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IN THE BEGINNING
Creation Myths from
Ancient Mesopotamia,
Israel and Greece

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by

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The poem, then, is not primarily an account of the creation of the universe. It is rather a propagandistic story meant to spread the cult of Marduk. Its insistence on Marduk's supremacy even deviates from traditional Mesopotamian mythology. In other creation accounts, for example, Marduk plays a minor role if he is mentioned at all. Instead, Enlil is usually credited with the creation of the earth, Ea with the creation of the human race, and Anu with the supreme authority over the other gods.

But when the priests who wrote *Enuma Elish* use such traditional material, they alter it to buttress their different perspective. Marduk takes over many of the functions of Anu, Ea, and especially Enlil. At his birth, Marduk is called the greatest of the gods, twice as strong and ten times more brilliant than the others. At the end of the poem, he has become the ruler of the world, and the gods give him fifty names to indicate his many spheres of influence. Even the mighty gods Enlil and Ea willingly offer Marduk their own names as an indication of his control over them.

This elevation of Marduk leads to other distortions as well. Unlike other Mesopotamian god-lists, which account for large numbers of gods, the opening genealogy of *Enuma Elish* mentions only those who are direct ancestors of Marduk. It begins in the traditional way with a list of paired male and female deities, Apsu and Tiamat, Lahmu and Lahamu, Anshar and Kishar. But after these pairs, it focuses only on Anu and Ea, Marduk's male progenitors. Enlil's name is conspicuously absent from this heavily edited list.

Enuma Elish, then, is not a typical Mesopotamian creation account. Yet despite this problem, it is still worthy of study because it contains the fullest account of creation which scholars have unearthed from ancient Mesopotamia. Although other poems, such as "The Origin of the Pickaxe" and "The Worm and the Toothache," tell creation stories, none of them has as much detail as *Enuma Elish*.

Creation Topics in *Enuma Elish*

In the polytheistic world of the ancient Near East, creation myths frequently included a theogony, a cosmogony, and a story of succession. *Enuma Elish* is a clear example of this kind of creation account. Although it develops the theme of succession in more detail, the poem does contain a limited theogony, or origin of the gods, which reveals some interesting patterns.

INTRODUCTION TO *ENUMA ELISH*

The Assyrians dominated Mesopotamia during the second millennium. Throughout the area, they were well known for their harsh policies. They were ruthless warriors when they attacked a city and stern taskmasters after they had subjugated it. More than once, they forced the whole population of a city into exile because their demands were not met. (See Chapter 7.)

The Assyrians even attacked Babylon, which was known throughout Mesopotamia as a sacred city. When they captured it (about 1200 B.C.), they carried off the city's statue of Marduk, its patron god and protector. For the Babylonians, such an occurrence was devastating. Their once prestigious city was at the mercy of the savage Assyrians. But even worse, their patron god Marduk, had abandoned them and proven himself inferior to the Assyrian god.

It took Babylon nearly one hundred years to recover from this disaster. Finally, when King Nebuchadnezzar I recaptured the statue (around 1100 B.C.), the city could regain its pride. It was, of course, a time for great celebration in Babylon. Triumphal processions, festivals, and thanksgiving rituals filled the city. From the Babylonian point of view, not only was Marduk's statue back where it belonged, but also Marduk himself had triumphed over his enemies. He had returned to protect Babylon again and bestow his favors on the city which he had founded.

Enuma Elish was probably written in this festive atmosphere by a group of priests dedicated to Marduk (W. G. Lambert, "Reign of Nebuchadnezzar"). At least the purpose of the poem confirms this assumption. Taken as a whole, *Enuma Elish* is a celebration of Marduk's powers and accomplishments, including his conquest of Tiamat, his rise to kingship over the other gods, his creation of the world and the human race, and his building of Babylon itself.

Each new generation of gods surpasses its elders in wisdom, strength, and personality. The early gods' personalities are limited by the natural phenomena which they represent. Apsu, for example, is the underground fresh water and wants only to rest undisturbed. Tiamat, the salt water ocean, is not easily aroused, but once she is angered her power is nearly unstopable. At the beginning of the poem, Apsu and Tiamat are sexually united as they mingle their waters together. Both are passive partners in this encounter and seem unaware that new gods are born as a result of their union. Unlike anthropomorphic gods, they do not make personal choices because they are bodies of water.

The later generations of gods, however, are not so closely tied to natural phenomena. They act in more human ways, playing, dancing, making noise, and planning for the future. Unlike Apsu and Tiamat, they are gods with personality from the time of their birth. (See Chapter 7.) For example, Ea is first characterized as a god of intelligence and craftiness. He shows his shrewd understanding of character when he puts Apsu to sleep and slays him. Ea easily wins this contest because he recognizes that Apsu's greatest weakness is his desire for rest. Only after he slays Apsu and takes control of the fresh water is Ea identified with any natural phenomenon. Even then, he is clearly not the water itself, but the ruler of the water.

The cosmogony (origin of the world) in *Enûma Elish* is also incomplete. It does not account for the creation of plants and animals or other important creatures. Rather, it emphasizes the process of creation instead of its results. Although this process is not systematic, two methods of creating are frequently seen throughout this poem: sexual generation and craftsmanship.

In *Enûma Elish*, sexual generation produces not only the gods but also some features of a partly formed earth. Apsu and Tiamat, for example, are the fresh and salt water. Their children, Lahmu and Lahamu, are silt deposits which build up at the mingling of the waters and will eventually produce land. Anshar and Kishar are the horizons which mark the border between the earth and the sky. Finally, Anu is the sky itself. (See Notes to *Enûma Elish*.) This mythic image of a primitive earth in the process of formation is based on the experience of the Mesopotamian people. They could directly observe, for example, the silt deposits adding to the land at the juncture of the rivers and the Persian Gulf. The priests of Marduk, however, were not interested in developing this idea, for the cosmogony

abruptly stops at this point. No surface is given to the earth; no plants, animals, or humans are formed. All of these essential features must wait for Marduk to create them as an awesome display of his mighty powers.

The other method of creation, craftsmanship, is used frequently throughout the poem. Anu, for example, creates the four winds for his baby grandson to play with; Tiamat makes seven monsters as engines of war; and Marduk fashions human beings from the body of a dead god. All of these things are formed from pre-existing material while the creator-gods act as crafts-men, molding the new object into shape.

The fullest example of this method occurs when Marduk forms the surface of the earth out of Tiamat's body. The scene clearly describes a master craftsman at work. Marduk steps back occasionally to get a fuller view of his new creation. The other gods, watching him work, marvel at the thing as it takes shape. But Marduk's motive is just as important as his method here. Since he has only recently gained kingship over the gods by defeating Tiamat, he must now do something with her body. So he uses it to separate her waters and prevent her from returning to life. Marduk creates the world, then, for a pragmatic purpose, to keep himself in power. Likewise, he creates the human race to forestall a possible revolt by the defeated gods. Finally, he gives the younger gods large responsibilities to keep them out of trouble.

In *Enûma Elish*, then, we see two very different views of the creation of the world. In the genealogy which begins the poem, we see the world being formed naturally as the gods breed new generations of themselves. In this view, the world is virtually a living being, divine and constantly expanding. In the later creations, we see personal deities creating things at will for their own purposes. These gods do not follow any unified plan, nor do they worry about the conflict which their new creation may cause.

All of this suggests a chaotic and unpredictable universe. There is no necessary end to the process of creation, no permanent resolution of the inevitable conflicts which result from continual formation of new parts of the world. Within this context, the theme of royal succession emerges as the most important element. Obviously, a world as unpredictable as the one described in *Enûma Elish* needs stability and control, but such an order is lacking until Marduk assumes the powers of kingship over all the gods.

Before Marduk's reign, a generation gap divides the gods into two opposing groups. The older gods, headed by Tiamat, are passive in nature and dislike change. The younger generation, led by Anu, are noisy, disorderly, and always active. Inevitably, a full-scale war breaks out between the two groups. Since Tiamat proves to be too strong for the younger generation, Anu seeks the help of Marduk. In return for his aid, Marduk receives absolute control over the other gods.

Marduk's conquest of Tiamat, however, is only the beginning of the new order which he establishes. His fabulous creations of sky, earth, and the human race bring the older generation under his control. But more importantly, Marduk uses his power to establish a lasting order among the younger generation. Marduk channels their ceaseless activity by assigning to each his own station (a planet or star) from which he can use his energy constructively. By these maneuvers, Marduk successfully deals with the conflicts which would otherwise threaten his reign and the stability of the world. The gods now work harmoniously with one another in a well-ordered world and pay homage to the genius of Marduk.

Such a story can be interpreted in many ways. On a mythic level, it can be seen as a resolution of the conflict between chaos and order which is prominent in many creation stories worldwide. From this viewpoint, Tiamat and her followers are the representatives of chaos. Marduk, the representative of order, shapes this chaotic mass into a stable universe. On an historical level, the poem can be seen as an explanation of the development of kingship in Mesopotamia. The various ways in which the gods are organized echo the governmental structures of Mesopotamia from its earliest times. (See Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*.) But whatever else it may be, *Enuma Elish* is primarily a celebration of Marduk as god of Babylon and the most powerful of all the Mesopotamian deities.

OUTLINE OF *ENUMA ELISH*

- A. The Beginnings (I:1-104)*
 - 1. Early Generations of Gods (I:1-20)
 - 2. War between Apsu and Ea (I:21-78)
 - 3. Birth of Marduk (I:79-104)
- B. War between Tiamat and Marduk (I:105-IV:122)
 - 1. Tiamat's Preparations for War (I:105-161)*
 - 2. Anshar's Attempts to Stop Tiamat (II:1-III:138)
 - 3. Marduk's Victory (IV:1-122)*
- C. Marduk's Creations (IV:123-VI:44)*
 - 1. Creation of Sky and Earth (IV:123-46)
 - 2. Creation of Stars and Gods' Stations (V:1-22)
 - 3. Creation of Human Race (VI:1-44)
- D. Building of Babylon (VI:45-81)
- E. Glorification of Marduk (VI:82-VII:144)
 - 1. Praises of Marduk's Weapon (VI:82-102)
 - 2. Humanity's Duties to Marduk (VI:103-20)
 - 3. Marduk's Fifty Names (VI:121-VII:144)
- F. Epilogue (VII:145-57)

*Starred passages are included in the readings which follow.