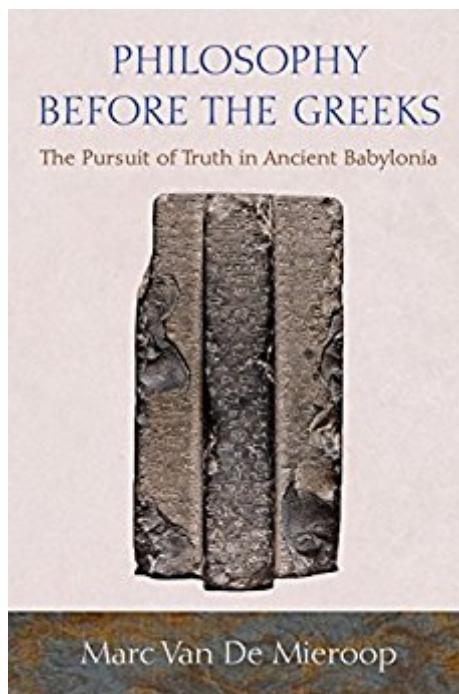


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Philosophy Before The Greeks: The Pursuit Of Truth In Ancient Babylonia



Synopsis

There is a growing recognition that philosophy isn't unique to the West, that it didn't begin only with the classical Greeks, and that Greek philosophy was influenced by Near Eastern traditions. Yet even today there is a widespread assumption that what came before the Greeks was "before philosophy." In *Philosophy before the Greeks*, Marc Van De Mieroop, an acclaimed historian of the ancient Near East, presents a groundbreaking argument that, for three millennia before the Greeks, one Near Eastern people had a rich and sophisticated tradition of philosophy fully worthy of the name. In the first century BC, the Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily praised the Babylonians for their devotion to philosophy. Showing the justice of Diodorus's comment, this is the first book to argue that there were Babylonian philosophers and that they studied knowledge systematically using a coherent system of logic rooted in the practices of cuneiform script. Van De Mieroop uncovers Babylonian approaches to knowledge in three areas: the study of language, which in its analysis of the written word formed the basis of all logic; the art of divination, which interpreted communications between gods and humans; and the rules of law, which confirmed that royal justice was founded on truth. The result is an innovative intellectual history of the ancient Near Eastern world during the many centuries in which Babylonian philosophers inspired scholars throughout the region "until the first millennium BC, when the breakdown of this cosmopolitan system enabled others, including the Greeks, to develop alternative methods of philosophical reasoning.

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Customer Reviews

For those who work in the field of Ancient Near Eastern Studies, especially with a focus on texts, Van De Mieroop's volume has great implications. It also brings clarity to some of the puzzling areas of the ANE written record, not just in Babylon, but throughout the Levant, Anatolia, and Egypt (although he does not deal with these other geographic areas in depth). The major short-coming, from my perspective, is that the title of this volume mistakenly leads those who do not know Van De Mieroop's previous work and are not familiar with ancient Babylonian writings to assume that this book has more to do with philosophy and Greeks than it actually does. I am actually very grateful that the Greeks are not center-stage in this book, because it is important to understand the Babylonians on their own accord and not just as a foil to the Greek way of philosophy. That being said, I did want a more fleshed-out answer to the question "So what?" at the end of the book. I was able to follow all of Van De Mieroop's arguments about the various genres he discussed, but I wanted to hear more of the author's thoughts about how text-as-first-philosophy shaped the ancient Near Eastern mind and experience. Van De Mieroop is, after all, one if not the most learned scholar of ancient Babylonian texts of this generation and this book has such a great potential to hit home that I wanted to have a richer take-away than Van De Mieroop provides --- however, this book is now in my head. I know it has implications that are significant, but those are for the reader to explore for him/herself.

Readable introduction to the Mesopotamian written culture. But Mieroop totally blows it on epistemology. He comes nowhere close to proving his claim that the Babylonians had a theory of knowledge. Based on his other work, I was hoping this would be an intellectual history on the order of Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane, but it was not by a long shot. For an in-depth review, please see: <https://ritterreviewblog.wordpress.com/2015/11/13/did-the-babylonians-have-philosophy/>

Utterly unconvincing.

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