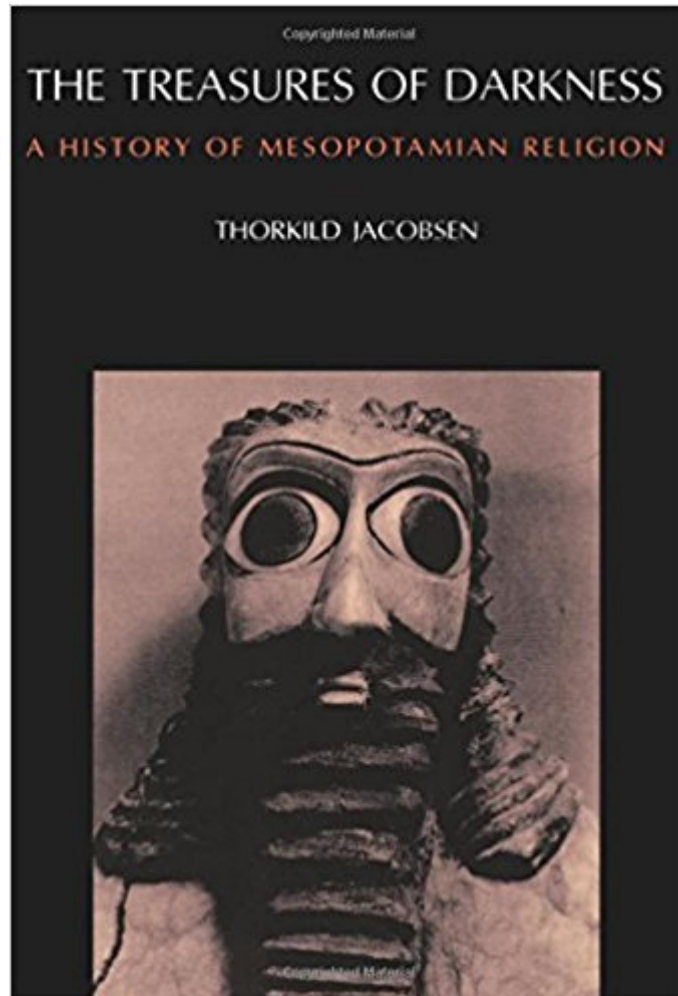




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The Treasures Of Darkness: A History Of Mesopotamian Religion



Synopsis

“The Treasures of Darkness is the culmination of a lifetime’s work, an attempt to summarize and recreate the spiritual life of Ancient Mesopotamia. Jacobsen has succeeded brilliantly. . . . His vast experience shows through every page of this unique book, through the vivid, new translations resulting from years of careful research. Everyone interested in early Mesopotamia, whether specialist, student, or complete layman, should read this book. . . . It is, quite simply, authoritative, based on a vast experience of the ancient Mesopotamian mind, and very well written in the bargain.”

—Brian M. Fagan, *History*

“Professor Jacobsen is an authority on Sumerian life and society, but he is above all a philologist of rare sensibility. The Treasures of Darkness is almost entirely devoted to textual evidence, the more gritty sources of archaeological knowledge being seldom mentioned. He introduces many new translations which are much finer than previous versions. . . . Simply to read this poetry and the author’s sympathetic commentary is a pleasure and a revelation. Professor Jacobsen accepts the premise that all religion springs from man’s experience of a power not of this world, a mysterious Wholly Other. This numinous power cannot be described in terms of worldly experience but only in allusive metaphors that serve as a means of communication in religious teaching and thought. . . . As a literary work combining sensibility, imagination and scholarship, this book is near perfection.”

—Jacquetta Hawkes, *The London Sunday Times*

“A brilliant presentation of Mesopotamian religion from the inside, backed at every point by meticulous scholarship and persistent adherence to original texts. It will undoubtedly remain for a long time a classic in its field.”

—*Religious Studies Review*

“A fascinating book. The general reader cannot fail to admire the translated passages of Sumerian poetry with which it abounds, especially those illustrating the Dumuzi-Inanna cycle of courtship, wedding and lament for the god’s untimely death. Many of these (though not all) are new even to the specialist and will repay close study.”

—B.O.R. Gurney, *Times Literary Supplement*

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Customer Reviews

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"Here is the latest scholarly contribution by one of the foremost interpreters of cuneiform texts. The book begins with definitions of scope and terminology. This is followed by lengthy expositions on the various periods in Mesopotamian religion, with copious illustrative translations added. Names and functions of the gods are defined and related to man and society. For the historian, cuneiform expert, the student of religion this work will be of prime importance." [Library Journal](#)

"Thorkild Jacobsen is the most brilliant of the small band of interpreters of Mesopotamian religion, and his new book naturally brings a major advance in its understanding. . . . Work on Mesopotamian religion will be immeasurably advanced by the appearance of this fascinating book." [G.S. Kirk, Biblioteca Orientalis](#)

"The Treasures of Darkness is the culmination of a lifetime's work, an attempt to summarize and recreate the spiritual life of Ancient Mesopotamia. Jacobsen has succeeded brilliantly. . . . Everyone interested in early Mesopotamia, whether specialist, student, or complete layman, should read this book, one of the culminating works of Jacobsen's long career. It is, quite simply, authoritative, based on a vast experience of the ancient Mesopotamian mind, and very well written in the bargain." [Brian M. Fagan, History](#)

"A brilliant presentation of Mesopotamian religion from the inside, backed at every point by meticulous scholarship and persistent adherence to original texts. It will undoubtedly remain for a long time a classic in its field." [Religious Studies Review](#)

"Readers who are tired of secondhand and superficial treatments of Mesopotamian religion will do well to turn to this extremely systematic and thorough accounting by the master of the field. Jacobsen knows the detail

of religion garnered from archaeological remains as well as anyone. But better than most and with some daring, he organizes the evidences and comes up with valid definitions of religion and classifications of motifs having to do with deity in various epochs. Will serve to correct many an impression about the origins of civilization."

— The Christian Century "The only up-to-date, book-length survey of Mesopotamian religion. . . . Unquestionably Jacobsen here illuminates a dark area of human experience. An introductory chapter provides a definitions and a framework. An epilogue deals briefly with the first millennium. Of the rest of the book, two thirds treats the fourth and third— millennia, one third the second millennium. Individual chapters focus on the fertility cult, the cosmos as polity, individual divine figures, personal religion, the creation epic, and the Gilgamesh epic. Well written, with an abundance of sensitive translations from the originals."

— Choice "Easily the best of last year's books in this category."

— Christianity Today "This book is more than a badly needed scholarly tome on an esoteric subject; it is the quintessence of a man who is a scholar, poet, and philosopher all rolled into one, a man who has spent his entire life immersed in the subject about which he writes. And Professor Jacobsen can write! Not only does his prose flow smoothly, the poetry— the book abounds with translations of Sumerian and Akkadian poetry into English— is in that wonderful style for which the author has become famous. The presentation is also not interrupted by numerous footnotes and learned excursuses, a trap which Jacobsen consciously and wisely avoided. For these reasons the book under review deserves, and no doubt will win, a much wider readership than students of ancient near eastern thought."

— A.K. Grayson, Journal of Biblical Literature "The self-recorded continuum of endogenous cultural achievement in Mesopotamia spans four millennia, from the origins of urban literate society to the end of the first millennia B.C., and provides unique documentation for the succession of Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian peoples. A span such as this understandably attracts a variety of researchers, intent on illuminating a variety of cultural and historical problems within the cuneiform record. The most difficult of these problems is surely Mesopotamian religion, for its investigator must not only be the master of the literal content of the extant Sumerian and Akkadian documents but must understand, as well, their intent and social context. Thorkild Jacobsen, master Assyriologist and tireless investigator of the Mesopotamian past, now presents his unique synthesis. . . . With rare literary elegance Jacobsen interprets and presents new translations of the key metaphorical documents of the age, the enchanting Gilgamesh epic— a story about growing up— and the Enuma elish creation epic which concretized the position of Marduk as universal monarch. . . . Jacobsen's history . . . masterfully puts us in touch with the roots of our own metaphors."

— The Yale

Review" Jacobsen has gathered up a lifetime of research into the languages, literatures, history and archaeology of the Ancient Near East and used them to formulate a mature and comprehensive synthesis of what he conceives to have been the essence of the ancient Mesopotamian world view. The result is a thesaurus of new insights and of sensitive and authoritative translations of crucial passages from a vast number of Sumerian and Akkadian texts." William W. Hallo "A model of scholarly and humanistic interpretation one which treats the ancient texts with the seriousness and penetration they deserve. This is a masterwork of one of the great humanists and scholars of our age." Yochanan Muffs

ok

It is interesting and informative. If you are new to Sumerian reading this is the book for you. Zechariah Sitchin is probably the greatest authority on Sumerian History and it reminds me of him.

Unlike Kramer's "The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character", this book is a slow burner and a more difficult read, demanding more patience at least in the first half of the book. No matter how fascinating the history of ancient Sumer is, and no matter how much Jacobsen tried to compose this book for the non-specialist, we're still faced with a demanding text dedicated to only a subtopic of Sumer from one of the top-notch scholars in the field. After the warning above, I have to say that I found the last few chapters much more motivating and exciting. Starting from the "Rise of Personal Religion", continuing with "Enma Elish", and reaching its peak with the most famous Gilgamesh epic, Jacobsen's analysis is a tour de force of connecting today's understanding with the world view of 4000 years ago, as well as their connections to other cultures such as ancient Greek literature, Judaism, and Christianity. It is not easy to take such ancient material, values and ideas barely visible from the traces on clay tablets, and bring them to life in such a lively manner, providing the reader with enough context to support the mind opening analyses. The author succeeded in this, and I can recommend this book after Kramer's book, if only for its second part.

Jacobsen is a giant in his field, but as an introduction to the subject "Treasures of Darkness" can be heavy going. Most helpful to me was the way that he tackles the myths chronologically, starting the book with the Dumuzi cults recored in the earliest Sumerian sources and ending with the stories of Marduk and Gilgamesh from later records. In between he covers topics from the rise of kingship to the growth of personal religion in a way that makes the beliefs come alive as an evolving response

to the world rather than an inert collection of tablets. Jacobsen has a tendency to present speculation as fact--you wouldn't guess from reading this alone that many of his points are disputed--and the translations are a little stilted, at least to my ears. But his book goes a long way to turning the fragmentary evidence into a coherent philosophy of nature, humanity and the gods. Mesopotamian religion is often described as pessimistic; Jacobsen restores some of the awe, love and splendor that might have made it a convincing world view for thousands of people we'll never otherwise know.

The book 'Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion' by Thorkild Jacobsen is a text used by courses in my seminary and others to provide a background to religious feeling and development over a long stretch of human history -- nearly three thousand years. Whether one accepts that the patriarchs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are real historical figures or not, no one can plausibly deny that the religious development of the peoples of Canaan (and indeed of all the ancient world around the eastern Mediterranean to the Indus river) were affected by the cultural and religious developments in Mesopotamia, the centre of the region, and a fertile region second to none known in the world, on a par with the Nile, around which another major civilisation arose. This is a text of history of Mesopotamia in its own right. By the time history gets back this far, the lines become very blurred, rather like parallel lines intersecting on the horizon. Literature, religion, archaeology, sociology, psychology -- all of these disciplines become intertwined in Jacobsen's text as he looks at Sumerian society. The book is organised with an introduction, then according to time divisions of fourth, third, and second millennia, then concludes with an epilogue into the first millennium, during which the Bible as we know it (and most ancient history such as is commonly known occurred) came to be.

Ancient Mesopotamian Religion: The Terms

The first chapter introduces basic concepts for doing religious studies of any historical era, as well as those specific to this text. Key concepts such as understanding the numinous, the confrontation with power not of this world, the use of metaphor and the importance and limitations on literalness are explored. With regard to what makes Mesopotamian religion unique, Jacobsen explores this with direct quotation from texts from the periods of Sumerian history. One thing that is important in the development of religion is the shift toward human identification. No longer do 'sun gods' and 'nature gods' dominate. The ancient Mesopotamians also saw this divinity as immanent, rather than transcendent. It is something within, at the centre, rather than something beyond. Because of this, the idea of a god living in a certain place or having special 'holy places' was a strong one -- a god was more present (sometimes only present) in certain places that usually became pilgrimage points or

temples. (One can see here the obvious parallel of the ancient Israelites with God who lives more fully on a mountain in Sinai or in a temple in Jerusalem.) What is true for us is also true for the ancient Mesopotamians in their religious development -- over the course of three thousand years, a dramatic development has taken place (just as thousands of years of development have wrought great changes in Judaism and Christianity), but there is always a tension and interplay of ideas between the old and the new. Religion through the Millennia

Looking at modern religions, ancient religious impulses and concerns rooted in nature have never completely faded. But during the third millennium, divine powers began to be seen as rulers and helpers of cities and tribes. There was personality beginning to be added to divinities, and they had particular human interests. Gods and goddesses became patrons of rulers and cities on earth, again reflecting the very real needs of the people at the time, whose security rested with rulers and a new invention in the world, the organised military force. Once again, one can see these issues relevant in ancient biblical texts. Into the second millennium, the distance of gods and goddess lessened, as people came to regard them not only as patron of cities, remote and distant rulers, or impersonal forces (although all of these elements survived in the divine images and characters) but also as personal patrons, someone/thing that could intervene in times of trouble, that could be thanked in times of personal prosperity, that could be sought for personal inspiration. Household gods and personal relationships with deities became common. Again, we can see this not only in the ancient biblical texts, but right up to the present day. It is from this second millennium that the Akkadian epic Gilgamesh derives; when we think of Gilgamesh today, it is this version we know. However, the elements of the Gilgamesh epic go back into the earliest parts of Sumerian history.

Minor criticisms

This is a generally excellent work. Jacobsen writes with an elegant but not overblown style, with liberal use of translated original texts to illustrate points. However, I consider it an important if not crucial point for histories such as this to have visual illustrations, maps, timelines, charts and other visual aids. Linguistically-oriented as I am, I appreciate a good narrative, but I also find that drawing on multiple intelligences reinforces the learning. There are a mere eight illustrations in this text, and three charts (oddly enough, not listed among the illustrations). There are no maps. Given the several thousand years of history being presented here, surely one map could be included? Similarly, there are no depictions of the original languages used, or the cuneiform script in which many of the original documents were penned. Line art, computer generated graphics, and photographs are readily available; the inclusion of a few would enhance this text greatly.

Overall, however, this is an excellent text, and one that will give great reading pleasure and considerable insight to the reader. Discover the ancient stories of snakes and floods. Encounter the gods who live on mountains and in

temples. All hundreds if not thousands of years before the book we call the Bible came into being.

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