Evidence suggests that ancient Mesopotamia possessed democratic features. Early Mesopotamian cities possessed governments in which a general assembly composed of a community’s free men managed normal public affairs. This assembly settled communal conflicts, decided such major issues as war and peace, and could—if the need arose—grant supreme authority (namely kingship) to one of its members for a limited period. A council of elders presided over the general assembly, but it did not possess supreme authority. Ultimate sovereignty\(^1\) rested in the assembly of free men.

**Historical Evidence #1**

The city of Kish’s assembly believed it was in its authority to choose a king. During an emergency, the assembly gathered in a field belonging to the Temple of Gula and made Ipurkish, a male citizen, the king. Moreover, Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk, refrained from action in matters concerning peace and war until he obtained the consent of the city’s assembly. For example, when the King of Kish sent messengers to Uruk and those messengers offended King Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh did not respond until he first approached the elders of Uruk and laid his proposals before them. Ultimate power, it seems, did not lay with the king. Here, then, we see a government in which the king must lay his proposals before the people (first the elders, then the assembly of townsmen) and obtain their consent before he could act. In other words, the assembly appears to be the ultimate political authority.

**Historical Evidence #2**

The people of Mesopotamia pictured their gods as human in form, governed by human emotions, and living in the same type of world as did men. It is therefore telling that Mesopotamian gods were organized politically along democratic lines. Thus, in the world of the gods, we see a reflection of ancient Mesopotamian society.

Mesopotamian gods existed within a broad assembly that did not base participation on gender: goddesses as well as gods played an active part in deliberations. The leadership of the assembly belonged to Anu, the god of heaven and “father of the gods,” but Anu shared power with Enlil, the god of the storm. Moreover, Anu or Enlil usually brought up issues for discussion in the assembly of gods. In this discussion, it was the merit of a proposal—not the source of the proposal—that gave it weight. Among the gods, wise thinking was much admired, as was the ability to make others listen to one’s words. Through general discussion—“asking one another” as Mesopotamians expressed it—the gods exchanged opinions and clarified issues. When the assembly of gods had reached a decision, it was announced by Anu and Enlil as

\(^{1}\) Sovereignty amounts to supreme power or controlling influence.
“the verdict of the assembly of gods.” In sum, no single god possessed ultimate authority. It was the assembly of gods that had such power. As it was with their gods, so it was with the people of Mesopotamia.

**Historical Evidence #3**

When the Babylonian empire ruled Mesopotamia, it is striking how many democratic features existed within the empire. Anyone could turn to the king with complaints. He investigated the complaints and then delegated the cases to a suitable court for decision. A court of royal officials and “judges of the king” then dealt out justice according to laws that the king had established. However, it is worth noting that more democratic institutions existed alongside these royal judges. More often than not, town mayors and town elders settled minor local disputes, and truly difficult or important cases were brought before the town as a whole in order to be decided. Thus, judicial powers belonged not just to the king and his servants, but to the entire community. Mesopotamian people could influence how their society functioned.

**Conclusion**

As time passed, Mesopotamian cities and empires became increasingly authoritarian. Kingships became permanent positions, and kings passed their powers to their sons without any elections taking place. However, early in the region’s history, this was not the case. General assemblies and councils of elders held significant powers, which restrained the power of kings. Moreover, even after royal power became entrenched during later periods, community assemblies did not die out completely. Kings often delegated authority to local leaders and local assemblies to ensure the smooth functioning of their realms.

**Questions/Tasks** [Write out the questions/tasks and provide your answers on a separate sheet of paper.]

1. What is the main idea (thesis) of this reading?

2. “This assembly settled communal conflicts, decided such major issues as war and peace, and could—if the need arose—grant supreme authority (namely kingship) to one of its members for a limited period.” What part of this sentence from the first paragraph best points to the democratic nature of ancient Mesopotamian society? Explain.

3. Why does the author believe it is “telling” that Mesopotamian gods “were organized politically along democratic lines”? Explain.

4. In your opinion, which of the 3 provided pieces of historical evidence best supports the author’s thesis? Explain.