

55. MESOPOTAMIAN COSMOGONY

(*'Enuma elish'*)

The long Babylonian creation epic *'Enuma elish'* (*'When on high'*), so called from the first two words of the poem, narrates a chain of events

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beginning with the very first separation of order out of chaos and culminating in the creation of the specific cosmos known to the ancient Babylonians. As the gods are born within the commingled waters of their primeval parents, Apsu and Tiamat, their restlessness disturbs Apsu. Over Tiamat's protests, he plans to kill them; but the clever Ea learns of his plan and kills Apsu instead. Now Tiamat is furious; she produces an army of monsters to avenge her husband and to wrest lordship from the younger generation. The terrified gods turn to Ea's son Marduk for help. Marduk agrees to face Tiamat, but demands supremacy over them as compensation. They promptly assemble, declare him king, and send him forth, armed with his winds and storms. The battle is short; the winds inflate Tiamat's body like a balloon and Marduk sends an arrow through her gaping mouth into her heart. He then splits her body, forming heaven and earth with the two halves. After putting the heavens in order, he turns to Ea for help in creating, out of the blood of Tiamat's demon-commander Kingu, the black-haired men of Mesopotamia. The poem concludes as the gods build a temple for Marduk and gather in it to celebrate his mighty deeds. Enuma elish was probably composed in the early part of the second millennium B.C.

When on high the heaven had not been named,
Firm ground below had not been called by name,
Naught but primordial Apsu,¹ their begetter,
(And) Mummu²-Tiamat,³ she who bore them all,
Their waters⁴ commingling as a single body;
No reed hut had been matted, no marsh land had appeared,
When no gods whatever had been brought into being,
Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined—
Then it was that the gods were formed within them.⁵
Lahmu and Lahamu⁶ were brought forth, by name they were called.
For aeons they grew in age and stature.
Anshar and Kishar⁷ were formed, surpassing the others.
They prolonged the days, added on the years.
Anu⁸ was their son, of his fathers the rival;
Yea, Anshar's first-born, Anu, was his equal.
Anu begot in his image Nudimmud.⁹
This Nudimmud was of his fathers the master;
Of broad wisdom, understanding, mighty in strength,

The notes to this text are on pp. 108-9.

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Mightier by far than his grandfather, Anshar.
He had no rival among the gods, his brothers.
The divine brothers banded together,
They disturbed Tiamat as they surged back and forth,
Yea, they troubled the mood of Tiamat
By their hilarity in the Abode of Heaven.
Apsu could not lessen their clamour
And Tiamat was speechless at their ways.
Their doings were loathsome unto [. . .].
Unsavory were their ways; they were overbearing.
Then Apsu, the begetter of the great gods,
Cried out, addressing Mummu, his vizier:
'O Mummu, my vizier, who rejoicest my spirit,
Come hither and let us go to Tiamat!
They went and sat down before Tiamat,
Exchanging counsel about the gods, their first-born.
Apsu, opening his mouth,
Said unto resplendent Tiamat:
'Their ways are verily loathsome unto me.
By day I find no relief, nor repose by night.
I will destroy, I will wreck their ways,
That quiet may be restored. Let us have rest!
As soon as Tiamat heard this,
She was wroth and called out to her husband.
She cried out aggrieved, as she raged all alone,
Injecting woe into her mood:
What? Should we destroy that which we have built?
Their ways are indeed troublesome, but let us attend kindly!
Then answered Mummu, giving counsel to Apsu;
Ill-wishing and ungracious was Mummu's advice:
'Do destroy, my father, the mutinous ways.
Then shalt thou have relief by day and rest by night!
When Apsu heard this, his face grew radiant
Because of the evil he planned against the gods, his sons.
As for Mummu, by the neck he embraced him
As (that one) sat down on his knees to kiss him.
(Now) whatever they had plotted between them
Was repeated unto the gods, their first born.
When the gods heard (this), they were astir,
(Then) lapsed into silence and remained speechless.
Surpassing in wisdom, accomplished, resourceful,

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Ea,¹⁰ the all-wise, saw through their¹¹ scheme.
A master design against it he devised and set up,
Made artful his spell against it, surpassing and holy.
He recited it and made it subsist in the deep,¹²
As he poured sleep upon him. Sound asleep he lay.
When Apsu he had made prone, drenched with sleep,
Mummu, the adviser, was impotent to move.
He loosened his band, tore off his tiara,
Removed his halo (and) put it on himself.
Having fettered Apsu, he slew him.
Mummu he bound and left behind lock.
Having thus upon Apsu established his dwelling,
He laid hold on Mummu, holding him by the nose-rope.
After he had vanquished and trodden down his foes,
Ea, his triumph over his enemies secured,
In his sacred chamber in profound peace he rested.
He named it 'Apsu,'¹³ for shrines he assigned (it).
In that same place his cult hut he founded.
Ea and Damkina, his wife, dwelled (there) in splendour.
In the chamber of fates, the abode of destinies,
A god was engendered,*most potent and wisest of gods.
In the heart of Apsu¹⁴ was Marduk created,
In the heart of holy Apsu was Marduk created.
He who begot him was Ea, his father;
She who conceived him was Damkina, his mother.
The breast of goddessess did she suck.
The nurse that nursed him filled him with awesomeness.
Alluring was his figure, sparkling the light in his eyes.
Lordly was his gait, commanding from of old.
When Ea saw him, the father who begot him,
He exulted and glowed, his heart filled with gladness.
He rendered him perfect and endowed him with a double godhead.
Greatly exalted was he above them, exceeding throughout.
Perfect were his members beyond comprehension,
Unsuited for understanding, difficult to perceive.
Four were his eyes, four were his ears;¹⁵
When he moved his lips, fire blazed forth.
Large were all hearing organs,
And the eyes, in like number, scanned all things.
He was the loftiest of the gods, surpassing was his stature;
His members were enormous, he was exceeding tall.

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'My little son, my little son!
My son, the Sun! Sun of the heavens!
Clothed with the halo of ten gods, he was strong to the utmost,
As their awesome flashes were heaped upon him.

.....
Disturbed was Tiamat, astir night and day.
The gods, in malice, contributed to the storm.
Their insides having plotted evil,
To Tiamat these brothers said:
'When they slew Apsu, thy consort,
Thou didst not aid him but remaindest still.
Although he fashioned the awesome Saw,¹⁶
Thy insides are diluted and so we can have no rest.
Let Apsu, thy consort, be in thy mind
And Mummu, who has been vanquished! Thou art left alone.

.....
[Several of the preceding lines are fragmentary. The gods incite Tiamat to avenge Apsu and Mummu. She is pleased and proposes to do battle against the offending gods. But first she bears a horrible brood of helpers—eleven monsters, 'Sharp of tooth, unsparing of fang/ With venom for blood she has filled their bodies.')

From among the gods,¹⁷ her first-born, who formed her Assembly,
She elevated Kingu, made him chief among them.
The leading of the ranks, command of the Assembly,
The raising weapons for the encounter, advancing to combat,
In battle the command-in-chief—
These to his hand she entrusted as she seated him in the Council:
'I have cast for thee the spell, exalting thee in the Assembly of the gods.
To counsel all the gods I have given thee full power.
Verily, thou art supreme, my only consort art thou!
Thy utterance shall prevail over all the Anunnaki!¹⁸
She gave him the Tablets of Fate, fastened on his breast:
'As for thee, thy command shall be unchangeable, Thy word shall
endure!
As soon as Kingu was elevated, possessed of the rank of Anu,
For the gods, her sons, they¹⁹ decreed the fate:
'Your word shall make the fire subside,
Shall humble the 'Power-Weapon,' so potent in (its) sweep!

[Ea again learns of the plot; but this time he has no ready response

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for it. He goes to his grandfather Anshar and repeats the entire story of Tiamat's fury and her preparations for battle. Anshar is profoundly disturbed. Finally he dispatches Anu, saying, 'Go and stand thou up to Tiamat, / that her mood be calmed, that her heart expand.' But when Anu sees the hosts of Tiamat, he loses his nerve and returns to Anshar.]

He came abjectly to his father, Anshar.
As though he were Tiamat thus he addressed him:
'My hand suffices not for me to subdue thee.'
Speechless was Anshar as he stared at the ground,
Frowning and shaking his head at Ea.
All the Anunnaki gathered at that place;
Their lips closed tight, they sat in silence.
'No god' (thought they) 'can go to battle and,
Facing Tiamat, escape with his life.'
Lord Anshar, father of the gods, rose up in grandeur,
And having pondered in his heart, he said to the Anunnaki:
'He whose strength is potent shall be our avenger,
He who is keen in battle, Marduk, the hero!'

[Ea warns Marduk of Anshar's plan and advises him to go before Anshar boldly. Marduk obeys and Anshar, seeing the hero, is instantly calmed.]

'Anshar, be not muted; open wide thy lips.
I will go and attain thy heart's desire. . . .
What male is it who has pressed his fight against thee?
It is but Tiamat, a woman, that opposes thee with weapons!
O my father-creator, be glad and rejoice;
The neck of Tiamat thou shalt soon tread upon!
.....
My son, (thou) who knowest all wisdom,
Calm Tiamat with thy holy spell.
On the storm-chariot proceed with all speed.
From her presence they shall not drive (thee)! Turn them back!
The lord rejoiced at the word of his father.
His heart exulting, he said to his father:
'Creator of the gods, destiny of the great gods,
If I indeed, as your avenger,
Am to vanquish Tiamat and save your lives,
Set up the Assembly, proclaim supreme my destiny!
When jointly in Ubshukinna²⁰ you have sat down rejoicing,

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Let my word, instead of you, determine the fates.
Unalterable shall be what I may bring into being;
Neither recalled nor changed shall be the command of my lips.'

[Anshar is prepared to accept Marduk's terms. He sends his vizier Gaga to a still older generation of gods, Lahmu and Lahamu. Gaga is instructed to repeat the entire story to them, and to invite the gods to assemble at a banquet for fixing Marduk's decrees.]

When Lahmu and Lahamu heard this, they cried out aloud,
All the Igigi²¹ wailed in distress:
'How strange that they should have made this decision!
We cannot fathom the doings of Tiamat!
They made ready to leave on their journey,
All the great gods who decree the fates.
They entered before Anshar, filling Ubshukinna.
They kissed one another in the Assembly.
They held converse as they sat down to the banquet.
They ate festive bread, partook of the wine,
They wetted their drinking tubes with sweet intoxicant.
As they drank the strong drink their bodies swelled.
They became very languid as their spirits rose.
For Marduk, their avenger, they fixed the decrees.
They erected for him a princely throne.
Facing his fathers, he sat down, presiding.
'Thou art the most honoured of the great gods,
Thy decree is unrivalled, thy command is Anu.²²
Thou, Marduk, art the most honoured of the great gods.

.....
We have granted thee Kingship over the universe entire.
When in the Assembly thou sittest, thy word shall be supreme.
Thy weapons shall not fail; they shall smash thy foes!
O lord, spare the life of him who trusts thee,
But pour out the life of the god who seized evil.'
Having placed in their midst a piece of cloth,
They addressed themselves to Marduk, their first-born:
'Lord, truly thy decree is first among gods.
Say but to wreck or create; it shall be.
Open thy mouth: the cloth will vanish!
Speak again, and the cloth shall be whole!
At the word of his mouth the cloth vanished.
He spoke again, and the cloth was restored.

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When the gods, his fathers, saw the fruit of his word,
Joyfully they did him homage: 'Marduk is king!'
They conferred on him sceptre, throne, and palū;
They gave him matchless weapons that ward off the foes:
Bel's²³ destiny thus fixed, the gods, his fathers,
Caused him to go the way of success and attainment.
He constructed a bow, marked it as his weapon,
Attached thereto the arrow, fixed its bow-cord.
He raised the mace, made his right hand grasp it;
Bow and quiver he hung at his side.
In front of him he set the lightning,
With a blazing flame he filled his body.
He then made a net to enfold Tiamat therein.
The four winds he stationed that nothing of her might escape,
The South Wind, the North Wind, the East Wind, the West Wind.
Close to his side he held the net, the gift of his father, Anu.
He brought forth Imhullu, 'the Evil Wind,' the Whirlwind, the
Hurricane,
The Fourfold Wind, the Sevenfold Wind, the Cyclone, the Matchless
Wind;
Then he sent forth the winds he had brought forth, the seven of them.
To stir up the inside of Tiamat they rose up behind him.
Then the lord raised up the flood-storm, his mighty weapon.
He mounted the storm-chariot irresistible and terrifying.
He harnessed (and) yoked to it a team-of-four,
The Killer, the Relentless, the Trampler, the Swift.
Sharp were their teeth, bearing poison.
They were versed in ravage, in destruction skilled.
.....
With his fearsome halo his head was turbaned,
The lord went forth and followed his course,
Towards the raging Tiamat he set his face.
In his lips he held [a . . .] of red paste;²⁴
A plant to put out poison was grasped in his hand.
Then they milled about him, the gods milled about him.
The lord approached to scan the inside of Tiamat,
(And) of Kingu, her consort, the scheme to perceive.
As he looks on, his²⁵ course becomes upset,
His will is distracted and his doings are confused.
And when the gods, his helpers, who marched'at his side,
Saw the valiant hero, blurred became their vision.

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Tiamat uttered a cry, without turning her neck,
Framing savage defiance in her lips:
'Too important art thou for the lord of the gods to rise up against thee!
Is it in their place that they have gathered, (or) in thy place?'
Thereupon the lord having raised the flood-storm, his mighty weapon,
To enraged Tiamat he sent word as follows:
'Mightily art thou risen, art haughtily exalted;
Thou hast charged thine own heart to stir up conflict,
So that sons reject their own fathers,
And thou who hast borne them, dost hate [. . .]!
Thou hast aggrandized Kingu to be (thy) consort;
A rule, not rightfully his, thou hast substituted for the rule of Anu.
Against Anshar, king of the gods, thou seekest evil;
Against the gods, my fathers, thou hast confirmed thy wickedness.
Though drawn up be thy forces, girded on thy weapons,
Stand thou up, that I and thou meet in single combat!'
When Tiamat heard this,
She was like one possessed; she took leave of her senses.
In fury Tiamat cried out aloud.
To the roots her legs shook both together.
She recited a charm, keeps casting her spell,
While the gods of battle sharpen their weapons.
Then joined issue Tiamat and Marduk, wisest of gods,
They swayed in single combat, locked in battle.
The lord spread out his net to enfold her,
The Evil Wind, which followed behind, he let loose in her face.
When Tiamat opened her mouth to consume him,
He drove in the Evil Wind that she close not her lips.
As the fierce winds charged her belly,
Her body was distended and her mouth was wide open.
He released the arrow, it tore her belly,
It cut through her insides, splitting the heart.
Having thus subdued her, he extinguished her life.
He cast down her carcass to stand upon it.
After he had slain Tiamat, the leader,
Her band was shattered, her troupe broken up.

[Tiamat's helpers panic and run, but Marduk captures and fetters
all of them.]

And Kingu, who had been made chief among them,
He bound and accounted him to Uggae.²⁶

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He took from him the Tablets of Fate, not rightfully his,
Sealed (them) with a seal²⁷ and fastened (them) on his breast.
When he had vanquished and subdued his adversaries,

.....
And turned back to Tiamat whom he had bound.
The lord trod on the legs of Tiamat,
With his unsparing mace he crushed her skull.
When the arteries of her blood he had severed,
The North Wind bore (it) to places undisclosed.
On seeing this, his fathers were joyful and jubilant,
They brought gifts of homage, they to him.
Then the lord paused to view her dead body,
That he might divide the monster and do artful works.
He split her like a shellfish into two parts:
Half of her he set up and ceiled as sky,
Pulled down the bar and posted guards.
He bade them to allow not her waters to escape.
He crossed the heavens and surveyed (its) regions.
He squared Apsu's quarter, the abode of Nudimmud,
As the lord measured the dimensions of Apsu.
The Great Abode, its likeness, he fixed as Esharra,
The Great Abode, Esharra, which he made as the firmament.
Anu, Enlil,²⁸ and Ea he made occupy their places.

[Much of Tablet V is broken. Marduk puts the heavens in order,
establishing the zodiac and telling the moon how to shine.]

When Marduk hears the words of the gods,
His heart prompts (him) to fashion artful works.
Opening his mouth, he addresses Ea
To impart the plan he addresses Ea
To impart the plan he had conceived in his heart:
'Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.
I will establish a savage, "man" shall be his name.
Verily, savage-man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods
That they might be at ease!
The ways of the gods I will artfully alter.
Though alike revered, into two (groups) they shall be divided.'
Ea answered him, speaking a word to him,
To relate to him a scheme for the relief of the gods:
'Let but one of their brothers be handed over;

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He alone shall perish that mankind may be fashioned.²⁹
Let the great gods be here in Assembly,
Let the guilty be handed over that they may endure.'
Marduk summoned the great gods to Assembly;
Presiding graciously, he issued instructions.
To his utterance the gods pay heed.
The king addresses a word to the Anunnaki:
'If your former statement was true,
Do (now) the truth on oath by me declare!
Who was it that contrived the uprising,
And made Tiamat rebel, and joined battle?
Let him be handed over who contrived the uprising.
His guilt I will make him bear that you may dwell in peace!
The Igigi, the great gods, replied to him,
To Lugaldimmerankia,³⁰ counsellor of the gods, their lord:
'It was Kingu who contrived the uprising,
And made Tiamat rebel, and joined battle.'
They bound him, holding him before Ea.
They imposed on him his guilt and severed his blood (vessels).
Out of his blood they fashioned mankind.
He³¹ imposed the service and let free the gods.

[After the creation of mankind, Marduk divides the Anunnaki and
assigns them to their proper stations, three hundred in heaven, three
hundred on the earth.]

After he had ordered all the instructions,
To the Anunnaki of heaven and earth had allotted their portions,
The Anunnaki opened their mouths
And said to Marduk, their lord:
'Now, O lord, thou who hast caused our deliverance,
What shall be our homage to thee?
Let us build a shrine to thee whose name shall be called
'Lo, a chamber for our nightly rest'; let us repose in it!
Let us build a shrine, a recess for his abode!
On the day that we arrive³² we shall repose in it.'
When Marduk heard this,
Brightly glowed his features, like the day:
'Like that of lofty Babylon, whose building you have requested,
Let its brickwork be fashioned. You shall name it "The Sanctuary."
The Anunnaki applied the implement;
For one whole year they moulded bricks.

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When the second year arrived,
They raised high the head of Esagila³³ equaling Apsu.³⁴
Having built a stage-tower as high as Apsu,
They set up in it an abode for Marduk, Enlil, (and) Ea.
In their presence he adorned (it) in grandeur.
To the base of Esharra its horns look down.
After they had achieved the building of Esagila,
The Anunnaki themselves erected their shrines.
[. . .] all of them gathered,
[. . .] they had built as his dwelling.
The gods, his fathers, at his banquet he seated:
'This is Babylon, the place that is your home!
Make merry in its precincts, occupy its broad places.'
The great gods took their seats,
They set up festive drink, sat down to a banquet.
After they had made merry within it,
In Esagila, the splendid, had performed their rites,
The norms had been fixed (and) all their portents,
All the gods apportioned the stations of heaven and earth.
The fifty great gods took their seats.
The seven gods of destiny set up the three hundred in heaven.
Enlil raised the bow, his weapon, and laid (it) before them.
The gods, his fathers, saw the net he had made.
When they beheld the bow, how skilful its shape,
His fathers praised the work he had wrought.
Raising (it), Anu spoke up in the Assembly of the gods,
As he kissed the bow:

[The remainder of the epic is a long hymn of praise to Marduk
It culminates in a recitation of his fifty names, attributes reflecting
his power and mighty deeds.]

Notes

- 1 God of subterranean waters; the primeval sweet-water ocean.
- 2 An epithet of Tiamat; perhaps meaning 'mother.'
- 3 A water-deity; the primeval salt-water ocean.
- 4 I.e., the fresh waters of Apsu and the marine waters of Tiamat.
- 5 The waters of Apsu and Tiamat.
- 6 The first generation of gods.
- 7 Gods.
- 8 The sky-god.
- 9 One of the names of Ea, the earth and water-god.
- 10 Ea, the earth- and water-god.

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- 11 That of Apsu and his vizier Mummu.
- 12 I.e., caused it to be in the waters of Apsu.
- 13 'The Deep.'
- 14 See note 13.
- 15 Cf. Ezekiel 1:6.
- 16 The weapon of the sun-god.
- 17 The gods who joined Tiamat in her war.
- 18 Here a collective name of the nether world gods.
- 19 Tiamat and Kingu.
- 20 The assembly hall of the gods.
- 21 A collective name of the heaven gods.
- 22 I.e., it has the authority of the sky-god Anu.
- 23 I.e., Marduk's destiny.
- 24 Red being the magic colour for warding off evil influence.
- 25 I.e., Kingu's course.
- 26 God of death.
- 27 By this action Marduk legalized his ownership of the Tablets of Fate.
- 28 The god of the wind, i.e., of the earth.
- 29 Out of his blood.
- 30 Meaning 'The king of the gods of heaven and earth.'
- 31 Ea.
- 32 For the New Year's Festival.
- 33 Name of the temple of Marduk in Babylon.
- 34 Meaning apparently that the height of Esagila corresponded to the depth of Apsu's waters.

Translation by E. A. Speiser, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton, 1950), pp. 60-72, as reprinted in Isaac Mendelsohn (ed.), *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, Library of Religion, paperback series (New York, 1955), pp. 19-46; notes by Mendelsohn

56. 'WHO CAN SAY WHENCE IT ALL CAME, AND HOW
CREATION HAPPENED?'

('Rig Veda,' X, 129)

This creation hymn is at once a supreme expression of the poetry and philosophy of the Rig Veda and an eloquent murmur of doubt, which carries over into the Upanishads its sense of the depth, the mystery, and above all the unity of creation. In 'darkness concealed in darkness' (tamas in tamas), in those 'unillumined waters' which harbour no 'being' (sat) or 'non-being' (asat), there is generated, by cosmic heat (tapas) the primordial unitary force, That One (tad ekam). 'Desire' (kāma) now arose as the primal seed of 'mind' (manas), the firstborn of tad ekam, and the rishis, who 'see' that original moment when the gods were not, claim now to know the bond of sat in asat. 'But who