

Thinking About the Bible



Part 2 The Mesopotamian Myths

by Andrew Parker

THINKING about the BIBLE

Part 2. The Mesopotamian Myths

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>

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Introduction

In Part 1 of *Thinking About the Bible* John and I discussed various ways of understanding what sort of a book the Bible is. Of course, the usual understanding is that it's a religious work but we came to the conclusion that reading the texts in this fashion leads to insurmountable difficulties.

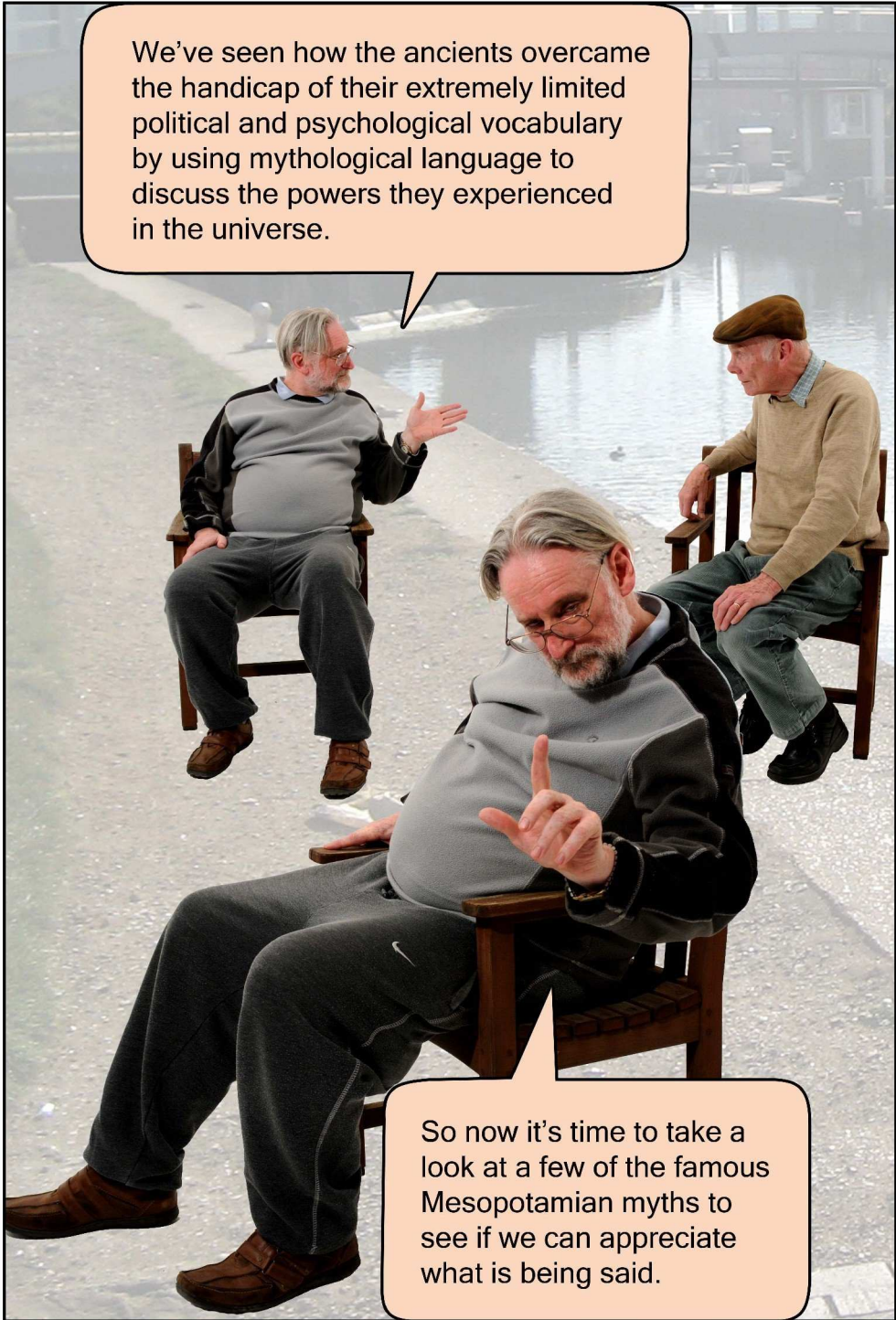
We therefore decided to look at the alternative approach in which ancient texts that employ mythological language, like the Bible, are seen as talking politics rather than religion. After a trial run on a Mesopotamian myth and an interesting conversation with Ancient Man himself we came to the conclusion that the approach seems to work rather well, making good sense of the text.

Here, in Part 2, John and I continue our examination of the Mesopotamian myths, on which the Biblical ones themselves are clearly based, using this new technique in preparation for employing it on the Bible itself.

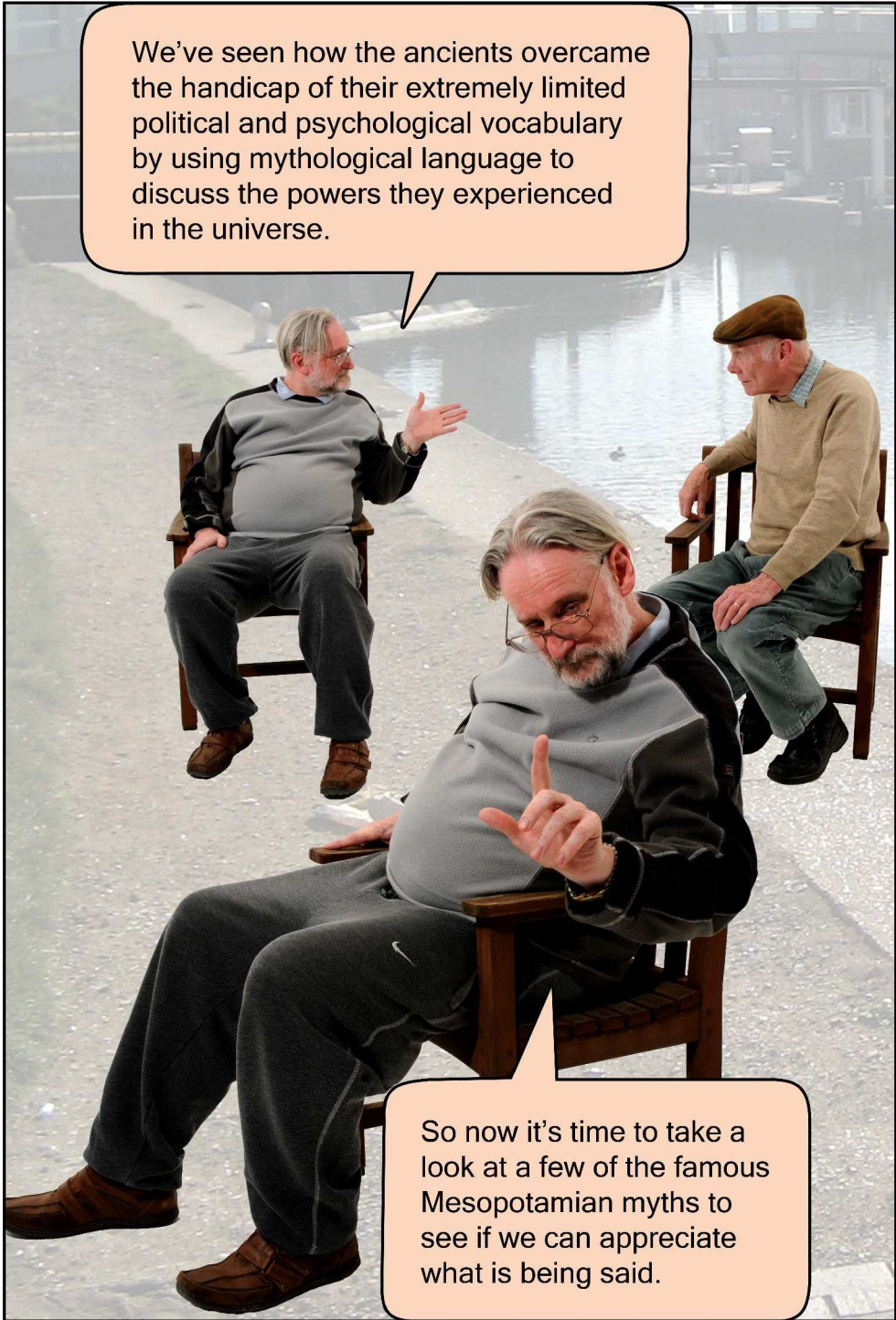
Just a reminder: Though this work is in cartoon form it is not designed for entertainment. It's an extended dialogue presented in pictures so as to make it less stark and I hope you will excuse my rather incompetent drawings. Because there are inevitably a lot of old men sitting around in chairs I have added misty background pictures of the East End of London, where John and I live, to add interest without distracting from the all important dialogue. You may just catch a glimpse or two of my dog, Danny, doing his thing. He accompanies me in my daily walks 'round the area.

1

The
Mesopotamian
Paradise Myths

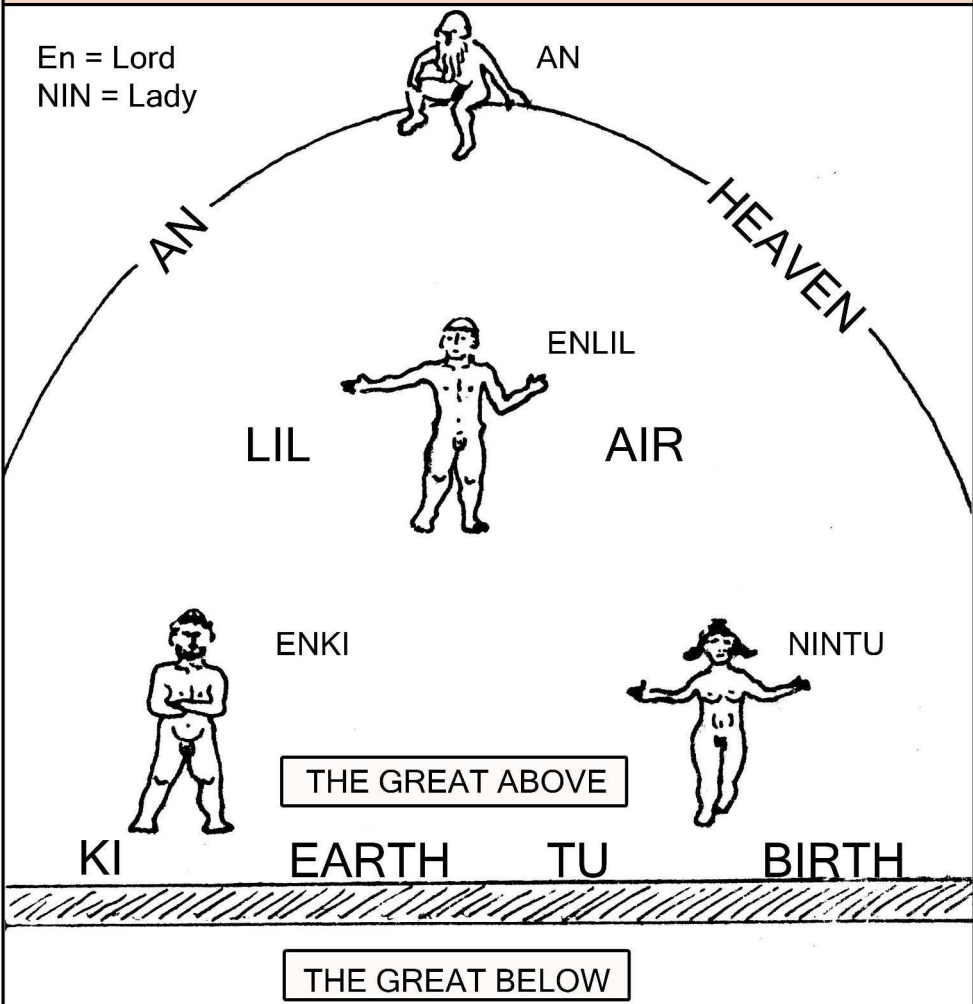
A photograph of three men sitting in wooden chairs outdoors. The man in the foreground is wearing a grey and black jacket and glasses, gesturing with his right hand. The man in the background is wearing a tan sweater and a brown cap. The man on the left is wearing a grey and black jacket and glasses, gesturing with his right hand. A speech bubble is overlaid on the top left of the image.

We've seen how the ancients overcame the handicap of their extremely limited political and psychological vocabulary by using mythological language to discuss the powers they experienced in the universe.

A photograph of three men sitting in wooden chairs outdoors. The man in the foreground is wearing a grey and black jacket and glasses, gesturing with his right hand. The man in the background is wearing a tan sweater and a brown cap. The man on the left is wearing a grey and black jacket and glasses, gesturing with his right hand. A speech bubble is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

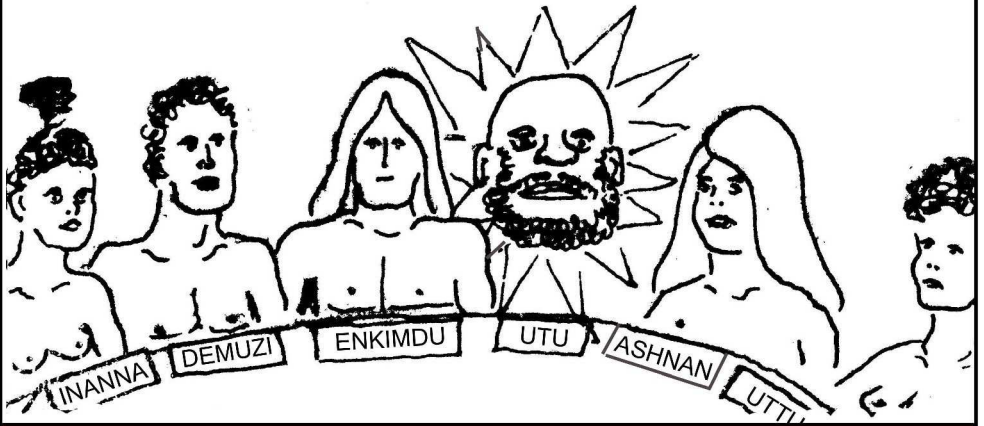
So now it's time to take a look at a few of the famous Mesopotamian myths to see if we can appreciate what is being said.

Here is an outline plan of the principal powers making up the Sumerian universe as far as the Great Above is concerned.



Of the four great gods, AN, Lord Heaven, was formerly chief god till succeeded by ENLIL, Lord Air, who had separated heaven from earth. Then there was ENKI, Lord Earth, god of fresh water and wisdom, and finally NINTU, the great mother goddess.

Next in line were a large number of first-ranking deities called the Anunnaki. Here are some who operated in the Great Above.



A few of these major deities not only had cosmological or economic roles but were also patrons of Sumerian cities.



AN
of
URUK



ENLIL
of
NIPPUR

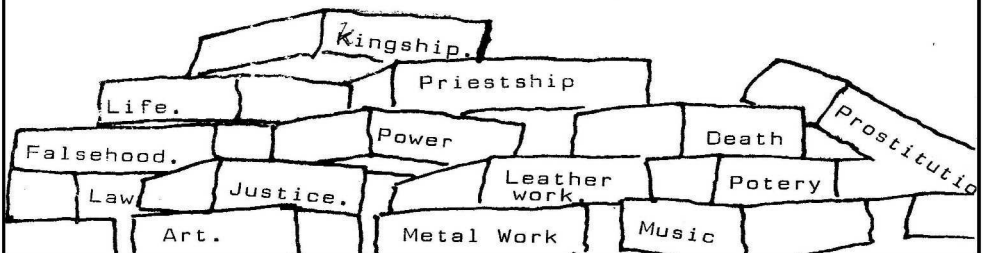


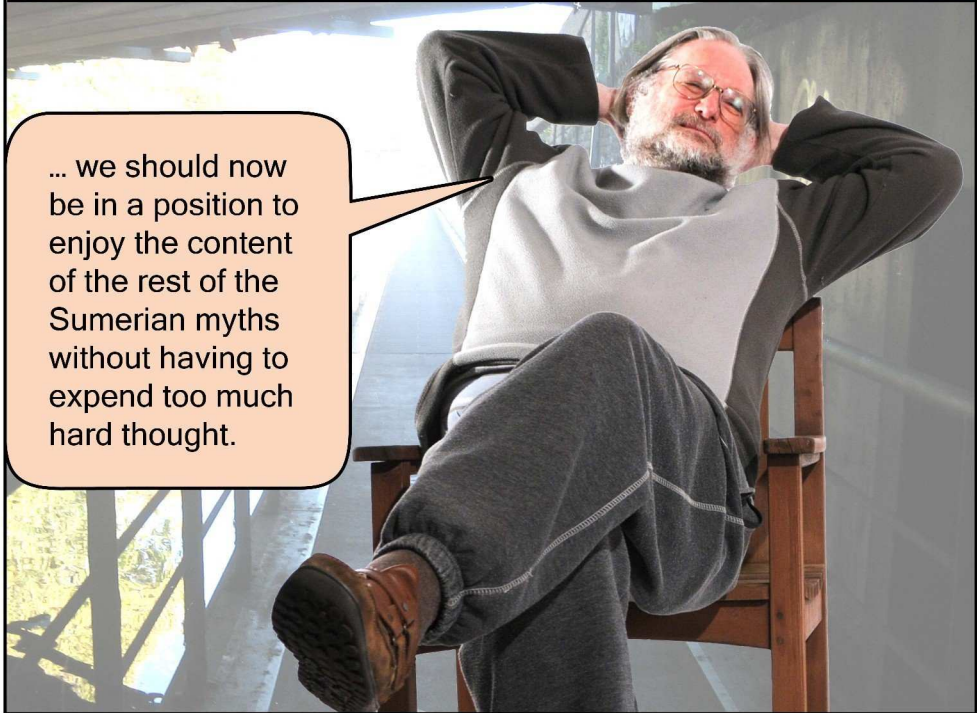
ENKI
of
ERIDU



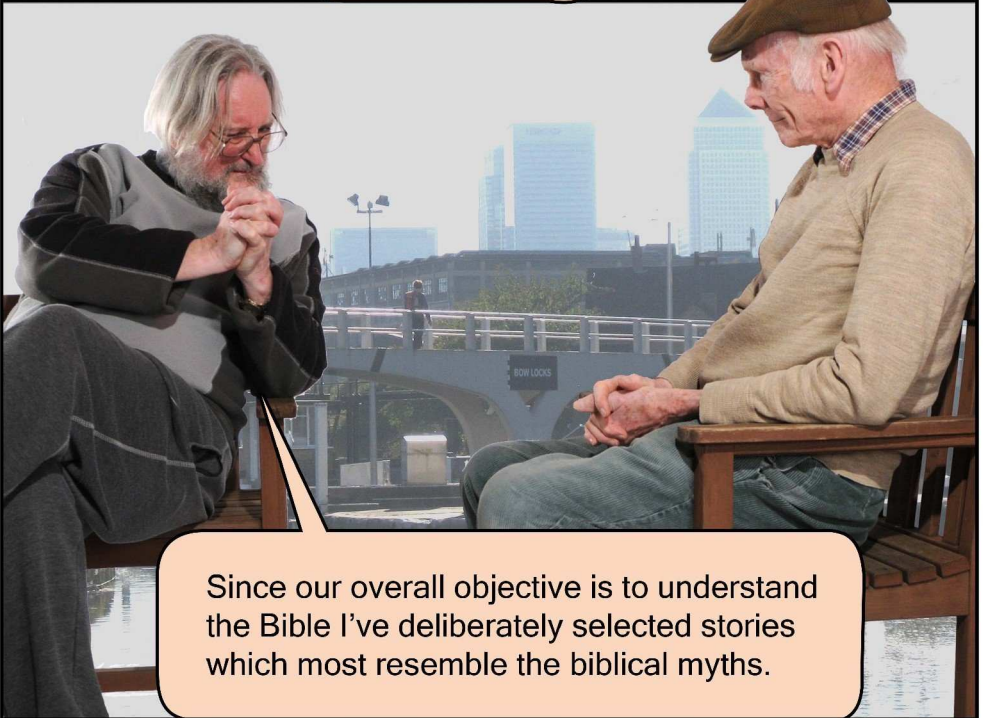
NANA
of
UR

Under them were numerous minor and personal deities. Finally there were also objects of power called the MEs, which stood for the positive and negative, ordering aspects of civilisation,



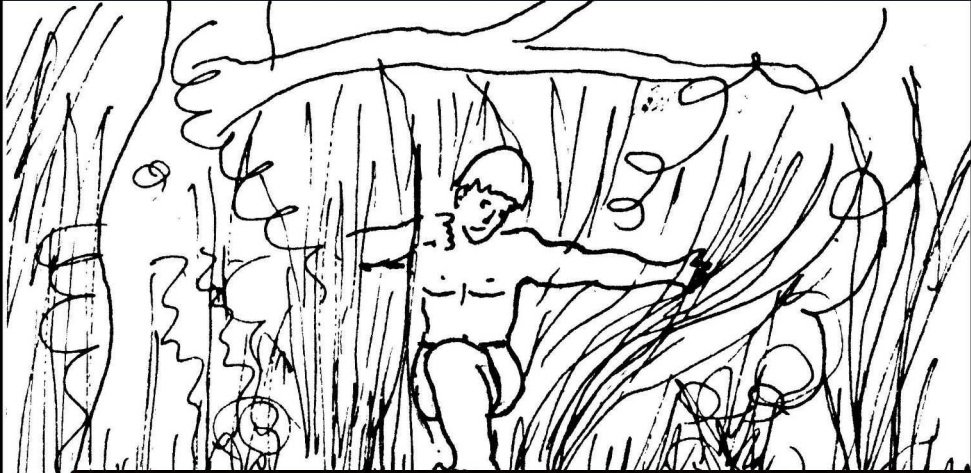


So let's take a look at a few of them, to see what they can tell us.



PARADISE (1)

The purpose of this myth is to reflect on the interplay between two powers regularly encountered in nature.

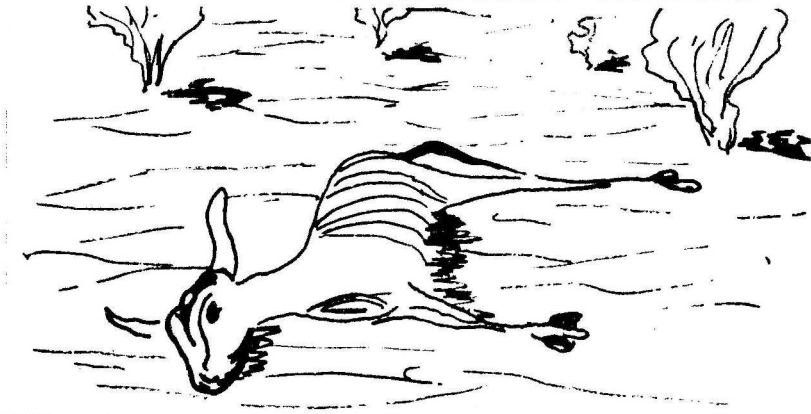


The first is the basic growth force which if left unchecked has a natural tendency to overrun everything, making civilised life all but impossible.

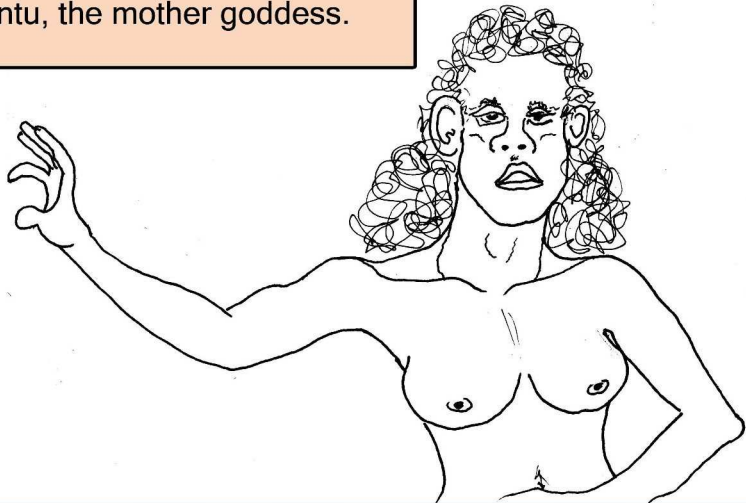
Our Sumerian scribe identifies this force as male and attributes it to his own god Enki.



The second is the restricting force.



Our Sumerian scribe identifies this force as female by attributing it to Nintu, the mother goddess.



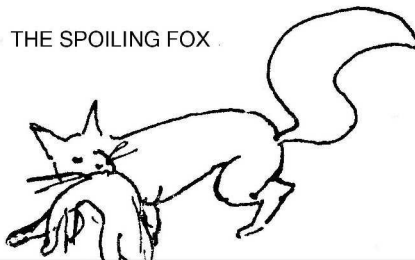
Witnessing in nature a thinning power pitted against the power of expansion, he seeks to reassure himself, and everyone else, that both are necessary in a well-ordered (civilised) universe.

In the myth the supporting roles played by the gardener and the fox are especially interesting. Each characterises one of the forces under discussion...

THE PRODUCTIVE FARMER



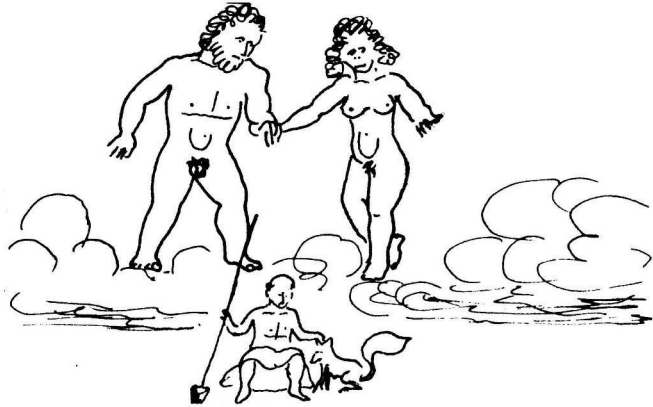
THE SPOILING FOX



and each performs a service to the deity, personifying one of these forces.



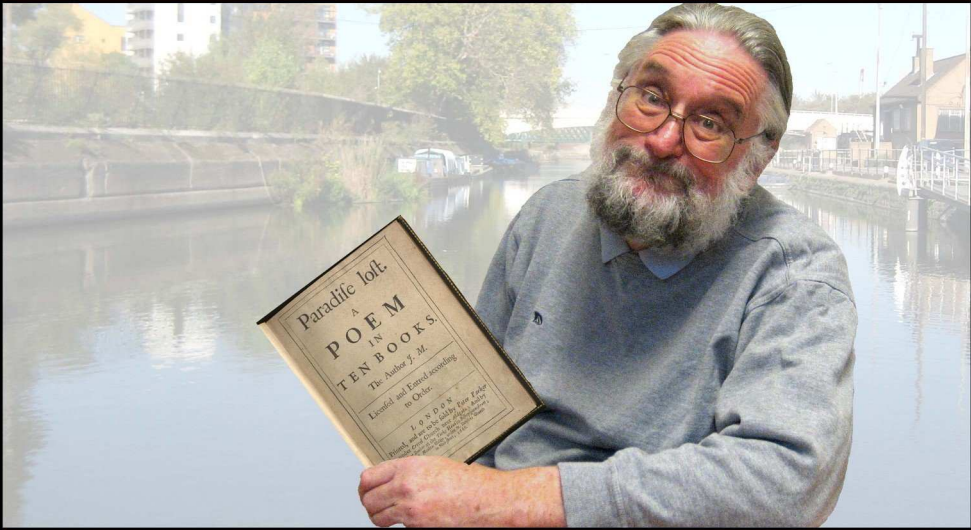
Manifestly, our Sumerian scribe wishes to make the point that, just as the restrictive force is essential to a well-ordered universe, so too there has to be room in this world for the fox and his kind...



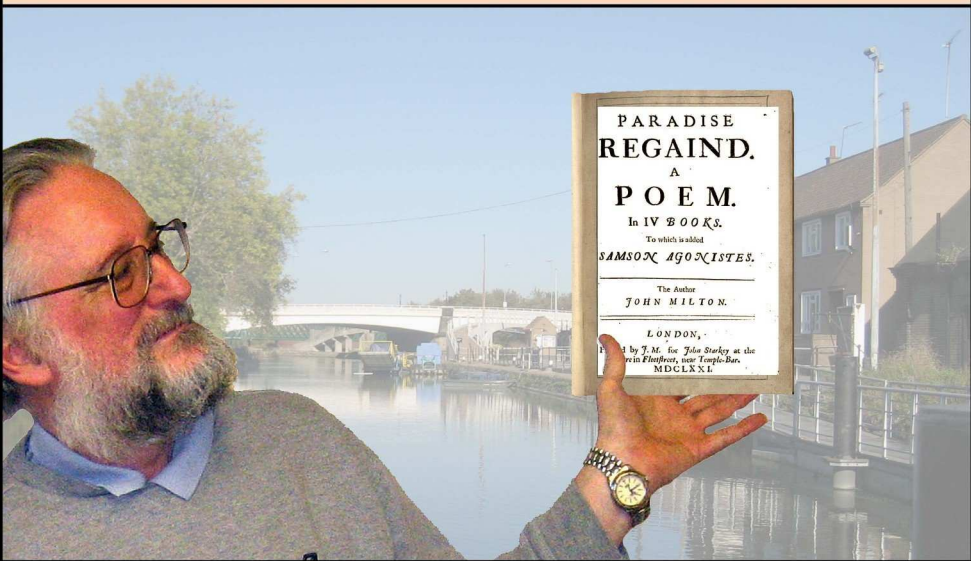
... something specifically not the case in the so-called 'paradise' situation which he describes.



This raises the whole issue of paradise which we nowadays tend to see as a fictive, pristine state which an unknown biblical writer invented in order to talk about sin, guilt and alienation.



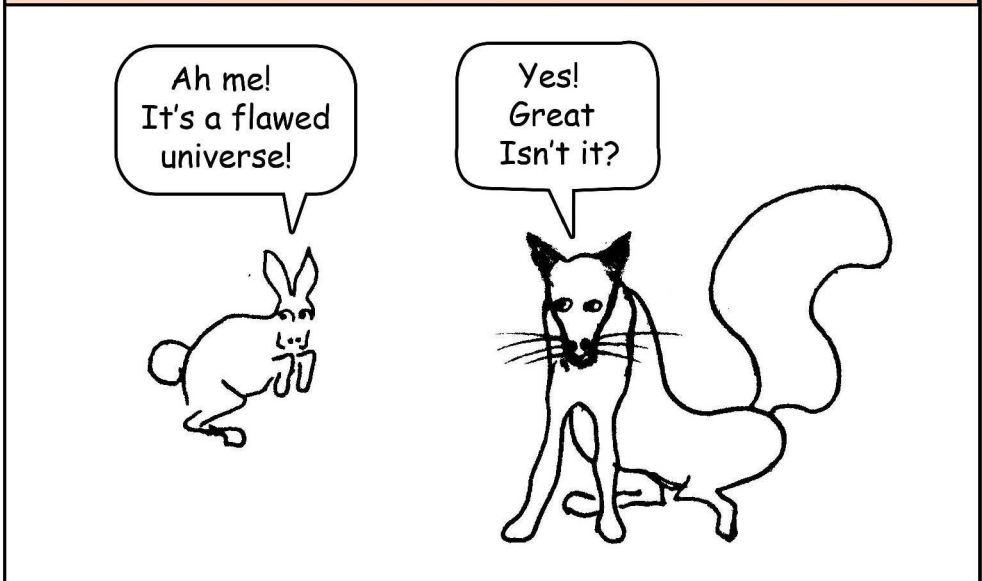
Because of this, people generally see paradise as standing for something religious; a blessed relationship with God the creator which mankind lost and supposedly longs to recover.



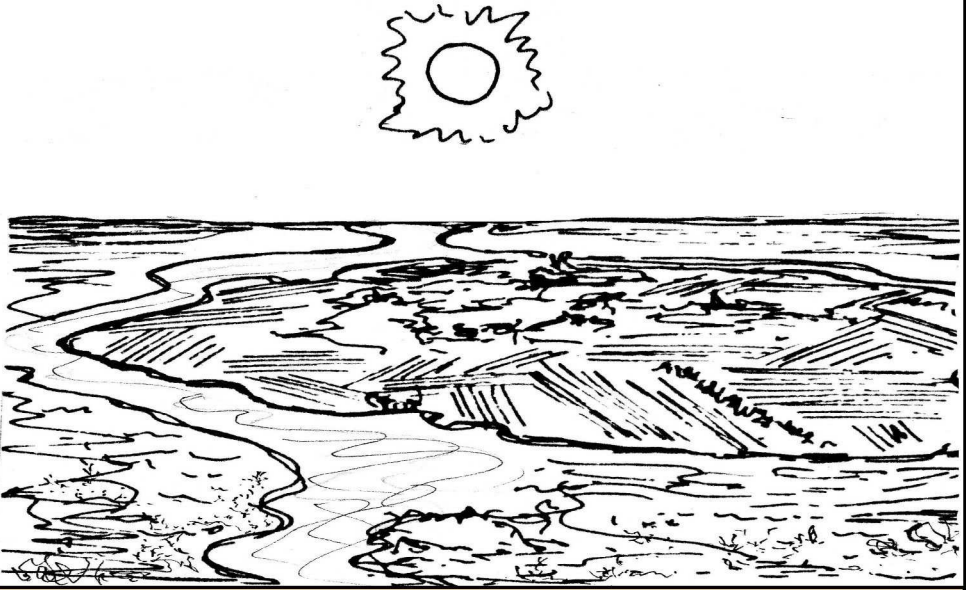
It should be noted that the present story makes clear that our Sumerian scribe never had anything so religious in mind. For here attention is firmly fixed on the need to come to terms with the universe **as it is actually experienced**.



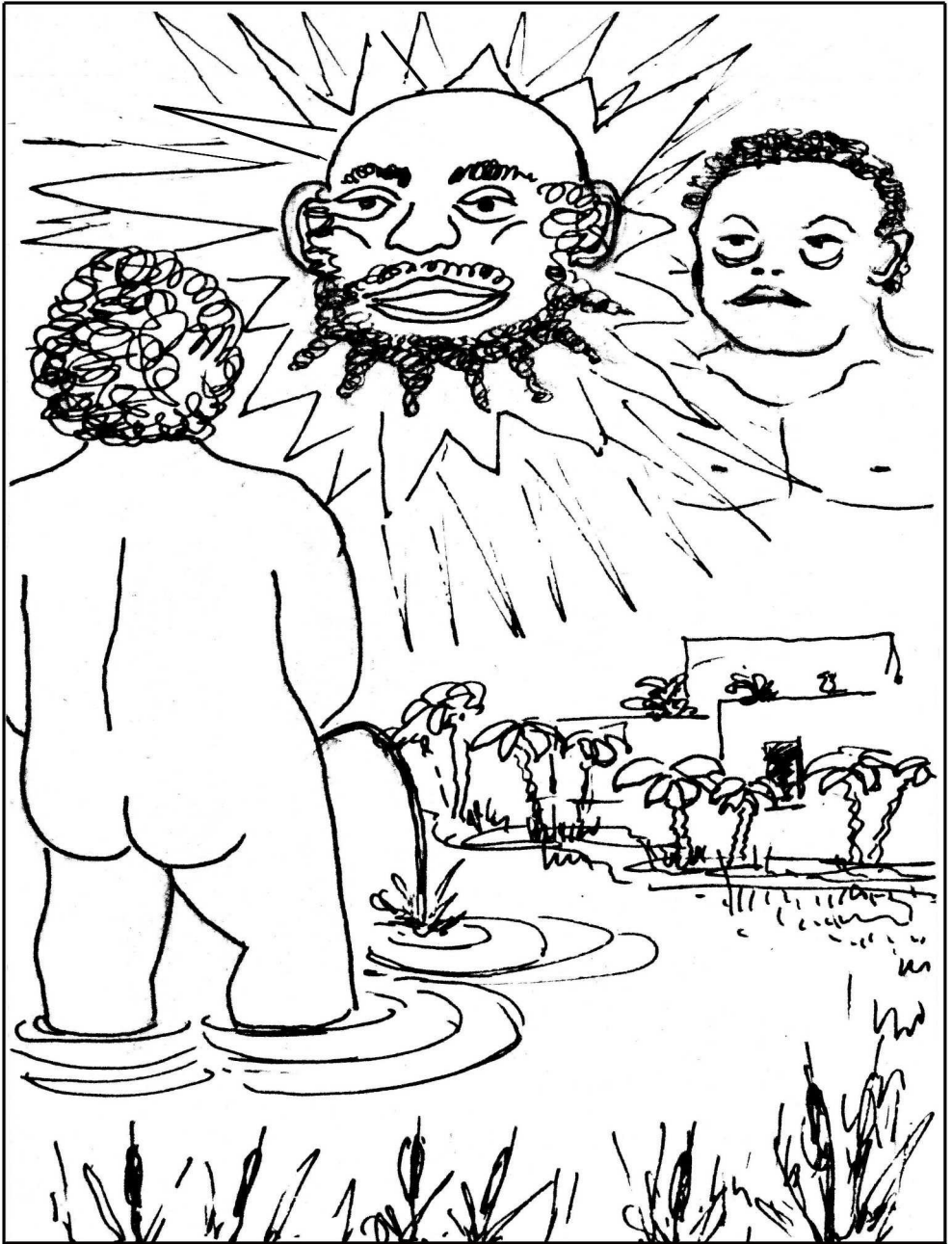
In short, the story shows no interest whatsoever in a **return** to the paradise state which, if meant in any historical sense, is seen as something unfinished, unstable and half-baked.



This myth dates from between fifteen hundred and two thousand BCE.



*There is a land called Dilman;
A land pure, clean and bright.
In that land the raven utters no cry,
neither, does the death bird caw.
There the lion does not kill;
the wolf does not carry off the lamb.
There are no wild dogs there, to devour the kids,
no blight to devour the grain.
In that land there are no widows.
In that land there are no sick..
No old women grumble that they are old.
No old men complain about their age.
You'll see no wailing priests walking around;
No singers lamenting outside the city walls.*



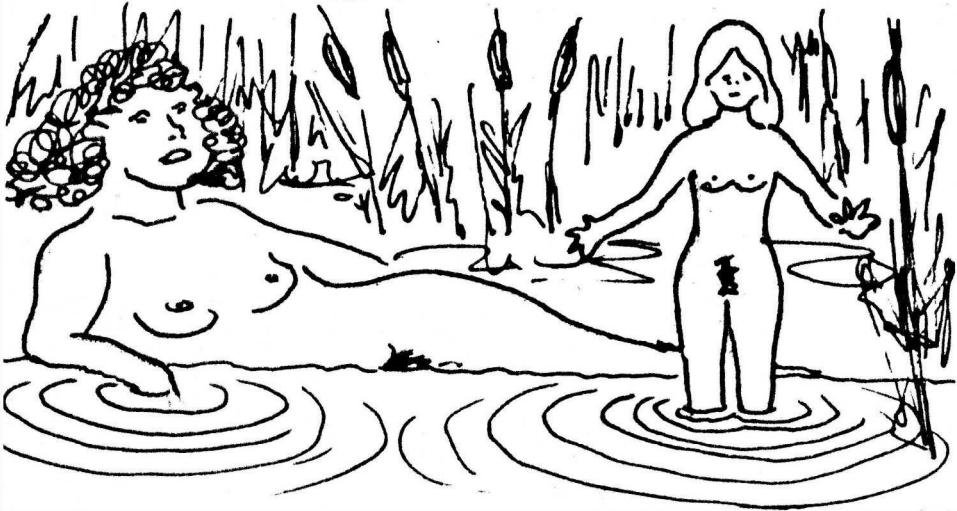
Utu, the sun god, and Nana, the moon god, bless the land and Enki waters it with his lifegiving fresh waters.

Enki pours his semen into the womb of Nintu, the great mother goddess...



* In the text the mother goddess is sometimes called Ninhursag but we will continue to call her Nintu.

... and in nine days of pregnancy she brings to birth a daughter, Nimu, on the banks of the river.

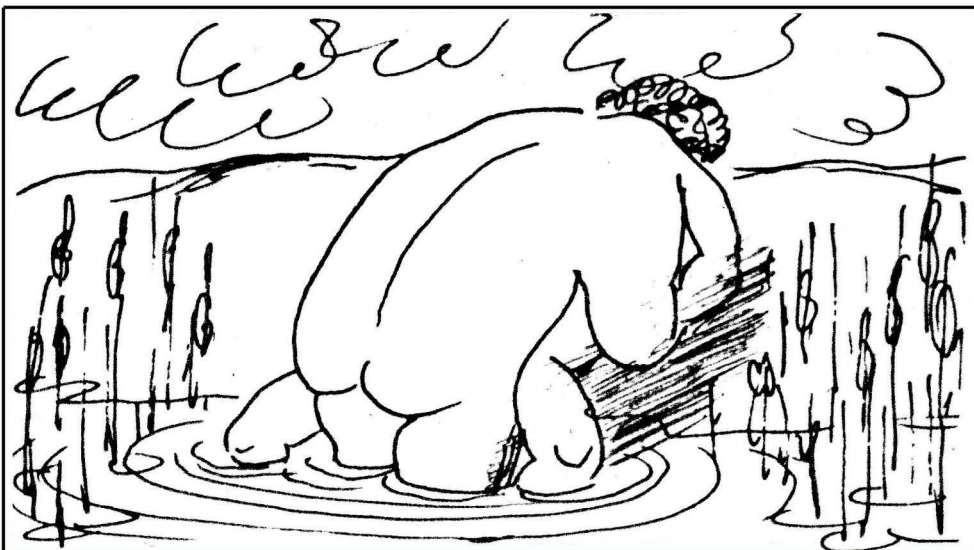


Enki, in the marshland, looks about.

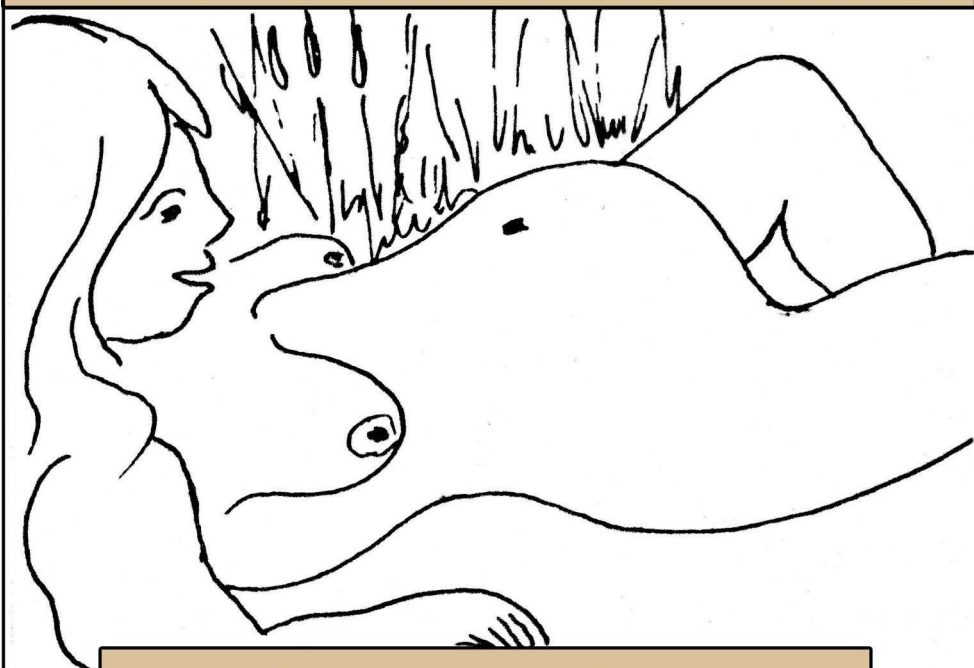
Ismund, my messenger, shall I not kiss the young one, the fair?

Yes Lord! and for my King I shall blow up a mighty wind.

*First he sets his foot in the boat,
Then he sets his foot on dry land.*

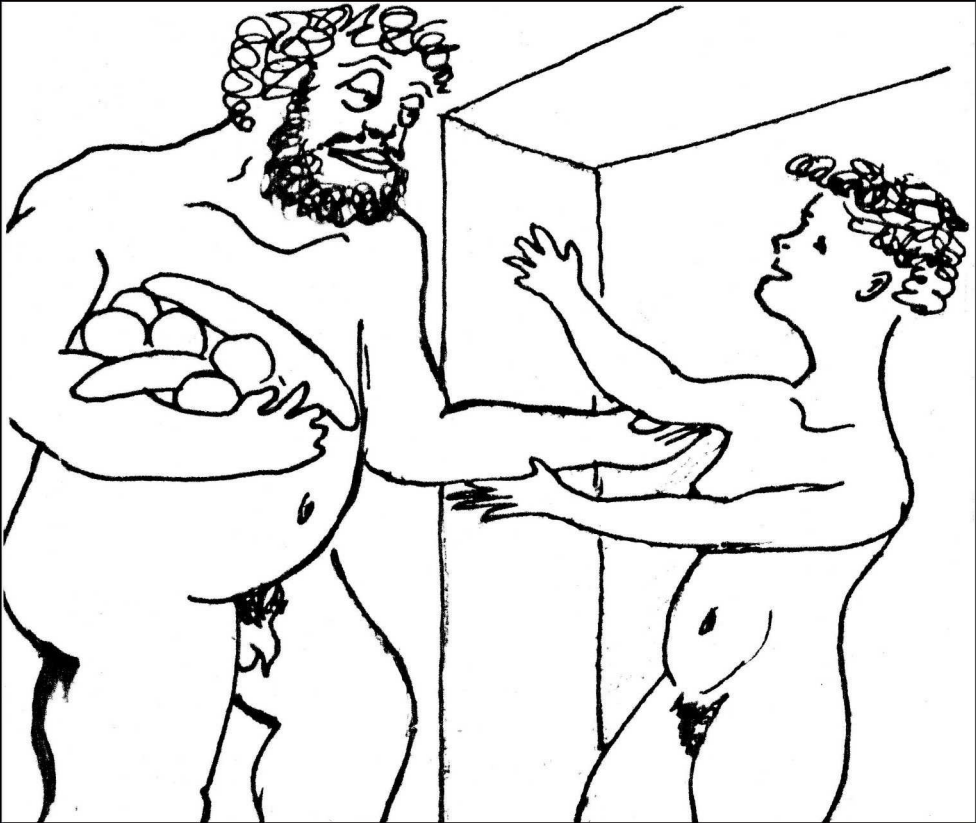


Enki embraces her and kisses her; Enki pours semen into her womb.



*And nine days being her nine months of womanhood,
In fat, good, princely fat, Nimu gives birth to Ninkurra
on the bank of the river.*

Enki impregnates his granddaughter Ninkurra who in the same painless way gives birth to a daughter Uttu. But before Enki can take his pleasure of Uttu, Nintu intervenes to advise her granddaughter not to accept Enki's advances till he pays with presents. However, the gardener of Dilmun comes to Enki's aid, offering him some vegetables in gratitude for the god's life-giving water and Enki uses these to bribe Uttu.



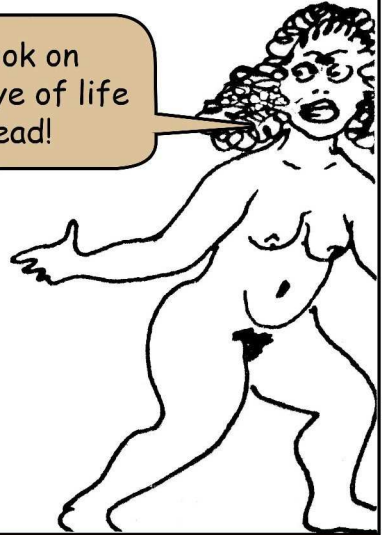
*Uttu with joyful heart opens the door of the house.
Enki gives Uttu, the fair, cucumbers, apples and grapes.
Enki takes his joy of Uttu.
He embraces her and lies in her lap,
With the young one he cohabits, he kisses..
Enki pours semen into her womb.*

The mother goddess is naturally furious:

Nintu curses Enki's name.



I shall never look on you with the eye of life until you are dead!

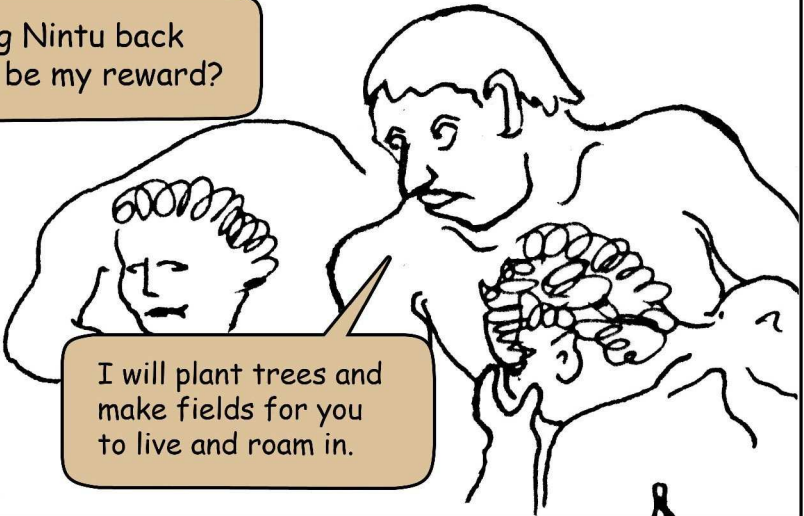


Her disappearance from the scene throws everything into chaos. The great Sumerian gods sit in the dust till the fox comes to their aid.

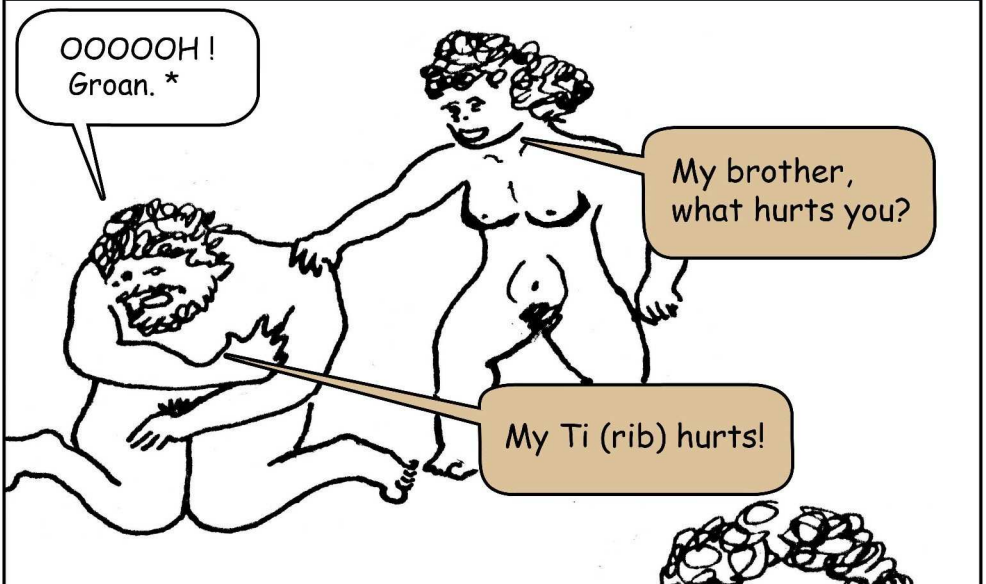
If I bring Nintu back what will be my reward?



I will plant trees and make fields for you to live and roam in.



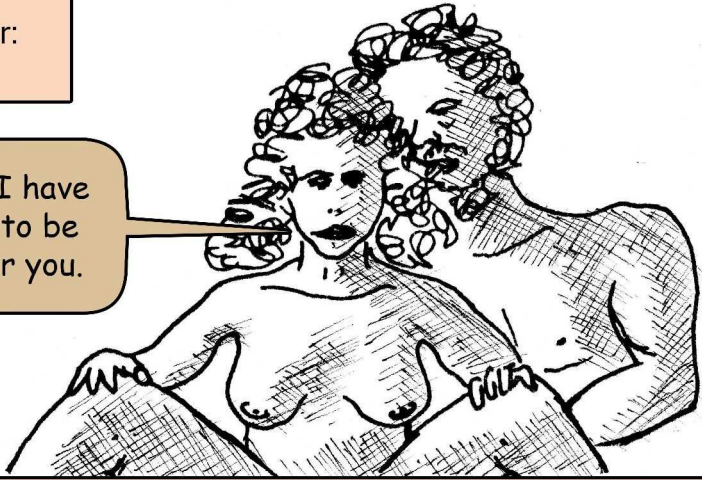
The fox succeeds in persuading the mother goddess to return. Meanwhile Enki has hit upon a way of getting what he wants.



* Expressions not actually found in the Sumerian text.

Nine days later:

Nin-Ti I have
caused to be
born for you.



Enki complains eight times of pains in various parts of his body and each time Nintu 'soothes' the pain in the same way.... and every time the result is a god or goddess whose name is a pun on the Sumerian word for that part of Enki's body supposedly hurt.



O Father Enki, praise !!

The text ends with Nintu defining the status of the new deities and a general vote of thanks to Enki.

PARADISE (2)

A fragment of another Sumerian paradise myth has survived by being incorporated into a bigger work with which we are not here concerned. The author calls this fragment 'The Spell of Enki' and the piece suggests that the breakup of man's initial paradise situation was the result of some difference of opinion between Enlil and Enki.



In line with other Mesopotamian myths it seems likely that Enlil had become fed up with the noise and commotion humans habitually cause and had called Enki to account for having created such misbegotten creatures.

In any case Enki decides to try and resolve his difference with Enlil by sowing incomprehension within the human community

*Then the Lord - the prince - the king,
Father (?) Enki, the Lord of abundance,
Whose commands are trustworthy,
The Lord of wisdom who understands the land,
The leader of the gods, endowed with wisdom,
The Lord of Eridu, changed the speech in their mouths
And brought contention into the speech of man
That until then had been one.*



What do you think of that?

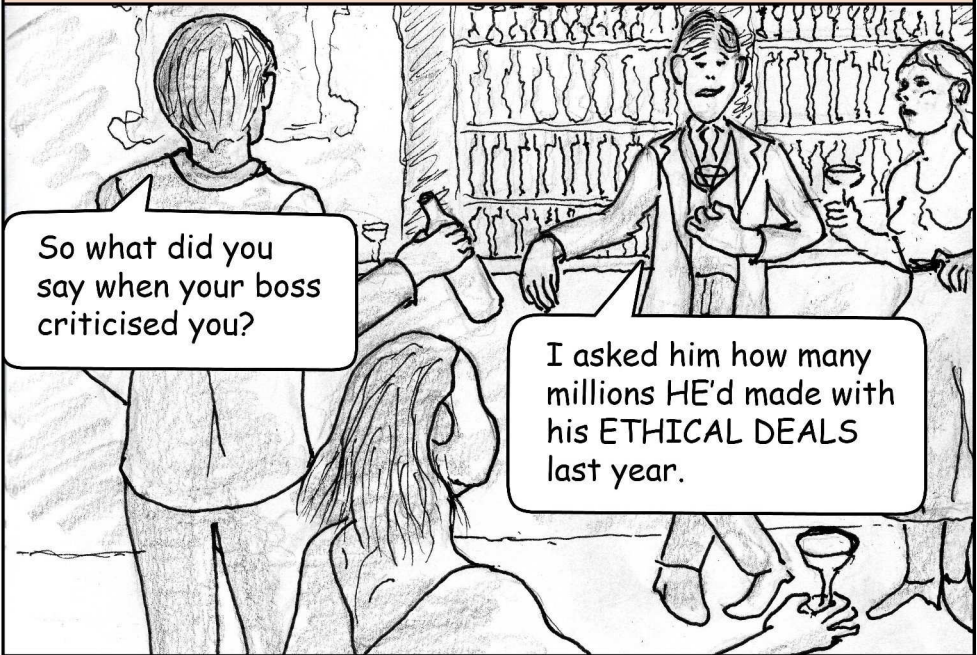


Yes I can certainly see the emphasis on Enki as the cunning god who, in spite of everything, manages to find a way of getting what he wants. But is this cunning administrative wisdom? It's hardly edifying!



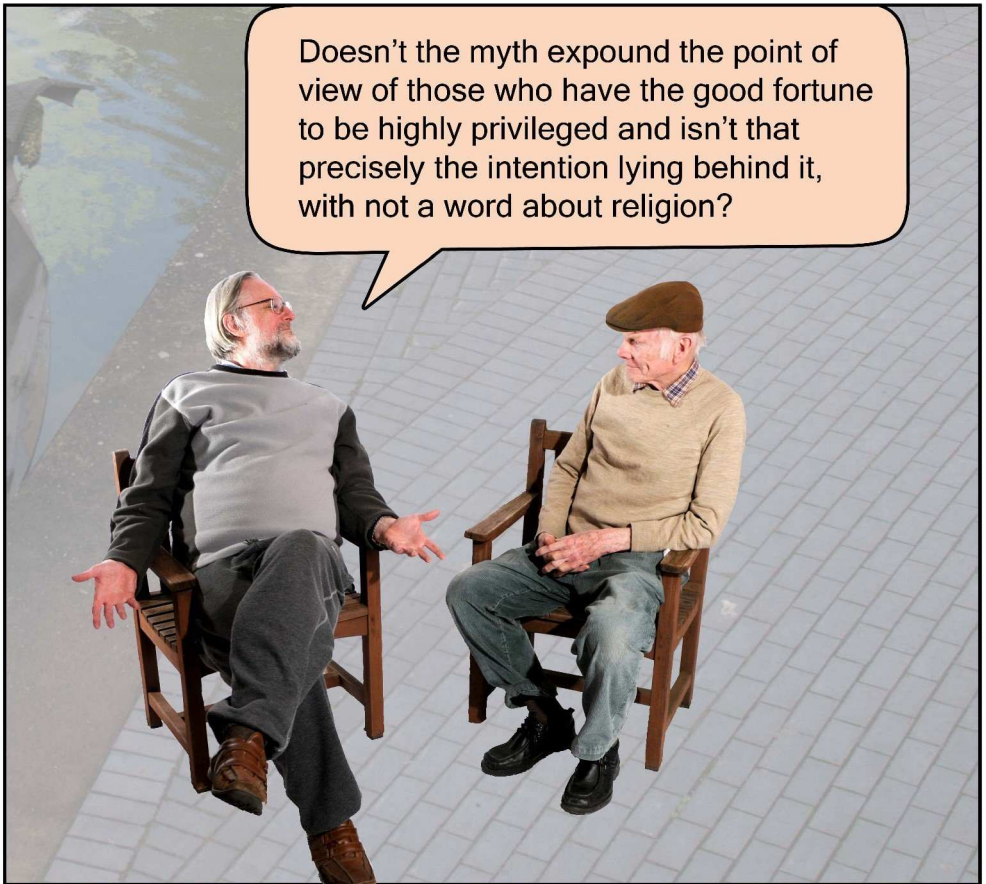
Who said the story was supposed to be edifying?

Doesn't it rather constitute a frank and honest account of the attitude you find in many of today's young high flyers?



So what did you say when your boss criticised you?

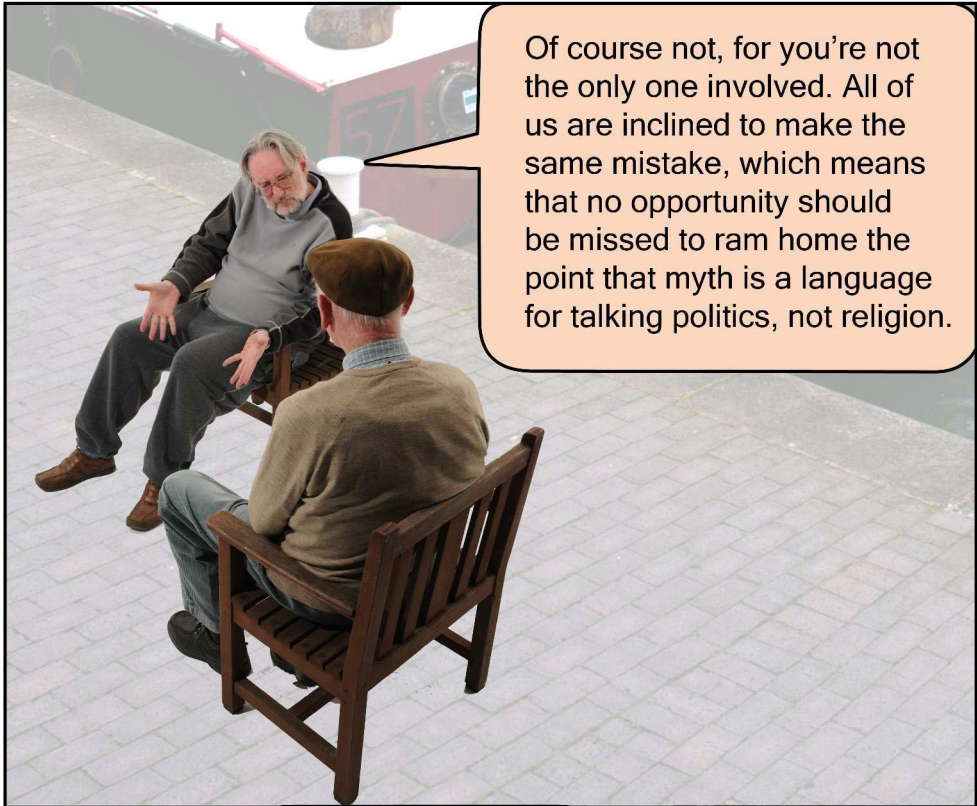
I asked him how many millions HE'd made with his ETHICAL DEALS last year.



Doesn't the myth expound the point of view of those who have the good fortune to be highly privileged and isn't that precisely the intention lying behind it, with not a word about religion?



I can see you're not going to let me forget my error in viewing myth as a religious language!



Of course not, for you're not the only one involved. All of us are inclined to make the same mistake, which means that no opportunity should be missed to ram home the point that myth is a language for talking politics, not religion.



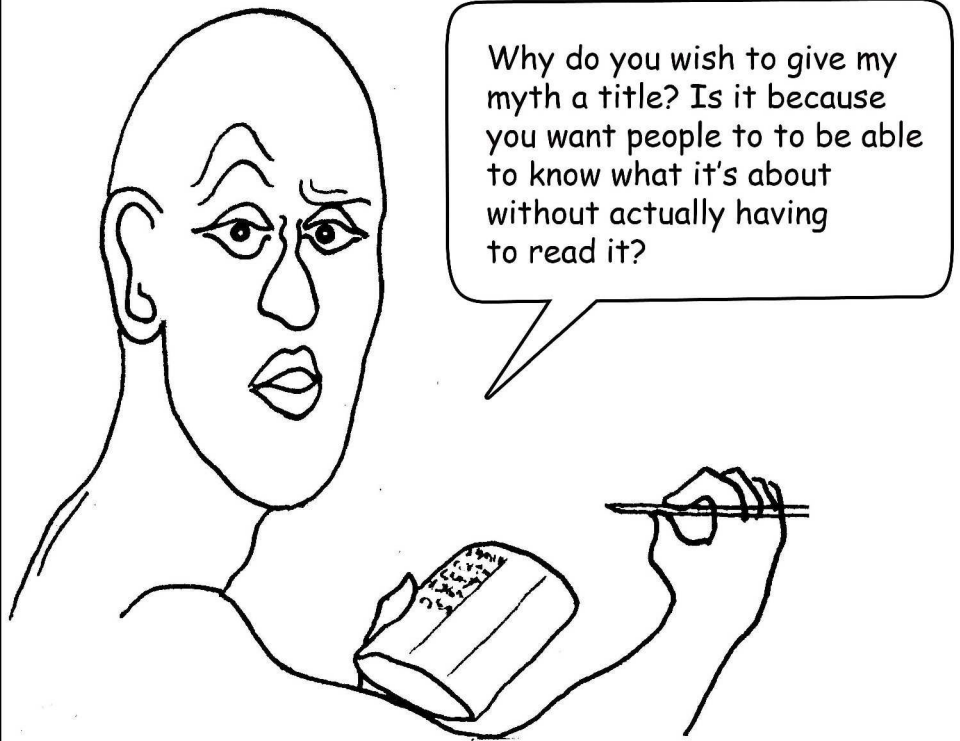
Now, let's look at one of the really great Sumerian myths.

2

The
Creation
of Man

THE CREATION OF MAN FROM CLAY OVER THE ABYSS

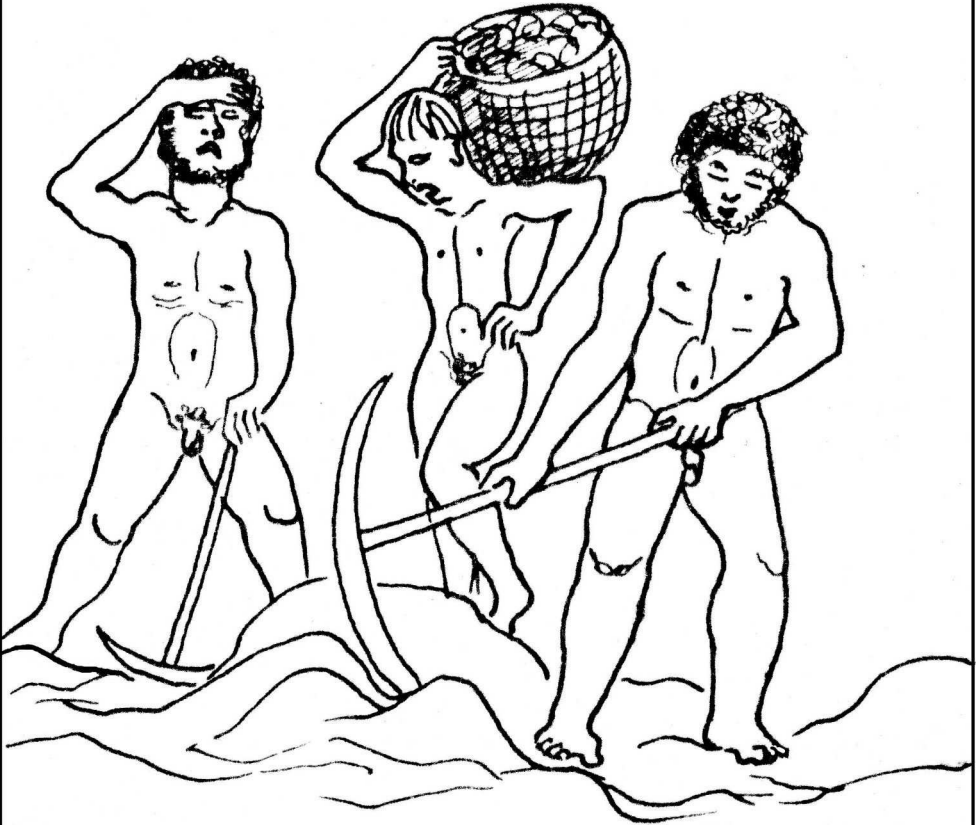
From the title you would expect this myth to deal with how or why man was created. However, as we shall see, it doesn't. The Sumerians gave no titles to their works. They simply called them by their first lines.



Unfortunately, as far as I am aware, no edited text of this myth exists so we will have to be content with summaries made by scholars and their translations of scattered passages.

In point of fact, it would seem that this early Sumerian myth seeks to come to terms with the phenomena of sickness and death: serious scourges of every civilisation.

In days of yore, when the sky had been separated from the earth ...



... the gods had to work for their living with pickaxe and sickle - and how they hated it!

They bring their problems to Enki, The Wise, but he is fast asleep and seems never to wake up.

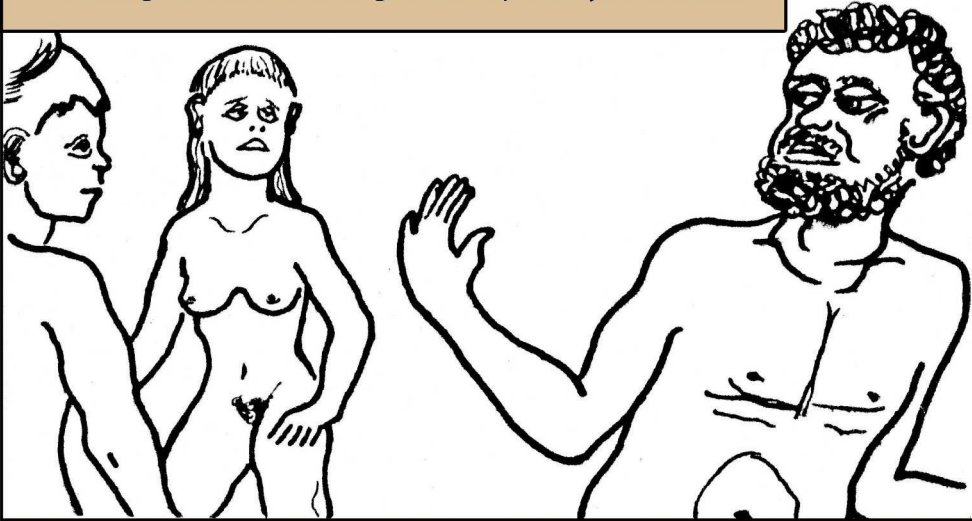


However, Namu, Enki's mother, and the goddess of the watery deep, takes up their case.



Enki first contemplates the problem and then sets to work ...

leading forth the host of good and princely fashioners.

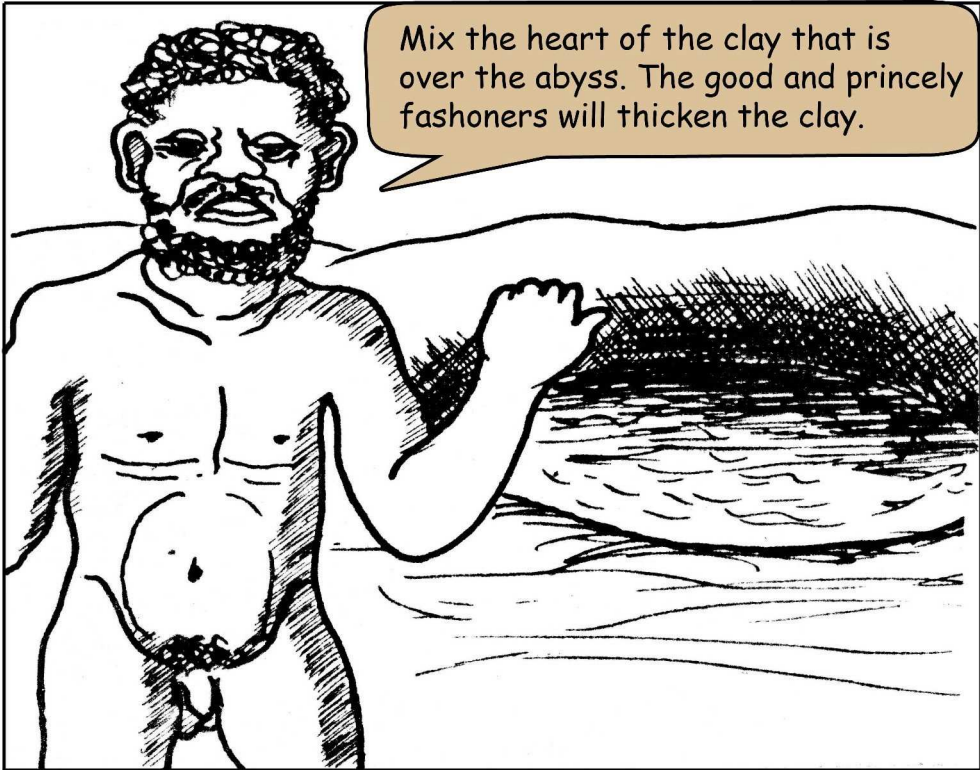


He organises everyone for the job giving them their instructions.



Mother you have only to utter the name of a creature and it exists. Put upon this new creature the image of the gods.

Mix the heart of the clay that is over the abyss. The good and princely fashioners will thicken the clay.

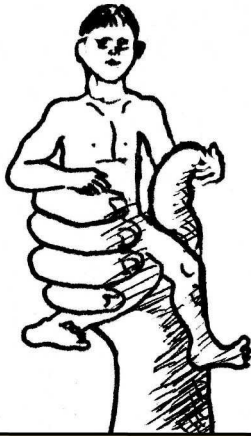


Nintu* will work above you; the goddess of birth will assist you during your fashioning.

* In the text the name of the mother goddess is given as Ninmah but we'll stick with Nintu.



Eventually the new creature; the personal servant of the gods, comes off the production line.



Mother, decree the newborn's fate. Nintu will imprint upon it the form of the gods. It is man!

To celebrate the occasion Enki holds a feast in honour of Namu and Nintu.



All the gods and goddesses are invited and congratulate Enki on his ingenuity, everyone becoming very drunk in the process.



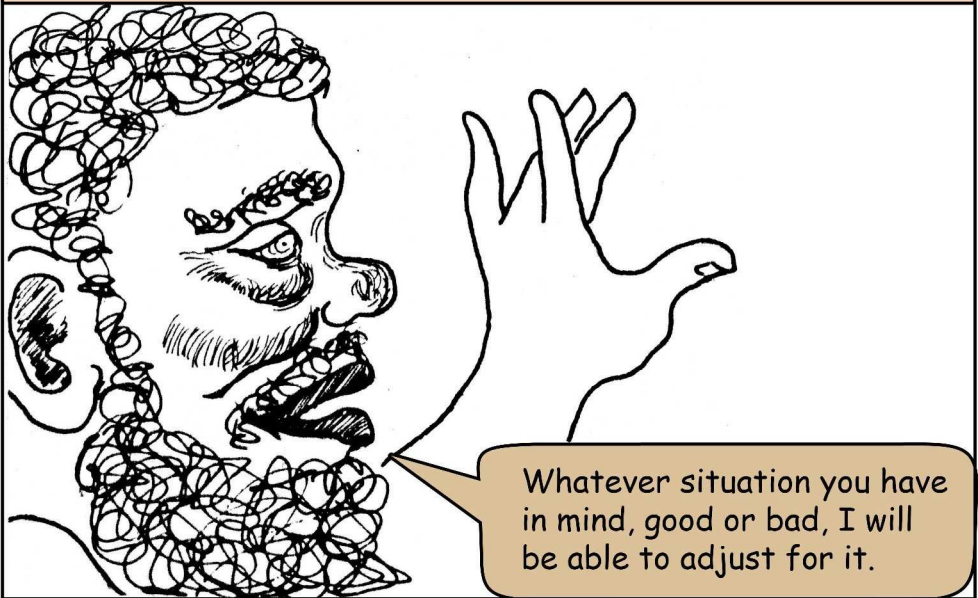
As Enki and Nintu drink much beer their hearts became elated.





If I like I can
make a man's lot
good or bad!

Nintu is extremely brownd off by all the praise heaped on Enki and determined to bring him down a peg. She challenges him to pit his ingenuity against hers. She will create the most way-out, miscreated creatures imaginable while he will have to find a slot for them in society. Enki accepts her challenge without hesitation.



Whatever situation you have
in mind, good or bad, I will
be able to adjust for it.

So Nintu takes some clay and with it models a series of human freaks. The first is a woman who is sterile.

The (.....) she made into a woman who can give no birth.

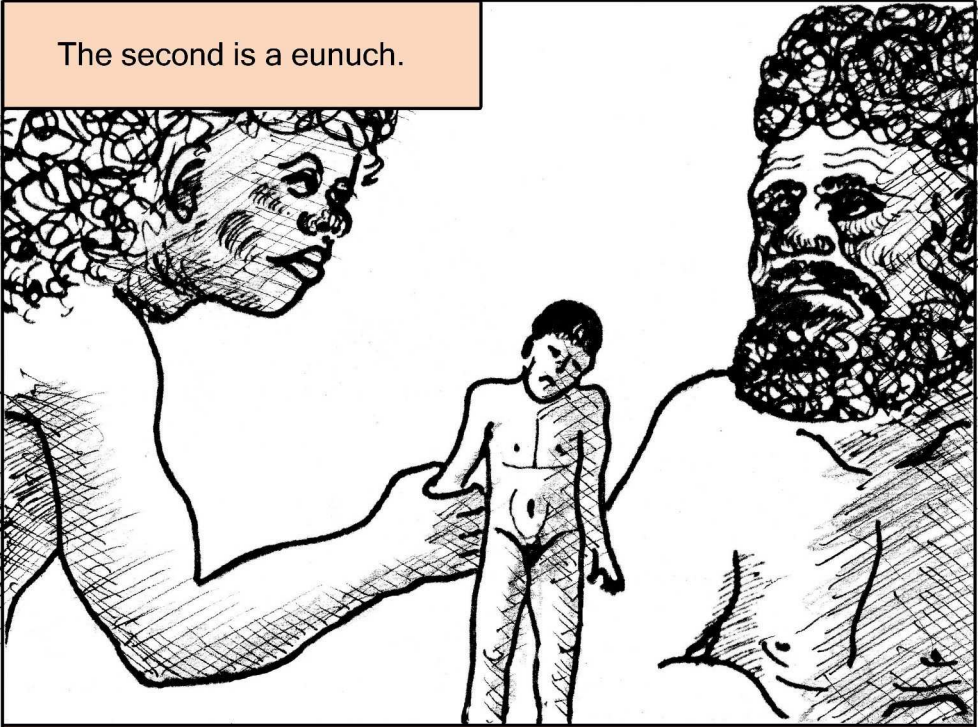


Enki deftly counters this move by placing the creature as a lady in waiting to the Queen.

Enki, upon seeing her, decreed her fate and destined her to be stationed in the women's house.



The second is a eunuch.

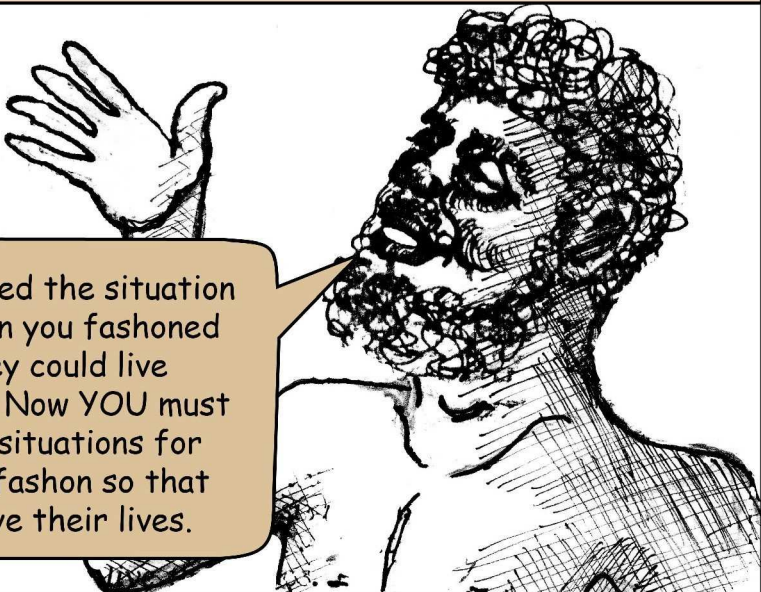


Enki parries this by making the creature the King's steward.

*Enki, upon seeing it
destined it to stand
before the King.*



Thus each time Nintu creates a freak Enki cunningly finds a place in society where it can live its life. Now Enki suggests to Nintu that they swap roles...



I determined the situation for the men you fashioned so that they could live their lives. Now YOU must determine situations for the men I fashion so that they can live their lives.

Enki begins his turn by creating a decrepit old man named My-birth-was-long-ago. His eyes are diseased, his life is ebbing, his liver and heart give him pain, his hands tremble and he can neither stand nor bend at the knees.



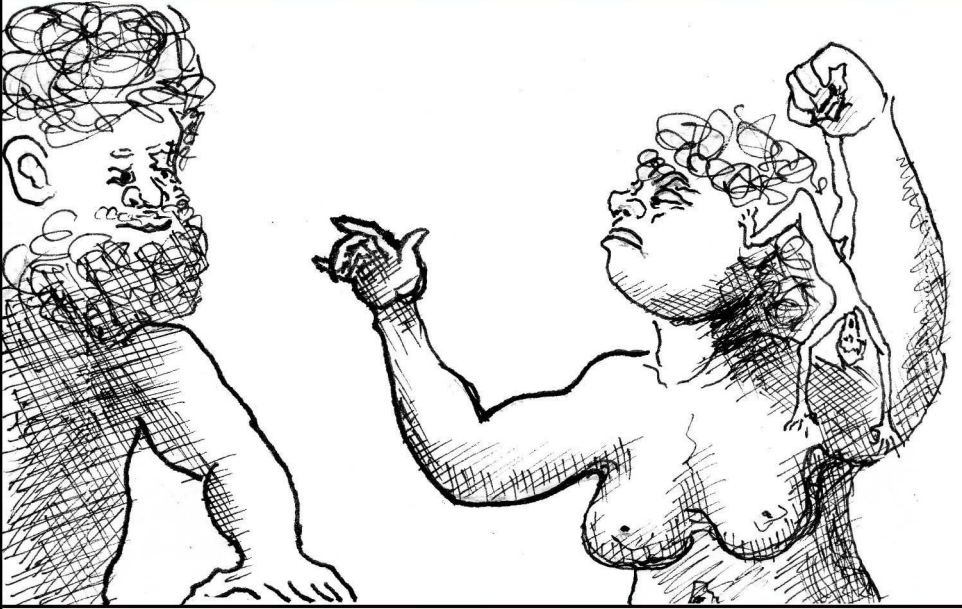
Nintu proves to be no match for Enki. She approaches the creature and asks it a question but it cannot answer.



She offers it a bit of bread she had been eating but it is too feeble to stretch out and take it.



Angrily she turns on Enki and claims he is a cheat, for the creature he has fashioned is not a real, live human being.



But Enki tauntingly reminds her how he coped with everything she threw at him.



The myth continues but it is fragmentary and, largely, unintelligible. However, at one point Nintu puts a curse on Enki.



As a result of which the Mesopotamian god of fresh water is forced to remain underground.

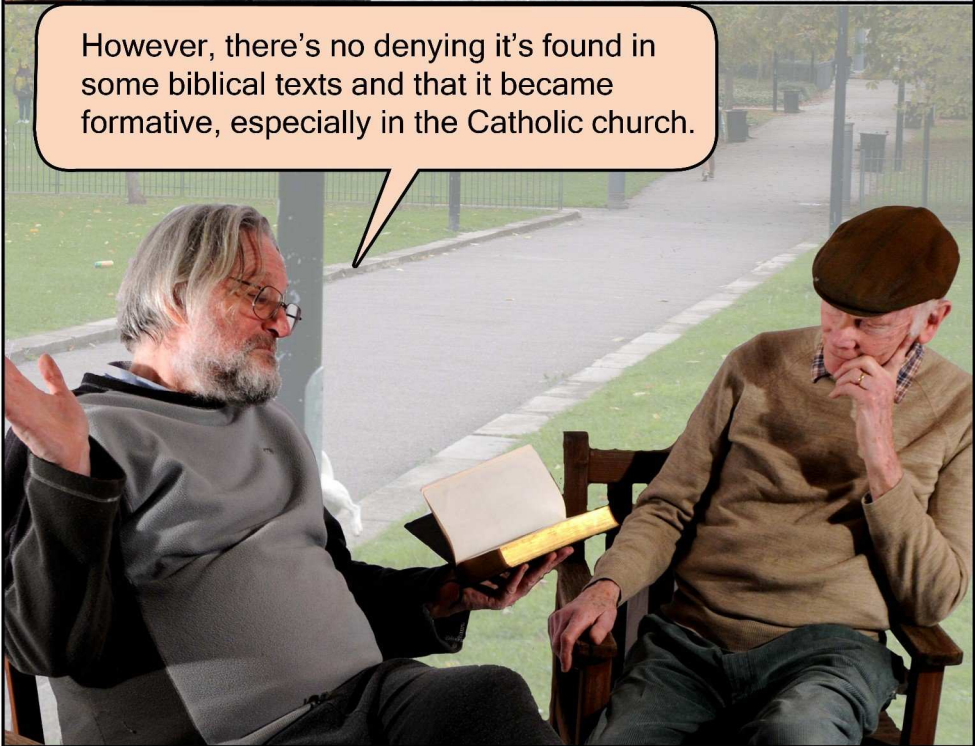
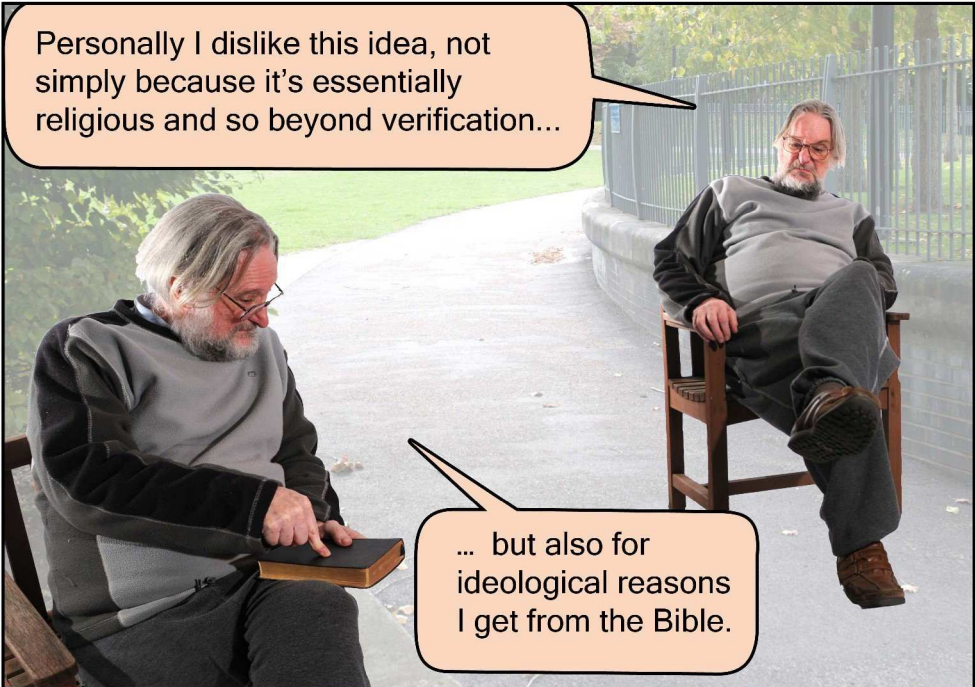


Yes, I can see it's a good story which, once again, glorifies Enki's administrative talent but why do you call it great?

I call it great because it contains the first account of what was to become the central tenet in conservative theology.

I'm talking about **the imago dei**: the belief that the characteristic which distinguishes humans from other creatures (call it wisdom or intelligence or whatever) is a **Godly** attribute which not only justifies authority but sanctifies it as well.





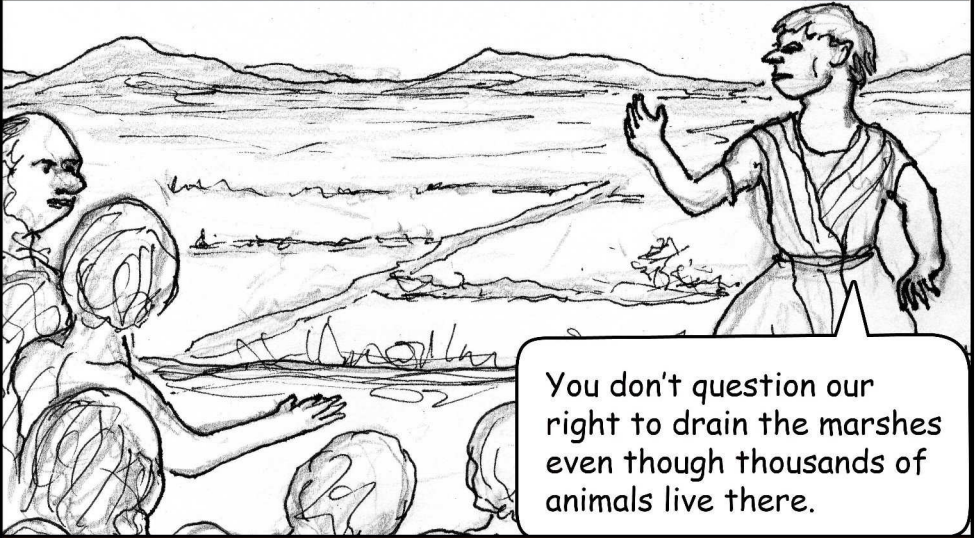
So this time you're admitting the myth has a religious focus!



No! No! the myth's focus is still clearly ideological.



It implies, experientially, that just as humans, because they are intelligent beings, rightly have authority over the rest of creation...



You don't question our right to drain the marshes even though thousands of animals live there.

... so administrators, because they are unusually wise, rightly have authority over the general public.

So, given my undoubted superior intelligence and training, how come you question my right to tell you where to live and what to do?





The only thing that's different here is that **the imago dei** - a superstitious belief which comes from reading the language of myth too literally - has been added to shore up and justify this principle of conservative authority.

But let's leave that for the moment, for we shall be obliged to come back to it later, and let's take a look at another great Mesopotamian myth.

3

Adapa
the
Mesopotamian
Adam

ADAPA

This myth seeks to come to terms with man's standing in the universe. It's an Akkadian text which dates from the fourteenth century BCE, some time after these Babylonians had taken over the Sumerian civilisation. Adapa is Akkadian for Man which makes this figure the representational forerunner of the Hebrew Adam.

In those days Enki created him (Adapa),
the sage from Eridu, as a prototype of men.
To him he had given wisdom; but he had
not given him eternal life.*

* The text actually uses the Akkadian name Ea but we will stick with Enki.

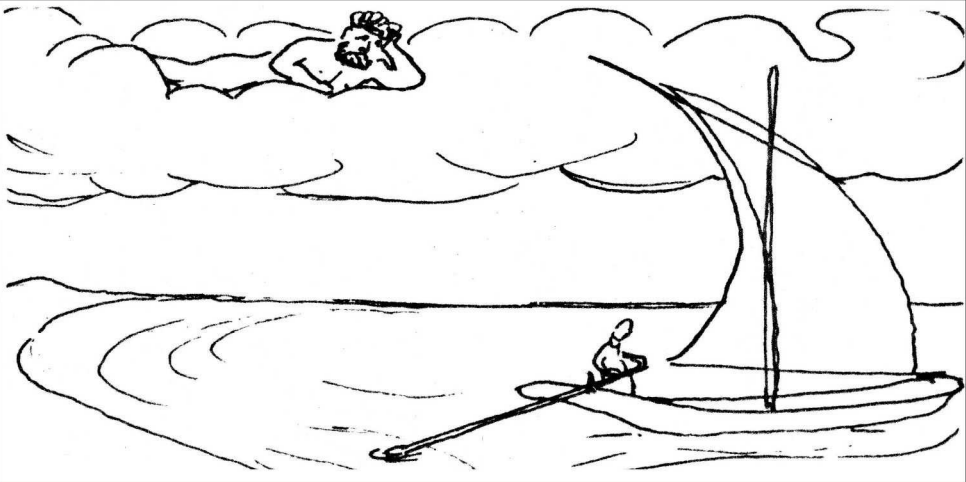


As we know, prior to Adapa's appearance on the scene it had been the gods' thankless task to provide themselves with food, drink and lodging. However, Enki had solved this problem by creating man.

If Enki endows Adapa with some of his godly wisdom it's only so that Adapa can run creation on the gods' behalf, operating as its manager or priestly-administrator.



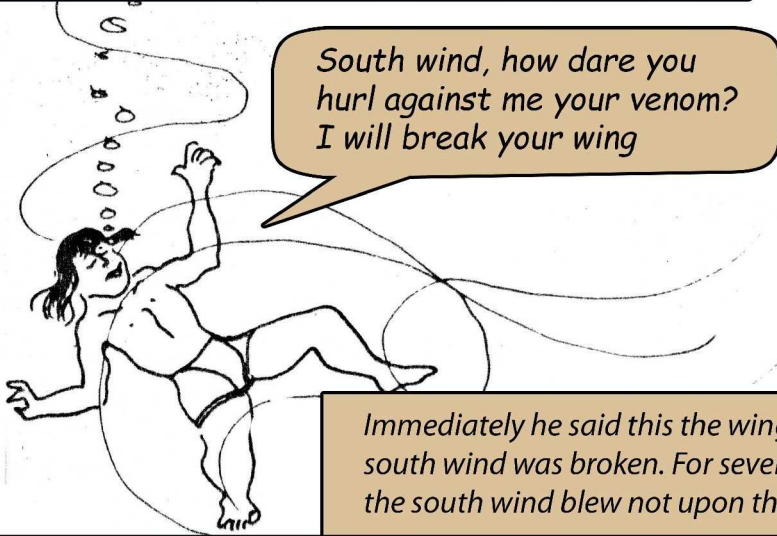
The sage, whose command no-one can vitiate, he is the capable, the most wise among the Anunnaki; the blameless, the clean of hands, the anointment priest, the observer of rites. He provides bread and water daily for Eridu. He arranges the offering table with clean hands.



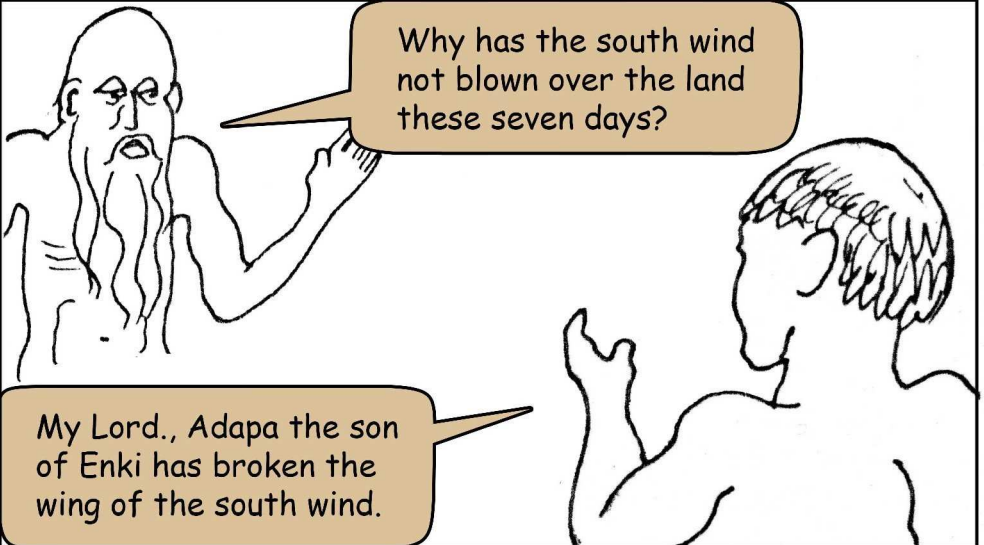
In those days, while Enki rested upon a couch, Adapa, the one of Eridu, boarded the boat at the Quay of the New Moon and when the wind arose the boat sailed off on the wide sea with Adapa steering it with an oar.

However, Adapa's boat gets into difficulties and sinks.

The south wind blew and sank him, causing him to go down to the home of the fish.



The disappearance of the south wind is noticed in heaven and An calls in his servants to find out what's happened.



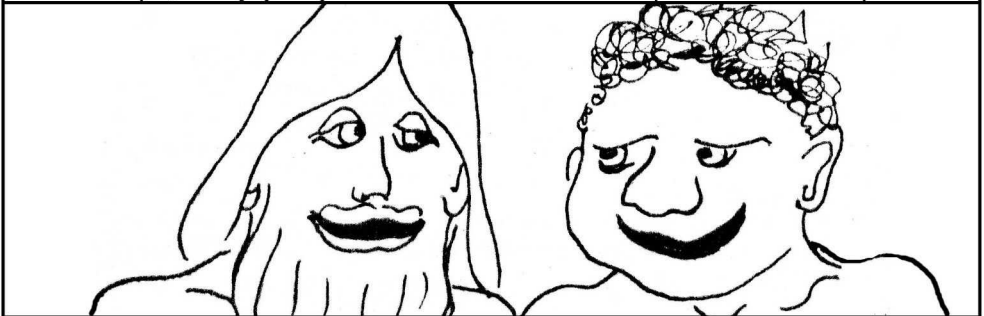
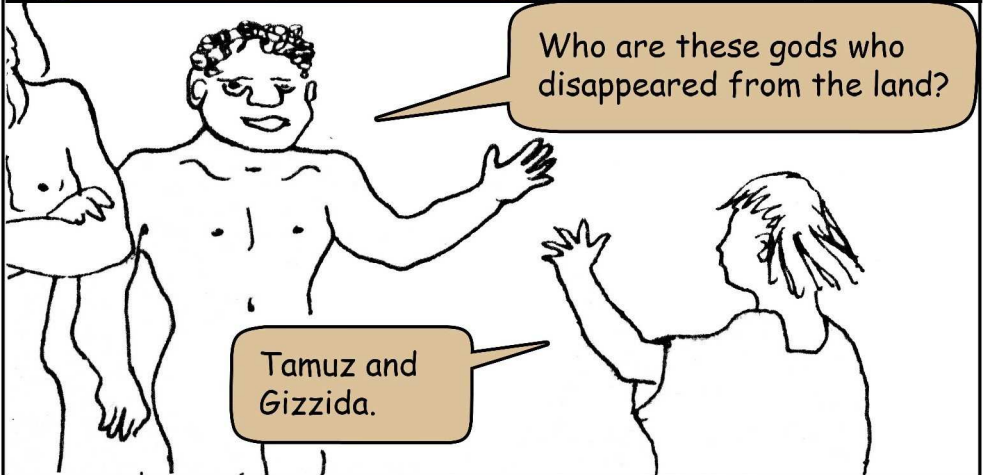


Enki soon learns that his protege is to be interrogated and, fearing that An may try to get rid of him, he coaches Adapa in how to present his case.



He tells him to put on mourning clothes and make his hair disheveled, explaining how he can use this disguise to win over the two gods guarding An's door. He further counsels Adapa to refuse all refreshment in case it is poisoned, but to graciously accept offers of clothes and toiletries.

When Adapa had ascended to heaven and approached An's front door he found Tammuz and Gizzida standing there.



As Adapa drew near before king An, An saw him and called out:



Come now, Adapa.
Why did you break the
south wind's wing?

My Lord I was catching fish
for the household of my master
in the middle of the sea.
The sea was like a mirror...

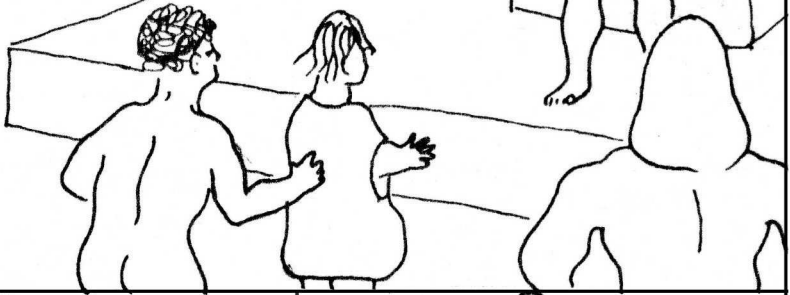


... but the south wind came and
sank me and caused me to go
down to the home of the fishes
and in the wrath of my heart
I cursed the south wind.

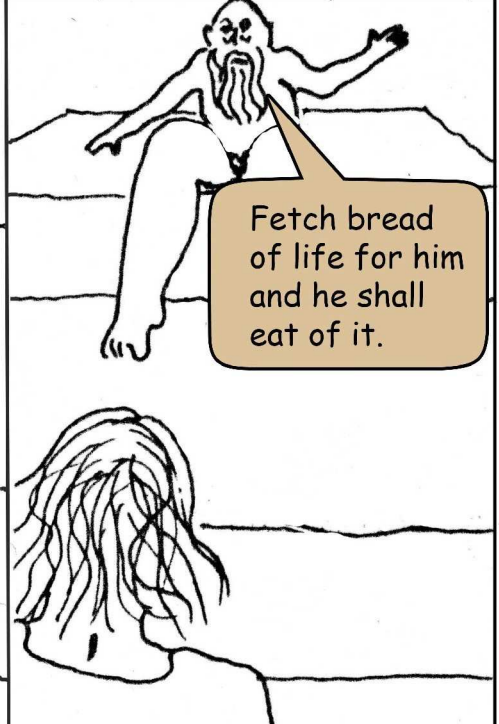
*Gizzida and Tammuz spoke up at his side
and addressed a good word to An.*

Adapa's heart stood still as judgement was given.

Why did Enki disclose the heart of heaven and earth to a worthless human, causing him to become distinguished and making a name for him?

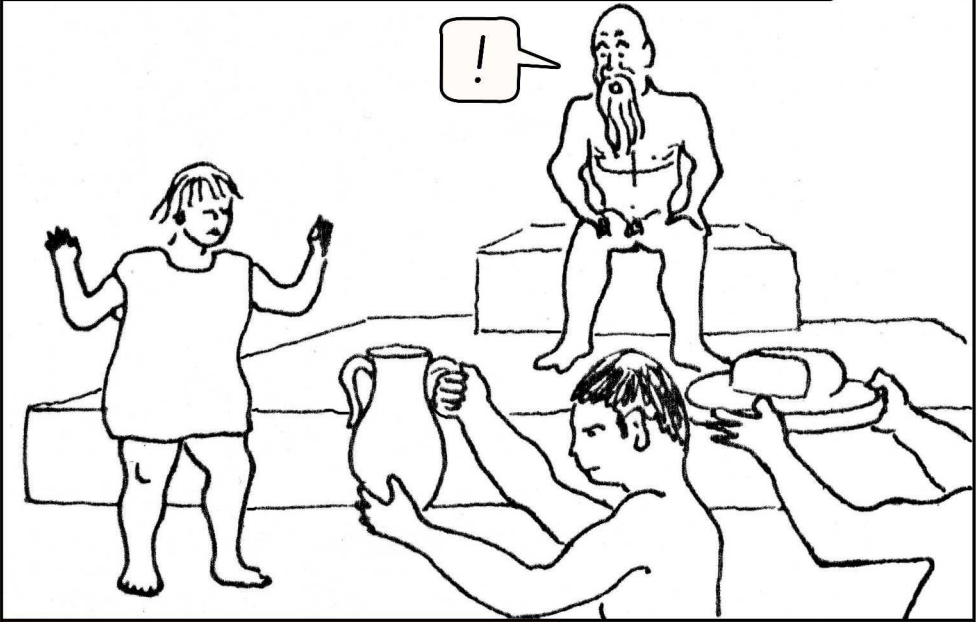


As for us
what shall we
do about him?

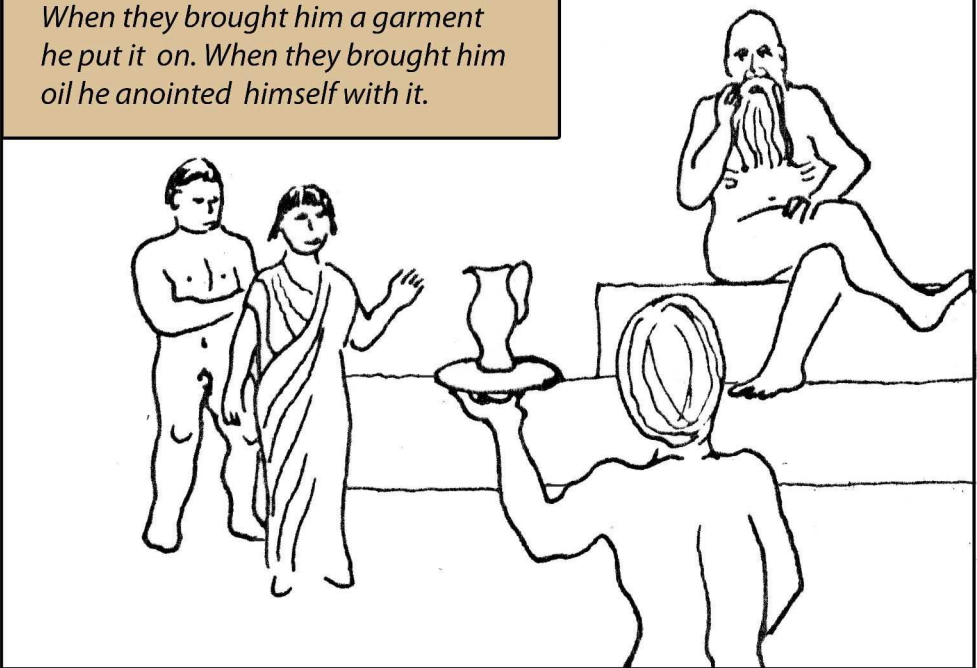


Fetch bread
of life for him
and he shall
eat of it.

When they brought to him the bread of life he did not eat.
When they brought to him the water of life he did not drink.



When they brought him a garment
he put it on. When they brought him
oil he anointed himself with it.



As An looked at Adapa he laughed at him.

Come now, Adapa Why did you neither eat nor drink? You shall not have eternal life. Ah! peverse mankind!

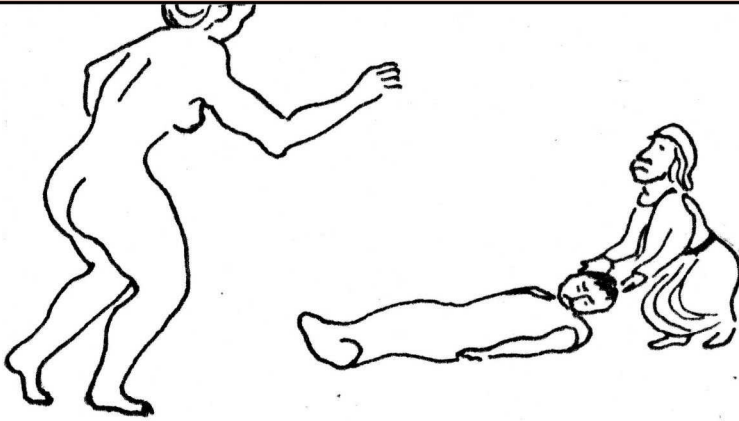


Enki, my master, commanded me 'You shall not eat. You shall not drink.'

Take him away and return him to his earth!



As Adapa has unwittingly refused the gift of immortality, humans become liable to sickness and death.



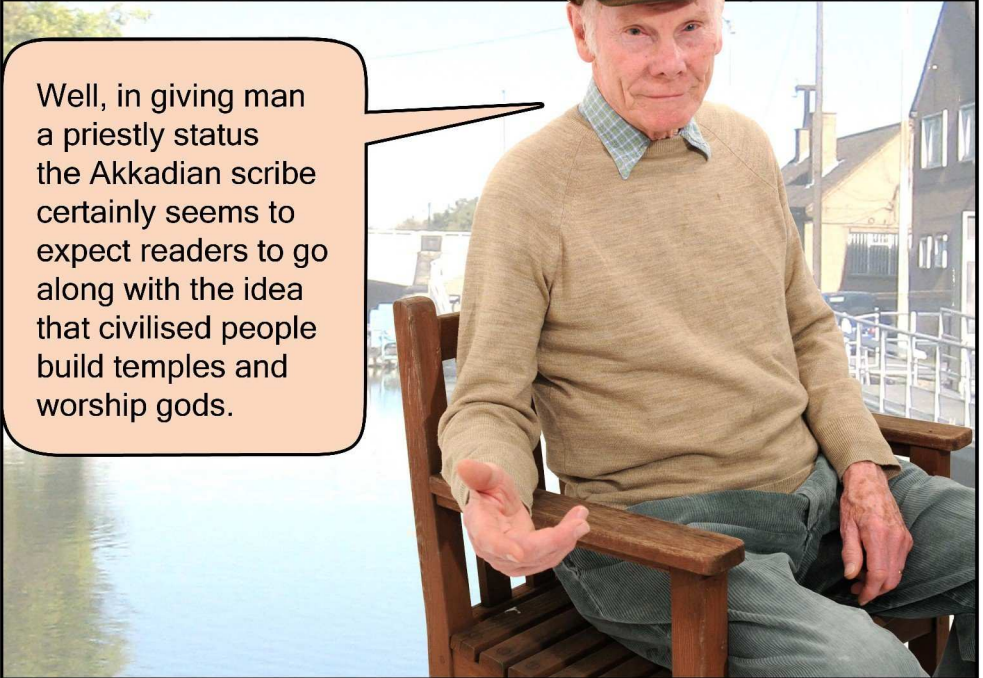
Concerning Adapa's descendants: The illness he brought upon mankind, the disease he brought upon the bodies of men will be healed by Ninkappar. Let illness be lifted, let disease turn aside.

The end of the tablet is broken. However, there remain a few words decipherable from something that looks like a curse.


*Upon this (...) let horror fall.
Let him in sweet sleep not lie down.
(...) ... joy of human hearts.*




I don't want to labour the point but do you think there's sufficient material in this text to make a religious reading viable?




Well, in giving man a priestly status the Akkadian scribe certainly seems to expect readers to go along with the idea that civilised people build temples and worship gods.




Yes, that's undoubtedly true and I appreciate your inference that the same sort of behaviour might not necessarily be expected of sub-human foreigners!



Great feeling, peeing on their gods!



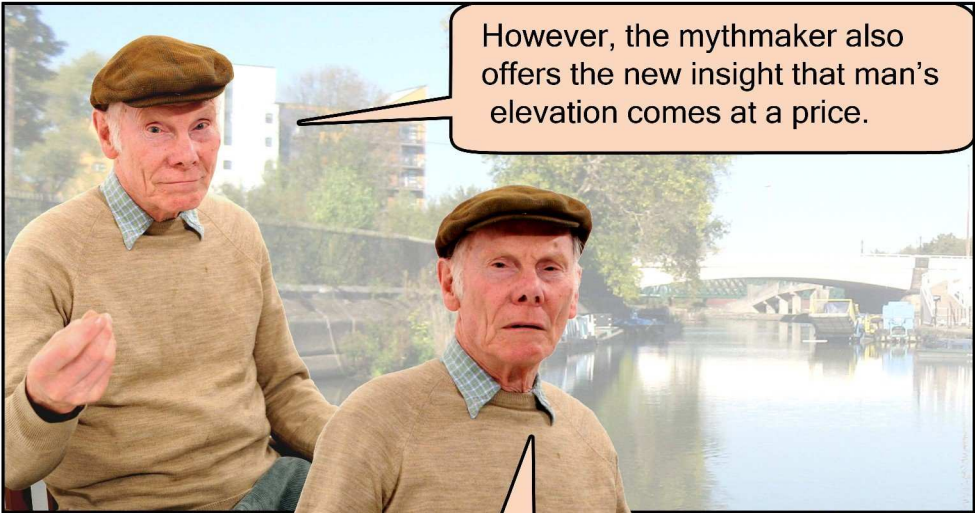
However, that was not really my question. We can all agree the myth **assumes** civilised religion but is that what it's on about?



Well clearly it advocates the same ideas we found in the previous myth.

Its central message, which I grant you is basically political, is that since only humans have been given godly intelligence...

... this gives them unchallengeable authority over the created order.



However, the mythmaker also offers the new insight that man's elevation comes at a price.



For humans have not been given immortality along with godly intelligence, as the writer thinks should have been the case. And this makes them worry about death and disease.

This new point about man's fear of death may well be religious, don't you think?

Yes we will have to unpack the story rather carefully to find out whether your suspicion is correct!

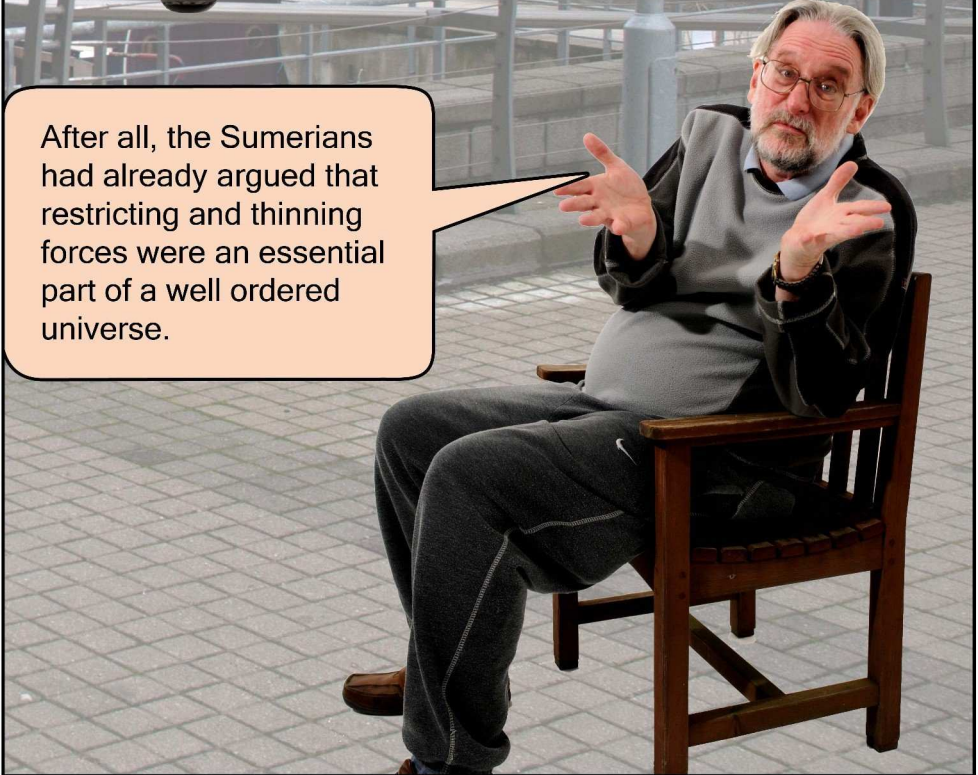


As you say, the myth suggests humans became vulnerable to sickness and death because they weren't granted immortality.

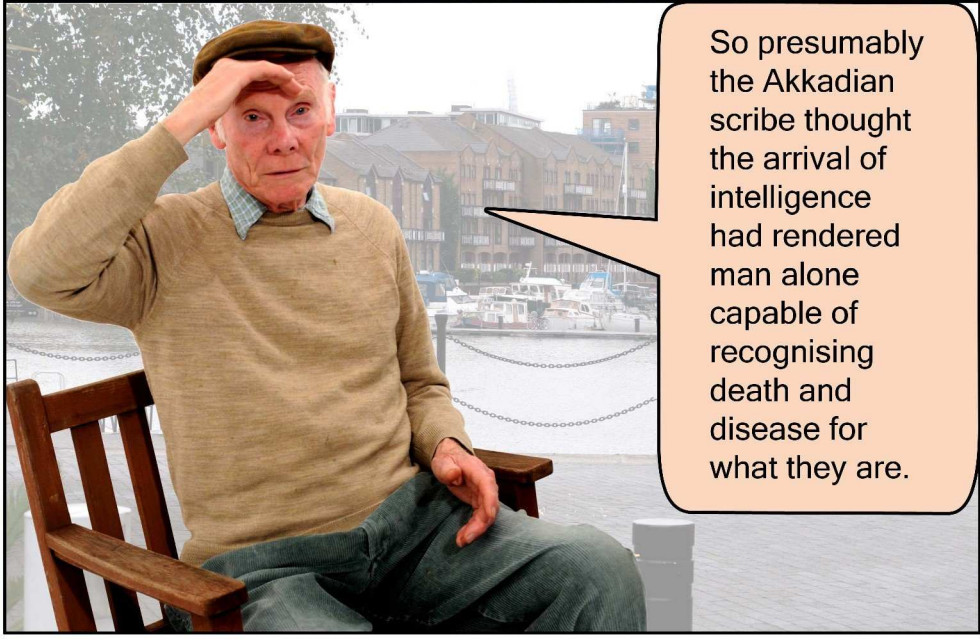
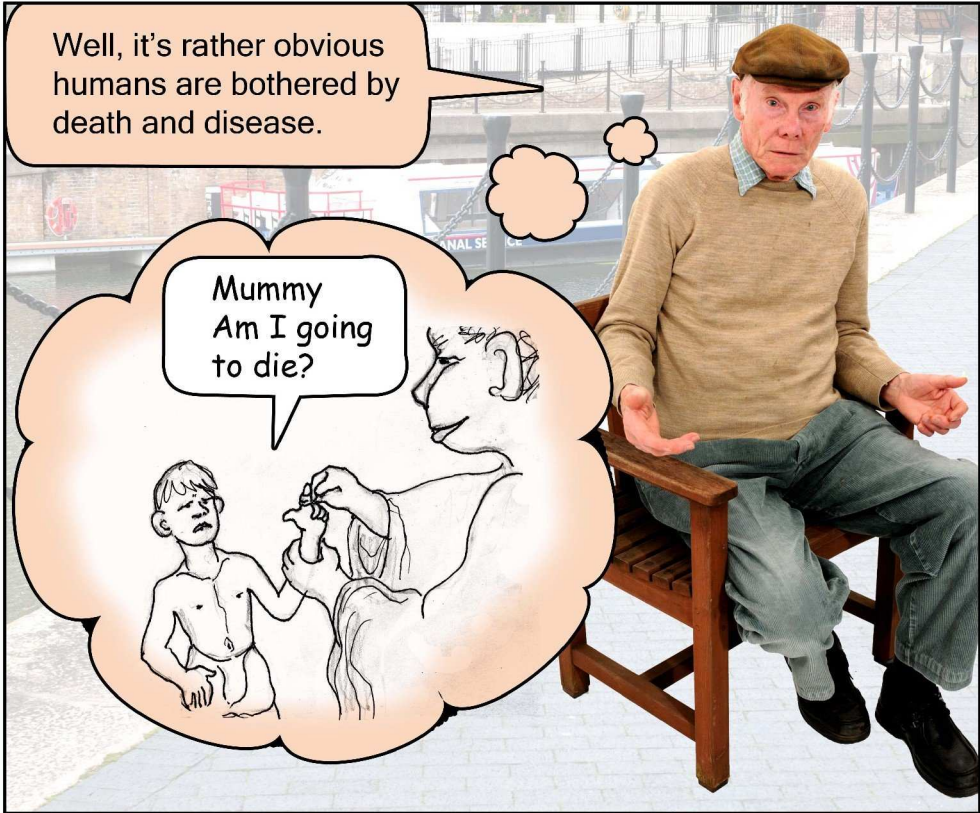




However, it doesn't claim sickness and death are a problem for other mortal creatures so why should humans find them such a bother?



After all, the Sumerians had already argued that restricting and thinning forces were an essential part of a well ordered universe.






So, you see the myth as being concerned with two connected awarenesses.


First a realisation that because of our intelligence we are in a position to dominate creation...

... and second a realisation that this same intelligence has exposed us to a crippling fear of death and disease?

Yes, that's about it.




If the scribe didn't actually say, that our fear of death is to be put down to our intelligence, it's because he had no psychological vocabulary, don't you think?



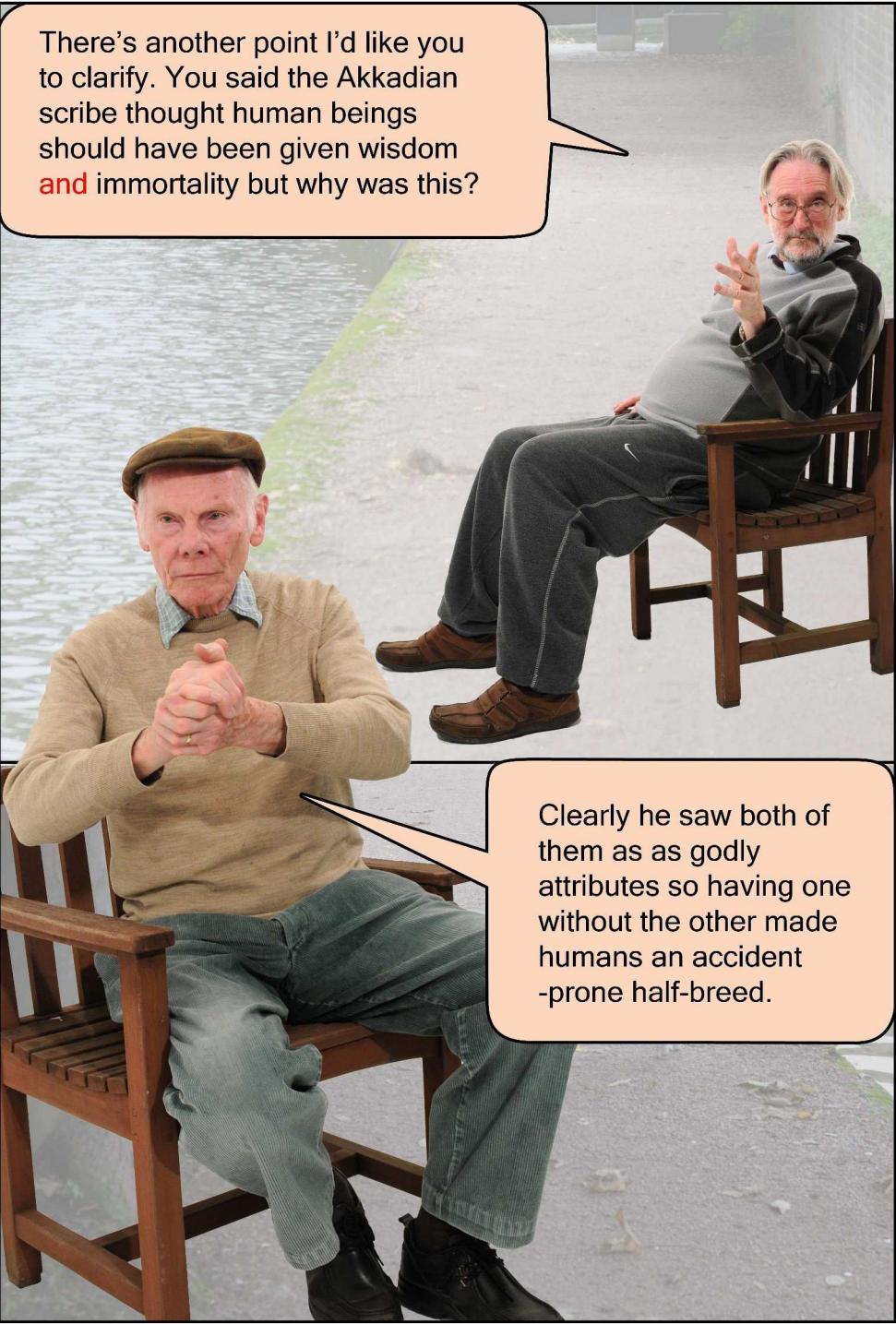
You mean that just as he had no word for a 'thought' he had no words either for an 'awareness' or a 'realisation'?



Precisely!

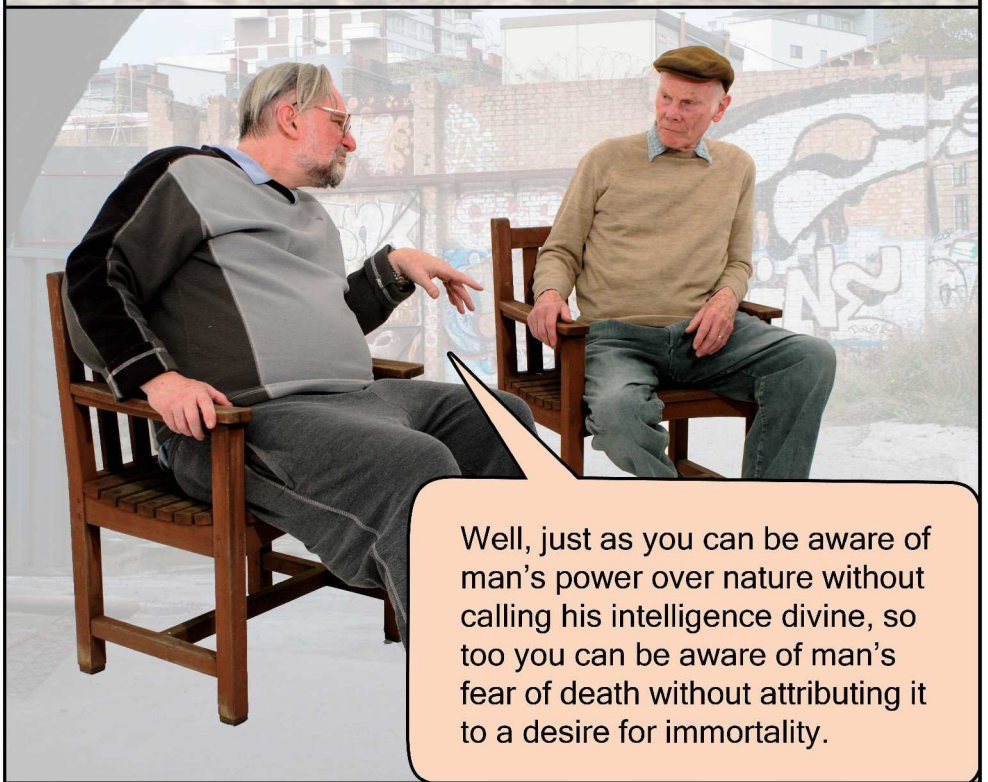
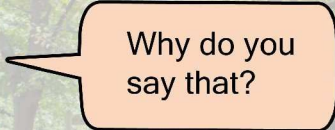


Yes I can go along with that.




There's another point I'd like you to clarify. You said the Akkadian scribe thought human beings should have been given wisdom **and** immortality but why was this?

Clearly he saw both of them as as godly attributes so having one without the other made humans an accident-prone half-breed.

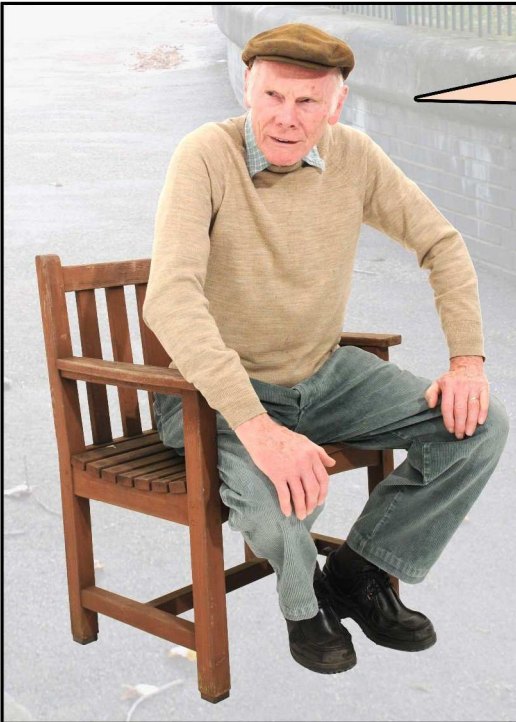






Isn't the Bible concerned about immortality?

Not really. All the other traditions in the ancient Near East are full of it but the Bible has little time for such nonsense!



You amaze me. We shall have to keep this question in mind when we come to examine the Bible itself.




Absolutely. However, for the moment let's look at what we've got here in this Mesopotamian myth.

Clearly it talks about our awareness of our intelligence and mortality but is there anything political or religious in such an awareness?



There's nothing religious in a simple awareness - unless you're talking about an awareness of God.





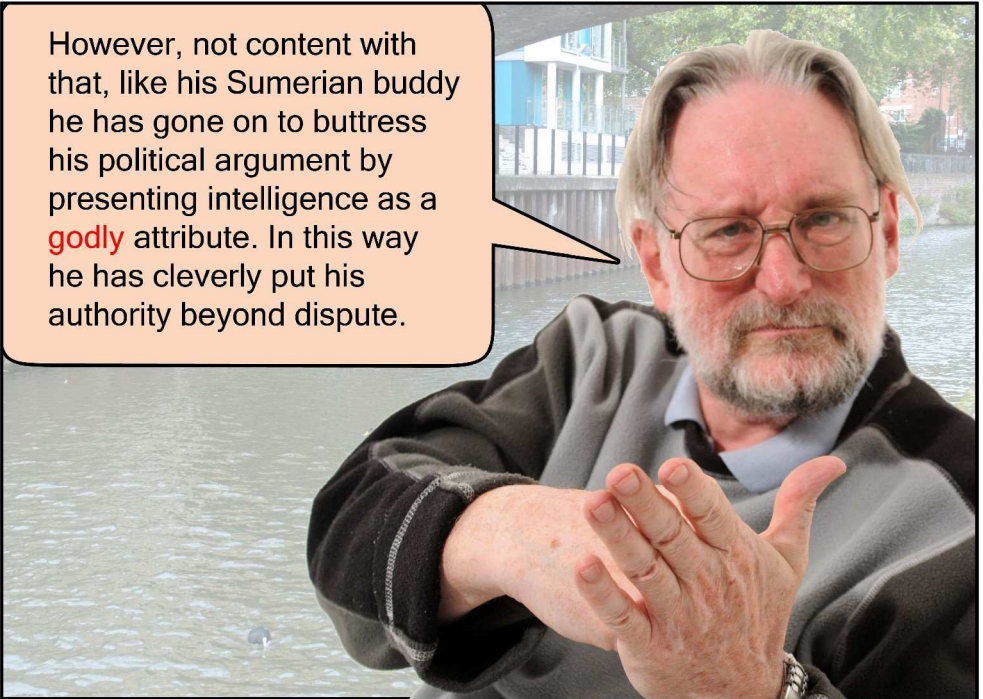
OK, but in choosing to view human intelligence bureaucratically - as administrative nous - the Akkadian scribe has deliberately politicised the concept so as to justify dominance and privilege.

So he has!

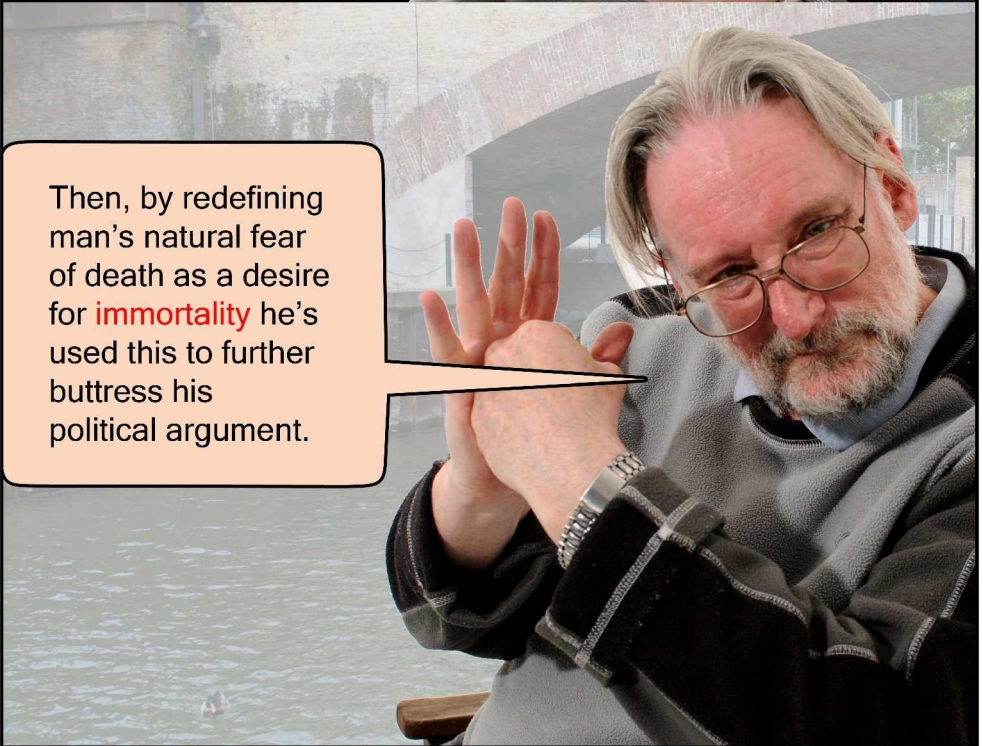
In doing this he has added a conservative colour to the text as happened too in the case of the Sumerian creation myth.

True!

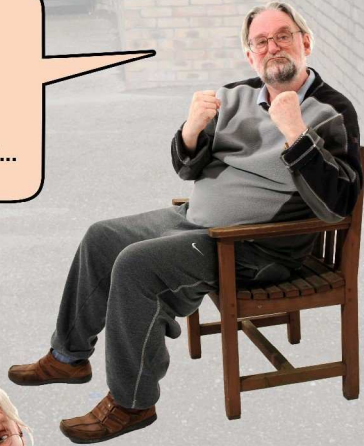
However, not content with that, like his Sumerian buddy he has gone on to buttress his political argument by presenting intelligence as a **godly** attribute. In this way he has cleverly put his authority beyond dispute.



Then, by redefining man's natural fear of death as a desire for **immortality** he's used this to further buttress his political argument.



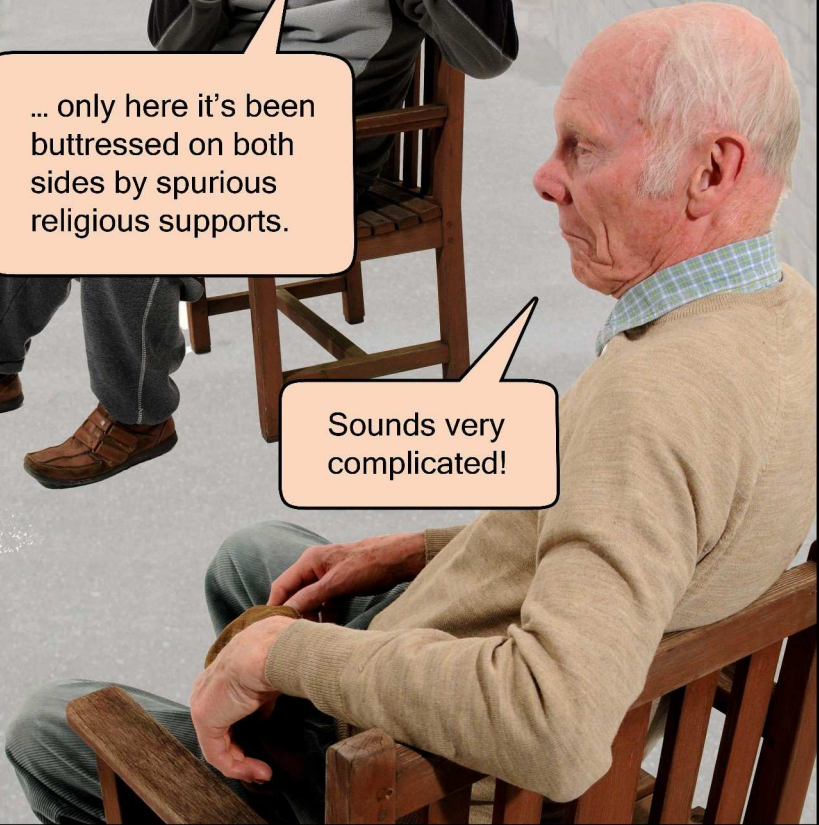
In short, all we have once again is the same old Sumerian political argument justifying conservative authority...



... only here it's been buttressed on both sides by spurious religious supports.



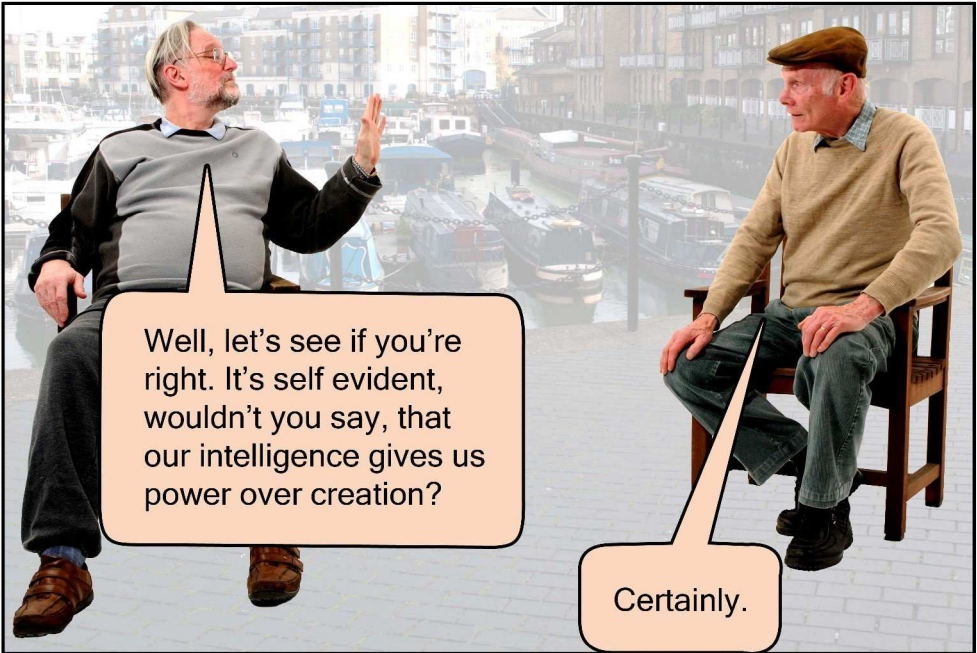
Sounds very complicated!



True, adding religious supports to ideological arguments is a complicated business. However, writers don't employ such tactics to increase the reasonableness of their case. They do so simply to appeal to peoples' 'civilisational' herd-instincts.



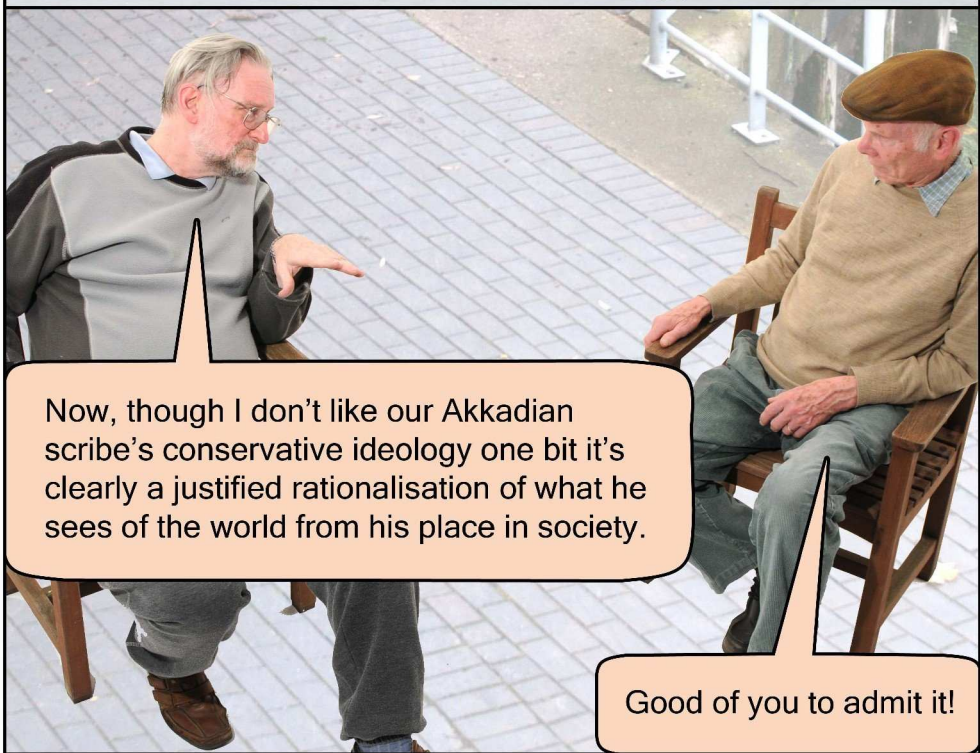
You're going a bit over the top in calling religion a 'herd instinct'!





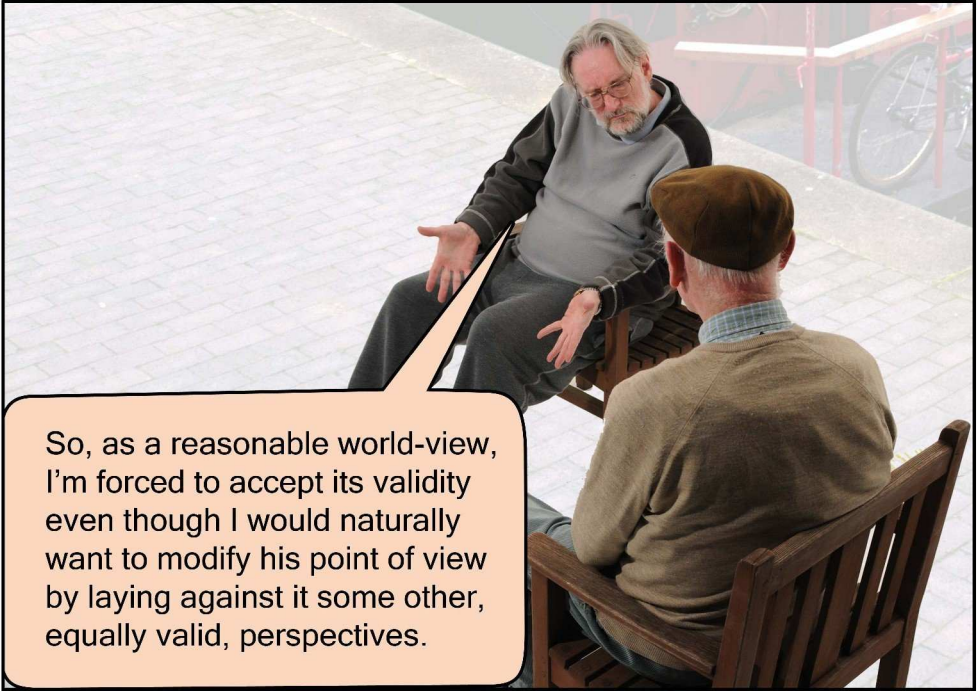
So we must pronounce these two awarenesses as valid and well-seen, don't you think?

So far so good!

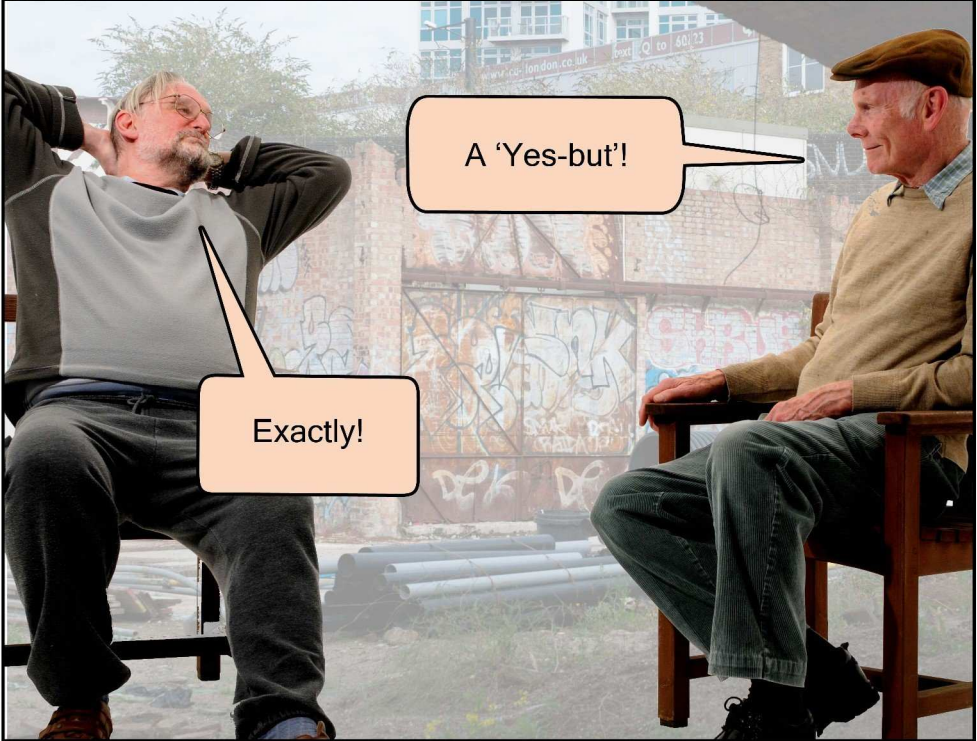


Now, though I don't like our Akkadian scribe's conservative ideology one bit it's clearly a justified rationalisation of what he sees of the world from his place in society.

Good of you to admit it!

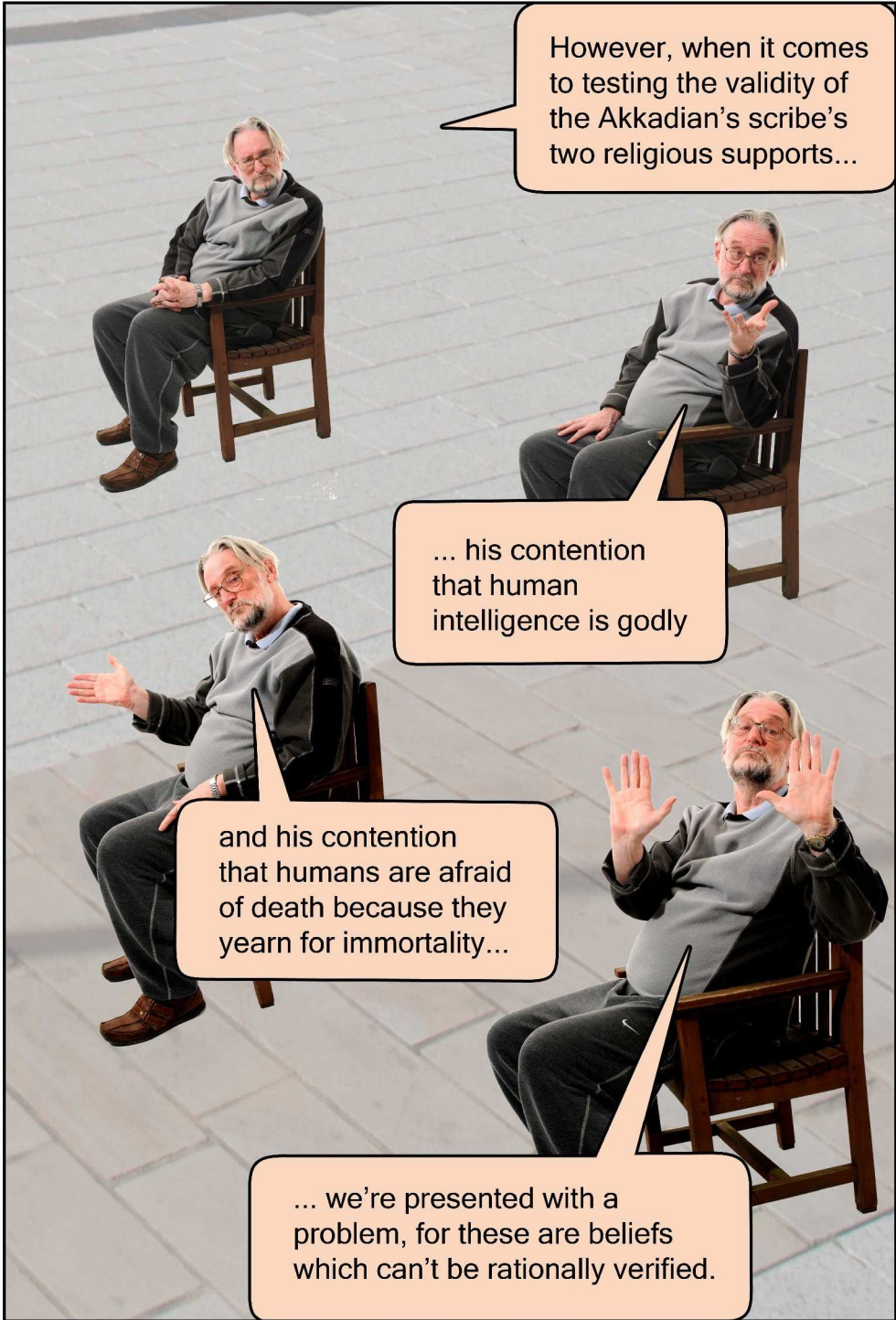


So, as a reasonable world-view, I'm forced to accept its validity even though I would naturally want to modify his point of view by laying against it some other, equally valid, perspectives.



A 'Yes-but'!

Exactly!



However, when it comes to testing the validity of the Akkadian's scribe's two religious supports...

... his contention that human intelligence is godly

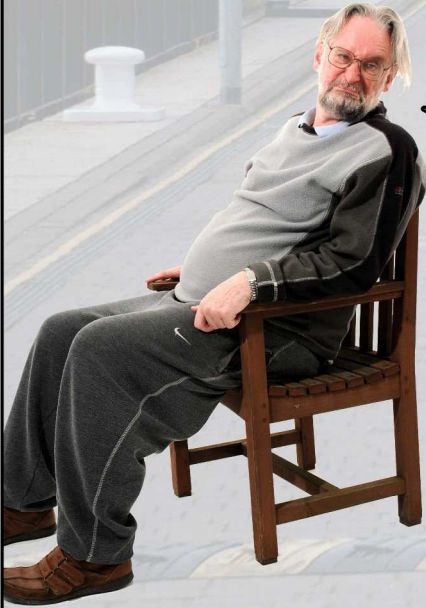
and his contention that humans are afraid of death because they yearn for immortality...

... we're presented with a problem, for these are beliefs which can't be rationally verified.

They may be validated in some other way, however.




That's possible. But it's clear, wouldn't you say, that, as beliefs, they add nothing to the political argument they buttress?



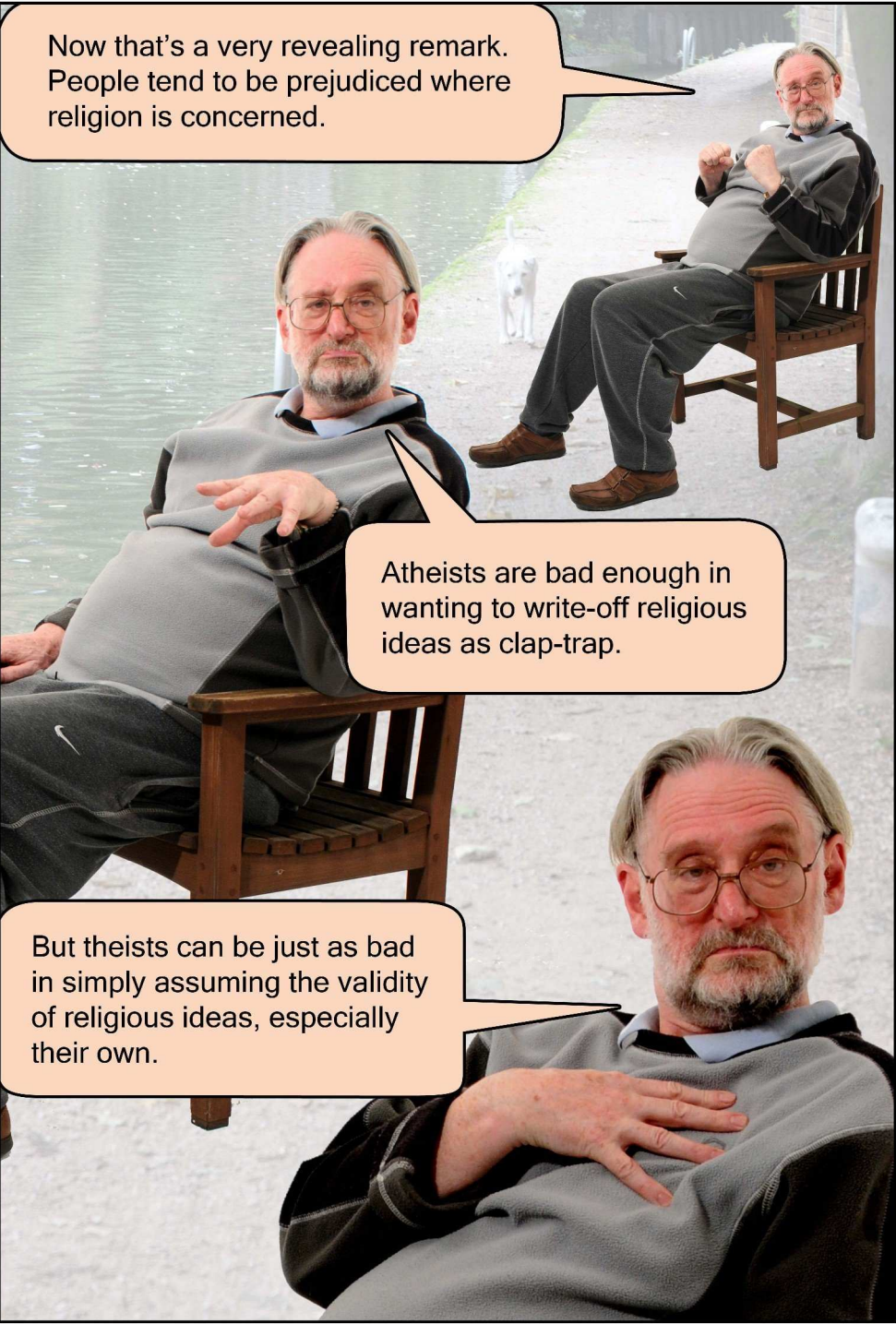
They add nothing rational, that's true.





That makes me think their aim is to provide a warm emotion of cultural belonging, which means they're an appeal to herd-instinct, wouldn't you say?

I don't like you talking about religion as herd instinct. You seem to forget that some great achievements have come about as a result of the activities of religious people.



Now that's a very revealing remark. People tend to be prejudiced where religion is concerned.

Atheists are bad enough in wanting to write-off religious ideas as clap-trap.

But theists can be just as bad in simply assuming the validity of religious ideas, especially their own.

But we get our religious ideas from the Bible!




So you say, though I see no reason to take the matter on trust.


However, for the moment, we're not even talking about the Bible.



If, in discussing a Mesopotamian myth, you tell me you don't like the way I treat its religious ideas, how are we going to deal with the Bible objectively when we come to it?

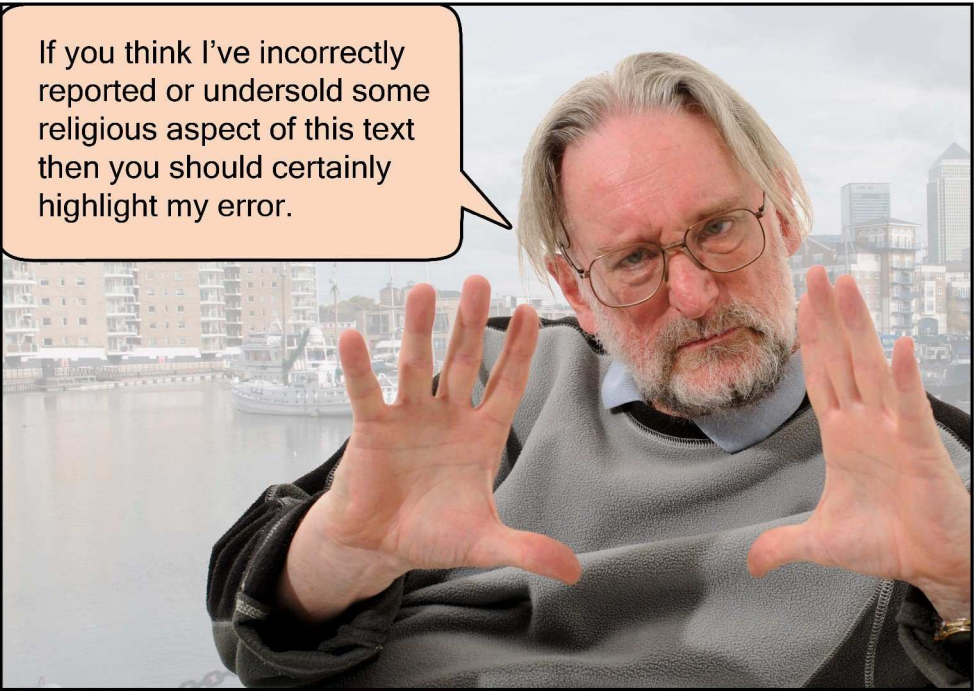


So what should I do with my religious sensitivities if not make use of them in understanding these ancient texts?

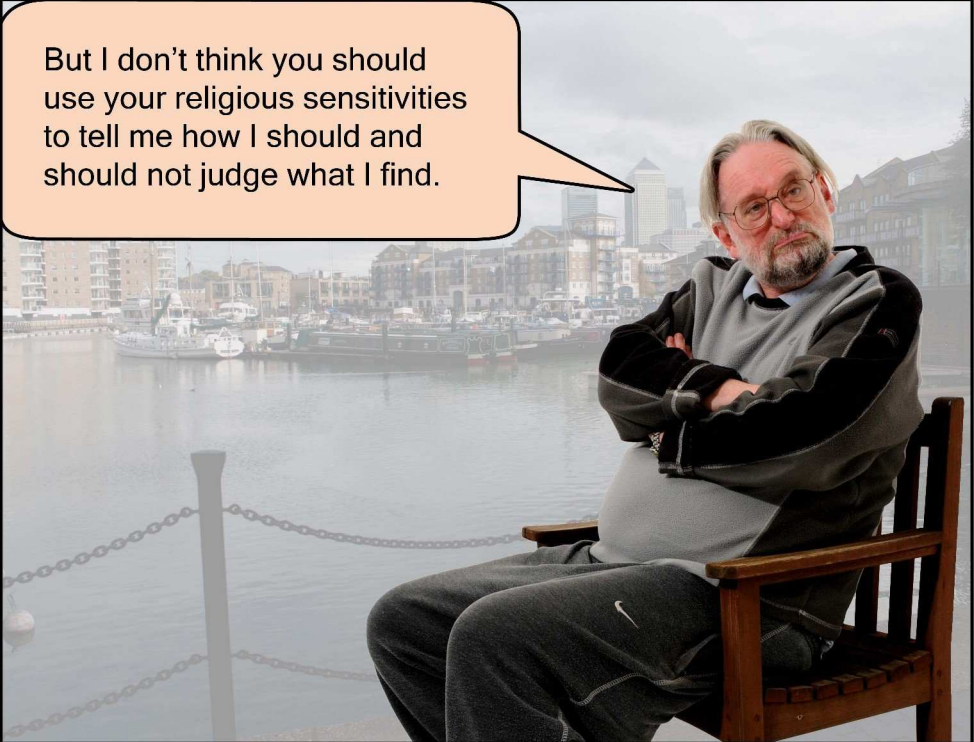


Since there's no way of validating them we should all keep our religious or anti-religious sensitivities firmly under control.

If you think I've incorrectly reported or undersold some religious aspect of this text then you should certainly highlight my error.



But I don't think you should use your religious sensitivities to tell me how I should and should not judge what I find.



For, given my position (that all of these ancient texts, including the Bible, are basically concerned with politics) why should I consider religious sensitivity any more relevant in understanding them than atheistic sensitivity?





So what sort of state of mind should I adopt when reading the Bible?

We should all read the Bible expecting not to like what it tells us about ourselves.

Should it tell us our religious ideas are nothing but glorified herd instinct, as it may very well do, so what? We should expect correction from the Bible, not approval.



But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We've not yet reached the Bible!

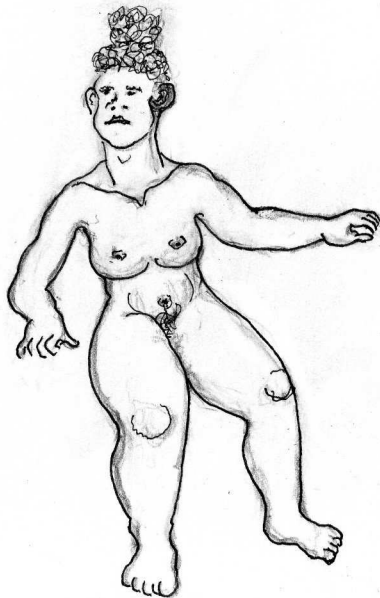
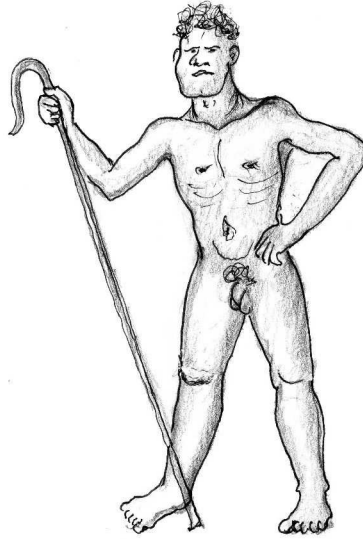


4

Dumuzi and Inanna

So far we've studied myths involving the four great Sumerian gods. In the next story we come across some new characters.

Two are especially important: Dumuzi, who is here presented as the shepherd god.



And Inanna, who plays the role of the goddess of love.

DUMUZI AND ENKIMDU

The subject of this old Sumerian myth is the natural rivalries that arise in a settled society where divisions of labour take place. The myth starts with Inanna, the goddess of love, out in the fields where she is approached by Utu, the sun god, her brother. He tries to convince her to marry Dumuzi, the shepherd god, but Inanna has other ideas.



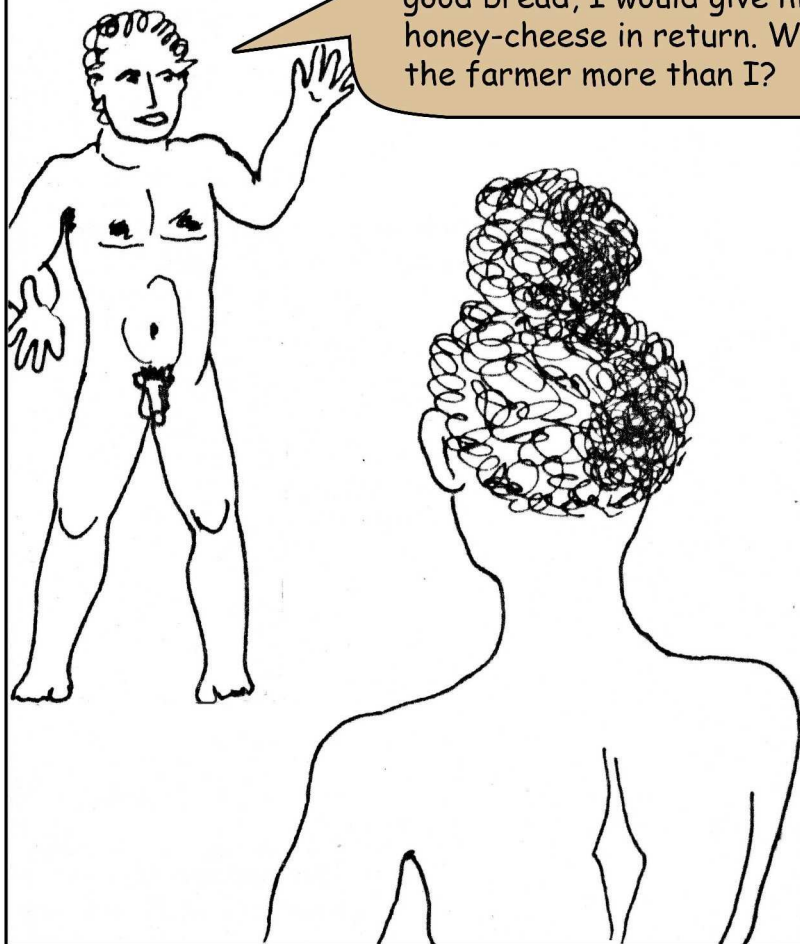
My sister, let the shepherd marry you. Maid Inanna, why are you unwilling? His fat is good, his milk is good. Everything that his shepherd's hand touches is bright.

The shepherd shall not marry me. In his new garment he shall not drape me. Let the farmer marry me, the maid.

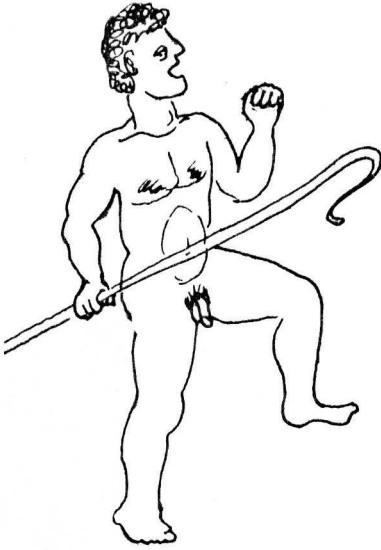


So Dumuzi decides to have a go at convincing Inanna himself.

What has Enkimdu the farmer, the man of the ditch, the dike and the plough, more than I? Should he give me his black garment, I would give him my black ewe in return. Should he pour me out some of his prime date wine, I would pour him out some of my yellow milk.. Should he give me some of his good bread, I would give him honey-cheese in return. What has the farmer more than I?

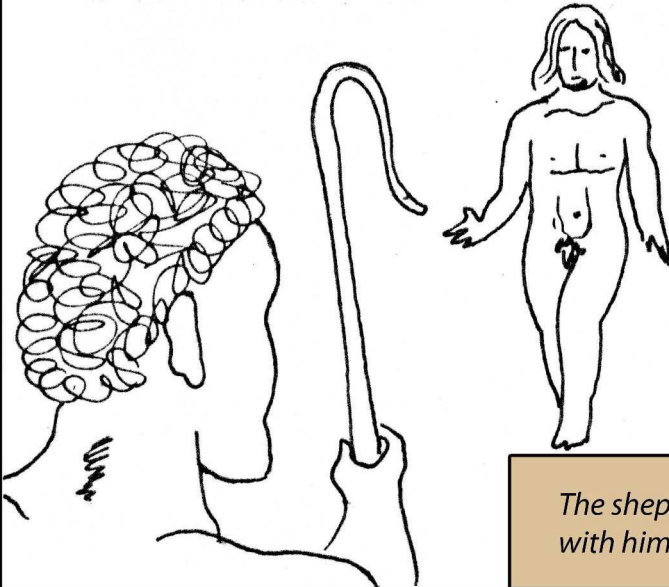


Apparently he is successful.



*He rejoiced on the river bank.
On the river bank the shepherd,
on the river bank, rejoiced.*

*The farmer, Enkimdu, approached the shepherd
on the river bank.*



*The shepherd starts a quarrel
with him..*

However, Enkimdu refuses to be forced into a fight.

Shepherd why should I strive against you? Let your sheep eat the grass of the riverbank. In my meadow-lands let the sheep walk about. In the bright fields of Erech let them eat grain. Let your kids and lambs drink the water of my canal.



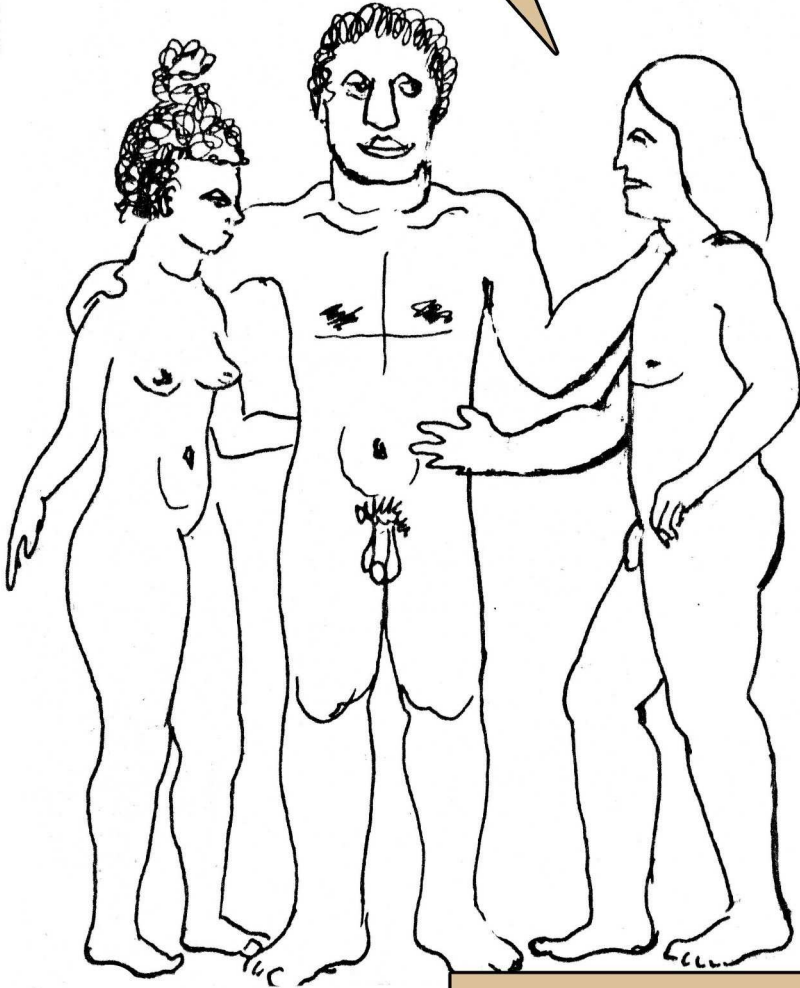
Dumuzi is completely won over by Enkimdu's speech.

At my marriage, farmer, may you be counted as my friend.



The myth ends with handshakes all round.

I will bring you wheat, I will bring you beans,
and you who are a maid, whatever you desire,
Maid Inanna, I will bring you.



Inanna, your name is good.



No, this time I won't rise to your bait for I can identify no obvious trace of religious teaching here.



The message this myth conveys is that, if you live in a community composed of people who make their living in different ways, you should not allow natural rivalries to tear the community itself apart.



In the following more complicated stories the personages of these two deities are considerably expanded.

Now, Inanna is presented as Queen of the 'great above'. As such she represents not just love, sex and war but life itself.



Dumuzi, too, undergoes a spectacular transformation. Here he's presented not just as the shepherd god but as the dying and reviving god of fertility and new life.

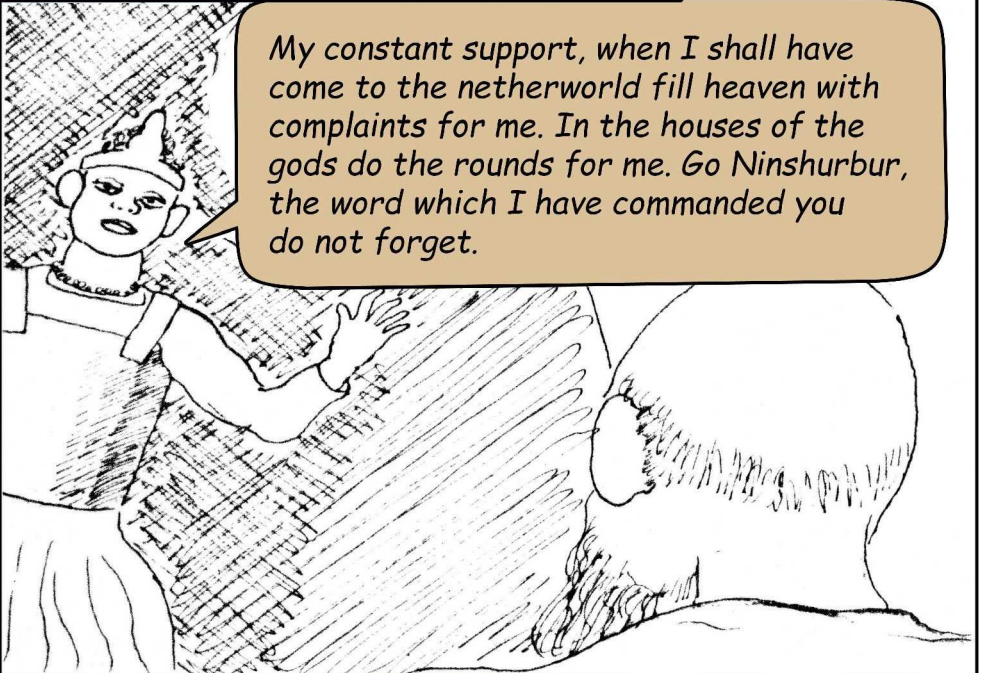
INANNA IN THE UNDERWORLD

The subject which this old Sumerian myth deals with is the relationship between life and death. In the story Inanna represents the power of life, whereas her sister, Ereshkigal, the queen of the underworld, represents the power of death.



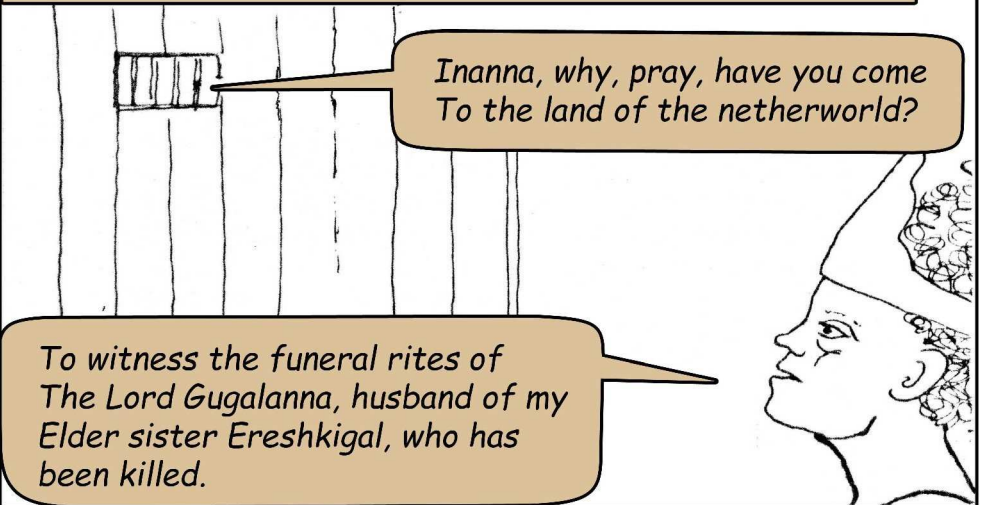
*Inanna arrayed herself in the seven Mes.
The Sugurra crown of the plains she put on her head.
The measuring rod and line of lapis lazuli she gripped in her hand.
Small lapis lazuli stones she fastened to her breast.
A gold ring she put about her hand.
A breastplate she put about her breast.
With the Gala garment, the garment of ladyship, she covered her body.*

*Inanna walked towards the netherworld.
Her messenger Ninshurbur walked at her side.*



My constant support, when I shall have come to the netherworld fill heaven with complaints for me. In the houses of the gods do the rounds for me. Go Ninshurbur, the word which I have commanded you do not forget.


When Inanna arrived at the lapis lazuli palace of the netherworld, at the door of the netherworld she lied.



*Inanna, why, pray, have you come
To the land of the netherworld?*


*To witness the funeral rites of
The Lord Gugalanna, husband of my
Elder sister Ereshkigal, who has
been killed.*

Neti, the chief gatekeeper of the netherworld, answers the pure Inanna.



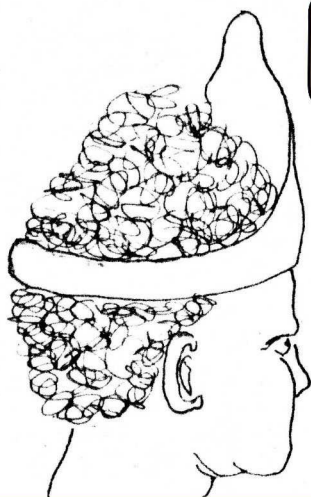
Stay, Inanna, to my queen I will speak.

Neti explains to Ereshkigal that her sister is at the door, dressed in all her regalia, and wanting in.

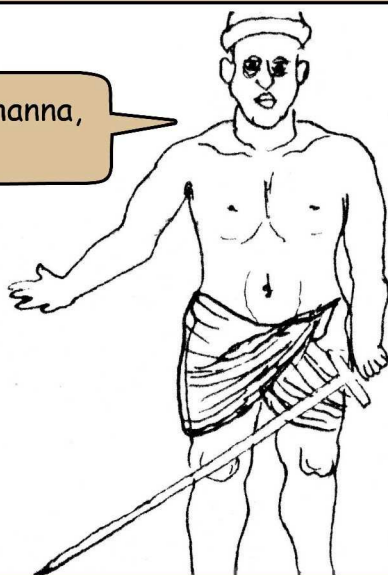


Come Neti, chief gatekeeper of the netherworld, open the locks of the seven gates of the underworld.

Neti, the chief gatekeeper of the netherworld, of the seven gates of the netherworld he opens the locks. To the pure Inanna he says:



Come Inanna,
enter.

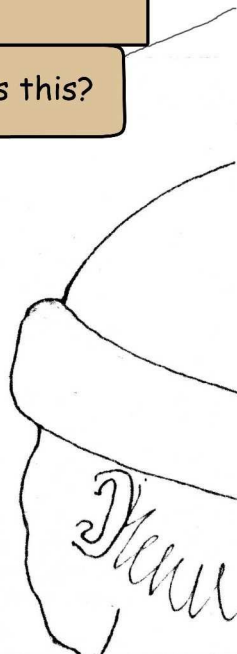


Upon her entering, the Sugurra, the crown of the plains, was removed from her head.

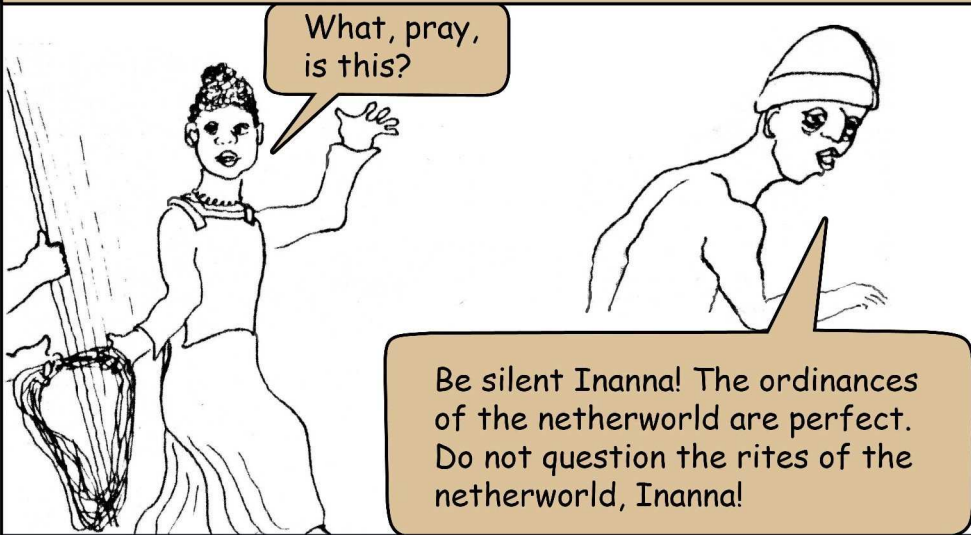


What, pray, is this?

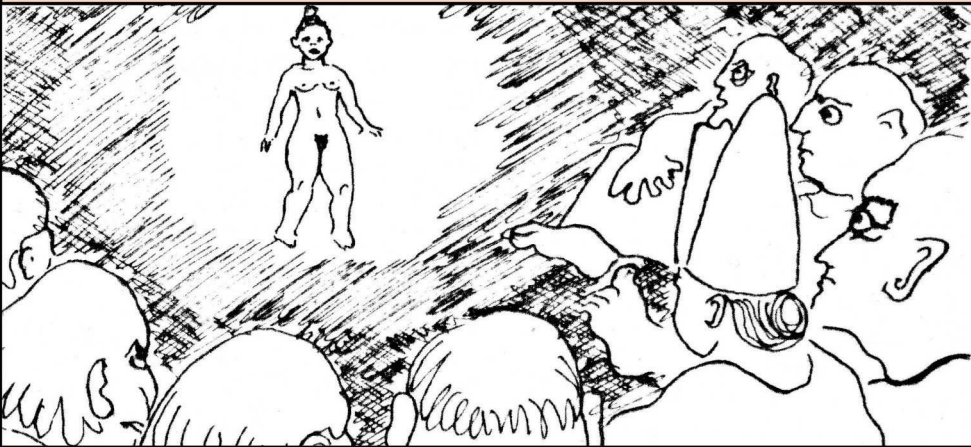
Be silent, Inanna! The ordinances of the netherworld are perfect. Do not question the rites of the netherworld, Inanna!



Upon her entering the second gate the measuring rod and the line of lapis lazuli were removed.

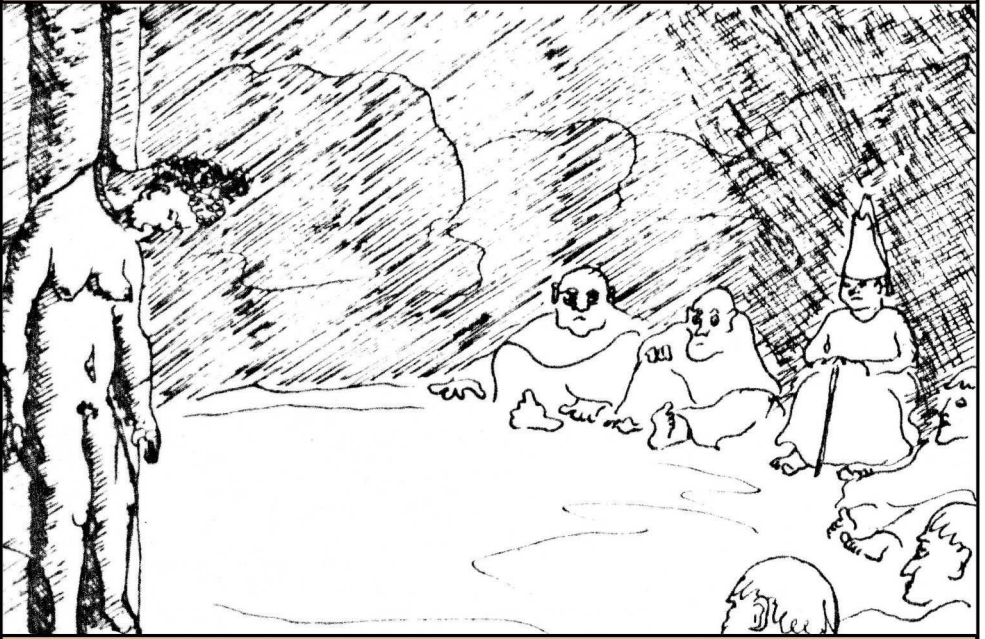


At each of the seven gates Inanna loses one of her seven Mes so that, finally, when she enters into her sister's presence she is completely naked.

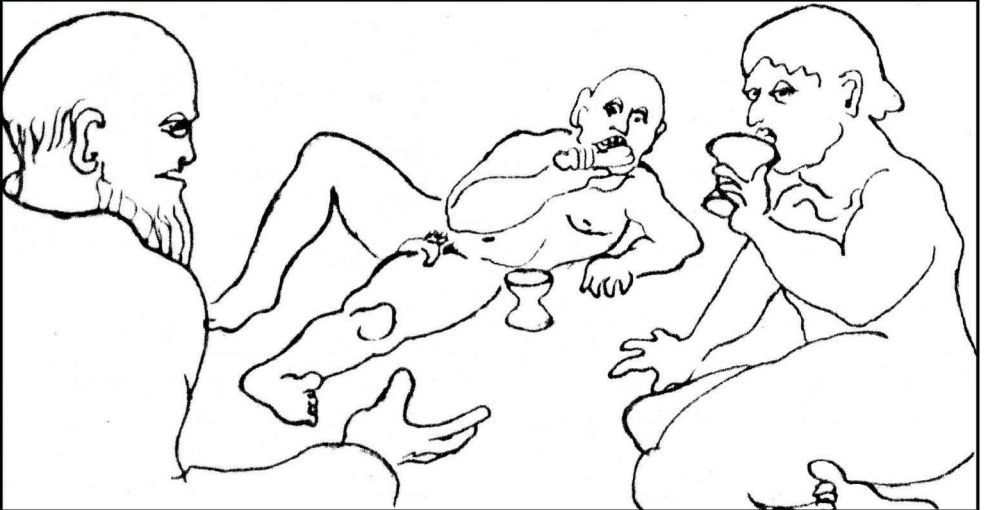


The pure Ereshkigol seated herself upon her throne. The Anunnaki, the seven judges, pronounce judgement before her. They fasten upon Inanna the eye of death.

At their word, the word that tortures the spirit, the woman was turned into a corpse. The corpse was hung from a stake.

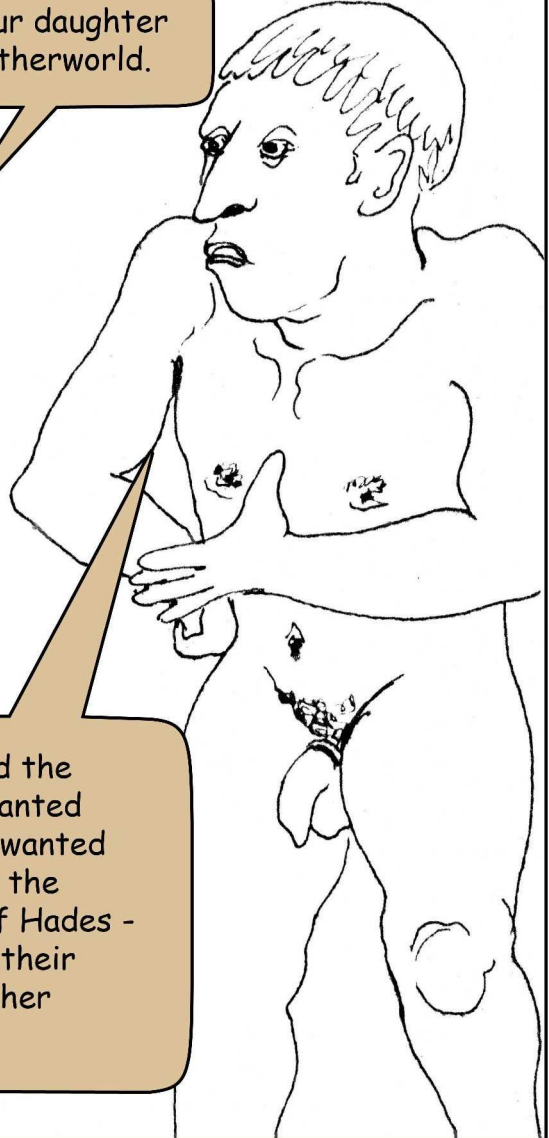


After three days and nights had passed her messenger Ninshubur filled the heavens with complaint for her; cried out for her in the assembly's shrine; did the rounds of the houses of the gods.



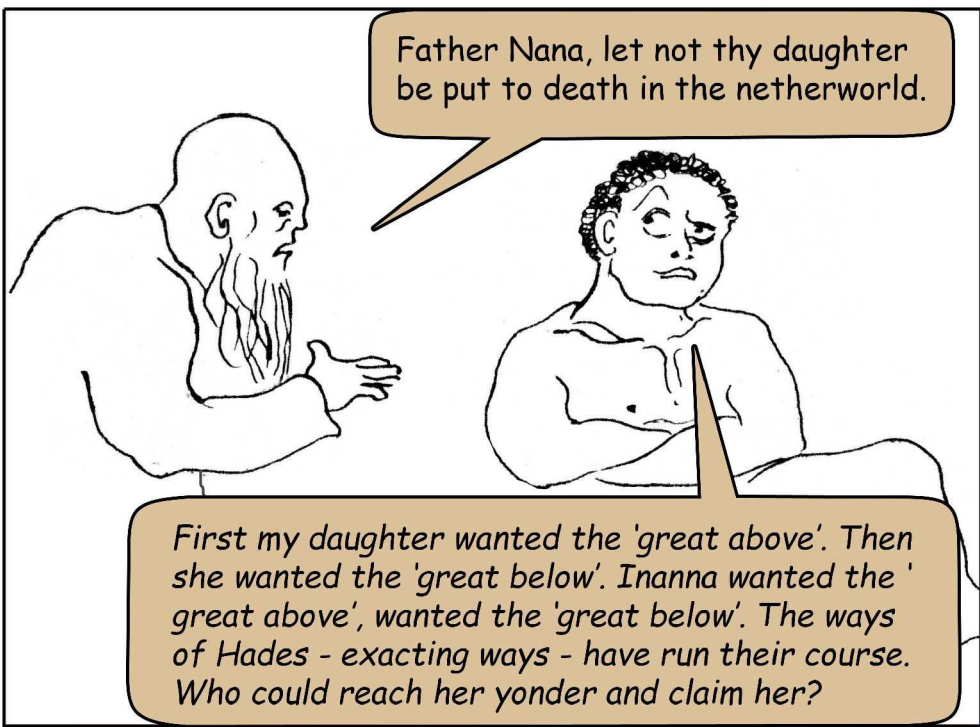
Dressed for her like a pauper in a single garment, all alone he directed his steps to the house of Enlil. He weeps before Enlil.

O father Enlil, let not your daughter be put to death in the netherworld.



First my daughter wanted the 'great above'. Then she wanted the 'great below'. Inanna wanted the 'great above', wanted the 'great below'. The ways of Hades - exacting ways - have run their course. Who could reach her yonder and claim her?

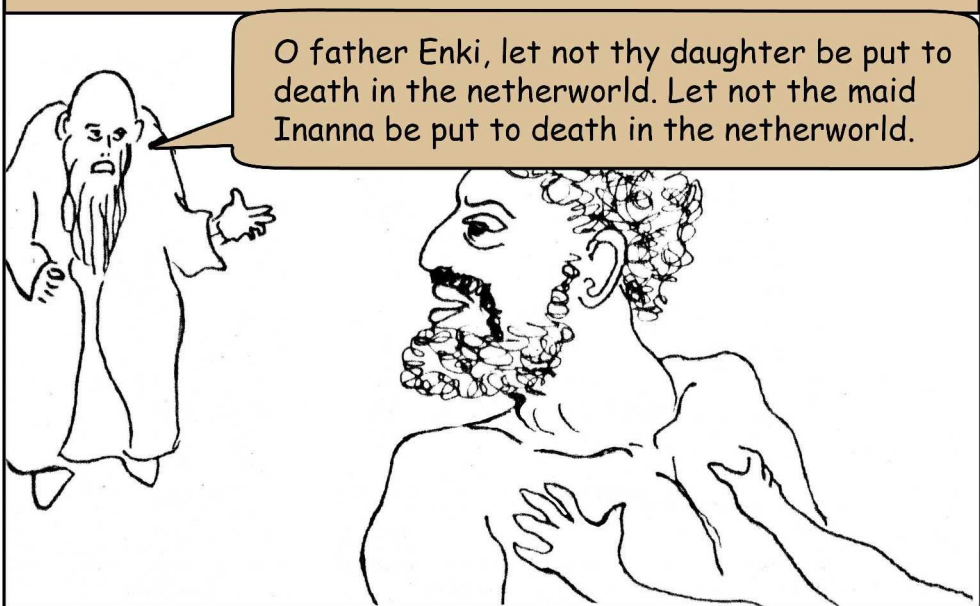
As father Enlil stood not by him in this matter he went to Ur. Upon entering the house of Nana he weeps before Nana.



Father Nana, let not thy daughter
be put to death in the netherworld.

*First my daughter wanted the 'great above'. Then
she wanted the 'great below'. Inanna wanted the '
great above', wanted the 'great below'. The ways
of Hades - exacting ways - have run their course.
Who could reach her yonder and claim her?*

*As father Nana stood not by him in this matter he sent to Eridu.
In Eridu, upon entering the house of Enki he weeps before Enki.*

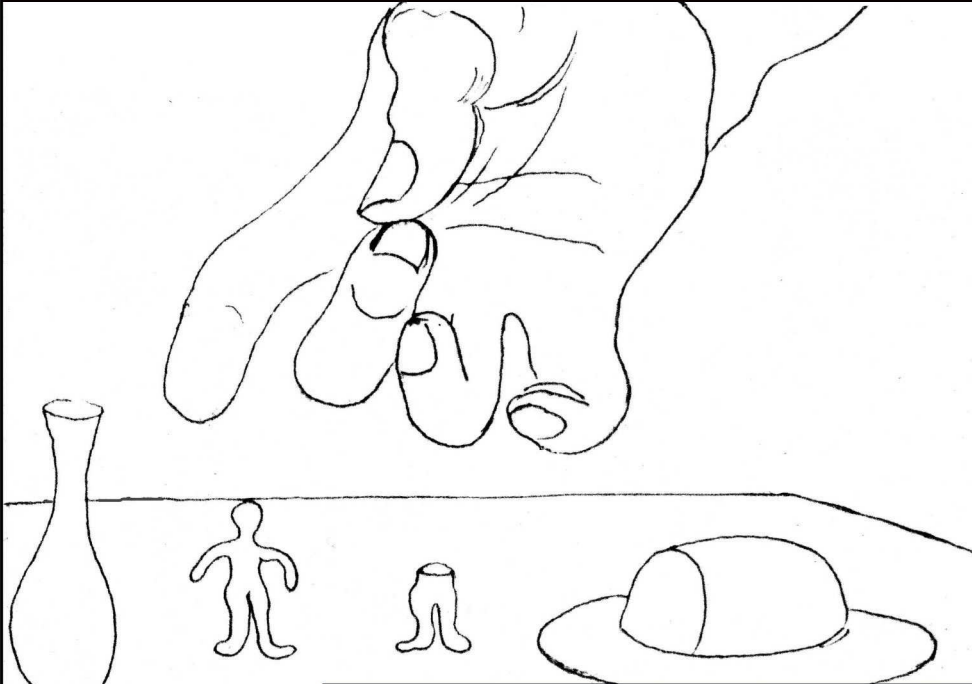


O father Enki, let not thy daughter be put to
death in the netherworld. Let not the maid
Inanna be put to death in the netherworld.



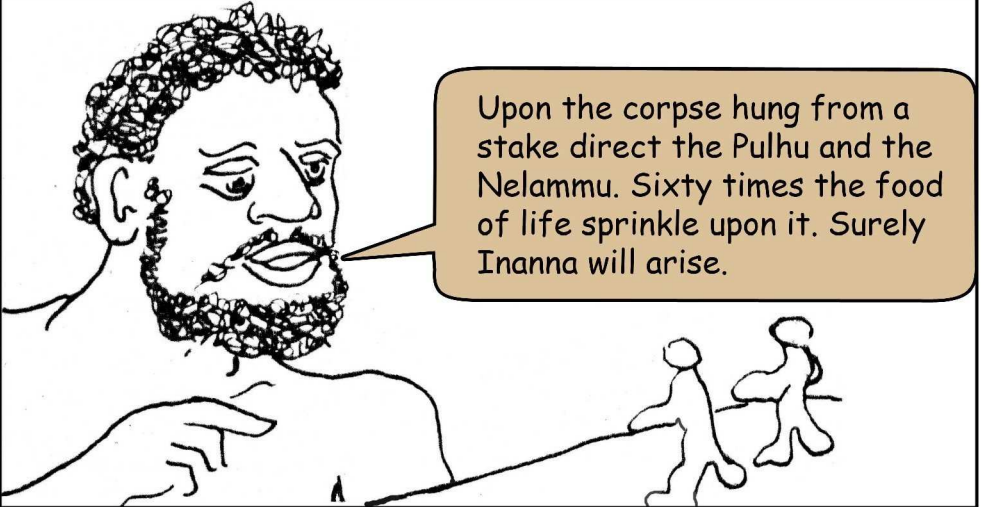
What has happened to my daughter?
What has happened to Inanna? What
has happened to the queen of all the
land? What has happened to the
priestess of heaven? I am troubled.

From his fingernails he brought forth dirt and made the Kurgarru. From his red-painted fingernail he brought forth dirt and fashioned the Kalaturru.



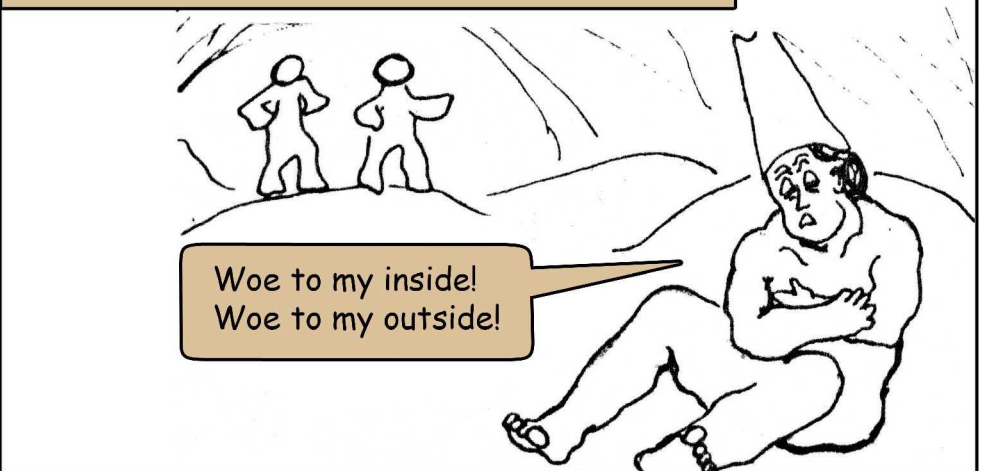
*To the Kugarru he gave the food of life.
To the Kalaturru he gave the water of life.*

Enki gives the Kalaturru and the Kugarru their instructions. They are to ingratiate themselves to Ereshkigal and, when she offers to repay them, they are to accept nothing but the corpse of Inanna.




When the Kalaturru and Kugarru arrive in the underworld they apparently find Ereshkigal in the throes of giving birth and in a terrible state.

*The birth goddess lies sick because of her children.
Naked and uncovered she continually moans.*




They proceed to alleviate her distress with magical incantations.



From my inside
to your inside.
From my outside
to your outside.

In return for curing their queen ...

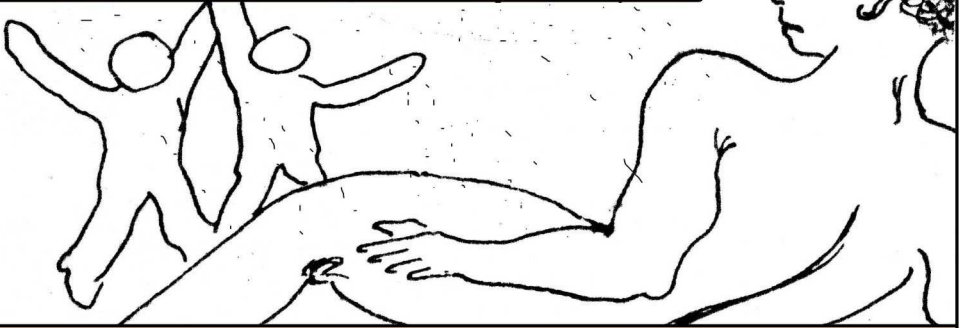
*The Anunnaki offer them the water of the the river; they accept it not.
They offer them the grain of the field; they accept it not.*



Give us the corpse
hung from the nail.

The corpse,
it is your queen's !

*They give them the corpse hanging from the nail.
One sprinkled upon her the food of life.
The other the water of life.
Inanna arose.*



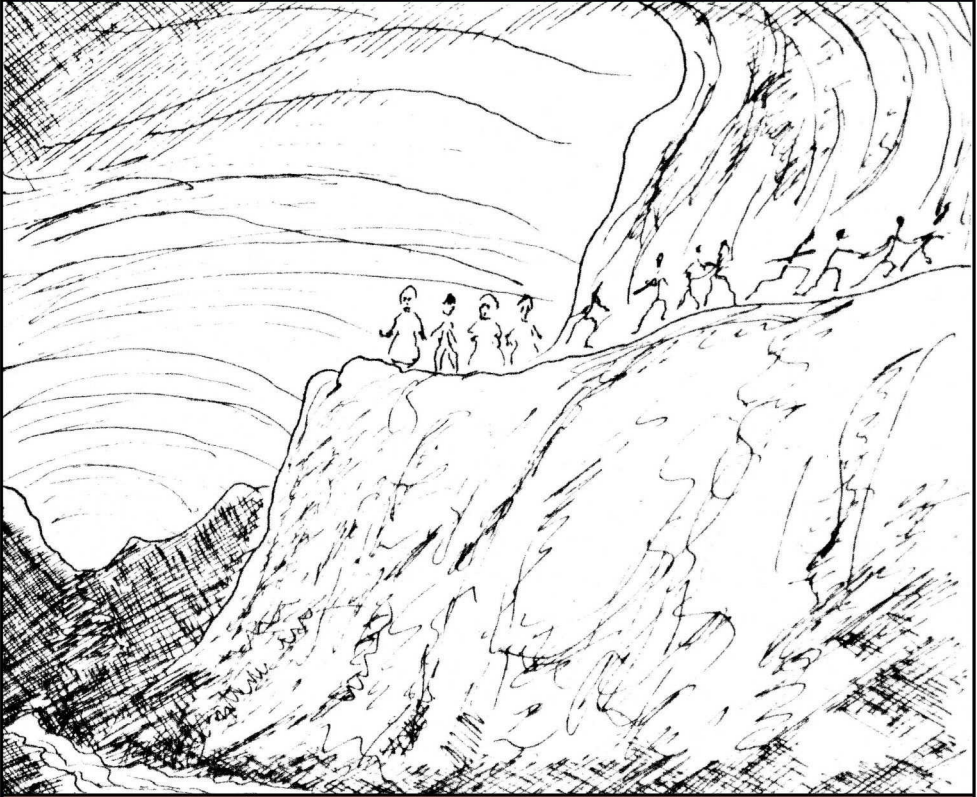
Inanna is ready to ascend from the netherworld but she is waylaid by the Anunnaki.

Who of those who have descended to the netherworld ascends from the netherworld? If Inanna would ascend from the netherworld let her give someone as a substitute.



So it is decided that the dead will accompany Inanna to collect a substitute.

*When Inanna ascends from the netherworld
Verily the dead hasten ahead of her.
The small Gala like spear shafts,
The large Gala walking by her side.*

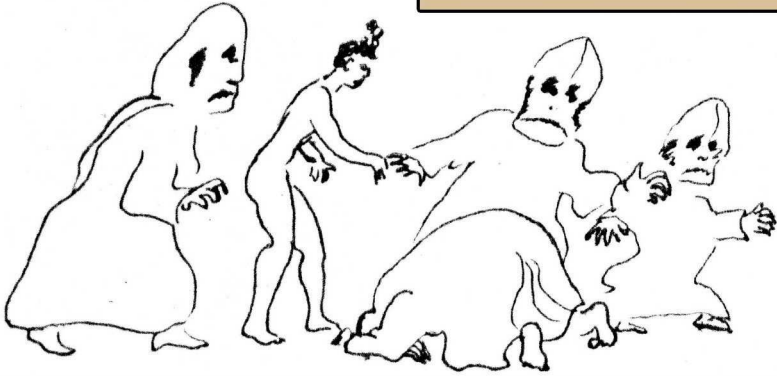


The myth explains how these Gala, being neither gods nor mortals but shades, are not open to being swayed either by bribes or appeals to emotion.

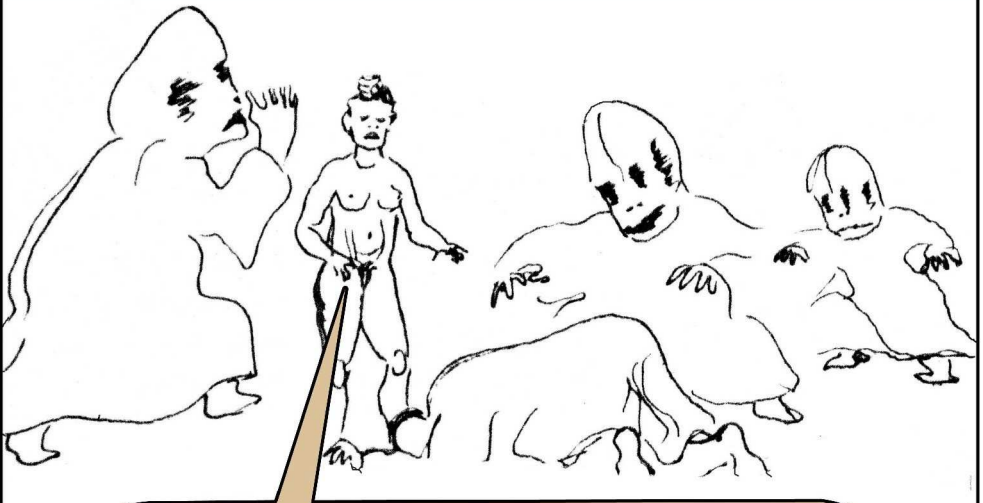
*They who accompanied Inanna
Were beings who know not food, who know not water,
Who eat not sprinkled flour, who drink not liberated water,
Who take away the wife from the loins of the man,
Who take away the child from the nursing mother.*

Upon Inanna's reappearance, Ninshurbur her messenger...

*... throws himself at her feet.
Sits in the dust, dressed in dirt.*

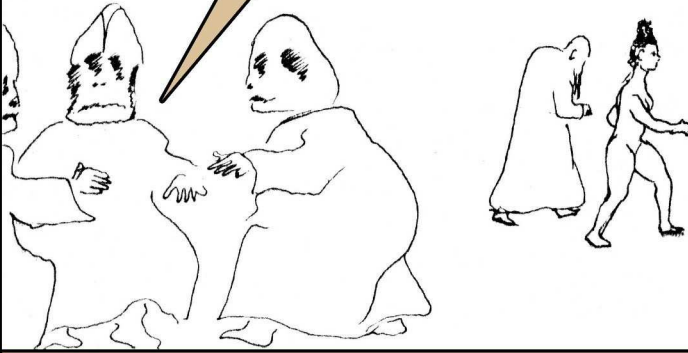


The Gala propose to take him as the substitute but Inanna protests that it was Ninshurbur who saved her.



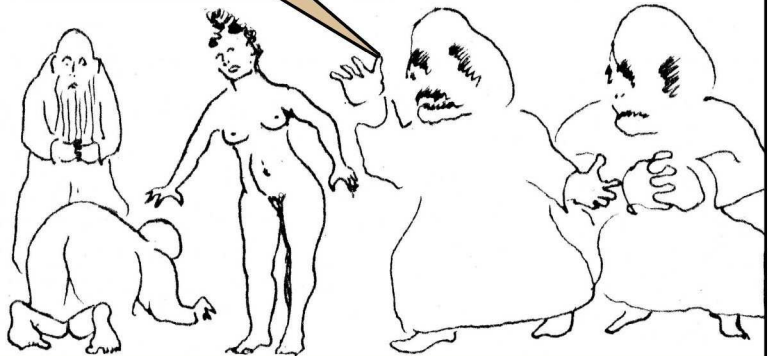
My messenger, my carrier of true words,
who failed not my directions, neglected not
my commanded word. He brought me to life!

Let us accompany her to Umma.



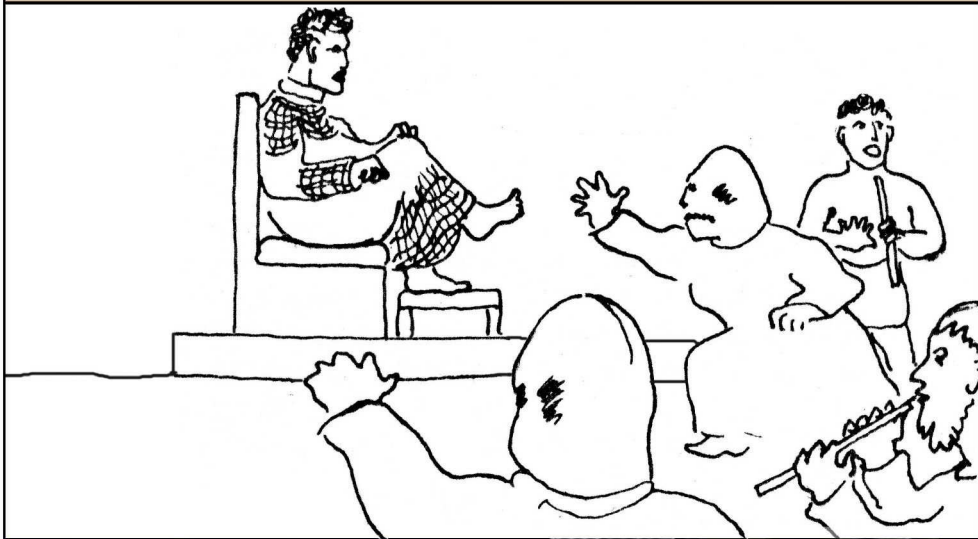
In Umma, Shara (the god-king and son of Inanna) throws himself at her feet, sits in the dust dressed in dirt. The Gala say to pure Inanna:

Inanna, wait outside the city while we carry him off.



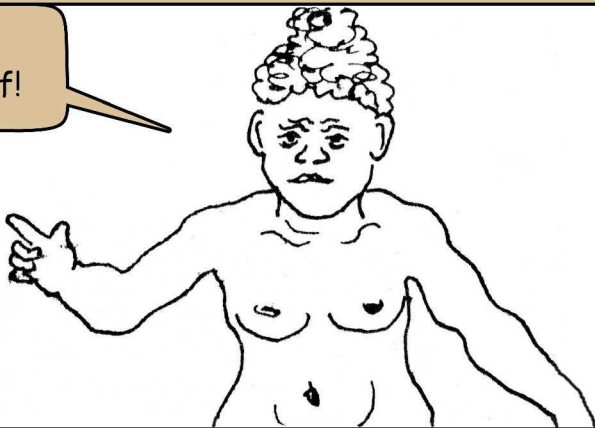
Again Inanna protests and the party proceeds to Badtibira where another of Inanna's sons, Latarka, is the god-king. The Gala ask of they can carry him off but again Inanna protests, so the party sets out and finally arrives at Kullab where Inanna's husband, the shepherd-god Dumuzi, is king. If Inanna expects to find her husband in mourning as well, she is in for a shock...

*Dumuzi put on a noble robe. He sat high in his seat.
The demons seize him by the thighs.
The seven demons rushed at him as at the sides of a sick man.
The shepherds ceased to play the flute and pipes before him.*

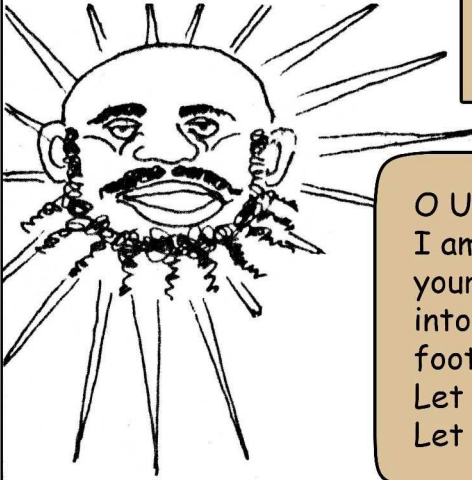


*Inanna fastened the eye of death upon him, the eye of death;
Spoke the word against him, the word of wrath;
Uttered the cry against him, the cry of guilt.*

As for him
carry him off!



The pure Inanna gave the shepherd Dumuzi into their hands.



*Dumuzi wept, his face turned green.
Towards heaven, to Utu,
he lifted up his hands.*

O Utu, you are my wife's brother.
I am the one who brings cream to
your mother's house. Turn my hand
into the hand of a snake. Turn my
foot into the foot of a snake.
Let me escape my demons.
Let them not seize me.

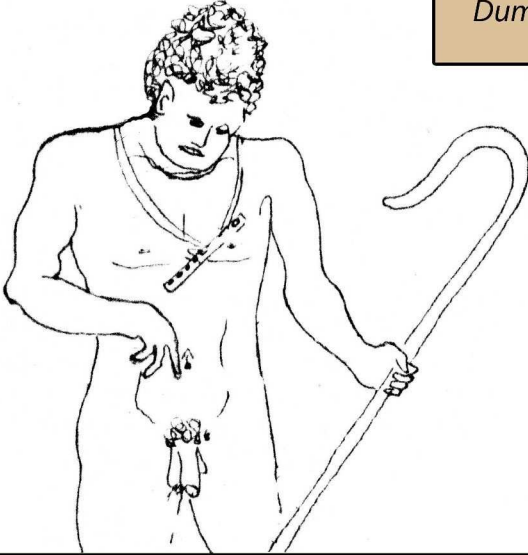


Unfortunately the tablet is broken at this point and the rest of the text lost. So we wouldn't have known the end of the story had not a completely separate Sumerian myth, dealing exclusively with Dumuzi's death, been uncovered.

THE DEATH OF DUMUZI

This is an old Sumerian text dating from about 1750 BCE.

Dumuzi has a premonition of death.



*Dumuzi the shepherd, his heart was filled
with tears. He went forth to the plain.
He fastened his flute about his neck;
Gave utterance to a lament.*

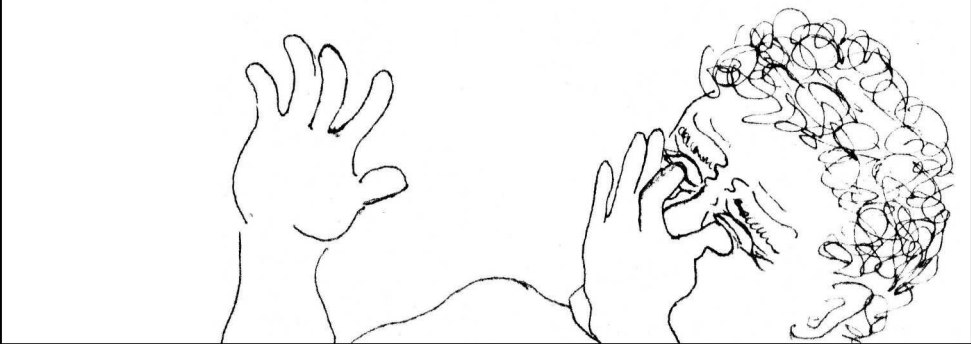
O plain, set up a lament,
set up a wail. Let my mother
Sirtur utter words of lament.
On the day I die she will have
no one to care for her. On the
plain let my eyes shed tears
like my mother.



Dumuzi lies down and has a ominous dream.



*As the shepherd lay down among the buds he dreamed a dream.
He arose, it was a dream; he trembled, it was a vision.
He rubbed his eyes with his hands, he was dazed.*



Dumuzi calls on his sister Geshtinanna, the goddess of poetry, song and the interpretation of dreams.

My dream, my sister,
this is the heart of
my dream...

Rushes rise up all about me.
Rushes sprout all about me.

One reed standing alone
bows its head for me.

Of the reeds standing in pairs
one is removed for me.

An owl holds a rabbit
in its beak.

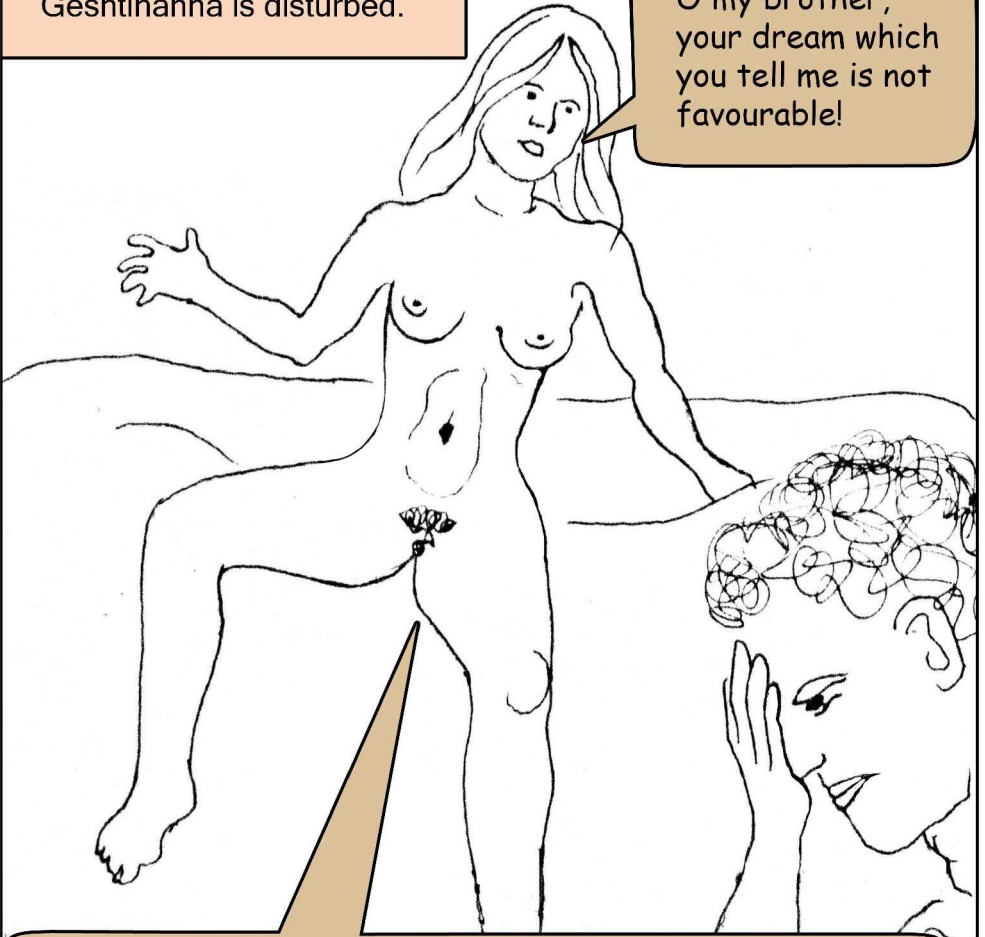
A falcon holds a lamb
in its claws.

My sheep of the fold paw the ground.
The churn lies shattered, no milk is poured.

The cup lies shattered, Dumuzi lives no more.
The sheepfold is given over to the wind.

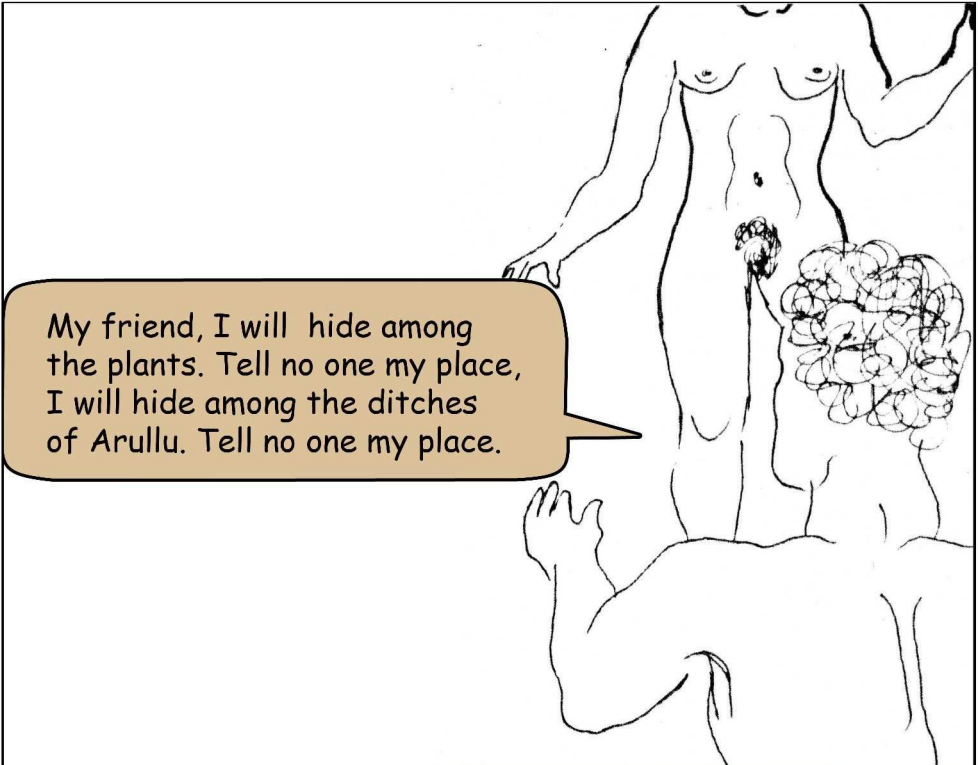
Geshtinanna is disturbed.

O my brother,
your dream which
you tell me is not
favourable!



Rushes rise about you. Outsiders will rise and attack you.
One reed standing alone bows its head for you.
Your mother who bore you will drop her head for you.
Of the reeds standing in pairs one is removed.
I and you, one of us will be removed.

Geshtinanna interprets his dream, item by item, and ends by warning her brother that he must go and hide, as the Gala demons are closing in on him.

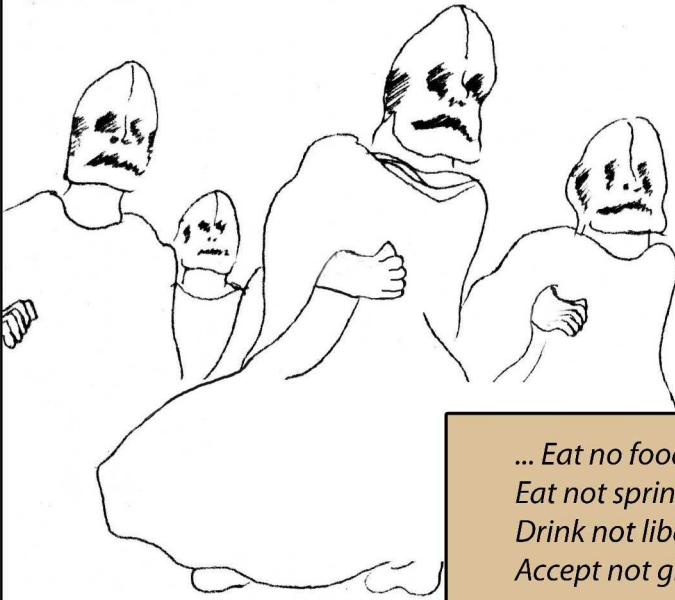


My friend, I will hide among the plants. Tell no one my place, I will hide among the ditches of Arullu. Tell no one my place.



If I tell your place may your dogs devour me; the black dogs, your dogs of shepherdship. The wild dogs, your dogs of lordship, may your dogs devour me!

And so the Galla come searching for Dumuzi; the implacable
Gala who, unlike gods and men...

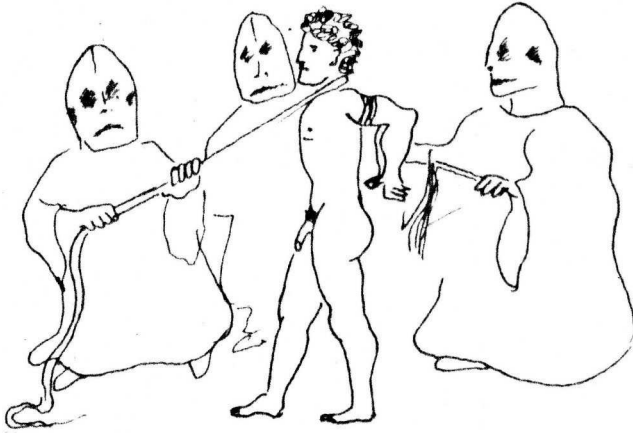


*... Eat no food, know no water;
Eat not sprinkled flour;
Drink not libated water;
Accept not gifts that mollify.*

Being unable to find Dumuzi the Gala seize his sister and try
to bribe her into disclosing his whereabouts but Geshtinanna
remains true and tells them nothing.



Dumuzi does not stay in hiding but for some reason returns to the city of Kullab where the Gala catch him.



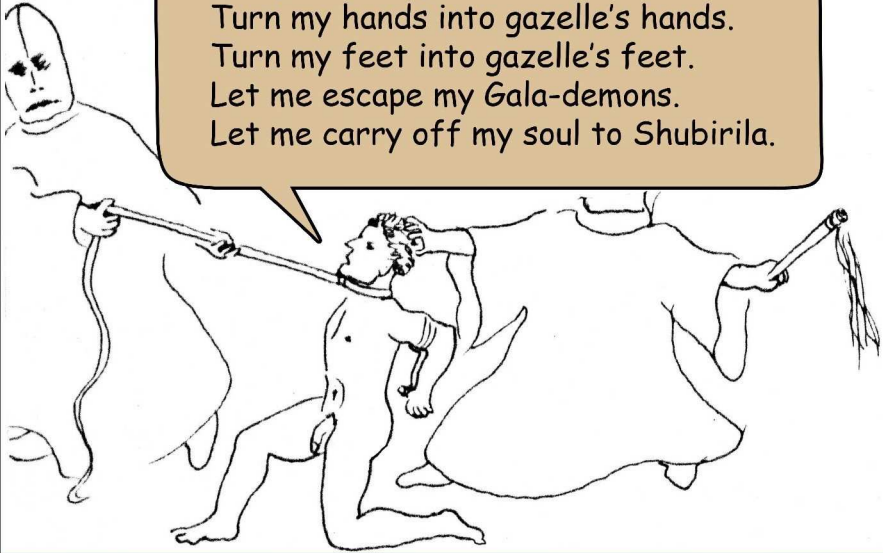
They belabour him with blows, punches and lashes...



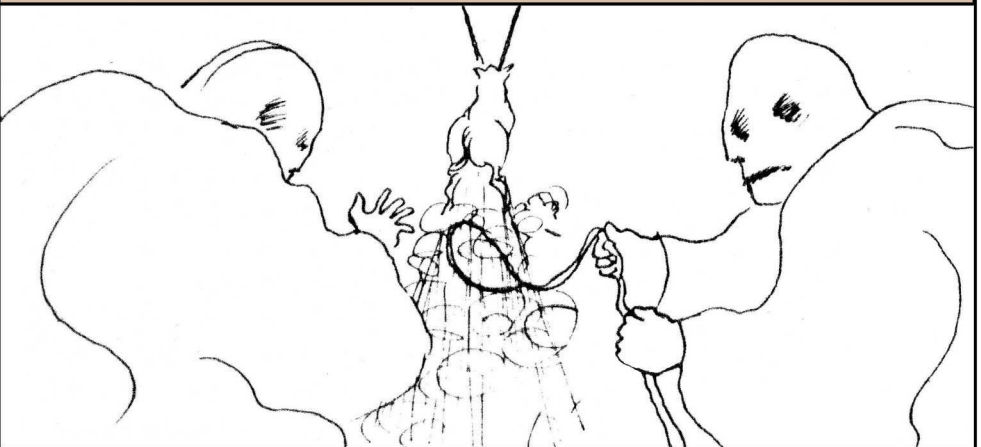
They bind his hands and arms and are ready to drag him off to the netherworld.

In desperation Dumuzi prays to Utu, the sun god and his brother-in-law, for help.

Utu you are my wife's brother.
Turn my hands into gazelle's hands.
Turn my feet into gazelle's feet.
Let me escape my Gala-demons.
Let me carry off my soul to Shubirila.



*Utu took his tears as a gift; like a man of mercy he showed him mercy.
He turned his hands into gazelle's hands.
He turned his feet into gazelle's feet.
He escaped the Gala demons; carried off his soul to Shubirila.*



Unfortunately the pursuing Gala catch up with him and beat him and torture him as before. Utu again saves him. This time Dumuzi escapes to the house of the goddess Belili, the wise old woman.



He has hardly time to snatch a bite to eat and drink before the Gala again burst in on him.



Again Utu saves him, turning him into a gazelle. Dumuzi flees this time to his own sheepfold where his fate finally catches up with him.



*The first Galla enters the sheepfold.
He strikes Dumuzi on the cheek with a piercing nail.
The second enters the sheepfold.
He strikes Dumuzi on the cheek with a shepherd's crook.
The third enters the sheepfold;
Of the holy churn the stand is removed.
The fourth one enters the sheepfold;
The cup hanging from the peg falls.
The fifth one enters the sheepfold;
The holy churn lies shattered, no milk is poured;
The cup lies shattered, Dumuzi lives no more;
The sheepfold is given over to the wind.*

When Geshtinanna hears of Dumuzi's capture she immediately sets out in search of him.

The sister, on account of her brother, roamed around in the city like a circling bird:

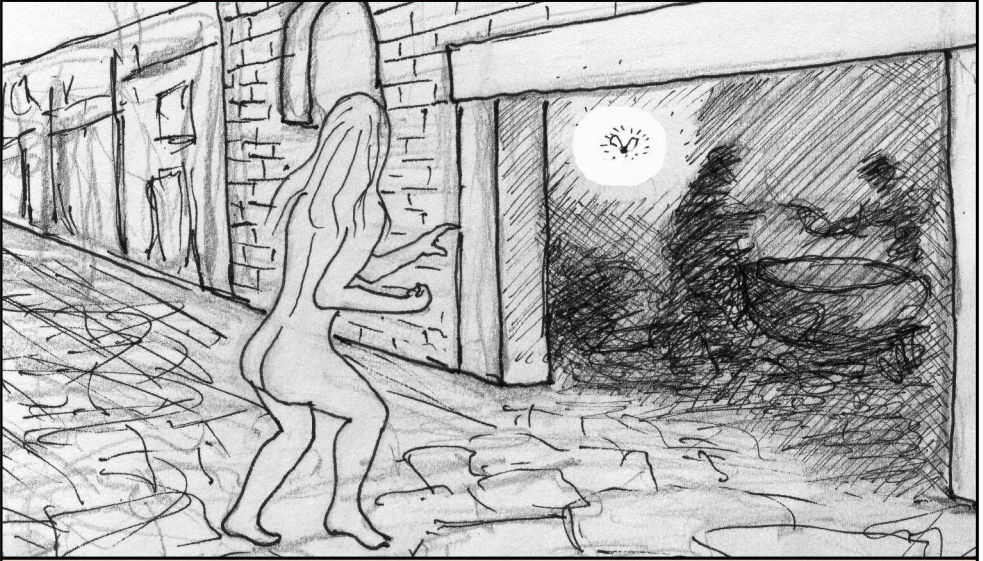
I will go to the perpetrator of this outrage on my brother, I will enter any house.



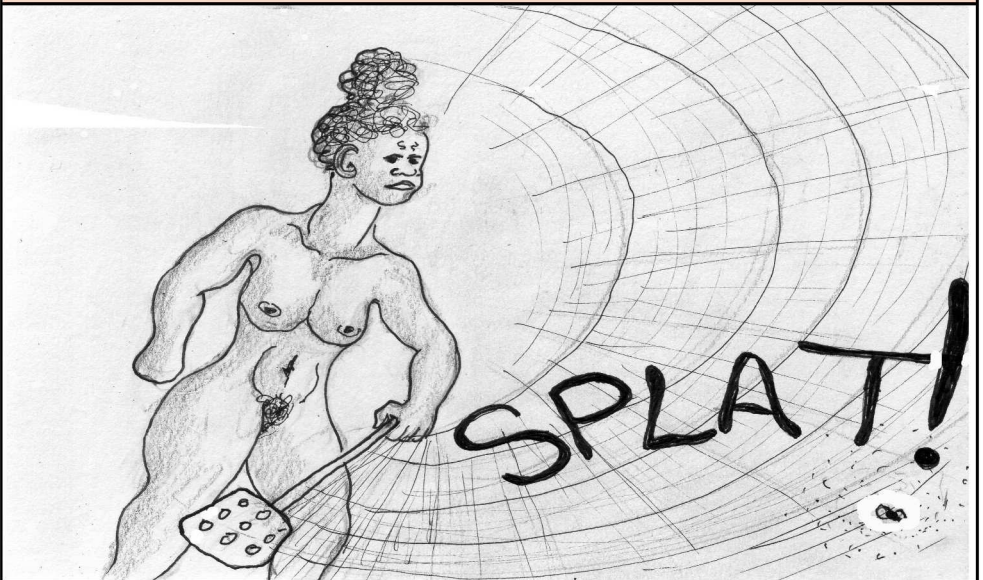
Once more the tablet is damaged so we have to turn to other, rather fragmentary texts, for suggestions as to how the myth continues. One of these explains that it was the fly who eventually told Geshtinanna of her brother's whereabouts.



The fly leads Geshtinanna to the brewery where Dumuzi has been made a slave to the brewmaster.



Later Inanna was to deal with this unfortunate creature for daring to divulge to Geshtinanna her husband's whereabouts.



Out of love for her brother, Geshtinanna decides to stay with Dumuzi and share his fate.

Dumuzi wept

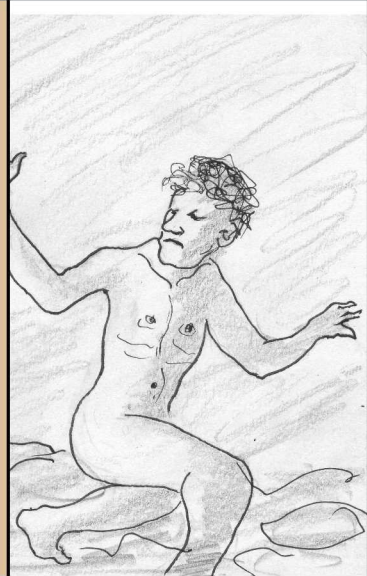
My sister has come, she has been delivered up with me! Now, alas, her life is cut short..



It seems that Inanna is touched by Geshtinanna's self-sacrifice for she relents: letting her and her brother take turns to go free for six months in each year, the other remaining underground as her substitute.



You, half a year, your sister, half a year. While you are walking around alive she will lie prostrate. While your sister is walking around alive you will lie prostrate.



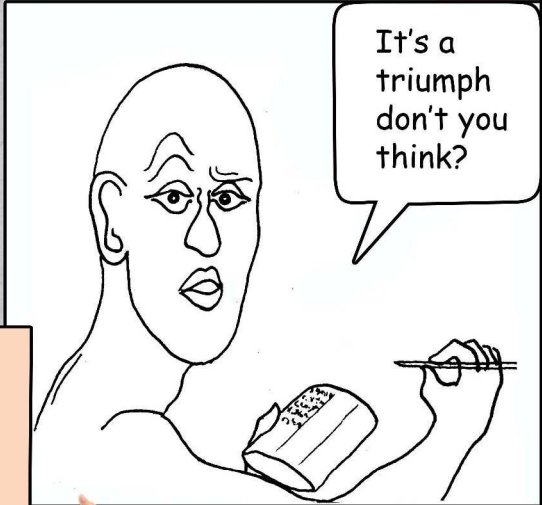
The mythmaker ends his story by drawing attention to what he sees as the imbalance in the relationship between life and death. Whereas life only manages to limp along by relying on a process of substitution (rebirth) death remains inviolable: the only true mistress of the universe.

*Holy Inanna
was delivering up Dumuzi
as her substitute.*

*Holy Ereshkigal!
your praise is sweet.*

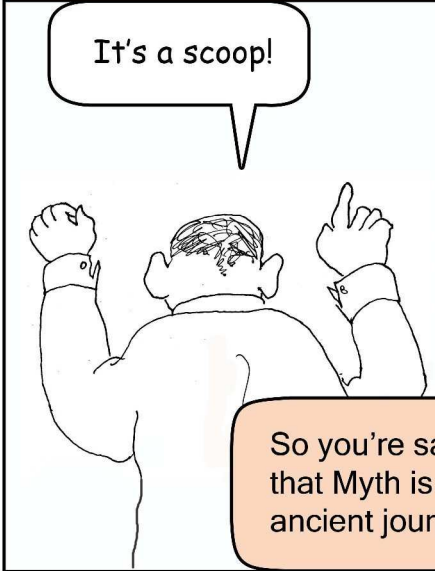


Wouldn't you agree that the Sumerian scribe has pulled out all the stops in painting this amazing picture of his civilization using the language of myth.



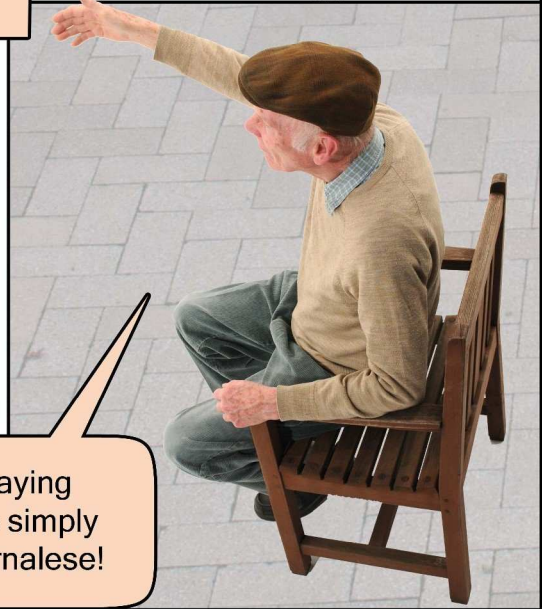
It's a triumph don't you think?

Journalists writing today attempt to do much the same thing using their own idiosyncratic language!



It's a scoop!

So you're saying that Myth is simply ancient journalese!



You could put it like that and don't you think the Sumerian scribe has made his own perspective marvellously clear.

For in these stories he relates that while the military authorities, Enlil and Nanna, are quite prepared to abandon the over-adventurous goddess to her fate.

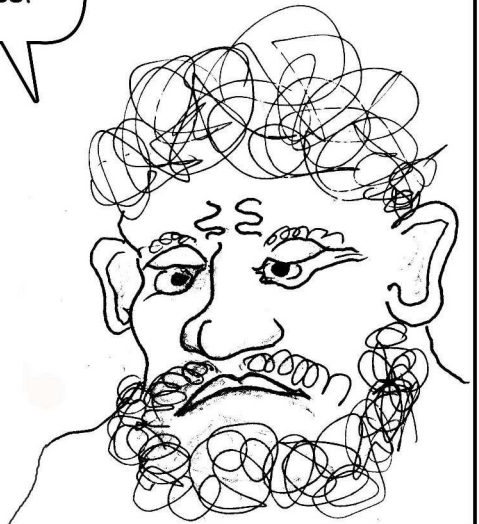
Stupid girl!

Deserves what's coming to her!



Enki, as the administrator god, goes out of his way to rescue her when, as is inevitable, she gets herself into trouble.

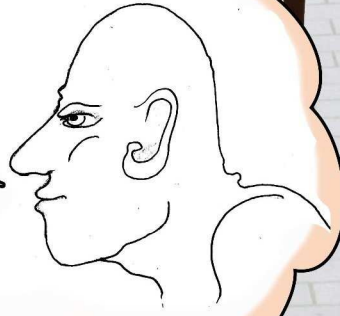
We've got to find a way out of this mess!



But what exactly is the mythmaker telling us he can see, from his privileged place at the administrative heart of everything?



How can I express it/



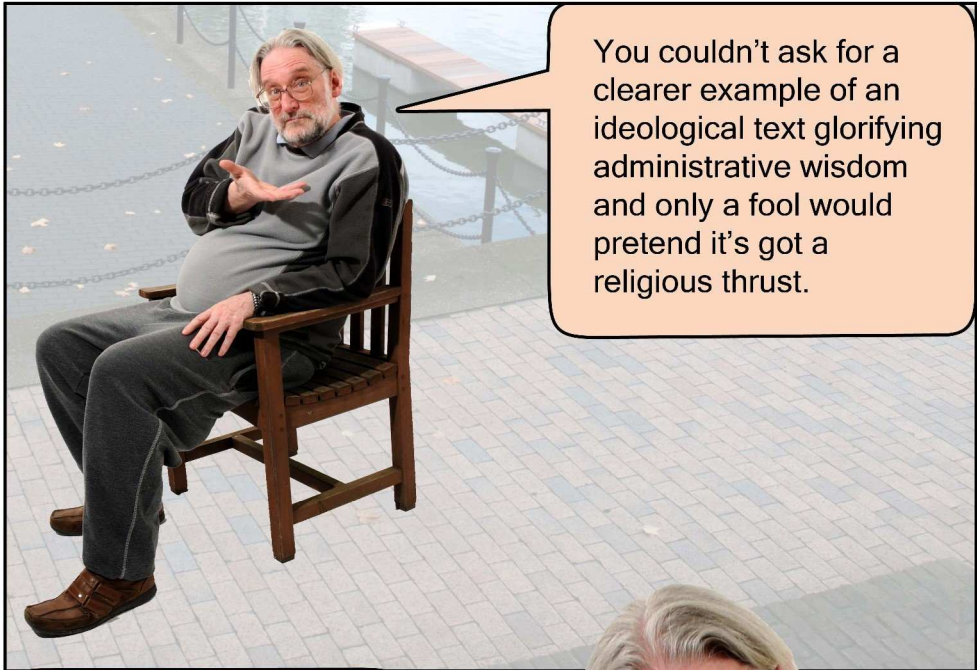
He's saying that civilisation is all to do with possessing intelligence and imagination and of having the courage to put what you have imagined into effect. This, as he sees it, is what makes him different and superior to his brutally plodding military overlords; though, of course, they too have their own importance.

There's one final myth we simply have to look at: the Great Flood story. I say this not simply because the Bible makes use of it for its own ideological purposes...



... but also because it provides a hugely entertaining account of how the priestly administrators saw their military bosses.





You couldn't ask for a clearer example of an ideological text glorifying administrative wisdom and only a fool would pretend it's got a religious thrust.



Keep your eye on the character of Enlil in the story and tell me what you think of the way in which the mythmaker describes him.

5

The Flood

THE FLOOD

This myth, which arrived late in the tradition, concerns a great storm that all but completely destroyed mankind.



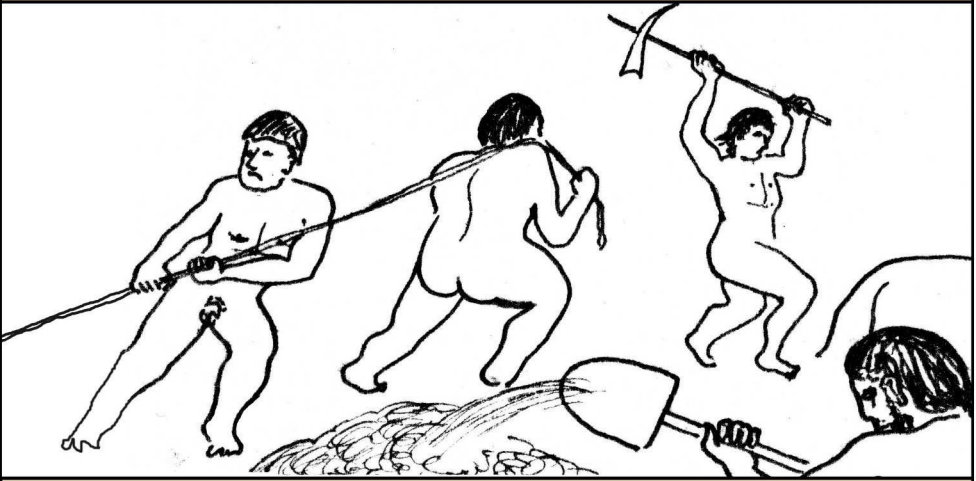
We have it in several forms: first a rather fragmentary Sumerian version in which the hero is the king Ziusudra, then an Akkadian version in which the hero is simply called Atra-hasis or 'the exceeding wise one'. Finally there is a third version, also in Akkadian, which has found its way into a much larger work called the Gilgamesh Epic. In this the hero, still called 'the exceeding wise one', is named Utnapishtim.

The basic subject this myth deals with is the natural disasters which periodically visit civilisation. The explanation for these events, given by the Mesopotamian scribes, is that Enlil is determined to get rid of humans because of the disturbance they cause, only Enki prevents him from doing so by exercising amazing administrative ingenuity and cunning.

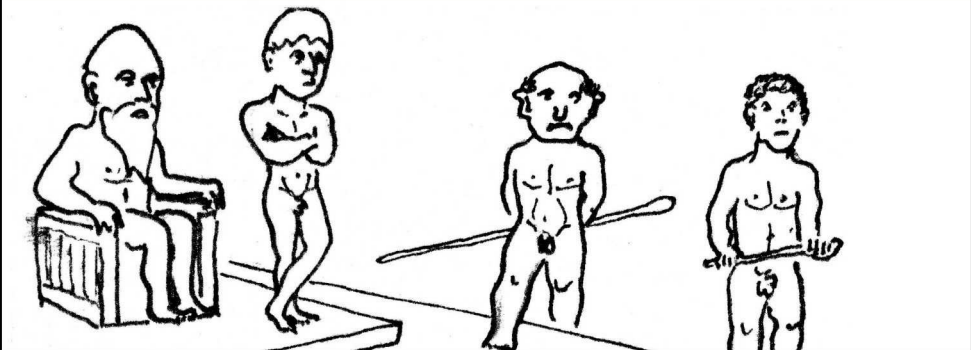
The Sumerian version, perhaps because it is so fragmentary, adds nothing substantial to the other two so we will ignore it and go straight to the Atra-hasis myth.

ATRA- HASIS

Long ago it was the gods who had to do all the work and suffer toil like people do today. The work was heavy, the gods' distress considerable.



It was the seven great Anunnaki who made the other gods do all the work. An, their father, was king; Enlil, the warrior, was their counsellor; Ninurta was their works supervisor and Ennugi was their chief constable.



These had come to an agreement about sharing the jobs by drawing lots. An went up to heaven, leaving the earth to his subjects. To prince Enki fell the responsibility of guarding the bolt that held back the sea.



The other gods set about building Mesopotamia - digging the rivers, building the mountains and forming the marshes. For forty years they suffered this work, night and day, but there was lots of backbiting and grumbling on the building sites.



However, there eventually came a time when the minor gods had had enough and revolution broke out.

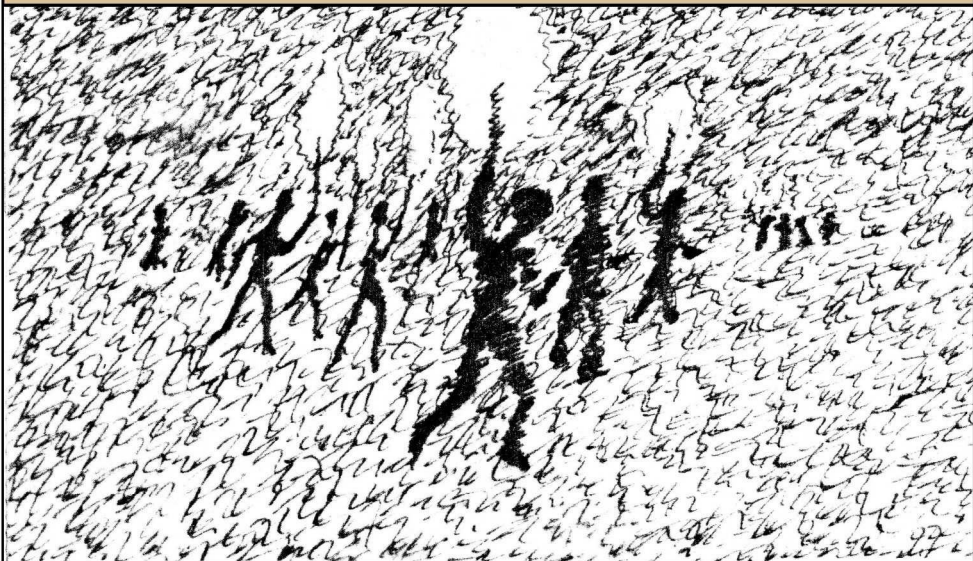
Let us go and confront the works supervisor and get him to relieve us of this heavy work.

Come on. Let's embarrass Enlil by tackling him at his house.

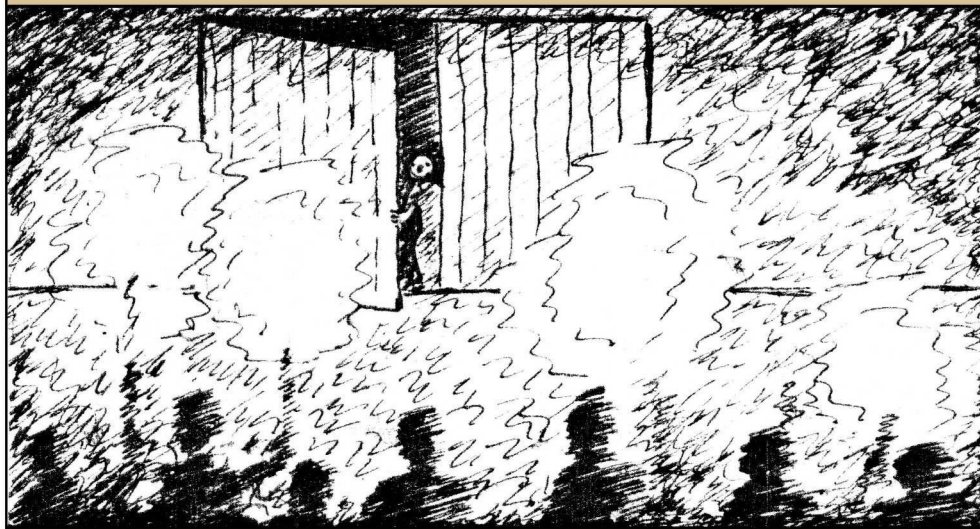
Take up hostilities!
War is declared!
The battle commences!



They set their tools on fire, their hoes ablaze and held them aloft as they went to the door of Enlil's shrine. It was midnight and halfway through the watch.



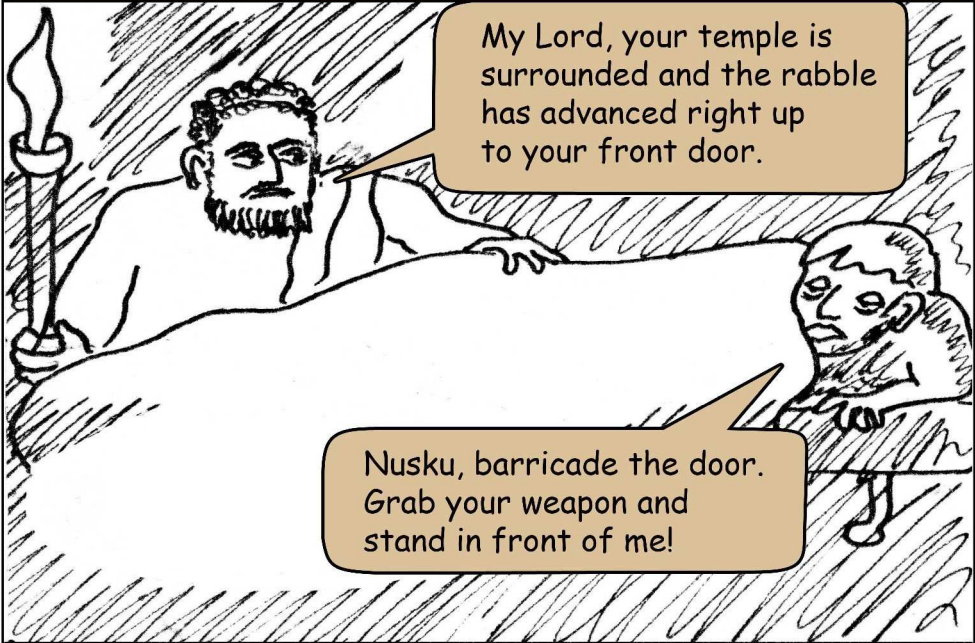
*The temple was surrounded without Enlil knowing of it.
Kalak - the doorman - saw it and was very upset.
He slid the doorbolt back and took a look...*



then woke up Nussku - the butler - and they both listened to the noise.

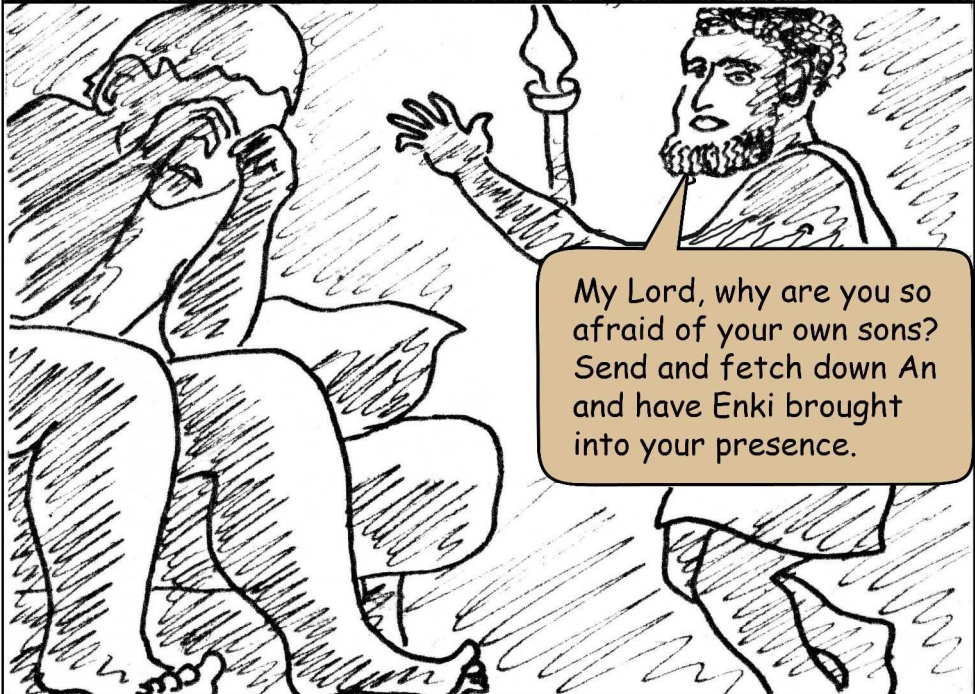


Nusku woke his lordship and got him out of bed.

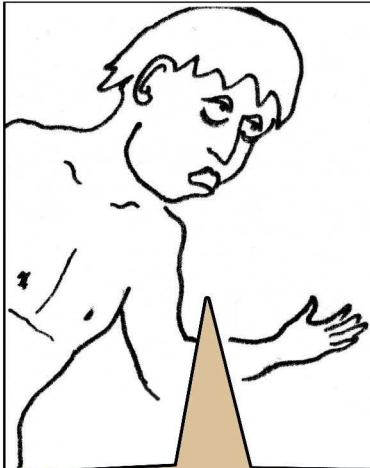


My Lord, your temple is surrounded and the rabble has advanced right up to your front door.

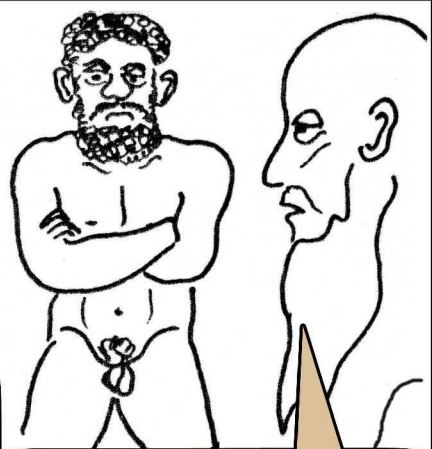
Nusku, barricade the door. Grab your weapon and stand in front of me!



My Lord, why are you so afraid of your own sons? Send and fetch down An and have Enki brought into your presence.

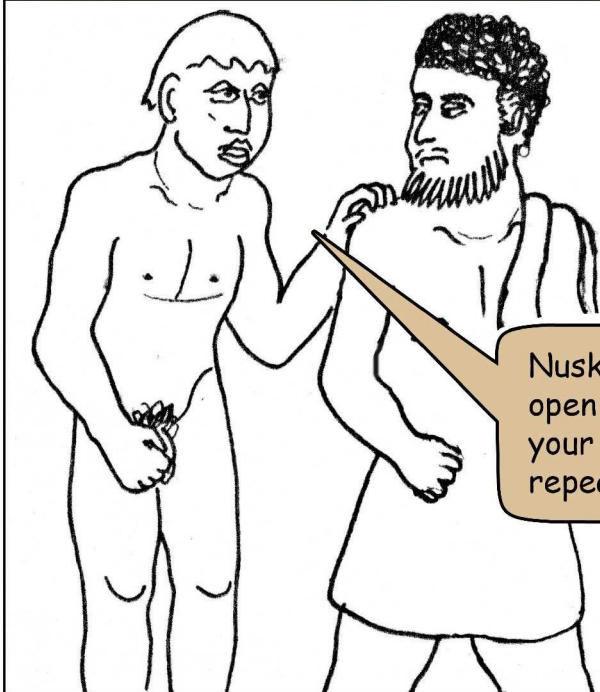


An and Enki are fetched in.

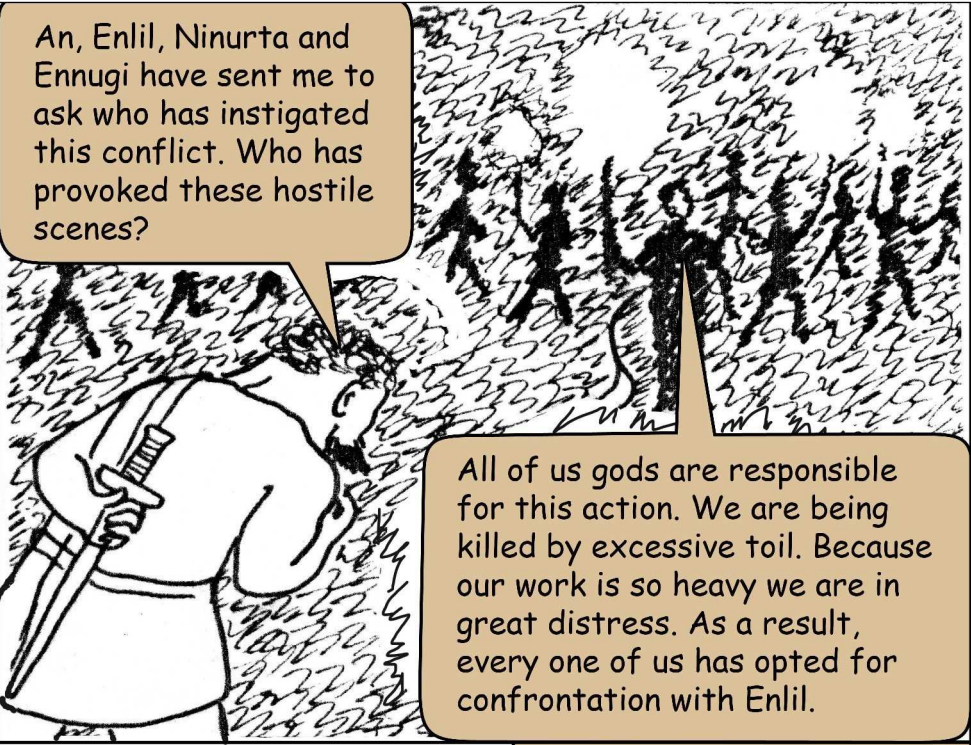


Do you think this is directed against me personally? Should I fight against my own family? With my very own eyes I have seen the rabble that they have brought right to my front door.

Let Nusku go and find out the reason why the gods have surrounded your house.

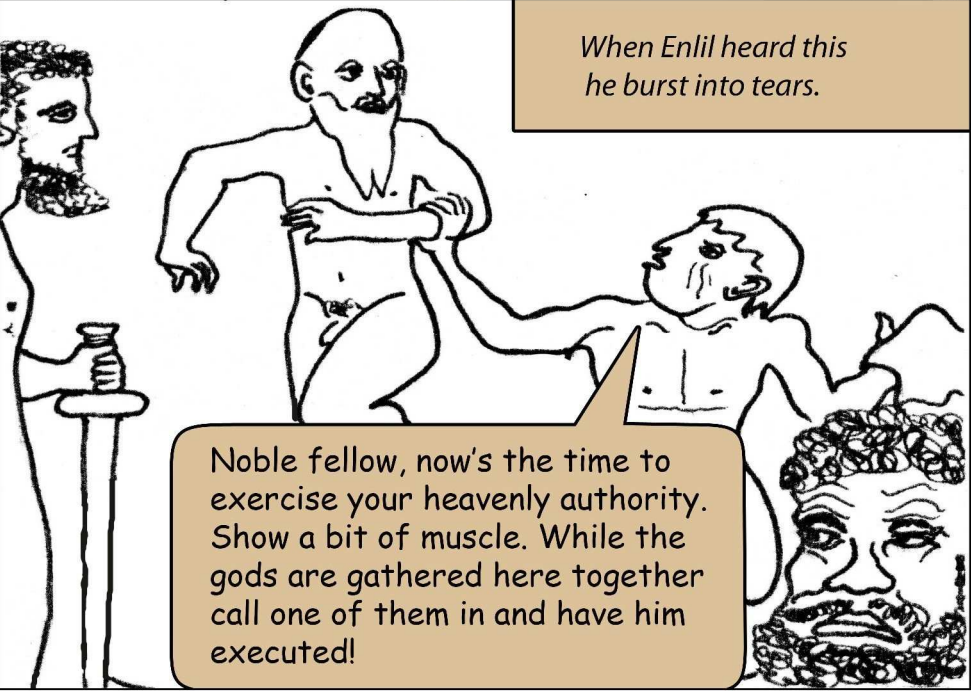


Nusku take your weapon, open the door and make your bow to the gods and repeat these words.



An, Enlil, Ninurta and Ennugi have sent me to ask who has instigated this conflict. Who has provoked these hostile scenes?

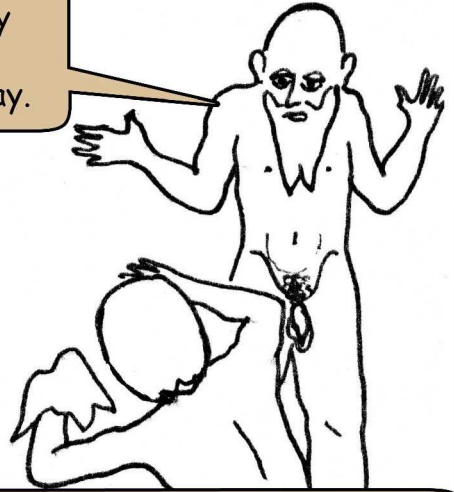
All of us gods are responsible for this action. We are being killed by excessive toil. Because our work is so heavy we are in great distress. As a result, every one of us has opted for confrontation with Enlil.



When Enlil heard this he burst into tears.

Noble fellow, now's the time to exercise your heavenly authority. Show a bit of muscle. While the gods are gathered here together call one of them in and have him executed!

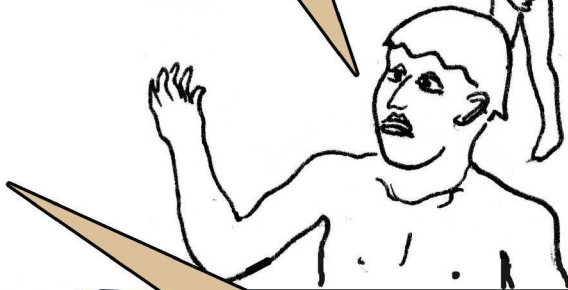
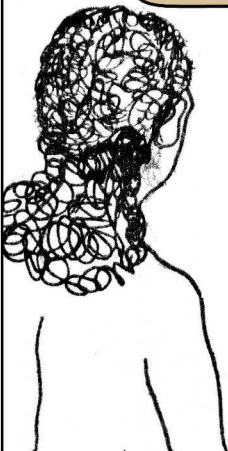
But what are we accusing them of? It's true that their work is heavy and distresses them. We could hear their heavy wailing every day.



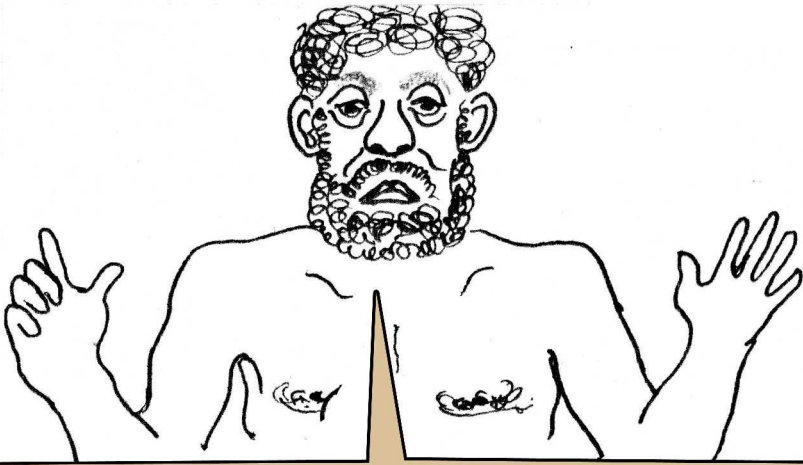
I see that Nintu, the goddess of birth, is there. Why don't you get her to create man so that HE can bear the yolk and carry this labour for the gods?

They summon Nintu, wise midwife of the gods.

As you are the goddess of birth why don't you create man so that he can do the gods' work?

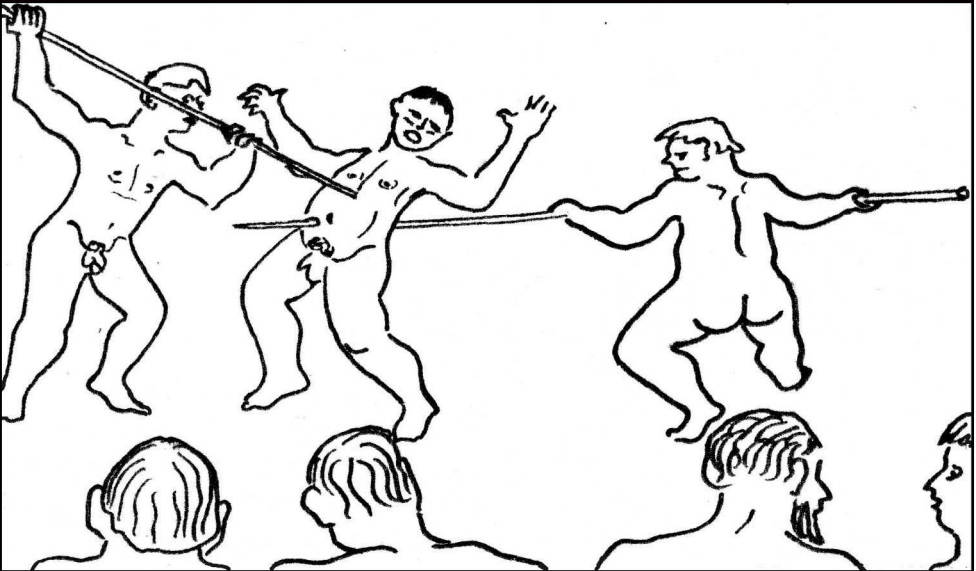


I can't just create things like that. Enki is skilled since he can cleanse everything. Let him give me some clay to do the job.

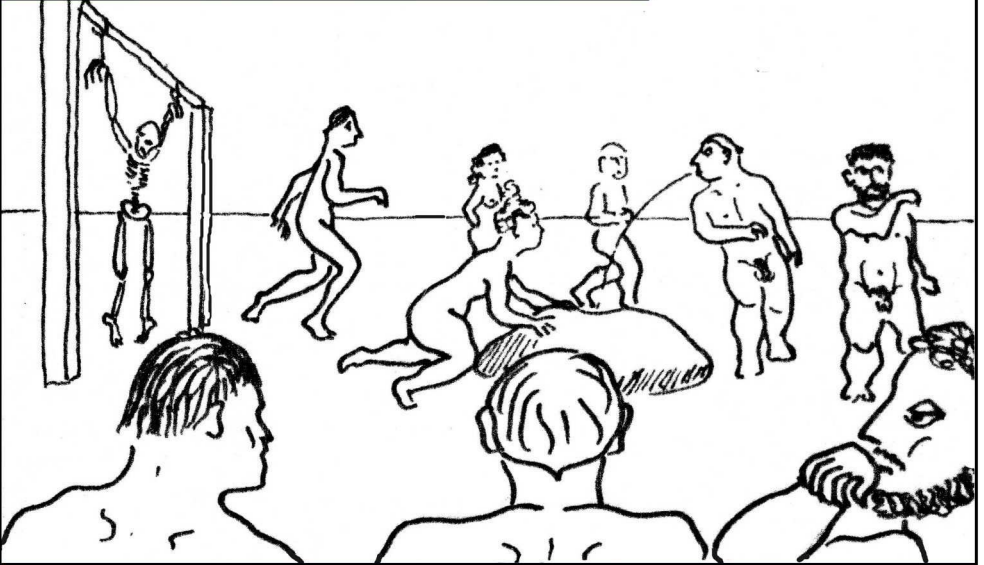


We will have to slaughter one god so that the others can be cleansed. Nintu must make her mix of clay from his flesh, in which 'god and man' are thoroughly mixed. A live spirit will result from this god's flesh and we will hear the drum that announces that the time for rest has come.

In the assembly they slew Weila, who had personality.



Nintu mixed the clay from his flesh and blood and all the gods spat on the clay.



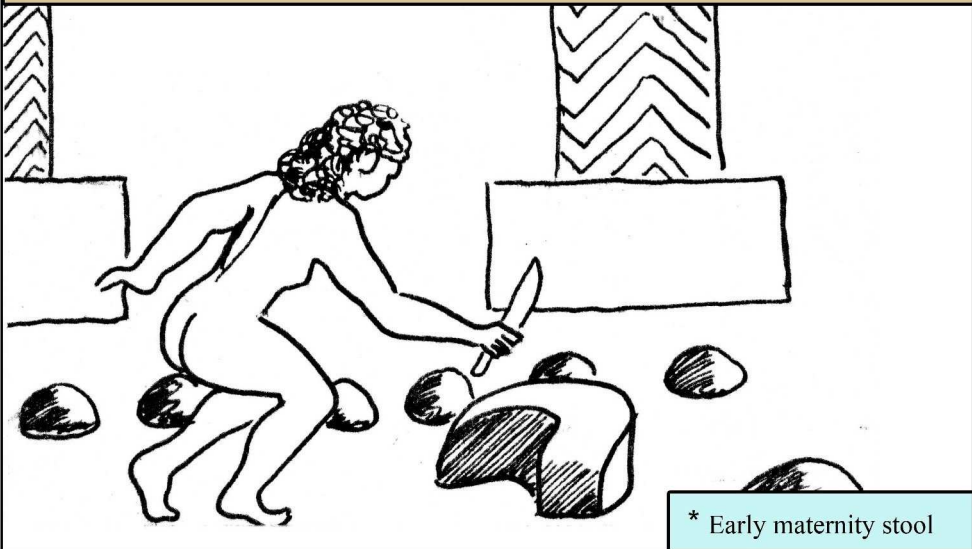
Enki and Nintu entered the house of destiny. He kneaded the clay in her presence. All around, the goddesses of birth were gathered.



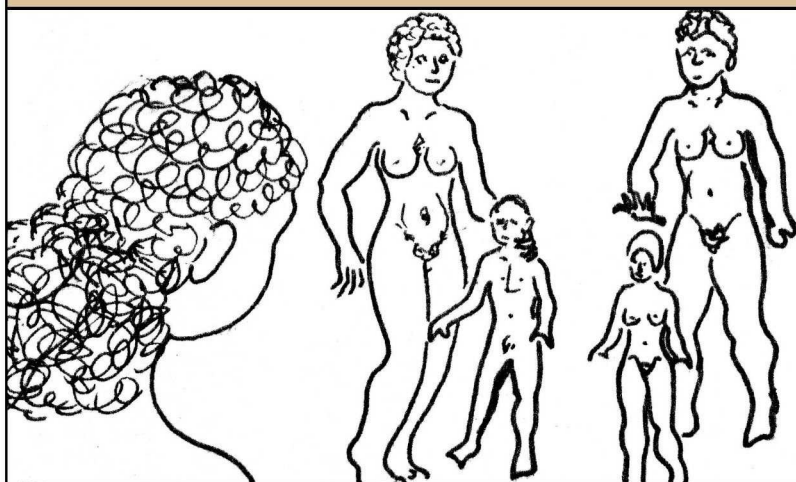
She started reciting the incantation. Enki, sitting in front of her was prompting her.



After she had finished the incantation she nipped off fourteen pieces of clay. Seven she put on the right, seven on the left. Between them she placed the brick and on it the knife to cut the umbilical cord.*



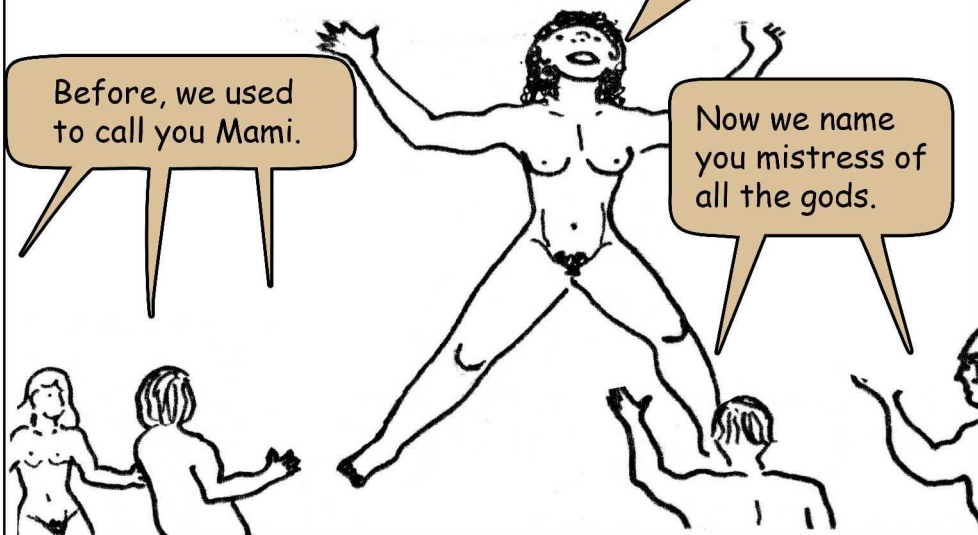
Of the fourteen goddesses of birth present, seven produced males and seven females. Since Mama (Nintu) conceived the regulation for the human race they completed them in pairs, in her presence.



There! You gave me a job to do and I have done it. I have removed your heavy labour. I have imposed your toil upon man. You have slaughtered a god together with his personality and I have loosed the yolk, I have established freedom!

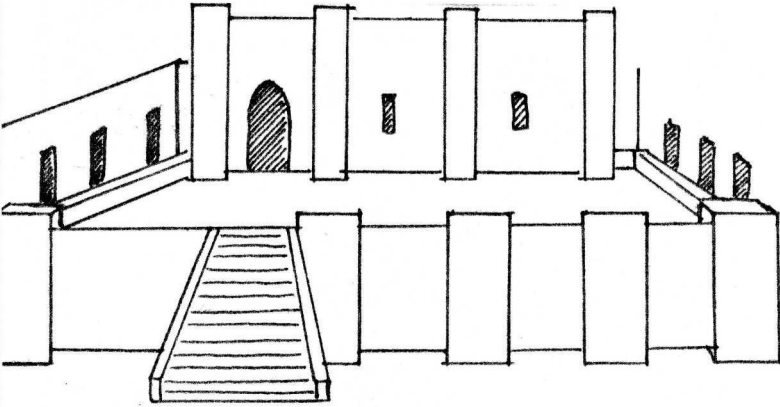
Before, we used to call you Mami.

Now we name you mistress of all the gods.



The humans are now set to work to complete the creation that the gods had started.

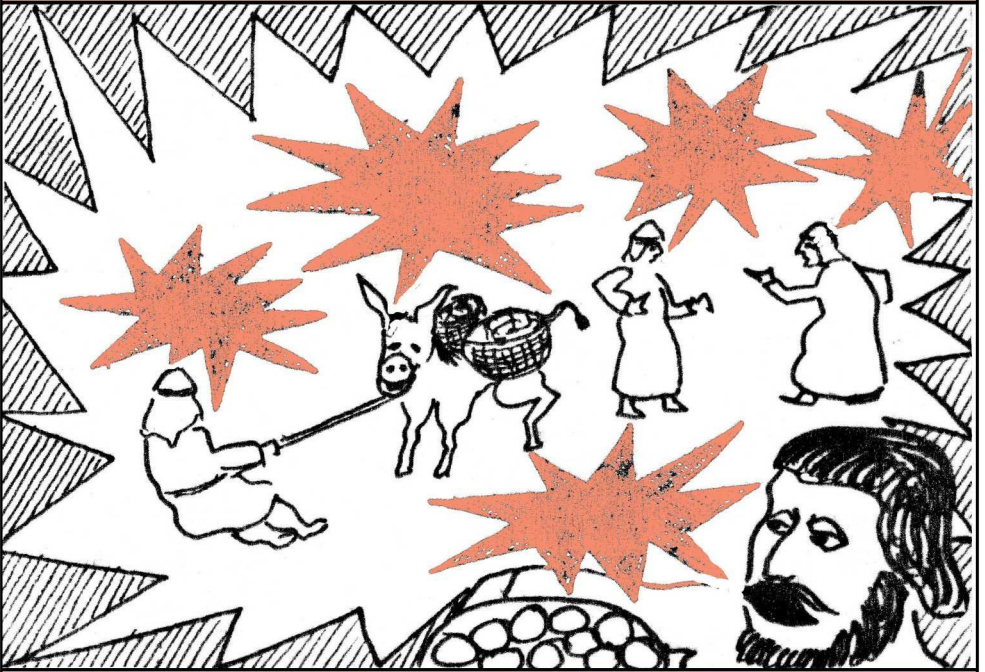
With picks and spades they built the shrines...



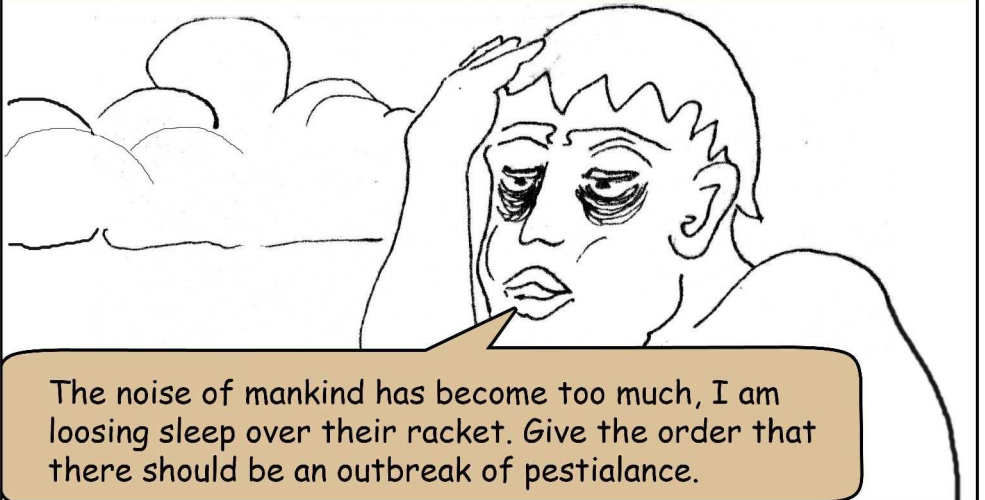
... they built the big canal banks for the sustenance of the gods and for food for the people.



Before 12,000 years had passed the land became wide and the people multiplied. The land bellowed like a wild ox.



Enlil was disturbed by their uproar and brought the matter up with the great gods.



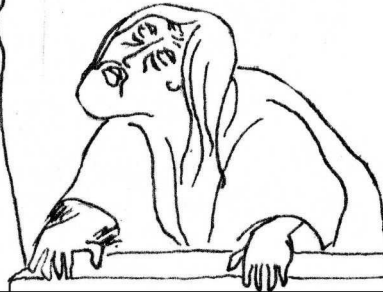
The noise of mankind has become too much, I am losing sleep over their racket. Give the order that there should be an outbreak of pestilence.

Atra-hasis, the discerning one, kept an ear open to Enki. He and his god spoke to each other quite freely.

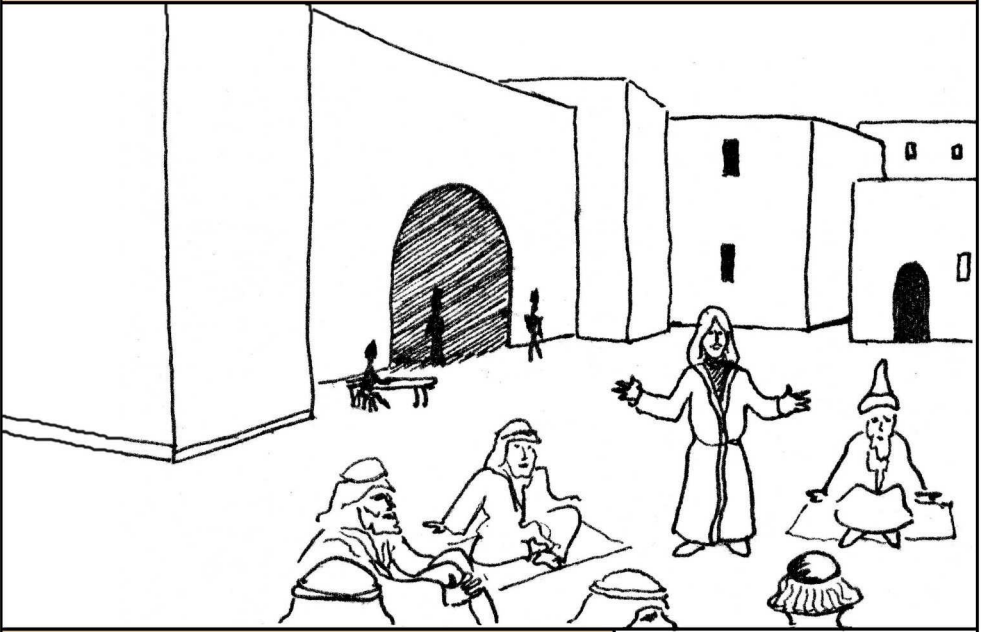
Lord, humanity is groaning. Your disease is consuming the land. Since it was you who created us, will you remove the disease, sickness, plague and pestilence?



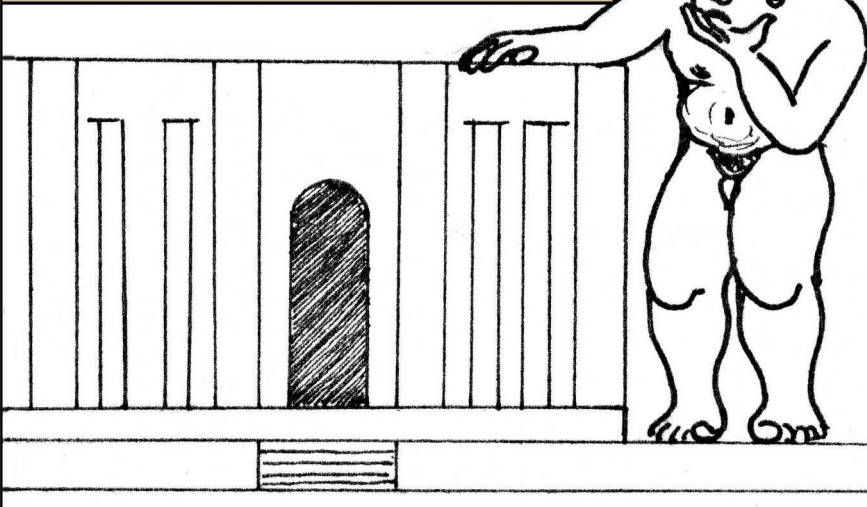
Hmmmm. Tell this to the people. 'Stop praying to all your gods and goddesses and concentrate your efforts on Nantura. Bring a baked loaf and put it in front of his door. Maybe this offering will please him and he will be ashamed and lift his hand.'



Atra-hasis spoke to the elders and they agreed with all he said.

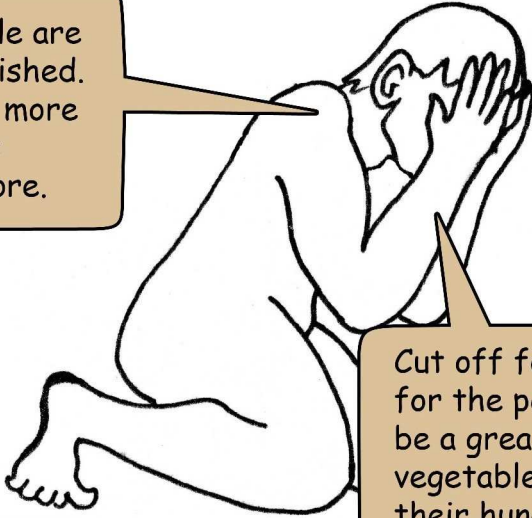


They built a temple for Nantura in the city and singled out his door. Nantura was shamed by the gifts, lifted his hand and the plague left.



*Again the land widened and the people multiplied.
The land bellowed like wild bulls. Enlil was disturbed
by their uproar and addressed the gods.*

The people are
not diminished.
They are more
numerous
than before.



Cut off food supplies
for the people. Let there
be a great scarcity of
vegetables to satisfy
their hunger.

Adad must make his rain scarce. The flood must not
rise above its source. Let the winds parch the ground.
Let the clouds hold back their rain. Let the land withhold
its yield. Let there be no more rejoicing among them!

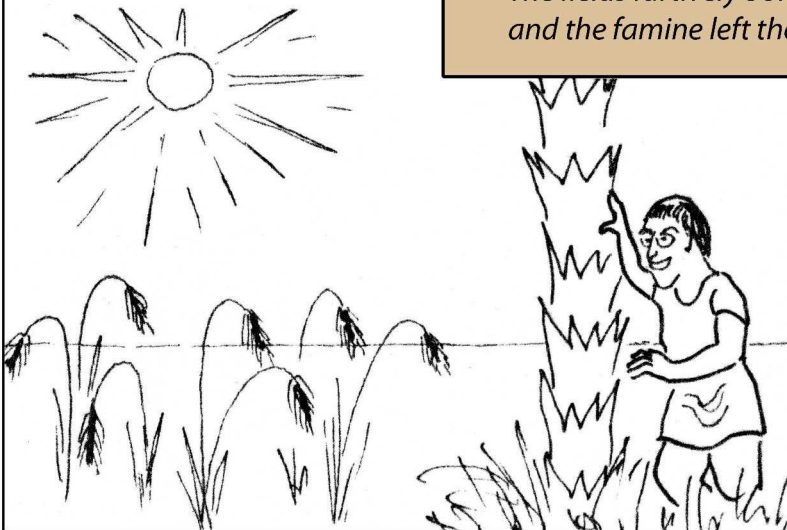


The people again go to Enki for advice. He suggests they concentrate their prayers and offerings on Adad. The ploy works.

Adad was shamed by these gifts and lifted his hand. In the morning he rained down a mist and in the night he furtively rained down a dew.



The fields furtively bore grain and the famine left them.



There's a gap here in the text but presumably Enlil again sets about dealing with mankind, for ...

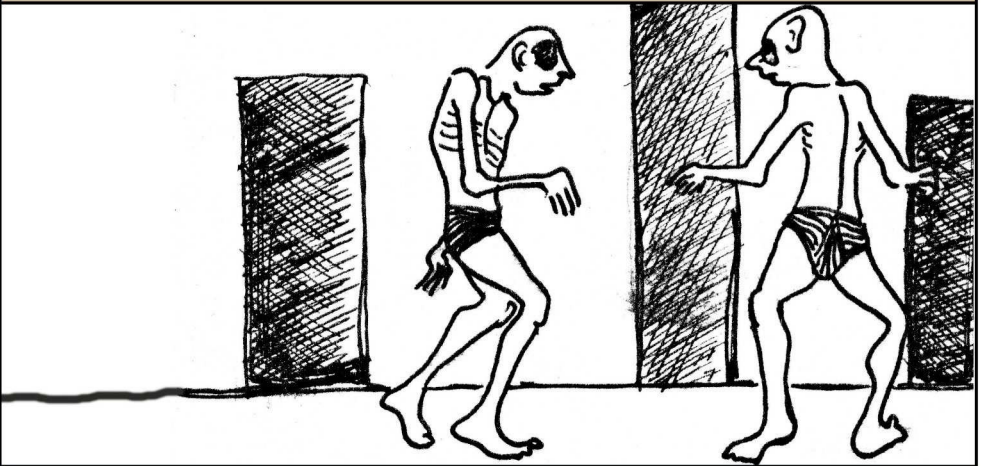
Above, the rain was withheld; below, the flood did not rise above its source. The womb of the earth did not bear, vegetation did not sprout. The black fields became white as the broad plains choked with salt.



The first year they ate grass. The second they were afflicted with the itch. When the third year came their features were drawn with hunger. Their faces were encrusted like malt. They lived on the verge of death.



When the fourth year arrived their faces appeared green, they walked on the street hunched up, their broad shoulders narrowed, their long legs shortened.



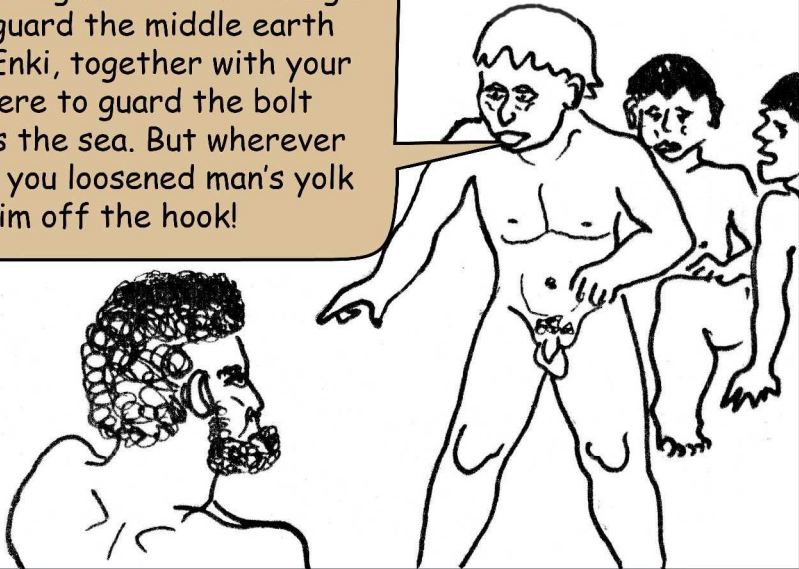
When the fifth year arrived the mother would not open the door to the daughter.



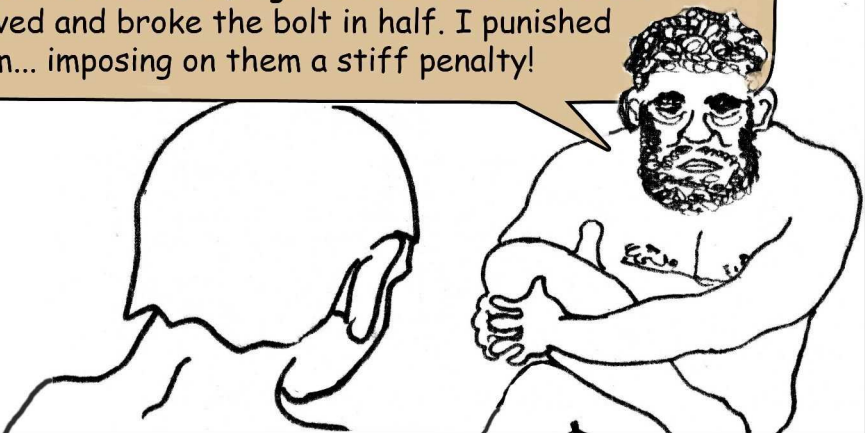
When the sixth year arrived they served up the daughter for dinner and the son for food. One house consumed another. The people lived on the verge of death.

We don't know how Enki saved humanity this time, but he must have done for the next thing we hear is that an infuriated Enlil has called yet another meeting of the gods.

We all of us agreed on a common policy. An and Adad were to guard the upper regions. Sin and Nergal were to guard the middle earth and you Enki, together with your plants, were to guard the bolt that bars the sea. But wherever you went you loosened man's yolk and let him off the hook!



I did guard the bolt that bars the sea, together with my plants. However, a great multitude of fishes arrived and broke the bolt in half. I punished them... imposing on them a stiff penalty!



The argument goes on and on, Enlil repeating his charges again and again, till finally ...

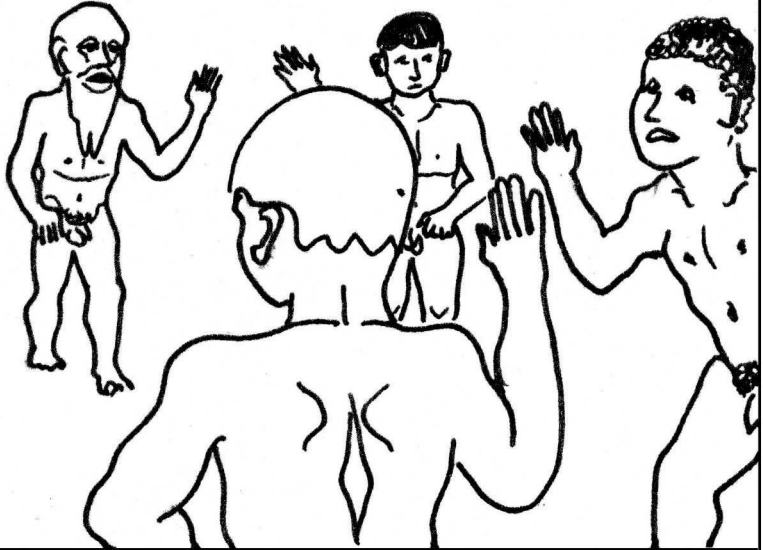
Enki got fed up sitting in the assembly of the gods and was overcome by laughter.



Enlil changes tack and introduces his final solution: a great flood that will finish mankind for good and all.

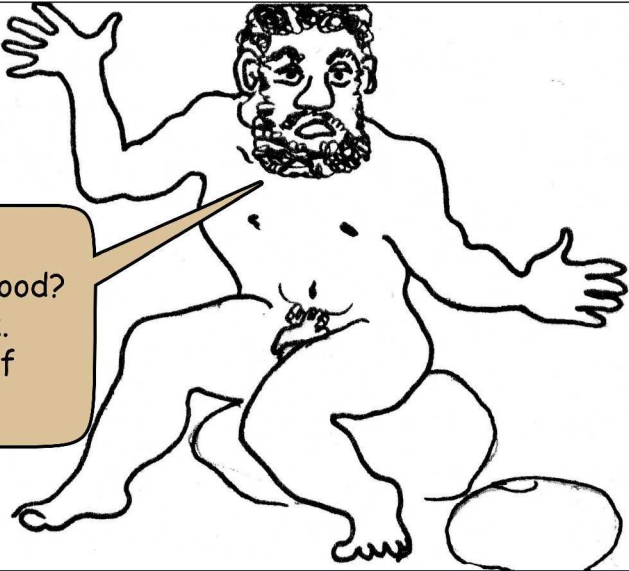


An swears first, then Enlil swears and his sons, the gods, swear with him.



Why will you bind me with an oath?
Do you want me to lay hands on my
own people? What is this flood that
you are ordering me to create?





Am I supposed to
bring to birth a Flood?
That is Enlil's task.
Let him create it if
he so chooses!

The gods commenced total destruction, Enlil did an evil deed to humanity.



Enki decides to send a dream to warn Atra-hasis of the assembly's decision against humanity. But Atra-hasis is confused.



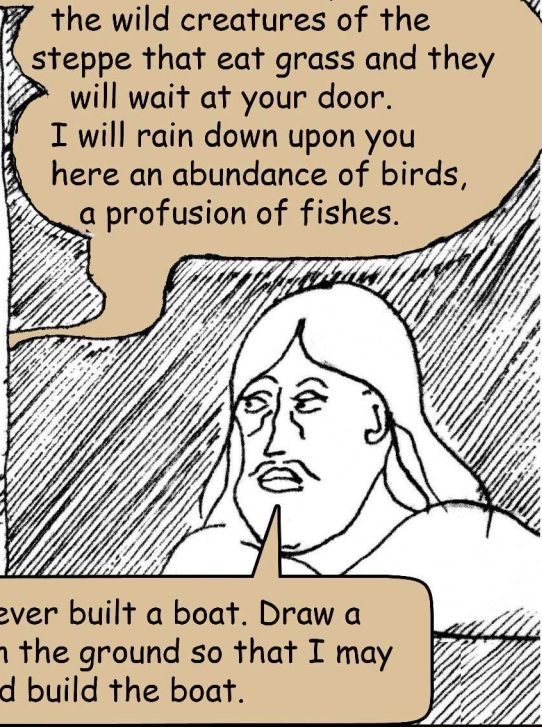
Lord, show me the meaning of this dream that I may search for its outcome.

To avoid being accused of giving the game away Enki addresses the reed-hut's wall rather than Atra-hasis himself.



Wall, listen to me! Reed-hut, observe my word. Abandon your property and save your life. Destroy your house and build a boat. It shall be an ark and shall be called 'life preserver'. Its structure shall be made entirely of reeds. Roof it over like the heaven so that the sun shall not see inside it. The tackle should be very strong. Calk the boat well. Let the pitch be tough so as to give the boat strength.

Observe the appointed time of which I will inform you. Enter the boat and close the boat's door. Send up into it your goods, your property, your wife, your kith, your kin and the skilled workers. I will send you all the wild creatures of the steppe that eat grass and they will wait at your door. I will rain down upon you here an abundance of birds, a profusion of fishes.



I have never built a boat. Draw a design on the ground so that I may see it and build the boat.

Enki drew the design on the ground. He opened the water clock and filled it and announced the coming of the flood for the seventh night.

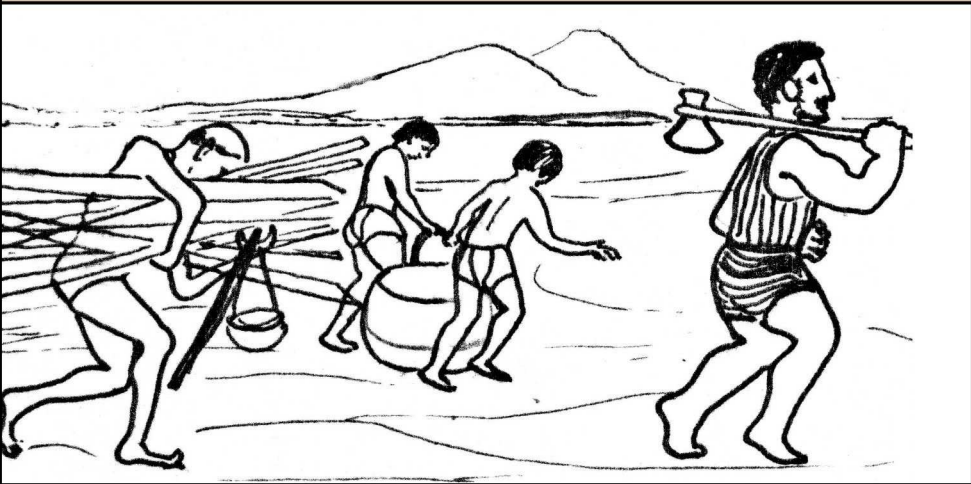


*Atra-hasis received the command.
He assembled the elders at the gate.*

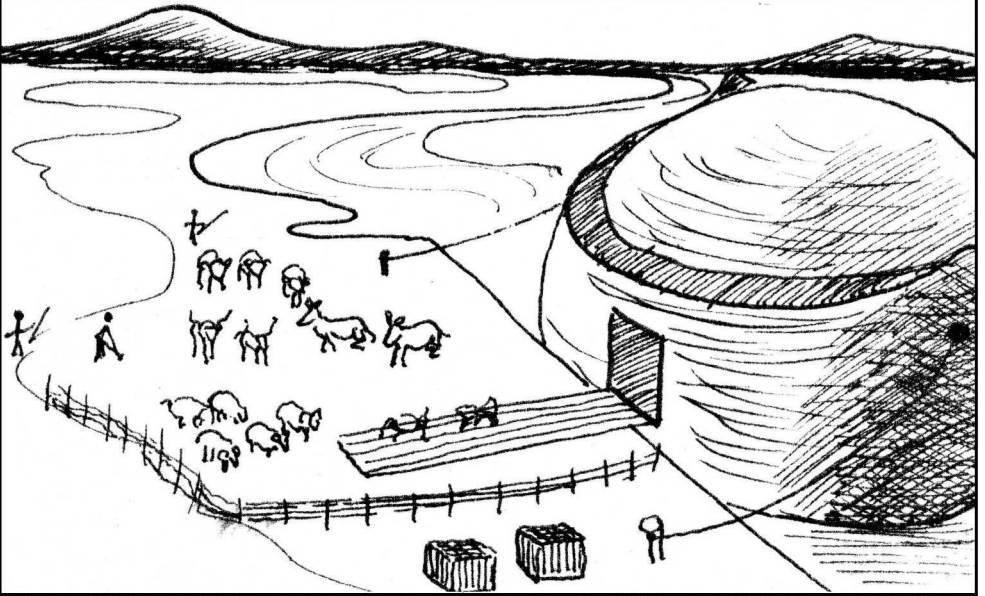


The elders agreed to help him.

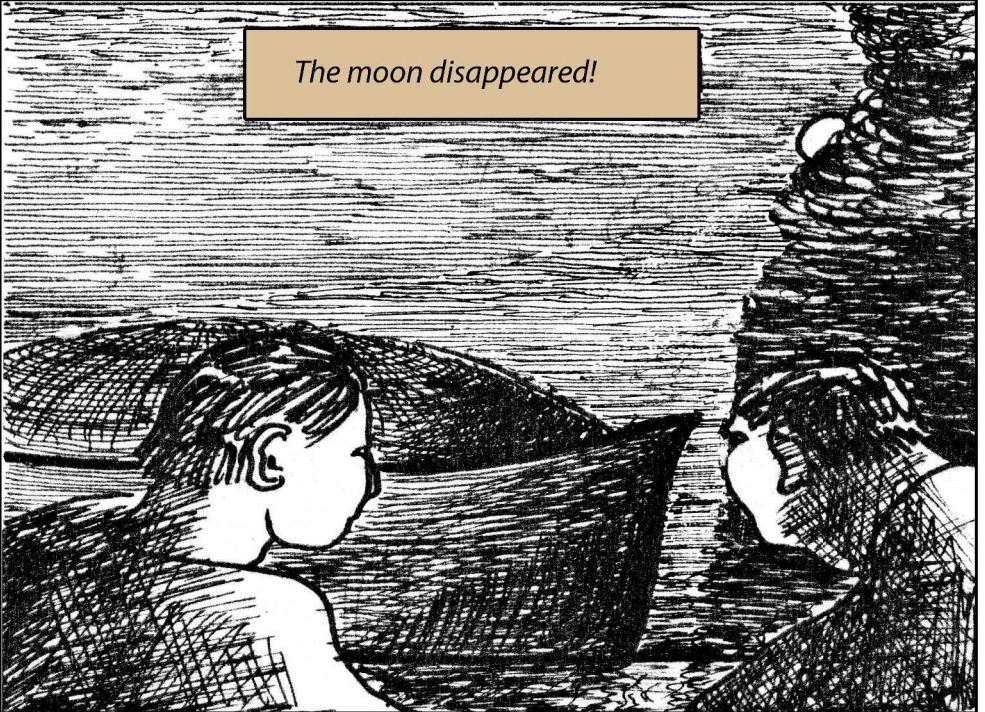
*The carpenter carried his axe, the child carried the pitch,
the poor man brought what was needed.*



Clean animals, fat animals, winged birds of heaven he put on board. Cattle and wild animals he put on board.



The moon disappeared!



He invited the people to a banquet. He sent his family on board. They ate and drank but he was in and out. He could not sit, he could not crouch, for his heart was broken and he was vomiting gall.



The appearance of the weather changed. Adad roared in the clouds. As soon as he heard Adad's voice, pitch was brought for him to close the door.



*Soon after he had bolted the door the winds became savage.
He arose and severed the hawser and set the boat adrift.*



*Adad rode on the four winds, his asses. The storm, the gale, the
tempest blew for him. The south wind arose at his side, the west
wind blew along with him. The chariot of the gods, it sweeps
forward, it kills, it threshes.*



Ninurta went ahead and caused the dykes to overflow, Errakal tore up the mooring poles, Zu with his talons rent the heavens. He smashed the land like a pot and scattered its council.



The flood set out and came upon the people like a battle. One person did not see another, they were not recognizable in the destruction. The flood bellowed like a bull. Like a whinnying wild ass the wind howled. The darkness was intense. There was no sun.



The noise of the flood set the gods atremble. Enki was beside himself, seeing that his sons were thrown down before him. Nintu's lips were covered with feverishness seeing that her sons were thrown down at her command.



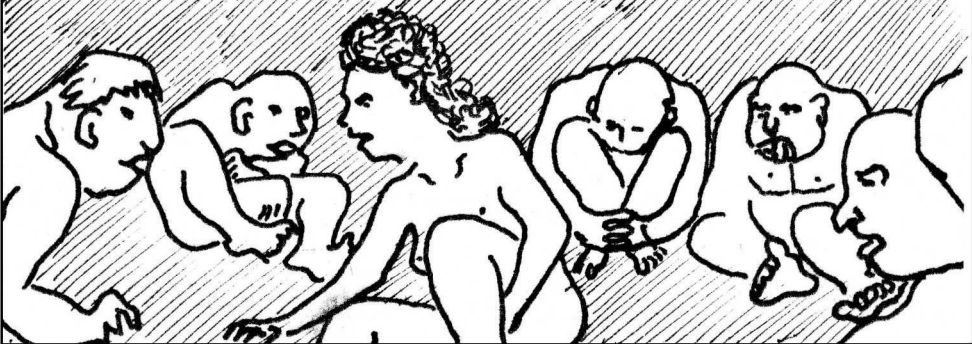
Let the day become dark; let it become gloomy again. How could I have commanded total destruction in the assembly of the gods? Enlil has given an evil order, he had uttered an abominable evil. Of my own choice and to my own hurt I listened to their noise. My offspring, cut off from me, have become like flies!



They fill the rivers like dragonflies, like a raft they have put into the riverbank. I have seen and wept over them. I have ended my lamentation for them.



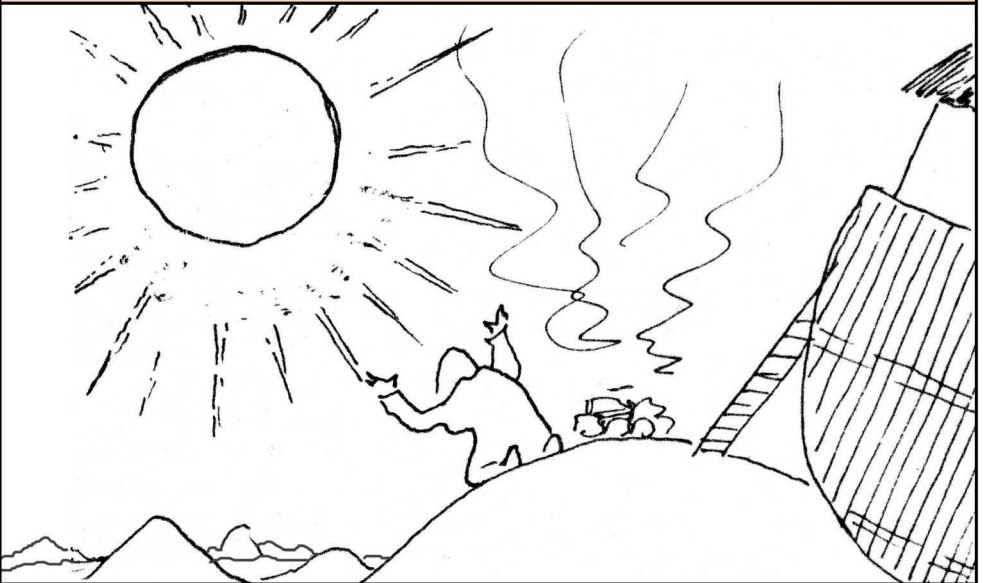
Nintu wailed and spent her emotions. She was surfeited with grief and thirsted for beer. The great gods were sitting in hunger and thirst where she sat weeping. Like sheep they filled the trough. Their lips were feverishly athirst. They were suffering cramp from hunger.



*For seven days and seven nights
came the deluge, the storm, the flood.*



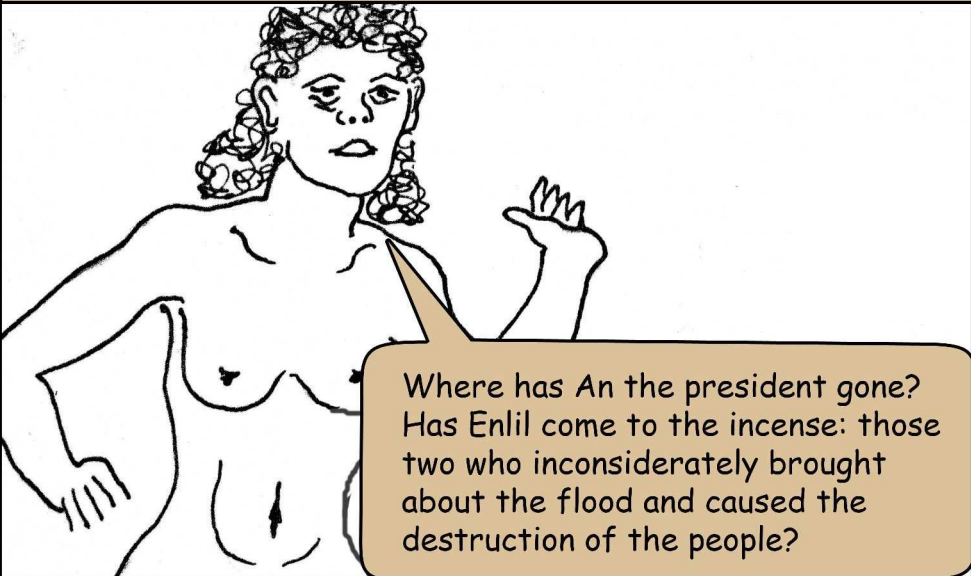
There's a gap in the text of about fifty lines here, which can only be filled by looking ahead to the Gilgamesh - Utnapishtime version. From this we learn that, after the storm had abated, the boat came to rest on a mountain top where Atra-hasis offered up a sacrifice to the gods, in gratitude for his preservation.



The gods sniffed the smell. They gathered like flies over the offering.

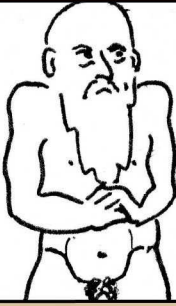


After they had eaten the offering Nintu arose to complain against all of them.



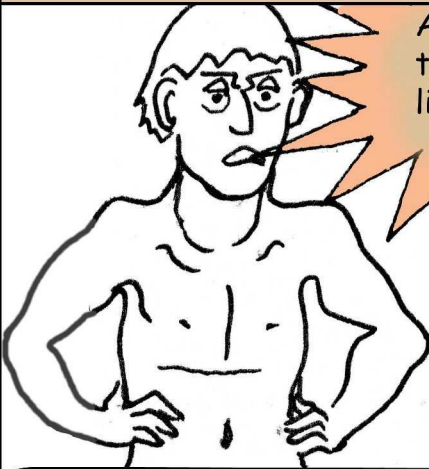
Where has An the president gone?
Has Enlil come to the incense: those
two who inconsiderately brought
about the flood and caused the
destruction of the people?

An brings Nintu a beautiful necklace of blue lapis lazuli stones carved in the form of flies as a peace offering.

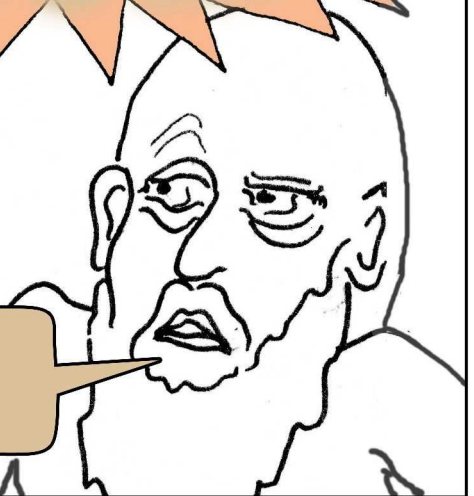


Let this lapis around my neck stand for those flies, that I may remember what has happened, everyday and forever.

The warrior Enlil saw the boat and was filled with anger against the great gods.



All of us great gods decided together on an oath. How did life escape? How did man survive the destruction?



Who but Enki could do this? I did not reveal the command!

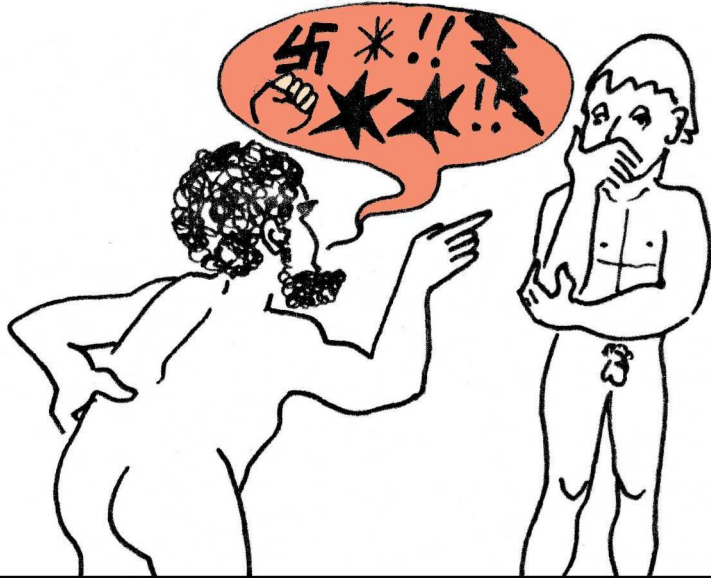


INDEED IT WAS I WHO DID
IT BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES.
I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR
SAVING LIFE.



How COULD you impose on
someone who disregards your
commands such a penalty?

The text is again damaged here but it would seem that Enki, his patience worn thin, decides to let Enlil know exactly what he thinks of his tactics...



... and Enlil seems to respond to this rough treatment.



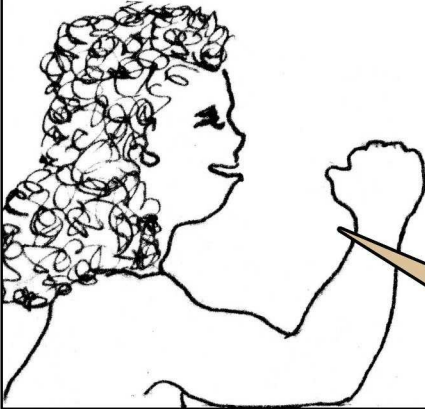
THERE, I have eased my feelings!

Come now, summon the birth goddess Nintu. You and she must confer in the assembly.

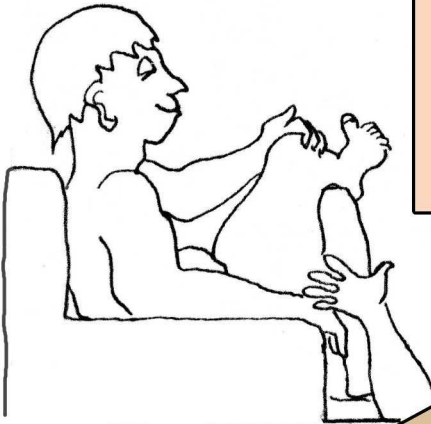


Enki and Nintu decide that the best way to deal with human overpopulation is to create thinning mechanisms.

In addition let there be a third category among the people - women who bear and women who do not bear.



Let there be Pasittu-demons to snatch the baby from the lap of her who bore it.




The myth ends with a hugely flattering but quite undeserved speech in praise of Enlil made by Enki.



... this was the reason why we brought about the flood. But mankind survived the destruction! Let the great gods hear this song and speak to one another about your greatness, in praise of you, great counsellor!

UTNAPISHTIME

Now to the Gilgamesh version of the flood story. The epic itself is about Gilgamesh's quest for immortality and describes how, during his wanderings, he came across Utnapishtime, the only man to have been granted eternal life by the gods. Naturally, Gilgamesh is anxious to know how this came about.

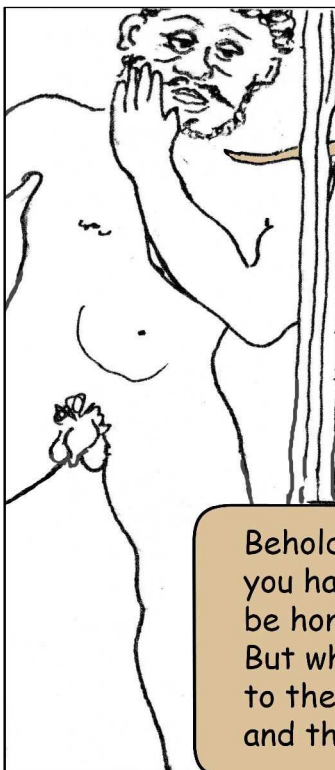


Looking at you, Utnapishtime, I don't find you very different from myself! Tell me how was it that in your quest for life you managed to join the assembly of the gods?


I will reveal to you a secret, Gilgamesh. It took place in a city you know called Shurripaic, a city that was already ancient when the gods plotted to bring the flood. Enki was with the other gods and he revealed their words to a reed hut.




Reed hut, listen, wall reflect,
Man of Shurripaic, son of Ubar
Tutu, tear down the house and
build a ship, Give up possessions.
Seek life, forswear goods and
keep the soul alive,



Take the seed of all living things aboard the ship. The ship's dimension shall be to measure. Her width and length shall be equal. Her roof shall be like the vaults of heaven,

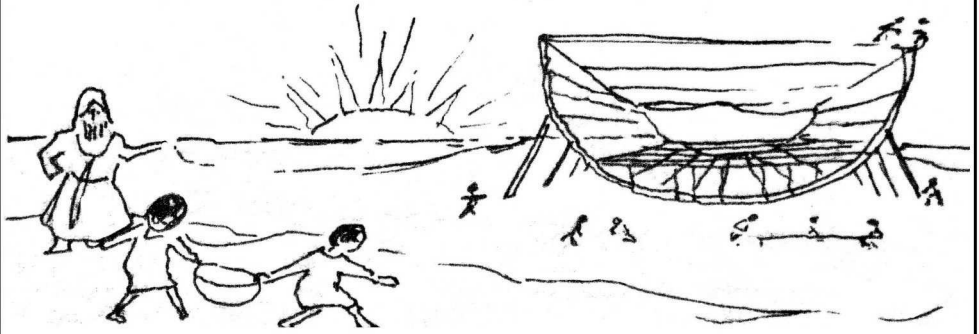


Behold, my Lord, what you have ordered I will be honoured to carry out. But what shall I answer to the city, the people and the elders?



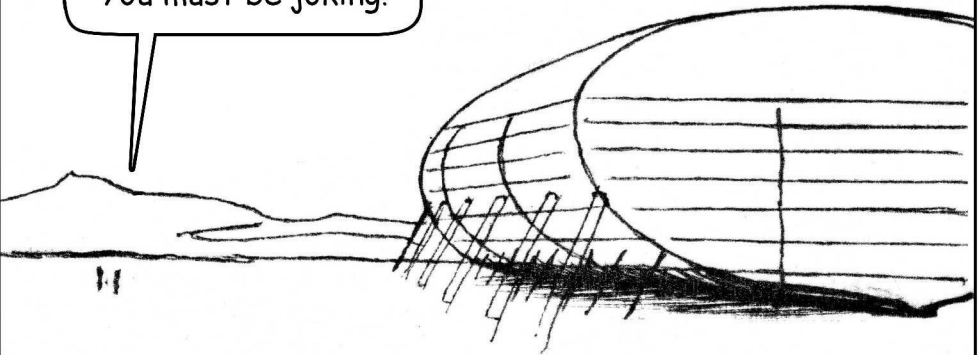
This is what you shall say to them: 'I have learnt that Enlil is hostile to me so I cannot reside in your city. I will go down to the deep waters to live with my Lord Enki. But upon you he will shower abundance. The land shall have its fill of rich harvests.'

With the first glow of dawn the people of the land were gathered about me. The little ones carried bitumen while the grownups brought everything else that was needed.



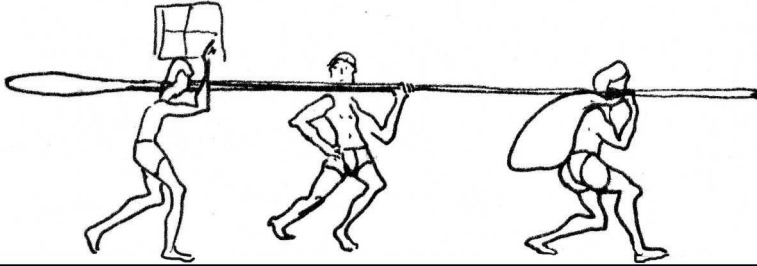
On the fifth day I laid the keel and the ribs, then I made fast the planking. The ground-space was one acre, each side of the deck measured one hundred and twenty cubits, making a square.

That's a boat?
You must be joking!



Measurements for a cargo boat going nowhere!

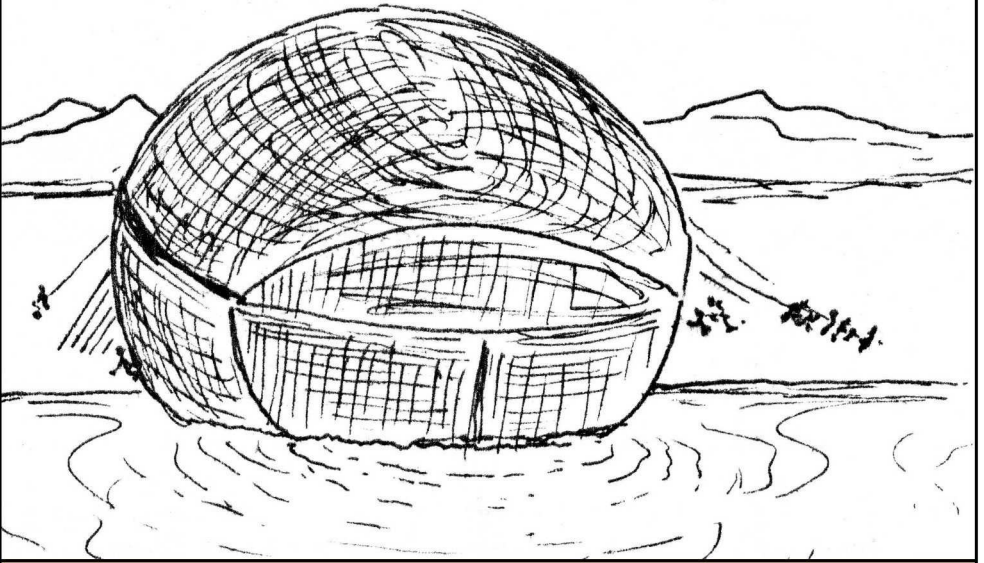
I built six decks below, seven in all. I divided them into nine sections with bulkheads between. I drove in wedges where needed. I saw to the punt poles and laid in supplies.



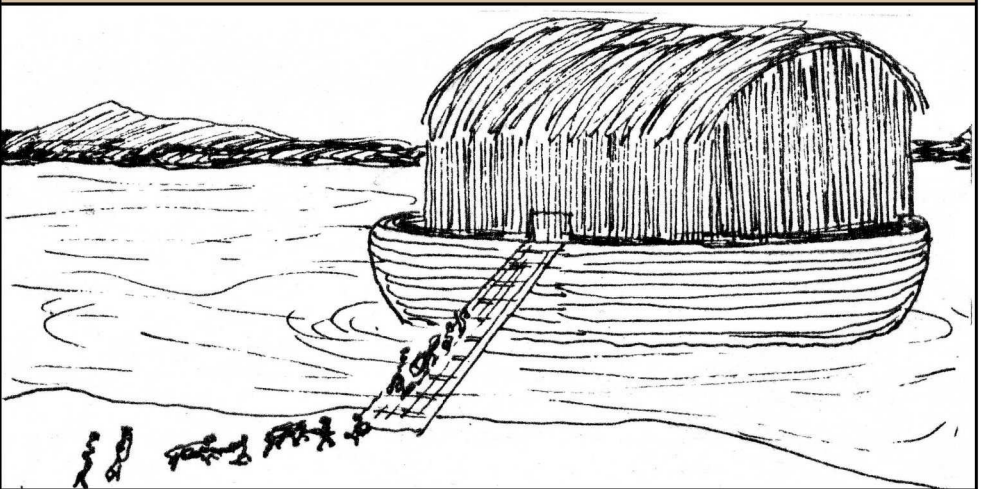
The carriers brought oil in baskets. I poured pitch into the furnace and asphalt and oil; more oil was consumed in calking, and more again the master of the boat took into his stores. I slaughtered bullocks for the people and every day I killed sheep. I gave the shipwrights wine to drink as though it were river water. There was feasting as at the time of the New Year's festival. On the seventh day the boat was complete.



Then was the launch full of difficulty; there was shifting of ballast above and below till two thirds was submerged.



I loaded onto her all that I had of silver and gold. I loaded onto her all the livestock that I had. All my family and kin I made to go aboard the ship. The beasts and the wild creatures of the field and all the craftsmen I made to go aboard.

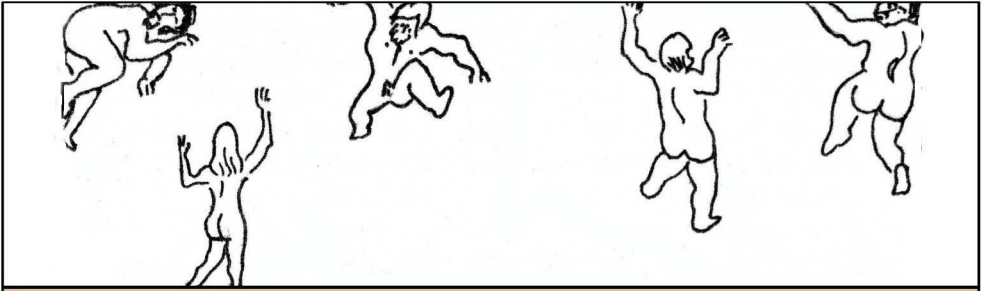


I watched the appearance of the weather. The weather was awesome to behold. I boarded the ship and battened up the entrance.

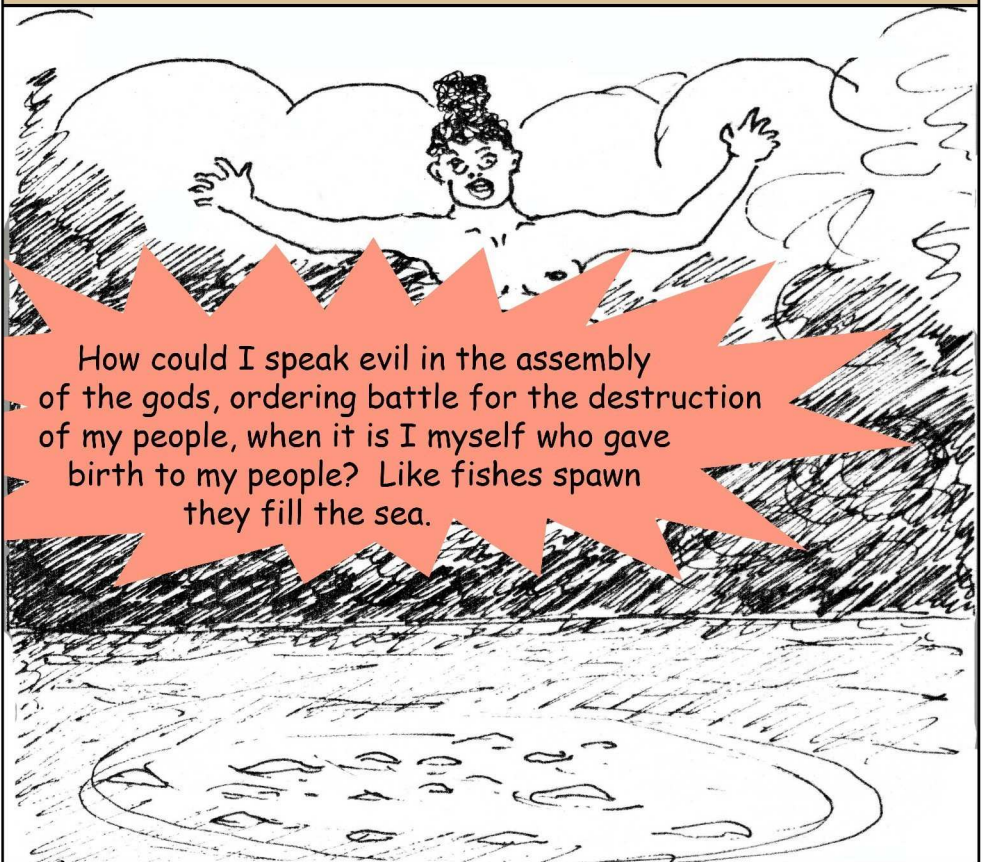


The wide land was shattered like a pot. For one day the south storm blew, gathering speed as it blew, submerging the mountains, overtaking people like a battle. No one can see his fellow, nor can the people be recognised from heaven.





The gods were frightened and, shrinking back, ascended to the heaven of An. The gods cowered like dogs, crouching against the outer wall. Inanna shrieks like a woman in labour.



How could I speak evil in the assembly of the gods, ordering battle for the destruction of my people, when it is I myself who gave birth to my people? Like fishes spawn they fill the sea.

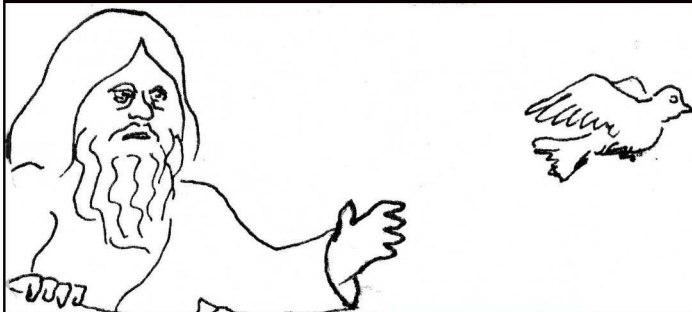
The Anunnaki gods weep with her. The gods, all humbled, sit and weep, their lips drawn tight, one and all.

Six days and nights blows the flood-wind as the south-storm sweeps the land. When the seventh day arrived the south storm hurricane subsided, the sea grew quiet, the tempest was still, the flood ceased. All of mankind had turned to clay. The landscape was as level as a flat roof.



I opened a hatch, and light fell upon my face. Bowing low I sat and wept, tears running down my face. I looked about for coastlines in the expanse of the sea.

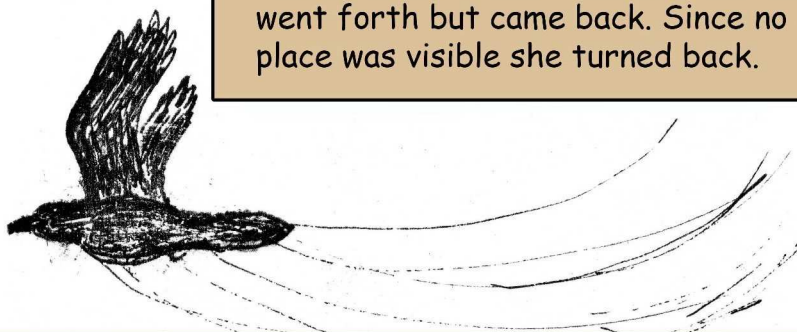
On mount Nisir the ship came to a halt. Mount Nisir held the ship fast, allowing no motion.



When the seventh day arrived I sent forth a dove. The dove went forth but came back. Since no resting place was visible she turned around.



Then I sent forth a swallow. The swallow went forth but came back. Since no resting place was visible she turned back.



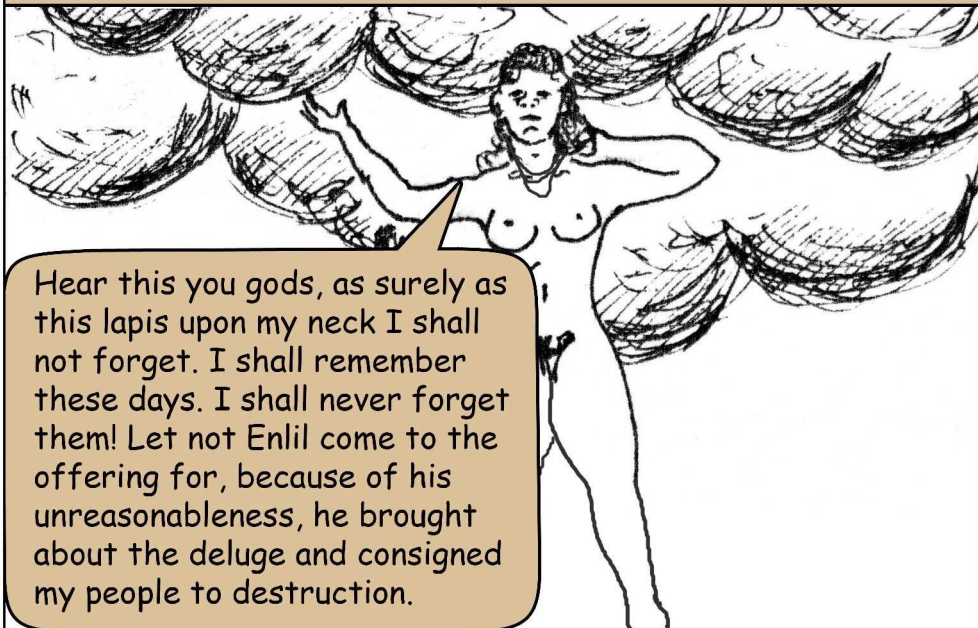
Then I sent forth and set free a raven. The raven went forth and seeing that the waters had diminished he eats, circles and turns not round.

Then I let out all the four winds and offered a sacrifice. I poured out a libation on top of the mountain. Seven, and again seven cauldrons, I set up on their stands. I heaped up wood and cane and cedar and myrtle.



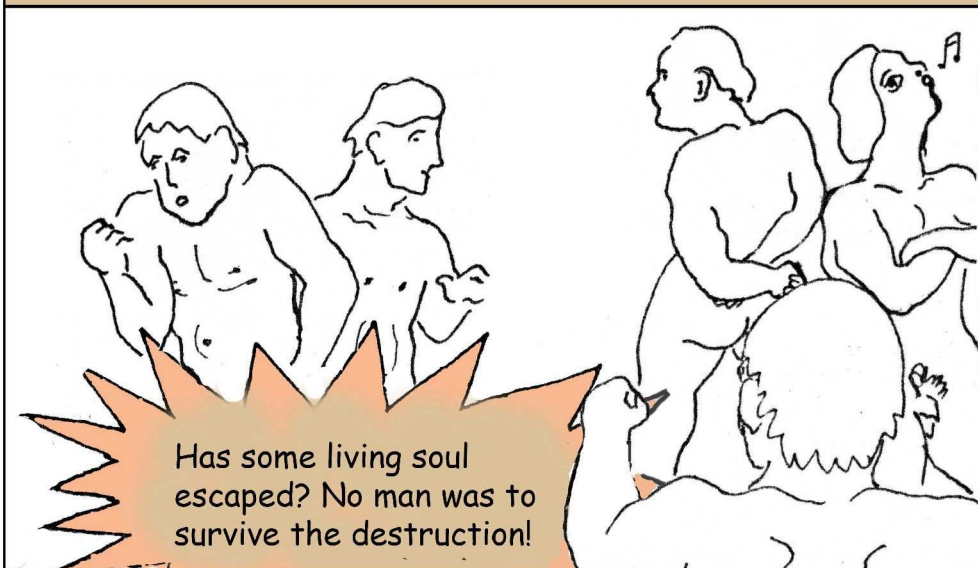
The gods smelled the savour, the gods smelled the sweet savour. The gods crowded like flies about the sacrifice.

When at length the great goddess arrived she lifted up the great jewels which An had fashioned to her liking.



Hear this you gods, as surely as this lapis upon my neck I shall not forget. I shall remember these days. I shall never forget them! Let not Enlil come to the offering for, because of his unreasonableness, he brought about the deluge and consigned my people to destruction.

When at length Enlil arrived and saw the ship he was angry. He was filled with wrath with the heavenly gods.

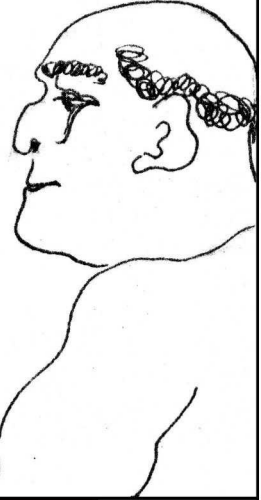


Has some living soul escaped? No man was to survive the destruction!

Ninurta opened his mouth to speak, saying to valiant Enlil...



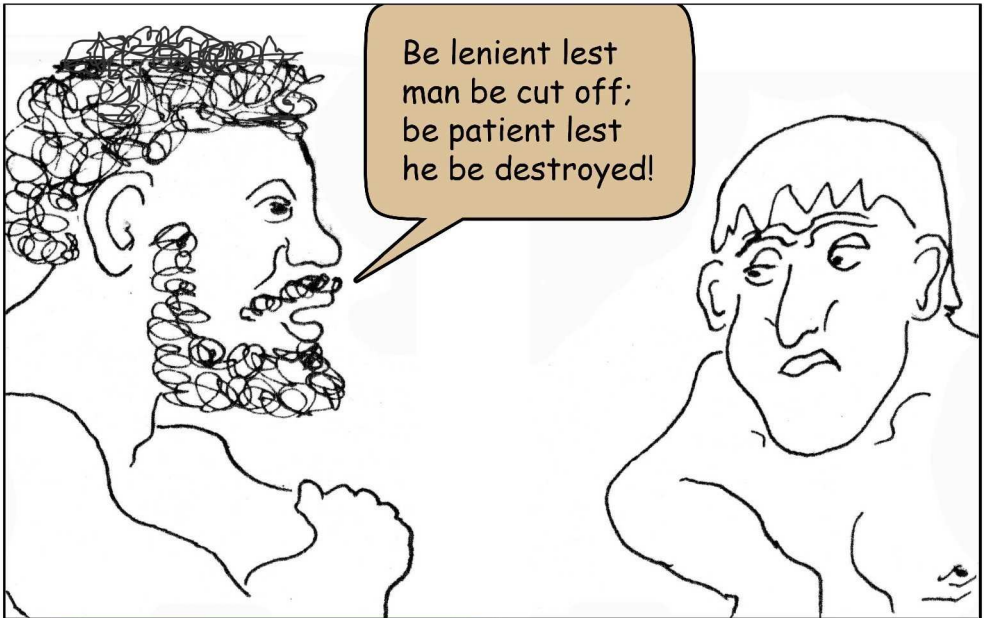
Who can devise plans better than Enki? Only Enki knows every matter.



Enki opened his mouth to speak, saying to valiant Enlil.



You wisest of the gods,.
You hero! How could you unreasoningly bring about the deluge, on the sinner impose the sin, on the transgressor impose his transgression?

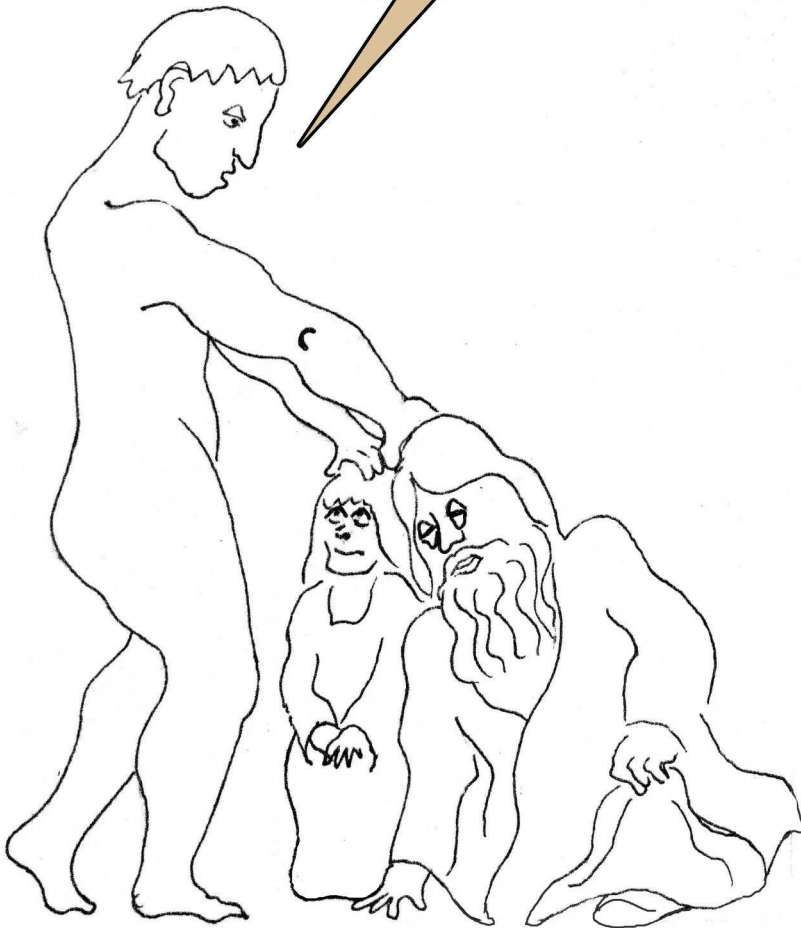


Be lenient lest
man be cut off;
be patient lest
he be destroyed!

It was not I who disclosed
the secret of the great gods.
I let Atra-hasis see a dream
and he perceived the secret
of the gods.

Thereupon Enlil went aboard the ship. Holding me by the hand he took me aboard. He took my wife and made her kneel by my side. Standing between us he touched our foreheads to bless us.

Hitherto Utnapishtime has been a human. Henceforth Utnapishtime and his wife shall be like unto us gods. Utnapishtime shall reside far away at the mouth of the river.



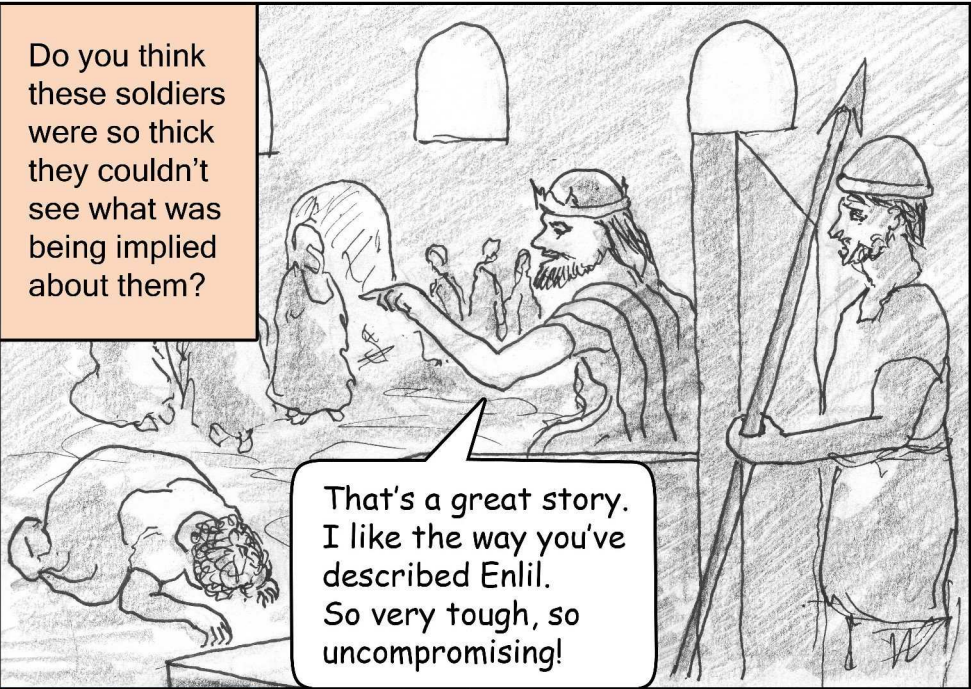


He paints a very unflattering portrait of him and his leadership, while cleverly protecting Enki against any accusation of insubordination.



When you remember archaeologists found these texts in the archives of ruined palaces you can't help wondering what the kings had made of them.

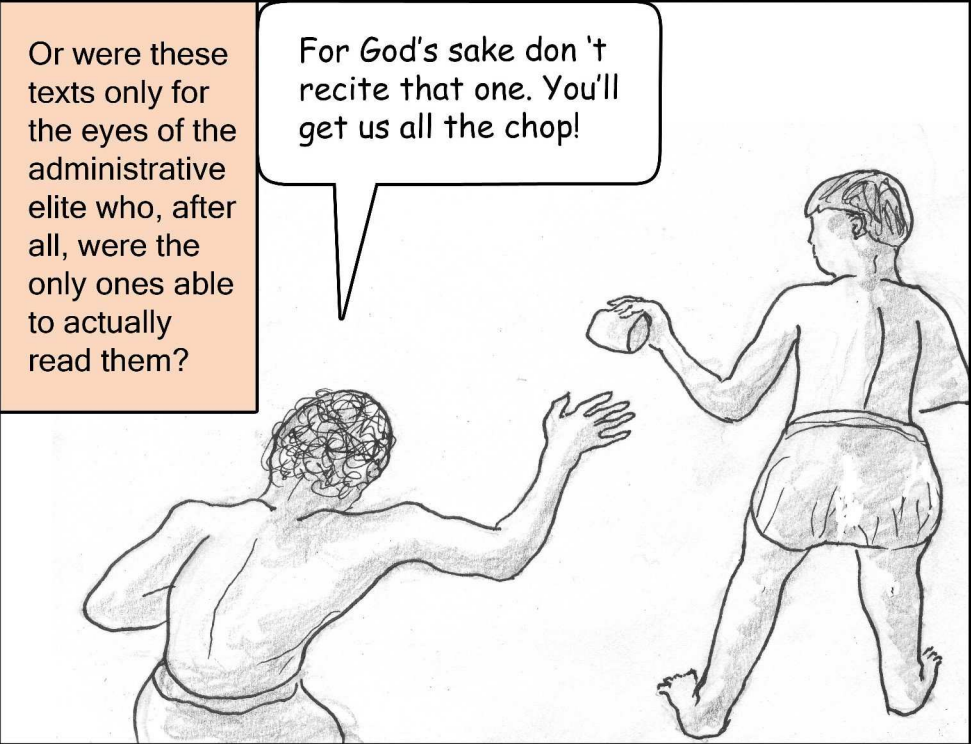
Do you think these soldiers were so thick they couldn't see what was being implied about them?



That's a great story. I like the way you've described Enlil. So very tough, so uncompromising!

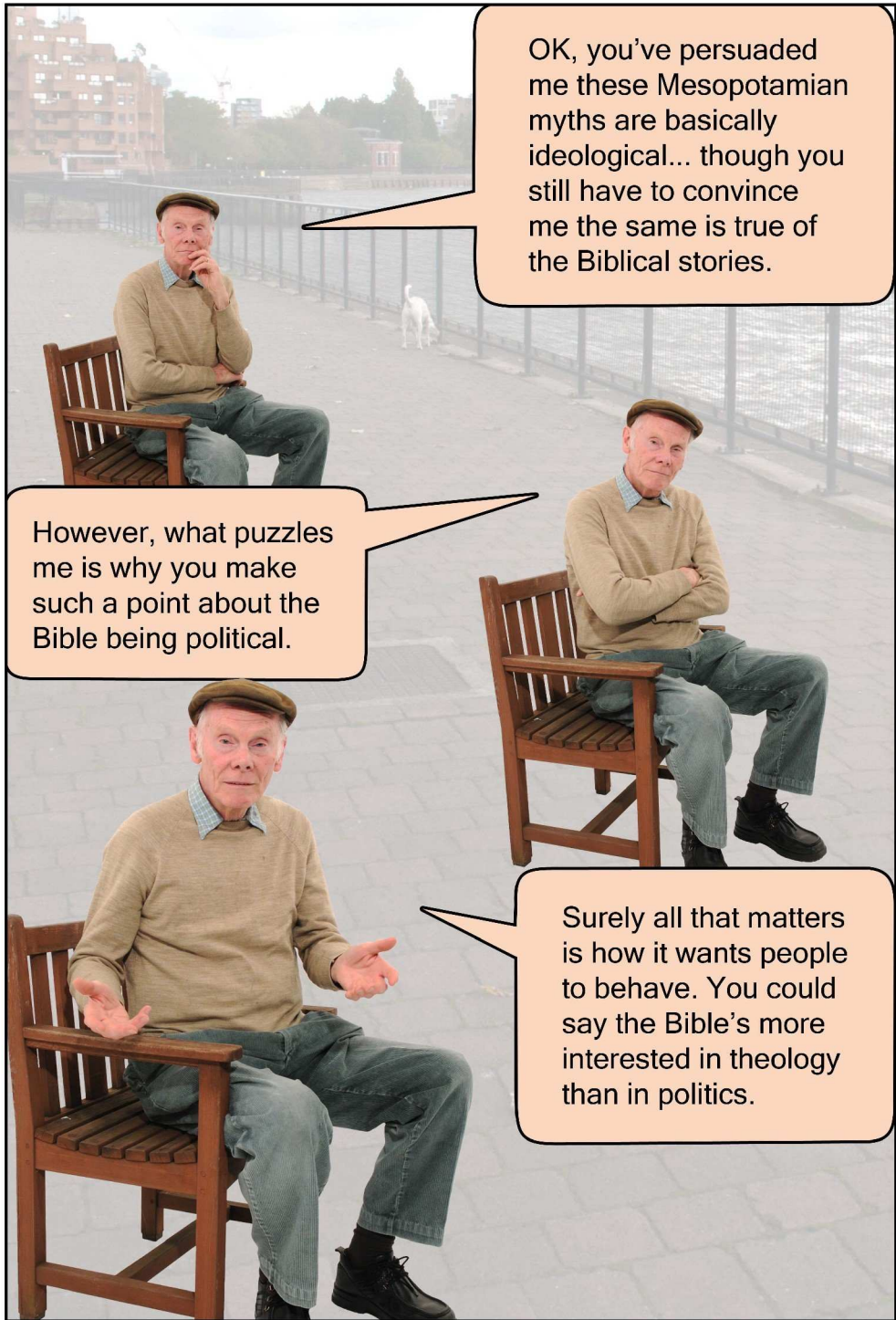
Or were these texts only for the eyes of the administrative elite who, after all, were the only ones able to actually read them?

For God's sake don't recite that one. You'll get us all the chop!



6

A Political Approach or a Religious Approach to the Bible?

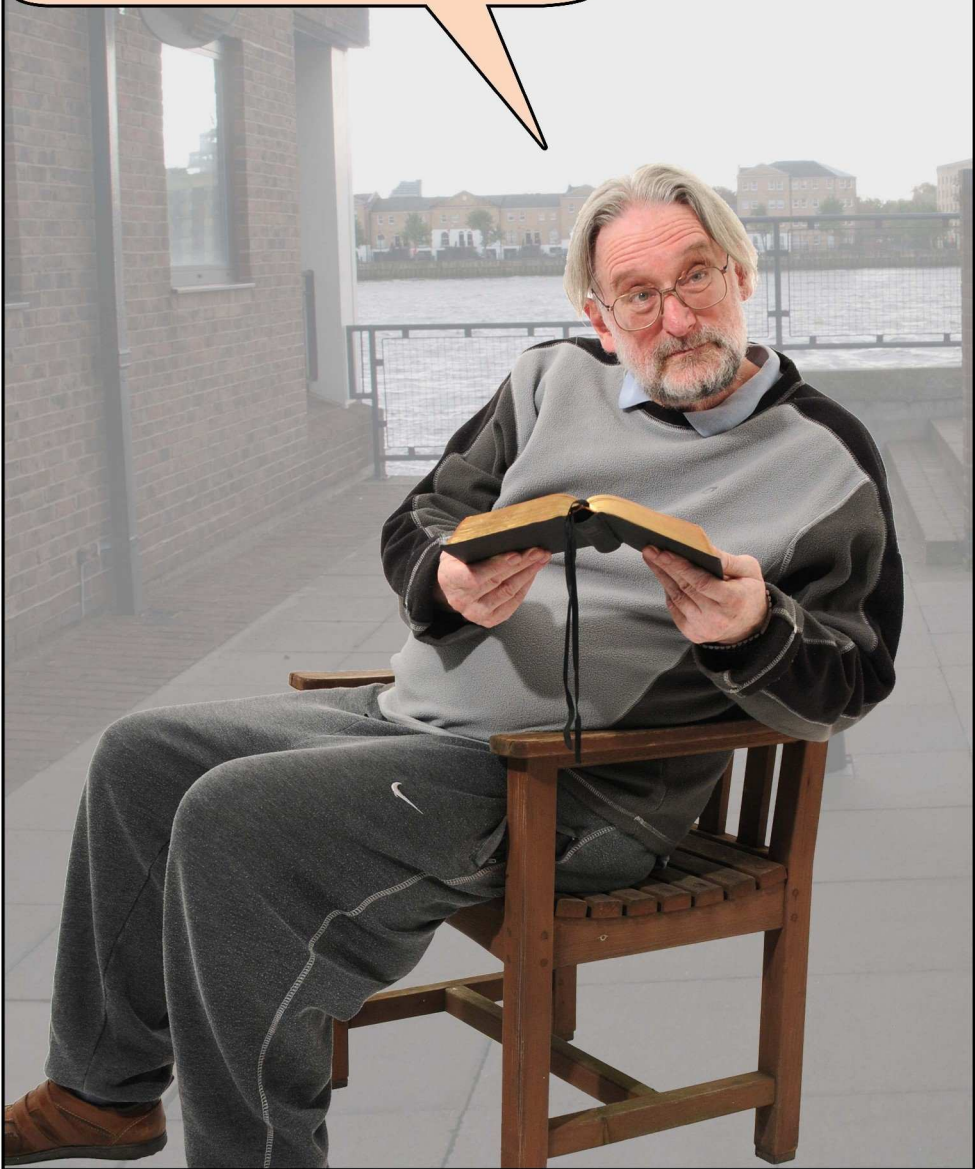


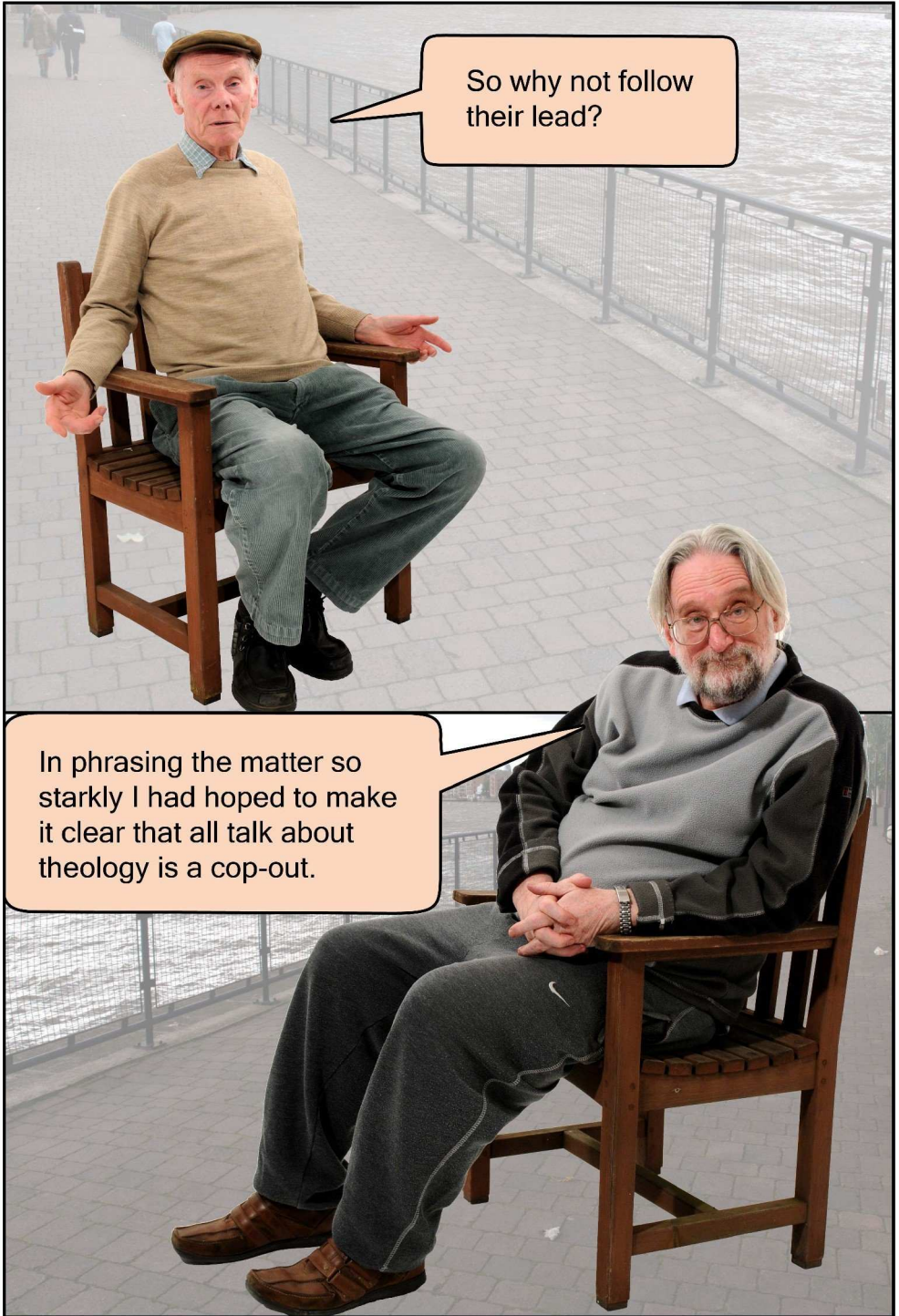
OK, you've persuaded me these Mesopotamian myths are basically ideological... though you still have to convince me the same is true of the Biblical stories.

However, what puzzles me is why you make such a point about the Bible being political.

Surely all that matters is how it wants people to behave. You could say the Bible's more interested in theology than in politics.

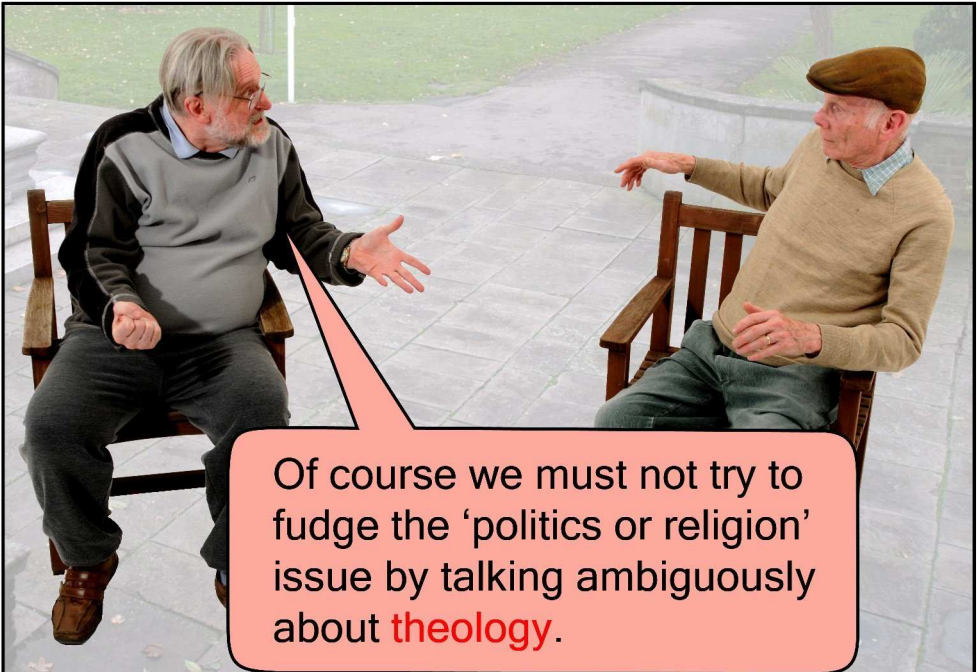
Yes, I agree, it would be so much simpler if we could avoid the whole 'politics or religion?' question by talking evasively about the Bible as theology, as most scholars do!





So why not follow their lead?

In phrasing the matter so starkly I had hoped to make it clear that all talk about theology is a cop-out.

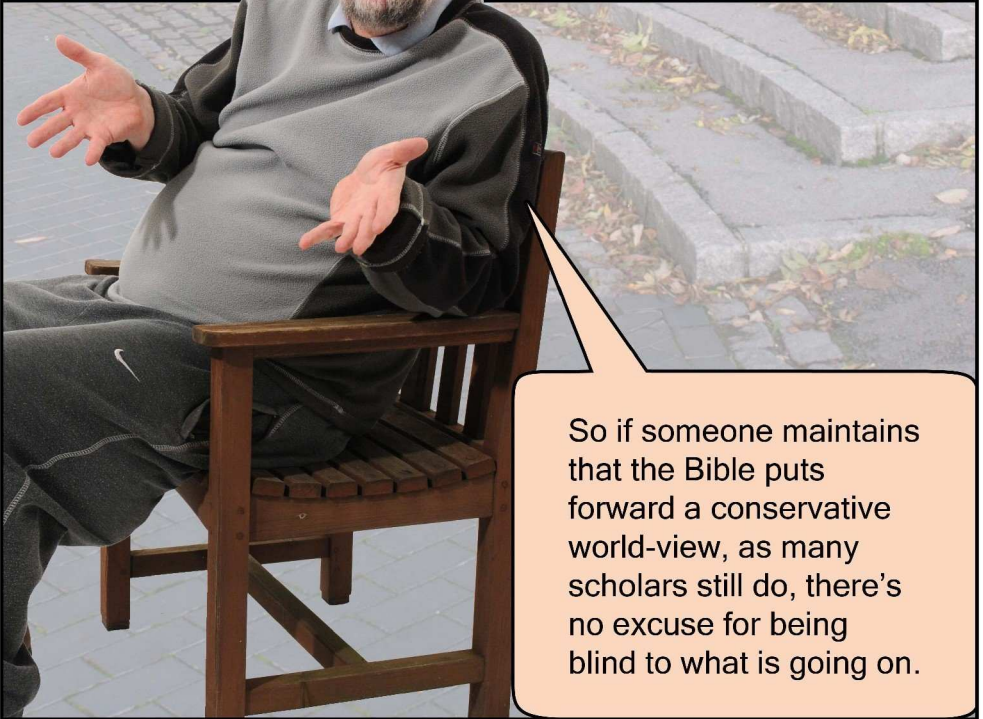


Can't you see that in talking glibly about the Bible as theology all people are doing is being dishonest?






The great advantage of an ideological approach is that everything remains verifiable.

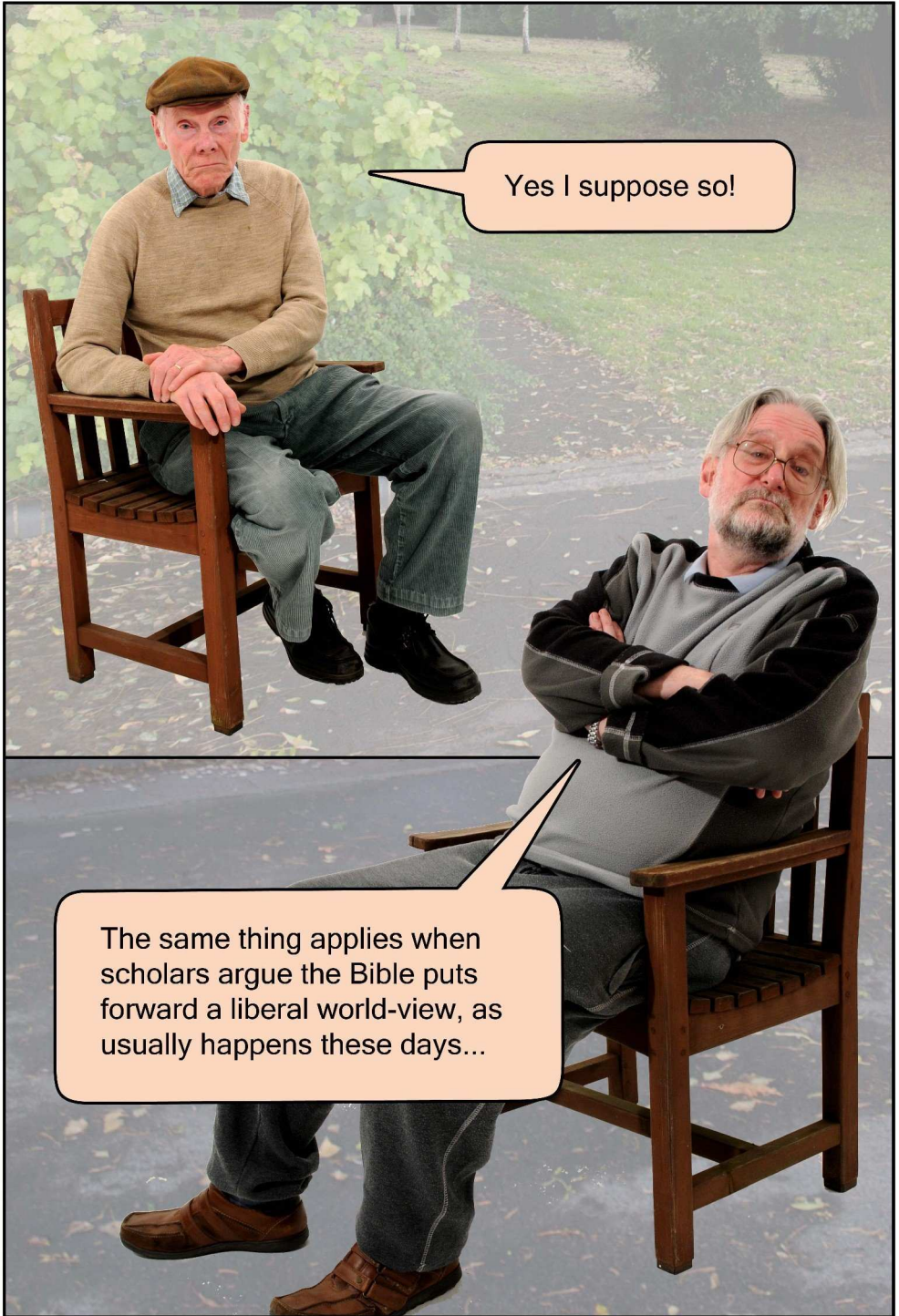


So if someone maintains that the Bible puts forward a conservative world-view, as many scholars still do, there's no excuse for being blind to what is going on.



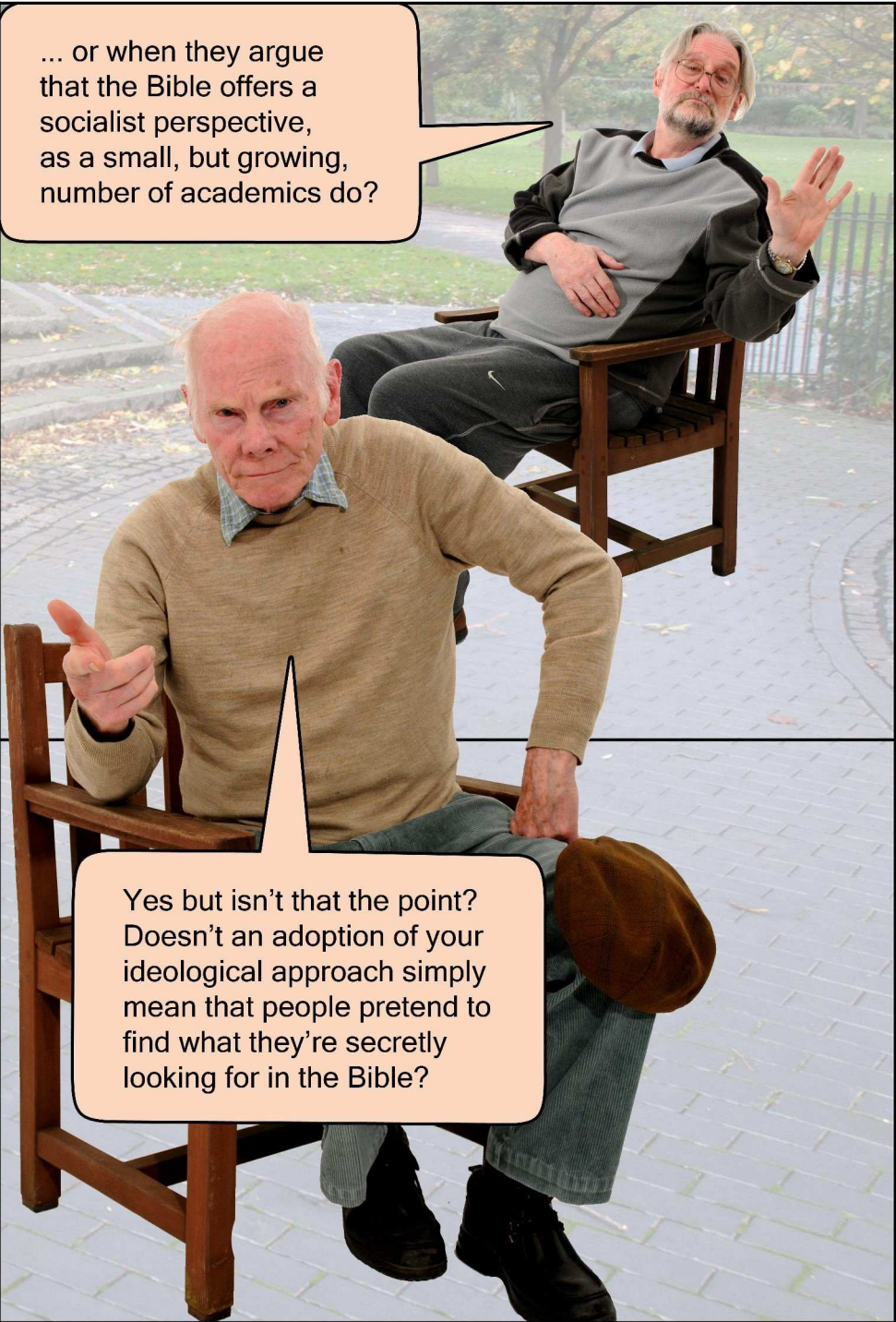
For, by now, everyone should know where conservative world-views come from...

... and what sort of people produce them. Isn't that the case?



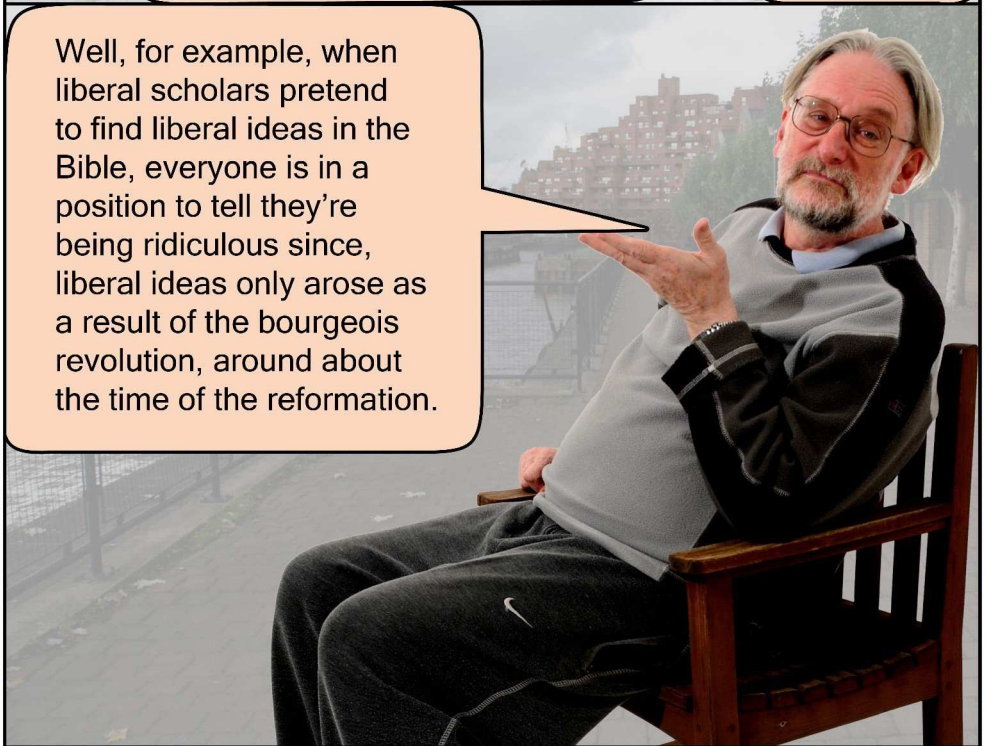
Yes I suppose so!

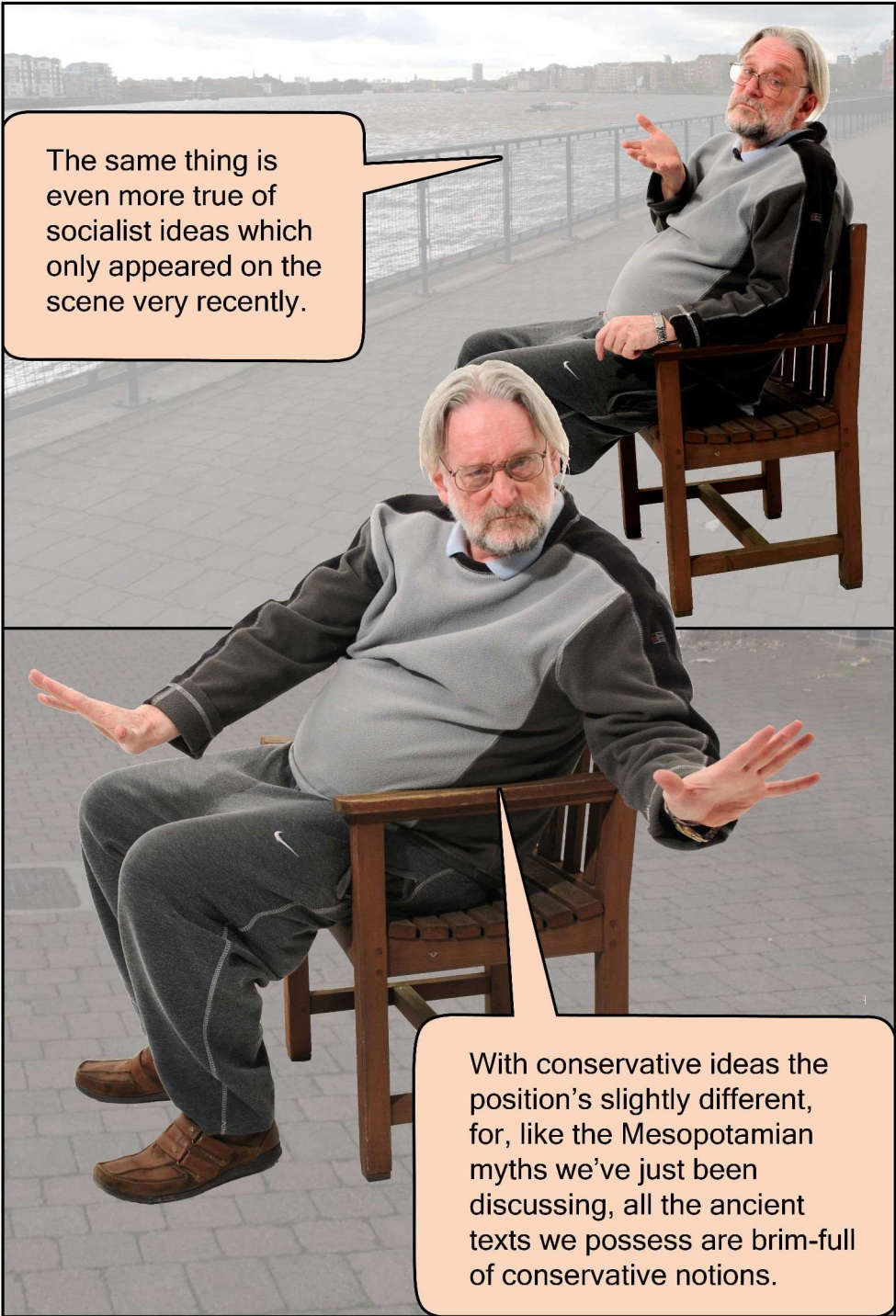
The same thing applies when scholars argue the Bible puts forward a liberal world-view, as usually happens these days...



... or when they argue that the Bible offers a socialist perspective, as a small, but growing, number of academics do?

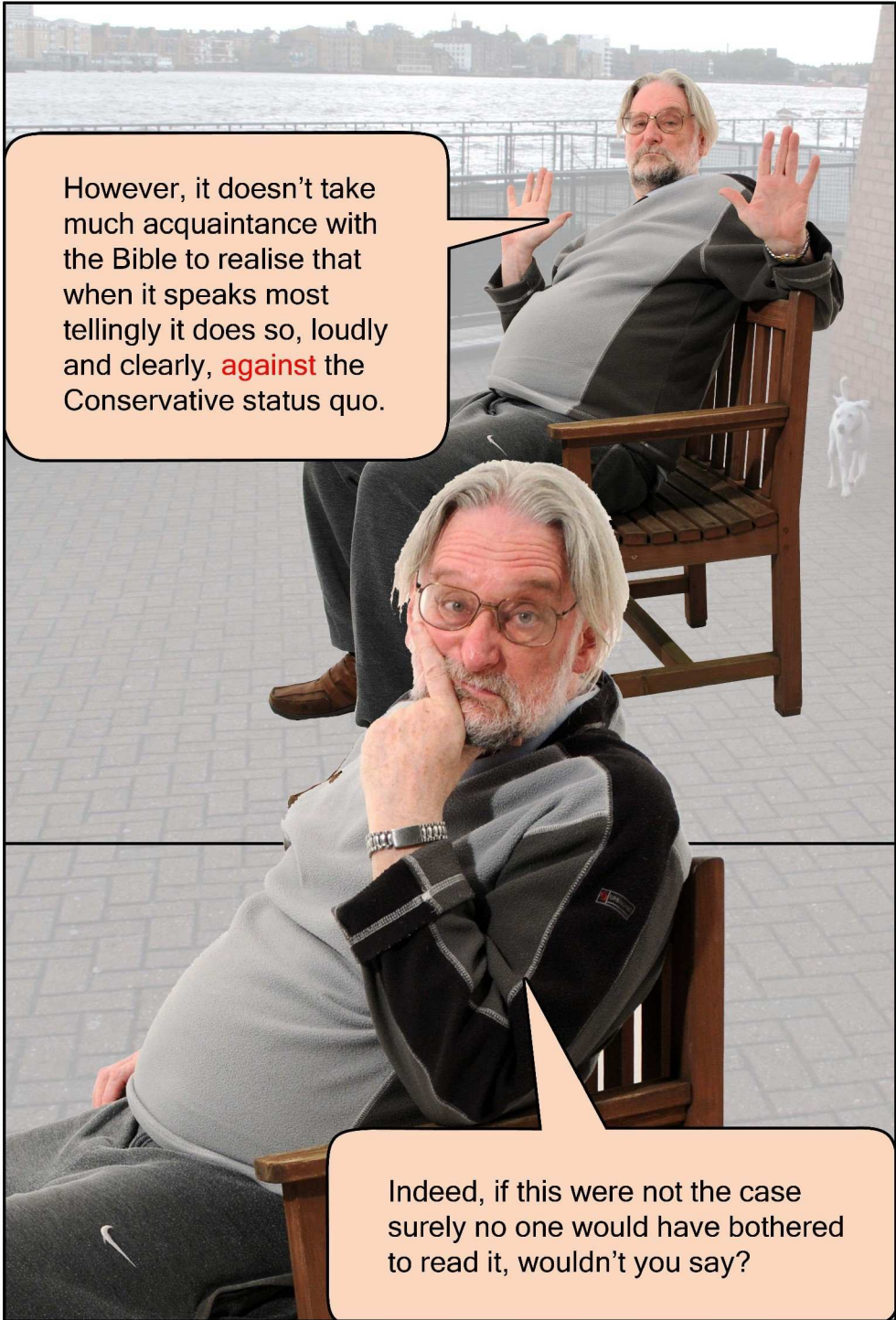
Yes but isn't that the point? Doesn't an adoption of your ideological approach simply mean that people pretend to find what they're secretly looking for in the Bible?





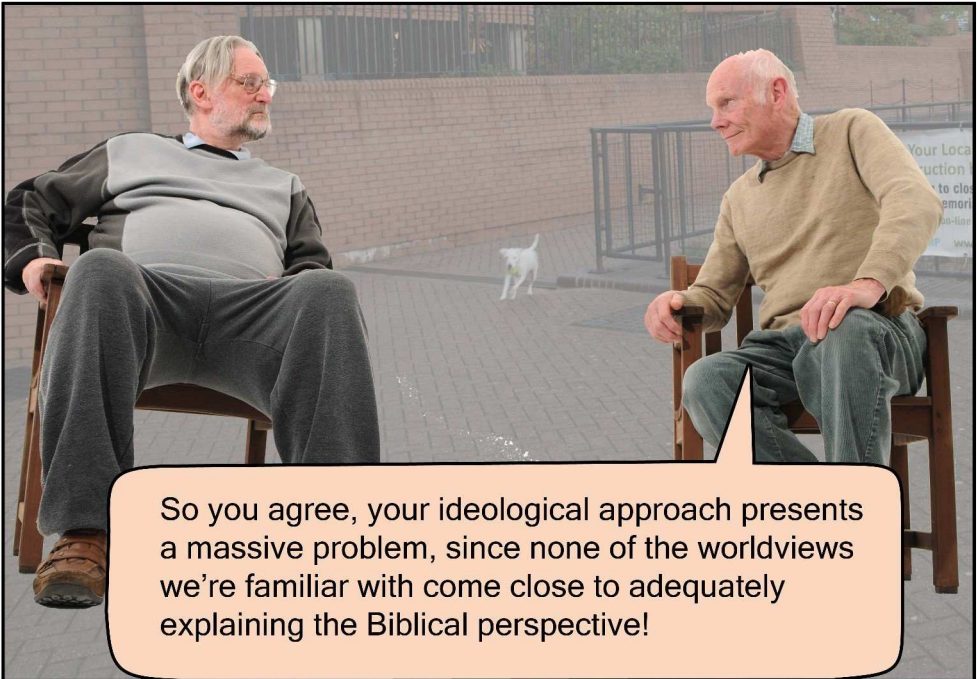
The same thing is even more true of socialist ideas which only appeared on the scene very recently.

With conservative ideas the position's slightly different, for, like the Mesopotamian myths we've just been discussing, all the ancient texts we possess are brim-full of conservative notions.



However, it doesn't take much acquaintance with the Bible to realise that when it speaks most tellingly it does so, loudly and clearly, **against** the Conservative status quo.


Indeed, if this were not the case surely no one would have bothered to read it, wouldn't you say?



So you agree, your ideological approach presents a massive problem, since none of the worldviews we're familiar with come close to adequately explaining the Biblical perspective!



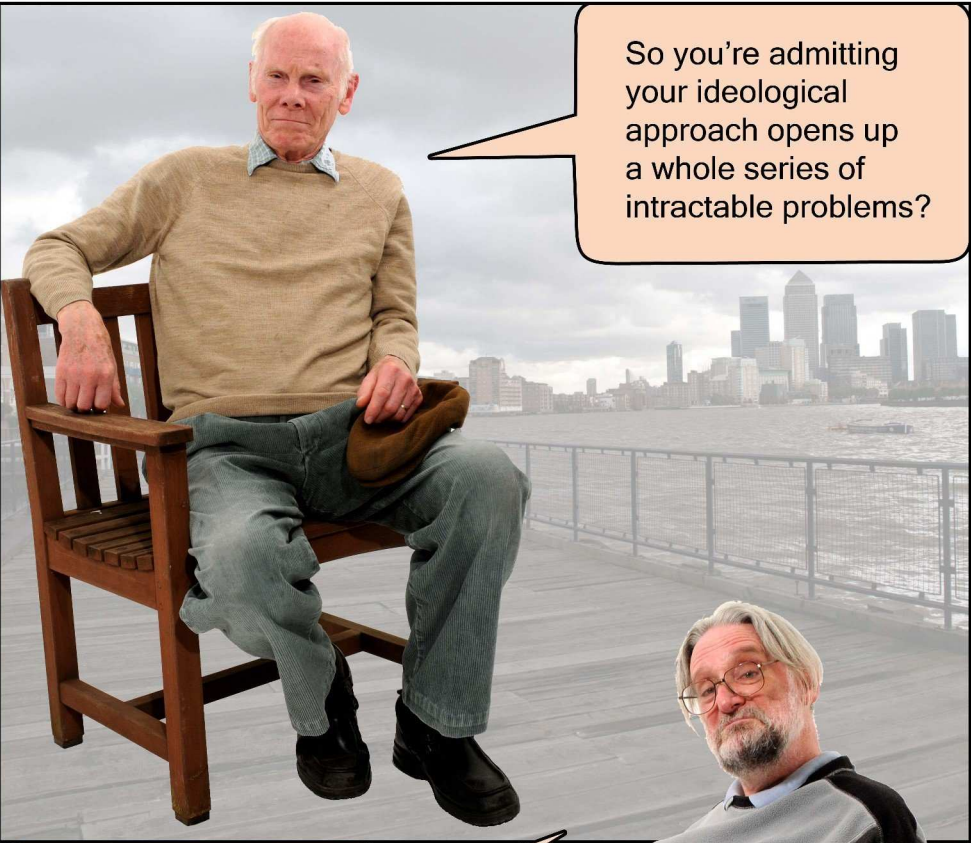
Indeed. And that's not the only difficulty!



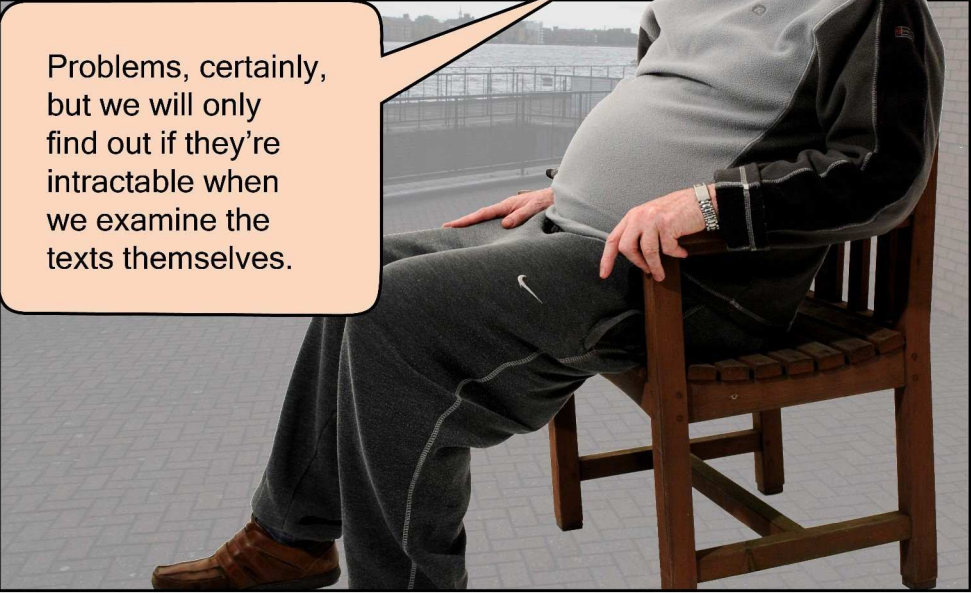
For clearly the Bible aims to offer a **universal** perspective...

... and it has always been difficult to see how an ideology, as the worldview of one particular section of society, could provide a pattern of thought agreeable to everyone...

... even if we could identify what particular section of society this was.



So you're admitting your ideological approach opens up a whole series of intractable problems?



Problems, certainly, but we will only find out if they're intractable when we examine the texts themselves.



However, let's leave that aside for the moment to take a look at your religious approach.

The great advantage of a religious approach is that it proposes a transparent worldview coming direct from God; a perspective uncoloured by human group-interests.



What's that rag you're reading now?

'God's News.'
It just fell out of the sky!



As such it claims to offer truths everyone ought to be happy to adhere to.

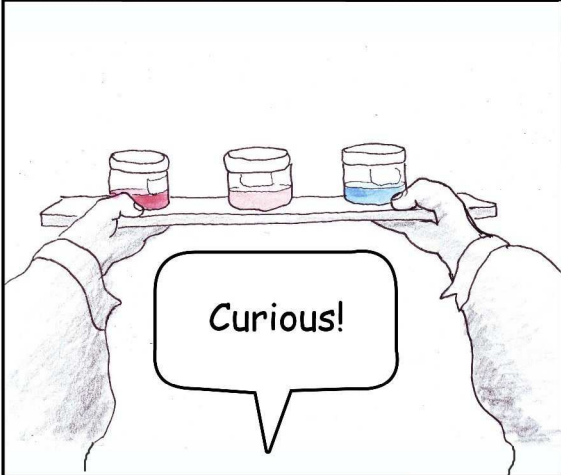


Sounds great!



Yes but a religious approach too has its problems.

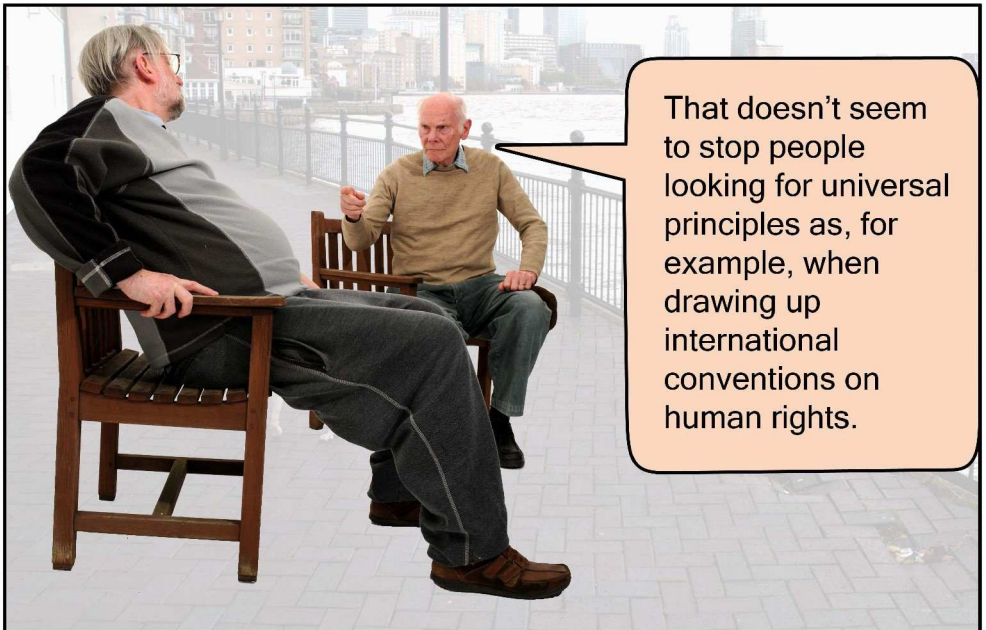
First is the fact that when you actually examine the 'universal truths', people say they get from God, they don't look colourless.



Indeed they all seem to display either a conservative, liberal or socialist colour... depending on the unavowed leanings of those proffering them.

In fact this idea of colourless religious truths is just a con... an attempt to get everyone to adopt **your** way of seeing things.





That doesn't seem to stop people looking for universal principles as, for example, when drawing up international conventions on human rights.



Yes, practically speaking it's always going to be sensible to try and get everyone to agree to a set of rules but it's one thing to struggle towards such an agreement and another to impose your set of rules on others.

The second major problem with a religious approach is that it makes assertions which are deliberately put beyond reason's scrutiny.

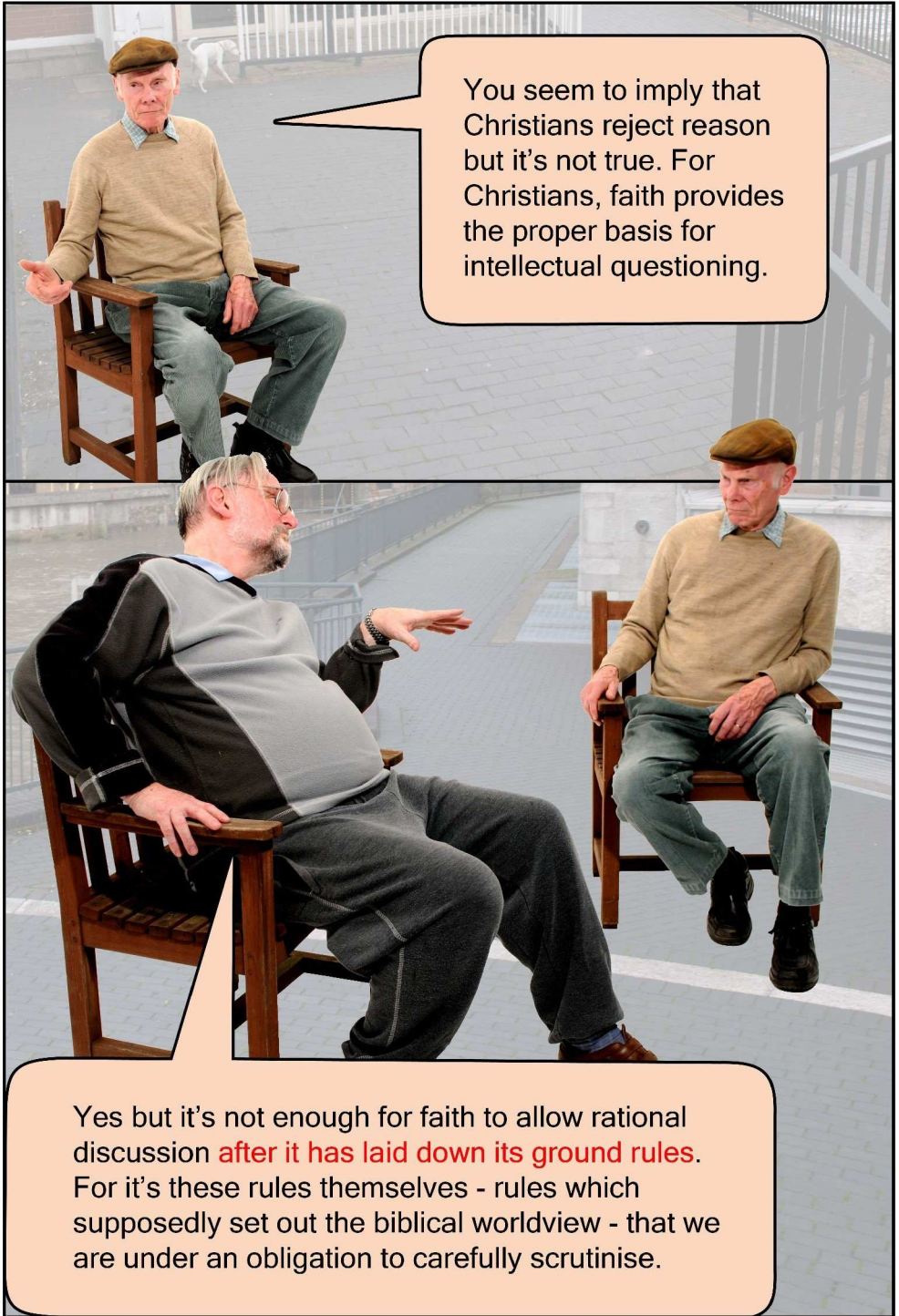
But surely...

There are no 'BUTS'.
This is faith.

I'm aware, of course, that a belief in **unquestionable** truth can make the religious approach emotionally attractive...

Reassuring
to be told
what is
the truth.

... but in doing away with root and branch scepticism it also does away with the very thing which makes it possible for individuals to come to wholesome opinions by testing the ground.

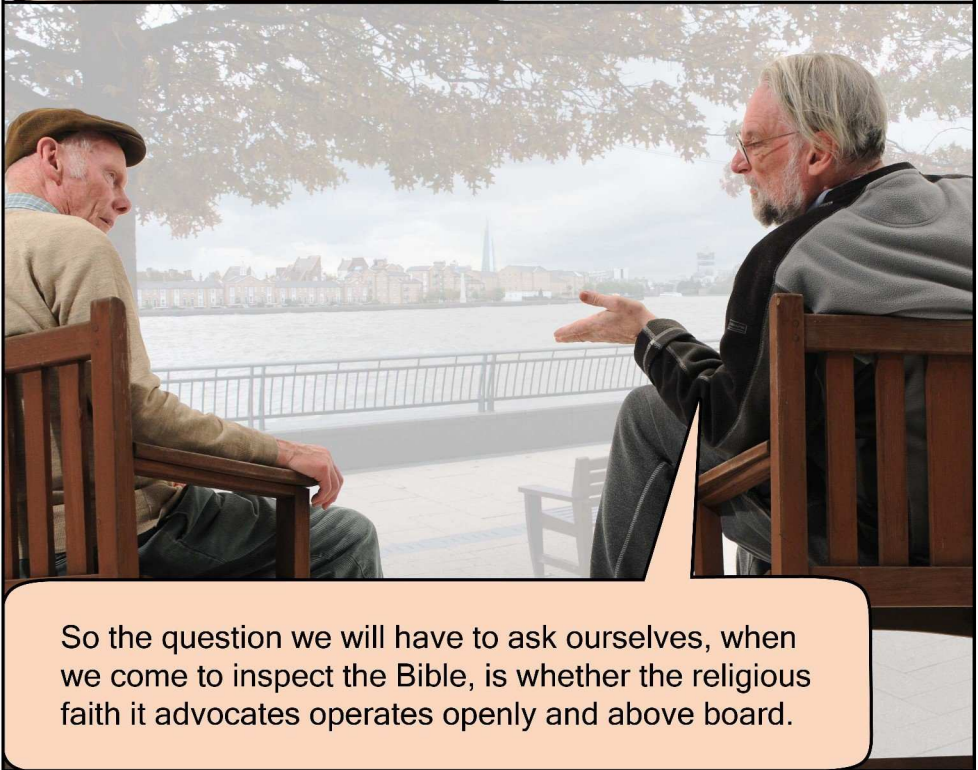


You seem to imply that Christians reject reason but it's not true. For Christians, faith provides the proper basis for intellectual questioning.

Yes but it's not enough for faith to allow rational discussion **after it has laid down its ground rules.** For it's these rules themselves - rules which supposedly set out the biblical worldview - that we are under an obligation to carefully scrutinise.



For, as we have just seen, it's clear religion is often used by people to hide their ideological game from prying eyes.



So the question we will have to ask ourselves, when we come to inspect the Bible, is whether the religious faith it advocates operates openly and above board.



However, for the moment we're not concerned with whether a transparent religious faith is possible. What we have to decide is whether a religious approach is appropriate when studying the Bible.

As we have said, people who adopt a religious approach (e.g. Augustine and Anselm below) simply take it as read that religion has the right to impose ground rules **behind reason's back**.



Augustine: "Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand."



Anselm: "Fides quaerens intellectum."
(Reason is faith seeking understanding of itself).

All I'm suggesting is that this is simply not good enough when it comes to the study of the Bible for here everything has to be open to examination.

There's a third problem with the religious approach which puts it, for me, beyond the pale. This is the fact that it's based on a belief that God has favourites.



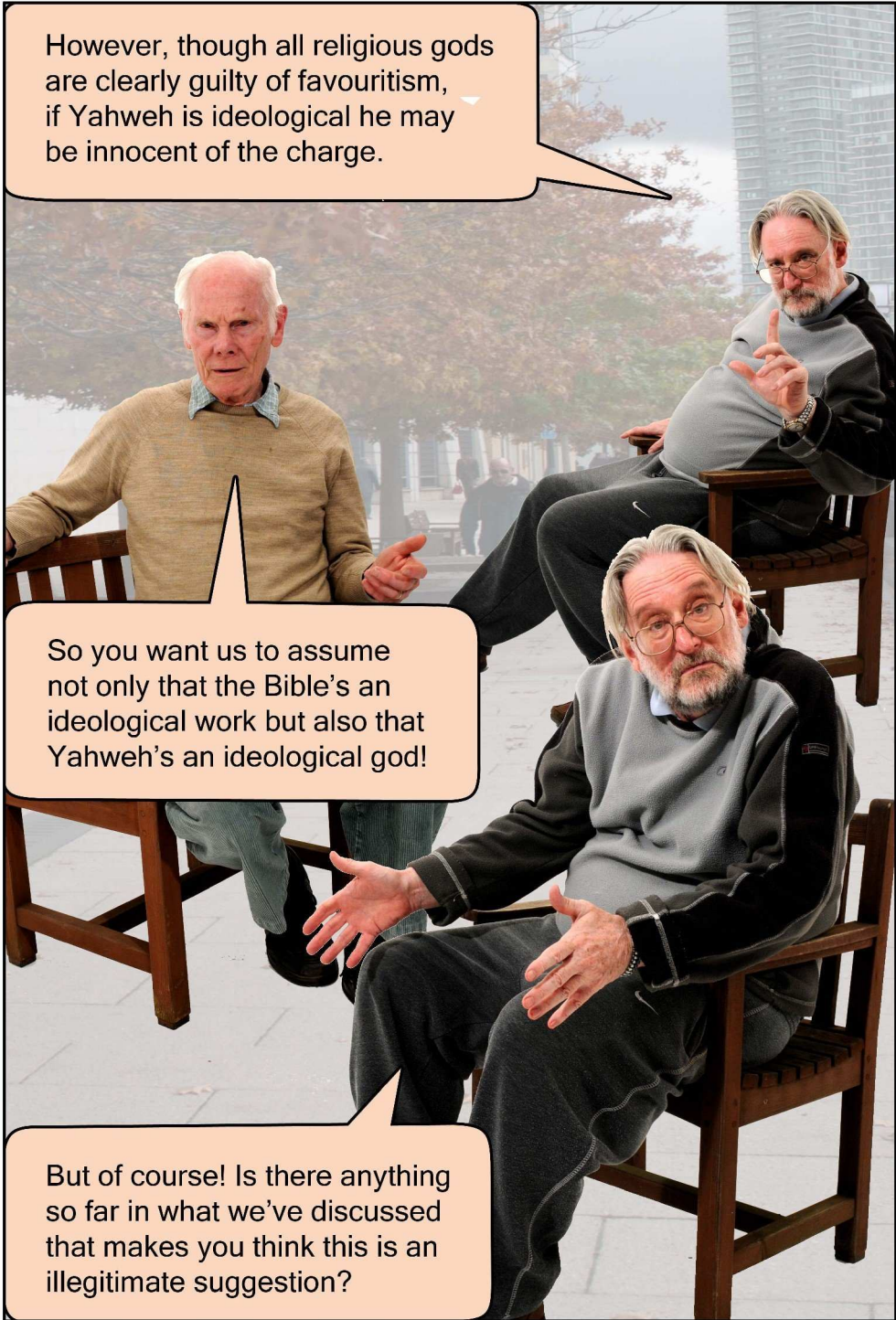
Psst! Atra-hasis can you hear me?

Religious people may deny their god has favourites. However, the whole religious construct is built on the idea of private revelations made to the faithful.

So, in the absence of an argument that the religious god in question reveals his will privately to **everyone**, (an argument never seriously advanced) it seems futile to attempt to exonerate him.

How am I supposed to give private revelations to **everyone**? It's worse than being Father Christmas!



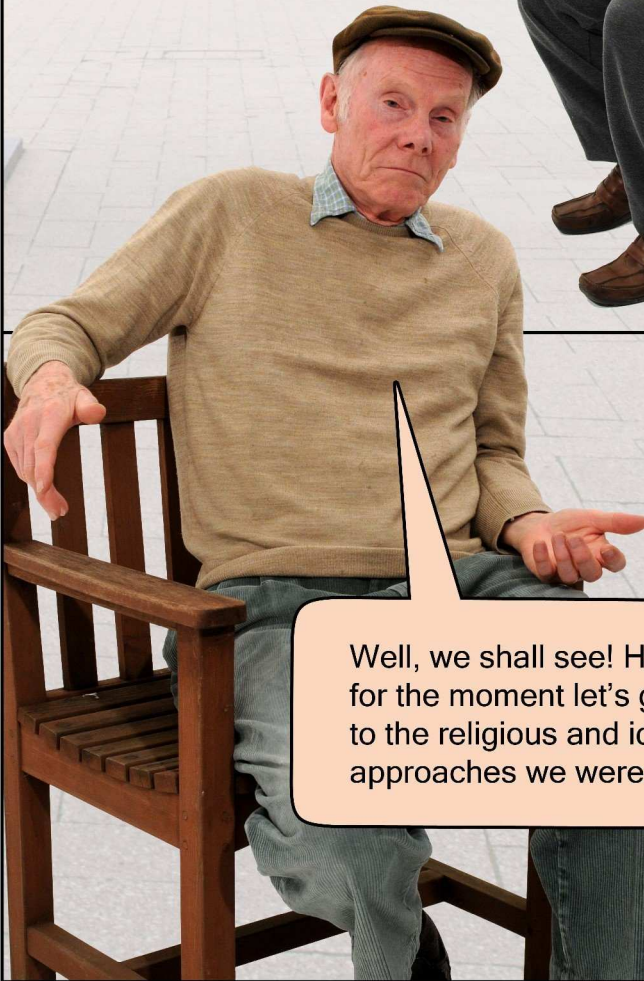


However, though all religious gods are clearly guilty of favouritism, if Yahweh is ideological he may be innocent of the charge.

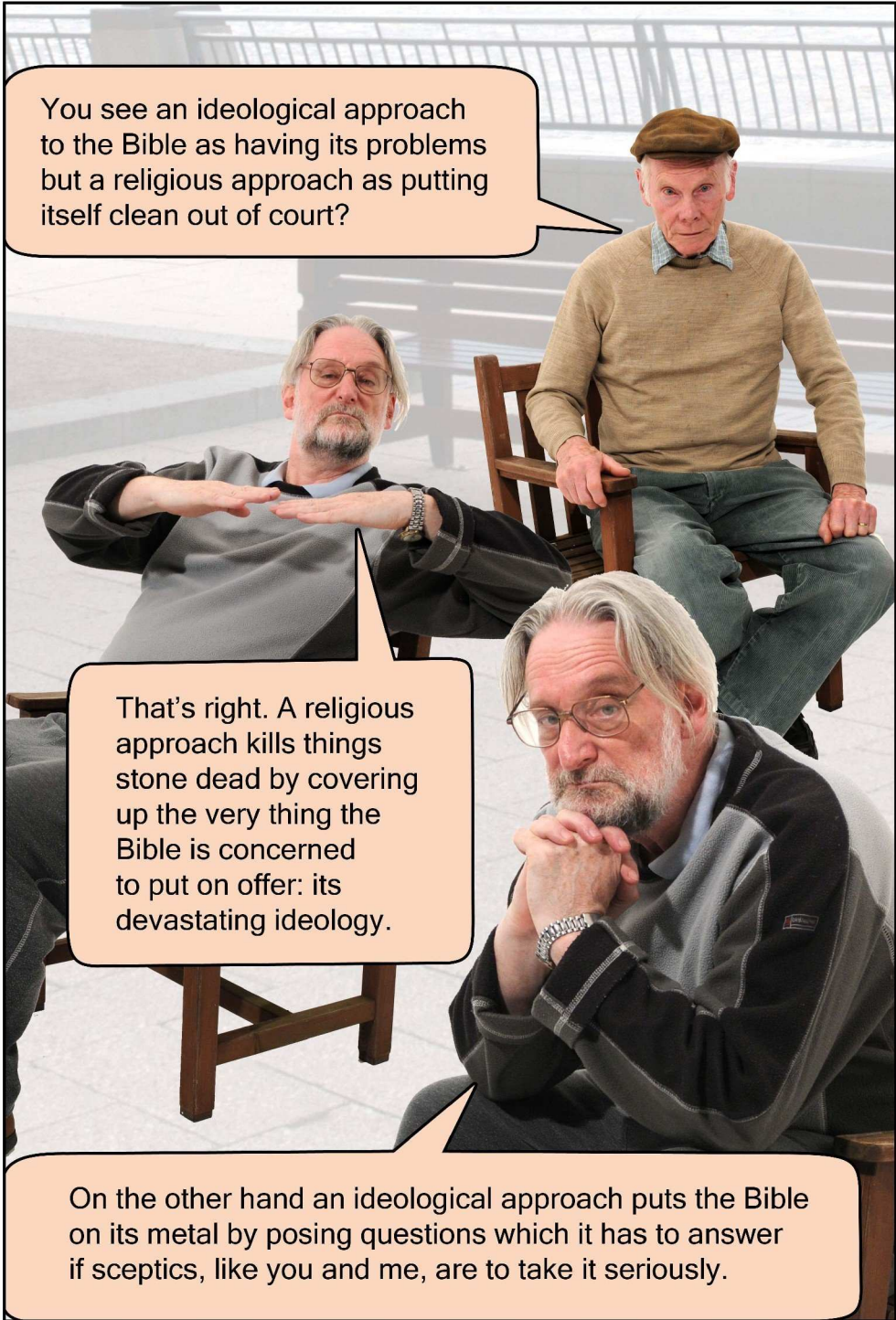
So you want us to assume not only that the Bible's an ideological work but also that Yahweh's an ideological god!

But of course! Is there anything so far in what we've discussed that makes you think this is an illegitimate suggestion?

Hasn't our examination of the Mesopotamian myths shown that deities function as ideological powers in these texts? So what makes you think Yahweh will prove to be different?



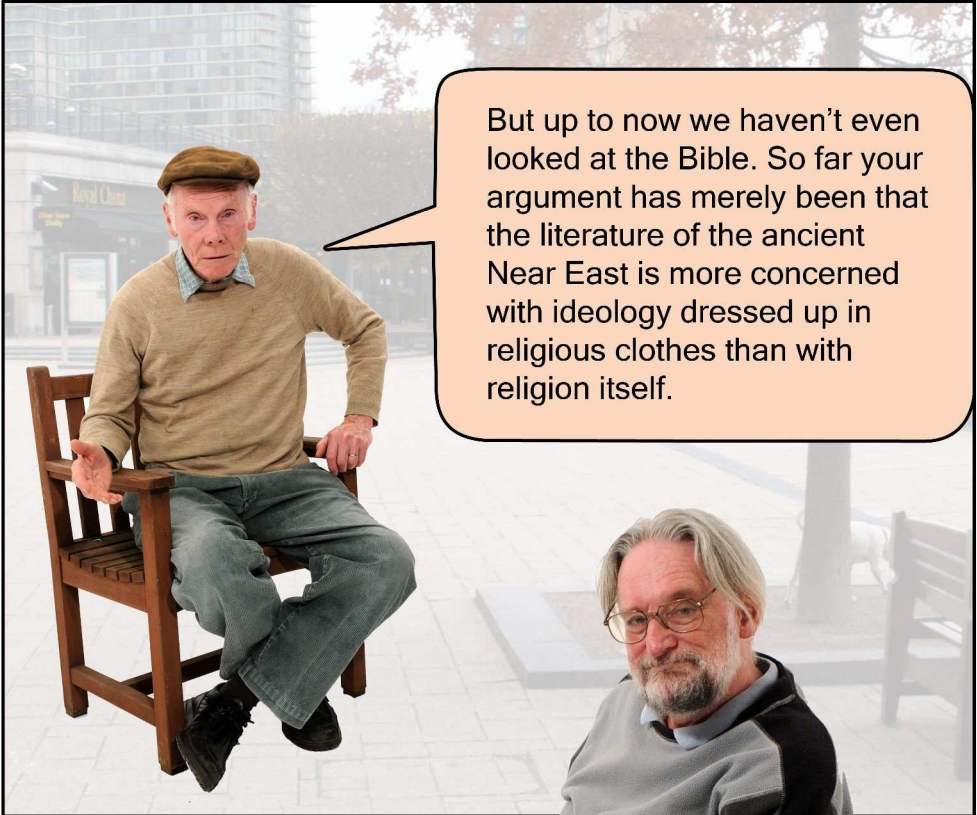
Well, we shall see! However, for the moment let's get back to the religious and ideological approaches we were discussing.



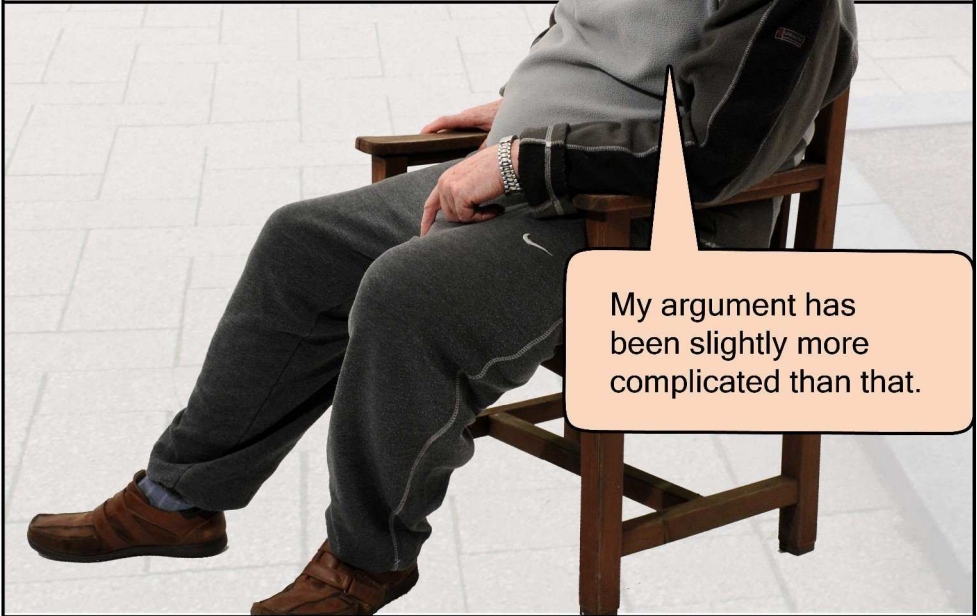
You see an ideological approach to the Bible as having its problems but a religious approach as putting itself clean out of court?

That's right. A religious approach kills things stone dead by covering up the very thing the Bible is concerned to put on offer: its devastating ideology.


On the other hand an ideological approach puts the Bible on its metal by posing questions which it has to answer if sceptics, like you and me, are to take it seriously.



But up to now we haven't even looked at the Bible. So far your argument has merely been that the literature of the ancient Near East is more concerned with ideology dressed up in religious clothes than with religion itself.

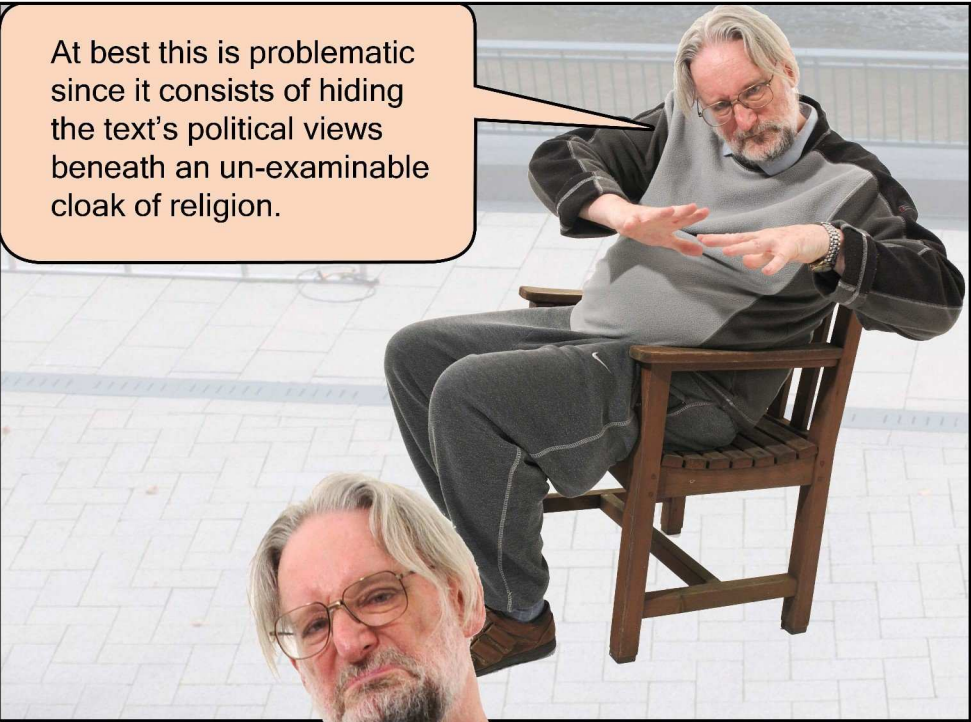


My argument has been slightly more complicated than that.

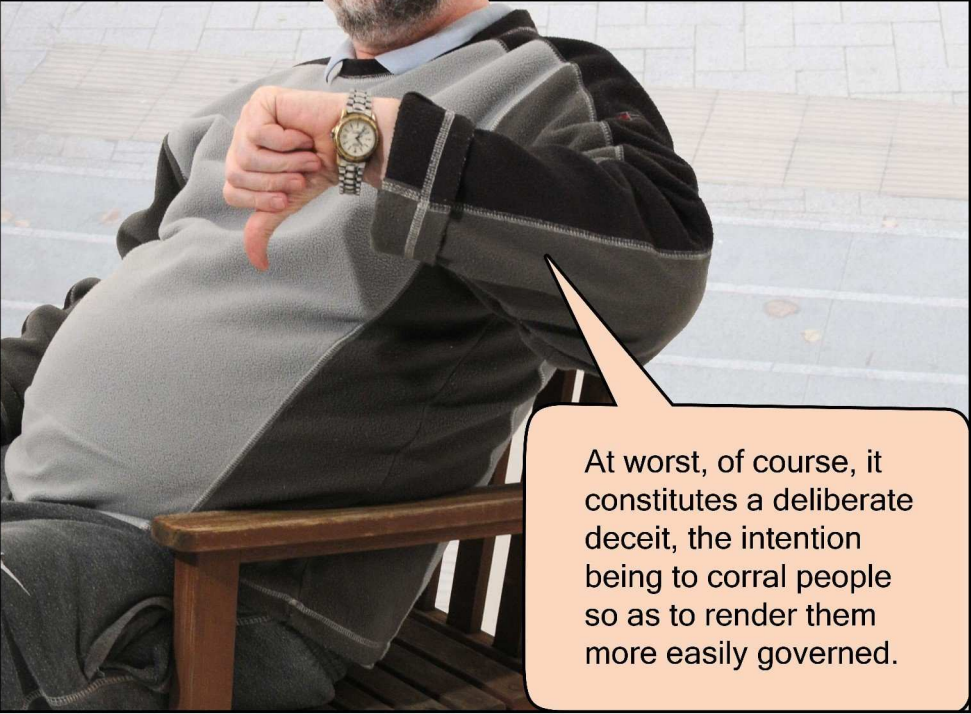


It's true that an ancient text's religious dress is often simply a matter of language: ideology harmlessly spelled out in myth.

However, as we have just seen, there are times when an ancient text's religious dress turns out to be something more pernicious: ideology sugared with herd-instinct.



At best this is problematic since it consists of hiding the text's political views beneath an un-examinable cloak of religion.



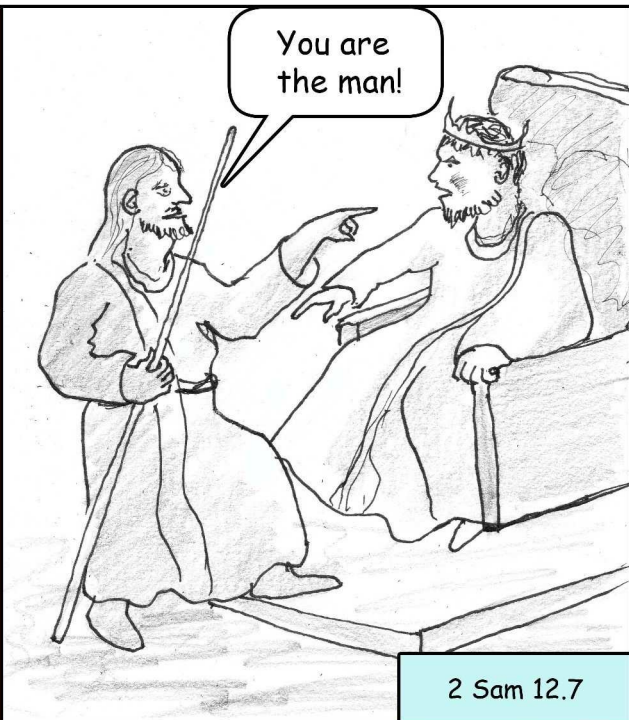
At worst, of course, it constitutes a deliberate deceit, the intention being to corral people so as to render them more easily governed.



So you believe all ancient Near Eastern texts, **including the Bible**, should be viewed from the outset as ideological works dressed-up for one reason or another, whether good or bad, as religion!

That's certainly the basic assumption I want to establish in peoples' minds.

However, I would also want to put them on their guard, for it's always dangerous to presume you know what the Bible's up to, given its disconcerting habit of stabbing you in the conscience when you least expect it.



That is the end of Volume 1
in my cartoon series.
Thinking About the Bible.

In Volume 2 *God of the Marginals*
John and I will start our examination
of the Bible itself beginning with
the Genesis Myth Cycle.

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
For the great photos

To John Rowe
and Julie Mansfield
and Pat Parker
For help in editing

To St Pauls Bow Common
For the use of their ChurchHall



