seldom deceive one another, even when faced with their enemies. The gods, on the other hand, are constantly at war among themselves. How does this differ from the Near Eastern epics? The Greek warriors in the *Iliad* do not fight for kingship or power, but for *arete* ("honor"). Gilgamesh strives for immortality, similar to the drive for *arete*, though there is a fundamental difference. The gods and immortals for Homer are unable to gain *arete* because they cannot die, and an aspect of *arete* is taking it from a warrior by killing him in battle. In this sense as well, men have an advantage over the gods. Though they will all succumb to mortality, their honor will not diminish. Homer provides a more humanistic approach to mythology through his epics, and Hesiod expanded his motives later. Thus, Greek mythology has the same characteristics for the gods as the Near Eastern models, but the place of humans is much more significant and pertinent.

The last important element that connects Greek and Near Eastern mythology is the influence of motifs, or paradigms. This refers to mythological plot elements as well as classifications of the gods. The major paradigms involved in these mythological systems are cosmogonies,

⁴⁷ Hoffner p. 43.

theomachies, the sister-wife relations, hero myths and the destruction of mankind by the gods. It seems like a foregone conclusion that any mythological system includes a cosmogony, a creation story. For the Greeks, the theogony is a complex process that includes numerous generations of gods begetting and usurping one another. Regardless of the steps involved in the development of the pantheon, there is a key aspect to this kind of myth: the gods are a family. The gods governing the natural order of the universe have a relationship among themselves, for good or ill. In Canaanite mythology, El is the father of the gods, including Baal.⁴⁸ In Babylonian mythology, there were different generations of gods. The two water deities, Tiamat and Apsu, salt and fresh water respectively, gave birth to Mummu, the god of the mists.⁴⁹ Eventually, their offspring created the god Ea, who, with the goddess Damkina, birthed Marduk, the chief deity of the Babylonian pantheon.⁵⁰ The concept of a theogony comes from the Near East, as early as the composition of *Enuma Elish*. This motif of "deep genealogy" not only served the purposes of the gods, but humans as well. The book of Genesis provides extensive lists of the progeny of Abram. In the *Iliad*, heroes are often referenced as the children of another hero, such as *Agamemnon Atreidos* ("Agamemnon, the son of Atreos"). The heavy reliance on genealogy helps to display the prominence of gods and legendary men.

Like many families, there are conflicts from within. Hesiod's *Theogony* involves two such conflicts of the gods. The first is the usurpation of the cosmos by the Titans, led by Kronos. This episode relates rather closely with the Hurrian myth of Kumarbi. Some scholars believe that the plot came from the Kumarbi myth, and Hesiod readjusted it for his own purposes in the

⁴⁸ Coogan p. 42.

⁴⁹ Heidel p. 3.

⁵⁰ Heidel p. 5.

Theogony.⁵¹ In the second, and more significant theomachy, the Olympians challenge Kronos and the Titans for supremacy of the cosmos. This again is like the story of *Enuma Elish*. The younger deities overthrow the original generation of gods, their own ancestors. While Zeus banished Kronos and the Titans to Tartaros, Marduk slew Tiamat in order to assume power, as well as ensure the safety of the other gods.⁵² The imprisonment in Tartaros is often interpreted as a symbol for death, relating it more closely with the Babylonian model. The conflict of the gods does not stop with succession myths. In Homer, the gods contend with each other, supporting different sides for the Trojan War. Occasionally they fight directly, such as the duel between Poseidon and Apollo, but often they exert their influence on men. A similar situation occurs in *Gilgamesh*. The goddess Aruru created a wild-man, Enkidu, to challenge King Gilgamesh, since his people were complaining about him.⁵³ But after they fight, they reconcile and embark on a journey. On this journey, gods, such as Shamash, assist them.⁵⁴ Since the Greeks focused on mankind's role in the universe, the conflicts amongst the gods have larger role. The gods take sides with different men as opposed to forming factions within the pantheon alone, such as in *Gilgamesh* and *Enuma Elish*.

A common and important motif in ancient mythology is the sister-wife relationship. For humans, this seems to be an unhealthy combination. But for the gods, this was common practice. The Greeks used this paradigm for Zeus, who married his sister Hera. Similarly at Ugarit, Baal married his sister Anat.⁵⁵ Both of these examples parallel the famous Egyptian example, the sister-wife relation of Isis to Osiris. While the story of Baal and Anat plays out

⁵¹ Powell p.35.

⁵² Heidel p. 40. Tab. IV, l. 101-104.

⁵³ Ferry p. 5. "Create his double and let the two contend." Tab. I, sec. ii.

⁵⁴ Ferry p. 23. Tab. IV, sec. i.

⁵⁵ Coogan p. 13.

more like the Egyptian myth,⁵⁶ the marriage itself is a peculiar trait. Why would brother and sister deities marry each other? Fortunately, the gods are not glorified men. But in the ancient world, legitimacy was an important issue. In order to ensure the divine purity of the next generation of gods, the parents must have their own legitimacy. The Greek and Egyptian models further this argument. Zeus and Hera conceived the god Ares, perhaps a hint to the marital conflicts that ensue between the two.⁵⁷ This is a unique relationship, for men or gods. Therefore, it seems logical that the model spread from an established Near Eastern system into the minds of the Greeks.

Perhaps the most apparent motif shared by the various systems is the heroic myth. Homer's epics are less mythological descriptions than they are examinations of human exploits. The men in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are connected in some way with the gods, but they are mortal nonetheless. Homer paints the divine backdrop behind the narrative of the hero's quest. This paradigm, particularly the plot of the *Odyssey*, was well established long before the 8th century BC. *Gilgamesh* recounts a story similar to the *Odyssey*. Gilgamesh was a king, like Odysseus, who embarked upon a perilous journey of discovery and trial. A number of episodes from the epic appear almost identical to the *Odyssey*, including a journey into the underworld.⁵⁸ The purpose of these stories varies, but they end with a similar theme. *Gilgamesh* returned to Uruk after enduring many hardships and losing his chance at immortality, only to realize that man is significant, even if he is mortal.⁵⁹ The end of the *Atra-Hasis* epic, which provides the flood account for the Akkadian version of *Gilgamesh*, shows the survival of man through the same

⁵⁶ Both myths involve the death of the brother, who is brought back to life by his sister.

⁵⁷ Hesiod p. 87 (l. 927).

⁵⁸ Ferry p. x.

⁵⁹ Ferry p. 81. Tab. IV, sec. i.

heroic fashion.⁶⁰ However, the *Odyssey* ends differently. The men of Ithaca are engaged in war, so the goddess Athena stops them before they kill each other.⁶¹ Odysseus complies with this and they make a pact of peace. While this ending nearly diminishes the glory of the hero, he nevertheless reassumes his role as the king and accepts the terms of peace. All three of these examples end in peace, but that is not indicative of the heroic epic. Still, they each follow similar plots that exalt the actions of the hero and show the relationship between gods and men.

Of course, no great mythology would be complete without stories about the end of mankind. The gods are enduring, but mankind is mortal and their lives mean little to the immortals. Hesiod mentions this topic in the *Works and Days* with his famous Five Ages of Men. Two of the generations, the Silver and Bronze, each squander their lives through greed, violence, and disrespect, both among themselves and toward the gods. Therefore, Zeus destroyed these men for their evils.⁶² The last of the Five Ages is the Iron men, the living world of Hesiod's time. Hesiod describes that they too will be destroyed for their crimes against the gods and one another, unless of course they embrace the virtue of justice.⁶³ Hesiod's *Works and Days* is meant to be philosophical, but what of the older stories of mankind's demise? The *Atra-Hasis* is a story of a flood that destroys mankind since they cannot die and world becomes overpopulated. Like Noah in the Genesis story, *Atra-Hasis* is told by the god Enki to build a boat and save his family and creatures from the flood. "Destroy your house, build a boat, spurn property and save life."⁶⁴ The same story is told in *Gilgamesh*, when the king speaks to Utnapishtim. The god Ea tells Utnapishtim to build a boat and leave before the flood washes

⁶⁰ Lambert p. 105. Tab. III, l. 9-18.

⁶¹ Homer, Butler p. 714.

⁶² Hesiod p. 27 (l. 148-177).

⁶³ Hesiod p. 29 (l. 210).

⁶⁴ Lambert p. 89. Tab. III, l. 22-23.

away mankind. "Abandon your house, abandon what you possess, abandon your house and build a boat instead. Seek life instead of riches, save yourself."⁶⁵ Though Hesiod does not have a flood myth, each account has the same ultimate message: honor the gods. The gods choose righteous mortals, such as Atrahasis or the heroes of Hesiod's Five Ages, to set the example for the rest of mankind. The gods destroy men when they fail to adhere to principles of propriety and justice.

Thus, the Greeks borrowed the three elements from a number of mythological systems from the Near East. Having demonstrated the broad categories, which the Greeks assumed from the east, it is necessary to examine specific examples of this transfer. As I mentioned before, this is not arbitrary parallelism. Each of these examples is strong enough to demonstrate that the Greeks deliberately selected parts from Near Eastern myths for their own purposes. The reality that Greek epic storytelling is eclectic becomes clear through the following examples.

⁶⁵ Ferry p. 66. Tab. XI, sec. i.

Chapter 3: Parallel Examples

As I have already stated, finding parallels between different myths does not prove that one had an influence over the other. But the Greeks engaged in commercial contact with certain Near Eastern cultures in Anatolia, the Levant, and Mesopotamia. Therefore, parallel stories that involve nearly the same characters or plots stand a greater chance for direct influence. The evidence may come from the similarity of the stories, or even in the language used. The following are such examples that appear too closely related to be coincidental.

The first example is Aphrodite, connecting her character to that of the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar. Second, the epic of *Gilgamesh* is often cited as the basis for Homer's *Odyssey*. Third, there are numerous parallels within the texts to support this claim, including the famous *nekuia* scene in *Odyssey* 11 and tablet X of *Gilgamesh*. Moreover, *Enuma Elish* provides structural parallels for Hesiod's *Theogony*, to which the Hurrian Kumarbi has closely related motifs as well. Finally, there are a number of random occurrences throughout Homer and Hesiod of names and epithets that have their origin in earlier myths. While this process of determining origin through parallels is risky, there is little evidence that shows the subsequent Greek examples developed independent of Near Eastern influence.

Aphrodite is an interesting figure in Greek mythology. Though she is one of the twelve Olympians, most of whom came from the lineage of Kronos, her birth came earlier than that of Zeus. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aphrodite was born from the severed genitals of Ouranos, when Kronos overthrew his father.⁶⁶ This early appearance suggests that the character of Aphrodite appeared in Greek mythology earlier than the Olympians. One of the best Near Eastern examples that relates to the character of Aphrodite is the goddess Ishtar, appearing in

⁶⁶ Hesiod p. 66 (l. 177-187).

the epic *Gilgamesh*. Like Aphrodite, Ishtar is the goddess of love and is the daughter of the sky deity.⁶⁷ There is one scene in particular from the *Iliad* that shows how closely the two systems relate. In *Iliad* 5, Aphrodite is wounded by Diomedes when she tried to protect her mortal son, Aeneas. She then went back to Olympos to her mother, Dione, and Zeus to complain about this injury. "The Danaans are beginning to fight even with the immortals."⁶⁸ Similarly, Ishtar propositioned Gilgamesh after he defeated Humbaba. When he denied her advances, she returned to her parents, Anu and Antu, to complain and ask for vengeance upon Gilgamesh. "The king of Uruk has insulted me. He has found out and told about my foulness."⁶⁹ Burkert points out that not only are the narratives the same, but the situation is identical. The goddess of love appeals to her parents, both sky deities, after an injury at the hands of a mortal man.⁷⁰ He explains that, even though the popular Aphrodite birth story is from Ouranos' genitals in the sea, this episode with Dione has a valid place in the lore.⁷¹ The name "Dione" in Greek is the feminine form of Zeus, paralleled directly with Antum, the feminine form of the name Anu.⁷² This suggests that Homer relied on *Gilgamesh* when he fashioned this scene, one of the rare instances featuring Dione. It also provides useful evidence that Aphrodite was a derivation from a much older Mesopotamian goddess in Ishtar.

Gilgamesh offers much more than the original model for Aphrodite. The epic correlates with Homer's *Odyssey* frequently, both in theme as well as in action. Perhaps the most blatant

⁶⁷ Burkert p. 97.

⁶⁸ Homer, Lattimore p. 138 (l. 380).

⁶⁹ Ferry p. 32. Tab. VI, sec. ii.

⁷⁰ Burkert p. 98.

⁷¹ This is one of the inconsistencies between Homer and Hesiod. In Homer, Aphrodite is the daughter of Zeus, while in Hesiod she was born before Zeus. Since neither account can be proven false, it can be assumed that the poets used the same figure to explain different stories.

⁷² Burkert p. 98.

connection comes with the *nekuia* (the summoning of the dead) in *Odyssey* 11. The *nekuia* involves Odysseus venturing to the underworld to make contact with the dead. Though he does not physically enter the underworld, he speaks with important figures that help him on his journey home. He proceeds to the land of the Cimmerians, where Circe leads him to evoke the spirits of the dead.⁷³ Likewise, Gilgamesh crosses the seas with the boatman, Urshanabi, in order to find Utnapishtim and eternal life.

Tell me the way to find the only one of men by means of whom I might find out how death can be avoided. Tell me the way. What are the signs of the way to Utnapishtim? If I must cross the waters of death, I will.⁷⁴

In each instance, the heroes are assured that they will succumb to their mortality. Odysseus is told by Tiresias that he will slay the suitors and reclaim his kingship, but he will die at sea. "Death shall come to you from the sea, and your life shall ebb away very gently when you are full of years and peace of mind."⁷⁵ Gilgamesh finds Utnapishtim and has the opportunity to achieve immortality. He must stay awake for seven days, but Gilgamesh falls asleep on the sixth night, losing his chance for immortality. "Who takes us away has taken hold of me. Death is in my chamber when I sleep; and death is there wherever I set foot."⁷⁶ Gerald Gresseth points out this motif in the *Odyssey*. In book 10, after sailing for nine sleepless days, the men of Odysseus' ship sight Ithaca. Unfortunately, he falls asleep and subjects them to further peril and pain.⁷⁷ The ends in these situations may not have been ideal, but they have a larger point.

⁷³ Homer, Butler p. 539.

⁷⁴ Ferry p. 40. Tab. VII, sec. iii.

⁷⁵ Homer, Butler p. 542.

⁷⁶ Ferry p. 77. Tab. XI, sec. v.

⁷⁷ Gresseth p. 10.

Gilgamesh was one of the first pieces of literature that stressed the importance of humanism.⁷⁸ Though the gods play a significant role early in the epic, the story focuses on Gilgamesh as a hero. He seeks the chance to live among the undying, but in the end his human faults and weaknesses prevent that from happening. Homer was no stranger to the psychological study of mankind, especially through the character of Achilles. "I would rather be a paid servant in a poor man's house and be above ground than king of kings among the dead."⁷⁹ The story of Patroclus is mirrored in *Gilgamesh* through the death of Enkidu. After the gods decide to kill Enkidu as a punishment, Gilgamesh grieves greatly for his lost friend. "Enkidu has died. Must I die too? Must Gilgamesh be like that?"⁸⁰ Much the same, Achilles is fated to die after his companion fell in battle. "Then I must lose you soon, my child, by what you are saying, since it is decreed that your death must come soon after Hektor's."⁸¹ Thus, the two epics not only share similar plot elements, but the general theme of humanity's worth in each story is a substantial starting point for humanistic philosophy.

There is another aspect of the *Odyssey* that appears relevant to nearly every Near Eastern system. Throughout the epic, Poseidon assails Odysseus for dishonoring the gods. While this may seem like a reasonable antagonist for the hero, who is returning to his homeland by sea, the motif of water as an adversary exists in almost every Near Eastern culture. In *Gilgamesh*, Utnapishtim describes his experience with the great flood that destroyed mankind, leaving only him and his wife alive.

⁷⁸ Gresseth p. 13.

⁷⁹ Homer, Butler p. 550.

⁸⁰ Ferry p. 48. Tab. IX, sec. i.

⁸¹ Homer, Lattimore p. 377 (l. 95-96).

Then rain came down in floods. Beneath, the god of the Underworld, Nergal, broke down his doorposts and opens the earth. Ninurta god of chaos and war opened the dikes, and other floods burst forth.⁸²

A nearly identical scene happens in *Atra-Hasis*, undoubtedly the source for the flood narrative in tablet IX of *Gilgamesh*. "The flood [set out], its might came upon the peoples [like a battle array]."⁸³ The primary antagonists in the *Enuma Elish* are Apsu and Tiamat, two deities of water. Closer to the tone of the *Odyssey*, the story of Baal involves the god battling with Yam, god of the Sea. "Strike Prince Sea on the skull, Judge River between the eyes. Sea will stumble, he will fall to the ground."⁸⁴ The *Odyssey* depicts a different result for Odysseus in his conflict with Poseidon. In book 11, Tiresias tells Odysseus to make a sacrifice to Poseidon in order to curb his wrath.⁸⁵ This difference is twofold. First, Baal kills Yam, the Sea, because as a god, only he has the ability to destroy another god, whereas Odysseus is powerless against Poseidon without the assistance of another immortal. Second, this shows the beginning of the newly developed Greek mode of thought. While the old solution included fighting and potentially killing an opponent, the Greeks began turning to arbitration and the pursuit of justice. It is interesting that water, a source of life, is portrayed so frequently as hostile in mythology. This suggests that Homer merely built upon the ancient models when he composed the *Odyssey*, a tale of a man versus the sea. He adapted the motif, thereby connecting it with the *Iliad* and giving it a particularly Greek flavor.

In terms of structure, Hesiod's *Theogony* finds its origin in a number of Near Eastern works, including the *Enuma Elish* and *Atra-Hasis* epics. The stories involve the creation of the universe through the birth of the gods and ultimately war among themselves. In Hesiod, the

⁸² Ferry p. 70. Tab. XI, sec. iii.

⁸³ Lambert p. 95. Tab. III, l. 11-12.

⁸⁴ Coogan p. 89.

⁸⁵ Homer, Butler p. 542.

process begins with Chaos before the earth appears, namely Gaia. From Gaia, the first principle sky deity, Ouranos, was born. "Earth's first child was Ouranos, starry Heaven, just her size, a perfect fit on all sides. And a firm foundation for the blessed gods."⁸⁶ However, in the *Enuma Elish*, the progression stems from the two water deities, Tiamat, the salt water, and Apsu, the fresh water. They were responsible for giving birth to the next generation of gods. "(When) they had not (yet) been called by (their) name(s, and their) destinies had not (yet) been fixed, (at that time) were the gods created within them."⁸⁷ Though they begin with different situations, the image is the same. Chaos symbolizes disorder, similar to the use of the salt and fresh waters. Robert Mondi examines the problem with *chaos* in Hesiod, since the concept rarely appears elsewhere in Greek mythology. The idea is that *chaos* is distinct from the other fixed entities in the cosmos, namely the sky, sea, earth and underworld.⁸⁸ This separates the Hesiodic model from the *Enuma Elish*, though the force is the same for each system. Before the universe existed, there was essentially nothing, whether it was physical disorder or water and mist alone.

In form, the *Theogony* relates closely to the *Enuma Elish*. They each begin with the formation of the cosmos from nothingness, followed by various theomachies. However, one of the likely sources for the *Theogony*, more so than *Enuma Elish*, is the *Kumarbi Cycle* from Hurrian myth. A number of Greek artifacts found at Ugarit and al-Mina provide evidence that the Greeks would have had contact with the Near East well before and during the time of Hesiod.⁸⁹ Therefore, the glaring similarities have their basis in a real connection between the Greeks and Hurrians. In the *Theogony*, there are three main deities who signify three generations of gods: Ouranos, Kronos, and Zeus. These three gods correspond with an almost

⁸⁶ Hesiod p. 64 (l. 126-128).

⁸⁷ Heidel p. 18. Tab. I, l. 18-19.

⁸⁸ Mondi p. 5.

⁸⁹ Barnett p. 101.

identical triad of deities in the Hurrian story: Anu, the sky-god, Kumarbi, the father of gods, and Teshub, the storm-god.⁹⁰ As mentioned earlier, the motif for Kumarbi's usurpation reflects the method by which Kronos takes power from Ouranos in the *Theogony*. Kumarbi bites off Anu's genitals and becomes pregnant with three more deities. "(Kumarbi) bit his (Anu's) loins, and his 'manhood' united with Kumarbi's insides like bronze."⁹¹ Kronos acts in a similar fashion using a sickle to sever Ouranos' genitals before throwing them into the sea. "The son reached out with his left hand, while with his right he swung the fiendishly long and jagged sickle, pruning the genitals of his own father with one swoop and tossing them behind him."⁹² As a result of each of these, there are new deities formed. When Kumarbi becomes pregnant, he spits out the terrible gods on the ground and has Tešub cut out from him as well.⁹³ Likewise, the blood drops from Ouranos fell to the ground creating the Furies, the Giants, and Meliai, or tree nymphs.⁹⁴ When Ouranos' genitals landed in the sea, they foamed and the goddess Aphrodite was born.⁹⁵ The resemblance of the Hesiodic tradition to the Hurrian myth is crucial to understanding the influence of the one culture over the other. Hesiod modified an older myth as the basis for his own Greek *Theogony*. Therefore, the parallels to other Near Eastern stories in Hesiod's epics must demonstrate that his works are eclectic instead of original or based on a purely Greek mythological tradition.

Aside from the sprawling thematic and literary parallels that connect the Greek and Near Eastern models, there are a number of examples of linguistic correlations. These include epithets, names, the use of loan words and calques that otherwise did not exist in the Greek

⁹⁰ Guterbock p. 130.

⁹¹ Hoffner p. 42.

⁹² Hesiod p. 66 (l. 179-183).

⁹³ Hoffner p. 43.

⁹⁴ Walcot p. 203.

⁹⁵ Hesiod p. 66 (l. 195-197).

language. I have already used the example of Baal, referred to often as "Rider on the Clouds," a parallel epithet for Zeus. In *Iliad* 9, the Greek warrior Diomedes is called *boen agathos* ("good in the war cry"). Likewise, in *Gilgamesh*, the same epithet is used to describe the king as "good in shouting."⁹⁶ This was either a common cultural epithet, or it became a popular phrase in the Near East, later catching on with the Greeks.

The name Tethys, described in the *Iliad* by Hera, seems to be derived from the Akkadian language, in which the *Enuma Elish* is composed. The name Tiamat is written either *tiamtu*, as the sea, or as *tawtu*. This latter version of the name transcribes identically into Greek as Tethys.⁹⁷ The Greek language is not without its fair share of loan words from Semitic languages, but they have cleverly masked them to make them sound more Greek.⁹⁸ For example, the word for "tent, barracks," *skene* relates to the Assyrian-Akkadian root *šakānu*, meaning "to set up."⁹⁹ The word for "fight, battle", *macha* likely comes from the Semitic word *maāu* ("to hit") or the Aramaic *maha* ("battle").¹⁰⁰ Other words, such as names of fabrics or minerals, also have foreign roots. The word *elephas* ("ivory") appears like the Hittite word *lapha*.¹⁰¹ The supply of loan words in Greek, particularly those referring to trade goods, as well as material evidence points to their commercial dealings with the Near East. They adjusted the forms of words to suit their own language, cloaking the fact that they borrowed the words from another culture.

The specific parallels do not prove any influence occurred, but it seems that the closeness of the parallels is most easily explained the interaction of the east and west. The Greeks surely

⁹⁶ Feldman p. 16.

⁹⁷ Feldman p. 18.

⁹⁸ Burkert p. 35.

⁹⁹ Burkert p. 39.

¹⁰⁰ Burkert p. 39.

¹⁰¹ Feldman p. 14.

included their own elements to the stories, but they borrowed examples that helped fill in the gaps in their own myths. Much like the Babylonian *Gilgamesh* epic linked together the various Sumerian stories of Gilgamesh, the Greeks used these stories to fill out their own epics. But the real separation between the Greeks and Near Eastern mythologies comes from the use of abstract deities. The following chapter examines the presence and meaning of these *daimones* ("divine entities") and their impact on the Greek state of mind.

Chapter 4: Abstract Deities

The Greeks employed a variety of deities in their pantheon, ranging from the traditional storm and sea gods, to a myriad of lesser gods, all of whom relate to some phenomenon of the natural world. These natural phenomena included not only the physical cosmos and weather, but also love, sleep, dreams, death and other human traits. These deities were not at all unique to the Greeks. But the Greeks took this idea a step further. Beyond the common characteristics of men and nature, they added a number of abstract deities. The term "abstract" here refers to concepts rather than physical entities. For example, sleep can be described as a natural human phenomenon. But the same cannot be said for justice, a concept that does not have a clear definition or form. The Greeks used these abstract concepts and turned them into lesser immortals, often termed *daimones*. The idea behind emphasizing these *daimones* shifts the focus of mythology from the gods to mankind. Two of clearest examples of this are the Muses and Dike, the personification of justice. Hesiod sees *dike* ("justice") as a crucial aspect of a moral life, and he furthered his anthropocentric philosophy with the Five Ages of Men. This aspect of Greek mythology changed the antiquated purpose of mythology, from a way to honor a king or god into a lesson in moral living.

Homeric and Hesiodic epics differ immediately from the Near Eastern predecessors with the invocation of the Muses. The Muses, nine daughters of Zeus, offer inspiration for poets and singers. While the Near Eastern epics begin right away with the story, Homer and Hesiod opened their epics with a brief proem. The invocation of the Muses, especially in Homer, signifies the introduction of a problem or crisis. The solution then comes through the deeds of

the figure targeted by the invocation, like Achilles in the *Iliad*.¹⁰² The Muses may be called upon multiple times within the epic, such as the seven instances found in the *Iliad* alone.¹⁰³

What function does this serve? The Muses pose an unusual problem. They are not commonplace in everyday life or the natural world, since they deal with artistry and the imagination. There is even a difference between their manifestation in Homer and Hesiod. In Homer, the Muses tend to show the crisis that ends in defeat.¹⁰⁴ However, in Hesiod, the Muses are a means for telling his story. They have taught Hesiod *pseuda* ("falsehoods") that he uses to explain the creation of the Greek cosmos. "We know how to tell many believable lies, but also, when we want to, how to speak the plain truth."¹⁰⁵ This apparent incongruity between Homer and Hesiod demonstrates that the Muses are based on an abstract concept rather than a natural phenomenon. Abstract concepts, such as inspiration, may take various forms, such as they do in Homer and Hesiod. At the same time, they are considered to be a gift for mankind. According to the *Theogony*, the Muses were born to Zeus by Mnemosyne.¹⁰⁶ One of the key themes in the *Theogony* is the glory and honor of Zeus as the king of gods and men. Whatever comes from Zeus is meant to be good for men, such as the Muses. They reinforce the notion that human achievement, especially in the fine arts, is a noble endeavor.

Regardless, the Muses are concrete enough, each having a different characteristic of art or music at their disposal. But Hesiod goes even deeper, depicting more abstract deities to complete the still frame of reality. He includes concepts such as discord, building upon the

¹⁰² Minton p. 293.

¹⁰³ Minton p. 295.

¹⁰⁴ Minton p. 309.

¹⁰⁵ Hesiod p. 61 (l. 28-29).

¹⁰⁶ Hesiod p. 86 (l. 920-921).

Homeric model of *eris* ("discord"), deception, shame and most importantly justice.¹⁰⁷ The goddess Dike, like the Muses, was a daughter of Zeus from Themis, one of his many female companions. This is an interesting allegory. The Greek word *themis* means "right." Therefore, the communion of Zeus, the king of gods, and Themis, the goddess of right, produces *dike* ("justice"), *eirene* ("peace") and *eunomia* ("good laws").¹⁰⁸ Adhering to Dike is the main theme of Hesiod's *Works and Days*. There, he tries to describe the characteristics of the just man. He argues that a man will live better if he follows a path of *dike*, as opposed to one of violence, greed, or treachery. "There's a better road around the other way leading to what's right. When it comes down to it Justice beats out Violence. A fool learns this the hard way."¹⁰⁹ Some scholars have argued that *dike* refers to legal justice as opposed to moral justice.¹¹⁰ However, if Hesiod intended his argument as an examination of morality, then justice has a greater impact.¹¹¹ Any man that dishonors Dike will ultimately feel the wrath of Zeus, her father.

And there's the Virgin Justice, Zeus' own daughter, honored and revered among the Olympian gods. Whenever anyone hurts her by besmirching her name, she sits down by the son of Kronos, her father, and speaks to him about men's unjust hearts until the people pay for their foolhardy rulers' unjust verdicts and biased decisions.¹¹²

Hesiod composed the *Works and Days* as a response to a disappointing legal matter, but words come with a strong moral effect. Even Homer uses *dike* to mean "righteousness" in the *Iliad*, describing the wrath of Zeus upon unjust men.

¹⁰⁷ Clay p. 105.

¹⁰⁸ Hesiod p. 86 (l. 906-907).

¹⁰⁹ Hesiod p. 30 (l. 251-253).

¹¹⁰ Dickie p. 91.

¹¹¹ Dickie p. 92. Matthew Dickie points out that certain scholars have attested that since Homeric society lacked inhibition or restraint, *dike* cannot be a moral quality, but rather a legal issue.¹¹¹ He concludes that *dike* was not a concrete idea in Homeric times, but it more often than not meant "righteousness" in Hesiodic contexts. In Hesiod, the moral translation of "justice, righteousness" makes more sense.

Zeus sends down the most violent waters in deep rage against mortals after they stir him to anger because in violent assembly they pass decrees that are crooked, and drive righteousness from among them and care nothing for what the gods think.¹¹³

Abstraction, as a tendency in Greek thought, speaks to morality more than organized religion. Therefore, abstract deities follow the philosophical model of abstraction more directly than the principal gods. Figures such as Dike, the Furies and Fate all exist in a realm above even the most powerful gods. Men and gods alike are subject to these abstract *daimones*.

Dike serves another function for Hesiod. The abstract deities, the children of Zeus, aid Hesiod in shifting the focus of Greek mythology from the power of gods to the importance of mankind. For this reason, the mythology of Greece tends to involve less fantasy than the Near Eastern examples.¹¹⁴ There is a practical purpose behind Greek mythology, especially when looking at Hesiod. The *Works and Days* included tales of the divine, but they are not meant to be taken as religious or as purely literary. The story of Prometheus is an allegory explaining the unfortunate lot of mankind. "Because before that the human race had lived off the land without any trouble, no hard work, no sickness or pain that the Fates give to men."¹¹⁵ This passage is a study of philosophy more than a concrete aspect of religious thought. Hesiod should be called the "father of Greek philosophy" because of his direct examination of justice and propriety. The gods have an effect on mankind's fate, since their actions result in consequences for humans. Hesiod utilizes this notion and creates a picture of practical human concerns.

The most famous passage from Hesiod's *Works and Days* is his description of the Five Ages of Men. The examination was not original for Hesiod. There are examples of this motif in

¹¹³ Homer, Lattimore p. 340 (l. 385-388).

¹¹⁴ Kirk p. 78.

¹¹⁵ Hesiod p. 26 (l. 111-113).

Persia, Egypt, and Mesopotamia.¹¹⁶ For example, *Atra-Hasis* uses a similar motif, dividing the history of creation into five ages.¹¹⁷ The closest parallel to Hesiod's model however comes from Persia. For Hesiod, four of his five ages are represented by metals: gold, silver, bronze, and iron. The Persian story *Bahman Yast 1* details that Zarathustra saw a tree with four metals for branches: gold, silver, steel, and iron alloy.¹¹⁸ Like Hesiod's model, the four Persian ages show the downward progression of mankind, from a pious to an entirely wicked state of existence.¹¹⁹ But Hesiod differs from the Persian story by adding the fifth race of men, the heroes. While the Persian story shows deterioration, Hesiod's version has a disparity. The age of heroes is a step back from the digression, showing that there was a time of justice before the present age, when men are again facing destruction. "And when Death's veil had covered them over Zeus granted them life apart from other men, settling them at the ends of the Earth."¹²⁰ This is a significant move for Hesiod, not only because it separates the Greeks from the Near East, but also it suggests the possibility for mankind to regain a moral sense.

This creates a problem for modern scholars, who notice a disruption of harmony with the inclusion of a fifth age. Carl Querbach argues that Hesiod's model works in harmony without the iron race.¹²¹ The first four races create a matrix, each connected perfectly with one another in a number of ways.¹²² However, it is the iron race that disrupts the cyclical pattern. The conclusion is that Hesiod must have originally formed the model based on the first four races,

¹¹⁶ Feldman p. 18.

¹¹⁷ Koenen p. 20.

¹¹⁸ Fontenrose p. 3.

¹¹⁹ Fontenrose p. 3.

¹²⁰ Hesiod p. 28 (l. 188-190).

¹²¹ Querbach p. 1.

¹²² Querbach p. 2.

and the iron race came as a later addition.¹²³ As a result, he determines that the Iron Age must signify the effects of *hubris*, or more accurately the absence of *dike*.¹²⁴ Whether this is true or not, the point remains clear. Hesiod used the Five Ages of Men to support his anthropocentric mythology. The Near Eastern myths were used to honor kings or show the place of the gods in the world. But Hesiod's message is that mankind is important in universe as a whole. The task of humanity is supporting *dike* and avoiding *adike* ("injustice"). It is for this reason that the Greeks emphasized so greatly the abstract deities. Without revering them, humans would perish like the haughty races before them, not prosper like the age of heroes.

Thus, the Greeks added a dimension to their mythology in order to shift the focus toward humanity. Abstract deities often had little vignettes throughout later stories, but they never exceeded the influence on the Olympians. This spotlight on humanism may also explain why Greek religion was not as autonomous. Hesiod stated that justice serves the gods. But it is implicit that without mankind, there would be no justice, shame, or honor. The Greeks reflected these traits in mythology more than the Near East because of their tendency toward abstraction as opposed to concretion. Therefore, through these abstract concepts, the status of humanity becomes as important as the gods themselves.

¹²³ Querbach p. 5.

¹²⁴ Querbach p. 7.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated, the Near East influenced Greek mythology in three main respects: form, characterization, and motif. The Greeks in turn added abstract deities to their mythology, in order to establish anthropocentrism. While Homer and Hesiod certainly included their own cultural symbols in their epics, they nevertheless found inspiring and useful motifs from the Near East. This does not in any way weaken the effect of Greek mythology. What was its purpose to begin with? Homer simply carried on a longstanding oral tradition, as did Hesiod. Both authors carefully intermingled examinations of human psychology and morality into their stories. These stories set a standard for mythological writing in the later Greek and Roman eras, but they were not considered "sacred," as the Bible or Qur'an would be. Above all, they provided motifs for other poets and artisans to model their own works after.

What does all of this mean? Why would it matter that Greek mythology is an eclectic blend of east and west? The study of comparative literature allows the modern reader to notice similarities that would otherwise be glossed over as cultural preferences. But more specifically, this sheds lights on the ancient world of Homer's own time. The Greeks did not have a solid, national identity, one which distinguished them from the more prolific Mediterranean cultures. By engaging in commerce with the Near East, the early Greeks were able to define their own society, both politically and artistically. The introduction of the Phoenecian alphabet not only opened the door for a rebirth of literacy, but it also welcomed mythological influence. The Greeks retained what they could from the Myceaneans, so the Near East did not berth Homeric mythology. However, they were able to fill in the gaps and create a more complete picture of the Greek pantheon.

Homer ushered in a new age of thought in Greece, but not without help from an existing tradition. The ideological commerce between Greece and the Near East was not the only factor that helped to solidify the state. Much of the success in the Peloponnesus came from trade and outside political factors. However, I hope that this paper has demonstrated how greatly the Near East influenced the development of mythology. The Greeks have a proud tradition of philosophy and advancement, but they had some help along the way. That in no way diminishes the importance or effect of these stories, particularly for the Homeric Greeks. Nearly every known religion, including Judaism and Hinduism, did not sprout up autonomously. They may have found outside influence, or evolved from an earlier model, or even arose from an innate archetype. These are all possibilities when discussing religion. Based on the extant evidence, Greek myths appear to have found influence in Near Eastern lore. They are no worse for this, since in the end they represent the Greek culture well, bearing the characteristics of humanity and honor that were important to the Greek people.

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