

Beer, Gods, and Statues: Unearthing Similarities and Differences to the Ancient Near East

Reading *Weavers, Scribes, and Kings* is akin to a whirlwind vacation where you try to squeeze in visits with family, friends, and acquaintances in too short a time. The panoply of humans represented in the book is astounding, and, like that whirlwind visiting vacation, it was not enough time with most of the individuals with whom we engaged.

I think the most surprising aspect of the book is how much I enjoyed reading it. At first glance it reminded me of reading all the “begats” in Genesis between Adam and Eve and Noah, and between David and Jesus in Matthew. It was an overwhelming number of names to process. However, Podany takes what could have been a relatively dry account of people and weaves stories about daily life that feel tangible and relatable. I found it remarkable that she was able to make baked, buried, and unearthed clay tablets come so alive in the accounts of such a variety of people. I found myself surprised several times remembering that this information was not originally found in some recent internet sphere of zeros and ones, but rather in the lines and wedges of the very first written language of humans.

As someone who read ahead in history texts through most of my school time, fascinated by the happenings over the millenniums, I would have expected to have at least a cursory grasp of the world that Podany explores in *Weavers, Scribes, and Kings*. Upon entering the year 3500 BCE in her narrative, however, I was quickly disabused of that assumption. She quickly makes clear that this was not a disorganized time vastly different from our modern world. Though there are clearly many differences, much of the book discusses commonalities that would not feel out of touch in a modern context. Podany says “We share a surprising number of other life experiences with people who lived in Uruk five and half thousand years ago” (53). From the

ubiquity of death and taxes to drinking beer, marriage, farming, travel, squabbles, political turmoil, and family, we share more in common than separates us, even after centuries of technological advancement and learning. This led to a significant shift in my view from an amorphous sense of ancient history to a relatable connection to the priestess Enheduana, the merchant Ashur-idi, and others about whom Podany shares details. Part of this is due to Podany's accessible and engaging writing style, but it also has to do with her focus as much as possible on the daily life of average people.

While they might be paying taxes and drinking beer in ways that would feel familiar, the worldview undergirding these activities was different. One of the threads I most appreciated in the book is Podany's examination of the beliefs and deities of the people in Near Eastern history, but she makes a distinction from our modern concept of religion, noting instead that "peoples of the ancient Near East didn't even have a word for religion" (55). Rather, they witnessed storms, drought, contagions, and other things beyond human attribution and saw them originating on a scale larger than human understanding; these things happened because the gods caused it. Their polytheistic views might seem similar to the later, and better known, polytheism of the Greeks and Romans, but for Mesopotamian peoples the gods were not living on a mountain somewhere, but rather lived in the temples that occupied the cities. Popular Greek and Roman myths can also be argued to have a stronger similarity to modern fables and tales than to how a Mesopotamian citizen would understand the king of the gods Enlil or the moon god Nanna. Podany says, "They weren't just gods of these phenomena—they *were* the phenomena" (55, emphasis author's own). She points out that this is reflected in their names,

which are the same word as the phenomena: the sun rising is indistinguishable from the sun god Utu rising.

This difference in worldview and lived experience of the gods is further emphasized by the discovery of a statue of King Enmetena of Lagash, a city-state in what is now southeastern Iraq, dated to around 2450 BCE. The statue was created showing the king in prayer, hands folded over his chest, and inscriptions written on it tell that the statue was placed in the temple of Enlil to pray for Enmetena for his benefit. To us this would seem like a proxy and ineffective, but to the king and the rest of the people, this statue was a part of Enmetena that was constantly now in prayer to Enlil. It goes beyond a celebratory effigy of piety and was seen as having a direct effect. This is reflected in how ancient Mesopotamians viewed statues of the not as representations, but actual parts of the person or gods that were taken care of and dressed and fed.

This reverence for statues as a living extension is also shown in the record of what we would think of as the macabre 2300 BCE royal honeymoon of Tabur-damu and Ishar-damu from Ebla, in what is now Syria. The newlyweds went to a royal mausoleum, what was called the House of the Dead, for purification rites. These rites were for themselves, but also for the two statues of the coupled gods Kura and Barama who protected Ebla and traveled with the couple. These statues were not trinkets to be taken lightly; though the statues did not survive to modern times, based on similar statue descriptions they would have been adorned with precious jewelry and the best clothes, glittering with precious metals and stones. Podany points out that it was, however, not the material value that made the statues traveling dangerous (as thieves would have feared divine wrath in attempting to steal them), but that “statues of city

gods made for very valuable hostages if seized by enemy forces” (125). Hostages as opposed to loot – a very anthropomorphized distinction that would have felt absolutely natural to a resident of this time period.

Throughout *Weavers, Scribes, and Kings* these stories of pious rulers, industrious farmers, and diligent merchants collect to paint a vibrant picture of a massive span of history. If anything critical could be said of the book, it is merely that it looks like a daunting and erudite tome. Once I started reading, however, Podany captured me with her emphasis on shared human experience made accessible and relatable.