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Give Me Back My Idol: Investigating the Dating of Enuma Elish

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On December 3, 1872, George Smith announced the discovery of cuneiform tablets that contained 1,100 poetic lines scholars called "The Babylonian Epic of Creation."[1] However, the Babylonians and Assyrians knew the poem as *Enuma elish* ("When above").[2] Sir Austin Henry Layard initially located four tablets in the library of Ashurbanipal (668–626 B.C.E.).[3] Later, the tablets were brought to the British Museum and translated by Smith in 1876. The subsequent publication would cause decades of theological battle and were known as the "Babel-Bible controversy."[4] Parallels between the two creation stories and their implications fueled the debate. The controversy propelled subsequent archaeological digs, which unearthed many more tablets. In all, the complete account of *Enuma elish* is divided into seven sections/tablets.

Enuma Elish: Preliminary Scholarly Discussion and Thesis

Formerly, scholars dated the poem's origin earlier than 2000 B.C.E.[5] However, consensus points to a later date put forth by scholars such as W. G. Lambert[6] (1126–1105 B.C.E.), Thorkild Jacobsen[7] and Alexander Heidel[8] (1500–1400 B.C.E.), and W. von Soden[9] (1894–1595 B.C.E.). This paper agrees

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1. William Notz, "The Babel-Bible Controversy," *BSac* 68.269 (1911): 641–57.
2. Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), 1.
3. Morris Jastrow, "The Hebrew and Babylonian Accounts of Creation," *JQR* 13.4 (1901): 620–54.
4. Notz, "The Babel-Bible Controversy," 642. The debate was so popular at the time that all classes of society became embroiled in the conflict. Interestingly, Germany built a Babel-Bible library at this time.
5. Jastrow, "The Hebrew and Babylonian Accounts of Creation," 622.
6. W.G. Lambert, "The Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I: A Turning Point in the History of Ancient Mesopotamian Religion," in *The Seed of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of T.J. Meek* (ed. W.S. McCullough; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 6.
7. Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1976), 165–67.
8. Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 14.
9. Wolfram von Soden, "Der hymnisch-epische Dialekt des Akkadischen," *Zeitschrift*

with Lambert in asserting that *Enuma elish* in its complete form was originally composed after the return of the statue of Marduk from Elam. The article advances new evidence based on internal evidence within *Enuma elish*.

Before engaging fully in this topic, some parameters must be established. Though the dating of *Enuma elish* has bearing on understanding historical issues dealing with the Hebrew Bible, this paper will solely focus on *Enuma elish* and not on parallels with the Genesis narrative. Also, this paper will be restricted to historical and textual evidence rather than the philological approach put forth by scholars such as von Soden and Jacobsen.[10] In addition, something must be said about the challenges in matching literary compositions with historical activity. Because we do not have the original copies of *Enuma elish*, the process of ascertaining exactly when the document was originally composed can be problematic. Furthermore, the period we are examining is riddled with textual and archeological gaps that are difficult to fill in. Additionally, even the most scientific approach can still be debated and, in the end, is subjective.

The majority of the tablets of "The Epic of Creation" have been dated from 750 to 200 B.C.E., with four fragmented copies from Assur dating to approximately 900 B.C.E. In reality, the so-called "Epic of Creation" is a misnomer and, according to Benjamin Foster, might be called "The Exaltation of Marduk."[11] In fact, most of the text does not focus on creation but on Marduk's rise to kingship over the Babylonian pantheon. Therefore, the composition of *Enuma elish* is inextricably linked with the rise to power of Marduk in the Babylonian pantheon. Consequently, this paper will follow the history of the rise of Marduk as a framework upon which to draw conclusions, using a chronology that moves from early possibilities to later ones.

Early Chronology Composition Theory: The Accession of Hammurabi (1792)

Marduk first appeared as an inconsequential god in the Sumerian pantheon around 3000 B.C.E.[12] Lambert states that although Babylon rose to prominence during the early years of the Babylonian dynasty its patron god Marduk remained relatively insignificant.[13] However, during the reign of Hammurabi Marduk was made the national god. All this attention to Marduk was fertile ground for a composition such as *Enuma elish*, in which the gods loudly proclaim the epic's purpose, "Marduk is king" (*Epic* 4:25). Hammurabi took both Babylon and Marduk from obscurity to prominence. Because of Hammurabi's influence, Heidel favors a dating during his reign. Heidel believes that the Babylonians promoted Marduk to the head of the pantheon in order to establish ideological and political dominance over rival cities.[14] In fact, the code

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für Assyriologie und verwandte Gebiete 41 (1933): 90–181.

10.   For a linguistic analysis see: von Soden, "Der hymnisch-epische Dialekt des Akkadischen," 177–81. Also see: Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 165–67.

11.   Benjamin Foster, "Epic of Creation," in William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, (3 vols.; Boston: Brill, 2003), 391. The translation used in this article will be based off their translation, see 1:391–402.

12.   John D. Pleins, "Marduk," *ABD* 4:522–23.

13.   Lambert, "Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I," 6.

14.   Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 14; see also: Amelie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*

of Hammurabi asserts Marduk's new authority by saying: "[Enlil] committed the sovereignty over all the people to Marduk; . . . they made him great among the Igigi; . . . they made [his name] unsurpassable in the regions of the world; . . . they established for him an everlasting kingdom whose foundations are as firm as heaven and earth."[15]

By analyzing the code of Hammurabi, it becomes clear that Marduk is receiving absolute dominion. Marduk's name is completely "unsurpassable," and he is ranked among the Igigi gods. Heidel suggests the above passage from Hammurabi's code is evidence that Marduk was made head of the pantheon during the reign of Hammurabi. The only problem with Heidel's assertion is that it contradicts the internal evidence found in *Enuma elish*. First, in the epic Marduk's absolute dominion is not over "the people" but over the gods.[16] Marduk bargains with the other gods, giving them protection from Tiamat in return for autocracy. The gods agree and state that they will let Marduk "ordain destinies instead of [themselves]" (*Epic* 3:120). Second, Marduk is not just great *among* the Igigi gods but is told by them:

A) You are the *most important* among the great gods,

   B) your destiny is *unrivalled*, your command is *supreme*.

A) O Marduk, you are the *most important* among the great gods,

   B) your destiny is *unrivalled*, your command is *supreme*! (*Epic* 4:1–5, emphasis added)

The composers of *Enuma elish* did not think that Marduk was just a fellow brother among the gods but rather the supreme ruler.[17] Memorably, the authors of *Enuma elish* made sure to underscore the ideology of Marduk's unrivalled godly kingship by using dual sets of poetic repetition. The authors probably wanted Marduk's exalted status among the gods to be remembered. Most likely, Hammurabi's priests would not have composed an epic focusing on Marduk's kingship over the gods, when he was considered in Hammurabi's code to be a ruler over only the people, not the gods. Furthermore, Hammurabi's code was not composed until his fortieth regnal year, and he died in his forty-second regnal year.[18] Therefore, there is not much of a possibility for any later ideological shift concerning Marduk's kingship during the reign of Hammurabi. In the end, because Marduk was not made king *over* the gods during the reign of Hammurabi, *Enuma elish* most likely was not composed during his reign.

(2 vols.; London: Routledge, 1995), 1:111. After Hammurabi's defeat of Rim-Sin of Larsa (1763 B.C.E.) Hammurabi conquered, Isin, Uruk, Ur, Nippur, Larsa, Eshnunna, and Mari. His territory became so big that it resembled the Ur III empire. This created a need to assert Babylon's religious prominence, and unify the empire ideologically, and thus politically. Hammurabi (who appointed cultic leaders) would have had no better time to influence the priests to compose *Enuma elish*. 111.

15. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 14.

16. Lambert, "Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I," 5 expresses that making Marduk king of the gods, when he is only mentioned as a ruler over the people is simply "not sound exegesis."

17. Lambert, "Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I," 5.

18. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 1:111.

Middle Chronology Composition Theories

After the death of Hammurabi, Babylon gradually lost its prominence. In a period of only twenty years after the death of Hammurabi, Babylon had lost control over Mari and within eighty years had lost the plentiful southern territories which gave them access to the Persian Gulf sea trade. The slow process of decline in Babylon continued until it was sacked by the Hittite king Mursili I in 1595 b.c.e.[19] Upon taking Babylon, Mursili removed the statue of Marduk and took it to Hatti. The statue of Marduk was gone from Babylon twenty-four years before being returned.[20] The perfect time for creating *Enuma elish* might have been when Marduk returned to Babylon. However, according to Lambert an analysis of date formulae, deity names, royal inscriptions, and literary works still reveal that Enlil was worshipped as the head god.[21] And though some may say that in Hammurabi's code Enlil had already handed over sovereignty to Marduk over the people, Enlil still retained his position over the gods themselves.

The next possible date of composition for *Enuma elish* is found in the inscription of Agum II (fifteenth century b.c.e.). Scholars have noted similar parallels between this inscription and *Enuma elish*. Heidel even claims that *Enuma elish* inspired parts of the inscription of Agum II. The inscription mentions Marduk's temple filled with monsters, which are similar to those that Marduk battles within the epic. Heidel believes that because the monsters are located in the same temple as Marduk, *Enuma elish* must have inspired this motif. He names the following monsters: the viper, bison, great lion, mad dog, dragonfly, and goat fish. The evidence is intriguing, considering that the inscription tells of the restoration of the statues of Marduk. Initially, Heidel's evidence seems to hint that the epic was composed during the fifteenth century. However, internal evidence in *Enuma elish* seems to weaken Heidel's argument. *Enuma elish* describes Tiamat's monsters as "serpents, dragons, and hairy hero men, Lion monsters, lion men, scorpion men, Mighty demons, fish men, and bull men" (*Epic* 3:89–90). Parallels with *Enuma elish* can be matched with all of "Agum's monsters" except the goat-fish. Furthermore, the inscription of Agum leaves out many of Tiamat's most potent allies, which include fish men, mighty demons, scorpion men, and especially hairy hero men. Though there is some overlap between the two texts, there seem to be more dissimilarities than similarities. It would be difficult to prove with any certainty a connection to *Enuma elish*. Also, Heidel admits in his footnotes that I. J. Gelb has explained that the inscription of Agum is a possible forgery. He states, "if the Agum inscription proves to be a forgery, [then my] . . . argument falls to the ground."[22] In the end an argument for a fifteenth-century composition of *Enuma elish* is to questionable to be relied upon.

Another possible date for the composition of *Enuma elish* is the time of the Babylonian ruler Adad-shuma-user (1216–1187 b.c.e.). Adad-shuma-user was able to successfully conquer Enlil-kudurri-usur (1197–1193 b.c.e.), king

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19. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 1:116.

20. J.J.M. Roberts, "Nebuchadnezzar I's Elamite Crisis in Theological Perspective," in *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts & Sciences: Essays on the Ancient Near East in Memory of Jacob Joel Finkelstein*, ed. Maria de Jong Ellis; 19 (1977): 184.

21. Lambert, "Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I," 6.

22. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 14.

of Assyria. The Babylonians had been under Assyrian hegemony since Tukulti-Ninurta I sacked Babylon in 1229 B.C.E. Texts indicate that it was during this time that Tukulti-Ninurta I took the statue of Marduk from Babylon. If this account is true, a return of the statue would definitely spark ideas for an *Enuma elish* composition.[23] Contrary to this dating scheme is the possibility that the account is a possible seventh-century forgery.[24] Also, other texts during Tukulti-Ninurta's reign do not mention removing the statue. In addition, the text places the theft of Marduk's statue during a time when the Elamites had possession of the statue. Likewise, the Elamite pillage is "well attested."[25] Consequently, we cannot place a date for the composition of *Enuma Elish* during the reign of Adad-shuma-user.

Later Chronology Theories

Because of the challenges with earlier dating models, Lambert dates the composition of *Enuma elish* after Nebuchadnezzar I (1126–1105 B.C.E.) conquers Elam and subsequently reclaims the statue of Marduk.[26] Lambert notes that the personal name "Marduk-is-king-of-the gods" appears earlier during the reign of Kudur-Enlil (1254–1246 B.C.E.) but is very rare.[27] To specify the dating, he argues that *Enuma elish* could not have been composed during Kassite rule because of their allegiance to *Samas* and *Enlil*.[28] Most likely, *Enuma elish* was composed after Kassite rule. So far, Lambert's reasoning appears to be very sound, but he does not elaborate any further. An additional look at the internal textual evidence in *Enuma elish* brings further insights.

New Insights into the Early Chronology Composition

In general, the epic seems to mimic the conflict with Elam (i.e., Elam and its forces represent Tamiat and her forces). For example, Shilhak-Inshushinak had retained the eastern fringe of Mesopotamia, which he had received from his father Kudur-Nahhunte, and Babylon had been subjected to many "devastating Elamite invasions."[29] This point in time was obviously not a comfortable one for Babylonia. Roberts points to a text that describes a valiant Nebuchadnezzar persuading his terrified nobles to face Elam.[30] Similarly, the epic describes the god Anshar's fear of Tiamiat's legions when "he cried out 'Woe!'"; he bit his lip, . . . his mind was uneasy, his cries to Ea his offspring grew choked [and he said], where is one who can face [Tiamat]" (*Epic* 2:50). On the other hand, Marduk (just like Nebuchadnezzar) shows no fear as he valiantly faces "countless invincible weapons" (*Epic* 3:130). Although Marduk is supreme throughout the epic, there is a point where "his tactic turned to confusion, his reason was overthrown, his actions panicky" (*Epic* 3:66). Marduk obviously had some major setbacks before his victory. Interestingly, this is exactly the pic-

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23. Roberts, "Nebuchadnezzar I's Elamite Crisis in Theological Perspective," 184.
24. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 1:356.
25. Ibid.
26. W.G. Lambert, "*Enuma Elish*," *ABD* 2:527.
27. Lambert, "Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I," 8.
28. Ibid.
29. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 1:375.
30. Roberts, "Nebuchadnezzar I's Elamite Crisis in Theological Perspective," 184.

ture we see happening in the historical documents that describe Babylon's at-tack against Elam. "The finest of the powerful horses gave out, the legs of even the strong man faltered," but in the end "Nebuchadnezzar presses on, nor has he rival. He does not fear the difficult terrain."[31] Just as Nebuchadnezzar in the end defeats the dreadful foe Elam, so Marduk "Subdued [Tiamat] and snuffed out her life" (*Epic* 4:100). The climax of the conquest in Elam is the return of the statue of Marduk to his temple, and Babylon became the "royal capital *par excellence*" the "eternal and holy city."[32] Consequently, a new year's celebration was integrated in which the other holy statues from other cities were gathered in submission to Babylon. *Enuma elish* was recited, and all the people paid absolute homage to Marduk. This image seems to be represented figuratively in the epic. For example, in the epic Babylon is described as the first and most important city on earth. In addition, all the gods are gathered together to the Marduk's temple to worship him.

Taking the previously mentioned evidence into consideration, the evidence previous to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I has too many difficulties to place any date with certainty. However, it seems that the name "Marduk is King of the Gods" was in existence during the reign of Kudur-Enlil (1254–1246 B.C.E.). At the earliest, the first solid evidence indicates that *Enuma elish* in its entirety was probably composed after Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Elam (1126–1105 B.C.E.). Lastly, *Enuma elish* in its entirety was probably created precisely to commemorate Babylon's victory over Elam and to reconfirm their religious preeminence.

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31. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 1:376.
32. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 1:378.