BUT WAS SHE RAPED?:
A VERDICT THROUGH COMPARISON

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Methodology

It is not generally the custom to draw conclusions from comparisons made on the basis of the illuminating insights which they are capable of providing, regardless of boundaries of genre (myth vs. law), of time (ancient vs. modern), of space (old vs. new world) and of religion (Christian, Muslim and pagan). The reason is that to disregard such boundaries violates a taboo basic to the disciplines of anthropology and sociology against finding common ground between the “primitive” and the “complex”. However, information drawn from any source may be profitably compared with any other, provided that proper care is taken to avoid decontextualization, and it must be said that overly rigid or improperly drawn boundaries impede rather than aid scholarship.

Our knowledge of ancient Mesopotamia is based on fragmentary sources. If an unconscious “read in” from our own modern cultural prejudices is to be avoided, conscious comparisons and contrasts need to be drawn between ancient Mesopotamia and other, better known, societies. Those chosen for comparison were selected because they provided source material suggestive of similarities with ancient Mesopotamia which were not incidental but which seemed to reveal hidden correspondences in underlying law or custom. The treatment of “rape” cases here discussed was not, to be sure, a “human universal” but, as the deliberate choice of widely dispersed examples demonstrates, an unsuspected commonality broadly distributed in both time and space. Many other choices could have been made; historians in disciplines not...
covered in this paper are invited to make these further comparisons for themselves.

**Rape(?) in The Myth of Enlil and Ninlil**

There is a Sumerian myth which, in modern colloquial rendering and omitting poetic repetitions, reads as follows:2

A long time ago in our city of Nippur,3 the god Enlil4 was an adolescent boy, the goddess Ninlil was an adolescent girl, and Nunbariegunu was a wise old woman. At that time, Nunbariegunu gave advice to her daughter Ninlil: “Don’t bathe in the clear canal, Ninlil; don’t walk along the banks of the Nunbîrût Canal! Handsome5 Enlil, who runs things,6 will see you and when he sees you, he will have sex with you and kiss you7 and when he has enjoyed you

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3 The original gives a rhapsodic description of the city.

4 The traditional reading of this god’s name has been retained to avoid confusion; it should, however, probably be rendered as Ellil.

5 Black translates “holy”. However, KÙ in this context does not mean “holy” but “pure” or “clean,” that is to say, not muddy.

6 Literally: “bright-eyed”.

7 He is described as “the master, the great mountain, father Enlil, the shepherd who determines destinies.”

8 This seems a rather peculiar order of events to most modern readers; we would expect kissing to precede copulation. However, “missionary position” and standing or sitting face-to-face intercourse did not exhaust the possibilities for ancient Mesopotamians. A number of representations of sexual activity from ancient Mesopotamia also show intercourse in a back to front position (with the man standing and the woman bending over) or a right angle position (with the woman on a bench and the man standing or the man lying and the woman squatting over him—for details, see Jerrold S. Cooper, “Heilige Hochzeit,” in *RA* vol. 4/4–5 [Berlin, 1975], pp. 259–269). It may be, therefore, that kissing served a natural post-coital function similar to Hollywood’s ritual smoking of cigarettes. At least the Sumerians did believe in kissing (for references, see Jerrold S. Cooper, “Kuss” in *RA*, vol. 6/5–6 [Berlin, 1983], pp. 375–379); in pre-modern