Every reading act takes place within one or more contexts. The choice of a contextualization other than that standardly produced by a given reader can lead to new ways of questioning the text itself. Here three different contexts are constructed in which to view an Old Babylonian mathematical tablet: other contemporaneous Babylonian mathematical texts, Egyptian mathematical texts, Babylonian technical texts of a non-mathematical nature. Each of these leads to a different way of viewing the manner in which the text encodes and structures its information and aids in extending our understanding of it. Finally, on the basis of the foregoing, the nature of “anachronism” in historical studies is queried.

What does a text mean? A question like this poses particularly acute problems for someone who works on ancient texts. This is not to underplay the complexity and plurality of interpretations in, say, contemporary literary texts, but rather that in the case of Antiquity we are often confronted with the opposite situation: the difficulty of finding even a single possible interpretation. The problem may occur at a very concrete level: lacunae in the texts, hapaxes, a technical vocabulary for which it is difficult or impossible to fix the semantic referents. Moreover, we are often confronted with contemporary constraints, not always immediately perceptible to us, concerning, among other things, the rules of the textual genre, the available concepts or techniques of expression, the aims pursued by the authors, . . . . Further, in the case of ancient Near Eastern texts no tradition of discourse, no contemporary meta-analyses—either philosophical or even linguistic—exist to provide us with what are seen, in other cases, as a privileged interpretative pattern, allowing us to take up one or another thread in the tapestry of responses already explored or possible.

With respect to this last there is, in fact, a hidden advantage. For the presence of a self-reflexive tradition as one part of a corpus of texts carries with it the risk of causing a relaxation of our critical stance before the rest of the corpus. There is the danger of reading at first degree all the texts in the unique light of this tradition—especially, as in the Greek case for instance, where successive rereadings of this tradition has become so rooted in our own historically determined canonical approaches to intellectual studies.
There is even a tendency to accept the ancient commentary as a sort of primary source for the domain itself—placing Plato or Aristotle on mathematics on the same level (or ‘higher’) than the texts of mathematical practice themselves. More generally, in the case of the ancient Near East, just because we are less liberally endowed with raw material, the choices we necessarily make in reading any text can more easily be made explicit and visible. In what follows I shall explore the effect of a variety of such choices for a single second-millennium Babylonian text.

No text exists in isolation; the reading of a given text depends, among other things, on the set of texts with which—against which—it is read. Such a set is not uniquely defined; the Western tradition is principally authorally centered and a standard approach in contemporary textual analysis is to assume that the first construction of such a set is to include all or part of the totality of works composed by the same author. Thus Henry VIII is normally read, at first at least, in relation to Shakespeare’s other histories, Richard II or Henry IV, and then say in the context of other ‘late period’ works of the author, such as The Winter’s Tale and The Tempest. Authorship (and the cortege of questions about the preeminence or intention of the author for the determination of the meaning of a text) is not an issue for the ancient Near Eastern texts on which I will focus here, dealing with such ‘technical’ subjects as computations of areas or treatments of illnesses—they are all anonymous. But their features will allow us to experiment with the contexts in which we read a given text; we can carry out a kind of ‘experimental contextualization’ in which variations of contexts can reveal to us different aspects of the text under study.2

My approach will be to determine the changes made in the understanding of a single text by choosing for an anchorage a series of different contexts, each defined and delimited by a specific corpus. An important methodological point to note is that this approach does not assume that any of the contexts studied were or were not relevant to the authors or previous readers of the text; it is neutral vis-à-vis ontological or epistemological positions. For example, one may hold a pure relativist position (which I do not) and believe such context choices to be all equivalent, or a historicist point of view (which I share), in which some contexts have an historical basis while others serve a heuristic purpose for the modern student. I shall return in a more explicit way to this point at the end of the paper.

As my point of departure I will use Strasbourg 368 (Str 368), a mathematical problem text of the Old Babylonian period (c. 1700 BC).3 I will choose three different contexts for my text, contexts in which I have worked recently, in order to show how different questions are raised by different choices of corpus—all, I think, interesting—and how different parts of the texts are thrown into relief in these various contexts. If I shall use Str 368 to illustrate my results, the conclusions come, as they must, from a systematic use of the full corpus. The contexts will be selected among:

- contemporary texts in the same field, viz. Old Babylonian mathematical problem texts,
- mathematical texts from other civilizations, here Egyptian,
- other contemporary textual genres from Mesopotamia: medical, divinatory and juridical.

Let me begin with a presentation of our central text.4