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Enuma Elish: The Origins of Its Creation

Svetlana Tamtik

THE Enuma Elish is a Babylonian creation epic, originally written on seven clay tablets which were found in the ruins of Ashurbanipal's library in Nineveh.¹ This epic describes the creation of the world by the god Marduk, performed through splitting the body of the sea monster Tiamat at the climax of a battle between the two. Yet, the main purpose of this epic was to explain the elevation of the chief Babylonian god Marduk to the top of the Mesopotamian pantheon and the legitimization of his superiority over the other gods.

The Enuma Elish is the most famous Mesopotamian creation story and is considered to be a masterpiece of their literature. However, it is not quite unique in its composition. It has many parallels with other ancient Near Eastern stories and originates from earlier traditions, myths, and beliefs. In this paper I will analyze those influences and will try to shed some light on the origins of its composition.

Like most cosmogonies of the ancient Near East, the Enuma Elish has some features common to all of them. They include several

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1. Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1.

elements: (1) the creation, or rather organization, of the world from the elements existing in the form of unbridled chaos, as represented by the primordial ocean or sea², (2) the presence of the divine creator, (3) the presence of the antagonist or a primordial monster, (4) a battle between “good” and “evil” forces, (5) the separation of the elements (earth and sky, land and sea, order and chaos, etc.), and (6) the creation of mankind. These features of a creation story existed in many ancient cultures. We find them in ancient Greek cosmogony, where Eurynome, the Goddess of All Things, appears from the primordial chaos and divides sea from sky.³ The elements of the creation from chaos are also present in Egyptian, Phoenician and Vedic literature.⁴ They also existed in Canaanite mythology, where the stage before the creation was represented by unrestrained rule of the sea, personified as the god Yamm, who was later subdued and organized by Baal—the creator.⁵ But the most popular comparison is between the Enuma Elish and the creation story described in the Old Testament. Both accounts include the majority of the elements listed above, except there is no reference to a primordial monster in Genesis. However, the name for “the deep” (referring to the waters covering the earth) in the Hebrew Bible is *tehom*, which corresponds with Tiamat—the Mesopotamian personification of the sea in Enuma Elish.⁶

Similar elements were typical for the creation stories of the other ancient Near Eastern cultures. Unfortunately only few of them are mentioned here, because not all of those texts are available. Yet, most surprisingly, most of those elements are not found as prevalent in earlier Mesopotamian cosmogonies. Those accounts lack a well-developed theme of the primordial chaos represented by the sea. They reflect no tradition of a single divine creator; gods usually make the

2. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 88–89; also David Neiman, “The Supercaelian Sea,” *JNES* 28.4 (1969): 246–48.

3. Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 26.

4. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 97.

5. Neiman, “The Supercaelian Sea,” 247.

6. George L. Klein, “Reading Genesis 1,” *SWJT* 44.1 (2001): 27; also Thorkild Jacobsen, “The Battle Between Marduk and Tiamat,” *JAOS* 88.1 (1968): 105.

world together.⁷ In some cases this role is assumed by different local gods, depending on the city in which the legend was used. There is no primordial battle between “good” and “evil” forces, and even though the theme of fighting dragons is very popular, it usually happens after the world was already created.⁸ Finally, there is no clear tradition of dividing the elements and separating the sky from the earth. All those elements seem to come to Mesopotamian cosmogonies at later times. On the other hand, the earlier creation stories of that region have features different from those described above and unique for Sumerian culture. Moreover, there is no typical Sumerian creation story. As S. G. F. Brandon notes, “When we survey the exceeding variety of legends dealing with the origin of things that have been recovered . . . it would seem that there was no common pattern in the Sumerian thought on this subject.”⁹

Nevertheless, there are many elements of earlier Sumerian myths that were also incorporated in *Enuma Elish*. Most of them did not come from cosmogonies, but rather from stories describing a combat between a local god and a dragon or some other monster. L. W. King has noticed that the

Dragon-Myth existed in more than one form in Babylonian mythology, and it is not improbable that many of the great cities of Babylonia possessed local versions of the legend in each of which the city-god figured as the hero.¹⁰

It is clear that fighting a dragon was one of the most important achievements for any Mesopotamian god, especially for Marduk—the chief god of all Babylonia. In this case the authors of *Enuma Elish* had to

7. L. W. King, ed., *Enuma Elish: The Seven Tablets of Creation* (2 vols.; vol. 12 of Luzac's Semitic Text and Translation Series (London: Luzac and Co., 1902; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1976), 2:125–27.

8. Robert William Rogers, ed., *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament* 2nd ed. (New York/Cincinnati: The Abingdon Press, 1926), 61; also King, *Enuma Elish*, 2:68.

9. S. G. F. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 68.

10. King, *Enuma Elish*, 2:69

make him look superior to other gods and his victory to be the most triumphant. Yet, in order to make him a legitimate god, the story of his exaltation had to be built on earlier Sumerian traditions. This explains why there are so many borrowed elements from different Sumerian dragon stories present in Enuma Elish.

One of the most interesting evidences of borrowing might be found in the Myth of Anzu. In this myth, the dragon Anzu steals the Tablet of Destinies from the chief god Enlil, intending “to usurp the Enlil-power,” to “control the orders for all the gods” and to “possess the throne and [to] be master of the rites.”¹¹ After Anu (Enlil) becomes aware of the loss of the Tablet of Destinies, he looks for a god who could slay Anzu. Similar story unfolds in Enuma Elish, when the sea dragon Tiamat takes a possession of the Tablet of Destinies, and Anshar—the chief god—looks for a hero to fight her. In the myth of Anzu, as in Enuma Elish, Ea plays the role of a counselor, proposing, “Let me give orders and search among the gods, and pick from the assembly Anzu’s conqueror.”¹² Finally, the congregation of gods asks the mother goddess Mami for her favorite son Ninurta, who agrees to fight the dragon. After the victory over Anzu, the gods acclaim Ninurta with many names.¹³ The same pattern is observed in Enuma Elish. After Marduk’s victory over Tiamat, the gods “pronounced his fifty names” and “made his position supreme.”¹⁴

Besides the preceding similarities, more evidence exists in Enuma Elish of the borrowings from the Myth of Anzu. In Enuma Elish, two gods—Ea and Anu (Enlil)—turn down the invitation to fight Tiamat before Marduk accepts it.¹⁵ Similarly, in the Myth of Anzu, three gods reject the request to lead the army, and only then does Ninurta agree

11. Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh and Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 207.

12. Benjamin R. Foster, trans., *Enuma Elish*, in *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002), 2:394; II.119–24.

13. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 210.

14. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 219–21.

15. *Enuma Elish*, 402; 7.144.

16. *Enuma Elish*, 394; 2.71–118.

to do so.¹⁷ According to Richard J. Clifford, “in Sumerian traditions eleven monsters oppose Ninurta.” The same number fight on Tiamat’s side in the *Enuma Elish*, but only eight are given names, which indicates that the number eleven is a borrowing.¹⁸ In addition, the Tablet of Destinies does not fit in the story of the *Enuma Elish* as it does with the Myth of Anzu, “where its disappearance initiates the dramatic action.”¹⁹ Moreover, it is not mentioned anywhere in the *Enuma Elish* that Tiamat had stolen the Tablet of Destinies. This assumption (implied by many scholars) may also originate from the Myth of Anzu. Another possible borrowing is the net used by Marduk to catch Tiamat.²⁰ This tool would not be very useful in fighting her but could be better applied against the birdlike Anzu.²¹ Finally, after telling Ninurta how to kill the feathered dragon, Ea wishes, “And let the winds bring his feathers as good news.”²² This phrase sounds very appropriate in this context, but when Marduk “cut(s) open arteries of [Tiamat’s] blood” and “let(s) the North Wind bear (it) away as glad tidings,”²³ it sounds rather awkward and clearly suggests a borrowing.

Another myth that might be used as a source for the *Enuma Elish* is the story of Ninurta and the dragon Kur. While in the previous story Anzu symbolizes mountains,²⁴ in this one Kur is associated with primeval waters (he held them in check). After his destruction, the waters began to rise up. To fix the problem Ninurta “pil[ed] up heaps of stones on the body of the dead Kur, so that they might hold back the ‘mighty waters.’”²⁵

In the *Enuma Elish* Marduk assumes a similar role when he slays Tiamat—a personification of the primordial waters. He also assumes

17. Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1994), 85.

18. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 85; also *Enuma Elish*, 392; 1.141–46.

19. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 85.

20. *Enuma Elish*, 398; 4.95.

21. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 85.

22. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 216; also Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 85.

23. *Enuma Elish*, 398; 4.131–32.

24. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 212–13, 218.

25. Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 102.

the role of the creator of heaven and earth, which he makes from Tiamat's split body. This role was usually ascribed to Enlil—the personified air that holds the sky and the earth apart.²⁶ S. G. F. Brandon writes that “It would, accordingly, be reasonable to suppose that the author of the Enuma Elish, intent on exalting Marduk, was led to ascribe to him something of the exploits of Ninurta, as well as of Enlil” and that “he fused together two very different myths, with a resulting confusion of motifs and imagery.”²⁷

In different myths the names of monsters and the deities opposing them may vary. In one of those myths Enlil fights a gigantic sea monster named Labbu. Here, as in the Enuma Elish and the Myth of Anzu, Enlil fights the monster only when another god, Tishpak, fails to do so. An interesting detail is the size of the Labbu. His length is fifty *biru* (one *biru* is about six or seven miles). When Enlil slew him, his blood flowed “for three years and three months.”²⁸ The size of Tiamat in the Enuma Elish (so big that it enabled Marduk to make the earth and the sky from her split body) may also be based on the borrowings from the earlier myths like this one.

Also, in order to fight Labbu, Enlil “raised up the cloud, and stirred up storm.”²⁹ In the Enuma Elish, winds also were used by Marduk to fight Tiamat: “He thrust in the ill wind so she could not close her lips. The raging wings bloated her belly.”³⁰ The winds were given to Marduk by his grandfather Anu (Enlil), who “formed and produced four winds, he put them in his hand,” and who also “fashioned dust, he made a storm bear it up.”³¹ The usage of dust along with winds seems to be traditional for gods in Mesopotamian mythology in fighting dragons. In the Myth of Anzu, Ninurta uses both of them: “The warrior marshaled the seven evil winds, who dance in the dust, the seven whirlwinds.”³² And in the myth about Labbu the same

26. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 12.

27. Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 102.

28. Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels*, 63.

29. Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels*, 61, 63.

30. *Enuma Elish*, 398; 4.98–99.

31. *Enuma Elish*, 392; 1.105–07.

32. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 213, 217.

thing seems to be implied, when Enlil “raised up the cloud, and stirred up storm.”³³ The presence of dust in the winds may fit well with the context of Mesopotamian mythology, but does not fit with the setting of the *Enuma Elish*, where everything was covered with water and the earth was not yet formed.

There is another important borrowing in the *Enuma Elish* that appears in the context of a conflict between Ea (Enki) and Apsu. Apsu and Tiamat are the parents of all the gods and are personifications of the primordial sweet and salt waters.³⁴ Yet, when we look at earlier Sumerian myths, it appears that Apsu played a more important role than Tiamat. The whole notion of the sea seemed to be less relevant than that of the river, because “it would seem, accordingly, that the Sumerians would have been more closely associated with the spectacle of water in the form of a river than as the sea.”³⁵ The rivers Tigris and Euphrates were the source of life for Mesopotamians. They even addressed the abstract River “who did(st) create all things” on one of their clay tablets. In that address was an interesting phrase: “within thee Ea, the King of the Deep, created his dwelling.”³⁶

It was an old tradition to associate Ea (Enki) with the “sweet” waters, which was expressed in his “sovereignty over the subterranean area from which the springs and rivers have their source.” He was called the “king of abzu,” which distinguished his dominion over the sweet waters. The temple of Enki was built in Eridu (an ancient settlement on a fresh-water lagoon) and “was said to be founded on this abzu,” so “the building of his temple there would give him lordship over this form of the primordial deep.”³⁷ One aspect of the *Enuma Elish* is built directly on that tradition. It is illustrated in a story when Ea (Enki) took over Apsu (the personification of the sweet waters) with his magic spell and put him to sleep. Then, Ea “stripped of his tiara, he took away his aura, he himself put it on,” after which he killed Apsu. Following

33. Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels*, 63.

34. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 3.

35. Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 68.

36. Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels*, 63; see also King, *Enuma Elish*, 2:129.

37. Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 71–72.

his victory, he rested in the chamber that he established there and called it “Apsu” what meant “They Recognize Sanctuaries.”³⁸ As stated by S. G. F. Brandon, “the episode clearly derives from the myth of the foundation of the Ea’s temple at Eridu.”³⁹

It is interesting that along with Apsu, Ea was also fighting Apsu’s son and counselor Mummu. Although Ea did not kill him, he made him “drowsy with languor.” Afterward he bound Mummu, “locked him securely,” and then “founded his dwelling upon Apsu,” holding him firm by a lead-rope.⁴⁰ At first glance, it may seem evident that the connection between Ea and Apsu in the *Enuma Elish* is based on the earlier traditions that probably came from Eridu, yet the role of Mummu appears to be unclear. Alexander Heidel helped to bring some clarity to this subject by proposing that while Apsu and Tiamat represented sweet and salt waters, Mummu might represent the mist rising from, and hovering over them.⁴¹ This explains why Ea, being the god of the marshlands,⁴² had to establish Mummu’s dwelling upon Apsu (associated with marshy Eridu) and hold him with a lead-rope, probably showing his power over the mist as well as over the sweet waters.

The role that Ea plays throughout the whole story of the *Enuma Elish* is very important. He is perhaps the only god, except Marduk, who acts like a hero and whose characteristics are described in detail. L. W. King states that “his birth, moreover, forms the climax to which the previous lines lead up,” and that because of detecting and frustrating the plans of the primeval gods, “Ea and not Marduk is the hero of the earlier episodes of the Creation story.”⁴³ Later in the epic, Ea continued to help Marduk and “didn’t cease his active opposition to the forces of disorder, but continued to play a chief role on the side of the gods.”⁴⁴ Thus, after Marduk’s victory over Tiamat, Ea actively

38. *Enuma Elish*, 391; 1.62–76.

39. Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 96.

40. *Enuma Elish*, 391; 1.66–73.

41. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 3.

42. Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 72.

43. King, *Enuma Elish*, 2:37.

44. King, *Enuma Elish*, 2:41.

participated in creating mankind. In fact, even though it may seem awkward, he was the one who actually made them. Marduk only gave him the idea, yet the idea was imperfect and Ea refined it by his council. He proposed to slay a god responsible for waging war and to create mankind from his blood. Then Qingu—the leader of Tiamat’s army—was brought to the gods. He was bound and held before Ea, so that they could shed his blood in order for Ea to create mankind.⁴⁵

All these facts reflect a strong earlier tradition with Ea being the chief god and the creator of mankind. It seems that it was very difficult for the authors of the *Enuma Elish* to avoid borrowing some important elements from the earlier myths; but in making those borrowings, they could not always fit them with the role of Marduk. S. G. F. Brandon explains that “the author [was] so consciously drawing on the well-established tradition that Ea was the creator of mankind, that, despite his clear intention to claim this role to Marduk, he insensibly slip[ed] into the older version.”⁴⁶ He also supposes that “the emphasis which is then laid upon the superiority of Enki [Ea] would suggest that this part of *Enuma Elish* must be derived from the tradition of some cult-centre of Enki, probably Eridu, where this deity was exalted above all the other gods.”⁴⁷ It is probable that the authors of *Enuma Elish* incorporated some other earlier traditions in order to justify the exaltation of Marduk over the older gods. It seemed that they wanted to ascribe to Marduk all the significant acts and attributes of other gods. L. W. King says that “the priests of Babylon made use of independent legends in the composition of their great poem of Creation” and that “by assigning to Marduk the conquest of the Dragon and the creation of the world they justified his claim to the chief place among the gods.”⁴⁸ They knew that by doing so they would also establish Babylon as the capital city of Mesopotamia and would

45. *Enuma Elish*, 400–401; 6.1–33.

46. Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 106.

47. Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 95.

48. King, *Enuma Elish*, 2:70–71.

legitimize its political hegemony over the whole region. Thus, it becomes evident that the Enuma Elish served more political purposes than religious ones.⁴⁹

Exalting Marduk, a local Babylonian god, over older and more respected Sumerian gods was a daunting task for the priests in a religious climate where most of the important divine roles seemed to be already taken. They could not, therefore, be ascribed to Marduk without a justifying precedent. This precedent was the victory over Tiamat, who threatened the very existence of all the gods.⁵⁰ It was a relatively new tradition in Mesopotamian mythology that did not completely mesh with older Sumerian traditions. Thus, several aspects of creation seem to be made twice. For example, before Marduk created the sky and the earth, they were already represented in older mythology in the form of Anshar and Kishar—gods whose names might be translated as “heaven” and “earth,”⁵¹ or the “horizons of sky and earth.”⁵² Similarly, before Marduk created day and night, they were already spoken of by Apsu in these words: “by day I have no rest, at night I do not sleep.”⁵³ Finally, it seems awkward that “the three great cosmic deities (Anshar, Anu and Ea) of the traditional pantheon had to wait for Marduk to be established in those parts of the universe over which they [already] presided.”⁵⁴

But where do those newer traditions come from? The answer to this question may be found by examining the names of the deities in the Enuma Elish. Most of the names are pure Sumerian and come from earlier myths and traditions, except for Tiamat.⁵⁵ Her name, as well as

49. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 93; see also Rivkah Harris, “The Conflict of Generations in Ancient Mesopotamian Myths,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34 (1992): 630; see also Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 11.

50. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 11.

51. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 89.

52. Barbara C. Sproul, *Primal Myths* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 91.

53. *Enuma Elish*, 391; 1.38. See also Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 101.

54. Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 103.

55. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 12.

the notion of the sea, appears to be a foreign borrowing. It comes from the Semitic root which means “sea.”⁵⁶ As was mentioned above, observing the sea was not typical for daily Sumerian life.⁵⁷ The sea was “far away to the South behind extensive sweet water marshes and reed-thickets,” and the idea that Mesopotamians could “independently have thought up a myth about a battle between the thunderstorm and the sea and should then have made the myth central in (their) cosmogony is exceedingly difficult to imagine.”⁵⁸ Therefore, it had to be brought from some other place by people who spoke a Semitic language. Thus, the only possible option, shared by many scholars, is that the *Enuma Elish* was influenced by Amorites—a Western Semitic group from Amurru that came from the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and established the First Dynasty of Babylon.⁵⁹

The origins of the battle between Marduk and Tiamat become clearer when we compare them with the Western Semitic story of the battle between Baal and Yamm, described in a myth from Ras-Shamra (ancient Ugarit).⁶⁰ The fight between the god of thunderstorms, Baal, and the sea god Yamm, is the fight between the elements, or forces in nature,⁶¹ in which Baal fights and subdues Yamm. He then becomes the “King over all the earth, the Lord of Creation.”⁶² A similar motif is found in the *Enuma Elish*, where Marduk subdues the sea in the form of Tiamat and, as a result of his victory, becomes the king over all gods.

It is interesting to note that like Baal, Marduk was also, originally, a god of thunderstorms. This role was indicated by his name pronounced as Marutuk or Maruduk, which meant “Son of the storm.”⁶³ The similarity between the roles of Marduk and Baal could be one of the reasons why the Semite legend of Baal could so easily find its way

56. Jacobsen, “The Battle,” 105.

57. Brandon, *Creation Legends*, 85–86.

58. Jacobsen, “The Battle,” 107.

59. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 85–86; see also Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 131; and Jacobsen, “The Battle,” 108.

60. Jacobsen, “The Battle,” 107.

61. Jacobsen, “The Battle,” 106.

62. Neiman, “The Supercælian Sea,” 247.

63. Jacobsen, “The Battle,” 106.

into the creation epic of the Enuma Elish and why “a story told about a victory of the god of thunder would naturally be met with interest and readiness of acceptance.”⁶⁴ Thus the legend of Baal and Yamm sheds more light on the nature of the conflict between Marduk and Tiamat.

As has become evident, the authors of Enuma Elish built their epic on many borrowings. Many of those borrowings come from a Mesopotamian background and are deeply rooted in the Sumerian culture. Others, however, come from a different region and reflect traditions and phenomena that might not be observed in Mesopotamia. One of the greatest foreign influences was brought to Mesopotamia by the Amorites, who later became the ruling dynasty of Babylon. They had adopted the cult of a local god, Marduk, and enriched it with West Semitic mythology. Later on, in a response to the political and religious needs of Babylon to become the capital of Mesopotamia, Marduk was also exalted above the other gods with a new creation epic composed for him by his priests, based on both Mesopotamian and Amorite traditions. It was their masterpiece—the Enuma Elish.

64. Jacobsen, “The Battle,” 107.