

## Mathematics-Science 380 – History of Mathematics

Trent University, 2006–2007

### Assignment #2

*Due in the week of 2 October, 2006.*

For this assignment, you will need to read *Words and Pictures: New Light on Plimpton 322* by Eleanor Robson (*American Mathematical Monthly* **109** (2002), pp. 105–120). You can read or download her article (in pdf format) from the Mathematical Association of America's web site at:

<http://www.maa.org/news/monthly105-120.pdf>

1. Describe in detail the three major interpretations of Plimpton 322, as described by Robson. Track down another description of each of the three interpretations and provide references. [8]
2. Summarize the arguments Robson gives for and against each interpretation. [8]
3. In your opinion, is Robson correct in her conclusions? Why or why not? [4]

Let us now praise prime numbers  
With our fathers that begat us:  
The power, the peculiar glory of prime numbers  
Is that nothing begat them,  
No ancestors, no factors,  
Adams among the multiplied generations.  
Non can foretell their coming.  
Among the ordinal numbers  
They do not reserve their seats, arrive unexpected.  
Along the line of cardinals  
They rise like surprising pontiffs,  
Each absolute, inscrutable, self-elected.  
In the beginning where chaos  
Ends and zero resolves,  
They crowd the foreground prodigal as forest,  
But the middle distance thins them,  
Far distance to infinity  
Yields them as rarely returning comets.  
O prime improbable numbers,  
Long may formula-hunters  
Steam in abstraction, waste to skeleton patience:  
Stay non-conformist, nuisance,  
Phenomena irreducible  
To system, sequence, pattern or explanation.

*Helen Spalding*