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# Enuma Eliš

The Babylonian Cosmogonic Poem

Editor Sebastiano Vottari

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# Preface

## *At the origins of the cosmos, at the origins of the story*

There are texts that, once rediscovered from the silence of the centuries, do more than fill a gap in our knowledge, they radically reshape the very way we think about the origins of culture. The *Enûma Elish* —the Babylonian cosmogonic epic whose title, following the ancient Mesopotamian custom of naming works by their incipits, reproduces the first two words of the first verse, "When on high"—is one such text. Composed in the Akkadian language and preserved on seven cuneiform tablets, it constitutes not only the most comprehensive narrative of the origins of the world that Mesopotamian civilization has left us, but also one of the founding documents of world literature, a work whose shadow extends across the entire history of subsequent cosmologies—from the Semitic Levant to Greek theogonies, from Hebrew scriptures to the speculative reformulations of late antiquity.

## *A discovery that rewrote antiquity*

The story of this poem's reemergence from the depths of human memory is itself integral to its meaning. When, in 1849, British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard unearthed the remains of Ashurbanipal's library in Nineveh beneath the ruins of Kuyunjik Hill, no one could have imagined that among the tens of thousands of recovered clay fragments lay a text destined to overturn the established idea that the Hebrew Bible constituted the sole archetype of Western creation narratives. It was only in 1876, thanks to the pioneering studies of self-taught Assyriologist George Smith, that the academic world was confronted with the evidence of a Babylonian poem of extraordinary literary and theological power, whose similarities

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with the Genesis accounts and other Near Eastern traditions would fuel debates that would never fully subside. Since then, the work of reconstruction has been slow, patient, and fragmentary: new tablets discovered in Sultantepe, Ashur, Kish, and Uruk have gradually filled gaps, integrated missing passages, and restored lexical nuances. However, the text we read today still retains, here and there, the scars of its transmission: portions of missing verses, worn words, lines whose interpretation remains conjectural. The modern reader must therefore accustom himself to an archaeological reading experience, in which the text is both object and ruin, monument and residue.

## *Dating, paternity and Sitz im Leben*

The date of the poem's composition is still the subject of scholarly debate, though it has never been fully resolved. An authoritative critical tradition, supported by figures such as Wilfred G. Lambert, has proposed placing its final draft in the era of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar I (12th century BC), coinciding with the moment when Marduk, the tutelary deity of the city of Babylon, was formally elevated to the rank of supreme ruler of the Mesopotamian pantheon, supplanting older deities such as Enlil and Anu in this role. Other scholars, embracing different linguistic and theological elements, have favored a later date—the Kassite period—or a lower one, as late as the first millennium. In any case, the work should not be understood as a creation *ex nihilo* by a single author, but as a layering and poetic reworking of much older mythical materials, some of which date back to Sumerian traditions of the third millennium BCE. The Babylonian poet—whose identity remains completely unknown to us, in accordance with the practice of sapiential anonymity that characterizes all Mesopotamian literature—does not invent: he reorganizes, synthesizes, finalizes. What makes him a great creator is his ability to bend an inherited mythological heritage into a unified

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theological-political design, giving it an unprecedented narrative coherence and epic scope.

This design is not purely speculative. The *Enûma Eliš* originated with a specific liturgical function: it was recited in its entirety on the fourth day of the month of Nisannu, during the Akītu festival, the Babylonian New Year ceremony that annually ratified, through a complex ritual apparatus, the renewal of the cosmos, the legitimacy of the human sovereign, and the social order of the city. The poem was therefore not a treatise to be meditated on in solitude, but a public word, performed before the statue of the god, a word whose very pronunciation renewed the efficacy of the creative act.

Understanding this cultic rootedness is essential: without it, the long final section of the fifty names of Marduk, which to the modern reader may seem like excessive rhetorical dilatation, instead reveals its true nature as a theological liturgy, a performative formula whose purpose is to install, through nomenclature, the sovereignty of the god in every corner of the universe.

## ***Narrative architecture: from undifferentiated waters to the city of the god***

The poem's structure unfolds with a progression possessing the elegance and inevitability of a theorem. The first panel opens onto a cosmos that is not yet a cosmos: an aqueous amalgam in which Apsû, the male principle of subterranean freshwater, and Tiāmat, the female principle of primordial saltwater, mingle their flows in an undifferentiation prior to any name or destiny. From this original pair, through a process of generation that proceeds in pairs and successive emanations, the divine dynasty springs: Lahmu and Lahamu, Anšar and Kišar, Anu, Nudimmud-Ea, up to Marduk, the hero destined to close the

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cosmogonic cycle. The narrative, from the very first bars, is pervaded by a fundamental tension: the vital noise of the new divine generations disturbs the somnolent silence of the progenitors, and from this generational conflict—which does not fail to evoke, for those familiar with Hesiod's *Theogony*, motifs of Cronus and Uranus—arises the first great dramatic act, the killing of Apsû by Ea, an event that prepares, without placating it, the subsequent insurrection of Tīāmat.

The second tablet unfolds the pantheon's anguish in the face of the monstrous army Tīāmat has spawned—eleven fearsome creatures whose catalogue (the Hydra, the Dragon, the Scorpion-Man, the Fish-Man, the Bull-Man, and others) constitutes one of humanity's oldest fantastic bestiaries—and the inability of the traditional deities, even Ea and Anu, to confront the threat. It is here that the poem's political theology reveals its audacity: the old order declares itself impotent, and on the threshold of the void, young Marduk, son of Ea, steps forward and agrees to fight on one condition: absolute sovereignty over the universe in exchange. The third tablet formalizes this pact through the assembly convened by Anšar; The fourth consecrates him in the epic battle scene, in which Marduk, armed with net and wind, bow and club, traps Tīāmat, pierces her belly with an arrow, shatters her skull, and literally turns her into the raw material of the world. The fifth tablet unfolds the actual cosmogonic work: from the torn body of the defeated goddess, the firmament and the earth are born, from her eyes flow the Tigris and Euphrates, from her breasts rise the mountains, from her tail the cosmic bond is formed. The sixth introduces the creation of humanity—not as a glorious fulfillment, but as a pragmatic expedient: from the blood of Qingu, Tīāmat's rebellious husband, Lullû, the man, destined to relieve the gods from the toil of labor, is fashioned. The seventh, finally, unfolds in the celebration of the fifty names of the victorious god, a ritual act of transferring divine powers that is equivalent to a total apotheosis.

## *Cosmogony as violence, anthropology as servitude*

Few ancient texts articulate with such starkness the conviction that cosmic order arises from violence. In the *Enûma Elish*, the world is created not out of love, nor out of abundance, nor out of play: it is torn from chaos through dismemberment, the corpse of a divine mother reconfigured in architecture. This tragic vision—which the history of religions has designated with the German term *Chaoskampf*, "struggle against chaos"—constitutes one of the most fertile conceptual cores of ancient mythology and runs, under different disguises, through a vast array of traditions: the battle of Baal against Yam in the Ugarit texts, Yahweh's duel with Leviathan and Rahab in prophetic and poetic passages of the Old Testament, Tešub's struggle against Ullikummi in the Hittite Kumarbi cycle, Apollo's clash with Python, and Zeus's clash with Typhoeus. In each of these narratives, civilization asserts itself as a mark imprinted on the body of the monster — and the *Enûma Eliš* is, in effect, the oldest and most complex document of this symbolic grammar.

Equally significant for the history of thought is the anthropological conception the poem expresses. The Babylonian human being is not created in the image of God, nor is he invested with a vocation to protect or dominate creation: he is born from the blood of a guilty man, shaped to fulfill a servile task, and his dignity is exhausted in the function of relieving the deities of a burden they no longer wish to bear. This vision is far removed from the biblical humanism of Genesis, and even more so from the Greek philosophical tradition: a vision in which the birth of humanity does not crown the cosmos but functionally completes it, like an added cog so that the machinery of worship can continue indefinitely. From this minimal anthropology, however, the poem deduces

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an ethic of ritual service that will become the hallmark of all Mesopotamian religiosity: man exists to nourish the gods through offerings, to honor the sanctuaries, to support the sacred edifice of the city with his labor.

## ***Marduk, or theology as politics***

It would be naive, however, to read the *Enûma Elish* as a purely religious text. The poem is, at the same time, a political manifesto of extraordinary sophistication. Marduk's promotion to the head of the pantheon not only reflects a theological evolution within Babylonian religion: it mirrors, and retroactively legitimizes, Babylon's political hegemony over all of Mesopotamia. When the poet has the assembled gods proclaim Marduk as their king, and when he meticulously describes the founding of Babylon as the "Abode of the Great Gods" and the construction of the Esagil temple as an earthly replica of the Apsû, he is actually offering Babylon's human ruler a cosmic justification for his own power. Earthly kingship is a projection and reflection of divine kingship; the city is the center of the world because the world was created to house it. In this respect, the *Enûma Elish* anticipates by many centuries a mechanism of legitimation that we will find in numerous subsequent imperial traditions: from the pharaonic concept of *maat* to the Chinese doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven, from the Byzantine ideology of *basileia* to the sacred iconography of medieval European rulers. Any power that wishes to endure must write its genealogy in the heavens.

The fifty names that conclude the seventh tablet constitute, from this perspective, the culmination of the operation. Each of them is the name of a pre-existing deity, whose prerogatives are now transferred to Marduk: the Babylonian god becomes Asarluhi (son of Ea), Tutu (of Borsippa), Šazu (lord of the heart of the gods), Enbilulu (lord of the canals), and so on. This is an act of radical theological subsumption, through which the

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plurality of the Mesopotamian pantheon is hierarchically subordinated to a single figure, without, however, being suppressed. Some scholars, from Tikva Frymer-Kensky to Thorkild Jacobsen, have seen this movement as a genuine step toward forms of proto-monotheism—or, more cautiously, "hierarchical henotheism"—destined to exert a significant influence on later religious developments.

## ***Echoes and resonances: the Enûma Eliš in the history of cultures***

Modern readers approaching this poem for the first time cannot help but perceive, throughout its lines, a network of consonances with other, more familiar traditions. The structure of the first line ("When the heavens above were not, / And the earth beneath had not come into being") strikingly recalls the inaugural cadence of the first chapter of Genesis ("In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth... and the earth was without form and void"); the motif of the divine spirit moving over the waters ( *tehom* , etymologically related to the Akkadian *Tiāmat* ) can be read as a distant echo of these cosmologies. The separation of the upper waters from the lower, attributed in the biblical text to the second day of creation, has its structural antecedent in the division of Tiāmat's body. This is not, of course, a literal dependence: the most discerning critics have long since abandoned the idea, cherished by a certain nineteenth-century erudition, that the Bible "copies" the Babylonian poem. Rather, it is a symbolic heritage shared by the ancient Near East, a common cosmogonic grammar that each tradition interprets according to its own theology: the biblical God creates through the word, without struggle and without a corpse, and this radical difference is measured by the entire theological distance between Babylon and Jerusalem.

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No less suggestive are the parallels with Greek tradition. The succession of Apsû, Anšar, Anu, and Marduk presents clear structural analogies with the Hesiodic succession of Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus; the battle against Tiāmat finds Mediterranean counterparts in the Titanomachy and the Typhonomachy; the role of Ea as the god of wisdom and magic has something in common with the Greek Prometheus. The mediations of these influences, likely passing through Hittite Anatolia and the Phoenician Levant, remain the subject of study and hypothesis; but it is now established that archaic Greek thought did not arise in a vacuum, and that its cosmogonies are rooted in a more ancient and vast terrain.

## *Notes on this edition*

This edition aims to offer the reader a complete, faithful, and readable translation of the seven tablets of the poem, based on the Akkadian texts critically established by the reference editions—primarily the now classic one by Wilfred G. Lambert, refined by decades of philological work—and careful to restore, wherever possible, the rhythmic cadence and formal solemnity of the original. We have deliberately chosen to maintain the division into numbered verses, according to the Assyriological convention, and to discreetly highlight missing or conjectural passages, so that the reader never loses sight of the fragmentary nature of the text in their hands. The occasional repetitions—particularly noticeable in the third plate, where speeches and news are retransmitted word for word through divine messengers—have not been abbreviated: they belong to the oral poetics of Mesopotamian epic, constitute one of its most characteristic stylistic hallmarks, and suppressing them would be equivalent to distorting the very physiognomy of the work.

A brief genealogical introduction precedes the text, intended to orient the reader to the complex relationships between the

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deities, while brief illustrative chapters open each tablet, contextualizing its narrative and theological function within the overall narrative of the poem. A conservative onomastic rendering has been preferred, retaining the Akkadian forms of the divine names (Tiāmat, Apsû, Marduk, Ea, Qingu, Anšar) and marking long vowels and palatal sibilants with diacritics, despite the awareness that the resulting pronunciation will always remain approximate for historical reasons.

## *A word to the reader*

Approaching Enūma *Elish* means crossing a threshold into profound time. It means listening to the voices of scribes who, in temples now dissolved into dust, poured into the moist clay a vision of the world we believe to be our own, yet predates us by millennia. It means discovering that some of the questions our modern consciousness holds dear—why something exists rather than nothing, why order requires effort, why the birth of the world resembles a battle, why man finds himself exposed to a task he did not choose—had already been asked, and already invested with memorable words, in an age when writing itself was a novelty and the names of the gods were carved with a wedge on tablets destined to outlive their authors.

Let us not read this poem, then, as an antiquity to be contemplated with museum-like detachment. Let us read it as a *living word*, one that still questions, that still illuminates, that still—to those who know how to listen—opens up perspectives on the nature of the cosmos, of power, and of humanity. It is in this spirit that it is offered to the reader today: with the conviction that, behind the patina of temporal distance, the *Enūma Eliš* is not merely a document of the past, but one of the most powerful voices through which humanity has attempted to express, once and for all, *how the world came to be*.

*The Publisher*

## Genealogical and Theogonic Structure

To understand the dynamics of the text, it is essential to map the divine genealogy that emerges from the early stages of the narrative. The process of creation proceeds through the progressive differentiation of natural elements.

| Generation | Masculine Principle | Feminine Principle | Associated Cosmological Role |

Primordial | Apsû | Tiāmat | Freshwater underground (Apsû) and saltwater ocean (Tiāmat)

Second | Lahmu | Lahamu | Principles of primordial silt/mud

Third | Anšar | Kišar | Celestial horizon and terrestrial horizon

Fourth | Anu | - | Supreme deity of the sky

Quinta | Nudimmud (Ea) | Damkina | God of wisdom, magic, and lord of the Apsû

Sixth | Marduk | - | Son of Ea, champion of the gods and creator of the cosmic order

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# Plate I: Theogony and the Emergence of Chaos

The first tablet establishes the initial cosmic void, describing the universe as an undifferentiated amalgam of primordial waters (Apsû and Tiāmat). The emergence of new divine generations creates a tumult that shatters the original silence, triggering a generational conflict between the passive creators and their active progeny. Below is the full translation of the first segment of the work.

- 1 When the heavens above did not exist,
- 2 And the earth below had not come into existence —
- 3 There was Apsû, the first in order, their parent,
- 4 And the demiurge Tiāmat, she who gave life to them all;...

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