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Chapter 2

The poem of Erra and Ishum: A Babylonian Poet's View of War

A. R. George

Introduction

The history of war begins in ancient Iraq. The earliest reported conflict in human history was fought by neighbouring city-states, Lagash and Umma, in the mid-third millennium BC. The early course of the war is reported by Enmetena, ruler of Lagash, in a Sumerian cuneiform inscription preserved on clay objects (a cone, a cylinder, two votive jars) that commemorate his restoration of a religious building that had been damaged in the war (Cooper 1986: 54–57 La 5.1; Frayne 2008: 194–99). The text records a succession of aggressive acts and retaliations. The prose is bald and matter-of-fact. The following passage is typical. It recounts the invasion of Lagash's territory by Ur-Lumma of Umma and his allies during the time of Enmetena's father, Enannatum, and their repulse by forces commanded by his son:

> kur-kur e-ma-ḫun e ki-sur-ra ^{d}nin-gír-su-ka-ka e-ma-ta-bal en-an-na-túm en$_5$-si lagaš^{ki}-ke$_4$ gána-^{ú}gig-ga $^{a\text{-}šà}$aša$_5$ ^{d}nin-gír-su-ka-ka giš ur-ur-šè e-da-lá en-te:me-na dumu ki-ág en-an-na-túm-ma-ke$_4$ tùn-šè ì-ni-sè ur-lum-ma ba-da-kar šà umma^{ki}-šè e-gaz anše-ni érin 60-am$_6$ gú íd-lum-ma-gír-nun-ta-ka e-šè-tag nam-lú-ùlu-ba gìr-pad-rá-bi eden-da e-da-tag$_4$-tag$_4$ saḫar-du$_6$-tag$_4$-bi ki-iá-a ì-mi-dub
>
> Enmetena 28–29 iii 1–27

> He enlisted (troops from) all countries and crossed over the boundary ditch of the god Ningirsu (i.e. of Lagash). Enannatum, ruler of Lagash, joined battle

> with him at close quarters in Wheatfield, land belonging to the god Ningirsu (i.e. to Lagash). Enmetena, Enannatum's beloved child, defeated him. Ur-Lumma ran away but was killed in Umma. He abandoned his chariotry, sixty teams strong, at the bank of the Lumma-Girnunta canal. The bones of their personnel were left scattered all over the plain. (Enmetena) heaped up burial mounds for them in five different places.

This and other accounts of the war from Lagash are already vivid in detail but do not make for impartial history-writing: Umma is always the unjust aggressor and Lagash always triumphs after initial defeat. Nevertheless, the detail encourages a belief that the sequence of events reported in the narrative of this and other inscriptions from Lagash is chronologically accurate, even if tendentious. On this basis, modern scholars have confidently written histories of the conflict (e.g. Lambert 1956, Cooper 1983, Bauer 1998: 445–495).

The war was fought over the rich arable land that lay between the two city-states. The territories of Lagash and Umma straddled what is now the road north from Nasiriya to Kut al-Imara in southern Iraq. The road runs parallel to the Shatt al-Gharraf, also known as the Shatt al-Hai, a watercourse that brings water from the Tigris to the country north of Nasiriya. In antiquity an ancestor of the same watercourse was considered part of the Tigris itself, and acknowledged as the source of Lagash's prosperity, for it provided water to irrigate the land and produce the enormous yields of barley that were typical of the whole country and, much later, astonished Herodotus. One may reflect with melancholy that this fertile plain is now largely a barren waste, and that the road through it not long ago provided an easy route for tanks going into battle in the invasion of Iraq.

Like many conflicts over natural resources, the war between Lagash and Umma was no short affair, for the inscriptions of Enmetena and others tell that it flared up during the reigns of successive rulers across several generations. Victory eventually fell to Umma, whose ruler Lugalzaggesi (fl. 2350 BC) sacked Lagash, destroyed its sanctuaries and brought a temporary end to its existence as an independent state.

Thus the people of Iraq, ancient and modern, have had the misfortune to witness war at both extremes of human history. War has returned to them on many occasions during the interval of 4,500 years that elapsed between Enmetena and Saddam Hussein. This essay considers a long Akkadian composition of the first millennium BC, in which a Babylonian poet reflects on his own experience of war in the land that is now Iraq. The composition is usually called the poem of Erra and Ishum. In order

to understand it better, it is apt first to examine other literary responses to war that survive in the extant poetry and prose of ancient Mesopotamia. These responses occur in texts composed in the two literary languages of Babylonia: Sumerian (mostly older) and Akkadian (mostly later).

Heroic war in Babylonian literature

There is no shortage of literary description of war in ancient Mesopotamia. The Akkadian annals of Assyrian kings, especially, are punctuated by accounts of military campaigns. Some of these are written in highly literary language. A fine example is the composition known as Sargon's Eighth Campaign, in reality a campaign report by an Assyrian king, Sharru-kēn II (biblical Sargon, reigned 721–705 BC). There he debriefs the national god Assur on the outcome of a long and difficult campaign conducted in the Zagros mountains of Iraq and Iran, present-day Kurdistan, in 714 BC (Mayer 1983, Foster 2005: 790–813). The report is notable for unusual and original descriptions of the terrain crossed by the Assyrian army. The major battle scene also deploys literary language but is comparatively brief. A more extended description of battle from ancient Mesopotamia occurs in the account of the eighth campaign of Sargon's son and successor on the throne of Assyria, Sîn-ahhē-erība (biblical Sennacherib, 704–681 BC). This campaign was fought against Elam (modern Khuzistan) and its Babylonian allies in 691 BC, and culminated in a great battle at Halule, a town on the Tigris perhaps somewhere near modern Samarra. This is Sennacherib's version of events:

> *ina qibīt Aššur bēli rabî bēlīya ana šiddi u pūti kīma tīb meḫê šamri ana nakri azīq ina kakkī Aššur bēlīya u tīb tāḫāzīya ezzi irassun anē'ma suḫḫurtašunu aškun ummānāt nakiri ina uṣṣī mulmullī ušaqqirma gimri pagrīšunu upalliša* UD-*ziziš Ḫumban-undaša nāgiru ša šar Elamti eṭlu pitqudu muma"er ummānātīšu tukultašu rabû adi rabûtīšu ša patar šibbi ḫurāṣi šitkunū u ina šemirī aṣpi ḫurāṣi ruššî rukkusā rittēšun kīma šūrī marûti ša nadû šummannu urruḫiš upallikšunūtima aškuna taḫtâšun kišādātēšunu unakkis asliš aqrāti napšātēšunu uparri' gū'iš kīma mīli gapši ša šamūtu simāni umunnīšunu ušardâ ṣēr erṣeti šadilti lasmūti murnisqī ṣimitti rukūbīya ina damēšunu gapšūti išallû nāriš ša narkabat tāḫāzīya sāpinat raggi u ṣēni damu u paršu ritmukū magarrūš pagrī qurādīšunu kīma urqīti umallâ ṣēra sapsapāte unakkisma baltašun ābut kīma bīnī qiššê simāni unakkis qātīšun šemerī aṣpi ḫurāṣi* ki.sag *ebbi ša rittīšunu amḫur ina namṣarī zaqtūti ḫuṣannīšunu*

uparri' patrī šibbi ḫurāṣi kaspi ša qablīšunu ēkim … šū Umman-menanu šar Elamti adi šar Bābili nasikkāni ša māt Kaldi ālikūt idīšu ḫurbašu tāḫāzīya kīmalê zumuršunu isḫup zarātēṣun umaššerūma ana šūzub napšātīšunu pagrī ummānātīšun uda"išū ētiqū kī ša atmi summati kuššudi itarrakū libbūšun šīnātēšun uṣarrapū qereb narkabātīšunu umaššerūni zûšun ana radādīšunu narkabāti sisîya uma"er arkīšun munnaribšunu ša ana napšāte ūṣû ašar ikaššadū urassabū ina kakki

Oriental Institute Prism v 76–vi 16, 24–35 (text Luckenbill 1924: 183–185)

By command of the great lord Assur, my lord, I blasted against the enemy to front and side like the onslaught of a violent tempest. With the weapons of my lord Assur and the fierce onslaught of my battle I turned their advance and put them into retreat. With arrows and darts I pierced the enemy's troops and perforated their entire bodies like pin-cushions(?).

Humban-undaša, the marshal of the king of Elam, a well-trusted fellow who commanded his army, his main hope, along with his officers, whose belts were equipped with gold daggers and arms girt with sling-bands of ruddy gold – I butchered them forthwith like fattened steers tethered by rope and brought about their demise. I slit their throats like sheep. I sliced through their precious necks as through thread. I made their blood flow over the broad earth like a flood cresting in the rainy season. The thoroughbred stallions harnessed to my vehicle plunged at a gallop into deep pools of their blood as into a river. The wheels of my battle chariot, which lays low wicked and evil, were awash with blood and gore. I filled the plain like grass with the corpses of their warriors. I cut off their moustaches and robbed them of dignity. Like the fruit of a ripe cucumber I cut off their hands and took from their arms the sling-bands of pure gold and silver. With sharp swords I severed their belts. I robbed them of the daggers of gold and silver at their waists…

Umman-menanu, the king of Elam, along with the king of Babylon and sheikhs of Chaldaea who accompanied him – terror of my battle overwhelmed their persons like a spectre. They abandoned their tents and, to save their lives, escaped by trampling over the corpses of their soldiers, their hearts pounding like a hunted pigeon-chick's. Scalding their chariots with urine they fouled them with excrement. I commanded my chariotry to chase after them, in order to cut down those running for their lives wherever they could catch up with them.

We know from the Babylonian chronicle, a less partial source, that the outcome of this battle, for all Sennacherib's claims of a rout, was actually an Assyrian reverse.[1] Leaving aside the historical context and turning to

literary issues, the passage is notable for its bombastic style and rhetorical ambition, conveyed especially in its choice of vocabulary and relentless (but often mundane) imagery. This can be seen in translation. So too can the literary allusions that give the account a 'mythical dimension' by recalling the primeval battle of the gods that gave order to the cosmos (Weissert 1997). Less visible is a syntactical feature, in which the verb of some clauses is placed in penultimate position.[2] In normal Akkadian, verbs fall at the end of the clause. In prose, unlike in poetry, the penultimate placing of a verb in its clause does not occur where the conjunctive enclitic particle (*-ma*) binds the clause to what follows. Its function thus seems to be pausal. Penultimate placing of the verb is a standard feature of elevated Akkadian prose, going back to the third millennium (George 2007a: 41). It marks the present passage, and indeed Sennacherib's inscription as a whole, as a deliberately literary artefact.

As a literary artefact, a piece of writing can exhibit more than just elevated language and special syntax. It can also display a particular tone. In this case, the tone is heroic. The heroic style is not only achieved by language. It is also achieved by the ideas that the language conveys. This is important for the present purpose. The idea expressed here is that the battlefield is a place of carnage, but the carnage is glorious. The gory details so carefully composed redound to the glory of the king, giving the impression of an heroic figure charging through the field in his chariot, impervious to danger and laying low the enemy on all sides. The text speaks of the ideal kingly exploit rather than reality, for Sennacherib was probably at home in his palace when the battle was fought. This gave the composer all the more leeway to present an heroic embellishment of the battle rather than a purely factual description.

The heroic view of war articulated in Sennacherib's annals and other royal inscriptions is characteristic of much ancient writing on war, not least in Mesopotamia. It can be explored by a brief exposition of one particular trope, the idea that war is a festival. This idea is typical of poets of ancient Mesopotamia and firmly entrenched in their repertory. The exact word 'festival' occurs in this context in two compositions of the early second millennium. The Sumerian narrative poem *Lugale* elaborates a myth in which a young warrior-god defeats a demonic mountain that threatens order. In the course of the god Ninurta's preparations for battle, one of his weapons cautions against doing battle with the monstrous Asag:

> en mè ne-en rib-ba-šè ba-ra-ab-ši-gen-né-en
> ^{giš}tukul-sìg-ge ezen nam-guruš-a

ešemen ^{d}inanna-ke$_4$ á-zu ba-ra-ni-zi
en mè-maḫ-a la-ba-e-du-un na-ab-ul$_4$-en gìri ki-a si-bí-ib
^{d}nin-urta á-sàg-e kur-ra gìri mu-e-ši-ni-gub-gub

Lugale 135–139, second-millennium text, van Dijk 1983/I 69

My lord, do not go forth to a combat so giant!
Do not raise your arm where weapons clash,
in the festival of young men, the dance of Inanna!
My lord, do not go rushing to a battle (so) serious, keep your feet fixed here!
O Ninurta, on the mountain there lurks in wait for you Asag.

The motif of the cautious servant who advises against a fight occurs elsewhere in Mesopotamian literature, notably in the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, where the hero's companion Enkidu cautions him against attacking the monster Humbaba in the mountain of the Cedar Forest. An Old Babylonian version of this Akkadian poem reads thus:

īdēma ibrī ina šadî	I knew him, my friend, in the uplands,
inūma attallaku itti būlim	when I roamed here and there with the herd.
ana šūši bērā nummât qištum	All about for sixty leagues the forest's a wilderness,
mannu ša urradu ana libbīša	who is there would venture inside it?
Ḫuwāwa rigmašu abūbu	Huwawa's roar is the Deluge,
pīšu Girrumma napīssu mūtum	his mouth is Fire, his breath is Death!
ammīnim taḫšiḫ anni'am epēšam	Why desire to take this action?
qabal lā maḫār šupat Ḫuwāwa	Huwawa's ambush is a battle unwinnable.

OB Gilgamesh III (Y) 106–16, George 2003: 198

The two passages, Sumerian and Akkadian, elaborate the exact same theme in the very similar circumstances, and are an example of the common ideas that could inform literary creativity in both languages. Apart from the motif of the cautious servant this passage of Babylonian Gilgamesh shares with *Lugale* the image of the monstrous opponent lurking ready to surprise the hero in unfamiliar territory, but it does not express the heroic idea that battle is a festival (Sumerian *ezen* in *Lugale*).

Elsewhere in Gilgamesh, however, the idea is explicit. Enkidu's early misgivings are set aside when it becomes clear that his king will go to the Cedar Mountain, come what may. On the journey to the forest Gilgamesh has a series of nightmares, and Enkidu's task is to give them a reassuring explanation. Each explanation is a prophecy of perilous combat leading to ultimate success. The following lines explain a nightmare in which Gilgamesh is pinned down by a mountain avalanche but then extricated:

inanna Ḫuwāwa ša nillakūšum	Now this Huwawa whom we go against,
ul šadûmma nukkur mimma	is he not the mountain? He is different in every way!
tennemmidāma išti'at teppuš	You and he will come face to face and you will do something unique,
parṣam ša mutim šipirti zikari	the rite of a warrior, the task of a man.
urta"ab uzzašu elīka	He'll make his fury rage against you,
ulawwa puluḫtašu birkīka	he'll wrap his terror tight around your legs.

OB Gilgamesh Schøyen$_2$ 16–20, George 2009: 30

The context in which the poet inserts the line *parṣam ša mutim šipirti zikari* is clear enough. Gilgamesh will encounter his monstrous enemy and combat will ensue, unique because never before experienced in the history of heroism: a mortal king will fight a god. The line that occupies us here expresses the idea of battle through metonyms, 'the rite of a warrior, the task of a man'. Combat is a masculine activity but, more than that, it is a divinely ordained duty (*parṣum*).

The word *parṣum* in the previous passage is close in meaning to 'festival' and there takes the same function. Other Old Babylonian compositions in Akkadian use *isinnum* 'festival', a loanword from Sumerian *ezen*, the word encountered already in *Lugale* 136. In *Lugale* battle was not only a 'festival' but also the 'dance of Inanna'. Inanna was the Sumerian name for the ancient Mesopotamian goddess of war and sex. According to the poet of one Sumerian hymn in her honour, war was an expression of her joy, the very music of her being:

šà-ḫúl-la-ka-ni šìr nam-úš-a edin-na mu-un-gá-gá
šìr šà-ga-ni gá-gá-da-ni
^{giš}tukul-bi úš lugud mu-un-tu$_5$-tu$_5$

Inninšagurra 43–45, Sjöberg 1975: 182

With joyous heart she brings a song of death to the field (of battle),
and while her heart performs the song,
she soaks their weapons in blood and gore.

The Babylonians called this goddess Ishtar. Her nature as a goddess of sex has been much explored, but there have been fewer studies of the textual evidence for her as war-goddess (recently Zsolnay 2010). The Old Babylonian poem of Agushaya eulogises Ishtar in her aspect as divine patron of warfare, among others, and asserts once more that *isinša tamḫāru* 'her festival is battle' (text Groneberg 1997: 76 iii 7 // 11). The metaphor is part of the repertoire in poems that describe battle, and at least two more occurrences of it survive in Akkadian poetry. One is also Old Babylonian, in a heroic poem about the inimitable conquests of a legendary third-millennium king, Sargon of Akkade. In a passage that celebrates the qualities of a warrior, the poet looks forward to battle on the morrow, when *isinnum ša mutī innepuš* 'the festival of men will be enacted' (text Westenholz 1997: 62 i 19).[3] A long narrative poem about the Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta II's conquest of Babylonia employs the trope twice. First the Assyrian looks forward to battle as an occasion when divine justice will be meted out to his untrustworthy adversary, king Kashtiliash of Babylon, and hopes that *ina isin tamḫāri šâtu ētiq mamīti ay ēlâ* 'he who broke his vow [i.e. the Babylonian enemy] shall not survive the festival of combat' (text Kuk 1981: 99 IIIa 20). A battle duly won, and the coward Kashtiliash put to flight, the Assyrian warriors urge their king to have them attack the Babylonian army and march on Babylon, reflecting how, since the beginning of Tukulti-Ninurta's reign, they have enjoyed nothing but warfare, and *qablu u ippiru isinnani ḫidūtni*(?) 'combat and fighting are a festival and a joy to us!' (text Kuk 1981: 106 V 11).

The heroic vision of war is a young man's idea. First-hand experience of battle often leads to a revision of that idea. General William Sherman (1820–1891) knew much of war, for he rose to command Union forces in the American Civil War and thereafter led the US army in the Indian wars of the 1870s. In 1880 he gave an impromptu address to a large crowd of veteran soldiers and civilians in Columbus, Ohio, and made the much quoted observation, 'There is many a boy here today who looks on war as all glory but, boys, it is all hell.' These simple words of an old soldier neatly assert the divide between the juvenile idealism of the heroic view of war and the realism of those who have been through it. The same divide exists in literature, between the heroic idea of war, documented above for Babylonia, and a very different response. To the latter we now turn.

Non-heroic war in Babylonia: The poem of Erra and Ishum

The Babylonian poem of Erra and Ishum, like many literary compositions in Akkadian, is currently in the process of reconstruction. It was last subject to a critical edition 40 years ago (Cagni 1969), but a more up-to-date reconstruction informs the most recent English translation (Foster 2005: 880–911). Much of it is now extant, but further discoveries of text are needed in order to gain complete knowledge of it. For the moment we have the text in five sections ('tablets') of unequal length, yielding a total of nearly 700 lines of poetry. The middle of the poem is especially fragmentary (Tablets II–III), but the poem was probably about 800 lines when complete.[4]

The poem's date of composition is disputed. The oldest manuscripts come from the royal library of Nineveh (mid-seventh century BC), but scholars have judged variously from the poem's content that it is anything from 400 to 100 years older than that (Machinist 1983: 221, Beaulieu 2000: 25–29, Frahm 2010: 7). The content is mainly a succession of long speeches, through which is described the destruction of Babylonian cities in a combination of civil war and foreign invasion. The historical background is a long period of weak rule in Babylonia punctuated by violent disorder, which began with the Aramean incursions of the eleventh century and continued to the eighth century. For much of this period very little is known of Babylonian history, and only slightly more of Assyrian.

The poem is formally kin to the traditional Babylonian mythological narrative poetry, often called 'epic', as in the Creation Epic (Talon 2005, Lambert 2008: 37–59) and the Epic of Gilgamesh (George 2003), but represents a radical departure from it in style (Foster 2007: 106–109). Its form is much less the customary narrative and much more extended rhetorical monologue; the speeches serve to tell the story and thus function as narrative. In this respect it recalls the old Sumerian genre of city laments (see Sperl in this volume). Like the city laments, its topic is war among humans, and so it bears comparison with the *Iliad*. Its protagonists, even more than the *Iliad*'s, are gods: Erra, god of war, his minister Ishum, and Marduk, king of the gods. There are no named human characters at all, only a milling mass in the background, like the extras in a Hollywood blockbuster. I have previously observed that, in Fowler's typology of the development of epic, the poem of Erra and Ishum belongs in the tertiary stage, for it serves as an allegorical reinterpretation of the old myth in which gods make war on mankind (George 2007b: 56).[5]

Its generic kinship with the older Babylonian 'epics' should alert us to the possibility that, like some of them, especially the Epic of Gilgamesh, the poem of Erra and Ishum is a vehicle for reflection on the human condition. The Epic of Gilgamesh is, in its last version, partly a meditation on the fact of death and the meaning of life. The Creation Epic gives an answer to questions about mankind's origin and place in the great order of things. It seems that in the Babylonian literary system, philosophical and religious discourse concerned with existential problems was embedded not only in what is often called 'wisdom literature', but also in mythological narrative poetry. For all its divine cast of characters, the poem of Erra and Ishum is nevertheless a composition that grasps a very human problem, the problem of war, and attempts to understand it.

It has long been recognised that, for all that elsewhere in ancient Mesopotamian sources Erra is a god of plague, in the poem of Erra and Ishum he is a warrior, who longs only to practise his métier (e.g. Bottéro 1978: 138–39). His métier is nowhere more fully described than in this poem, where the accounts of war and its consequences are unrelenting and graphic. The absence of glory makes it clear that the poem is a forceful repudiation of war. Benjamin Foster has commented of the poem that its 'denuciations of violence are so eloquent and lengthy that the poem can scarcely be read as anything but a condemnation of civil strife as a violation of the cosmic order' (Foster 2007: 67). In my view, the condemnation is not restricted to civil war. In rejecting the Erra of the poem as an 'epic hero', Luigi Cagni rightly observed that he 'represents the hellish aspect of war' (Cagni 1977: 9), and found him not so much a character as an allegorical mask. It is legitimate to go further and assert that in this poem Erra is a divine personification of war in general, and that the poem's principal statement is of war's incomparable horror and irresistible force.

The poem's plot can be summarised briefly, but I shall dwell awhile on the opening passage, whose formal construction is tricky to parse but which contains a crucial message. As understood here, it begins with a five-line invocation to Erra's minister Ishum in his name Hendursanga, who is eulogised as king of the earth and creator of all things.

šar gimir dadmē bānû kib[*rāti*…]
Ḫendursanga apil Ellil rēšt[*û*…]
nāš ḫaṭṭi ṣīrti nāqid ṣalmāt qaqqadi rē'û [*tenēšēti*]
Išum ṭābiḫu na'du ša ana našê kakkī ezzūti qātāšu asmā
u ana šubruq ulmēšu šērūti Erra qarrād ilī inūšu ina šubti

Erra and Ishum I 1–5

King of all habitations, creator of the world [regions, …]
O Hendursanga, foremost son of Enlil […!]
Who bears an august staff, herdsman of the black-headed race, shepherd [of mankind,]
O Ishum, renowned butcher whose hands are suited to bear fierce weapons,
who, flashing his terrible battle-axe, makes even Erra, most warlike of gods, quake in his dwelling.[6]

We can note at once something important about the poem's form. In much Babylonian poetry (as well as other ancient Near Eastern poetry) lines conventionally coincide with syntax, so that a pause occurs at the end of the line, and lines combine by sense in pairs, so that a longer pause attends the end of the even line. Thus a poem proceeds couplet by couplet. Often couplets themselves are paired to form four-line stanzas, but identifying these can sometimes be problematic and a subjective exercise. The formal construction of this poetry has the advantage of flagging up the boundaries between units of sense and marking the extent of topics.

The first four lines of Erra and Ishum constitute a four-line stanza of two balanced couplets (ll. 1–2, 3–4), in each of which the second line is headed by one of the addressee's names.[7] The topic of the first couplet is Ishum's cosmic status: he is invoked as ruler of the world and son of the supreme deity. The second couplet dwells on his functions as first pastor, then warrior. The application of grand cosmic epithets to Ishum, the lowly minister of Erra, has disturbed many scholars, who have sought to place another god's name in the lacuna at the end of l. 1.[8] This is unnecessary because, as we shall see later, the poem has good reason, in the particular context of war, to exalt Ishum above all others. Line 5 presents a departure in form, because although it starts a new couplet, it is syntactically dependent on line 4. It serves to introduce Erra, who is the topic of the next line, as we shall see. The couplet ll. 5–6 is thus a hinge between Ishum, the addressee, and Erra, the protagonist. The disjunctive syntax, which places a sentence-final pause in between the two lines, results in an irregular couplet, after which the text again proceeds in regular couplets (ll. 7–8, 9–10, 11–12 etc.). Perhaps this violence to the poem's third couplet is a deliberate device to give force to the shift in topic, from Ishum to Erra. The burden of l. 5, that even Erra is afraid of Ishum, restates the poet's very exalted view of Ishum.

The poet follows the five-line invocation by showing Ishum (and the audience) a scene in which Ishum's master, lying in bed, ponders the pros

and cons of going to war. The arguments are articulated as an internal dialogue between Erra's mind (*libbu*, literally 'heart') and his physical self. The heart wants to make war, and to that effect addresses in turn Erra's weapons (the Seven), his vizier Ishum and finally Erra himself, in particular urging Ishum, as Erra's torch or firebrand (his name means 'fire'),[9] to show the others the way. The latter detail clearly alludes to the military tactic of surprise attack before dawn, and fixes the scene at night:

īrissūma libbašu epēš tāḫāzi
ītammi ana kakkīšu litpatā imat mūti
ana Sebetti qarrād lā šanān nandiqā kakkīkun
iqabbīma ana kâša lūṣīma ana ṣēri
atta diparumma inaṭṭalū nūrka
atta ālik maḫrimma ilū […]
atta namṣarumma ṭābiḫu […]
Erra tibēma ina sapān māti
kī namrat kabtatka u ḫadu libbuk

Erra and Ishum I 6–14

His (Erra's) heart desired of him the waging of war.
It talked to his weapons, 'Smear yourselves with lethal poison!'
and to the Seven, peerless warriors, 'Strap on your weapons!'

It spoke to you (Ishum), 'I would go forth to the (battle)-field!
'You are the firebrand, they watch your light!
'You are the vanguard, the gods [do follow you!]
'You are the sword that slaughters [the enemy!]

'O Erra, arise! How your mood will be bright,
'your heart joyous, when laying the land low!'

Erra's body is too sleepy to obey his mind and he chooses to stay in bed. War is not so easily started. The poet then resumes his address to Ishum, now in his name as the torch-bearing nightwatchman Engidudu:

Erra kī ša amēli dalpi idāšu an[*ḫā*]
iqabbi ana libbīšu lutbe luṣlalma
ītamma ana kakkīšu ummedā tubqāti
ana Sebetti qarrād lā šanān ana šubtēkunu tūrāma
adi atta tadekkûšu ṣalil uršuššu
itti Mammi ḫīratuš ippuša ulṣamma

Engidudu bēlu muttallik mūši muttarrû rubê
ša eṭlu u ardatu ina šulmi ittanarrû unammaru kīma ūmi

Erra and Ishum I 15–22

Erra's arms were exhausted, like a man without sleep,
said he to his heart, 'Should I rise or lie asleep?'
He spoke to his weapons, 'Go stand in your alcove!'
to the Seven, peerless warriors, 'Return to your places!'

Until you (Ishum) yourself rouse him he lies in his bedchamber sleeping,
making love with Mammi, his wife;
O lord Engidudu, who goes about at night, guiding the nobleman,
who guides man and woman in safety, shining a light bright as day!

The key to understanding this opening passage of 22 lines is the identification of who is speaking and where they stop. Because cuneiform writing lacks punctuation, translators of the passage have been uncertain where to place the quotation marks. In addition, the passage's formal construction has not always survived translation clearly, because it is not generally recognised that the little narrative of Erra in bed continues the poet's address to Ishum. In my view the correct interpretation has been clearly demonstrated by Gerfrid Müller (1995, also 1994: 783 n. 7a), but his important and convincing study of the passage has not achieved the attention it merits. It is tacitly rejected by Walter Farber's treatment of this passage (2008) and overlooked completely by Frauke Weiershäuser's discussion of it in her study of Ishum (2010: 361). For this reader, these most recent attempts to interpret the passage make for a step back into the hermeneutic mire that characterised discussion of it before Müller's breakthrough.[10]

Lest it be forgotten, Müller's reading demands restating. Ishum, as the addressee of the invocation, is the second person of ll. 9 and 19. The third-person subject of the verbs of speech in ll. 7 and 9 cannot therefore be Ishum, but must be Erra's heart: it speaks to Erra and is then answered by him. The heart addresses one couplet to the weapons (ll. 7–8), two to Ishum (9–12), and one to Erra himself (13–14). Erra's reply to his heart occupies one couplet (15–16) and his orders to the weapons a further couplet (17–18). He does not speak to Ishum at this point. The focus returns to Ishum, however, with a four-line stanza that reprises the poet's invocation (19–22). As punctuated here the opening 22 lines of the poem thus form 11 couplets that display very careful composition as a unit.

It has already been observed that the two invocations to Ishum (I 1–5, 19–22) act as a frame or *inclusio* (Machinist 1983: 223). What now

emerges more clearly is that the material so framed is the poet's revelation to him, Ishum, of a dialogue going on not between Ishum and his master but solely in Erra's mind (6–18). The important point is that it is not, after all, Ishum who urges Erra to combat (*pace* Machinist). The identification of the second person of ll. 9 and 19 as Ishum shows nevertheless that Ishum has the capability of rousing Erra to action and thus initiating warfare (19 *tadekkûšu*), even if he does not do it on this occasion.

The poem now turns its attention from Ishum to Erra's weapons, the Seven.[11] It first describes their origin, created by the sky-god Anu, and their function, which is to destroy human and animal life when Erra's tolerance of such things is exhausted (I 23–44). The only figure who stands between the Seven and action is not Erra but Ishum (I 27 *Išum daltumma edil panuššun* 'Ishum is a door bolted before them'). Ishum is thereby again identified as an initiator of violence, but the image is a double-edged sword, for doors close as well as open. Ishum, as we shall see, is a force of moderation; he can terminate warfare as well as start it.

The poem returns to the present, and the first true line of narrative, which describes the weapons' fury at Erra's rejection of them. From their corner they harangue him with a long speech which goads him into action (I 45–91). Part of the speech is a paean to the virtues of a soldier's life. The passage, like the whole speech, is firmly cast in the heroic mould, and contains a further instance of the 'war is a festival' motif introduced above:

kī lā ālik ṣēri nikkala akal sinniš
kī ša tāḫāzī lā nīdû niplaḫa nirūda
alāk ṣēri ša eṭlūti kī ša isinnumma
āšib āli lū rubû ul išebbi akla
šumsuk ina pî nišīšūma qalil qaqqassu
ana ālik ṣēri akī itarraṣ qāssu
ša āšib āli lū puggulat kubukkuš
ana ālik ṣēri akī idannin mīna
akal āli lullû ul ubbala kamān tumri
šikar našpi duššupi ul ubbalū mê nādi
ekal tamlî ul ubbala maṣallatu ša [*ṣēri*]
qurādu Erra ṣīma ana ṣēri turuk kakkīka

Erra and Ishum I 49–60

Shall we eat women's bread like those who do not go on campaign?
Shall we tremble with fear like those untried in battle?
For men to go on campaign is like a festival,
but he who stays in town can never eat enough, not even as ruler.

He is vilified by his people, his standing diminished,
how can he measure up to a veteran soldier?
However sturdy a civilian's muscles,
how can he wax strong as a veteran soldier?

The luxury bread of town cannot compare with a loaf baked in ashes,
sweet pale ale cannot compare with water from a leather bottle.
A palace on a terrace cannot compare with a bivouac [in the open;]
O valiant Erra, go forth on campaign and rattle your weapons!

The speech eventually turns to the reasons for the weapons' desire for action. These are two familiar motivations. The first is that the human and animal population has grown so much that the economy is in danger (I 79–86). War is thus justified, as in Greek literature (West 1997: 481), as a mechanism for controlling the numbers who compete for the planet's resources. The second motivation is that the weapons are going rusty:

u nēnu mūdê nēreb šadê nimtašši ḫarrānu
ina muḫḫi tillê ṣērīni šatâ qê ettūtu
qašatni ṭābtu ibbalkitma idnina eli emūqīni
ša uṣṣīni zaqti kepâta lišānšu
patarni ina lā ṭabāḫi ittadi šuḫtu

Erra and Ishum I 87–91

And we who (once) knew mountain passes, have forgotten every route,
cobwebs are spun on our battle kit.
Our sweet bow's turned rebel, too stiff for our strength,
our sharp arrow's tip is blunt.
Our dagger's gone rusty for lack of bloodshed.

This poet understood that, among the many causes of war, the desire of generals to test their men and equipment is a potent factor. As a military man, Erra is roused by these words, and proposes to go on campaign after all (I 92–99). Ishum asks why he plots war against mankind but Erra silences him with a paean of self-praise (I 100–123). The reason he gives for war is this: no god has recently brought conflict to the world, so men have lost their respect for the divine powers, and in particular do not fear Erra himself: *leqû šīṭūtī* 'they hold me in contempt', he says, not once but over and again (I 120, III D 15, IV 113). This is, again, a true insight. A generation that has not known war is less likely to fear it. Terror of war is learned most surely through experience. Erra intends to regain the respect he has lost.

Erra goes to Babylon, to visit Marduk, the king of the gods, in his temple Esangil. Marduk is characterised as distinctly past his prime. The purpose of Erra's visit seems to be to encourage Marduk to leave Babylon, on the pretext that his holy statue needs refurbishing, for then the world would be ungoverned and chaos could prevail. Marduk consents to Erra's plan but only when Erra promises to maintain order in his absence. When Marduk returns Erra takes offence, either at some slight or because he has been tricked out of the opportunity to use his power. He delivers a long monologue in which he vows to give Marduk and the other senior gods cause to remember him, and again brags of his warlike prowess and destructive power. The effect of Erra's anger is immediate bloodshed and anarchy, at least in the city of Nippur, where the local god, Enlil, abandons his dwelling. This is told in a report of Ishum to Erra, as if in remonstration with his master; here Ishum is a force for restraint. The violence in Nippur is not the result of Marduk leaving his cosmic station a second time. Rather it seems that his earlier absence from his temple has produced an instability in the cosmos which has repercussions even after he reoccupied it.

It is now Ishum's turn to vaunt Erra's power. He does so in the most lofty of terms:

[qur]ādu Erra ṣerret šamê tamḫāt
[napḫ]ar erṣetimma gammarāta mātumma belēta
tâmtamma dalḫāta šaddîmma gamrāta
nišīma redâta būlamma rē'āta
Ešarrāma pānukka E'engurrāma qātukka
Šuannāma tapaqqid Esangilma tuma"ar
gimir parṣīma ḫammāta ilūma palḫūka…
ša lā kâšāma tāḫāzu

Erra and Ishum III D 3–9, 13

O valiant Erra, you grasp heaven's halter,
you master the entire world, you rule the people!
You roil the very ocean, master even the mountain,
you herd mankind, you drive the livestock!

Heaven's at your disposal, Hell's in your hands,
you have charge of Babylon, give orders to Esangil:
You're master of all the cosmic powers, even the gods are in terror of you…
is there warfare without you?

Here Ishum voices the poet's view, that there is no force on earth, nor in the entire universe, that can master Erra, who eclipses even the king of the gods in Babylon. Ishum's speech continues with a vivid description of the chaos that Erra has wrought. What he describes is nothing less than political events in Babylonia, its invasion by an enemy army and the subsequent civil war. There is nothing heroic about the fighting. The description is notable for brutality:

ilūtka tušannīma tamtašal amēliš
kakkīka tannediqma tēterub qerebšu
ina qereb Šuanna kī ša ṣabāt āli taqtabi ḫabinniš
mārū Bābili ša kīma qanê api pāqida lā īšû napḫaršunu elīka iptaḫrū…
īmurūkāma ummānū kakkīšunu innadqū
ša šakkanakki mutēr gimil Bābili īteziz libbašu
kī šallat nakiri ana šalāli uma"er ṣābāšu
ālik pān ummāni ušaḫḫaza lemutta
ana āli šâšu ša ašapparūka atta amēlu
ila lā tapallaḫ lā taddar amē[*la*]
ṣeḫru u rabâ ištēniš šumītma
ēniq šezbi šerra lā tezziba ayyamma

Erra and Ishum IV 3–6, 22–29

You altered your divine being and became like a man,
you strapped on your weapons and entered the city.
Inside Babylon you spoke subversively(?), as if to take over the town,
like reeds in a marsh, having no leader, the men of Babylon all
gathered around you…

The soldiers saw you and strapped on their weapons,
Babylon's governor, the city's protector, was taken with fury.
He commanded his troops to loot as if looting a foe,
inciting the generals to acts of wickedness:

'You, my man, whom I send to this city,
'respect no god and fear no man!
'Do young and old to death just the same,
'and spare not even any babe unweaned!'

The city is so polluted by bloodshed that Marduk cannot any longer abide in his temple and, amid bitter lament, leaves his station at the centre of the cosmos. Erra now has the whole world at his mercy. One further excerpt

will give an idea of the poem's preoccupation with the effects of his war. Ishum is quoting Erra:

ša māra uldu mārīma iqabbi
annâ urtabbīma utâr gimillī
māra ušmâtma abu iqabbiršu
arka aba ušmâtma qēbira ul īši
ša bīta īpušu ganūnīma iqabbi
annâ ētepušma apaššaḫa qerbuššu
ūm ublanni šīmatī aṣallal ina libbīšu
šâšu ušmâssūma ušaḫraba ganūnšu
arka lū ḫarbumma ana šanîmma anamdin

Erra and Ishum IV 95–103

'Him who had a son and said "This is my son!
  '"Thus I have raised him, so he will return my favour!" —
'I shall do the son to death and his father shall bury him,
  'then I shall do the father to death and he shall have none to bury him.

'Him who built a house and said, "This is my home!
  '"Thus I have built it, so I may rest inside it!
  '"When fate has carried me off, I shall sleep within!" —
'him I shall do to death and his home make a ruin,
  'then, even as a ruin, I'll give it to a stranger.'

This passage expresses the denial, through Erra's violence, of the most basic human aspiration, to leave behind a lasting family. In a Babylonian household, where ancestors were often buried beneath the floor, it was a son's duty to lead commemorative rites for his family's ghosts. He thus ensured both the ancestors' comfort after death and the survival of the family as a social unit. The premature death of a son and the destruction of the home were considered a terrible violation of the natural order. The passage states that war made this fear a reality for many.

The emphasis of these two passages of Ishum's speech just quoted, and of the speech as a whole, is on the voracity of the war god and the indiscriminate violence he brings. The poem does not celebrate Erra's violence as glorious. It concentrates on the plight of the victims. It does so not because the manner of their deaths redounds to a victor's glory, as in Sennacherib's campaign report quoted above, but to demonstrate the horrors of warfare as suffered by those caught up in it. Similarly the poetry of Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) and others that served in the trenches of

Flanders provides countless images of helpless soldiers, gassed, maimed and dismembered. The readers of Owen's poems and of Erra and Ishum identify with the anonymous and numberless victims of war, defenceless in the face of war's ferocity ('though from his throat the life-tide leaps, there was no threat upon his lips'). It is this empathy with the victim that, above all, makes the mood non-heroic.

Next Erra vows to destroy the seat of cosmic government so that all voices of moderation are silenced (IV 127): *ana šubat šar ilī lū'irma lā ibbašši milku* 'I will attack the seat of the king of the gods, so no voice of reason will survive!' And the effect of Erra's ambition then becomes yet more terrible, as he launches on the world a conflict that will bring all countries to civil war:

Tâmta Tâmtu Subarta Subartu Aššurâ Aššurû
Elamâ Elamû Kaššâ Kaššû
Sutâ Sutû Qutâ Qutû
Lullubâ Lullubû mātu māta ālu āla
bītu bīta amēlu amēla aḫu aḫa lā igammelūma linārū aḫāmeš

Erra and Ishum IV 131–135

Sealander must not spare Sealander,
nor Subartian Subartian, nor Assyrian Assyrian,
nor Elamite Elamite, nor Kassite Kassite,
nor Sutean Sutean, nor Gutian Gutian,
nor Lullubean Lullubean, nor nation nation, nor city city,
nor house house, nor man man, nor brother brother, but they shall slay each other!

Only then will Erra permit the carnage to cease, when a new ruler will arise in Babylonia (IV 136). To facilitate this new order, Erra allows Ishum to bring an end to the conflict, which he does by making war on Mount Sharshar (formerly read Hehe).[12] This place was the symbolic homeland of the nomadic peoples whose uprising had brought chaos and civil war to Babylonia, so Ishum's campaign is a war not of aggression but of self-defence. His mission, with its clearly demarcated goal, is very different from Erra's indiscriminate rampage. It is told in briefest style and without blood:

Išum ana Šaršar šadî ištakan pānīšu
Sebettu qarrād lā šanān išappisū arkīšu
ana Šaršar šadî iktašad qurādu

iššīma qāssu ītabat šadâ
šadâ Šaršar imtanu qaqqaršu
ša qišti ḫašūri uktappira gupnīša
kī aḫra Ḫaniš ītiqu ēme qīšumma
ālī igmurma ana namê ištakan
šadî ubbitma būlšunu ušamqit
tâmāti idluḫma miširtašina uḫalliq
apī u qīšī ušaḫribma kī Girra iqmi
būla īrurma utēr ana ṭiddi

Erra and Ishum IV 139–150

Ishum set out for the mountain Sharshar,
the Seven, peerless warriors, following(?) behind him.
At the mountain Sharshar the warrior arrived,
he raised his hand and destroyed the mountain.

The mountain Sharshar he turned into a void,
he felled the trees of the forest of cedar.
The woodland looked as if traversed by the Deluge,
he took control of the towns and made them desert.

He destroyed the uplands and slew their flocks,
he roiled the oceans and wiped out their produce.
He laid waste reedbeds and woodlands, and burned them like Fire,
he cursed the livestock and turned them to dust.

Ishum's campaign is devoid of horror: it is without explicit human casualties, aside from the impersonal 'towns', and adopts instead the language of mythology, where gods do battle with mountains, seas and forces of nature. And with this bloodless passage the war is over.

As the gods look on in horror at Erra returning from the field, this is what he says to them:

qūlāma napḫarkunu amâtīya limd[*ā*]
mindēma anāku ina ḫīṭi maḫrî aḫsusa lemutt[*a*]
libbī āgugma nišī asa[*ppan*]
kī agir ṣēni immer pāni ušella ina pitqi
kī lā zāqip ṣippati ana nakāsi ul umâq
kī šālil māti kīna u ragga ul umassâ ušamqat
ina pî labbi nā'iri ul ikkimū šalamta
u ašar ištēn ra'bu šanû ul imalli[*kšu*]

Erra and Ishum V 5–12

'Be silent, all of you, and learn what I say:
  'Have no doubt:[13] I intended evil when earlier I did wrong!
'I was in a rage to lay low the people!
  'Like a hireling shepherd I'll send the bellwether up from the pen,[14]

'like one who's never planted an orchard I'll not hesitate to cut it down,
  'like one who pillages the land, I'll kill upright and wicked without discrimination.
'You cannot snatch a corpse from a ravening lion,
  'and where one is in a rage, another cannot counsel [him.]'

The gist of this passage is that it is the very nature of Erra, who nurtures nothing, to destroy without thought, and his excuse is that when he is angry that no one can control him. The gods, as well as men, have seen for themselves the full extent of Erra's power and witnessed the blind arbitrariness of his indiscriminate deeds. Erra then commends the role of Ishum, who brought the war to an end:

<ša> lā Išum ālik maḫrīya minû bašīma
ali zāninkunu ēnūkunu ayyinna
ali nindabêkunu ē teṣṣinā[15] *qutrinna*
Išum pâšu ēpušma iqabbi
ana qurādi Erra amâte izakkar
qurādu qūlamma šime qabâya
mindēma enna nūḫamma nizziza maḫarka
ina ūmī uggatīka ali māḫirka

Erra and Ishum V 13–21

'Without Ishum, my vanguard, what now would exist?
  'Where your provisioner, where your high priests?
'Where your food-offerings? You would smell no incense!'
  Ishum opened his mouth to speak,

saying a word to the hero Erra:
  'O hero, be silent and listen to what I say!
'Have no doubt: be calm and we shall stand at your service![16]
  'At the time of your fury, who could withstand you?'

Erra thereby acknowledges that Ishum saved the world from complete destruction, so that once again a king might perform the task traditionally his, to look after the care and feeding of the gods in their temples. Ishum, in turn, acknowledges on behalf of all that there is no power in the universe

to match Erra when roused. Recognition of this truth, self-evident from the events reported in Tablets III and IV, pleases Erra. At last he is content, basking in the gods' acknowledgement of the supremacy of his power. He commands that the country shall thrive in a period of new prosperity under the rule of a king in Babylon (V 25–38). Erra gives to Ishum the tasks of perpetuating Ishum's victory over the enemies of Babylon. Thus it is Ishum who will ensure that the Babylonians enjoy a future of order and prosperity:

akû māt Akkade danna Sutâ lišamqit
ištēn sebe lību[k] kīma ṣēni
ālīšu ana karmē u šadâšu tašakkan ana namê
šallassunu kabittu tašallala ana qereb Šuanna
ilū māti ša iznû tusallam ana šubtīšunu
Šakkan u Nissaba tušerred ana māti
šadê ḫiṣibšunu tâmta tušaššâ bilassu
qerbēti ša uštaḫribā tušaššâ biltu

Erra and Ishum V 27–34

The weakest Babylonian shall fell the strongest Sutean,
one shall lead seven captive like sheep!
You shall turn his towns into ruins, his mountain into wastes,
you shall bring their weighty plunder back to Babylon!
You shall reconcile to their homes the gods of the land who were angry,
you shall send down to the land the gods of livestock and grain!
You shall make uplands produce their plenty, the sea its yield,
you shall make bear crops the meadows laid waste!

The poem's conclusion follows. It begins with a summary of what the poem has been about and how it was transmitted to the poet. The first line and a half, however, complete Erra's instruction to Ishum:

zānin Esangil u Bābili šakkanakkī kal dadmē šubēl šâšu[*n*][17]
šanat la nībi tanitti bēli rabî ^{d}u.gur *u qurādu Išum*
ša Erra īgugūma ana sapan mātāti u ḫulluq nišīšin iškunu pānīšu
Išum mālikšu uniḫḫūšūma īzibu rīḫāniš
kāṣir kammēšu Kabti-ilāni-Marduk mār Dābibi
ina šāt mūši ušabrīšūma kī ša ina munatti idbubu
ayyamma ul imṭi ēda šuma ul uraddi ana muḫḫi[18]

Erra and Ishum V 38–44

'Have the provisioner of Esangil and Babylon rule[19] them, the
governors of all habitations (var. of each and every city),
for years without number.'[20] The praise-(song) of the great lord
Nergal (= Erra) and hero Ishum —
how Erra went into a rage and set out to lay the lands low and destroy
their people,
but his counsellor Ishum calmed him so sparing a remnant —
the compiler of its text was Kabti-ilāni-Marduk, son of Dābibu:
he (Ishum) revealed it to him in a nocturnal vision and, just as he
(K.i.M.) declaimed it while wakeful,
so he left nothing out, he added to it not a single line.

This passage is much cited as a rare example of the attribution of a Babylonian literary composition to an author (e.g. Foster 1991). The statement that Kabti-ilāni-Marduk received the poem in a dream is perhaps not a literary conceit, for it can readily be compared with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' (1798). Coleridge wrote that the poem came to him in sleep as a text of many hundreds of lines, but he had only managed to write out the beginning when interrupted by a visitor (Coleridge 1967: 295–296).

To return to the theme of war: at the beginning of the poem Ishum was invoked as a catalyst for war, but here at the end, in the passage just quoted, the poet identifies him as Erra's appeaser and the initiator of peace. A very revealing earlier line, repeated twice by Erra, makes clear in the briefest possible form of words that Ishum has both functions (I 99 // III C27): *u atta ālik maḫrīya ālik a*[*rkī*]*ya* 'and you are the one who precedes me, the one who follows me'. This makes no sense in spatial terms, for no soldier travels both as vanguard and rearguard, but understood in a temporal sense it is fully meaningful: Ishum both leads Erra into action and makes him desist from action.

The gods Erra and Ishum, who initiate, prosecute and end the war among men: both embody war. Both are warriors, *qurādu*. Not even the king of the gods can stand in their way. He too is subordinate to war's power. But the two war-gods, Erra and Ishum, have different attitudes to their work. When Ishum eulogises Erra's destruction, he stands in nervous awe at the destructive power of war. When Erra boasts of his destruction, he revels in the brutal power of war. Ishum repeatedly demands to know how Erra justifies his actions and tries to make him desist. Erra has no such scruples.

The different attitudes of Erra and Ishum to war arise from their different functions. Erra is, in Jean Bottéro's words, 'la Guerre pour la Guerre'

(1978: 155), war waged for the sake of it, with indiscriminate slaughter. Bottéro saw Ishum as Erra's opposite, 'la Guerre positive'. Ishum has a conscience: he is a force for peace, and acts to moderate Erra's violence. As seen above, Müller's reading of the poem's introduction reveals that Ishum has the capability of starting war but does not do so. He is only himself stirred to fight when commanded by Erra to repulse the enemy and deal him destruction. He represents just war, waged in self-defence and morally justified. As we have seen, two such wars are acknowledged by the poem. The first is the bloodless campaign that brought an end to the conflict in which Erra revelled, when Ishum razed Mt Sharshar (IV 139–150). The second is envisaged when Erra charges Ishum with maintaining Babylonia's political and military power, which is to be done by waging war – war with an expressly positive motive (V 27–39). Thus the two war gods Erra and Ishum are clearly distinguished by character, by function and by method and purpose. The distinction is not confined to the poem of Erra and Ishum. As Weiershäuser has observed (2010: 370–371), Ishum's essentially just nature is implicit in a fragmentary Old Babylonian narrative poem, which identifies his father as the sun god Shamash, who was the quintessential god of justice, and is fully explicit in an Assyrian composition which accords Ishum the epithet *rāʾim kīnāti* 'lover of truth'.[21]

The difference between Erra and Ishum, between war of aggression (unjust) and war in self-defence (just), explains Ishum's high status in the poem. Ishum, the prosecutor of just war, is the only power that can vanquish Erra. That is why Ishum is the real hero of the poem, as Bottéro saw (1978: 163, Bottéro and Kramer 1989: 718), and why it opens with an invocation to Ishum that attaches to him such extraordinary attributes and status. Ishum alone in the universe has the capability of defeating Erra. That makes him the greatest power of all.

The poem's distinction between two gods of war further implies a profound idea that not all wars are equal. Warfare conducted by Erra, random, unlimited and without excuse, differs from warfare conducted by Ishum, which has a just pretext and limited aim. Ishum's victory leads us to a moral conclusion, that just war is a greater force than an unjust war and morally superior to it. Differentiation between Erra and Ishum thus allows for the paradox that, though war is in itself evil, on those occasions when aggression can only be ended by fighting back, it becomes a force for good. Ishum fights a just war of defence to save Babylonia and is charged with continuing to do so in order to preserve its rightful hegemony. The poet does not make it explicit that he considers war of aggression morally

inferior to war of defence, but that is certainly a response that a reader might voice. What the poet does say is that even Erra is afraid of Ishum (I 5), which perhaps speaks for a view that fear of just retribution resides even in the lawless.

There is another ethical issue, however, on which the poem of Erra and Ishum is not silent: war is evil and yet created by the gods. How, when the gods created the world, can they allow such terrible events to occur in it? The usual explanation in ancient Mesopotamia was that the gods were angered by some human failing or sin. In this poem, only Erra is angry, and his is not an anger owed to any doing of men; it is his very nature.

The poem finds a different way to explain the problem: when the balance of the cosmos is upset, the normal rules of human and divine life do not apply. The unbalancing of the cosmos is expressed metaphorically on three separate occasions. First, the king of the gods, Marduk, warns Erra of what happened when he, Marduk, left his position at the centre of the universe at the time of the Deluge (I 133): *ina šubtīya atbēma šibīt šamê u erṣeti uptaṭṭir* 'I rose from my dwelling and the seams of heaven and earth were unravelled'. The same will happen again, if Marduk does as Erra asks (I 170): [*ina*] *šubtēya atebbûmma šibīt* [*šamê u erṣeti*] *uptaṭṭar* 'if I arise from my dwelling the seams of [heaven and earth] will be unravelled!'[22] Then, just as the Seven are unleashed and war breaks out, Ishum begs Erra to give reason for his actions, and Erra replies that Marduk has left his dwelling and (IIIc 49) *qabal ili u amēli ippaṭrā*[*ma*] *ana rakāsi iššiṭa* 'the beltstrap of god and man has come undone [and] will be difficult to refasten.' The description of the war that follows is recounted in a long address of Ishum to Erra, which holds Erra alone responsible for the strife. Among Erra's deeds is the capture of Babylon, the centre of the Babylonian cosmos, in this function known as Dimkurkurra, a Sumerian epithet that means Bond of the Lands. 'Bond' in this epithet is a means of cosmic control. The cosmic bonds ensured order and stability in the universe, and are expressed figuratively as lead-ropes and mooring-ropes, i.e. the means by which animals are led and rivercraft tethered (George 1992: 261–262, 1997: 128–129). The result of Erra's offensive is that the cosmic bonds disintegrate, as Ishum points out (IV 2): *ša Dimkurkurra āl šar ilī rikis mātāti taptaṭar rikissu* 'You have undone the bonds of Dimkurkurra, the city of the king of the gods, the bond of the lands.'

All three metaphors – unravelled seam, loosened belt, released rope – signify a universal absence of control, leading to chaos and the overturning of order. One consequence of cosmic disorder is negation of the civilised values by which men normally live. Implicit here is an acknowledgement

of a fact fundamental to war, that it turns upside down the normal rules of human society. The worst possible sin suddenly becomes, in an overturning of all moral education and ethical standards, a virtue, encouraged and rewarded by those who stand in moral authority. This is a profoundly unsettling truth, and if the poet of Erra and Ishum was the first to articulate it, it has surely been expressed since in other terms. John Steinbeck captures the idea in his novel *East of Eden* (1952), when an old soldier, like Sherman a veteran of the American civil war, gives advice to his reluctant son, shortly to enlist as a cavalryman in the Indian wars:

> In all of history men have been taught that killing of men is an evil thing not to be countenanced. Any man who kills must be destroyed because this is a great sin, maybe the worst sin we know. And then we take a soldier and put murder in his hands and say to him, 'Use it well, use it wisely.' We put no checks on him. Go out and kill as many of a certain kind or classification of your brothers as you can. And we will reward you for it…
>
> *East of Eden* Part One, Chapter 3, III

When this moral inversion has occurred, it is difficult to reverse. Even the king of the gods, having once abandoned his cult-centre in Babylon, cannot restore equilibrium to the cosmos and regain control until Erra is sated and his task done. War carries all before it, and will run its course no matter what power may be opposed to it.

This essay began with passages that articulate the heroic ideal of war. In the poem of Erra and Ishum the poet's characterisation of Erra necessarily leads him to reject that notion. The only place where heroic ideas intrude into his poem is when Erra's weapons eulogise the life of the soldier. But that is exactly what one expects of objects fashioned solely to take life. The actual descriptions of Erra's war in the poem are vivid and unflinching. They do not turn a blind eye to the horror but focus on the massacre of the innocent. They are anything but heroic.

The explicit purpose of the poem of Erra and Ishum was to bear witness to the might of Erra, so that none among gods and men may again hold him in contempt. It ends with the following words, spoken by Erra himself:

> *zamāru šâšu ana matīma liššakinma likūn qadu ulla*
> *mātāti napḫaršina lišmâma linādā qurdīya*
> *nišū dadmē līmurāma lišarbâ šumī*
>
> Erra and Ishum V 59–61

Let this song exist for ever, let it endure for all time,
so all nations may hear it and extol my warlike deeds,
so the people of the world may learn to magnify my name!

If we remove the cloak of allegory, what Kabti-ilāni-Marduk wants of his poem is that it open the eyes of people – everywhere and at all times – to Erra as the most violent power in the world, that is to the terrible reality of war, to what Tolstoy in *The Sebastopol Sketches* (1855) called 'war in its most authentic expression – as blood, suffering and death' (McDuff and Foote 2006: 192); and that it serve as a warning to not to hold Erra 'in contempt', that is not to go to war lightly. Speaking to the crowd in Ohio in 1880, Sherman added an injunction to the listening veterans, 'You can bear the warning voice to generations yet to come.'

This solemn duty, to warn future generations of the realities war, lies at the heart of the poem of Erra and Ishum. The poem itself carries at its end, immediately before the three lines just quoted, a claim of apotropaic function: those rulers, singers, scribes and householders who honour and repeat its words will win success and fame and be kept safe from plague, Erra's more routine speciality (V 49–58). This passage encouraged the use of the poem, especially Tablet V, as an amulet to protect a household from harm (Reiner 1960, Hruška 1974: 356–357). The claim has a less tangible implication, but one that resonates more strongly outside Babylonian culture. The greater the audience for poetry that denounces war, the wider will its message spread: the vain but irrepressible hope that less war will be waged.

Notes

1 Chronicle 1 iii 18 (Grayson 1975: 80): *ina Halule ṣaltu ana libbi māt Ašṣur ītepušma nabalkattu māt Aššur iltakan* '(Humban) did battle with Assyria at Halule and forced Assyria to retreat' (see also Grayson 1965: 342). On the course of the battle itself see Scurlock 1997: 517–523.

2 There are 15 in this passage: *upalliša* UD-*zizi*·, *rukkusā rittēšun*, *nadû šummannu*, *aškuna taḫtâšun*, *unakkis asliš*, *uparri' gū'iš*, *ušardâ ṣēr erṣeti šadilti*, *išallû nāriš*, *ritmuk, magarrūš*, *umallâ ṣēra*, *unakkis qātīšun*, *itarrak, libbūšun*, *umaššerūni zûšun*, *uma"er arkīšun*, *urassab, ina kakki*. By contrast, there are also 15 occasions where the verb falls at the end of a clause including other members and could thus have taken penultimate position.

3 Westenholz identifies an ambiguity in this clause, where the signs can also be read as *isinnum ša mūti* 'festival of death', and considers it intentional (1997: 63 sub 19). Such an ambiguity cannot be ruled out at the remove of nearly four millennia, and might also be asserted for *parṣam ša mu-tim* in the line of Gilgamesh

quoted earlier. However, in the passage of *Lugale* quoted above, the Sumerian ezen nam-guruš-a is unambiguously 'festival of young men', and the parallelism between *parṣam ša mu-tim* and *šipirti zikari*(*m*) in Gilgamesh only holds good if *mutum* and *zikarum* are rough synonyms. The idea, first and foremost, is that battle is heroes at play, even if death lurks there hidden.

4 In 1977 the poem reconstructed by Luigi Cagni had 642 extant verses (1977: 10), while he estimated the whole to have been between half as much again (i.e. 960+ ll.) and 750 ll. (1977: 11). Tablets I (192 ll.), IV (151 ll.) and V (61 ll.) were already complete, but II and III were beset with long lacunae. Cagni's figures can be refined by two further discoveries of text. The manuscript of Tablet II excavated at Tell Haddad (Mê-Turnat) and published in 1989 added knowledge of another 45 lines (Al-Rawi and Black 1989) to Cagni's 113. Al-Rawi and Black estimated the point of turn from col. i to col. ii at ll. 42–43, and counted 42 ll. also in col. ii, 40+ in col. iii and 35 in col. iv. That yields a total line-numeration of Tablet II as 159+ ll. A two-column Neo-Assyrian manuscript of Tablet III, at one time in Mosul museum, known to me only from photographs taken by Farouk Al-Rawi, will be a major advance when it is published. It is almost completely preserved, except for the middle of col. iv, which held the end of Tablet III, the catch-line and a colophon. The photographs do not permit a complete decipherment but are good enough to allow the disconnected passages known to Cagni to be placed in a running line-numeration. The tablet shows that an interval of 40 lines separates Cagni's Perikope A (ll. 1–35) from Perikope B, whose 21 lines match 20 on the Mosul tablet, i.e. III 76–95. A further interval of 19 lines elapses before the onset of Perikope C, whose 72 lines are III 115–88 on the Mosul tablet. I have not been able to tie Perikope D's 15 lines to the damaged text of col. iv of the Mosul tablet, but reckon that it cannot have begun before III 210. Tablet III thus had a minimum line-count of 224, almost 100 lines more than Cagni was able to reconstruct. The Mosul tablet is the major source for ll. 1–*c.*210. It is to be hoped that is quickly located and published. As regards the poem as a whole, the total line-numeration would on present evidence be a little less than 800.

5 See earlier Cagni 1977: 14: 'One might hazard presenting the poem of Erra as a sort of vast allegory'.

6 I have avoided a literal translation of this line as overly cumbersome, but Assyriologists will expect it: 'and at whose causing his terrible battle-axe to flash, also Erra, the warrior of the gods, quakes in his dwelling'. Cagni's analysis, that *ana šubruq* and *ana našê* are both governed by *qātāšu asmā*, and that *inūšu* in l. 5 is indicative, wrecks the syntax, as Machinist acknowledges (1983: 223 n. 15), and is best rejected. The verb *inūšu* is subordinative in a relative clause; so also Labat (1970: 117), Wilcke (1977: 195), *CAD* N/2 114 (1980), Müller (1994: 783, 1995: 350) and Farber (2008: 264).

7 That Hendursanga, a deified staff of office, is here a name of the vizier Ishum is not in doubt (see the evidence collected by Cagni 1969: 139–140). The formal division between the opening two couplets is not impaired by the fact that the epithets in l. 3 arise through scholarly speculation on the name in l. 2 (so already Bottéro 1978: 160): ḫendur(PA) = *ḫaṭṭu* 'staff', sag = *ṣīrtu* 'august', PA = *nāqidu* 'herdsman' (because PA+DAG.KISIM$_5$×GAG = nagada = *n.*), PA = *rē'û* 'shepherd' (because PA+LU = sipa = *r.*). The less recondite example of etymologically based epithetry in l. 4, i = *na'du* 'renowned' and šum(TAG) = *ṭābiḫu* 'butcher', was first expounded by W. G. Lambert (1957–58: 400); see further Noegel 2011: 171–172.

8 See most recently W. Farber (2008: 265), who argues for Erra's name to be restored at the end of the line.

9 The etymology of *Išum* as 'fire' (the common noun is feminine, *išātum*) is doubted by some, but even so Ishum's connection with fire is accepted as well established (Edzard 1976–80). As the passage under study later makes clear, Ishum (as Engidudu) was envisaged as a nightwatchman patrolling the streets, who shone a light to lead people home through the dark (Tablet I 21–22). For other evidence for his fiery nature see George forthcoming.

10 See further, especially on Farber's translation of l. 20, B. R. Foster's review of Weiershäuser 2010 (Foster 2011: 685).

11 On seven as a special number in Babylonia, as elsewhere in the ancient Near East, see most recently Reinhold (2008); for the seven warrior-gods, Wiggermann (2010).

12 On the reading *Šaršar* see George 2009: 12.

13 For the modal particle *minde* as a marker of a speaker's high level of confidence in what he says, see now Wasserman 2012: 43–63.

14 I.e., send it for slaughter, with the disastrous consequence of leaving the whole flock leaderless.

15 Spelled *te-eṣ-ṣi-na* (NB manuscript), though *tēṣinā* is expected. The irregular closing of the first syllable also occurs in manuscripts of Erra and Ishum V 50 (from Aššur and Ur), *a-a iṣ-ṣi-na* = *aj iṣṣina* instead of *ay īṣina*; and in a manuscript of Ištar's Descent, *li-iṣ-ṣi-nu* (*CT* 15 47 rev. 58, from Nineveh) = *liṣṣinū* instead of *līṣinū*. All are jussive forms of the same verb, a fact which makes it probable that the spellings are phonologically motivated. On irregular consonantal doubling see e.g. Mayer 1991: 47 (with further literature), George 2000: 273, Luukko 2004: 35.

16 This is an example of the modal particle *minde* before a quasiconditional construction, where it emphasizes the 'speaker's assurance, his commitment to its [the second clause's] actualization' (Wasserman 2012: 52).

17 *KAR* 166 rev. 3 (Aššur): *kal ālī kalīšunu li-bi-lu šá-a*-[x]; Bu. 91-5-19, 69+ (Nineveh, Lambert 1962 pl. 36): *kal ṛda-ád-meṛ šu-bé-el šá-a-š*[*un*]; BM 36734 rev. 8' (Babylon, unpub. copy W. G. Lambert Folio 421): *-e*]*l šá-a-šú-u*[*n*].

18 Line division according to BM 55363 (Lambert 1980: 80).

19 In this parsing of *šubēl* (Nineveh ms.) as III/1 *bêlu* 'to rule' I follow Brinkman 1968: 285 n. 1852. The variant *li-bi-lu* (Aššur ms.) is singular, i.e. I/1 *libēl* 'let him rule' + extra ('überhängend') vowel; the extra vowel is redundant, or perhaps an Assyrianism, for in Assyrian writing such a vowel can be syntactically motivated (e.g. Luukko 2004: 108–109).

20 Despite the ruling that intervenes between ll. 38 and 39 on the Ur ms., the adverbial phrase *šanat lā nībi* belongs to the preceding clause, as seen by Brinkman 1968: 285 n. 1852. The result is a rare enjambement that disrupts the conjunction between poetic line and syntax but frees *tanittu* to act as the nominal referent of the pronominal suffix (*-šu*, = fem. in NB) on *kāṣir kammēšu* (l. 42), which is otherwise an orphan. Like its Sumerian counterpart, zà-mí '(hymn of) praise', Akkadian *tanittu* 'praise' very often refers to a specific composition, written and sung.

21 The Old Babylonian fragment is *CT* 15 5–6 vii 8', ed. Römer 1966: 139; the Assyrian text is the Underworld Vision of Kummâ, most recently edited by Livingstone 1989: 68–76 no. 32, at rev. 16.

22 Note the alliteration, *šubtēya … šibīt*, in these lines. I take *atebbûmma* (*a-te-eb-bu-ma*) as present conditional with ventive in *-u*(*m*).

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