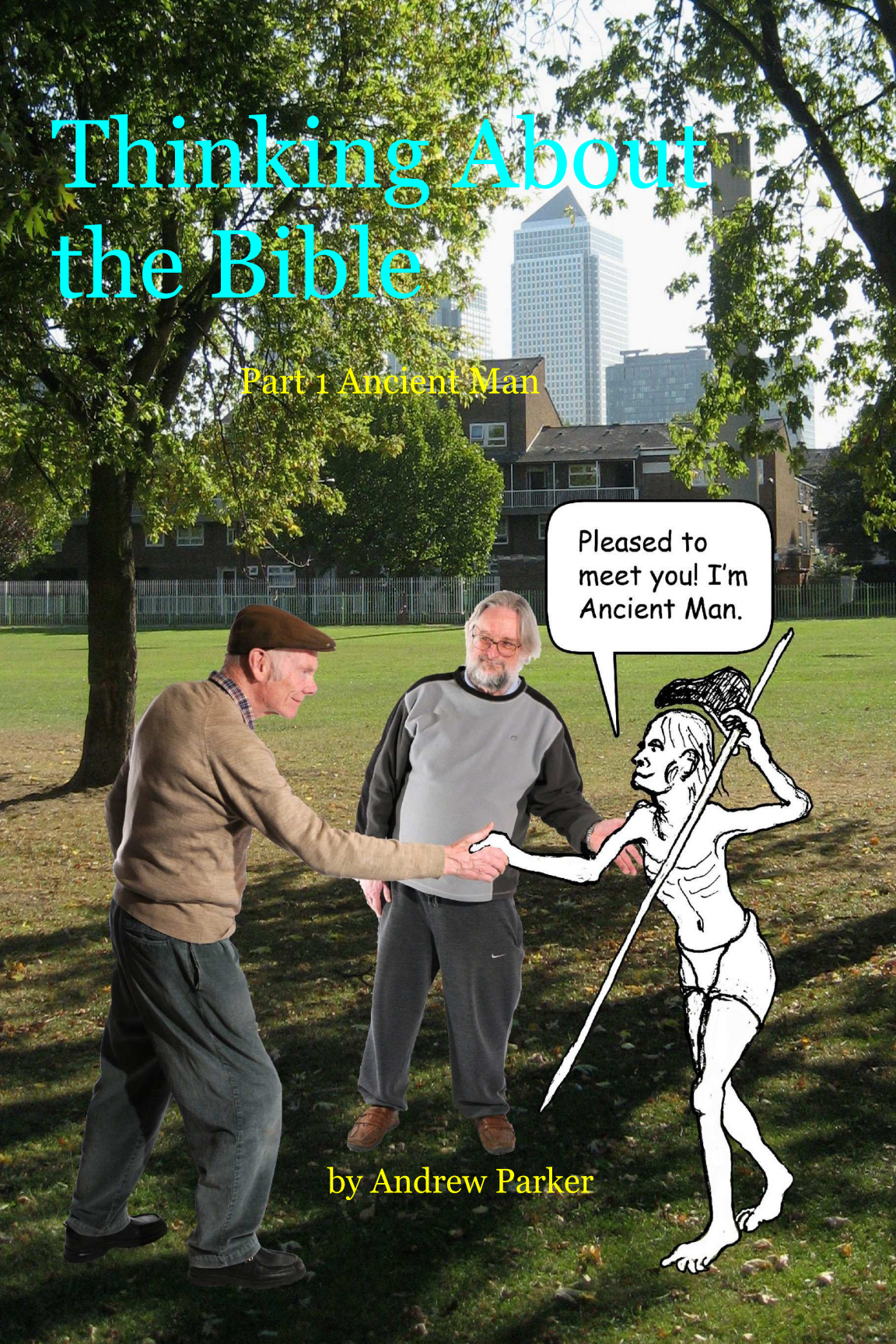


Thinking About the Bible

Part 1 Ancient Man

Pleased to
meet you! I'm
Ancient Man.

by Andrew Parker



THINKING about the BIBLE

Part 1. Meeting Ancient Man

Thinking about the Bible is the first volume in the *Bible in Cartoons* series. All of these volumes can be found on the following website: <http://bibleincartoons.co.uk>

Copies of this book can be purchased on <http://www.blurb.com/bookstore>



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Introduction

The aim of these cartoon books is not to teach the Bible but rather to open people's eyes, if it is possible, to this fantastic work. I have chosen Socrates' approach, which is the dialogue, since this makes it easier to see the subject 'in the round'. In this book the dialogue is with my old friend John. His job has been to raise questions and make criticisms of everything I say. Of course you can never do enough of this but I hope he has done enough to make it possible for you to see what I am driving at and also test it a little so as to be in a position to adjust to it.

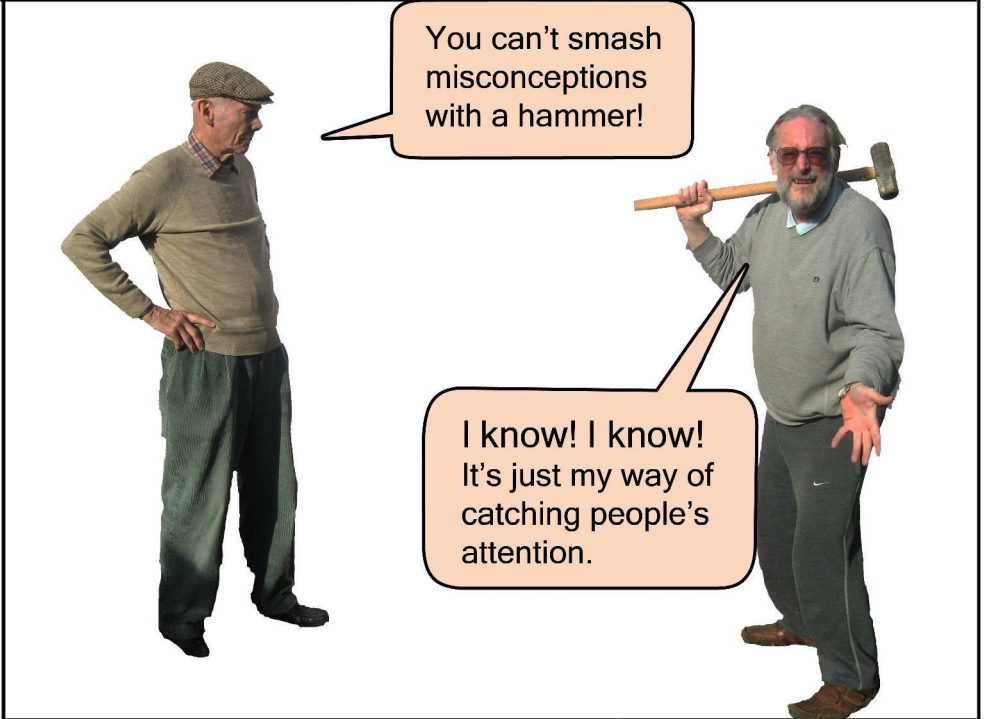
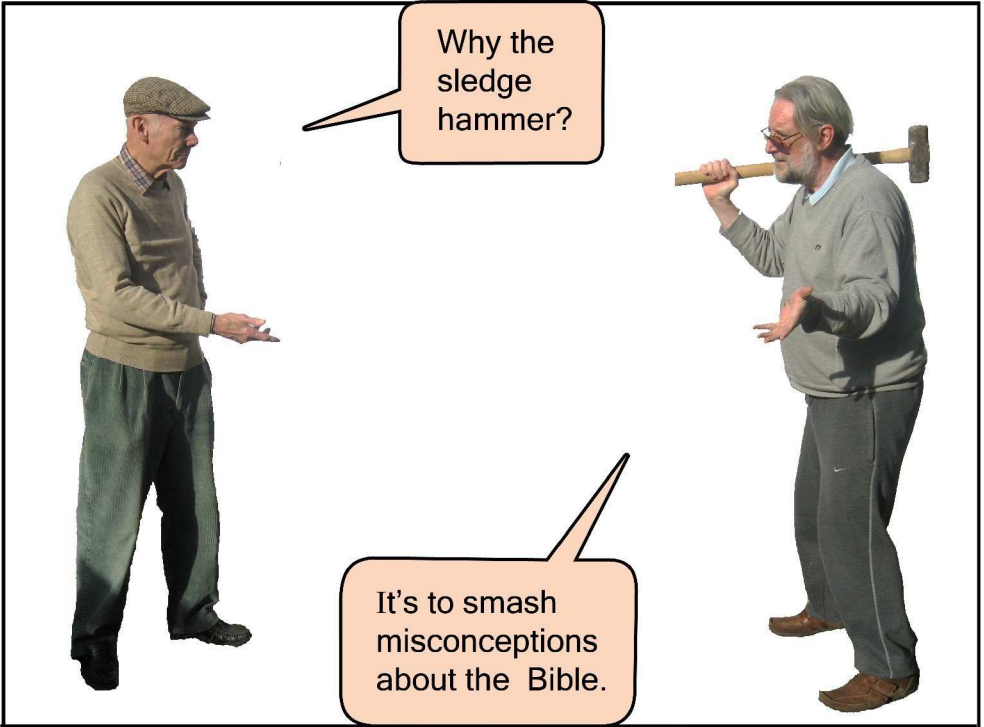
Now, anyone who has read a Socratic dialogue will know that it's not an easy read because hard thinking is hard work. So to make things more agreeable for you I have decided to do the dialogue in cartoons. This gives me loads more work but I hope it makes the exercise more enjoyable and rewarding. But don't be fooled. There are some jokes but these cartoon books are not designed for entertainment: as an easy way to come to understand. So be warned. You are going to have to think hard!

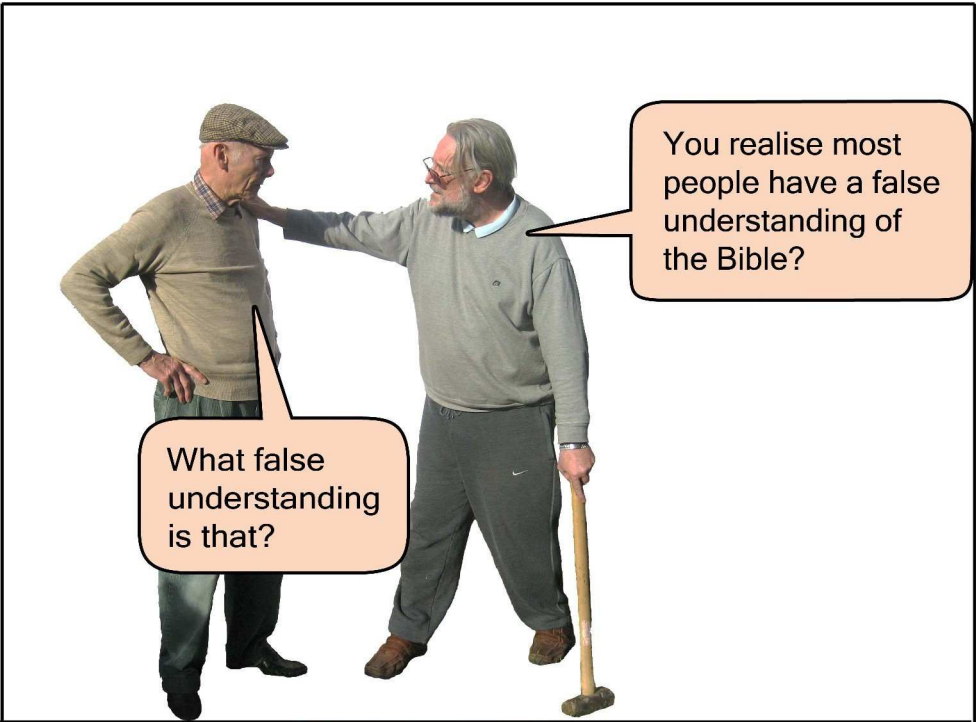
1

FALSE ASSUMPTIONS



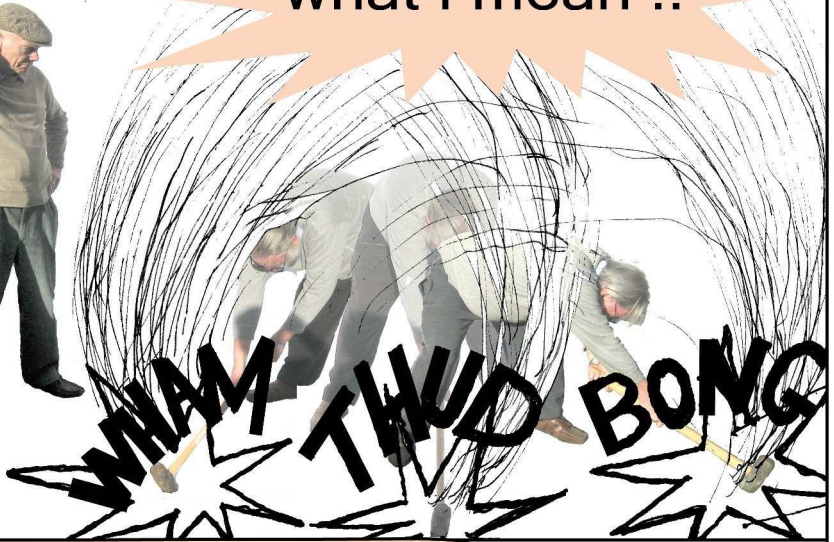
Three Wrong Ways
of looking at the Bible







Ye'see
what I mean !!



If I can't convince people I might as well
pack it in, for everything I have to say
depends on them understanding the
Bible's about **politics**, not **religion**.



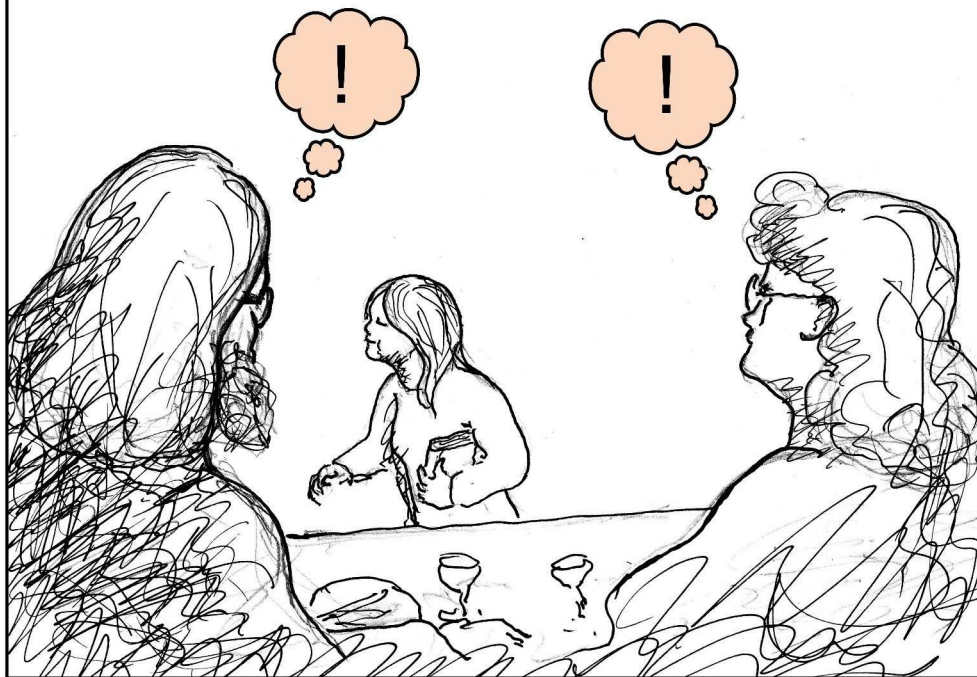
Perhaps you
should adopt a
less aggressive
approach.



Very well then,
Let me tell
you a story.



Some years ago my youngest daughter - she was about five at the time - left the dinner table saying that she was off to read the Bible.



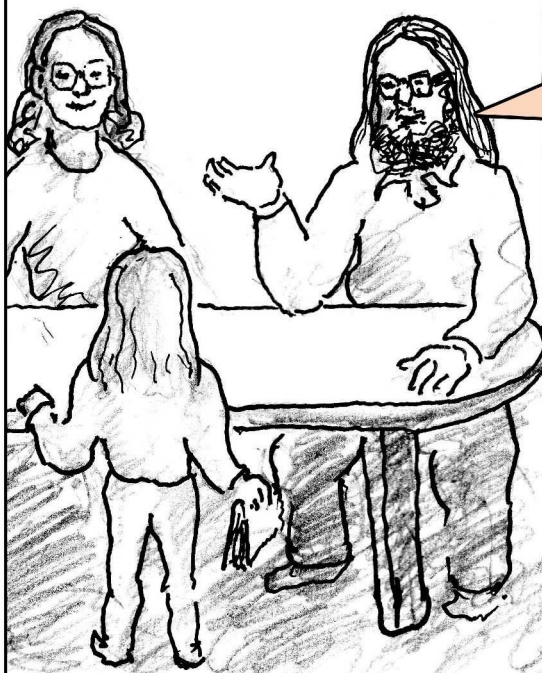
A few minutes later she came back to complain.



Daddy, it's so

BORING!

I did my best to help her understand



Yes, I know, little one. But, you see, the Bible isn't something you can just read as if it were a story book. It's thousands of years old and it wasn't written for people like us. So, to enjoy reading it you have to know quite a lot about it first. You'll see when you are older.

I'm happy to say that on this occasion life has proved me right for I've just taken her back to start her second year at university, reading theology.



So if we agree the Bible's not a great big story book - as any five year old, who knows something about books, might reasonably suppose - then what sort of a book is it?



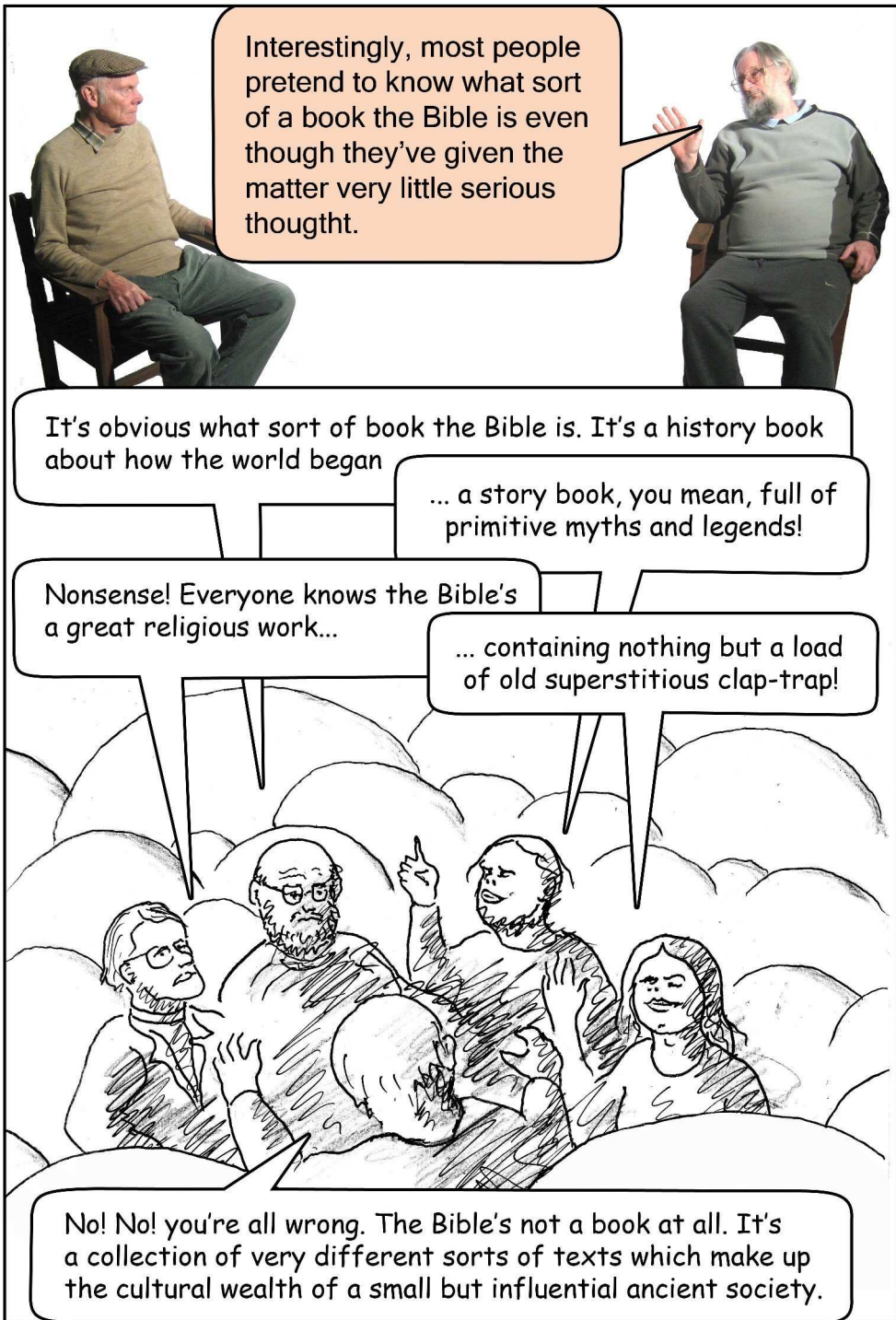
Take, for example, a librarian. Is he or she to place it on the 'fact' or on the 'fiction' shelves?



Well, you couldn't put it on the 'fiction' shelves. That would be like claiming it wasn't true.



OK but for the moment we're not bothered about whether the Bible's true or not. That's a matter we'll come to later. What interests us here is what sort of a work it takes itself to be.



We all tend to approach the Bible brim-full of prejudices thinking we know basically what it's about.



Hold on! What makes you think our ways of understanding the Bible are based on prejudice?

If I accuse **everyone** of prejudice it's because instead of conducting a cool assessment of what kind of a book it is, we all bugged off down our chosen paths, making rude gestures at each other.



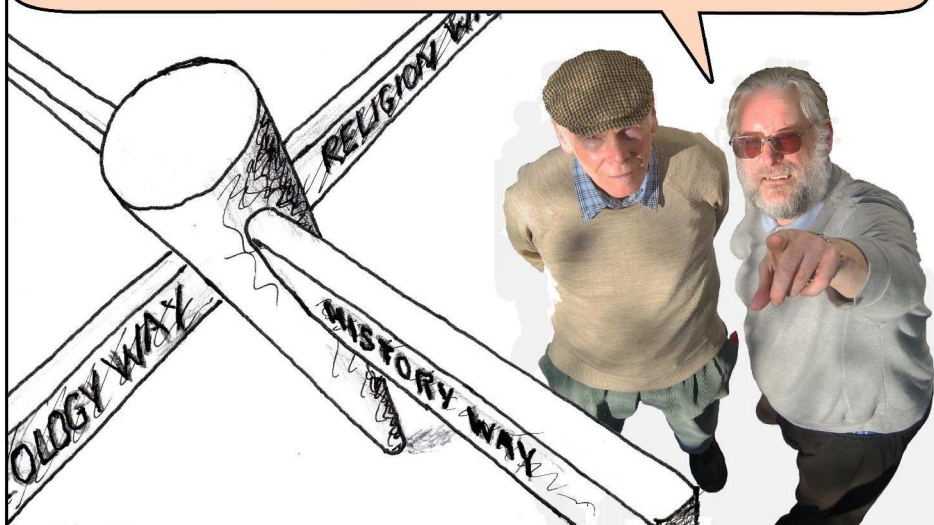
Ah! Where
have they gone?

POP!

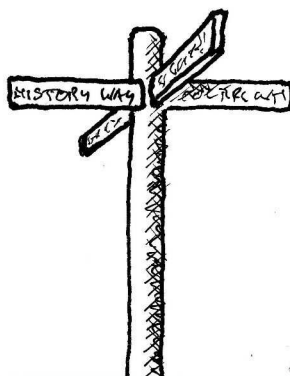
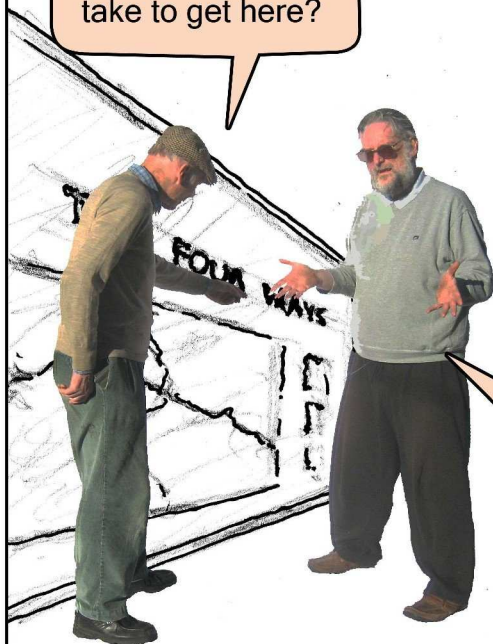
Who's gone? What
are you talking about?

Er.... No one
... Just thinking!

As things stand, four different **ways** have been suggested for understanding the Bible. The first sees it as a religious book. The second as an ideological work. The third as a book of history and the fourth as a library of ancient culture.



What way did we take to get here?



No way, of course! This scenario, with its four roads and a sign-post, is not real! We're not actually standing here...The whole thing's **a representation.**

Representation is a technique invented by ancient people who had problems in discussing certain matters.

What's up?
Are you sick?



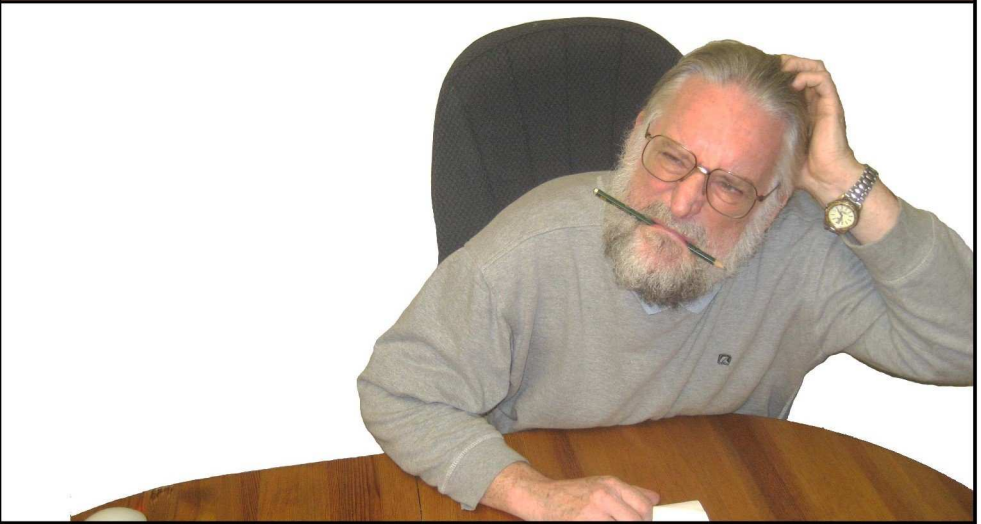
I don't know! I've this
vague idea in my head
but no words to think
about it with.

It's crucial to understand the technique since biblical writers used it all the time. For example they had great difficulty in talking about ideological situations. They solved the problem by expressing their thoughts using sexual terminology. This may seem bizzare to us but it proved to be surprisingly effective.

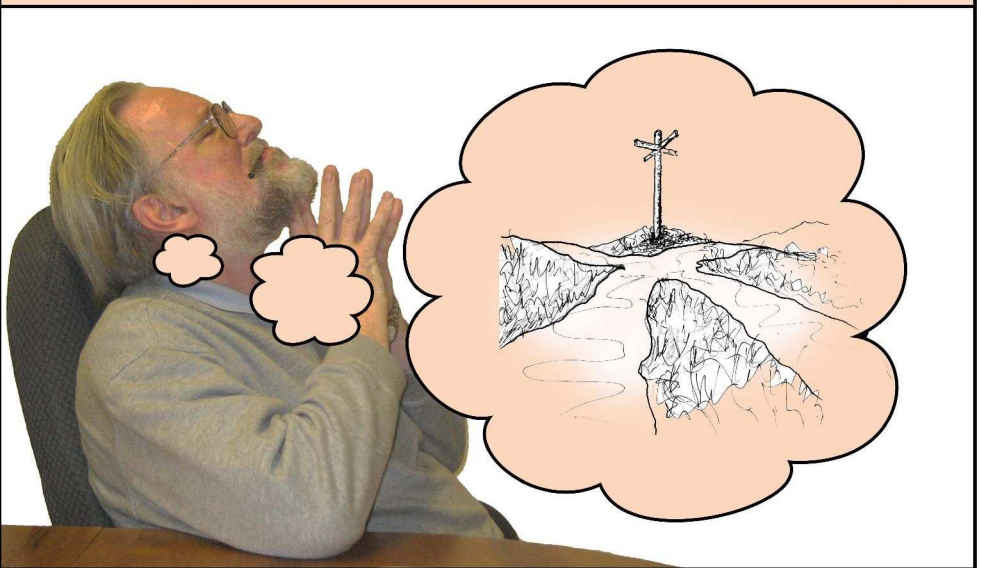
... and Israel
went a'whoring
after foreign gods.



My problem here is in describing people's assumptions about the Bible; abstract phenomena I find quite impossible to draw!



That's why I have decided **to represent** the whole matter by imagining these assumptions, which people make about the Bible, as different roads; and the choice we all have to take about the way we should go, as a sign-post where the roads cross.



Representations like these can be extremely useful making it easier to think and talk about abstract matters. However, they have their dangers for they can lead to terrible confusion if people wrongly take them literally.

Master, why
is the Bible
obsessed
about sex?

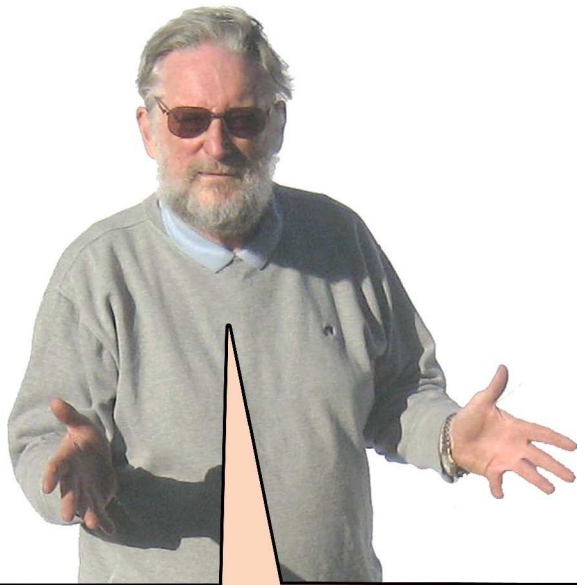


I don't know.
Is it?

So in reading what follows you should constantly bear in mind that I am discussing people's assumptions about the Bible and not some strange geographical matter!



A place
where four roads meet
but which has no way
for people to get there?
That's weird!



But, before proceeding, a word of warning.
In giving these four ways of understanding the Bible labels,
I don't want to give the impression that if you go down the
road marked history, for instance, you will come across
nothing to do with culture, politics and religion.

That would be silly!

People who decide to treat the Bible as a work of
history are perfectly aware that it also shows an interest
in culture, politics and religion...

... and of course the same thing goes for
those who take the other paths.

What we are dealing with here is the question of
the biblical writers' fundamental perspective, which is to
say 'what they were on about', not the subject matters
they discussed.

Now back to our business.

2

Religious Interpretations

Since we're alone here at the starting point we have to assume everyone else has gone off down one of those four roads ...

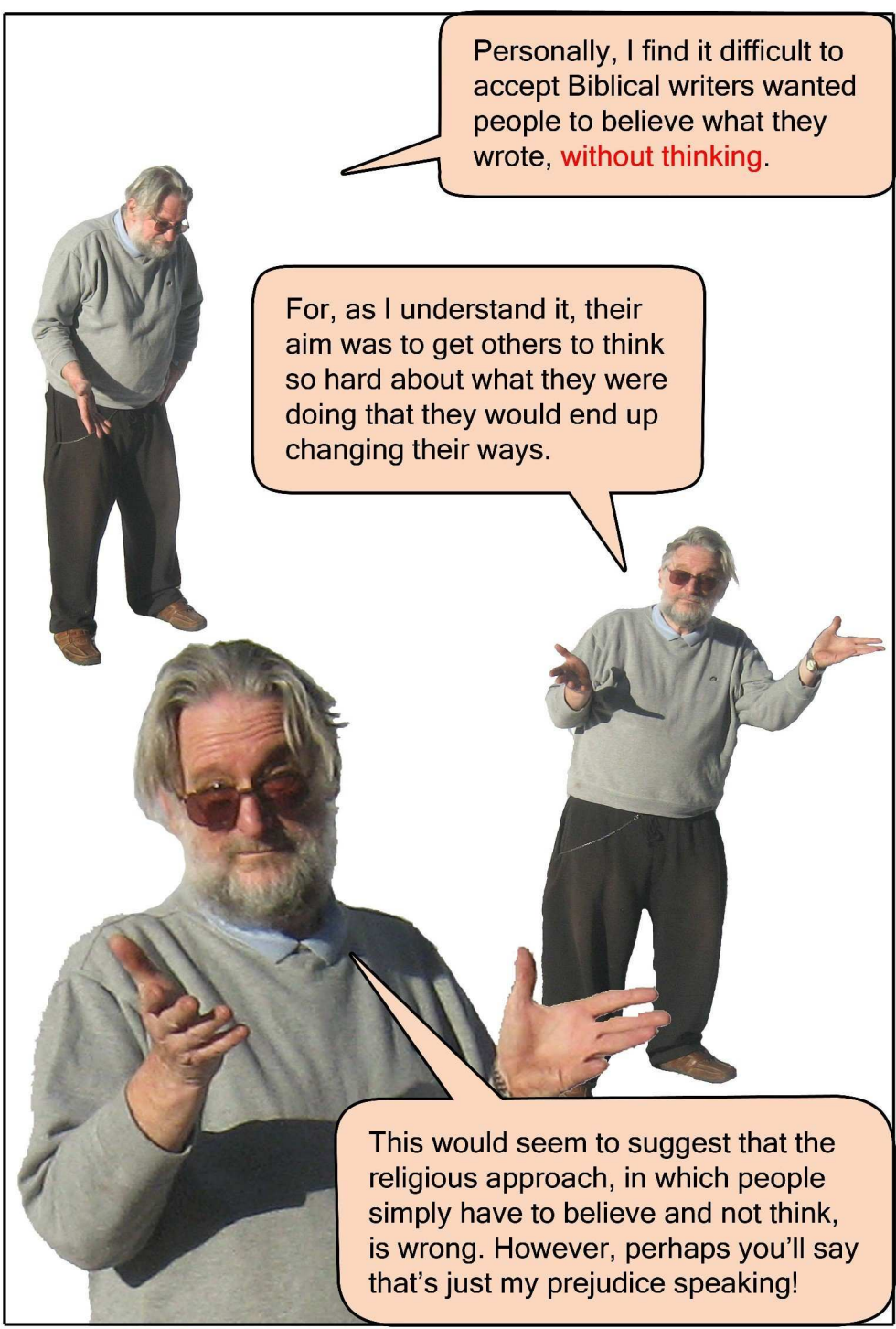
What's he talking about? How can anyone else be here? He's just told me all of this is in his imagination!



John's still having problems with my representation.

Most people who have an opinion about the Bible go down that broad highway marked 'religion' since it takes no effort. You don't have to think; all you have to do is believe or disbelieve!





Personally, I find it difficult to accept Biblical writers wanted people to believe what they wrote, **without thinking**.

For, as I understand it, their aim was to get others to think so hard about what they were doing that they would end up changing their ways.

This would seem to suggest that the religious approach, in which people simply have to believe and not think, is wrong. However, perhaps you'll say that's just my prejudice speaking!

You're surely not suggesting all Christians take what the Bible says literally? In my experience most of them are prepared to be critical even if they do end up saying the Bible as a whole points to what God has done for the world in Christ.



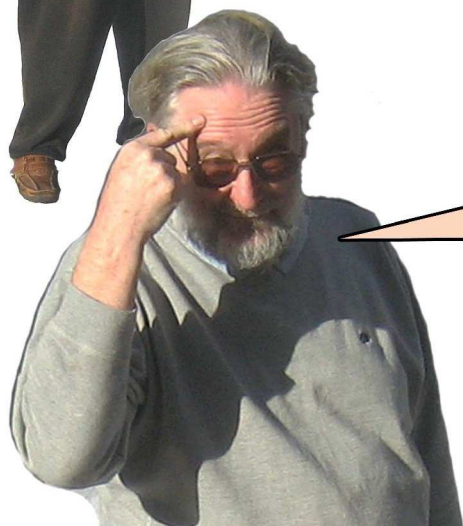
Now that's a good point! Clearly, not all believers are fundamentalists.



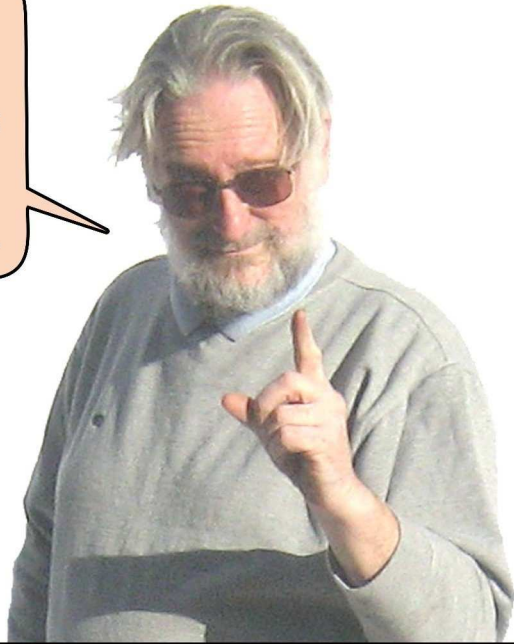
Yet even you, John, admit most Christians introduce religious ideas into biblical discussion which call for **belief** not **reason**.



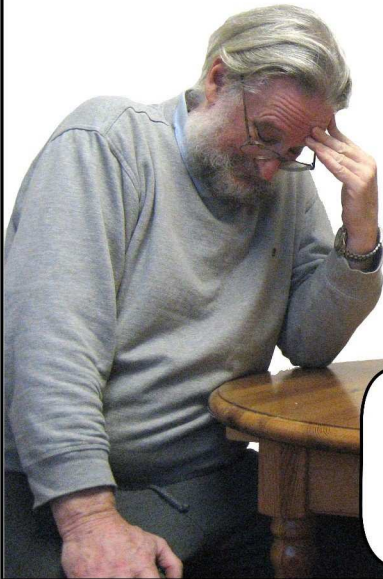
And the trouble is that such ideas have to be accepted or rejected, **in the end**, without thinking, and this makes them an unjustifiable imposition when foisted on others.



So I agree that some believers are prepared to think, up to a point. However, when it comes to the crunch most of them, too, switch off - just like fundamentalists.



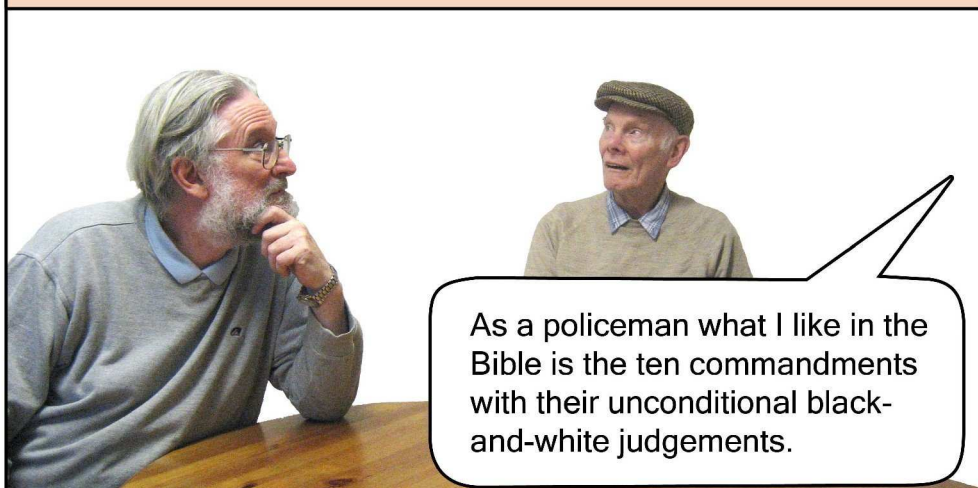
It's this refusal to go on thinking **right to the end** which makes believers such a pain when discussing the Bible.



On our holiday in Sinai Sophy and I saw the exact spot where God spoke with Elijah.



In discussions about the Bible it's hard enough coming to terms with the views of people who see things from a different perspective because of where their feet are placed.



As a policeman what I like in the Bible is the ten commandments with their unconditional black-and-white judgements.

But at least it's possible to have rational discussions about such differences of opinion.

It's not difficult to be clear when making ideological pronouncements.

What's difficult is knowing how to apply such pronouncements, as for example in the case of adultery where the penalty envisaged was death. See the story about Jesus in John 8.



This is not the case when it comes to dealing with religious issues.

What makes you think God actually spoke to Elijah?

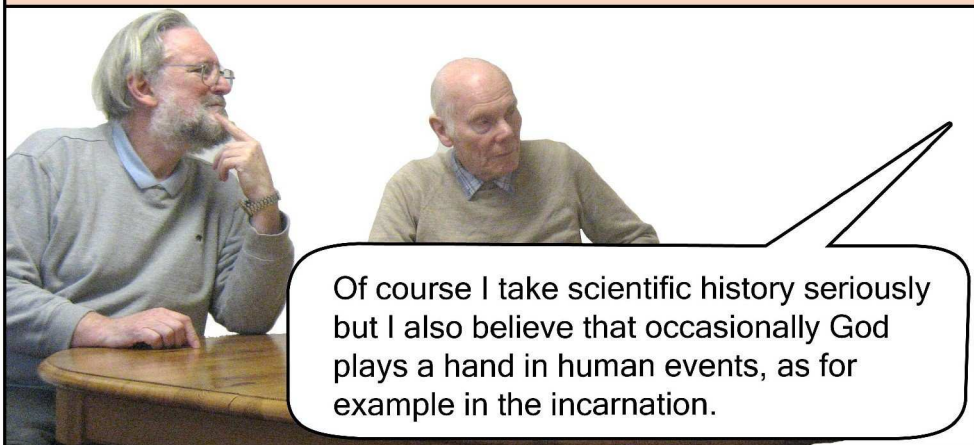
... or that there's any way of knowing where this incident took place?

Are you questioning the word of God?

To some extent it's easier to cope with fundamentalists, for they very soon get fed up and go away.

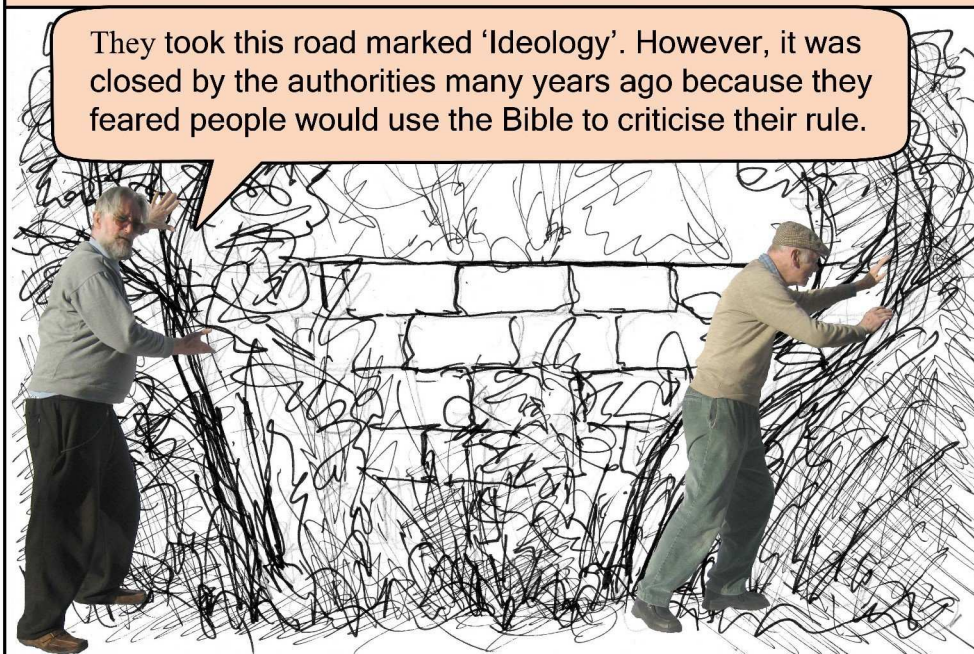
Come on, Sophy. We're obviously in the wrong place.

Critical believers are more of a problem because they insist on hanging around and spreading confusion with the religious ideas they, every now and then, chuck into the debate.

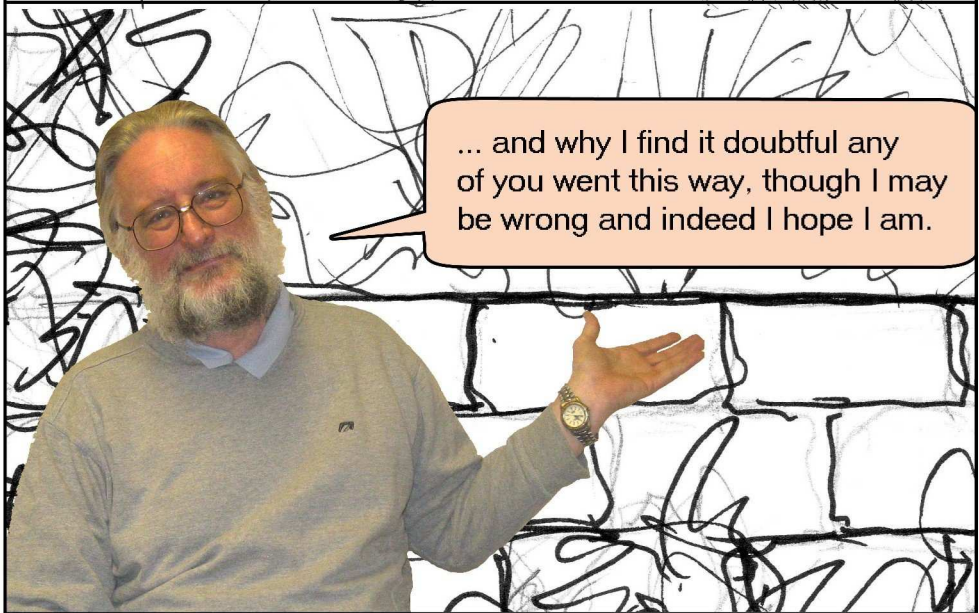
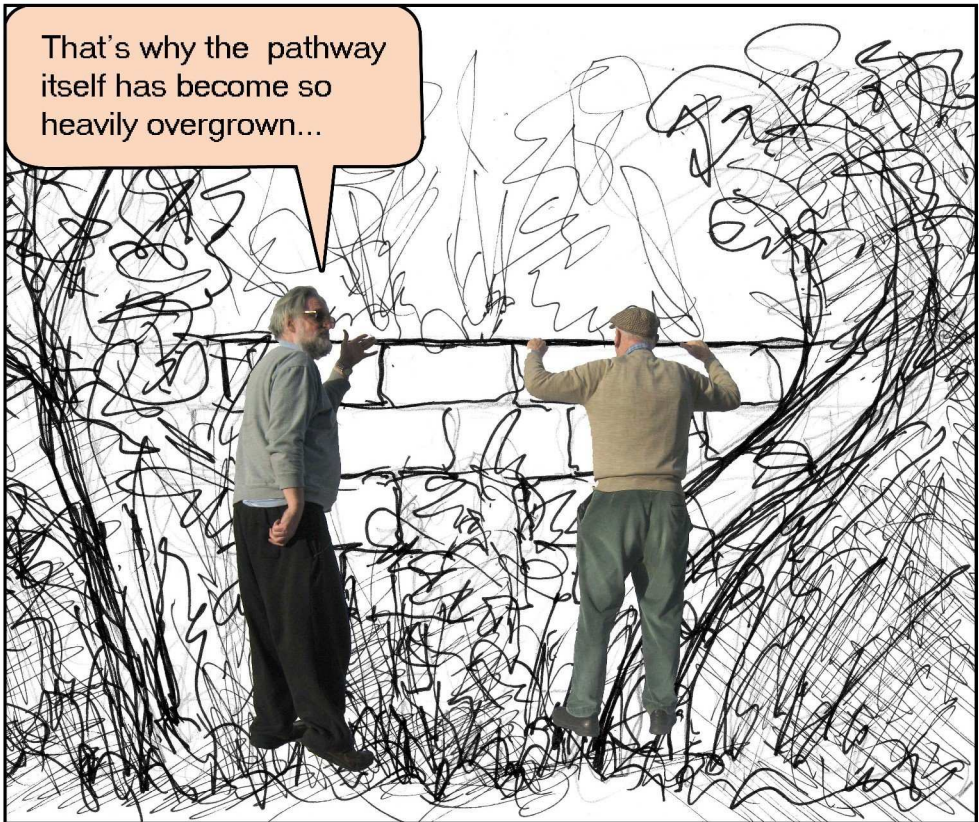


Of course I take scientific history seriously but I also believe that occasionally God plays a hand in human events, as for example in the incarnation.

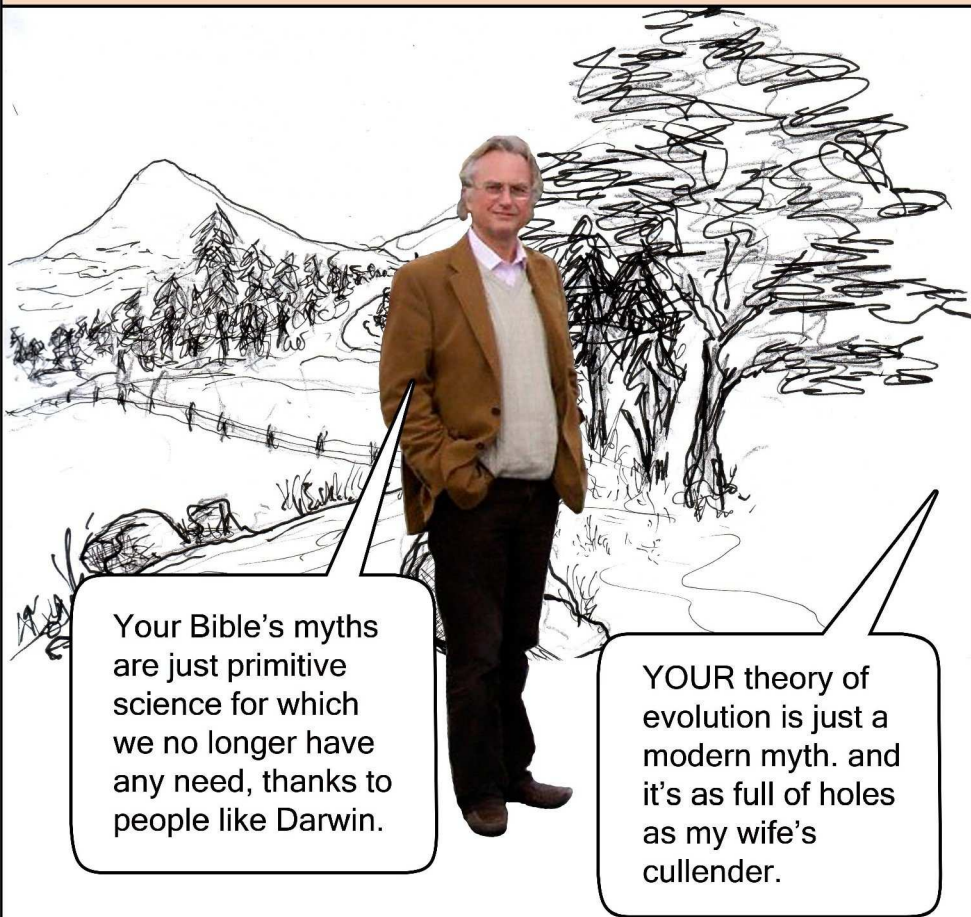
But not everyone has taken the religious road. There have always been a few people over the years who have chosen to read the Bible politically rather than religiously.



They took this road marked 'Ideology'. However, it was closed by the authorities many years ago because they feared people would use the Bible to criticise their rule.



However, there have been other possibilities. For example in modern times some people have chosen to go down that narrow lane marked 'History'. Indeed I fancy I saw Richard Dawkins recently going that way followed by a jeering crowd of creationists.



I suppose some thought goes into the debates between Dawkins and the creationists* but little if any of this is spent, on either side, in trying to understand what the Bible's actually saying.

* For more on Dawkins' controversy with the Creationists see Dawkins' website: richarddawkins.net, and, of course, his books.

The problem for those taking this 'History way' is that everything depends on seeing biblical writers as being concerned with how things first began and then developed into what they now are.

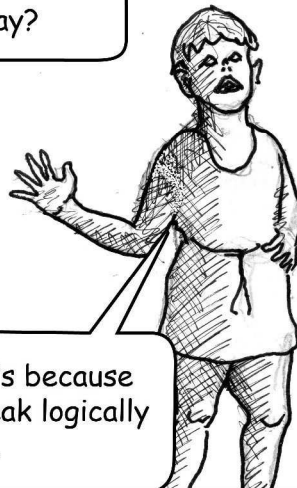
I say, Moses, are you quite sure you've got these dates right?



Yes I've checked them by calculating how long it would have taken for grass to cover the whole earth.

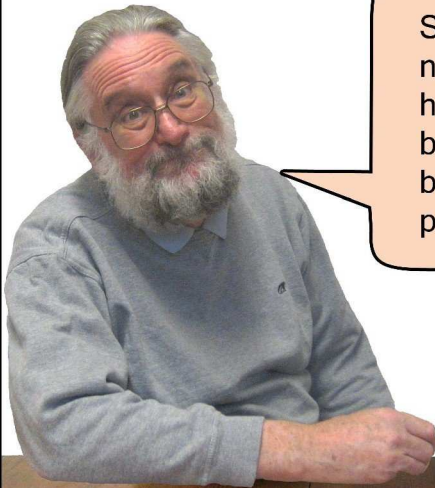
It's true that one or two ancient Greeks were probably capable of thinking **analytically** in such a fashion...

Aristotle, dearest, I can't understand a word you say?



That's because I speak logically Mum.

But no one could possibly suppose the biblical writers were of their number.



So, despite the fact that we moderns naturally tend to read the Bible as history, the suggestion that the biblical writers themselves were basically concerned to analyse their past is simply out of the question.

That's your opinion!



No it isn't!

Yes it is!



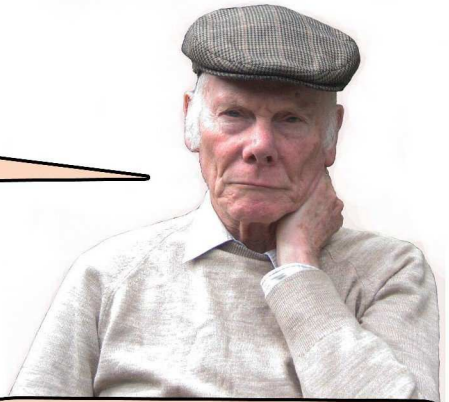
Let me introduce my son. He's always reminding me that what I say about the Bible is **only** my opinion. He knows it gets under my skin.



He's often right, but not here. For, in the absence of a convincing case that the biblical writers thought analytically, we are obliged to reject outright the 'Bible is history' hypothesis.



You surely can't be saying there's no genuine history in the Bible; that the whole thing's made up, a bit of self-serving make-believe?



No, of course I'm not saying anything so silly! We may discover plenty of genuine history in the Bible. We may even discover that some biblical writers were anxious the community should not forget crucial events from its past.



However, it cannot be said that 'scientific history' was their basic concern; that they wanted to find out, if they could, how their community began and developed so as to become what it actually was. For, although that's how Dawkins and all of us think, it was **not** how they thought, and that's a fact.

Though most people continue to take the 'religion' road, scholars now increasingly avoid it since it hampers reasoned debate. They argue that biblical writers operated with ordinary human insights just as we do, whatever their religious beliefs.



Does this mean that the 'ideology way' has now officially been reopened?

I'm afraid not! It simply means that scholars increasingly choose to study the Bible as the cultural heritage of a small, though influential, bygone civilisation.

The Bible's a compendium of texts from different historical periods. Some of them are political. Others are spiritual... or poetical... or psychological... or even erotic!

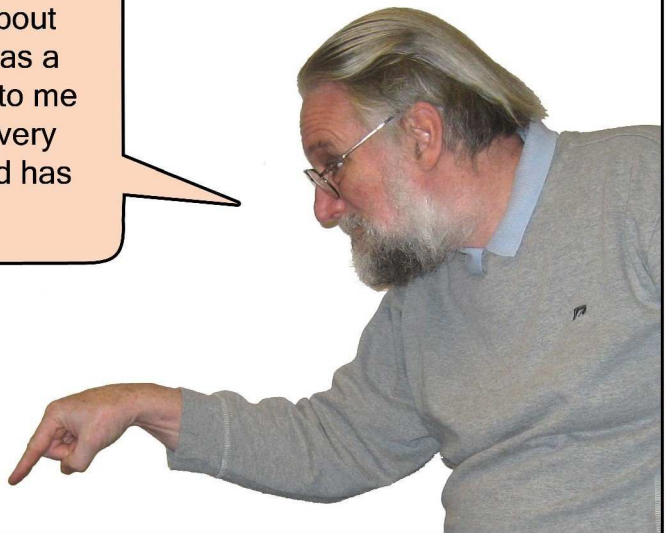


This may seem like a perfectly reasonable thing to do. However, it's only reasonable if it turns out the Bible hasn't got a religious or ideological focus. For treating the Bible as culture in itself constitutes **a denial** of such a focus.

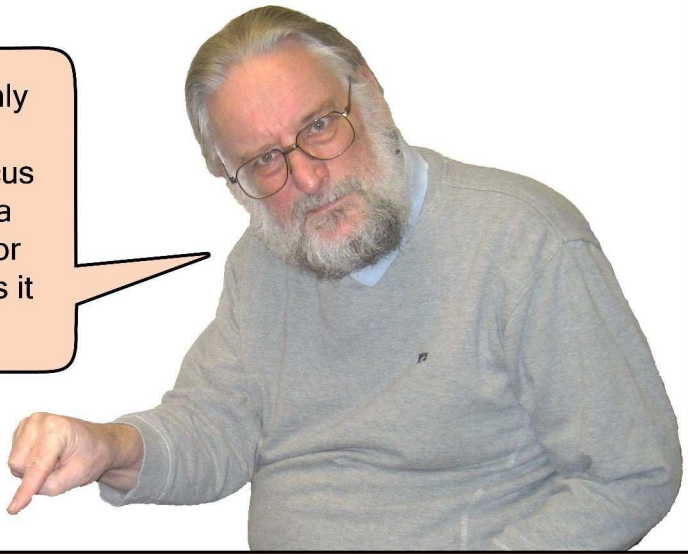


You know the biblical texts are very varied. You can find within the Bible any number of different, not to say contradictory, religious and political opinions.

For my money the surest thing we can say about the Bible is that it has a focus, for it seems to me that's how nearly every page of it reads and has usually been read.



As I see, it the only question is what exactly is this focus and what sort of a focus - religious or ideological - does it constitute?



If I am right this 'Culture Way' is nothing less than a path created by scholars to skirt around the Bible's disconcerting ideology, something they understandably wish to avoid!

OW! It bit me!



Don't worry.
I know how to
deal with it!

Though, of course, others will say that's just my opinion,
as indeed it is!

Accusing us scholars
of wilful blindness?
How ridiculous!

Who is he anyway?

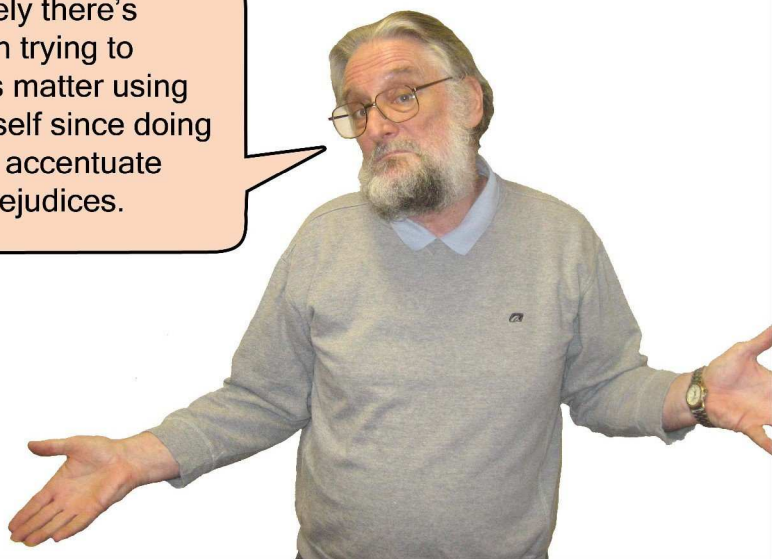
Never heard of him!

So how are we to come to a rational understanding, free of
prejudices, of what sort of book the Bible is?

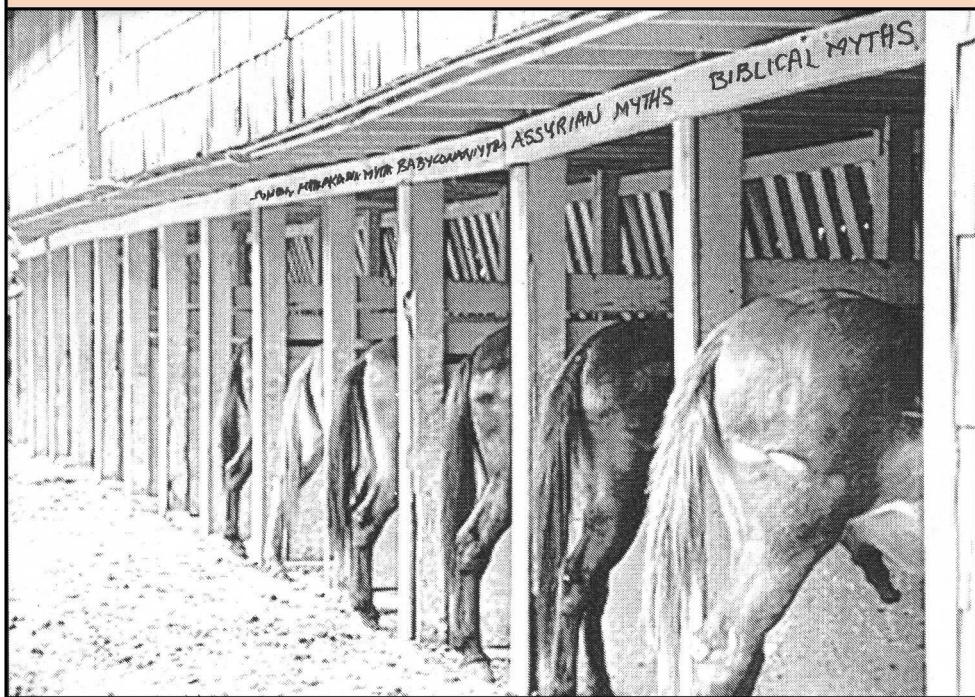
My question's much
simpler. When are we
going to discuss the
biblical texts?



Unfortunately there's little point in trying to resolve this matter using the Bible itself since doing so will only accentuate people's prejudices.



So I propose that we take a look at the stable from which the Bible came, which is to say the Mesopotamian literature.

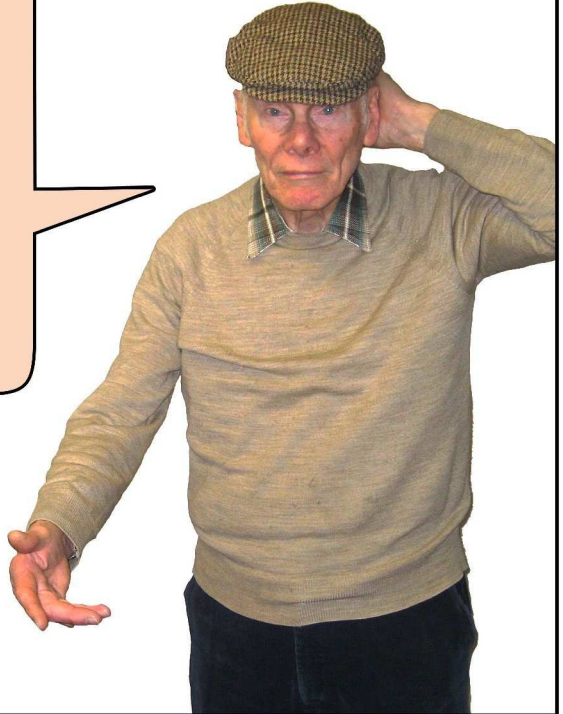


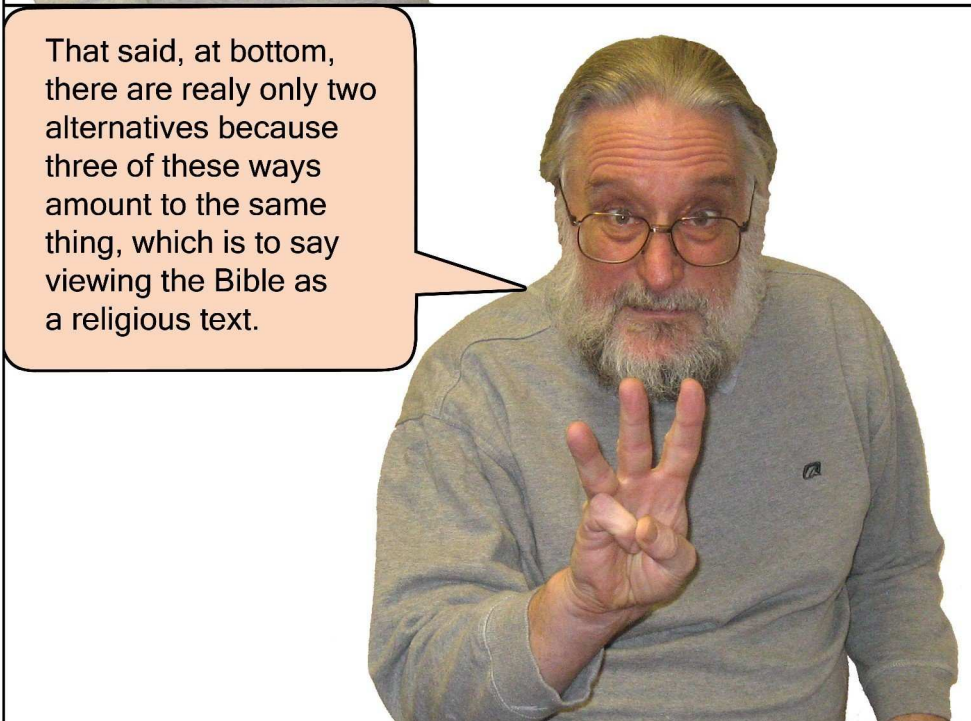
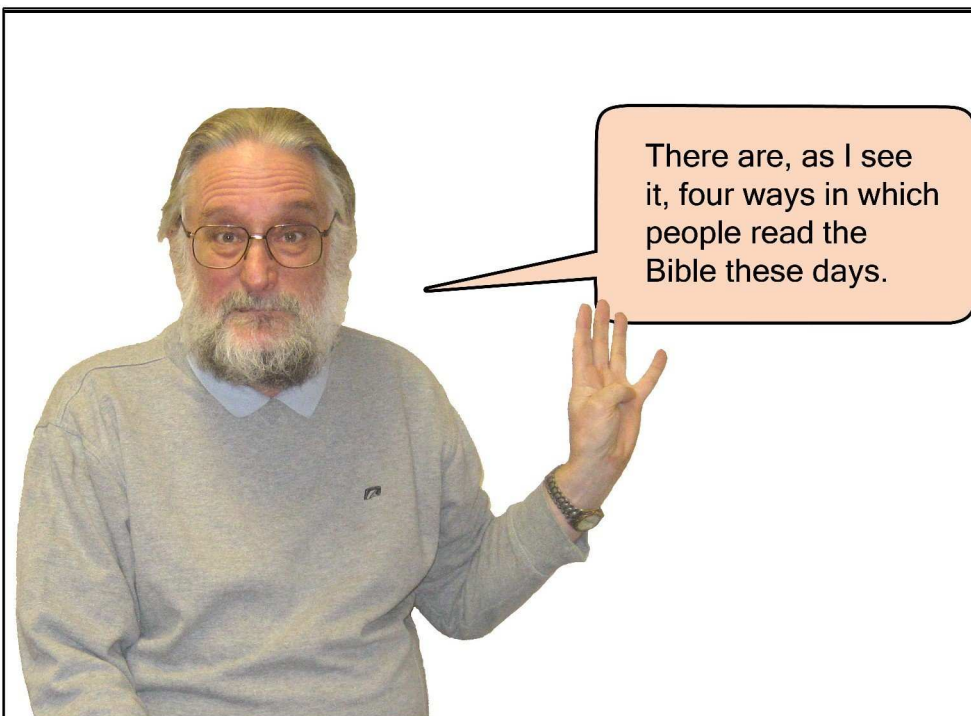
Don't be upset John.
I guarantee you'll find
the Mesopotamian
myths far more
entertaining than
the ones in the Bible.

What makes him think
I'm looking for
entertainment !



Hold on, I'm confused.
Let's go back a bit. You
began our discussion with
two choices, saying that
the Bible's concerned with
ideology, not religion.
However, you then went
on to speak of four ways
of reading it. So which is
it? Are we faced with two
or rather four options?





Take the 'History Way' for a start. Dawkins argues that the Bible's creation stories are primitive science and therefore **bad** science for which we no longer have any need.



Not only is Darwin's theory of origins incomparably more inspiring than the story of the Garden of Eden. It has the additional advantage of being almost certainly true!

Though he clearly knows next to nothing about the Bible itself Dawkins is no fool. He's aware most people think it deals with religion and he doesn't for a moment wish to dispute the point. All he wants to do is equate this assumed biblical religion with bad science since that way he can chuck it in the bin!

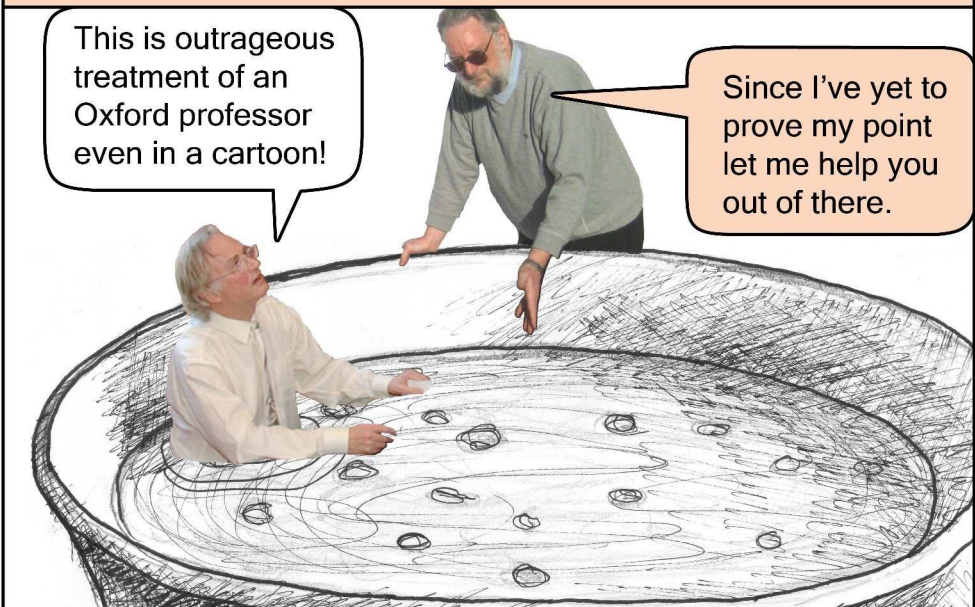


Science shares with religion the claim that it answers deep question about origins. But there the resemblance ends. Scientific beliefs are supported by evidence, and they get results. Myths and faiths are not and do not!

So, though Dawkins takes the 'History Way', he fundamentally agrees with his creationist opponents in supposing that the Bible's a religious work.

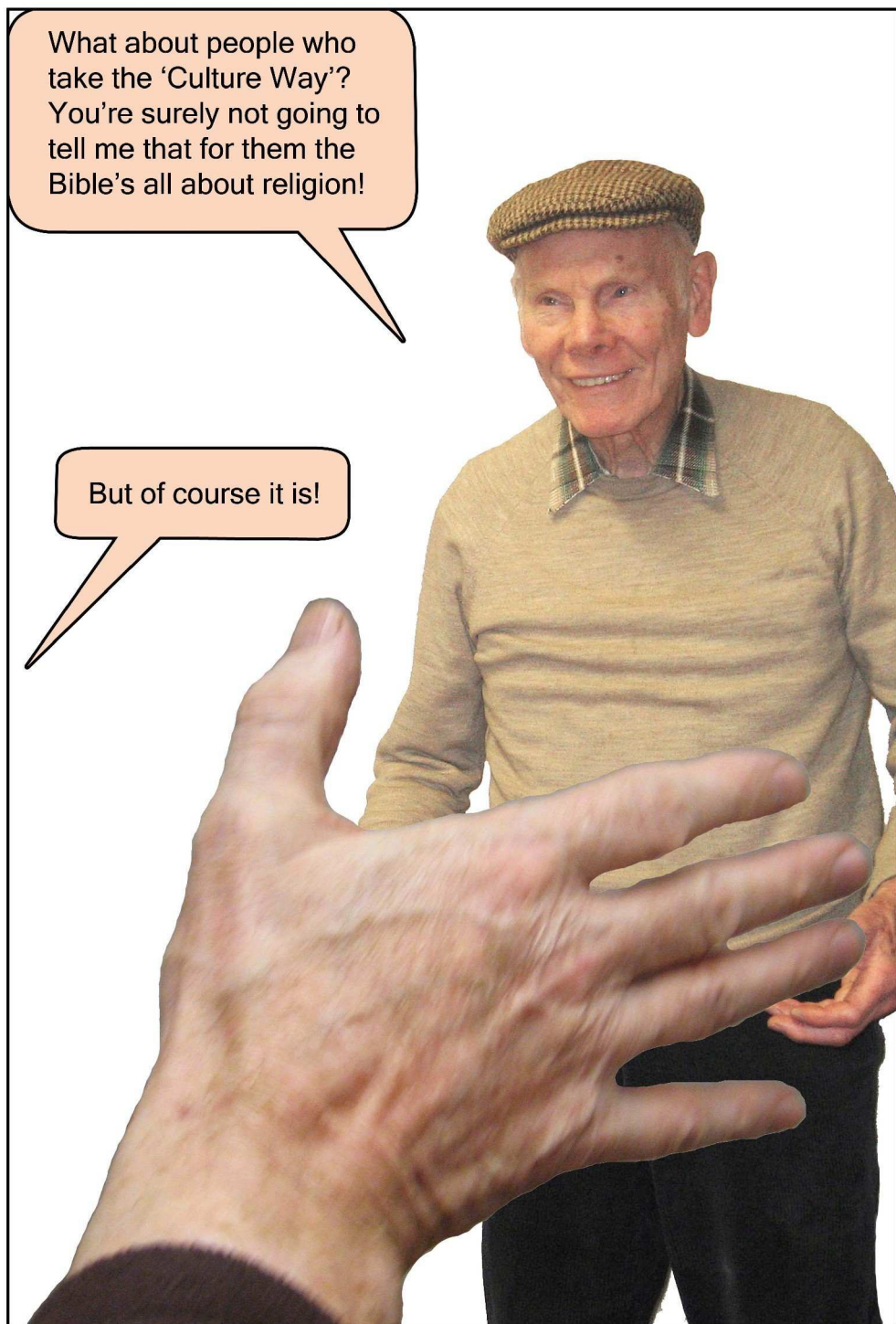


This means if I can show the Bible deals in ideology rather than religion, Dawkins is in the soup for no one will believe for a minute that **ideology** constitutes **primitive science**.



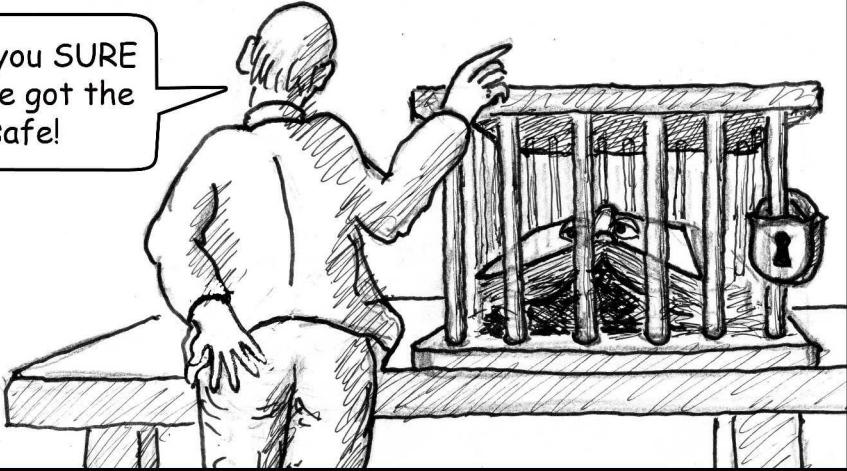
What about people who take the 'Culture Way'? You're surely not going to tell me that for them the Bible's all about religion!

But of course it is!

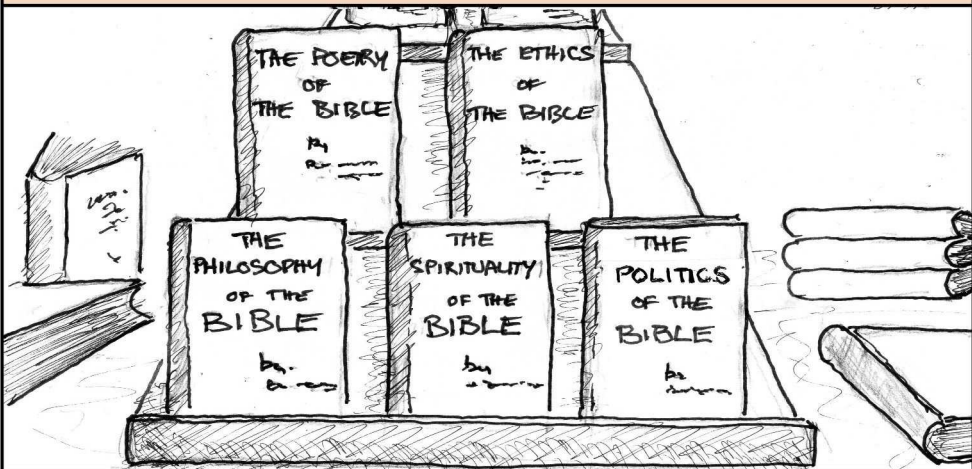


As I said previously, academics seek to avoid religion because it interferes with rational discussion. However, they don't want to fall into the trap of seeing the Bible as ideology, the logical alternative, because that would mean exposing their soft parts (their pride and self-esteem) to its vicious bite.

Are you SURE
you've got the
key safe!

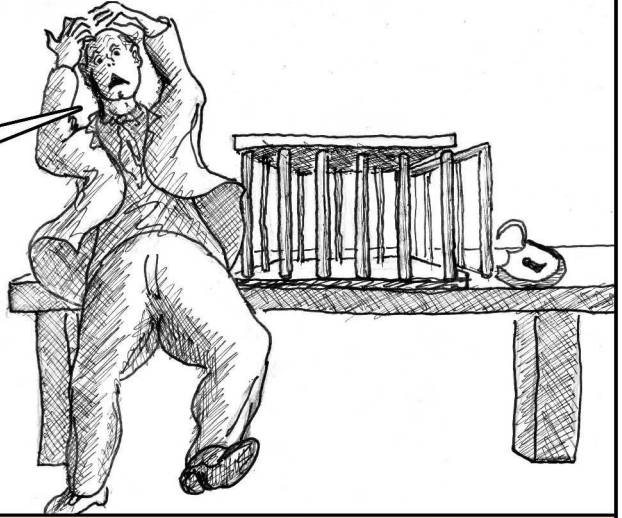


Generally speaking, academics agree the Bible's a religious text. However, since they can't deal in religion they put it in brackets and concentrate instead on what they see as the Bible's secondary aspects.



In this way, perhaps without realising it, they succeed in making out that the Bible's concerned with nothing in particular, in the long term an unsustainable thesis, but anything's better than having to face the Bible's wicked ideological teeth.

O my god!
It's escaped!



This fragmentation of the 'Religion Way' into three contradictory approaches shows how impossible it is to account for what we find in the Bible using religious ideas.



What amazes me is that people go on looking for new religious solutions to this conundrum instead of trying the all-too-obvious ideology alternative.

3

Ideological Interpretations

My problem is that I'm not sure what it means to say that the Bible's an ideological text. You don't really expect me to read it as a political manifesto do you?



Psst! Have you read our manifesto?

!



That's an interesting comparison! However, as you clearly see, there are problems in viewing the Bible in such a light!

But let's not be too hasty in drawing conclusions. Better to take a cautious approach by clarifying what we mean when we say a text is ideological or religious. This will enable us to make a reasoned judgement about the Bible when the time comes.

OK. You can start by reminding me what an ideology is.

Very well. Here goes!

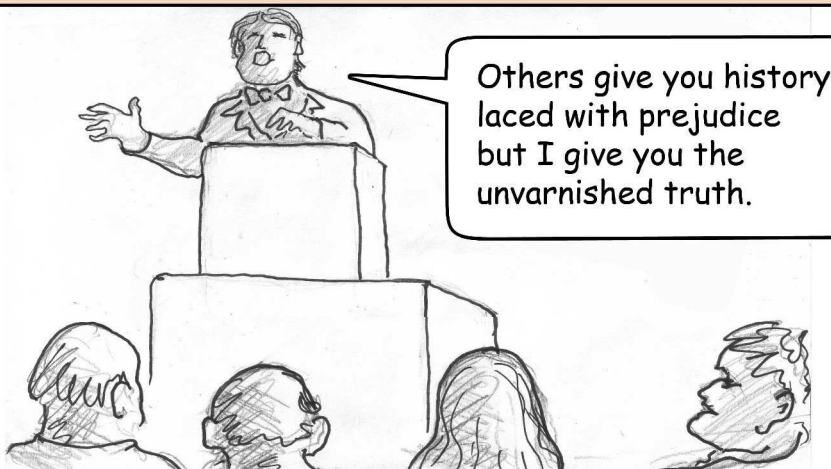


All healthy human beings acquire a pattern of ideas which enables them to make sense of the world and their position in it. Such a pattern is called a world-view or ideology and we all have one - unless we're mentally damaged.

He's bigger than me, which suggests he ranks above me. However, he gives way if I insist, which suggests I'm on my way up and he's on his way down.



That said, the truth is, most of us go about denying the evidence, claiming that our way of looking at the world is not just an ideology but rather the natural and right way of seeing things.



Others give you history laced with prejudice but I give you the unvarnished truth.

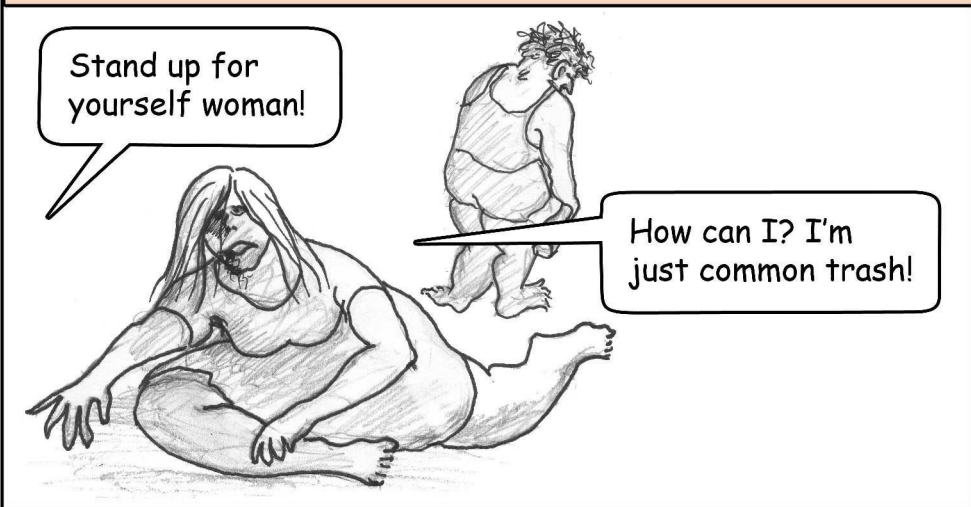
Few historians actually say such things; it's just the impression they convey.

Clearly we get our world-view ideas partly from others and partly from our own observations of life and personal interests.

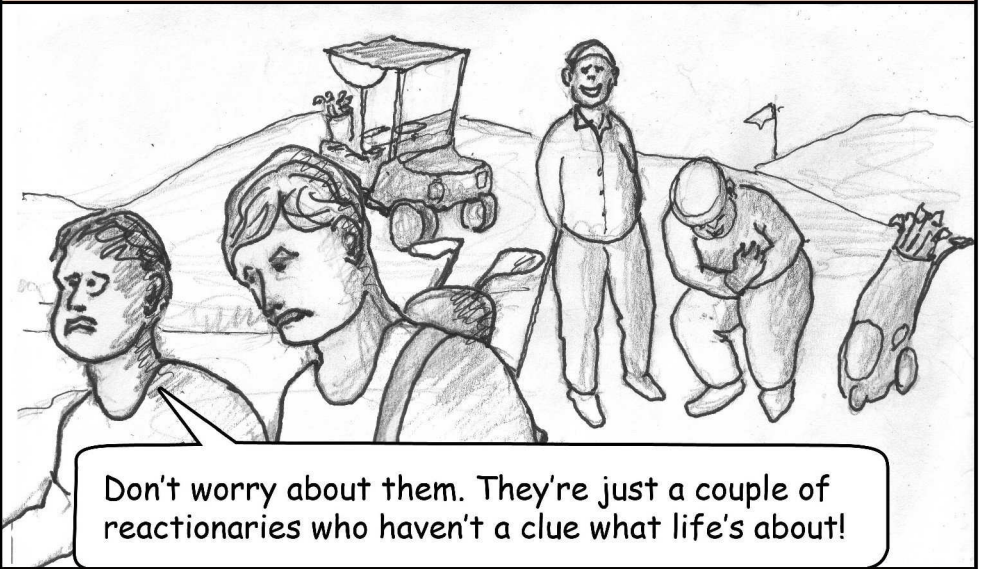


Lines overheard from a conversation between my two eldest daughters when they were about ten and eight respectively

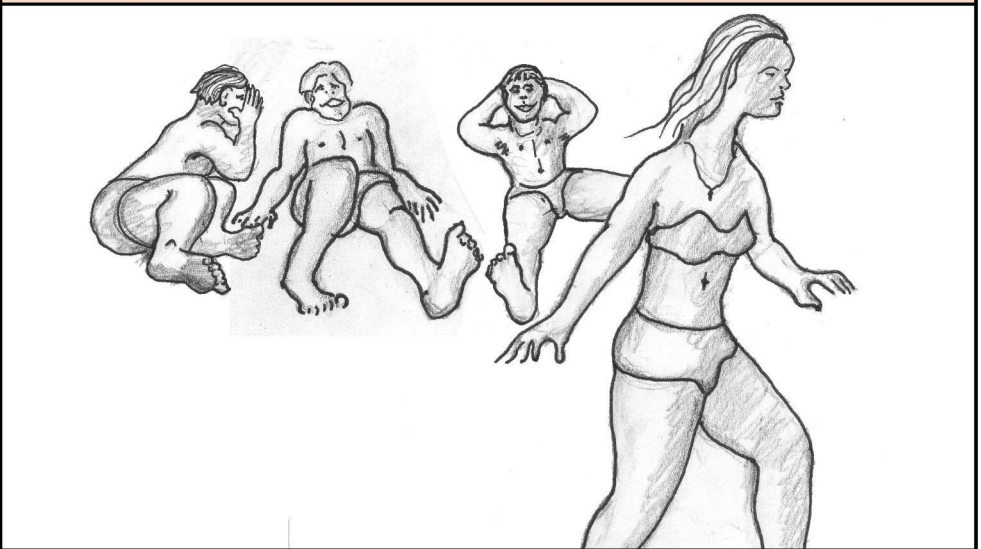
However, we have to recognise that Marx, who was an expert, only used the term ideology to describe the world-view of the ruling class, which he saw as being foisted on everyone.



But I find this restriction in the use of the word unhelpful since it makes it necessary to invent a new term for the ideas of those actively working against the ruling class.



So I use the word ideology of **all** world-views which means we can now say that all ideologies are 'coloured' by the common perspective and special interests of those who create them.



Throughout history people raised in privileged circumstances have naturally espoused ideas that justify the status quo. We label such ideas as 'conservative' and give them the royal colour blue.



I have often thought a little want and deprivation must be good for the soul.

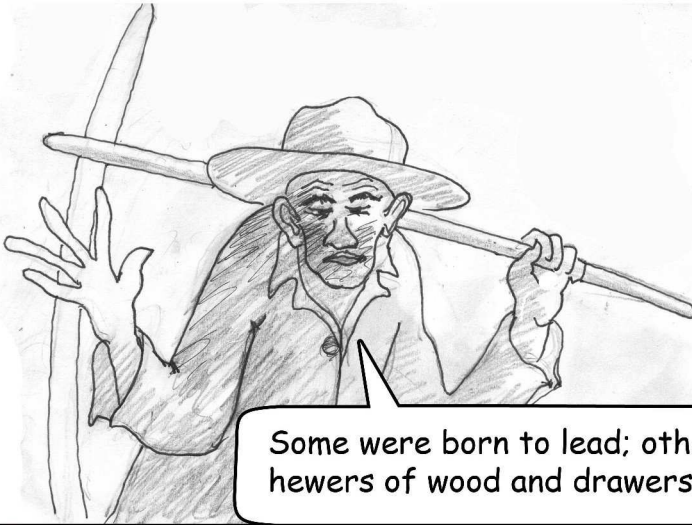
On the other hand, individuals raised in restricted circumstances, which hinder their advancement, have naturally adopted ideas that are critical of the prevailing set-up. We call such ideas 'revolutionary' and give them the colour red.



Go on! chuck it man! What have we got to lose?



In fact history shows that most people growing up in restricted circumstances never acquire revolutionary ideas but continue to work with the ruling class's imposed 'status-quo' notions.



Some were born to lead; others to be hewers of wood and drawers of water.

This, I presume, is why Marx chose to use the term ideology only of this all-pervasive, dominant world-view.

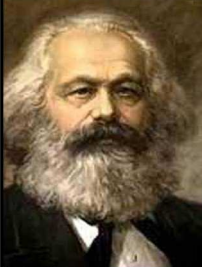


Then again history also shows that revolutions are almost invariably led by people from one of the higher classes.



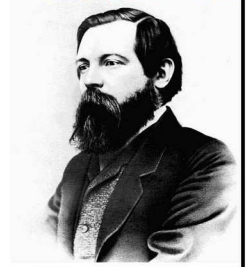
Oliver Cromwell
Landed Gentry

Maximilien
Robespierre
Lawyer



Karl Marx
Philosopher
Son of Lawyer

Fredrich Engles
Buisness man
and Manufacturer



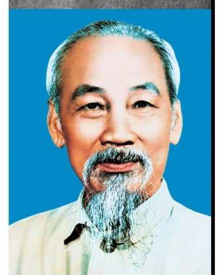
Vladimir Lenin
Son of education
official.
Educated in Law.

Mao Zedong
Soldier
Son of rich Peasant



Zhou Enlai
Family poor but
of scholar class.
Educated in Nankai
University and Tokyo

Ho Chi Minh
Father Confucian
scholar, teacher and
a civil servant in the
imperial palace

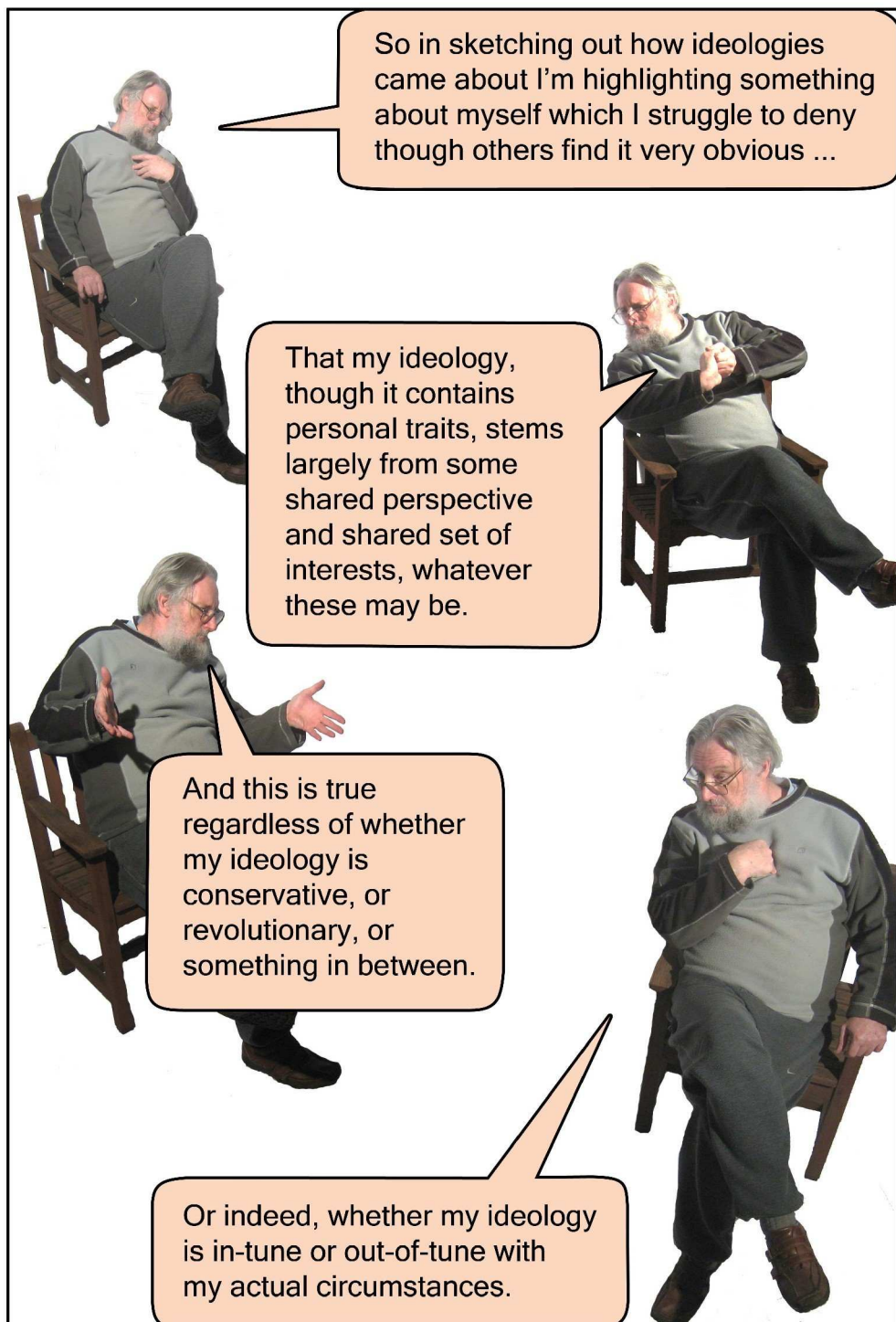


The reason for this is fairly obvious. Revolutions do not arise spontaneously but require intellectual leadership, which implies an education, and education has historically been the prerogative of the ruling class.

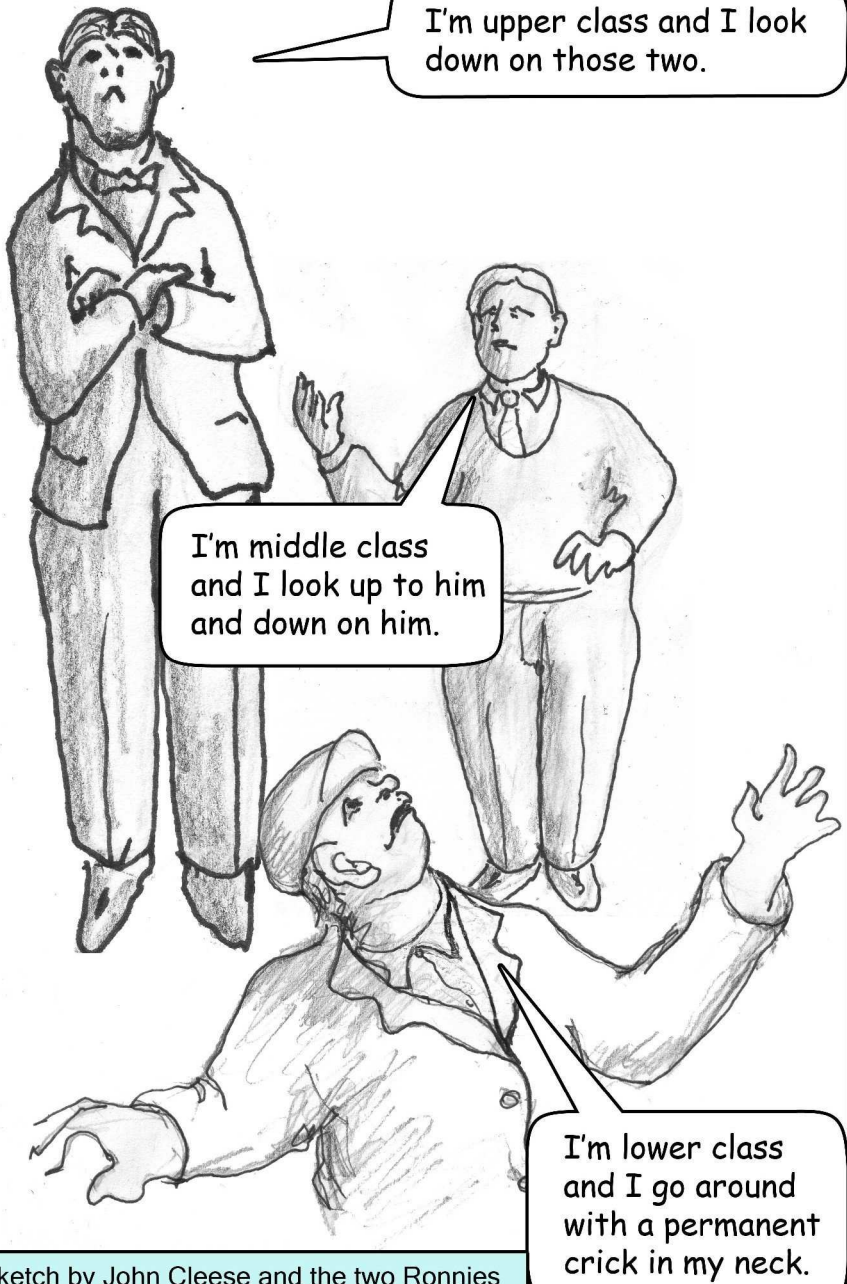
That's all very well but what you are forgetting is that, as many people see things, ideologies are mechanisms that blind. As a result people understandably want to have nothing to do with them.



It's true. Like everyone else I think I can see the world **just as it is**; there being no need for ideological spectacles. But it's a delusion for in fact the only way I can make sense of what I see is to look at it **from some perspective**. So, if the world makes any sense to you, it's entirely down to the ideological spectacles, you don't realise, you too are wearing.



This leads us directly to the phenomenon of class.

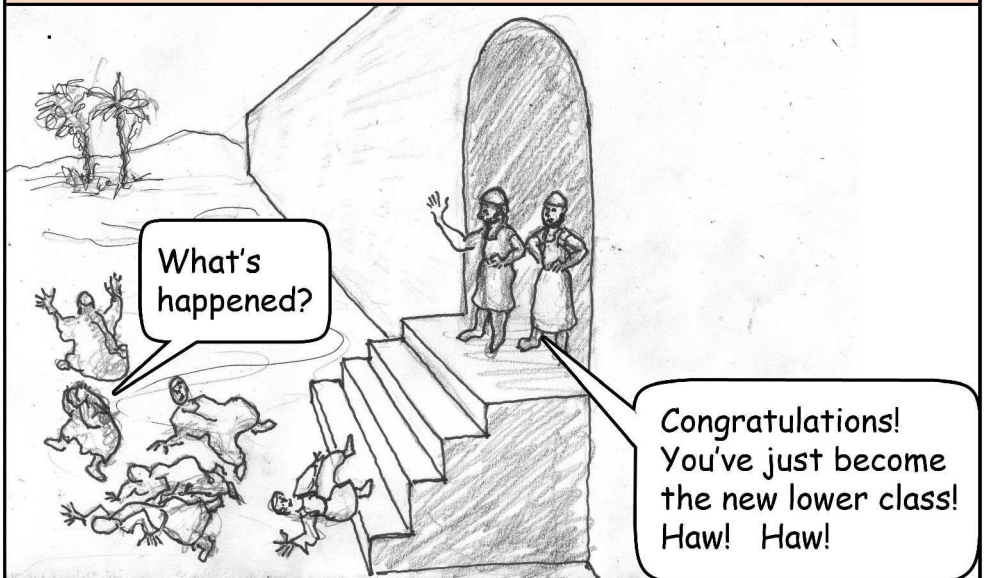


From a sketch by John Cleese and the two Ronnies

Analysing western society Marx demonstrated that civilisation took off as a result of the improved efficiency brought on by the introduction of a class structure that sidelined bickering and argument - the bane of all collective decision-making.



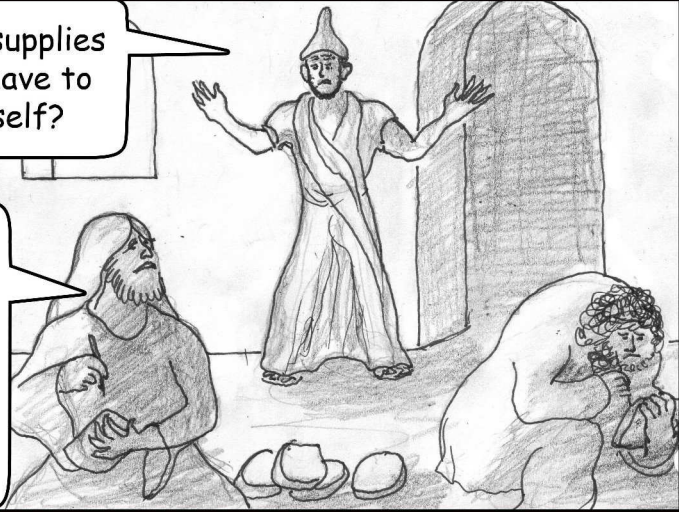
By depriving the majority of a say in how society is run a small minority was able to guarantee things got done.



Marx showed that, given this new efficiency, civilisation was able to continue to advance right up to the point when productivity began to stagnate, due to the inherent contradictions within the class system itself.

Why haven't the supplies been sent? Do I have to do everything myself?

Sire, everyone in the Palace is down with the flu, so there's no one with the authority to do the job!



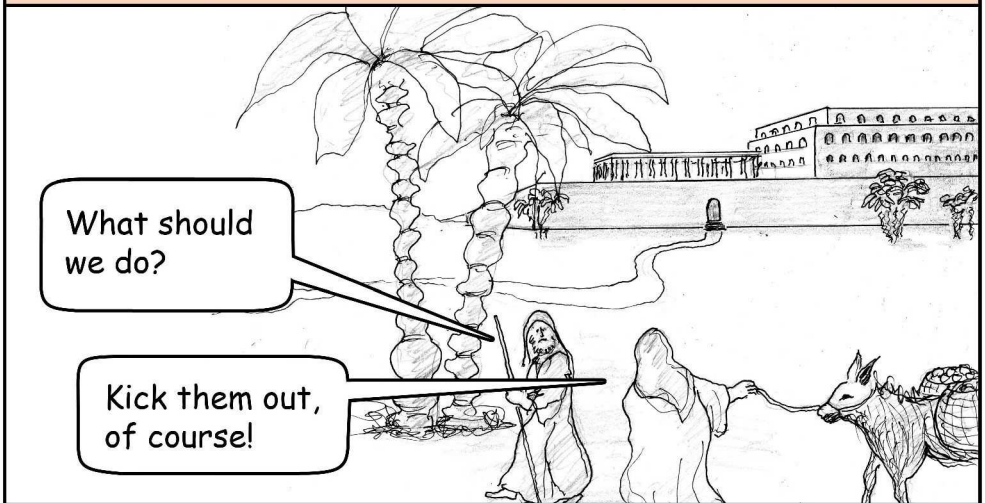
He argued that civilisation was then only able to rise to a higher state of productivity by dismantling the class system; a move the ruling class would, for obvious reasons, never contemplate.

What do you intend to do about this situation sire?

I'm bugged if I know!



The move therefore could only ever come about through a process of revolutionary pressure from the bottom upwards.



In analysing the economic interests of the classes making up western society Marx realised that this revolutionary process, geared to the dismantling of the class system, could only come about in stages. First, through a bourgeois revolution...



... and then through a proletarian revolution.

Now it's
your turn
mate.

THUD

For, though Marx was aware of people even more deprived than the proletariat within western society, he was convinced they possessed no potential for fermenting revolution.

You talk of the
proletariat but
what about us?

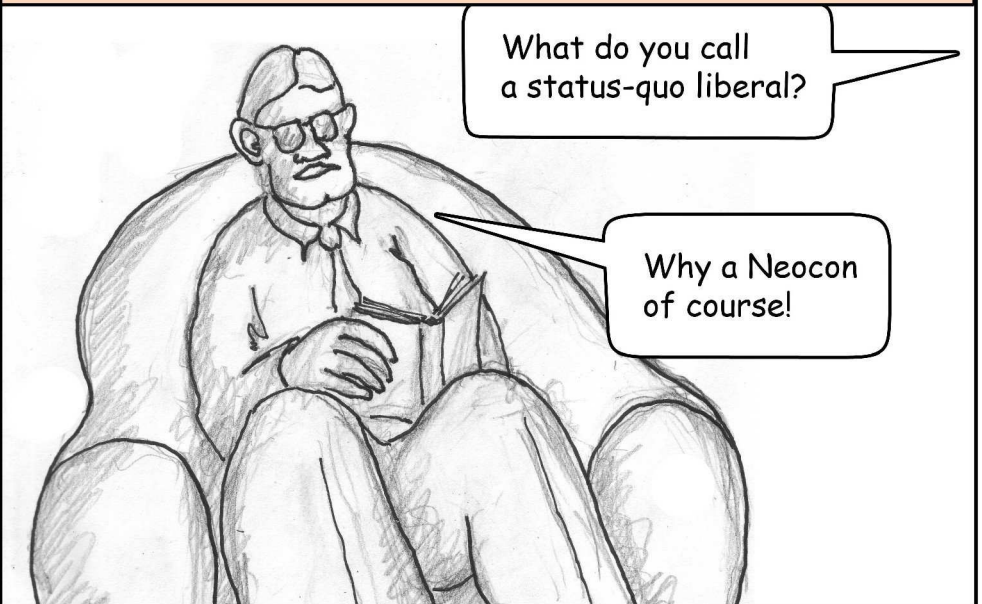


Who cares about you. You
can't even tie your shoelaces!

The fact that there are three full-blown ideologies in western society (conservatism, liberalism and socialism) but only two political colours - Red and Blue - presents a bit of a problem.



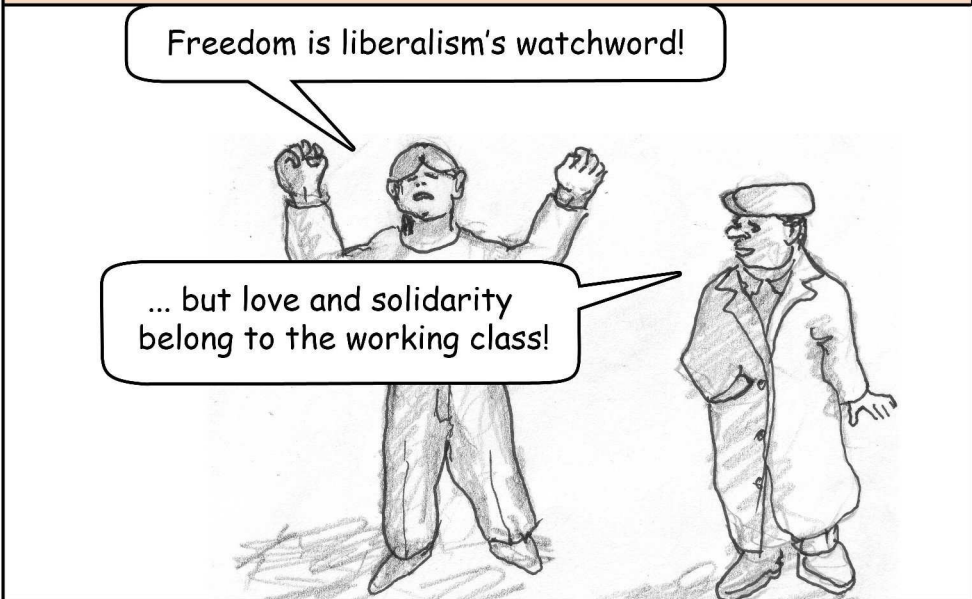
This is not a trivial point since it highlights something many people find confusing: the fact that liberalism, which was once a revolutionary ideology, now constitutes the bed-rock of the status-quo.



Given this weird situation, which Marx himself adequately described, it has seemed natural to attribute to liberalism not a third colour - say yellow - but rather a greatly reduced tone of revolutionary red: washed-out pink!



There's another equally important reason to stick with this notion of ideological colour. Since ideologies are made up of ideas it's easy to make the mistake of thinking that different ideologies employ different notions.



This, however, is not strictly speaking true. For all ideologies find room for concepts like freedom, equality and love. If they differ it's only in the way they pattern such ideas, which is what we are referring to in speaking of their colour.

And would Madam like her Freedom Socks in red, light fuchsia or rose bonbon?



One sometimes gets the impression Americans believe only they truly care about liberty. However, a moment's reflection should be enough to realise it's a fundamental plank of all ideologies.

Liberty and Democracy are America's gift to civilisation.

Does this mean we're free in the U.S.A. to elect a Communist government?



That said, it can't be denied that freedom means different things to different people. For conservatives it's the happy state which makes it possible for the ruling class to run things as they should be run, free of the wicked interference of subversives or greedy foreigners.

At last I'm free to do what I like...
Er, what I mean is, what's for the best!



For liberals, freedom is the happy state which makes it possible for the bourgeois to compete, free of conservative restrictions imposed from above or socialist restrictions imposed from below.

At last, thanks to me, everyone's in a position to compete freely.



For socialists freedom is the happy state which makes it possible for the proletariat to use its dictat to establish the panacea of the classless society on everyone's behalf.



At last I'm free to introduce the classless society in the name of the people... only unfortunately they all seem to be either in prison or dead.

It would seem therefore that all ideologies find a place for freedom, as they do for equality and love, only they all mean different things by these important words.



'My love is of the truest blue.'



'My love is as pink as a new-born babe.'

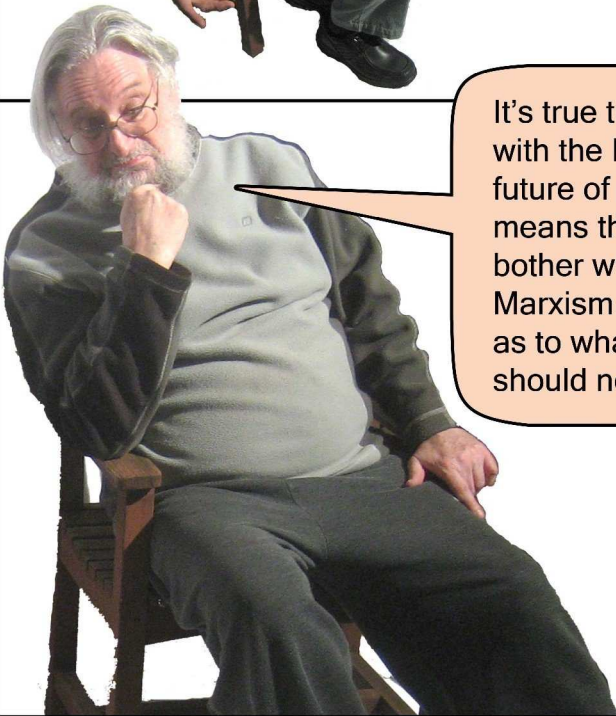


'My love is like a red, red, revolutionary rose.'

This is all very fascinating but wouldn't most people say that Marx's ideas have been disproved? And even if such a judgement is premature what on earth have Marx's ideas got to do with the Bible?



It's true that our concern is with the Bible and not with the future of global society, which means that we don't have to bother with the dispute between Marxism and liberal capitalism as to what course society should now steer.



However, given that we're discussing whether the Bible's a religious or ideological text, we obviously need to know about ideologies and here Marx is still by far our best teacher, though there's no reason to take what he says as gospel!



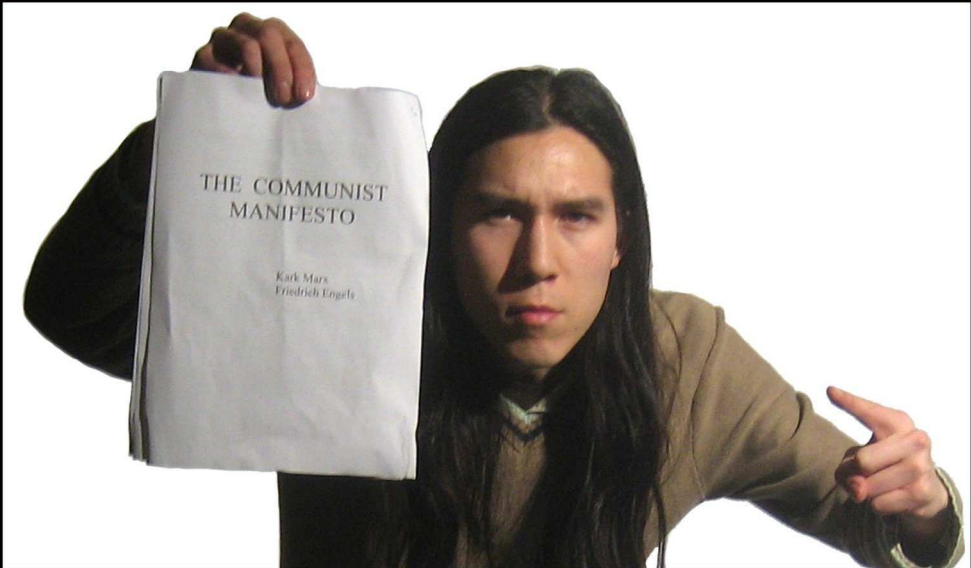
In some ways all texts are ideological. For everything a human produces bears some imprint of that individual's world-view. This, after all, is what distinguishes 'art' from 'nature'.



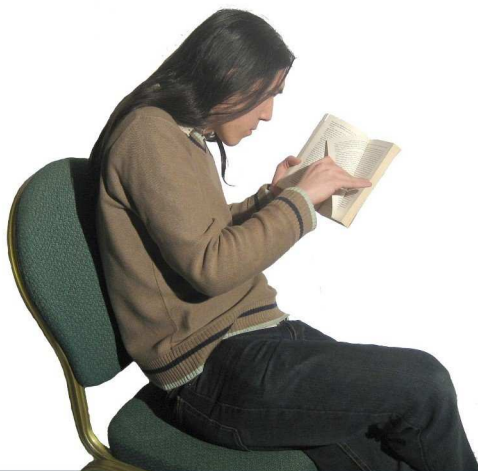
Above a work of Nature.
(Le Grotte di Frasassi)
To the right a work of Art.
(Reims Cathedral)



That said, in some texts the ideological imprint is stronger than in others. At one end of the scale you have things like political manifestos designed to actually define such an imprint.



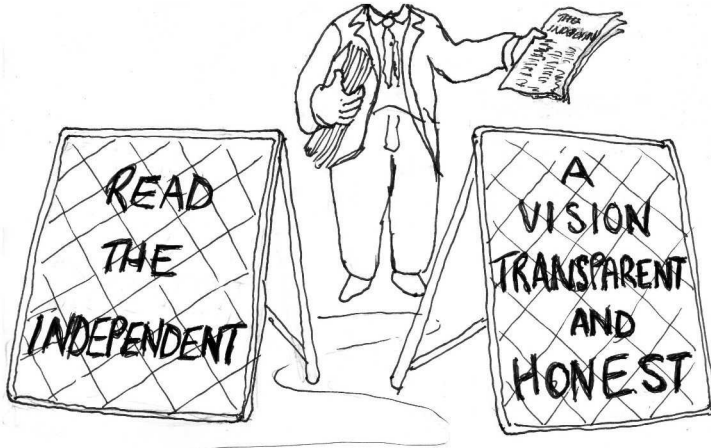
At the other end you have the story-book where the imprint is so tucked away that most readers are not aware the text is ideological, even though common sense dictates it must be.



Somewhere between these extremes there are texts, like our daily newspapers, which though they discuss anything and everything under the sun make their comments in such a way as to demonstrate clearly their ideological focus.



Of course, given that the job of a newspaper is to create a political opinion, it paradoxically sometimes serves the proprietor's interest to pretend it has no political colour.



However, no one who reads more than one newspaper can be blind to the fact that newspapers offer comment from a given perspective, which is why people refer to their political colour.

Like the Queen's hats The Daily Mail is a feminine blue.

The Guardian is a liberal pink with the odd red blushes.

The Sun is working-class red, white and blue, blue being the operative colour.

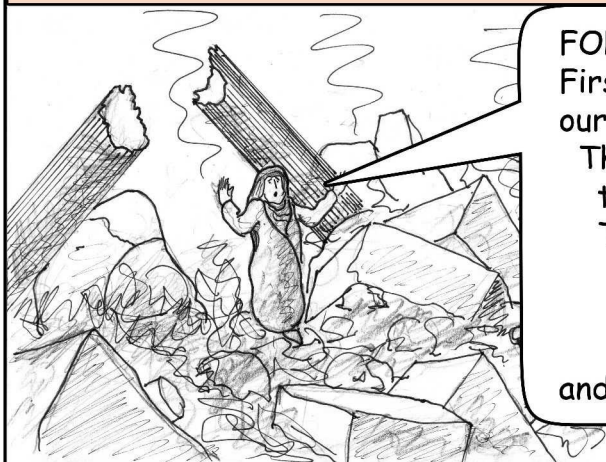
The Mirror is a vulgar pink. What the French call rose-bonbon.

So when I argue that the Bible, like a good deal of Mesopotamian literature, was an ideological text, all I am saying is that it was designed to do much the same sort of job as our mass media do today.



In other words in a more or less self-conscious way it aimed to provide a running commentary on what was happening in the world, from a very particular ideological perspective.

Viewed as media, the only real difference between the Bible and Mesopotamian texts - apart from the all important matter of their political colour which we will deal with later - is that the Mesopotamian publishing-houses were forever folding.



FOLDING he calls it!
First the Gutti destroyed
our civilisation!
Then it was Sargon and
the Akkadians!
Then the Assyrians!
Then the Babylonians!
Then the Persians!
Then the Greeks!
and now it's the Romans!

What's amazing is the fact that, for some reason which we must surely investigate, the Hebrew 'ideological rag' went on and on even though its power to affect the world seemed utterly derisory in comparison with its Mesopotamian counterparts.



What's that you're reading?

It's a Jubilee
copy of the
Daily Hebrew.
It's their
seventy
thousandth
edition.

One last thing before we get stuck into the Mesopotamian myths: to be able to decide whether a text is religious or ideological we need to be clear what people mean by a religious document, don't we?

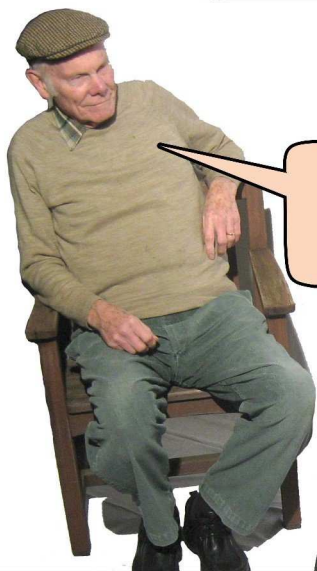


I think everyone, including Dawkins and his fundamentalist opponents, would agree that religion involves a belief in a supernatural being who can be appealed to by prayer and offerings and who is capable of directly affecting our lives.

Yes but haven't we agreed many believers recognise that God does not greatly interfere, leaving us, for the most part, to deal with our problems ourselves?



Fine, I'm happy with that proviso. However, it changes nothing regarding the above definition, does it?



No, I suppose not.

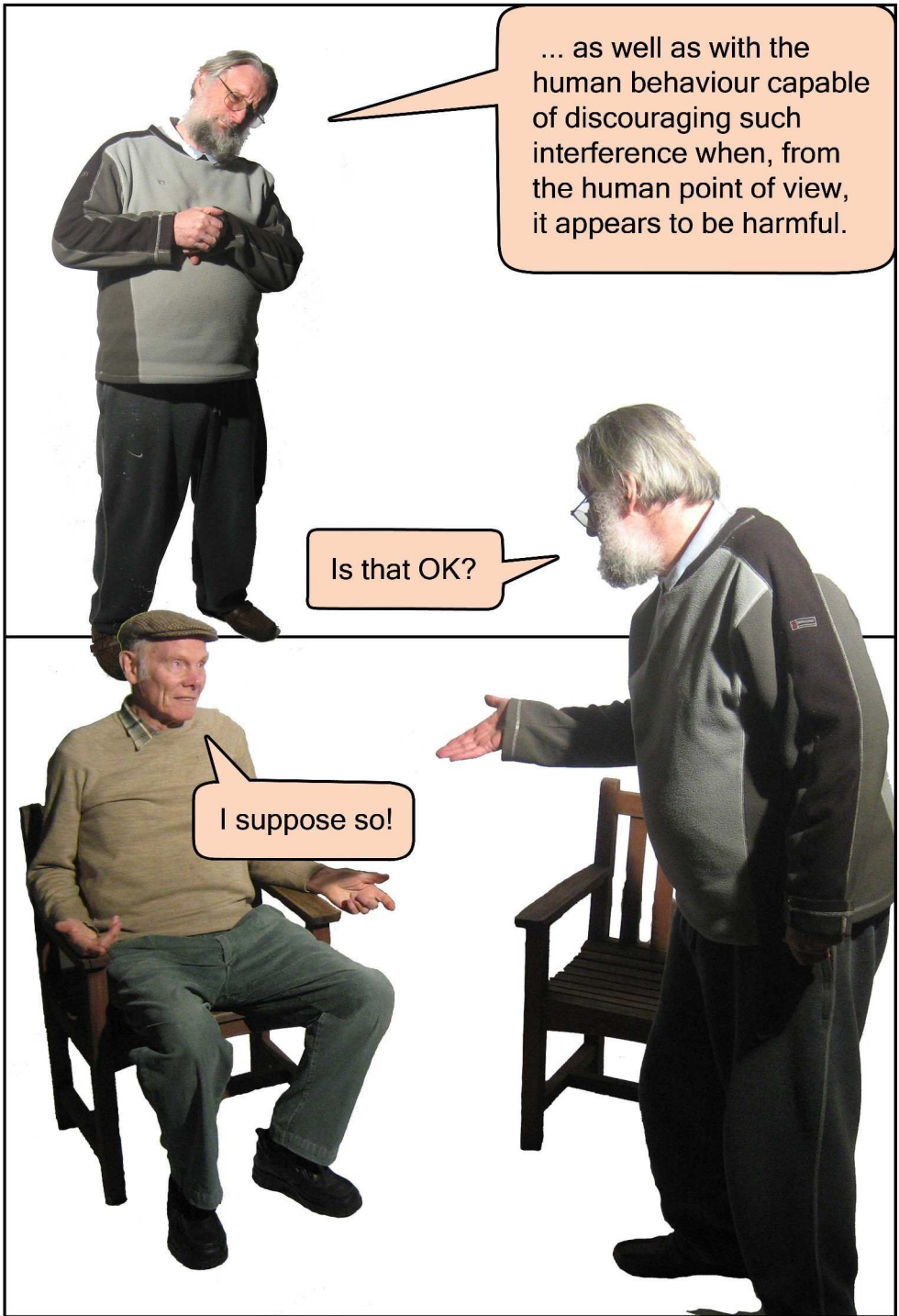




This being the case, claiming the Bible's a religious book amounts to seeing it as being concerned with the way God interferes in the universe - to the limited extent that he does...



and so with the human behaviour capable of encouraging such interference when, from the human point of view, it appears to be beneficial...



4

Mesopotamian Myths Religion or Ideology?



With the difference between an ideological and a religious text now highlighted, let's look at the Mesopotamian myths and see how they should be classified.



To avoid shocking people perhaps I should explain why I am going to portray the Mesopotamian deities as naked.

My object is not to titillate or emphasize these deities' sexual behaviour... in any case all too apparent. My aim is rather to make it absolutely clear that these gods and goddesses are just **representations** of either natural or political worldly powers.



Since I know of no way of drawing 'spiritual' beings without depicting them as ghosts, thereby putting into question their material reality, I have chosen to make their reality, personality, yet fundamental difference from us abundantly plain in the only way I know how, and if you find it objectionable, I'm sorry, that's too bad!

THE WORLD ORDER

This is a Mesopotamian text from around 1500 - 2000 BCE and it concerns the god ENKI who represents the enormous power of the Mesopotamian administrative class.



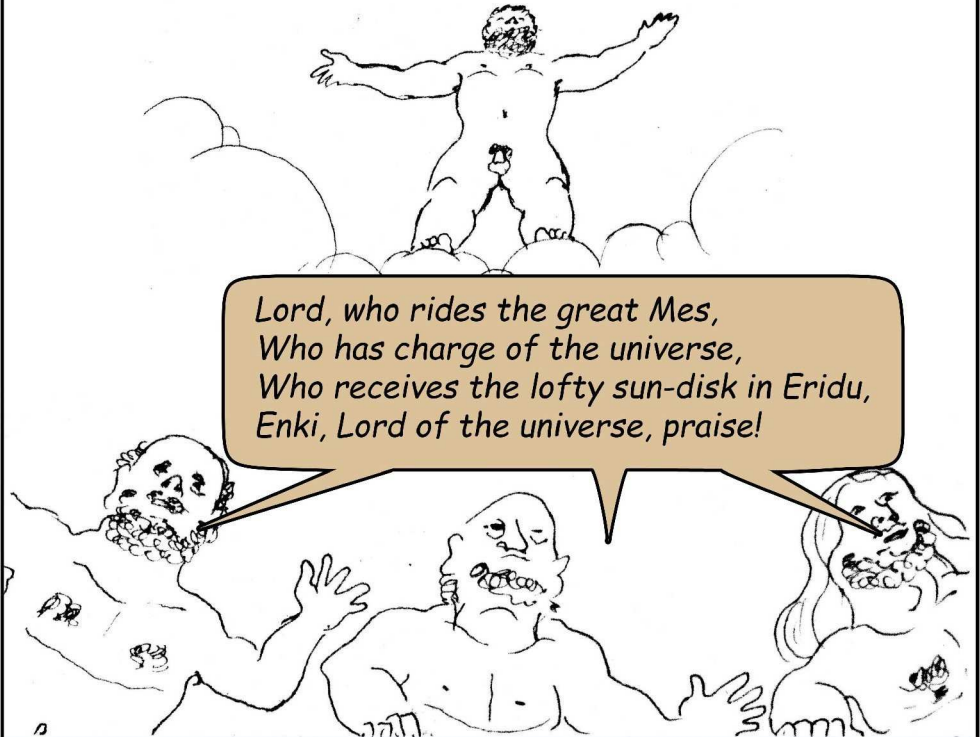
*When father Enki comes to the seeded land
it brings forth fecund seed.
When he comes out to my seeded cow
it gives birth to the fecund calf.
When he goes out to the field,
the cultivated field,
he piles up heaps and mounds
on the high plains.*

We begin with what is generally called The World Order myth. It's not the most interesting, however, it has a very simple plot which will make it easier for us to learn the 'language'.

*I am the fecund seed engendered by the great wild ox.
I am the first-born son of An.
I am the great storm who goes forth from the great below.
I am the lord of the land.
I am the big brother of the gods.
I am he who brings forth prosperity
I am the record keeper of heaven and earth
I am the ear and mind of all the land
I am he who directs justice with king An
I am he who decrees the fates with Enlil on the mountain of wisdom.
I am he to whom Nintu pays due homage.
I am the leader of the Anunnaki.
I am he who has been born as the first son of holy An.*



*To the great prince who came forth in his land
the Anunnaki pay due homage.*



*Lord, who rides the great Mes,
Who has charge of the universe,
Who receives the lofty sun-disk in Eridu,
Enki, Lord of the universe, praise!*

The Mes are an interesting Mesopotamian concept. Enki himself claims an unnamed ancestor gathered these symbolic objects together and placed them in his hands. Apparently they constitute the technological powers an administrator of civilisation needs to have at his disposition to govern properly. They do not belong to a ruler by right. Rather they come as a gift from the community when he finds himself in place. I am reminded here of our own British coronation ceremony where monarchs start dressed in a simple white smock. However, as the ceremony proceeds they are given all sorts of garments and objects which represent the powers the community bestows on them so as to be able to rule it effectively.

The subject dealt with in the first part of the myth is the universal geo-political order in Sumer, an ancient name for Mesopotamia.

*Sumer, great mountain, country of the universe filled with
enduring light, dispensing from sunrise to sunset the Mes
to the people.*

*Your lord is an honoured lord, he sits with king An on An's dais.
Your king, the great mountain, father Enlil, has made him for you
like a cedar, the father of all the lands.*

*The Anunnaki, the great gods, have taken up their dwelling
in your midst.*

*Sumer, may your many stalls be built, may your cows multiply.
May your sheepfolds be erected, may your sheep be myriad.*

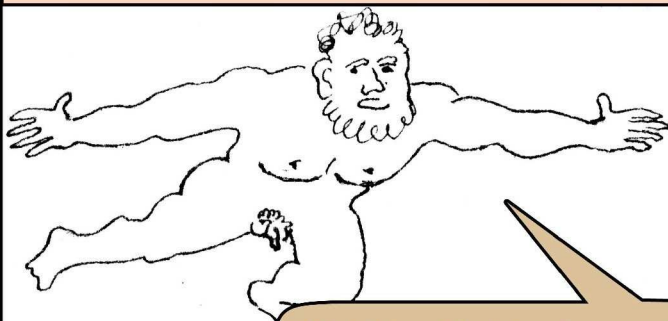


The myth then moves on to deal with the famous city of Ur.

*City possessing all that is appropriate.
Water-washed, firm-standing ox,
Dais of abundance of the highlands,
Knees open, green like a mountain.
City whose fate has been decreed by Enlil.
Shrine of Ur, may you rise heaven-high!*

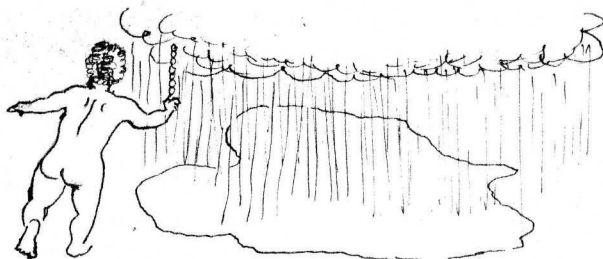


Then on to the two lands from which it is believed the Sumerians originally came: Meluhha (Iran?) ...



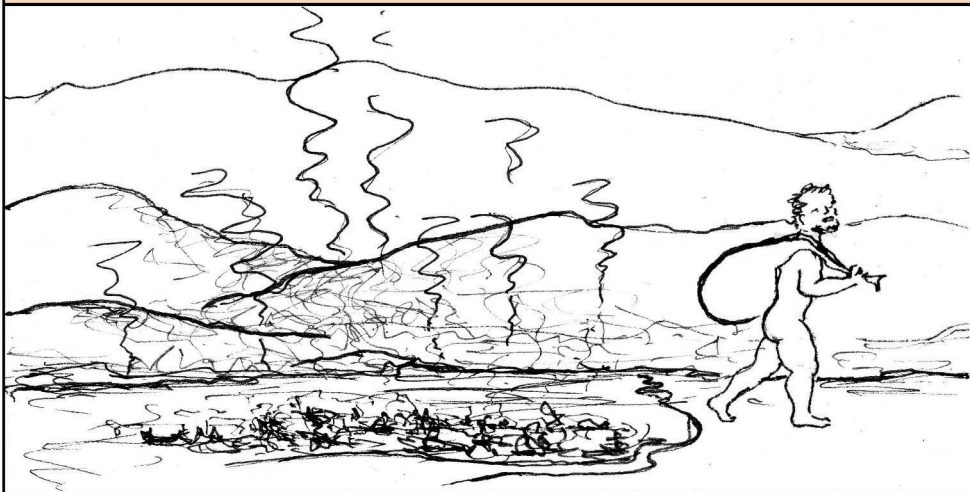
*Meluhha, black land, may your trees be large trees,
May they be highland trees.
May their thrones fill the royal palace.
May your bulls be large bulls.
May they be highland bulls.
Land, may everything that you have increase.
May your people multiply..*

and Dilmun (Bahrain?)



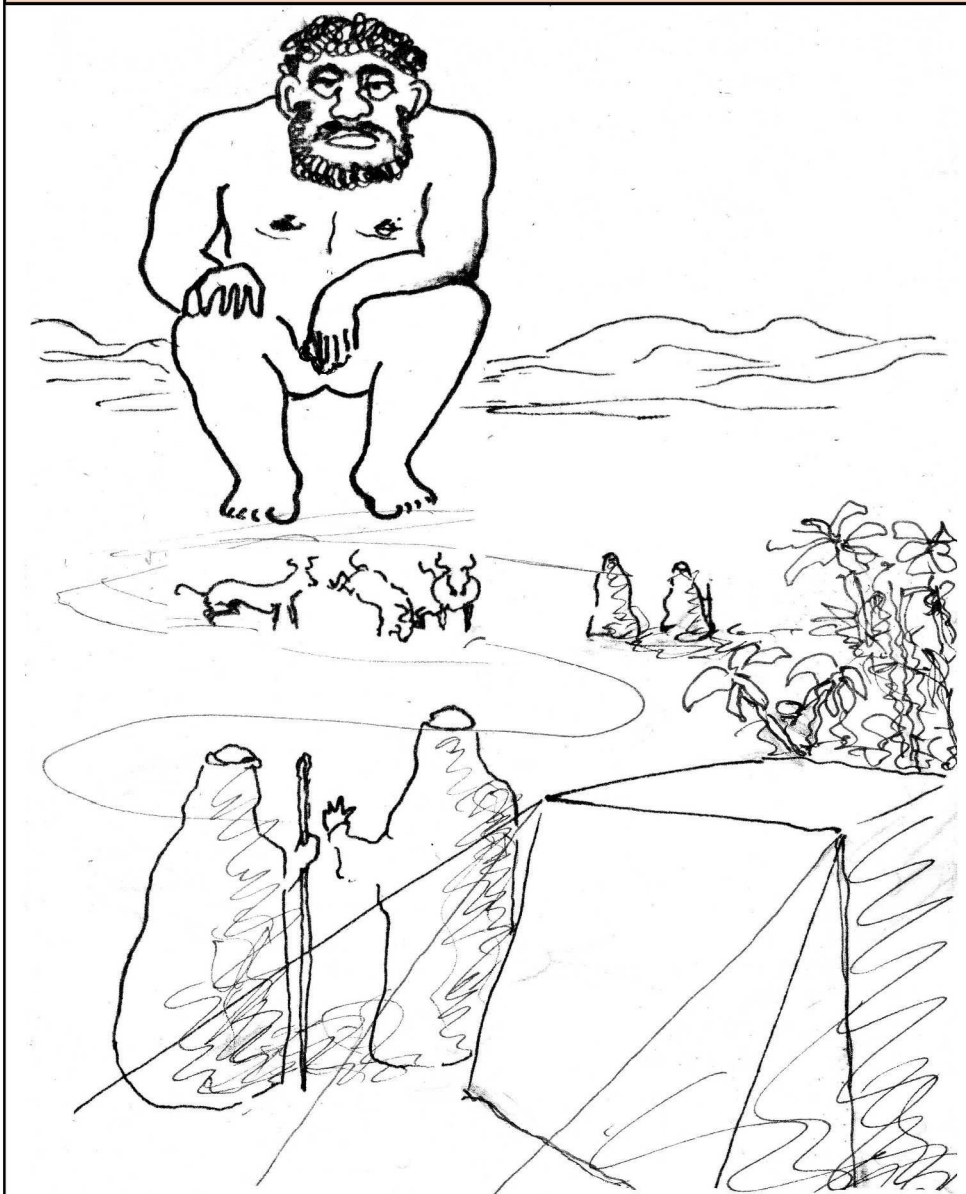
*He cleansed and purified the land of Dilmun,
placed Ninsikilia in charge of it.*

Then, on to Sumer's arch enemies, the mountain people to the north.



*Elam and Marashi were to be devoured like fish.
Enki, upon whom Enlil had bestowed might, destroyed their houses,
destroyed their walls,
Their metal, lapis lazuli and storehouses he brought to Nippur
for Enlil, the king of all the land.*

And, finally, on to the nomads out on the western steppelands.

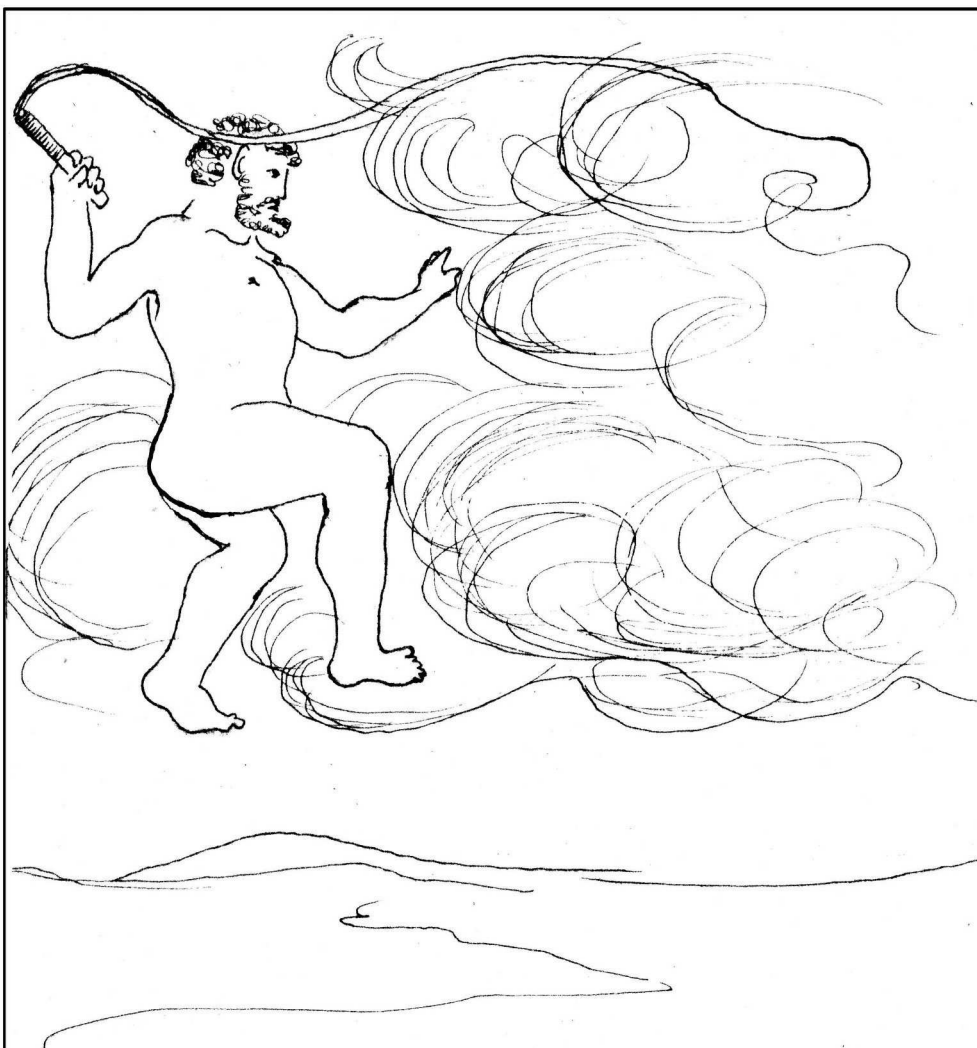


To him who builds no cities, builds no houses - the Martu - Enki presented cattle as a gift.

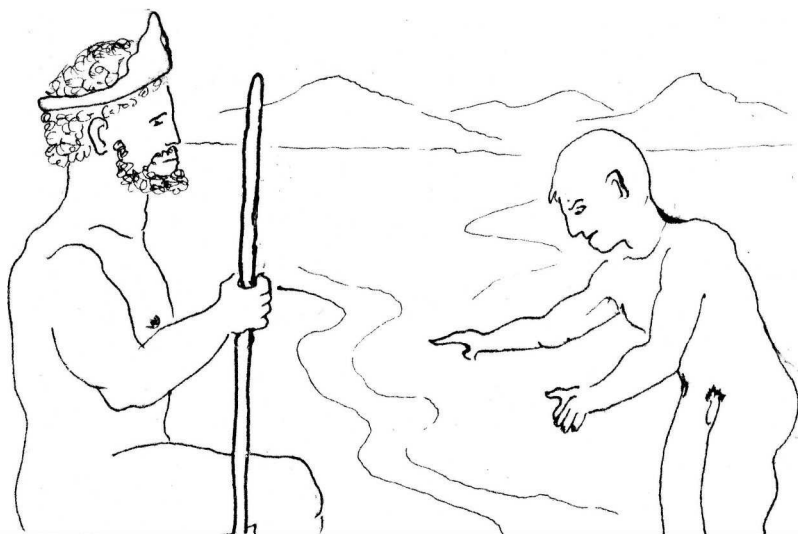
The subject in the second part of the myth is the natural order in the universe.

*After he had cast his eye from the spot;
After Father Enki had lifted it up over the Euphrates
He stood up proudly like a rampant bull;
He lifts the penis, ejaculates,
Filled the Tigris with sparkling water,
The wild cow mooing for its young in the pastures.
The Tigris surrendered to him as to a rampant bull.
He lifted the penis, brought the bridal gift,
Brought joy to the Tigris,
Like a big wild bull rejoiced in its giving of birth.
The water he brought is sparkling water,
Its wine tastes sweet;
With Enki Enlil rejoices, Nippur is delighted.*





*He called the two rains the water of heavens;
Drives their breath towards the horizon;
Turns the hilly ground into fields.
Ishkur ... the son of An, Enki placed in charge of them
Him who rides the great storm,
Who attacks with lightning.*



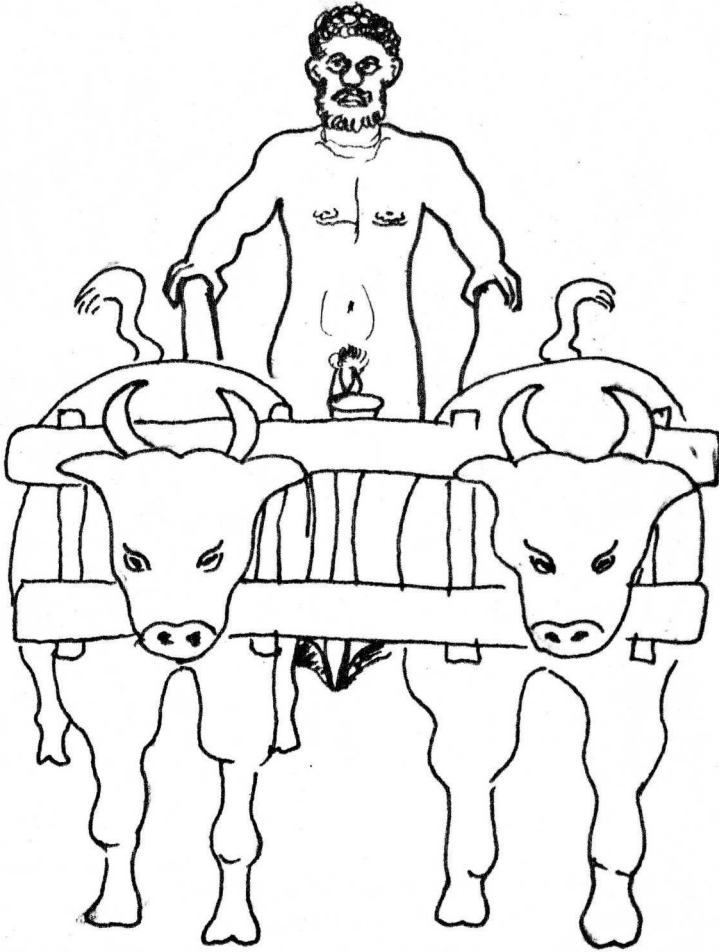
*The Lord Enki donned the diadem of lordship,
Put on the enduring tiara for kingship.
In order to make the Tigris and Euphrates eat together
Enki placed in charge of them Enlulu the inspector of canals.*



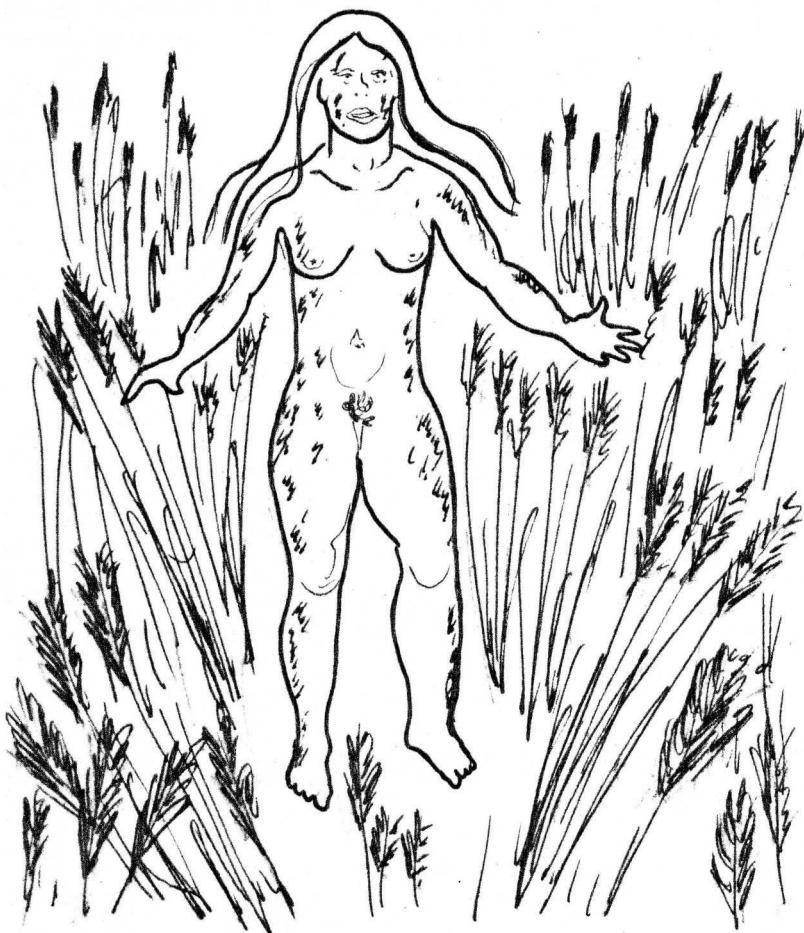
*He called the marshland, placed in it carp and fish.
He called the canebreak, placed in it green reeds.
Enki placed in charge of them -----
A god who loves fish.*

Whose name unfortunately is lost!

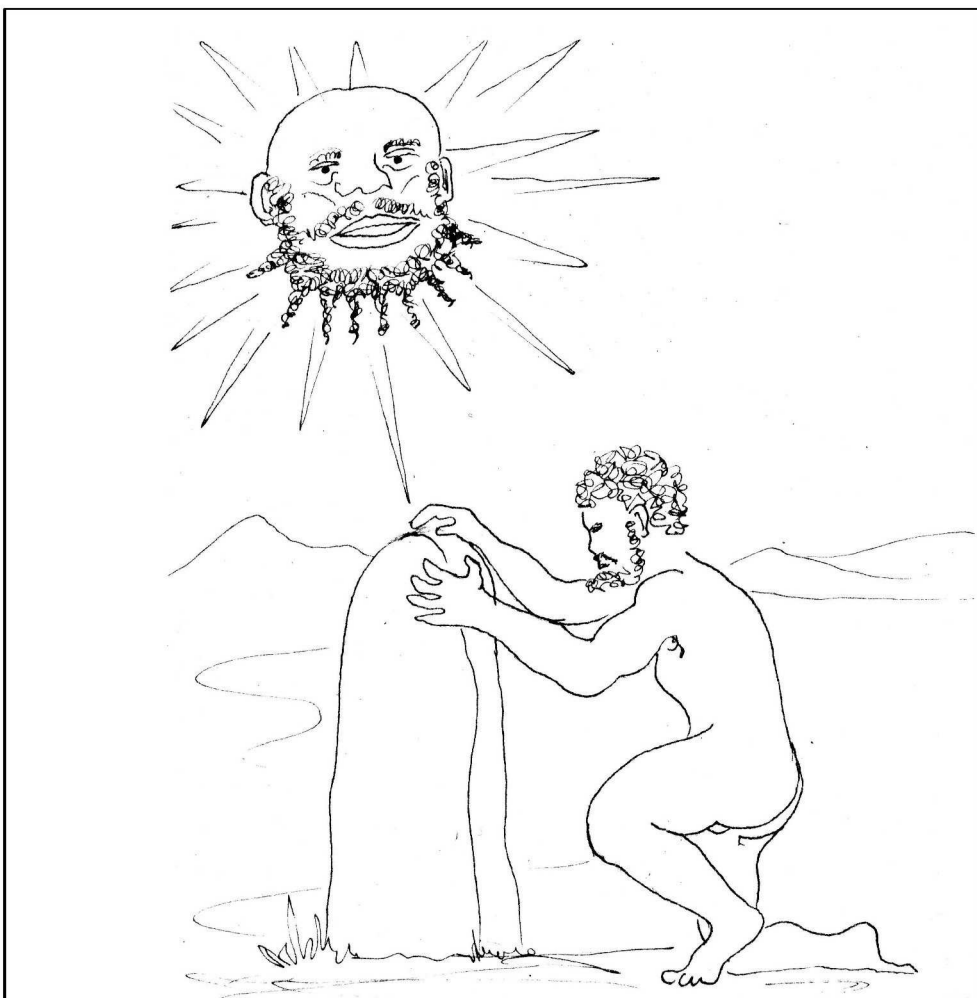
The subject in the third part of the myth is the economic order within the universe.



*He directed the plough and yolk.
The great prince Enki put horned oxen in harness,
Opened the furrows, made the grain to grow in the cultivated field.
Enki placed in charge of them the robust, the farmer of Enlil,
Enkimdu, the man of the ditch and dike.*

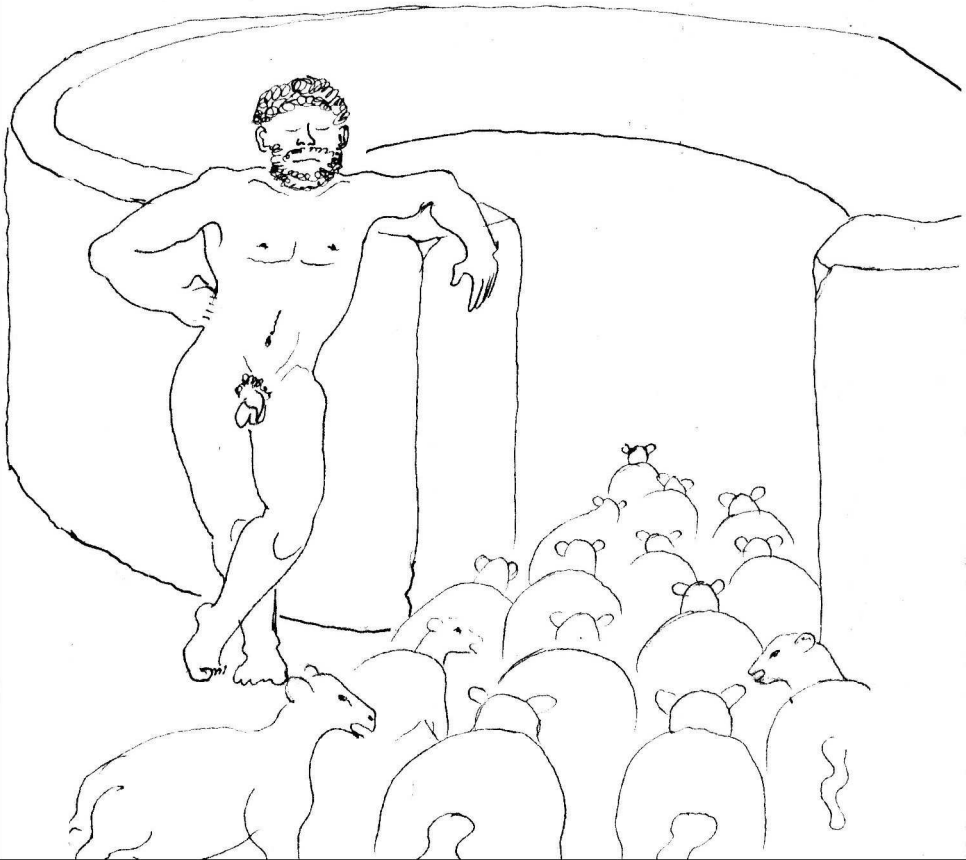


*The Lord called the cultivated field,
Heaped up its grain into piles.
Enki multiplied the heaps and mounds.
With Enlil he spread wide the abundance in the land.
Enki placed in charge of them Ashnan, the nourishing bread of all,
Her whose head and sides are dappled, whose face is honey-coloured,
The lady, the procreatress,
The vigour of the land, the life of the black heads.*



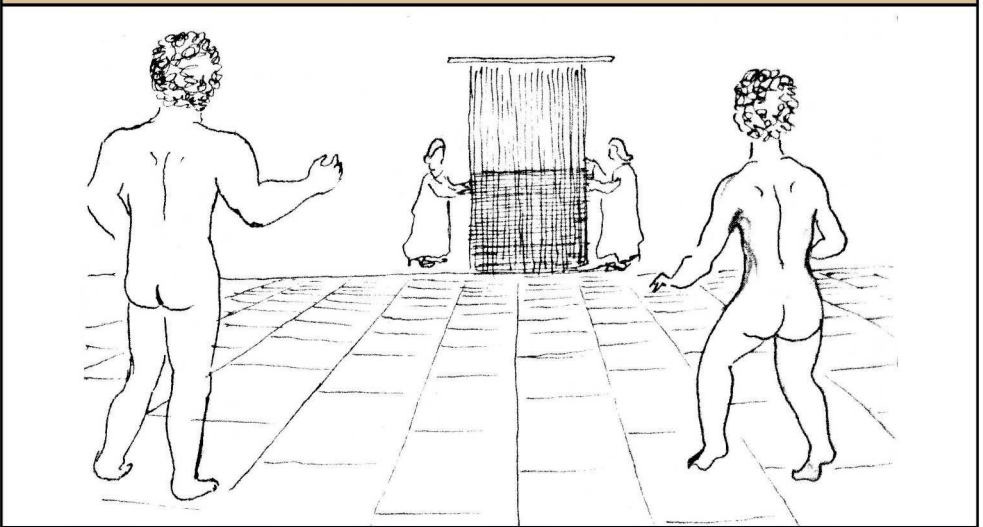
*Enki fixed the borders,
Marked them with boundary stones,
Erected dwelling-places in the cities for the Anunnaki.
Set up fields for them in the countryside.
Enki placed the hero Utu in charge of the whole universe,
The hero, the bull who comes out of the forest, who roars like a lion,
The judge, the decision-maker of the gods,
Who wears a lapis lazuli beard,
Who comes forth from holy heaven.*

Next Enki turns his attention to the building trade - unfortunately it's not possible to make much sense of what the myth says here ... so we'll go on to his next project.



*He built stalls, directed the purification rites,
erected sheepfolds, put in these the best fats and milk,
brought joy to the dining-halls of the gods.
In the green plain he made prosperity prevail.
Enki placed in charge of them Demuzi the divine,
the friend of An, the husband of holy Inanna.*

He wove cloth and perfected that which is women's work and placed in charge of them Uttu the joyous and trustworthy woman.



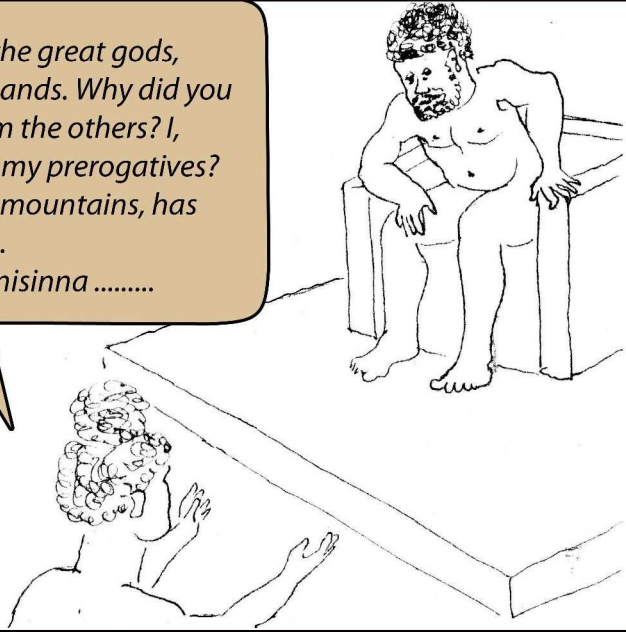
The myth ends with a characteristic male chauvinist's twist.



Then, all by herself, having abandoned the royal sceptre, the woman, the maid Inanna, enters the house and, humbly weeping, utters a plaint to her father Enki.

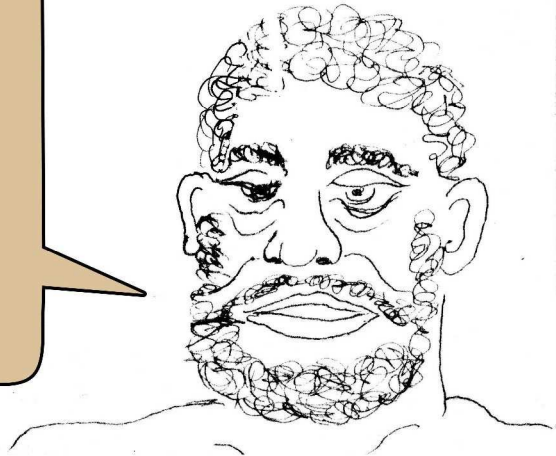
Her grouse is that, as regards the distribution of powers, she has come off badly compared with the other goddesses.

*Enlil placed the fate of the great gods, the Anunnaki, in your hands. Why did you treat me differently from the others? I, holy Inanna, where are my prerogatives? Nintu, the queen of the mountains, has taken on herself
That sister of mine, Ninisinna*



Enki attempts to reassure her.

You have taken charge of the crook, staff and wand of shepherds. Battles and onslaughts, you give the answers of their oracles. You have destroyed the indestructible, perished the imperishable, you whose admirers never grow weary looking at. Maid Inanna, what more shall we give you?



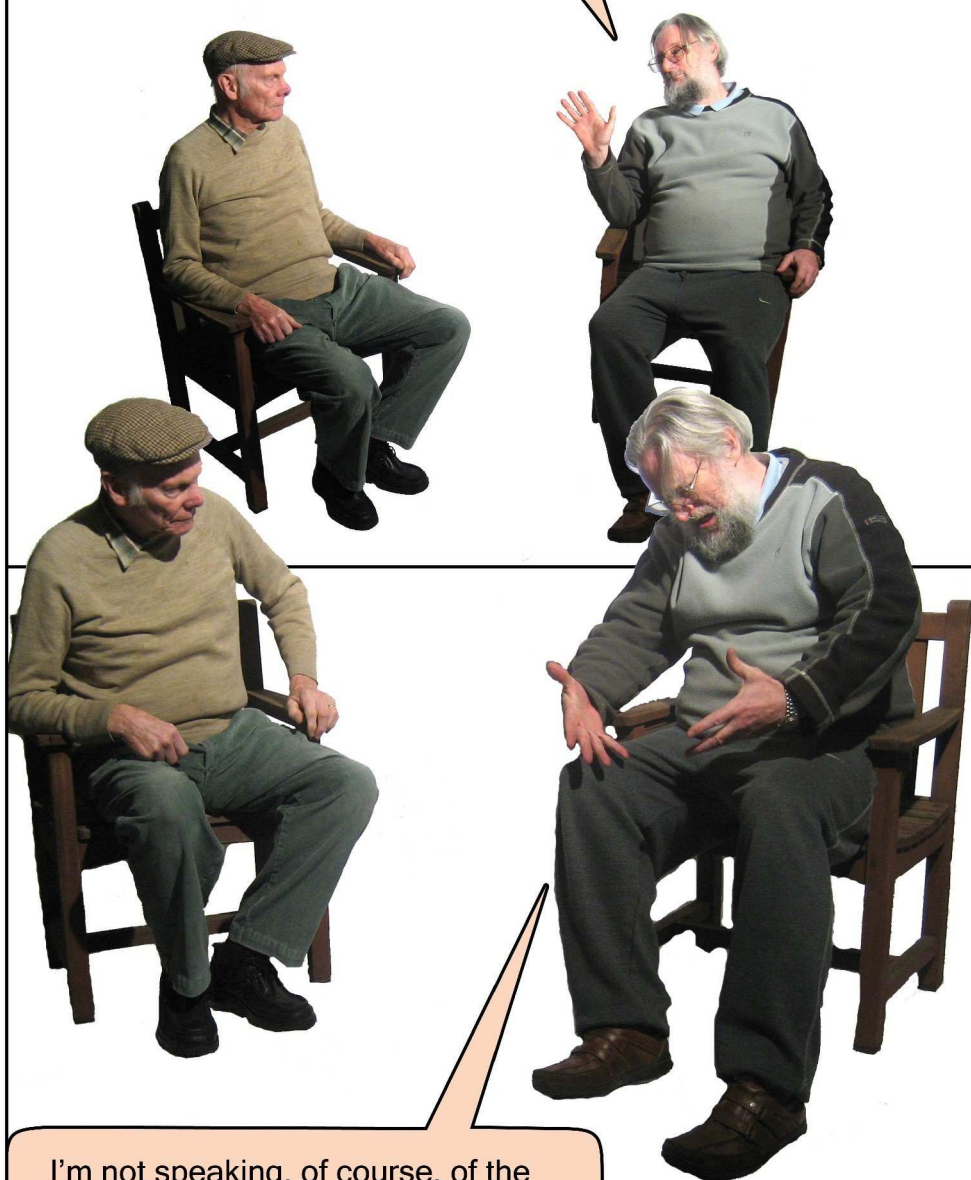
Given the distinction we've just drawn between religious and ideological texts what have you to say about this myth?



What strikes me is that it's all about a nakedly spiritual being named Enki and, I'm sorry, but this suggests to me a religious text.



There's no need to be sorry! You see, all you're noticing at the moment is the text's 'mental language': what we call myth.



I'm not speaking, of course, of the actual language of the text, which is Sumerian but of something deeper.

It's easy to think that all you need to do with an ancient text is to decipher the script and then translate it. But this is not true, for it is just as important to learn the 'mental language' in which it is couched.



Now, I grant you that to modern people like ourselves the mental language of myth sounds like religion. However, I don't for a minute accept this as an accurate description.



But we will leave that aside for the moment and concentrate instead on this business of a mental language.



When you go to a foreign country the first thing you notice is the 'noise' of the language which, because you don't understand it, seems to fill the universe, blanking out everything else.



However, the extraordinary thing is that as soon as you begin to understand a language its 'noise' begins to recede until a moment comes when you begin not to notice it at all since all your attention is on what is being communicated!

The train now standing at platform 12 is the 16.45 calling at

Would all passengers please have their tickets and passports ready to pass through the control.

Excuse me Sir. Would you mind.
You're standing on my coat!

The same thing is true of mental languages. When you're not familiar with them their 'noise' - what people wrongly describe as religion, in the case of myth - is all that you notice, leaving you totally in the dark about what is actually being said.

Given this situation we must make an effort to ignore the text's 'noise' and concentrate instead on learning its language by trying to understand the Mesopotamian scribe's mental processes: asking ourselves what was he 'on about'?



Well, as I see it the text focuses on the necessity of having some overall guiding power and intelligence in command if the Sumerian civilisation, in all its grandeur and complexity, is to be kept on the road.



Maybe, but maybe not! Everything depends on whether the guiding power and intelligence the myth talks about is human or divine. If it's human we're talking politics. However, if it's divine, as seems to be the case, then we're talking religion, surely?



You're back to being mesmerised
by the apparently 'religious' noise
of the text's mental language!



Yes but how can I separate the text's focus
from what seems to me to be the religious
sound of the language in which it's couched?

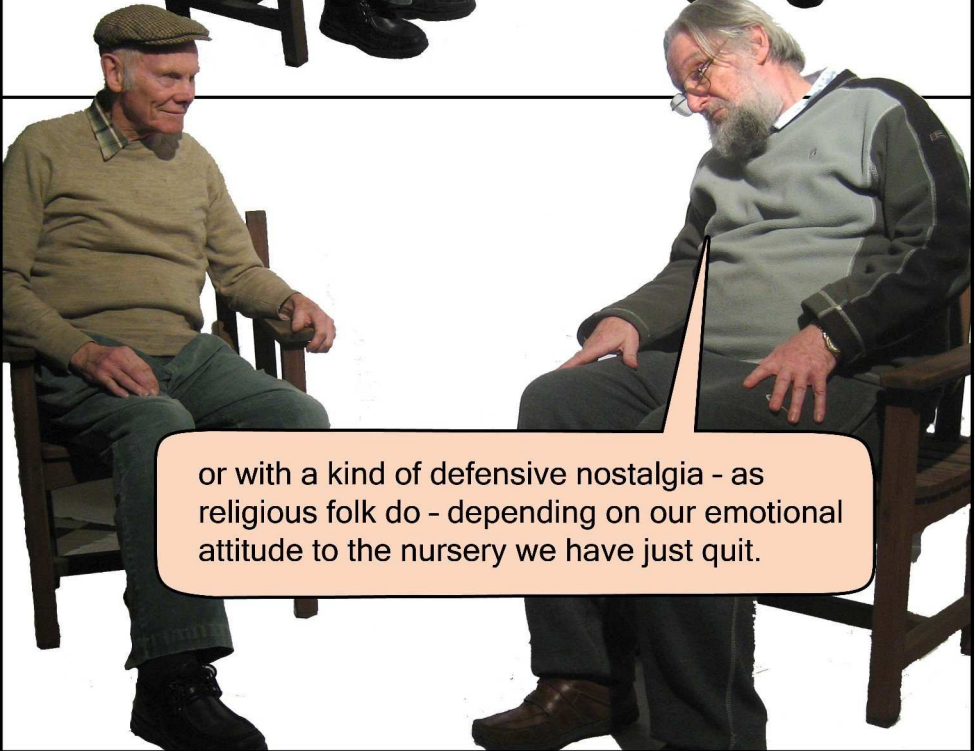




This means that we naturally tend to view texts written in this myth-language either with horror - as Dawkins does -



or with a kind of defensive nostalgia - as religious folk do - depending on our emotional attitude to the nursery we have just quit.



The trouble is that both of these attitudes, though seemingly natural, are equally unhelpful.



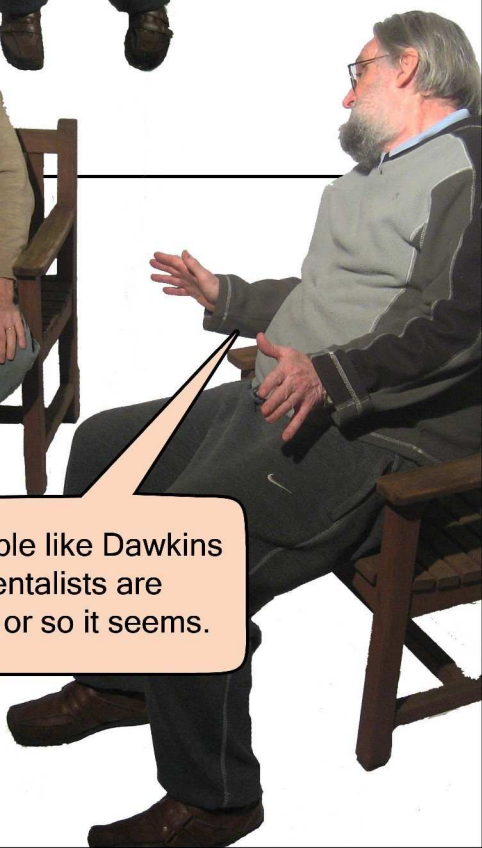
For if we want to relearn this forgotten language of myth, so as to properly understand the texts which employ it, we must actively leave emotion aside,



- something that demands considerable effort,

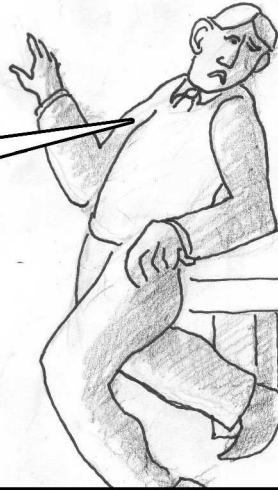


effort which people like Dawkins and the fundamentalists are loath to expend, or so it seems.



These days, biblical scholars tend to classify myth as a literary genre. This, as I see it, is just their way of avoiding the disturbing issue the Bible seeks to raise.

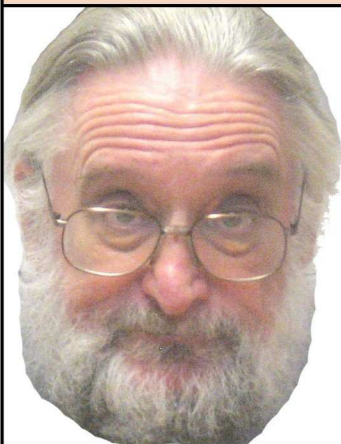
Go away you stupid thing you're just a myth!



If we can bear the truth we must avoid such stratagems and understand myth not as a literary genre but as a linguistic device developed by early humans to help them communicate with each other about the world.



A few minutes ago I pointed out that biblical writers used the language of sex to talk about ideological matters. What I am suggesting now is that not just the Biblical writers but ancient man himself used the language of myth for the same purpose.



To put it baldly, myth is

representation

- a language for talking politics -

not **religion** - a way of
presenting a system of beliefs.

Understanding myth as religion is as misguided as understanding my four-ways-meeting-at-a-crossroads as a curious bit of geography. Languages - even mental languages - are built from symbols which means that neither the language itself nor the symbols it employs should be taken literally.



Telephone

This is a sign for 'telephone' taken from a sign-language designed for parents who wish to communicate with their kids before they can talk.

Since no baby would confuse the sign with the telephone why can't adults distinguish the language of myth from what it communicates?

www.signwithme.com

5

A conversation with Ancient Man

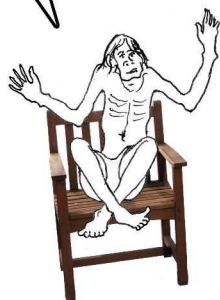
Since Ancient Man invented this language of myth we'd better allow him to explain how it works - remembering that he too is a representation, not to be taken literally!



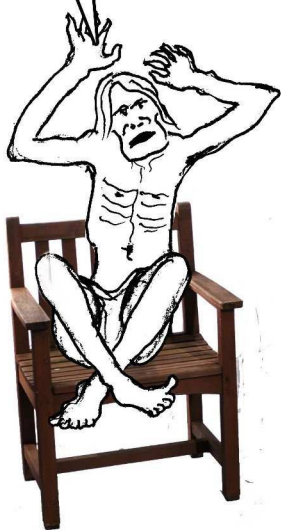
Hi! Pleased to meet you!
I'm Ancient Man.



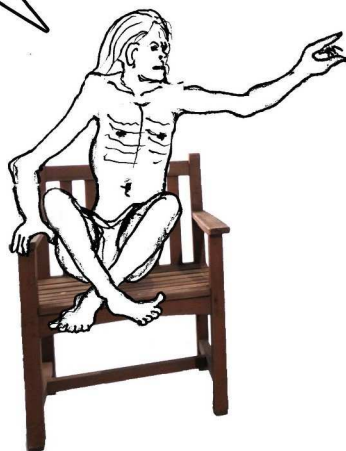
What annoys me most about you moderns is how little you seem to appreciate the problems I faced when trying to communicate.



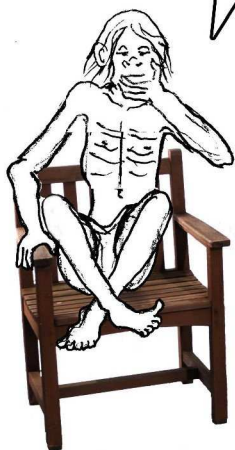
Take a very ordinary expression you might use any time, like 'I think I will have a haircut'.



It may surprise you to know I couldn't manage such a remark.



The closest I could have got would have been to say: 'I will go to the barber for him to cut my hair'.



You see, lacking an analytical mind-set I had not as yet come to realise it was possible for me to, as it were, stand outside of myself...



so as to be
in a position
to have an
internal
discussion
with myself...

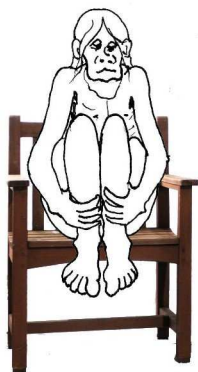
just as I had
external
discussions
with other
people.



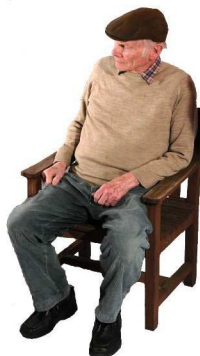
To put it baldly, I was not yet aware of the possibility of doing what you people call 'thinking to yourself'-having an internal dialogue.



Can you imagine my problem in having to communicate without being able to use any of the vocabulary and expressions that stem from the discovery of this 'thinking to yourself' process?

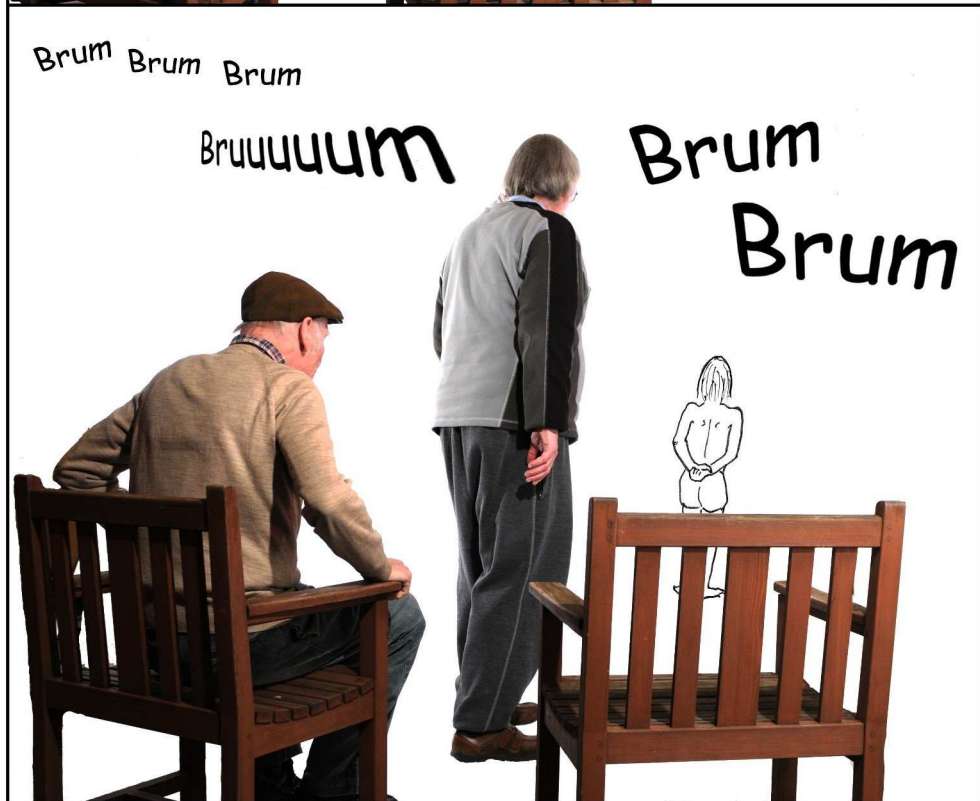
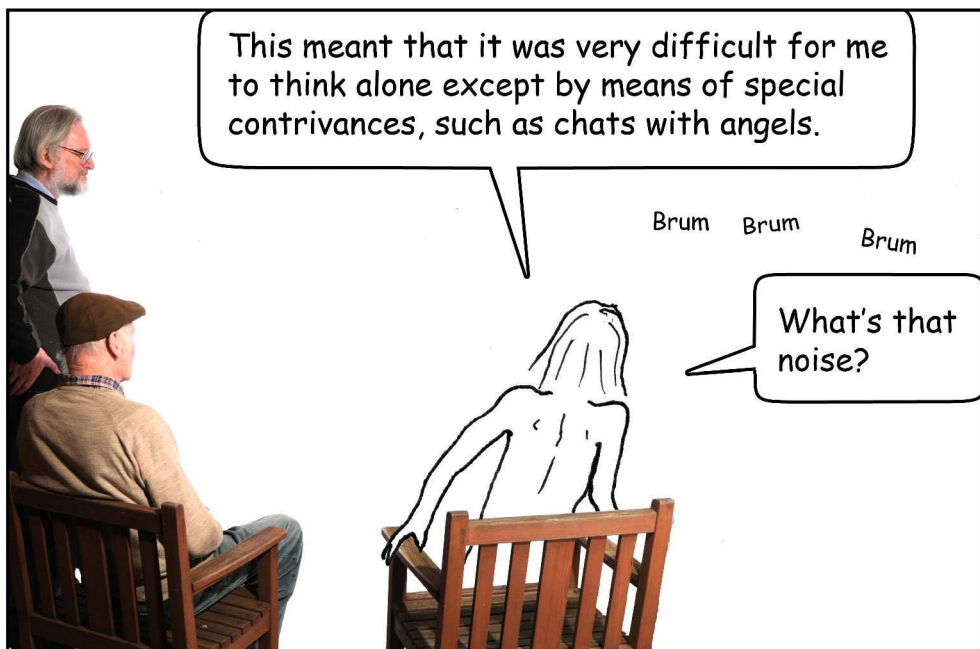


Having considered that little problem for a moment, now try to get your heads around the difficulty I faced in having no **personal** framework for word-based thought.



You see for me thought, involving words, was **communal** rather than personal, consisting as it did of actual discussions with others.





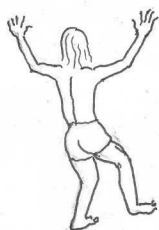
Let's be practical for a moment: take that enemy encampment which has suddenly sprung up on the other side of the river. From the expressions on your faces I can tell that your heads are full of words as you work out, in your minds, what's to be done.



However, when contemplating such a scene, my head was completely empty of words even though I was perfectly aware what was happening.



Words - and so what you call 'thinking to yourself' - only became available to me when I either spoke out loud...



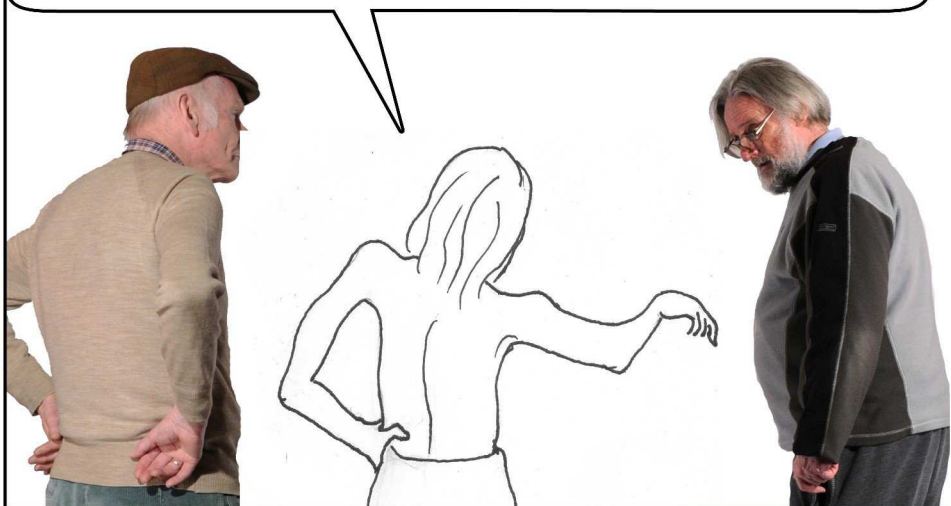
Help! It looks like they're getting ready to attack!

or when I discussed the matter later in my village.



Hey you people, what are we going to do? They're getting ready to attack!

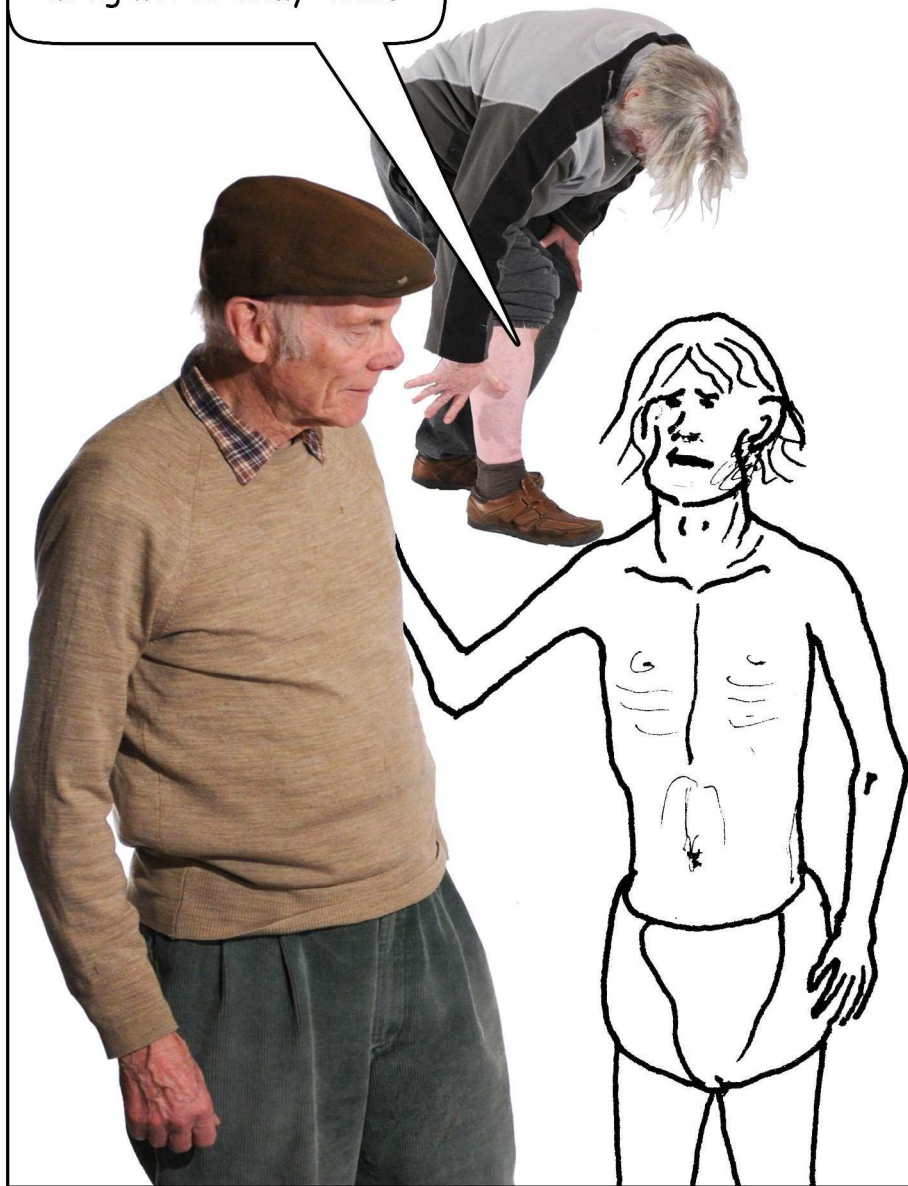
If you're thinking to yourselves that having a head free of words, could sometimes be an advantage, you're quite right. For, having your heads full of words, neither of you has noticed the ants crawling up Andrew's leg!



You little buggers!
Why pick on me?



However, don't kid yourselves. I would have given my back teeth to have been able to think to myself when alone - using words in my head.



But this problem's just for starters. For if I had no psychological vocabulary I had little 'collective' or 'political' vocabulary to speak of either.



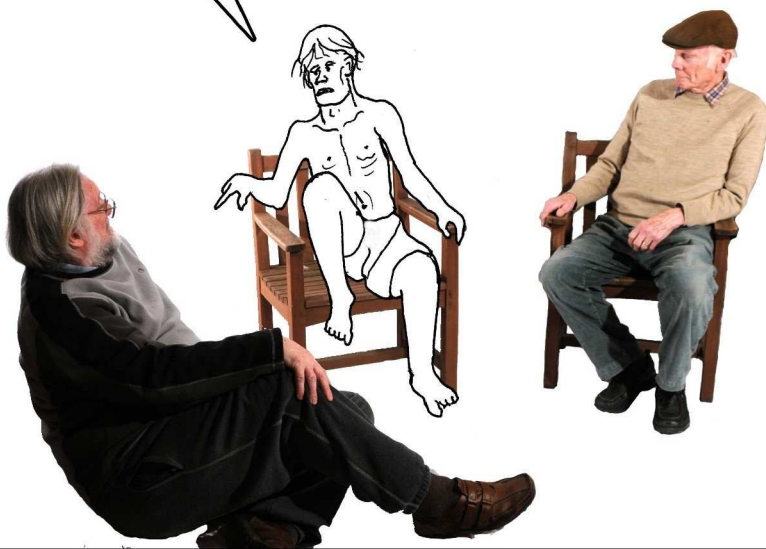
You moderns really only began to develop a political vocabulary when you switched to an analytical approach and started to consider how groups, as opposed to individuals, actually behave.



However, long before analytical thinking was available, when I was commenting on political situations I used individuals **to represent** groups and so talked about political relationships in personal terms.



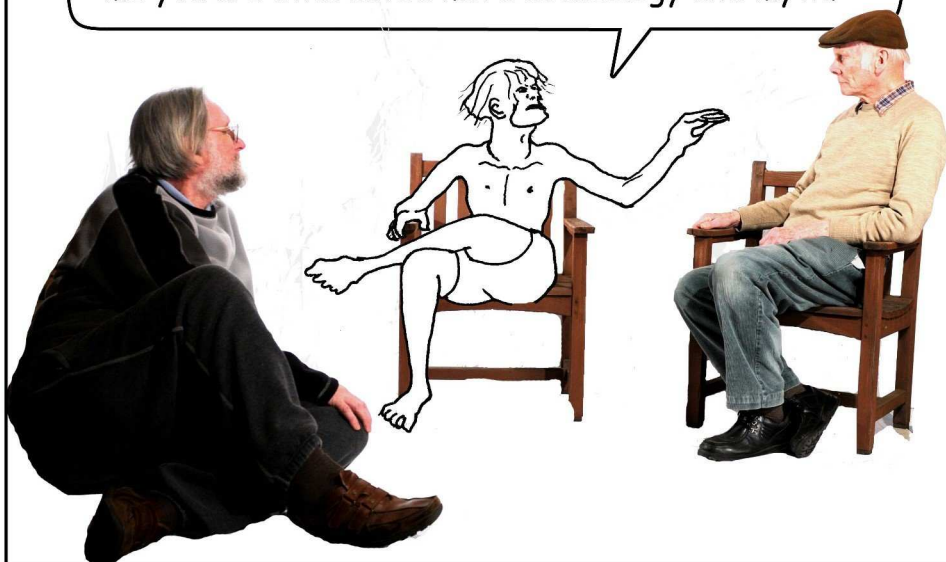
Some of you moderns say there's an advantage in using personal language for talking politics. You claim it makes everything less cold and impersonal.



But that's romantic nonsense! I would have given anything to have been able to talk easily and directly about political matters as you do.



So far I've only mentioned my difficulties in having to converse without the aid of psychological and political vocabularies; however, Andrew here tells me you are interested more in ideology and myth.



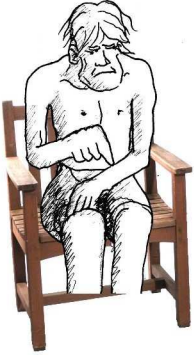
Like you, I too experienced numerous powers affecting my life. First, there was what you people call the weather:



Then there were all the other natural forces.

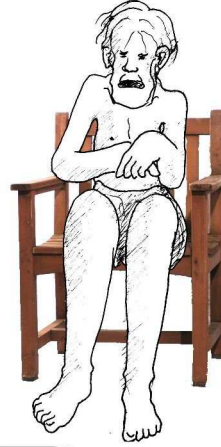
Finally there were the human influences surrounding me: Our enemies, the tribal elders, my relations, the neighbours, not to forget Mum and Dad.





However, having no analytical words at my disposition I found it impossibly difficult to talk **directly** about these powers.

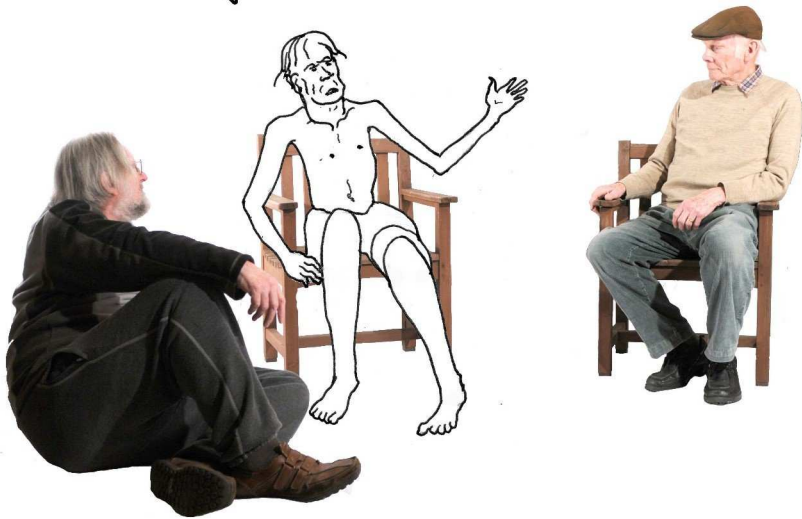
I could only communicate indirectly about what I saw and experienced, using a **representational** language I specially invented for the purpose.



You now call this language myth. I called it 'Harrumph', meaning 'genius' or 'desperation'!



Once again, let's be practical. Consider the problem of a tribal elder whose village lies next to a river.



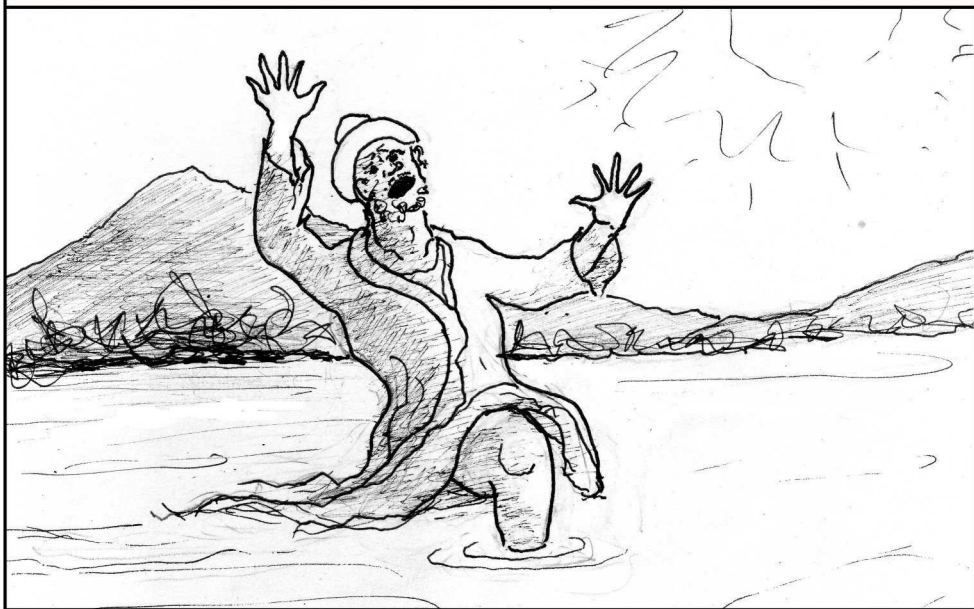
Experience has taught him the river's a killer.



He knows how warm and inviting it appears to the children playing in the still shallows at its edges



... however, he is also very aware that there comes a point where the bottom suddenly drops away and the water becomes icy cold and filled with unseen currents.



How is he to warn
the children of
the danger the
river presents?

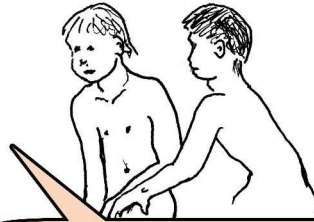


In his shoes you would
have relied on your
analytical understanding
of the situation...

See here, where the water
is shallow and still, the sun
has had time to heat it up
and make it lovely and
warm and safe to play in...
but just a couple of
footsteps over there...



... and on the ability of the older children in the village to handle such thinking too.



'You're big enough to understand but your little brothers and sisters....'

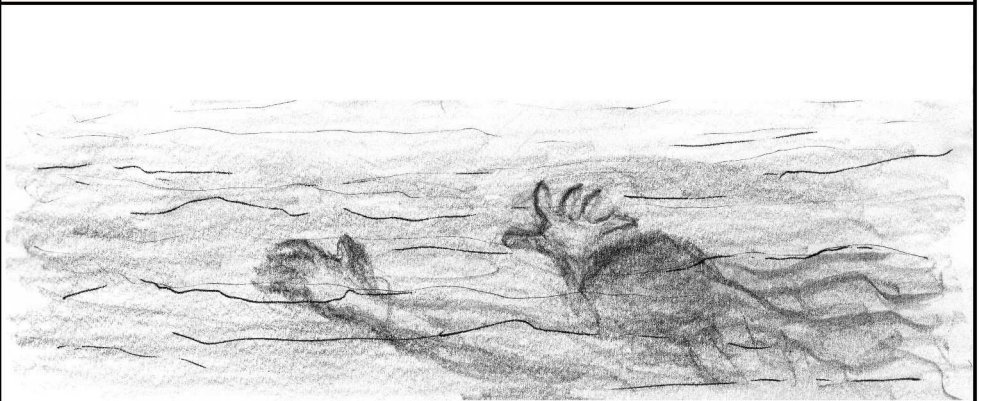
But our tribesman has none of these advantages. So what's he to do?



His way of solving this problem is to tell the children that the river's inhabited by a treacherous female spirit, who entices the unwary in to play.



Then, if they stray too far from the bank, she seizes her chance, grabs them and drags them down into the river's depths, suffocating them in her icy-cold embrace.

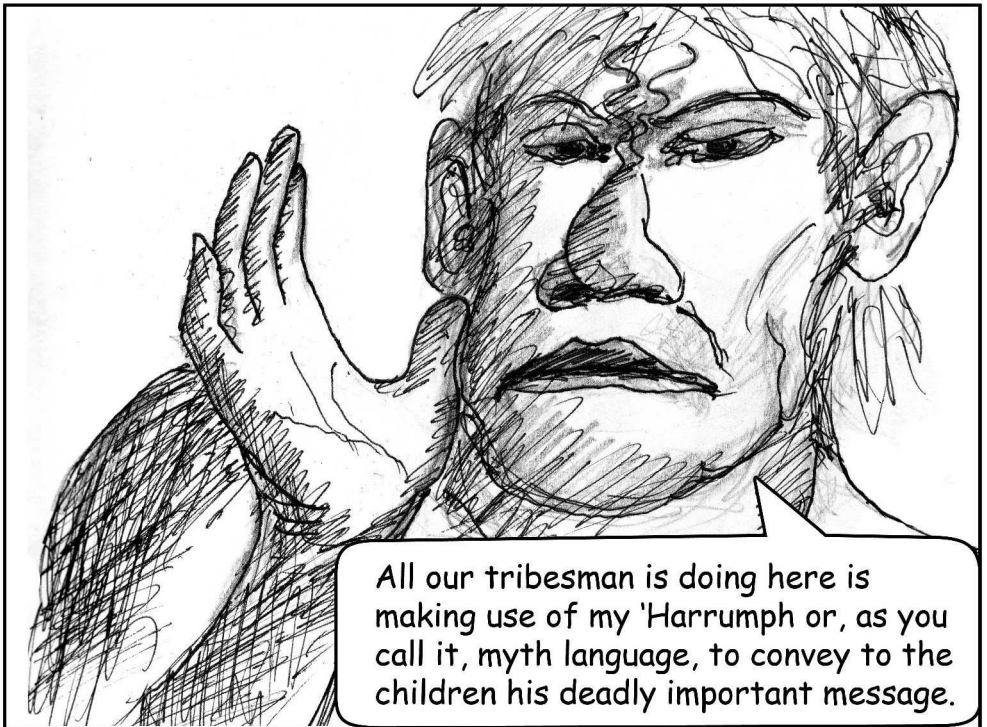


Days later, her appetite satiated, she spits out their lifeless corpses on the river bank miles away down-river, for unknown passers-by to find.

His message to the older children is that they'd better take care not to allow their younger brothers and sisters to venture more than a little way from the riverbank...

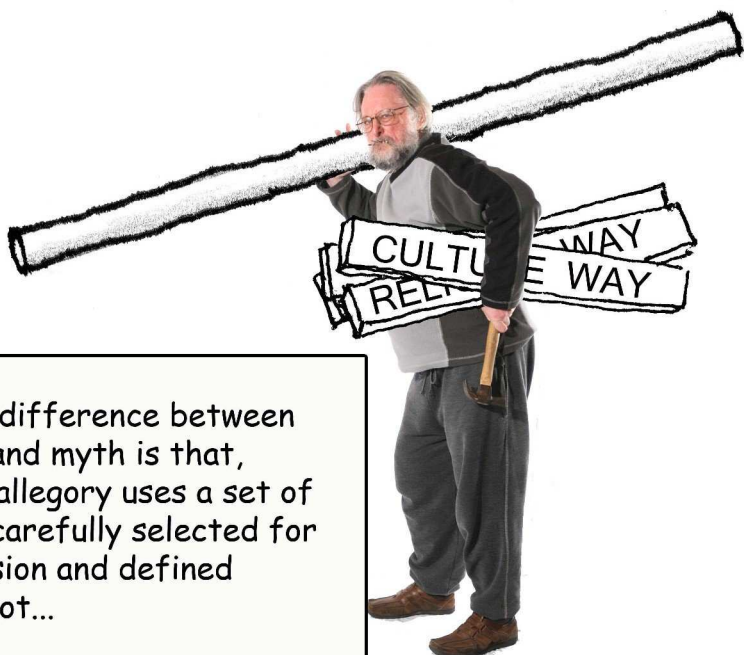


... for if they do the river spirit is sure to catch them and carry them away to their deaths.



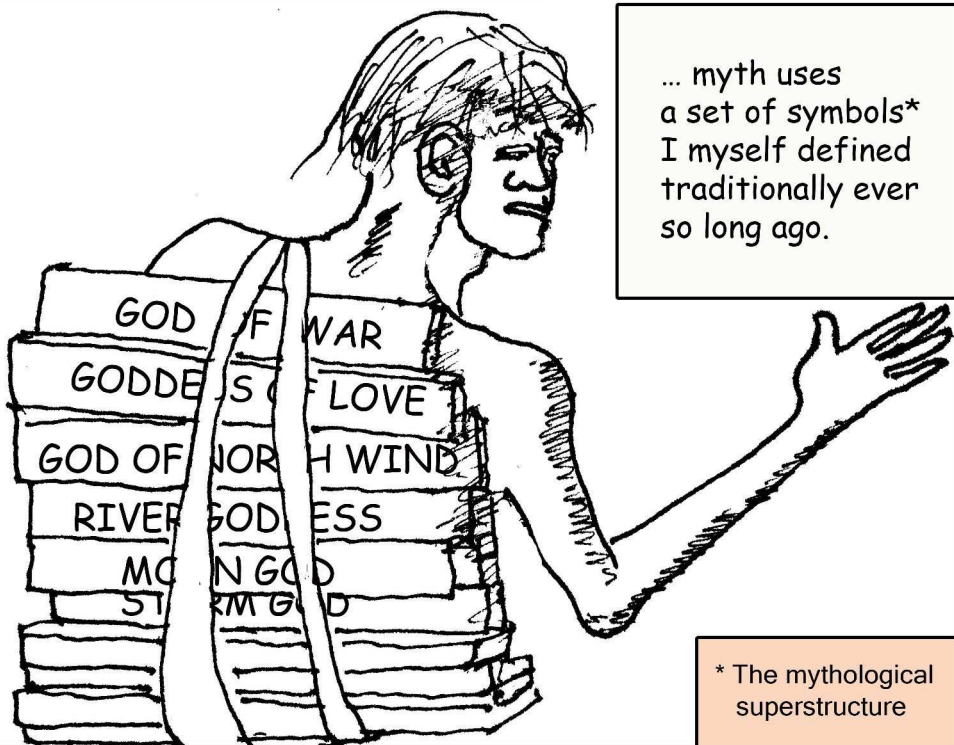
Myth actually works just like allegory - the speech-form Andrew here employed to discuss peoples' preconceptions about the Bible, using the figure of a crossroads.





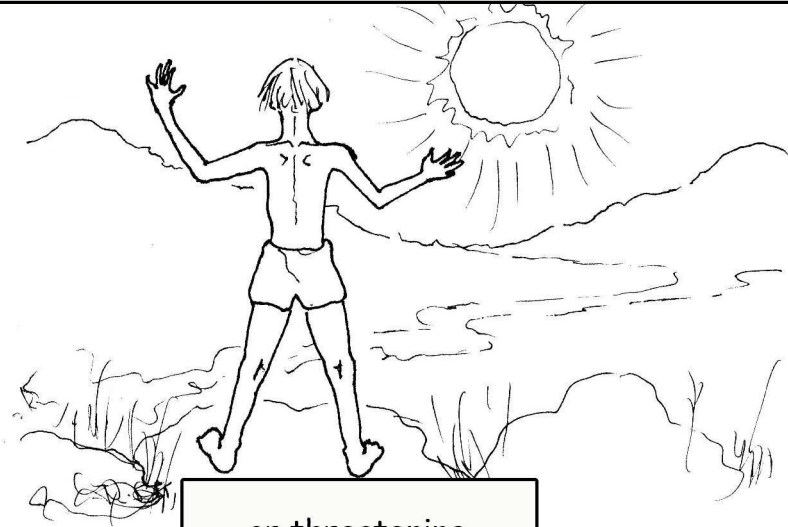
The only difference between allegory and myth is that, whereas allegory uses a set of symbols carefully selected for the occasion and defined on the spot...

... myth uses a set of symbols* I myself defined traditionally ever so long ago.

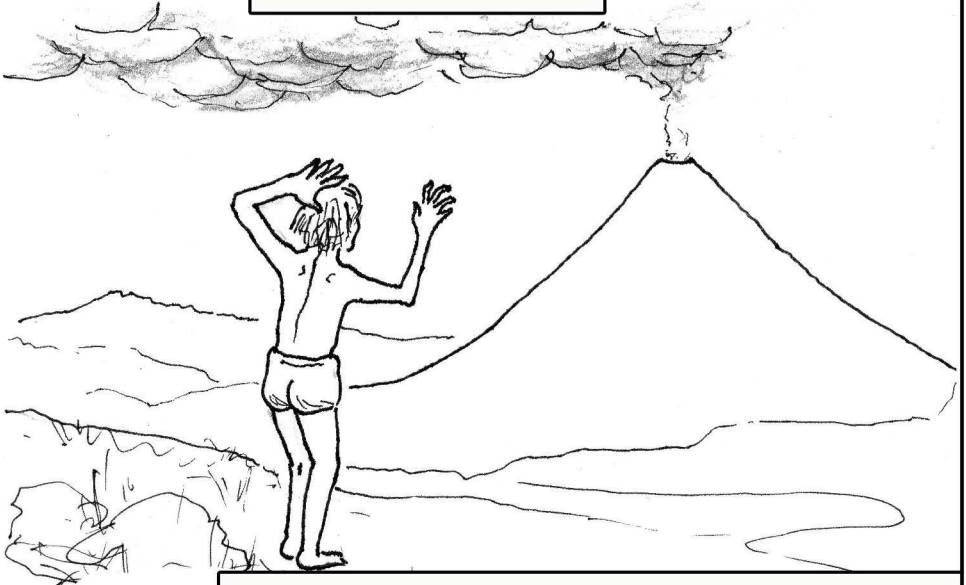


* The mythological superstructure

Here, all of the naked powers in the universe which humans daily experience as either beneficial...



... or threatening...



... are represented (and personalised) as deities or spirits. It's as simple as that!

The important thing to realise is that when our tribal elder speaks about a river goddess and when Andrew speaks about a cross-roads they're doing essentially the same thing.



Both are using **representational** language to talk about a matter which they would otherwise find difficult to handle.

The fact that our tribal elder chooses to use myth, whereas Andrew chooses to use allegory, is largely immaterial.



But isn't myth more religious than allegory?
Allegory strikes me as secular on the whole.

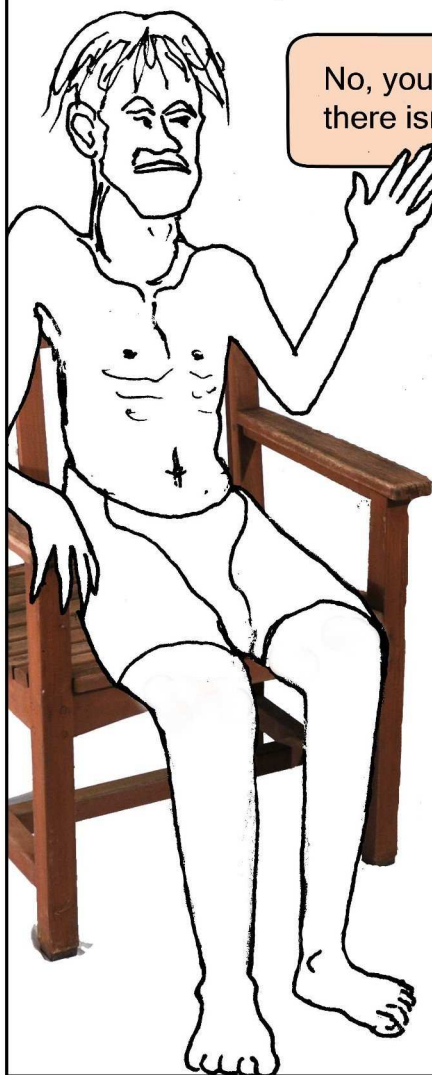


Yes, I've noticed you moderns take my
'Harrumph language to be religious.



But is there anything you can see as religious in the intention of our tribesman? Surely all he aims to do is to make the village children aware of the danger the river presents and there's nothing religious in that!

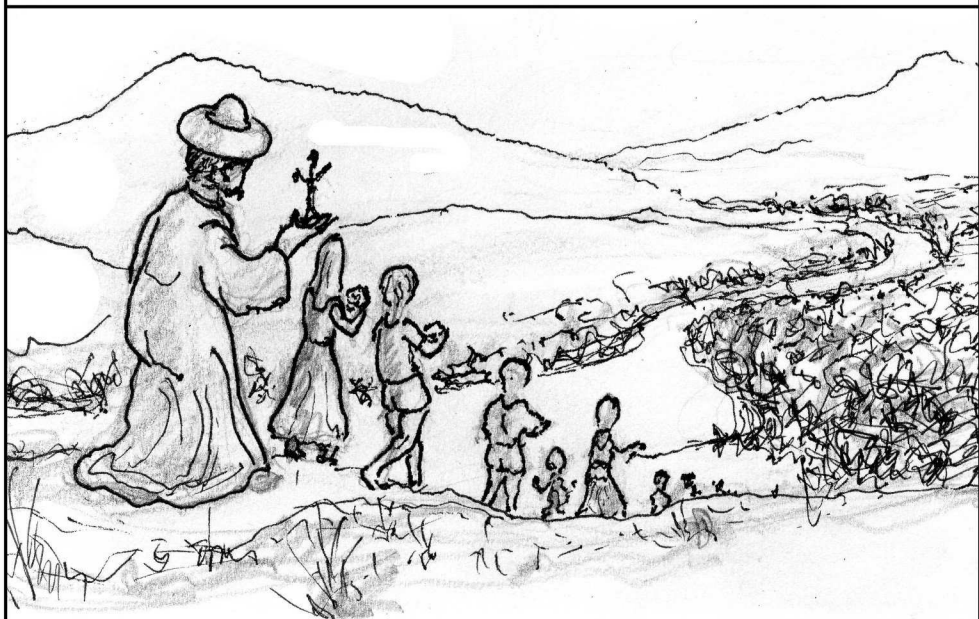
No, you're right, there isn't.





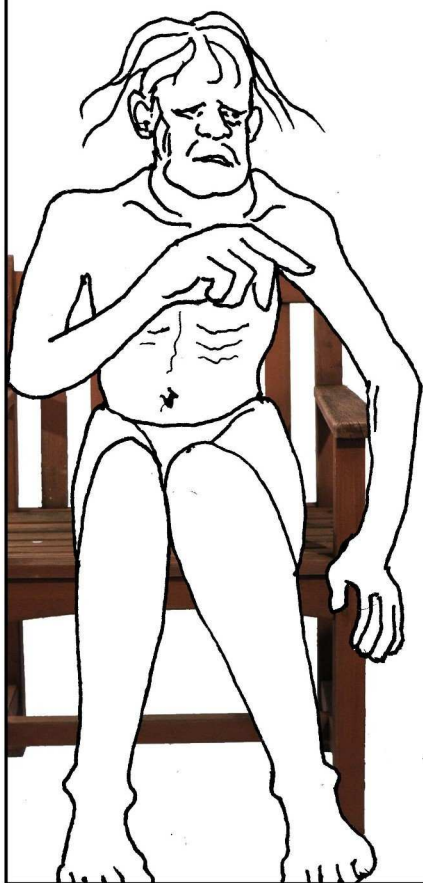
However, let me give you an alternative story. Suppose our tribal elder collects the village children together and tells them that they must all go down to the river with an offering...

... for though the river goddess can at times be cruel she can also be kind, providing the people of the village with water both to drink and to irrigate their fields.



Here we would have to say that his message is **religious**, wouldn't we? For his intention isn't solely to put the children on their guard but more importantly to involve them in what you would call a superstitious relationship; his belief being that making offerings can have an effect on what happens in the future.

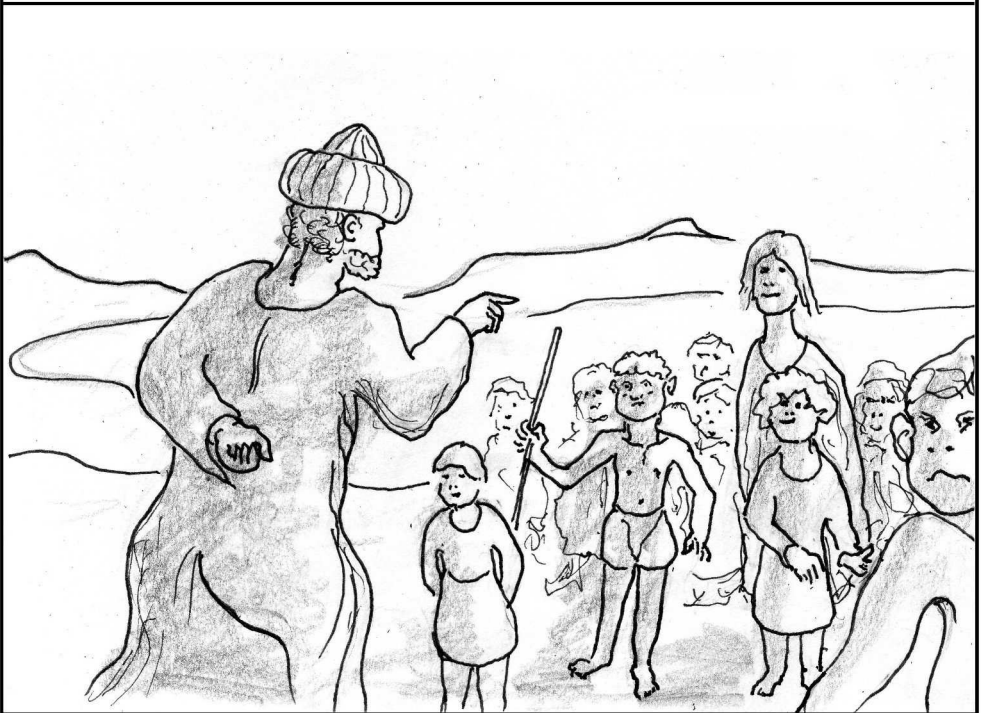
Yes. That would certainly seem to be the case.



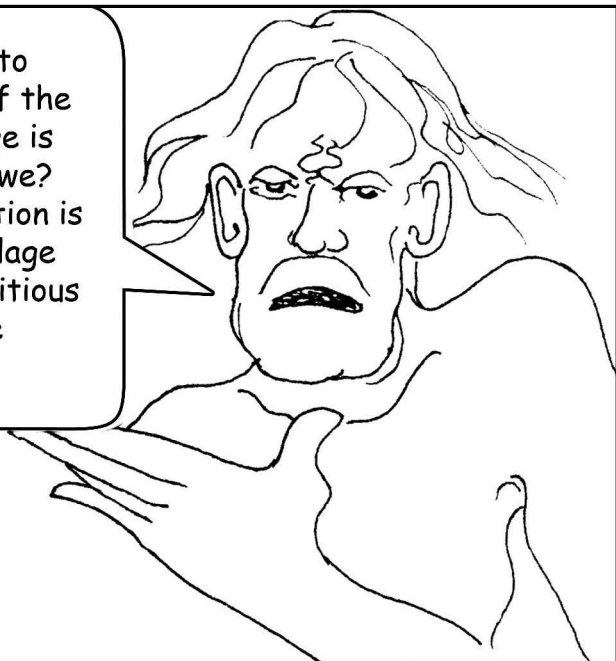
OK, now let's finally look at a third alternative. Suppose the tribal elder tells the children that the river goddess is the village's own deity, who rewards the village when its inhabitants do good and punishes it when they do evil.



So they had all better grow up doing what was good for the community **by showing a proper respect for authority.**



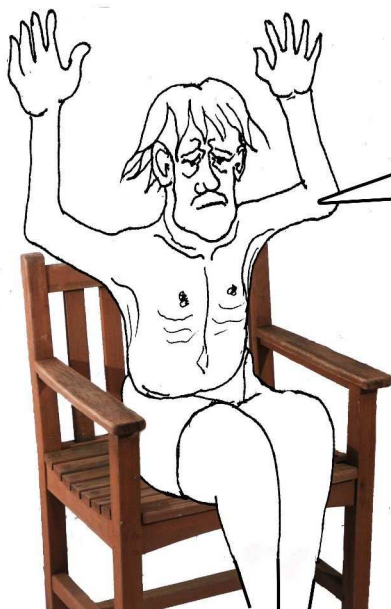
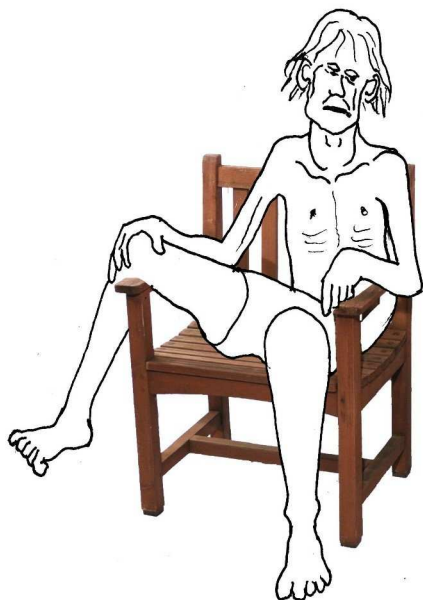
Here we would have to say that the focus of the tribal elder's message is **ideological**, wouldn't we? For clearly his intention is not to involve the village children in a superstitious relationship with the river goddess...



... but rather to impose on them an **authoritarian** world-view.

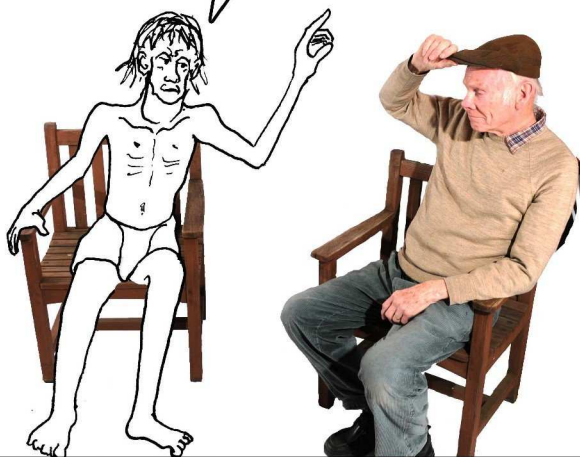


Yes. What you say is sound. But isn't it also true that mythical stories usually have **both** ideological **and** religious focuses, making the whole thing rather complicated and confused?



I can't tell you what sort of focuses mythical stories usually have. That's for you to decide. I can only tell you why I invented 'Harrumph', the language of myth.

That said, it seems to me you will only be in a position to identify **the kind of focus** a mythical story has **after** you have determined what it's driving at.



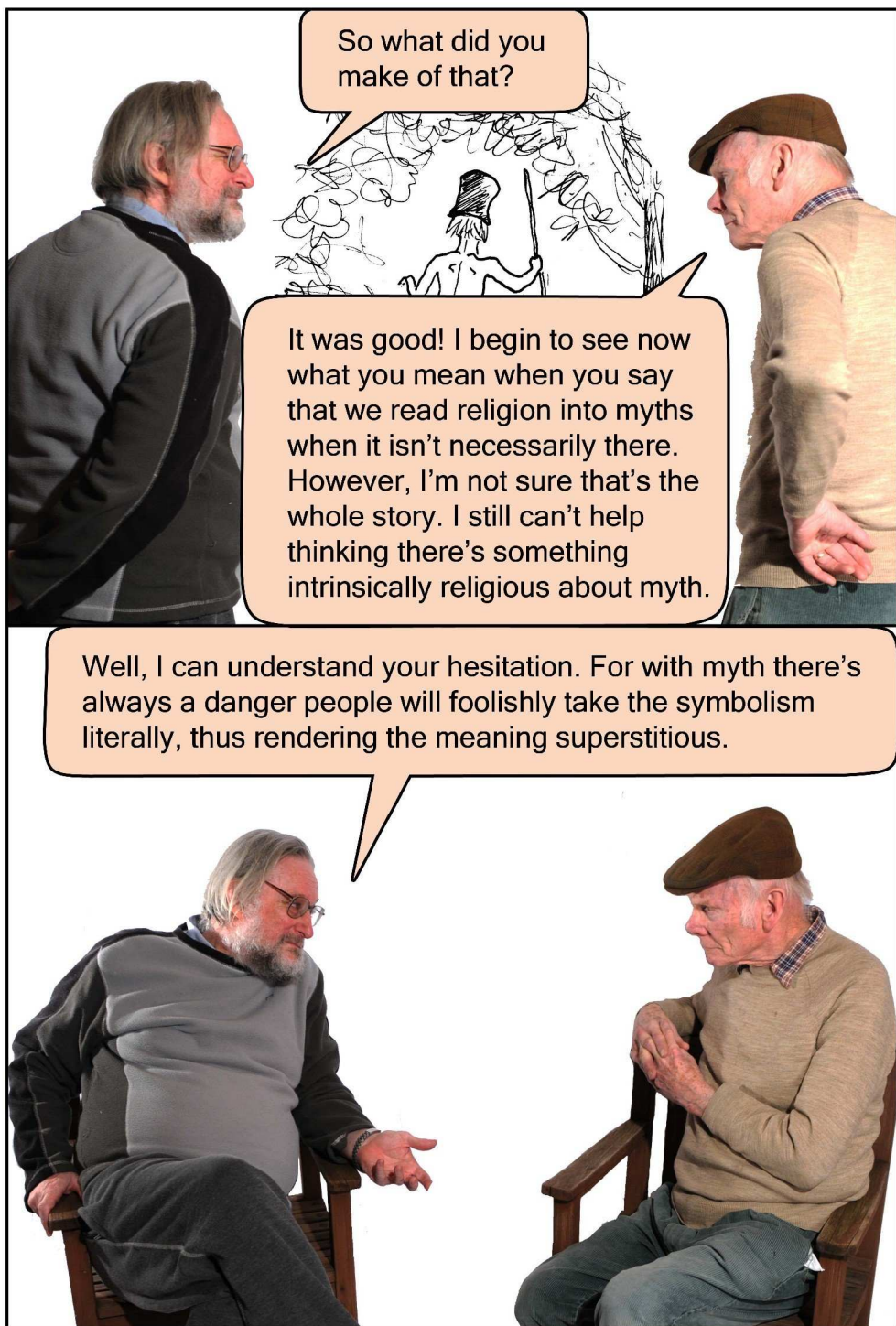
Thank you, Ancient Man. That was most helpful. I hope you won't mind if we call on you again if we get into difficulty.



Not at all. It's a pleasure to find people who take my problems seriously.

6

The Mesopotamian Myths as Ideological Texts



So what did you make of that?

It was good! I begin to see now what you mean when you say that we read religion into myths when it isn't necessarily there. However, I'm not sure that's the whole story. I still can't help thinking there's something intrinsically religious about myth.

Well, I can understand your hesitation. For with myth there's always a danger people will foolishly take the symbolism literally, thus rendering the meaning superstitious.

Using representations there's always a danger of misunderstandings.



However in most cases, such misreadings are clearly seen to constitute nonsense, as when you mistakenly took my crossroads as having something to do with geography*... or when the young apprentice scribe mistakenly thought the Bible was all to do with sex.



*See p. 22

However, in the case of myth the result of taking its symbolism literally is superstition, which is to say **dangerous** nonsense.



Because of this we should always be on the look out for superstition in texts written in Ancient Man's 'Harrumph language'. For mythical expression presents a constant danger for the unwary.



However, the truth is that there's little trace of superstition in the World Order myth we have just read, the only hint of it being in the rites and sacrifices referred to in association with the economics of sheep-rearing.



You cannot, therefore, justifiably claim it has a religious focus.



OK, I take your point!

So if you tell me that the myth **still** sounds religious to you
it's **not** because you have regard for what it's saying.



It can **only** be because you find its mental
language foreign and unintelligible...



... and its babble - what you wrongly take as being
a religious babble - is drowning out everything else!

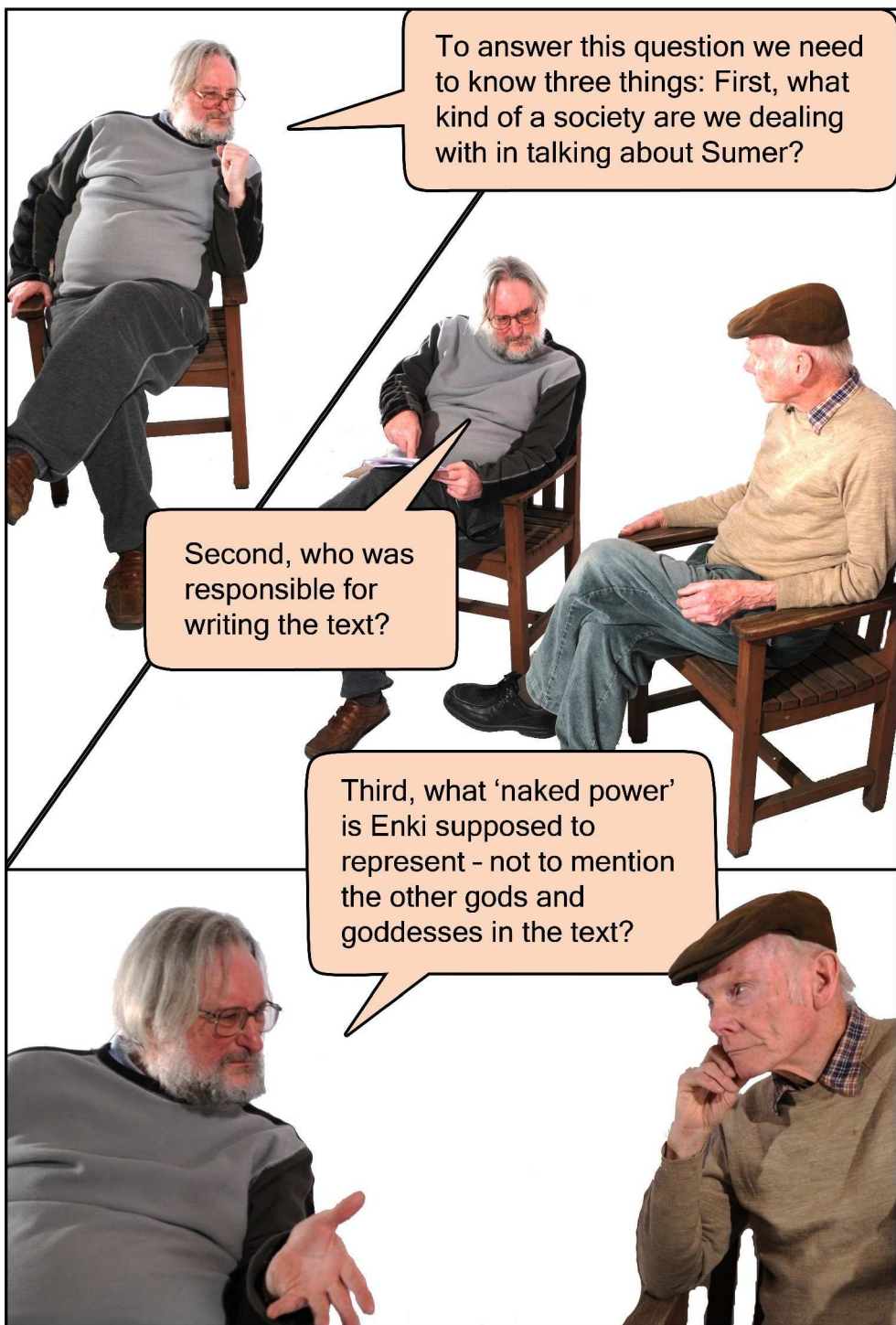
I surrender!



So, if we now agree that in the case of this myth, at least, a religious focus is out of the question...

... how does the text read if we see it as having an ideological focus?



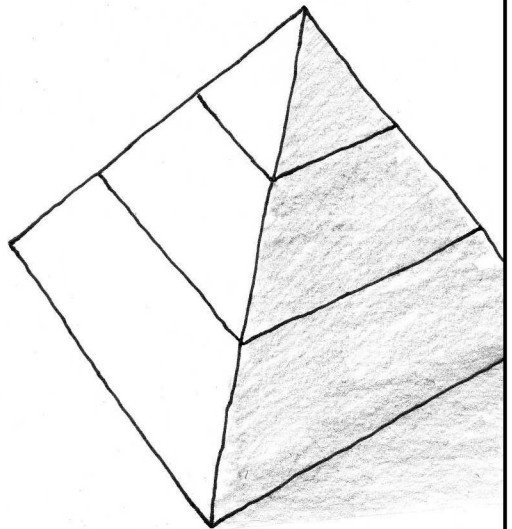


Like all of the great empires in the ancient Near East the Sumerian civilisation was fundamentally **centrarchical**.



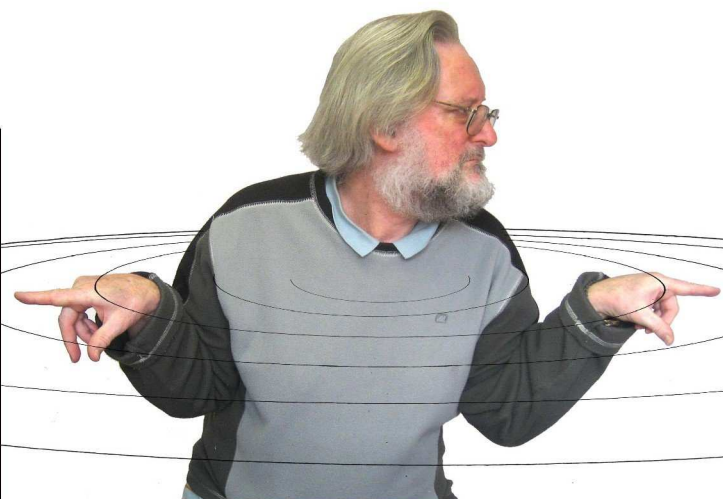
Nowadays sociologists describe Sumer's social structures as hierarchical rather than centrarchical. In doing so they betray our top-down / bottom-up way of thinking.

Here, society is seen as a layered pyramid of social classes. The biggest and most powerless congregate at the bottom and the smallest and most powerful group together at the top.



As far as we know, no one in the ancient world thought in this top-down / bottom-up manner.

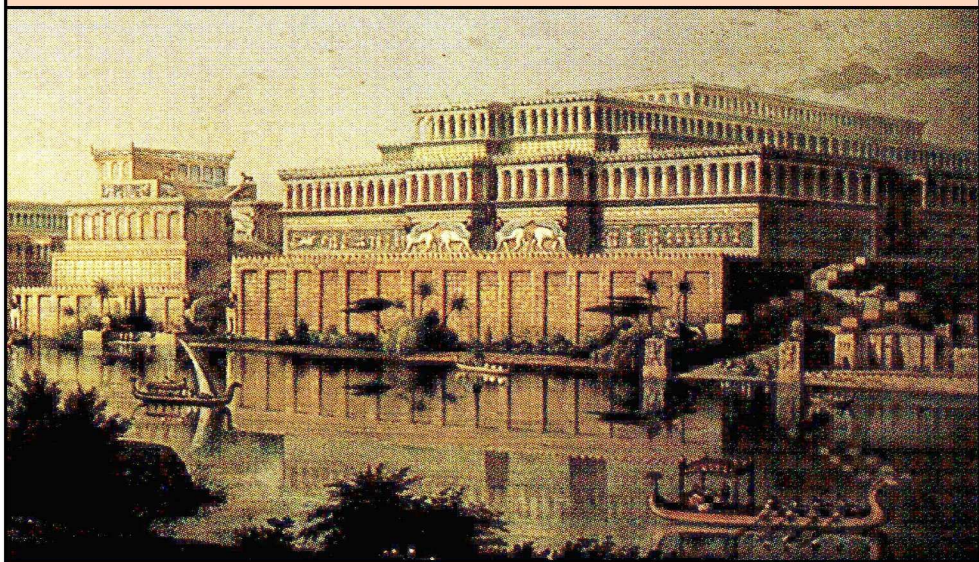
Their view was rather that power resided at the centre from where it radiated outwards.



The centre itself being marked by some great city such as Ur.



At the heart of this city lay twin focuses of authority. First, the palace housing the military command.



And second, the temple housing the administrative elite.



Reconstruction published by Layard of the later Assyrian city of Nimrud.

Outside of the city lay a countryside dotted with politically dependent towns and villages.



Sumer itself consisted of a number of such 'city states' living side by side in an uneasy, competitive, yet 'nationalist' relationship, Ur being one of them.



At any moment one city tended to dominate. However, over time power naturally switched from one city to another.



Given the dominance of a centrarchal outlook, privilege, for the Sumerians, consisted in being as closely in contact with the centre as possible.



Consequently it was the fringe-dwellers, people like the Martu living out on the western steppes, who were seen to occupy the least privileged position in Sumerian society.

Outside lay only foreigners living 'beyond the pale'; Elamites, for example, who, like many of the Mesopotamians' historic enemies, lived in the mountain country to the north.

Such foreigners were considered as scarcely human. Described as dogs, it was considered only right to treat them like dirt.

Outside lay only foreigners living 'beyond the pale'; Elamites, for example, who, like many of the Mesopotamians' historic enemies, lived in the mountain country to the north.

Such foreigners were considered as scarcely human. Described as dogs, it was considered only right to treat them like dirt.

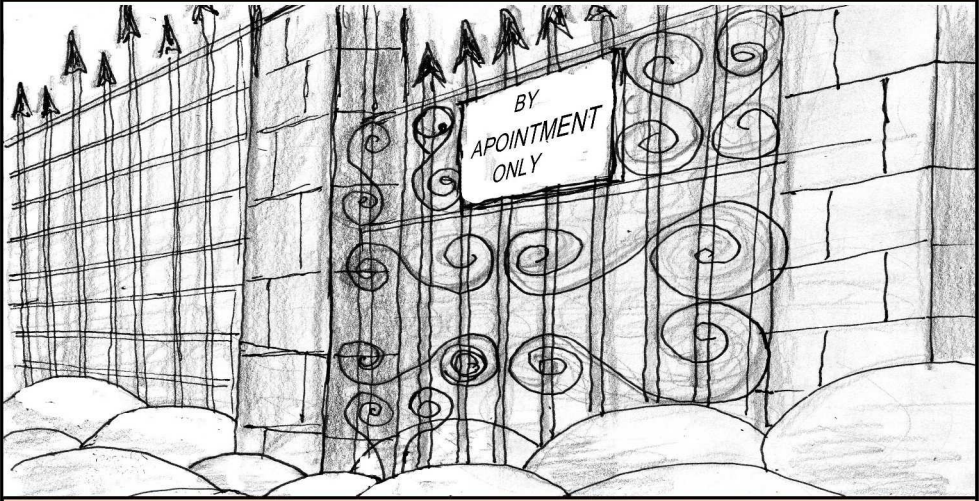
The situation I have described here is, of course, exactly what the writer of the Enki myth himself describes. But who was this writer and what does he want readers to see in this Enki, the god his myth is all about?



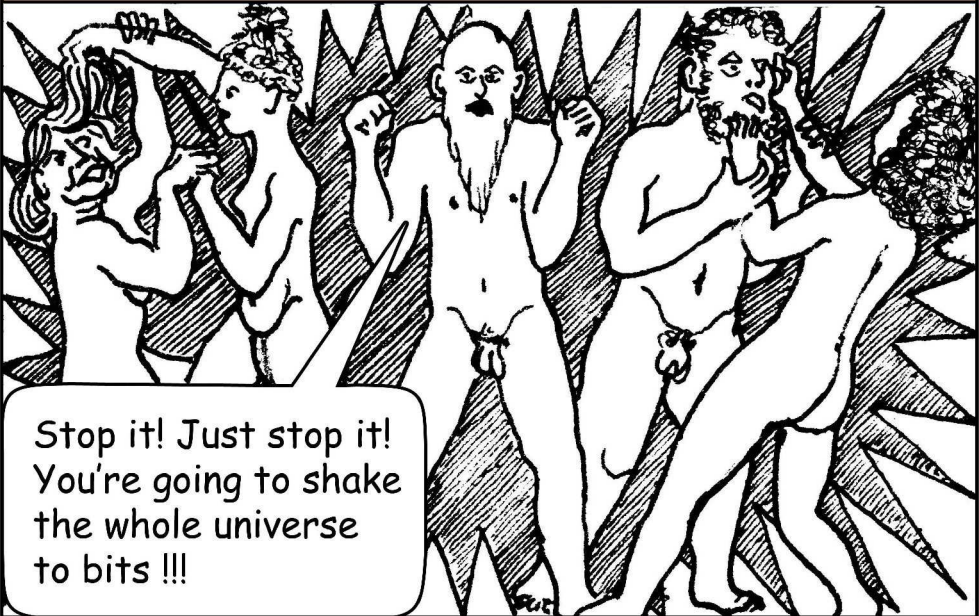
The first thing to note is that though Enki is undoubtedly the hero of the piece he was not the boss in the Sumerian pantheon, as you might have supposed.



The position of 'father of the gods' belonged to An. An, however, was a largely absent god, safely trucked away in Heaven.



He was a presidential figurehead who represented the pantheon itself, someone to be consulted about the general ordering of the universe or in times of crisis, but he was not the god actually in day-to-day control.



The executive top-dog was Enlil. He represented the military command: the naked power supporting the king.



It's possible to detect this underlying situation in the Enki 'World Order' myth. However, to have it clearly spelled out we need to turn to another poem.



IN PRAISE OF ENLIL
AND HIS CITY
NIPPUR

*Enlil, whose command is far-reaching, whose word is holy
etc etc.....*

*The city, (Nippur), its appearance is fearsome and awesome
etc etc.*

*Nippur - the shrine where dwells the father, the great mountain
etc etc.*

*Enlil's house, it is a mountain of plenty
etc etc.*

*Enlil, the shepherd whom you have called and made high
in the land etc etc.*

*Who prostrates the foreign lands wherever he steps forth
etc etc*

*Heaven - he is its princely one; earth - he is its great one.
etc etc.*

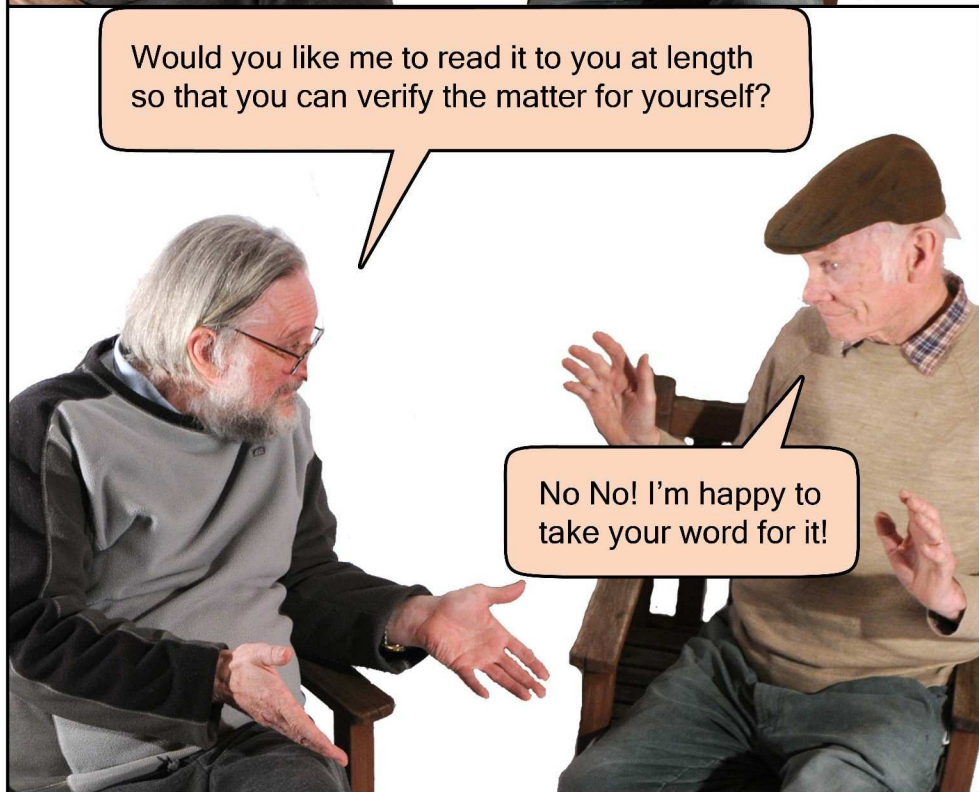
*Without Enlil the great mountain, no cities would be built
etc etc.*

*Workers would have neither controller nor supervisor
etc etc.*

*The birds of the heaven would not build nests on the wide earth
etc etc.*

*The trees planted in the mountain forests would not yield
their fruit etc etc.*

This text is so unashamedly boring in its unremitting, line after line exaltation of authoritarian prestige and capability that I find it impossible to illustrate. I will be merciful, therefore, and inflict no more of it on you.





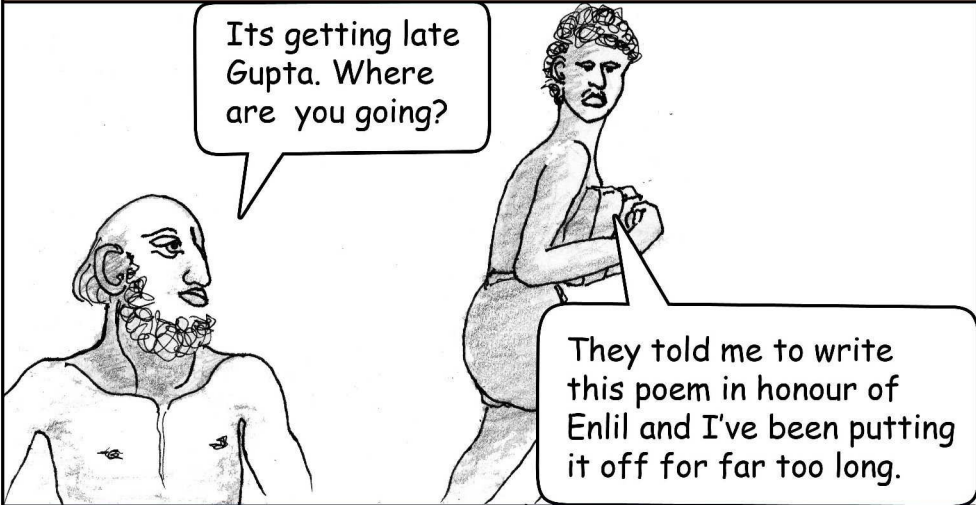
He must have been one of the priestly administrators since only they received the long and expensive training necessary to render someone capable of reading and writing, using the very difficult cuneiform script.



Consequently we can be certain he was a member of the tiny ruling establishment, albeit of its junior administrative branch.



In his poem to the glory of Enlil, therefore, our Sumerian scribe has to be seen as writing not about his own god but about the god who represented the naked power and authority of his military superiors.



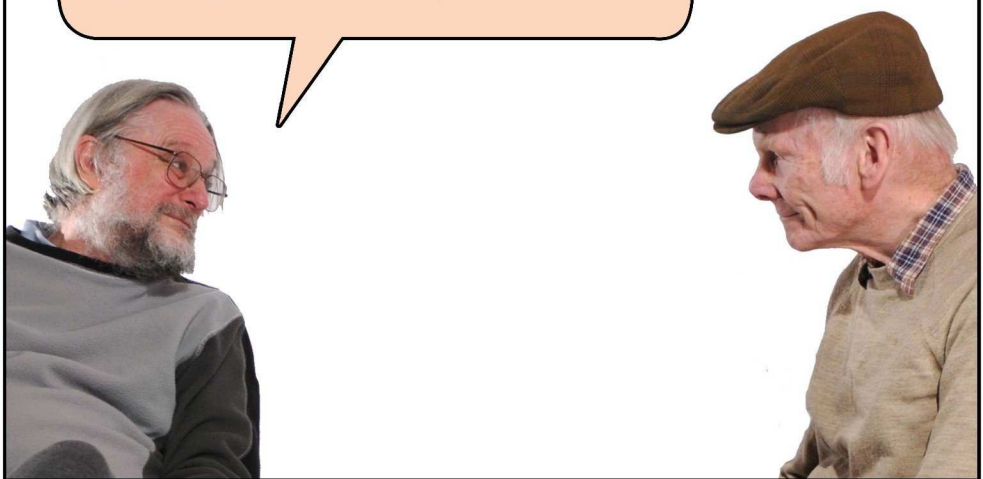
Obviously he did what he felt obliged to do, saying all the right things and copiously underlining that the military took precedence on all occasions, but clearly his heart wasn't in it.



So the military rulers, who presumably commissioned the work, got from him what they wanted as well as what they deserved: a paean of deadly dull, sycophantic adulation.



Seen in this light the poem is revealed as a fascinating though, rightly-speaking, boring ideological work!



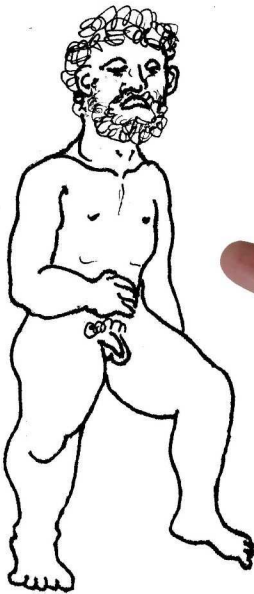
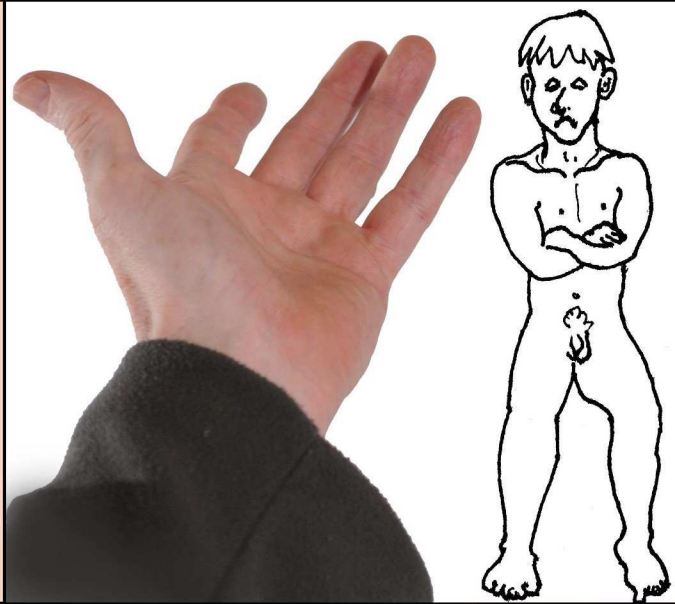
But what about the previous text we read: the Enki World Order myth?



Could it be that Enki represents the power and authority of the establishment's junior administrative branch? If so, that would explain why he comes across as a much more interesting and sympathetic figure. Let's check it out.



At the outset Enlil was the air god in Sumerian mythology. So it makes sense that he was chosen to represent the military.



Enki for his part started off as the earth god and hence the god of fresh water. From there he became the god of wisdom too.

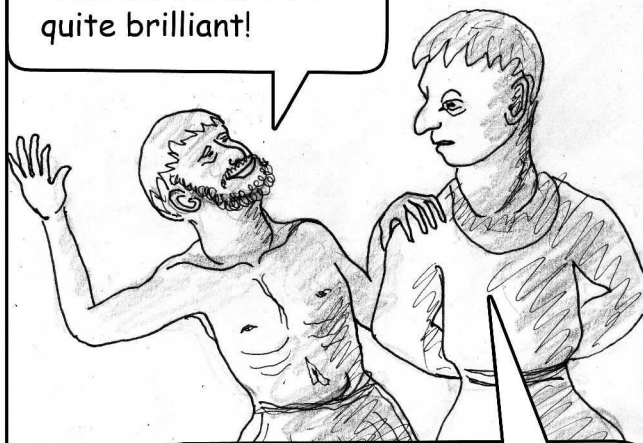
You can verify this for yourself by taking a second look at the World Order myth where Enki is described as being 'the ear and mind of the land' (page 92) and as setting in motion the great Tigris and Euphrates rivers by ejaculation! (page 98)

But what do these entities of 'fresh water' and 'wisdom' tell us about the group Enki was chosen to represent?

Well, given that the Sumerian economy was based almost entirely on irrigation-farming, it's clear that the administration of fresh water would have constituted the bulk of the priestly administrator's work.



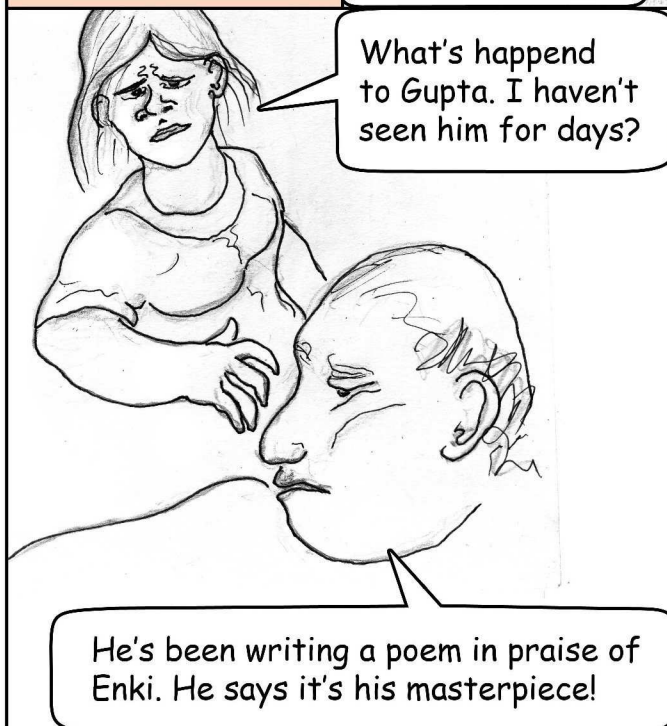
But how did you know it would work? It's quite brilliant!



Oh you know it's all part of a day's work for us scribes!

Then again, as will shortly become clear, the priestly administrators in Sumer saw intelligence and flair as the characteristic which fitted them for their work and distinguished them from others, especially their military superiors!

It would seem therefore that what the World Order myth presents us with is not a poem in praise of the military establishment, commissioned by the commander in chief and owed to him through filial duty...



Rather, what we have presented is a freely-drawn portrait of the Sumerian civilisation as seen from our Sumerian scribe's own perspective and offered in praise to the author's very own god.

As such, it's
a far more
entertaining
piece of work.



Though it would have been even
more entertaining still, had our
Sumerian scribe provided us with
his frank opinion of his military
bosses; a treat yet in store!



That is the end of Part1.

Now that John and I are beginning to get the hang of reading myths correctly as political works we are going, in Part 2, to examine the truly great Sumerian and Akkadian myths. This is all in preparation for reading the biblical myths themselves.

Hope you will join us!

John, Andrew and Adrian

Many thanks to all who have helped
in the production of this book

To Adrian Nettleship
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For the use of their ChurchHall



