Counter-texts, Commentaries, and Adaptations: Politically Motivated Responses to the Babylonian Epic of Creation in Mesopotamia, the Biblical World, and Elsewhere*

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Enūma eliš, the Babylonian epic of creation, was the most influential Mesopotamian religious text of the first millennium BCE. This article discusses how the epic was read, re-interpreted, and revised during the period from 900 BCE to AD 500, both within and outside Mesopotamia. The Assyrian version of the epic, and various Assyrian commentaries on the text, receive particular attention. The article argues that the Erra epic and parts of the Primeval History of the Bible represent counter-texts written in response to the ideological challenges posed by *Enūma eliš*, and that war and peace were factors that determined to a significant extent how the Babylonians and other people of the ancient world approached the epic.

Keywords: myth, *Enūma eliš*, reception history, creation, Primeval History, Genesis

I. Introduction

A widely held opinion, put forward with particular vigor by Carl Jung and Karl Kerényi,¹ claims that myth expresses something eternal and unchangeable, that it possesses certain archetypal qualities. Such a view seems not completely unwarranted. After all, if myths were meaningful only to the societies that produced them, then why would we still care for ancient Greek stories about the Olympian gods, or the Mesopotamian Gilgameš epic, a tale that had been completely forgotten for almost 2000 years? Surely these narratives have certain timeless qualities. And yet, it would be foolish to assume that myths, and the basic ideas they express, do not also age over time, that they need not be revised when political, economic, and cultural transformations occur. Without such adaptation, mythological narratives would lose their function to serve as charters of the norms and values of the societies in which they circulate — they would

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become obsolete.

The process through which societies renew their mythological traditions is complex and differs from case to case. A basic distinction must be made between oral societies and literate ones. In oral societies, the discarding of mythological material usually leaves no traces. When, for example, two of the seven divisional chiefdoms of the state of Gonja in northern Ghana were abandoned around 1900, a myth about the state's legendary founder was adapted to the new political reality by changing the number of the founder's sons. Instead of seven, representing the original number of chiefdoms, the new version of the myth provided him with only five sons. The first version of the myth had been recorded by British colonial officers at the beginning of the twentieth century, the second by the anthropologist Jack Goody, who visited the Gonja sixty years later. At that time, the Gonja themselves were no longer aware that their mythology had undergone a change — they believed there had been five sons, and five chiefdoms, from time immemorial.²

Adaptation of myth in literate societies is very different. Their written texts, stored in archives and libraries, buried in foundation deposits, or engraved on public monuments, continuously remind members of the ruptures of the past and prevent them from falling into the kind of structural amnesia the Gonja enjoyed.³

This article deals with the changing fates of a particularly important mythological narrative from the world's first literate civilization, ancient Mesopotamia. The narrative in question, the Babylonian epic of creation, also known as *Enūma eliš*, kept its central place in Mesopotamia's religious consciousness for at least a millennium, but was repeatedly rewritten and re-interpreted. It also had a significant impact on neighboring cultures.

Enūma eliš seems to be a particularly suitable topic for the volume at hand. The ideal world order towards which its narrative trajectory gravitates appears to owe a lot to an author yearning for (eternal) peace, and similar longings on the part of those who read or listened to the text may at least in part explain its enduring popularity. War and conflict, on the other hand, were factors that motivated new approaches towards *Enūma eliš* and prompted some of the revisions the epic underwent in the course of its history.

II. *Enūma eliš*: Its plot and its origins

It may be useful to begin with a short summary of the epic's plot.⁴ Written in a solemn and archaizing language, *Enūma eliš* opens with an account of the beginnings of creation. Tiamat, a sea-like embodiment of primeval chaos,⁵ and

Apsû, who represents the sweet waters, mingle and, supported by Mummu, the creative spirit, bring forth several generations of gods: the couples Laḥmu and Laḥamu and Anšar and Kišar, the god Anu, and Ea and his wife Damkina. Apsû, annoyed by the noise of the younger gods, threatens to destroy them, but is defeated and killed by Ea, who founds his abode in the sweet waters of the slain Apsû. There Ea engenders the main protagonist of the epic, Marduk, a god of great intellectual and physical powers, who grows up suckled by mighty goddesses. Soon it turns out that the conflict with Apsû was only the prelude to a much greater battle. Tiamat, the primeval mother, is enraged by the younger gods' continuing turbulent behavior and embarks on a new mission to kill her descendants. It seems, at first, as though no one is able to stop her, but eventually, Marduk takes up the battle and manages to overwhelm Tiamat and the host of terrifying monsters supporting her. He creates heaven and earth by splitting his female opponent in half, fashions the celestial bodies, makes human beings by using the blood of Tiamat's paramour Qingu, and assigns dwelling places to the gods. Those, in return, make Marduk their king and build his sacred abode, the Esagil temple in the city of Babylon. Babylon becomes the gathering place of the gods, a navel of the world, and Marduk the greatest god of all. At the end of the text, he receives fifty names expressing his newly acquired powers.

Enūma eliš takes up numerous motifs from other literary texts, especially Lugal-e and *Anzû*, and is heavily influenced by the theology of Nippur.⁶ Marduk assumes the roles of the two main deities of that city, Enlil, the divine king, and his son Ninurta, the great warrior. The epic was meant for wide distribution, as its concluding lines demonstrate, and played an important role in the cult of Babylon, where it was recited on several ritual occasions during the year. Most importantly, it served as the cultic legend of the *Akītu* festival, which took place at the beginning of the year in the month of Nisannu and culminated in a procession of Marduk to the *Akītu* house north of Babylon. The tablet that provides the most detailed outline of this festival dates to the Hellenistic era,⁷ but it seems likely that the ritual procedures of earlier times were not that different from those practiced in the late period.

Assyriologists are still debating when *Enūma eliš* was composed. Opinions vary widely, ranging from the Old Babylonian period⁸ to the first quarter of the first millennium.⁹ The earliest known manuscripts of the text, found in the city of Assur, have been dated on paleographical grounds to c. 900 BCE¹⁰ or slightly earlier,¹¹ but they hardly mark the beginnings of the *Enūma eliš* tradition. The complete lack, on the other hand, of any reference to *Enūma eliš* from the Old

Babylonian period makes it unlikely that the text was composed that early. All things considered, Lambert's suggestion to date the text to the twelfth century¹² remains at present the most plausible hypothesis. Lambert posits *Enūma eliš* was written, together with several other politico-religious texts, in an attempt to celebrate the new period of political independence Babylon had entered under the second dynasty of Isin on the occasion of the retrieval of the statue of Marduk from Elam by Nebuchadnezzar I (1125-1104 BCE).¹³ In Lambert's view, the author of the epic transferred to the divine realm the idea of political stability embodied, and putatively guaranteed, by the re-established Babylonian state.

That state, however, was soon after subjected yet again to a long phase of decline. Only a few decades after the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I, Suteans and Aramaeans invaded Babylonia and sacked its palaces and temples. Outside their city, the kings of Babylon were left with little authority. Babylonian statehood reached its nadir when the Assyrians, culturally close but politically hostile to their Babylonian neighbors, began to move into the power vacuum that had been created in the south and, in 729, during the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 BCE), brought the independent Babylonian state to a temporary end.

III. The Erra epic as counter-text to *Enūma eliš*

All these events must have undermined the religious plausibility *Enūma eliš* had for the Babylonians of the early centuries of the first millennium. The story of an all-powerful Marduk, god of Babylon, must have seemed to them more and more at odds with the reality of a city-state in decay and stripped of almost all of its former glory. Undoubtedly, *Enūma eliš* continued to be recited and studied in Babylon, instilling in its inhabitants the hope for better days; but the chaos that ruled the Babylonian political scene, and the rise of new political players, required mythological explanations of a different kind.

It seems that one such explanation was provided by the Babylonian Erra epic,¹⁴ a text that reports how Erra, the divine patron of destruction and violence, wrecked the world after convincing Marduk to leave his abode in Esagil and descend to the netherworld to have his cult image repaired. Erra becomes king in his place and immediately wreaks havoc. Civil war breaks out, and Sutean nomads and other barbarian groups vandalize the ancient cult centers of Mesopotamia. A desperate Marduk complains, "Alas for Babylon, whose crown I fashioned luxuriant as a palm's, but which the wind has scorched" (IV 40). Only the intervention of Erra's companion Išum restores order and peace in the end.

The Erra epic is based on the idea, foregrounded in *Enūma eliš*, that Marduk should be the champion of peace and stability, but presents the god as unable, or unwilling, to preserve them. The epic claims, in complete contrast to everything that is said in *Enūma eliš*, that it was Marduk who had brought about the deluge, the archetypal catastrophe that had befallen mankind in an earlier age. Now, by yielding to Erra, Marduk allows the forces of chaos to return yet again. Cosmological order, represented by the harmonious configuration of the heavenly bodies, falls apart, and the political order hitherto guaranteed by a strong Babylonian king is shattered.

As in the case of *Enūma eliš*, there is no consensus among assyriologists about the date of the composition of the Erra epic, although in the fifth tablet a certain Kabti-ilāni-Marduk claims that the text had been revealed to him in a dream. In a Babylonian list of kings and scholars from the Seleucid period, Kabti-ilāni-Marduk is associated with Ibbi-Sîn (2028-2004 BCE), the last king of the third dynasty of Ur,¹⁵ but this connection is undoubtedly a late fabrication, inspired by the tradition that Ibbi-Sîn's reign ended in chaos, and cannot be regarded as historically accurate. Dates proposed for the composition of the text by modern scholars, based on historical and linguistic grounds, include the twelfth century BCE,¹⁶ the year 763 BCE,¹⁷ and the reign of Sennacherib (704-681 BCE),¹⁸ but all these suggestions fail to convince, for one reason or another. It seems more sensible to follow once again Lambert, who has argued that references to the Suteans, and some additional evidence, point to the reign of Nabû-aplu-iddina in the ninth century as the most probable date for the composition of the epic.¹⁹

If Lambert's suggestions for the dates of *Enūma eliš* and *Erra* are basically correct, it would be legitimate, at least from a chronological point of view, to regard the latter as a kind of counter-text to the former, a somewhat farce-like sequel produced at a time of political insecurity and widespread violence. While there are no citations from *Enūma eliš* in the Erra epic, and its language seems to be less artificial and solemn, *Erra* clearly presupposes the theology outlined in the Babylonian epic of creation, and it takes up a number of its main topics. *Erra* might have been composed to explain in mythological terms the chaos and destruction that had befallen Babylonia.

Restrictions of space make it impossible to discuss here in detail all the complementary features that characterize the two texts, but the following table should help to highlight at least the key points:

<i>Enūma eliš</i>	<i>Erra</i>
etiology of order	etiology of chaos
heroic epic	farce
focus on creation	focus on destruction
exaltation of Marduk	Marduk's descent to the netherworld
Marduk uses the <i>abūbu</i> weapon to defeat Tiamat.	Marduk annihilates human beings through the deluge (<i>abūbu</i>).
Marduk star <i>Nēbiru</i>	Fox star as symbol of Erra ²⁰

The hypothesis of a literary connection between the two texts does not rule out, of course, that the Erra epic had other functions as well. It is, in fact, clear that the text also served as an apotropaic device that kept away violence and disorder from those who recited it or wrote it down.

IV. Assyrian responses to *Enūma eliš*: Textual usurpation, commentaries, and heretical re-readings

In the eighth century BCE, as already pointed out, Babylonia fell into the hands of the Assyrians, who ruled it henceforth either directly or by means of puppet kings installed in the city of Babylon. Quotations from (or at least allusions to) *Enūma eliš* in the royal inscriptions of Sargon II²¹ and Sennacherib,²² who occupied the Assyrian throne from 722 to 681, provide evidence that these kings and their circles of advisors were deeply interested in the Babylonian epic. Its doctrine of absolute rule, which mirrored quite closely their own imperial ambitions, must have had a tremendous appeal to them. But the god celebrated in the epic was Marduk and not Aššur, the divine patron of the new superpower on the Tigris, which meant that the Assyrians could not so easily incorporate the text into their own political and theological world view.

When Sennacherib destroyed Babylon in 689, after a number of Babylonian revolts against the Assyrian hegemony had exhausted his patience, he devised a plan to solve this dilemma: he implemented a “religious reform.”²³ While the king's architects strove to recreate the sacred landscape of Babylon in Assur, Assyria's religious capital, Sennacherib's scribes produced a revised version of *Enūma eliš* in which the name of Babylon was replaced by that of Baltil, a ceremonial designation of the city of Assur, and the name of Marduk by that of the god Aššur.²⁴ These were, essentially, the only changes that were needed to adapt the “canonical” *Enūma eliš* to the political realities of the early seventh century and to erase its old, “Babylcentric” message. Through a simple

act of “textual usurpation,” the epic had become the mythological blueprint for the new age of Assyrian imperialism.

Aššur’s name was written An-šár in the revised version of the text, according to conventions that had come into use during the reign of Sargon II.²⁵ At first glance, this writing seems to indicate a certain degree of textual incoherence, since the new *Enūma eliš* now featured two “Anšars”: on one hand, as in the old version, the son of Laḫmu and Laḫamu, who functioned as the original leader of the younger generation of gods, and on the other his great-grandson, the heroic conqueror of Tiamat. They are both mentioned together in the following passage from KAR 173:²⁶

¹*an-šár pa-a-šu i-[pu-šam-ma]* ²*a-na dka-kà su[kka]l-šú a-ma-[tu izakkar]* ³*dka-kà sukkal m[u]-ti-ib k[a]-bat²¹-t[i²¹]-ia* ⁴*áš-riš dlah-mu dla-[ha]-mu ka-a-ša lu-uš-p[ur]* ⁵*[ši]-te²¹-’a-a mu-da-a-ta te-eš-bu-ra te-le-’[e]* ⁶*dingir-meš ad-meš-ia šu-bi-ka ana²¹ maḥ-ri-[ia]* ⁸*li-ša-na liš-ku-nu ina qé-re-e-ti lu-uš-[bu]* ¹⁰*a-na an-šár mu-ter gi-mil-li-šú-nu li-ši-mu [šimtu]*

An-šár made ready to speak, / [Saying] to Kakka his vizier these words, / “Kakka, vizier who contents me, / Let it be you that I send off toward Laḫmu and Laḫamu. / You know how to find (a way), you can make a fine speech. / Send over to my presence the gods my ancestors / Let them converse, sit down at a feast / Let them ordain [a destiny] for **An-šár** (canonical version: Marduk), their champion.”

Lambert has attributed the supposed inconsistency of this and other paragraphs of the text to poor narrative skills on the part of the Assyrian *literati*.²⁷ But is it plausible that the authors of the new version of *Enūma eliš* were really so clueless when they revised the text? Given the political importance of their endeavor, this seems rather unlikely. It is, in fact, not that difficult to infer their ideological agenda. What they most probably aimed at was to assign to the god Aššur both genealogical priority — associated with the first Anšar — and political supremacy — ascribed to the heroic second Anšar, who had assumed the role of Marduk.²⁸ That the Assyrian version of *Enūma eliš* regarded the two Anšars, in a way, as representing one deity only is indicated by the fact that it presents Laḫmu as the father of both.

The notion of linking the divine hero’s supremacy to some kind of precedence in time can, in fact, be traced to the canonical version of the epic

itself. To be sure, tablet I of this version presents Marduk as the son of Ea, and therefore as a younger god. But the foundation of the concept of a time-transcending link between Marduk and his ancestors is already laid out in VII 97 of the canonical text, where Marduk is called *bān ilī abbē[šu]*, “creator of [his] divine (fore)fathers.”²⁹ This statement implies that Marduk was his own ancestor.³⁰ We are confronted here with a rather sophisticated concept of divine self-creation, a *topos* explicitly invoked in K 5413a, a Sennacherib inscription that calls Aššur (written an-šár) *bānû ramānišu* “the one who created himself.”³¹ In light of this epithet and other evidence for an intensive Assyro-Babylonian discourse on divine self-conception in Late Assyrian times,³² the rewriting of *Enūma eliš* undertaken on behalf of Sennacherib should be regarded as an enterprise of significant theological sophistication rather than an awkward narrative failure.

Other Babylonian texts celebrating Marduk were reworked by Sennacherib’s scribes as well. Inscriptions engraved in honor of Marduk and his wife Zarpanītu on a bed and a throne dedicated to these deities were replaced by texts that were similar, but composed in celebration of Aššur and his wife Mullissu, after Sennacherib’s troops had brought the divine furniture from Babylon to Assur.³³ And a Sumerian Šu’ila prayer in honor of Aššur that was based on a corresponding prayer celebrating Marduk shows that Babylonian cultic texts were likewise adapted to the new Aššur theology during Sennacherib’s reign.³⁴

Some key elements of Sennacherib’s religious reform were short-lived. His successor Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE) started to rebuild Babylon and to establish a new balance of power between Aššur and Marduk, a policy that remained essentially unchallenged during the reign of his son Assurbanipal (669 – ca. 630 BCE), at least during the better documented first half of his reign. The Assyrian adaptation of *Enūma eliš* may still have been copied during this time, and is apparently quoted in a letter written between 671 and 669 BCE,³⁵ but the traditional Babylonian version became again the predominant reference text in Assyria. A famous commentary on tablet seven of the epic, known from three manuscripts from Assurbanipal’s libraries at Nineveh, tries to establish speculative links between Marduk’s fifty names and the epithets that follow,³⁶ and it is revealing that the theology informing these commentarial musings is completely in line with Babylonian ideas, displaying not even the slightest traces of Assyrian influence.

Some of Esarhaddon’s and Ashurbanipal’s scholars, however, had not lost their aspirations to point out the relevance the epic possessed for the Assyrian

world view, and to address the challenges it presented to an Assyrian audience. Another commentary on *Enūma eliš*, K 4657+, which was likewise found among the tablets from Ashurbanipal's library in Nineveh and is still mostly unpublished,³⁷ provides in at least two cases what seems to amount to an *interpretatio assyriaca* of certain lines of the text. The first relevant entry identifies Marduk's nurse, who remains unnamed in *Enūma eliš*, as Ištar of Nineveh:³⁸

obv. 7' [..... *ta-ri-tu i*] *t-tar-ru-šu pul-ḥa-ti uš-ma-al-^rli^r* [x x x x x x x
Ištar ša / Bēlet]-*ni-nú-a*^{ki}

[... “The nurse] who raised him endowed him well with terrifying splendor” (quotation from *Enūma eliš* I 86) — [*The nurse in question is Ištar of*] Ninive (or: [Bēlet]-Ninua).

The idea that Ištar of Nineveh was Marduk's nurse is also expressed in two other theological treatises from Assyria: the Marduk Ordeal (Livingstone 1989, no. 34), which explains, in l. 33,³⁹ that milk was being “milked” before Ištar of Nineveh during the *Akītu* festival because “she had brought him (*scil.*, Bēl) up,” and the cultic commentary KAR 307 (Livingstone 1989, no. 39), which calls Ištar of Durna (= Nineveh) the “wet-nurse” (*mušēniqtu*) of Bēl (obv. 19).

The second commentary entry in K 4657+ that shows Assyrianizing tendencies is less straightforward. It mentions the god Zababa, who had been made the Assyrian counterpart of Nabû during the reign of Sennacherib,⁴⁰ in an entry on an *Enūma eliš* passage about gifts Marduk received from the other gods. These gifts are linked in the commentary to ritual acts that took place during the *Akītu* festival:

rev. 6' [.....] x [di]ngir-meš *maḥ-ri-šu^r li^r-še-ri-bu kàd-ra-šu-un qí-šá-a-tú šá ina^{iti} bára ta ud 6-kám en ud 12-kám sum-na mu^d za-ba₄-ba₄ ki-i dug₄-ga*

[.....] ... “The gods shall bring in their gifts before him” (quotation from *Enūma eliš* VII 110) — the presents given (to him) in the month of *Nisannu* from the sixth to the twelfth day are related to Zababa, as is said.

As pointed out by Dirven,⁴¹ the Late Babylonian religious text BM 32654 + 38193⁴² claims that the gods brought their presents on the sixth day of the

Babylonian *Akītu* festival, not to Marduk, but to his son Nabû (vi [col. D] 4 and 10). This suggests that the commentary entry may have been based on an Assyrian re-interpretation of an idea originally advanced by Babylonian theologians, namely that it was Marduk's son and not Marduk himself who received the gifts provided by the other gods.

The ideological agenda of K 4657+ is not completely transparent, but it seems the commentary tried to integrate the panthea of Assyria and Babylonia in a spirit of harmony and reconciliation. A third Assyrian commentary, the so-called “Marduk Ordeal,” has a very different goal: to provide a polemical, one might even say heretical re-reading of Babylonian Marduk theology. The “Marduk Ordeal” is known from a Late Assyrian version from Assur and another from Nineveh, both most recently edited by Livingstone.⁴³ The text probably originates in the reign of Sennacherib, but remained in use among scholars who lived during the period of his successors.⁴⁴ Focusing on the *Akītu* festival, the “Marduk Ordeal” mentions *Enūma eliš* only occasionally, but with rather startling conclusions. Among other things, it claims that the epic concerns, not the exaltation, but rather the imprisonment of Marduk:

e-nu-ma e-liš ša da-bi-bu-u-ni ina igi ^den ina ^{iti}bāra i-za-mur-ú-ni ina ugu ša ša-bit-u-ni [šu-ú]

Enūma eliš, which is recited and chanted before Bēl (= Marduk) in the month of *Nisannu*, is about his imprisonment.⁴⁵

To corroborate this statement, which is hardly supported by the epic itself, the commentator reads many of the ritual activities that took place during the Babylonian *Akītu* festival as references to a humiliating ordeal Marduk had to endure. It seems the main goal of the Ordeal text was to erase the idea that the festival mirrored the myth outlined in *Enūma eliš* by replacing this myth with an artificial new one that dealt with Marduk's captivity. A good example of the text's drastic re-interpretation of the ritual acts performed during the *Akītu* celebrations is an entry about the red garments put on the statue of Marduk during the *Akītu* procession. In the eyes of the commentator, these garments represented the bloody wounds Marduk received during his trial:

[ta-ḥap-šu] ša ina ki-ta-šú ^{s[ig]}tab-ri-bu ša lab-bu-šu-ni mi-iḫ-ši ša maḥ-ḥu-šu-ni šú-nu ina múd-meš-šú [šar-pu(?)]

[The cloth] beneath him (Marduk), and the red wool with which he is

clothed, are the blows with which he was struck. They are [*dyed*] with his blood.⁴⁶

This interpretation is, obviously, not in line with the meaning Babylonian (or pro-Babylonian Assyrian) theologians would have ascribed to the red color of the divine garments. For them, the color would probably have represented Marduk's great powers.⁴⁷

Interestingly, the Ordeal text seems to ignore the new Assyrian version of *Enūma eliš*. Unlike the latter, it uses the writing ^daš-šur, and not an-šár, when it refers to the god Aššur.⁴⁸ The only putative exception occurs in a passage that emphasizes “Anšar's” genealogical precedence over the much younger Marduk:

šu-u ina šà e-nu-ma e-liš iq-ṛṭi-bi¹ ki-i an-e ki-tim la ib-ba-nu-ni an-šár it-[tab-ši] / ki-i uru u é ib-šu-u-ni šu-ú it-tab-ši

It is said in *Enūma eliš*: When heaven and earth were not created, Anšar came into being. (Only) when city and temple (already) existed, did he (Marduk) come into being.⁴⁹

Yet in this paraphrase of the opening section of *Enūma eliš*, the reference may well be to Anšar the older god alone, and not also to the Assyrian god Aššur.⁵⁰ It seems, then, that the Assyrian version of *Enūma eliš* and the “Marduk Ordeal” are not the products of a synchronized Assyrian assault on traditional Marduk theology, but rather independent and uncoordinated attempts to undermine it.

What is beyond doubt is that the “Marduk Ordeal” was conceived as a true propaganda text. Its final passage makes it abundantly clear that it was meant for wide distribution:

man-nu ša ṭup-pu an-ni-u e-mar-ra-qu-u-ni ... / ù em-mar-u-ni a-na ša la ú-du-u-ni la ú-šá-áš-mu-u-ni / ^daš-šur ^d30 ^dutu ^diškur ù ^den ^dAG / uzu-meš-šú ina pi-i ša kal-bi liš-ku-nu

Whoever crushes this tablet ... or reads it but does not inform those who do not know it, may Aššur, Sîn, Šamaš, Adad, and Bēl and Nabû put his flesh in the mouth of a dog.⁵¹

This longing for a large audience is all the more remarkable when we consider that cultic commentaries from the Late Assyrian period, on which the “Marduk Ordeal” was modeled, were otherwise often labeled as secret knowledge.⁵²

V. The “Primeval History” of the Hebrew Bible: Another counter-text

The “Marduk Ordeal” stands at the beginning of an historical era that is characterized by highly intensified religious polemics. The most significant testimony to this new trend of theological combativeness is the Hebrew Bible with its numerous invectives against the futility of religious practices not sanctioned by the god of Israel.⁵³ Some of the horror the Biblical authors express with regard to pagan religion must have had its roots in the sixth century BCE, when a large part of the Judean elite, deported from its homeland by Nebuchadnezzar II, lived in exile in Babylon.

By this time, the political situation in Mesopotamia had once again quite dramatically changed. Babylonia, risen from the ashes, had succeeded the Assyrian empire as the most powerful state of the region, and the “Chaldaean” kings now in office had started to reconstruct the temples of Babylon on a massive scale. *Enūma eliš* seems to have served as a cornerstone of the religious ideology on which the new Neo-Babylonian empire was built. It was widely read in sixth century Babylonia, most importantly in school,⁵⁴ and regularly recited on the occasion of the large religious festivals. Since cuneiform ration lists document that members of the Judean royal family were held hostage in Babylon under rather favorable conditions and in immediate proximity to the Marduk temple, it can hardly be doubted that some key Judean deportees were confronted with the epic during their stay at the rivers of Babylon.⁵⁵ Most likely, despite the misgivings of some scholars,⁵⁶ their encounter with the text accounts for some rather striking parallels between passages in *Enūma eliš* and episodes in the Bible, especially the so-called “Primeval History” in Genesis 1 - 11:9. The most conspicuous correspondences can be found in the creation story at the beginning of the Primeval History, in Gen. 1 - 2:3, and in the story of the Tower of Babel in Gen. 11:1-9, the episode that concludes the Primeval History.⁵⁷ The parallels concern not only the contents but also the overall arrangement of the texts. The *Enūma eliš* episodes corresponding to the two aforementioned Biblical stories — the creation account in *Enūma eliš* I 1-20 and the description of the building of Babylon in *Enūma eliš* VI 39-81 — frame the epic in a way that resembles quite closely the structure of Genesis 1-11.⁵⁸

Because a detailed and comprehensive discussion of the parallels is beyond the scope of this paper, I must limit myself to juxtaposing portions from the two key episodes referred to above, highlighting correspondences in bold type, and providing some brief thoughts on them. The introductory lines of *Enūma eliš* and Genesis are the first passages to be investigated here:

<i>Enūma eliš</i> I 1-9	Gen. 1:1-3
<p>When on high no name was given to heaven, / Nor below was the (nether)world called by name / Apsû was the first (rēšû), their progenitor, / And Tiamat (i. e., the sea), (<i>endowed with</i>) creative spirit (<i>mummu</i>), was she who bore them all. / They were mingling their waters together / Then were the gods formed within them.⁵⁹</p>	<p>In the beginning (<i>b^e-rēšit</i>)⁶⁰ (when) god created the heavens and the earth, (but) the earth was (still) a formless void and darkness covered the face of the sea (or: the deep) (T^ehôm), and God's spirit (<i>rû^ah</i>) (or: a wind from god) swept over the face of the waters, then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.⁶¹</p>

Obviously, the Biblical passage reproduced here, and the whole first creation account of Genesis, is not simply a paraphrase of *Enūma eliš*; it rather represents yet another counter-text.⁶² In the Biblical creation story, an almighty male god, whose spirit hovers over the primeval waters, actively creates the world, while in *Enūma eliš*, a female “monster” embodying the sea is at the beginning of an initially rather passive process of cosmic unfolding — even though the sea-monster in question is apparently also endowed with some sort of a spirit.⁶³ It is only at the end of the story, after the monster, Tiamat, has been defeated, that a male deity, Marduk, creates from the monster’s corpse the world as we know it and emerges as its omnipotent ruler. And yet, despite these differences, the creation account in Genesis 1 - 2:3, with its reference to *T^ehôm* (< Tiamat?), its focus on naming and separating, and its acknowledgement, in Gen. 1:14, that the heavenly bodies can serve as “signs” (*’ōtōt*),⁶⁴ looks like a demythologized and significantly abbreviated version of *Enūma eliš*. Even the sequence of events in Gen. 1:26 - 2:3, with the creation of human beings being followed by divine rest, has an implicit parallel in the Babylonian epic, which reports how Marduk brought forth the human race to relieve the gods from work. In both traditions, creation is followed by recreation. One wonders, furthermore, if there is not also some relationship between the epic’s seven tablets and the seven days of the Biblical account — despite the fact that the latter obviously also serve as an etiology for the seven-day week and the Shabbat.⁶⁵ And finally, it is worth pointing out that both *Enūma eliš* and the first creation account of the Bible promote visions of a creation that is fully successful, necessitating the emergence of texts that explain how failure and destruction came into the world. The Erra epic, as we have seen, does this for a Mesopotamian audience, while the second creation account in the Primeval History (Gen. 2:4 – 3), with its focus on the fall of man, helps the reader of the Bible to understand how divinely ordained and executed creation could have resulted in a world less than perfect.⁶⁶

The building of Babylon according to *Enūma eliš* and the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 are the second set of texts to be compared here:

<i>Enūma eliš</i> VI 59-73	Gen. 11:1-9
The Anunna gods set to with hoes, / One (full) year they made its bricks , / When the second year came, / They raised the head of Esagil (i. e., “house which raises (its) head”), the counterpart to Apsû, / They built the upper Ziqqurrat of Apsû ... / After they had done the work of Esagil ... / The Lord, on the Exalted Dais, which they built as his dwelling, / Seated the gods his fathers for a banquet, / “This is Babylon (i. e., “ gate of the gods ”), your place of dwelling. / Take your pleasure there, <i>seat yourself</i> in its delights!” ⁶⁷	Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And ... they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar (Babylonia) and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.” ... Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its tops in the heaven. ” ... (But) the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore, it was called Babel , because there the Lord confused (Hebr. <i>bālal</i>) the language of all the earth; and from there, the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the earth.

The similarities between the two passages are fairly obvious,⁶⁸ and the fact that *Enūma eliš* VI 60-62 is also alluded to in an inscription of Esarhaddon⁶⁹ demonstrates that this episode of the epic was quite familiar to ancient audiences. Yet the ideological premises underlying the Babylonian epic are again completely reversed in the Biblical account. *Enūma eliš* presents Babylon as the center of the world, the place where all the gods come together, under the benevolent but absolute rule of Marduk, to build the city in which they are to dwell.⁷⁰ The Bible transfers this account from the divine to the human sphere, and turns its centripetal message into a centrifugal one. In Genesis, Babylon and its tower, instead of being symbols of unification, are presented as archetypal monuments of a hubris that is punished by God with the dissipation of the people and the confusion of tongues. The name of Babylon, explained in *Enūma eliš* as *bāb ilī* “gate of the gods,” is re-interpreted in the Biblical story, by deriving it from the Hebrew verb *bālal* “to mix,” as a reference to the linguistic muddle that makes communication between people from different lands difficult.⁷¹ The Babylonian myth and its agenda of legitimizing political and religious unity under the banner of Marduk are thus thoroughly deconstructed.⁷²

The Judean exiles must also have witnessed how the statues of Nabû and Marduk were carried around in triumphant procession during the Babylonian *Akitu* festival. Such processions are ridiculed in Isaiah 46:1-2:⁷³

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops, their idols are on beasts and cattle; these things you carry are loaded as burdens on weary animals. They stoop, they bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity.

s^ebī, the Hebrew term for “captivity,” refers to deportations and is clearly employed here to provide an implicit reference to the deportation of the Judeans by Nebuchadnezzar II. The term may, however, also allude to the various occasions, some remembered in literary texts, when the statue of Marduk had been “godnapped” by foreign rulers.⁷⁴ The remarks about Bel “bowing down” bring to mind Babylonian texts, most recently discussed by Sallaberger,⁷⁵ that interpret the various movements the Marduk statue made during processions as ominous signs.⁷⁶ The polemical tone of the whole passage is highly reminiscent of the Assyrian “Marduk Ordeal,” and it is remarkable that both texts re-interpret ritual activities associated with the *Akītu* festival by claiming that they refer to some sort of captivity of Bēl-Marduk.

VI. *Enūma eliš* in Late Babylonian times: repression and remembrance

A negative attitude towards *Enūma eliš* seems to have prevailed not only among the Judean exiles, but also in some of Babylon’s rival cities in the Mesopotamian south. In Uruk, several manuscripts of the epic were found in layers dating to the sixth century BCE, when Uruk was under Chaldaean rule.⁷⁷ Yet when the Chaldaean empire came to an end after the Persian conquest in 539 BCE, the priests and scholars of Uruk quickly stopped studying the text. This is indicated by the fact that there are no Uruk manuscripts of the epic from the Late Babylonian period, a lack that can hardly be attributed to the chances of discovery in light of the number of literary and scholarly texts from both the Achaemenid and Seleucid periods that have been unearthed in Uruk. The dismissive attitude shown by the *literati* of Uruk towards *Enūma eliš* corresponds to changes in the city’s onomasticon. In the post-Chaldaean era, fewer and fewer names attested in documents from Uruk include the theophorous elements “Marduk,” “Bēl,” and “Nabû.”⁷⁸ There is, furthermore, clear evidence that Marduk and Nabû were of little importance in the cults practiced in Uruk during the Seleucid period.⁷⁹

Enūma eliš and the theology exalting Marduk of Babylon began to be repressed in Uruk during a period when a number of important families originating in Babylon were expelled from the city.⁸⁰ This eviction of the Babylon elite can be regarded as the socio-political correlate of the ideological

and religious changes that took place in Uruk in the fifth century BCE. It may well be that elite families had to leave Uruk because the new Achaemenid overlords wished “to break the Babylon-centered polity which had survived the conquest of the Babylonian empire by Cyrus” in the wake of the rebellion against Xerxes in the early years of his reign.⁸¹ But it is certainly also true that many members of the indigenous families of Uruk approved of the removal of their former fellow citizens, and that they were glad to be no longer required to endorse their vision of a predominance of Babylon, which had most probably offended their local pride.

The dislike some Urukians felt towards Babylon may also have informed a Late Babylonian lament that seems to blame Marduk for having killed Ištar’s youthful lover Tammuz, a deity closely connected with Uruk.⁸² The event is linked to various horrors of war. The beginning and the end of the text read:

¹*mar-ša-a-tú unug^{ki} ...*²*unug^{ki}-a-a-i-tum tab-ku* ²³*ha-mi-ru dam la-*
le-e i-te-<ek>-ma-ni ^den

You are grieved, Uruk. ... The goddess of Uruk wept. “Bēl has deprived me of my spouse, the husband in whom I delighted.”

The theological background of this charge against Bēl-Marduk is not completely transparent. In traditional accounts such as “Ištar’s Descent,” it was the goddess Ištar herself who bore responsibility for Tammuz being sent to the netherworld. There were, however, traditions that identified Tiamat, Marduk’s main adversary in *Enūma eliš*, with Ištar, Uruk’s main goddess,⁸³ while Tammuz and Qingu, Tiamat’s consort and another of Marduk’s victims in the epic, are both among the “defeated gods” (*ilāni kišitti*) mentioned in Late Babylonian texts related to the ritual for covering a kettle-drum;⁸⁴ it was therefore easy to identify them as well. In light of such syncretisms, it seems feasible that the author of the lament drew on, but also drastically transformed and inverted, the basic plot of *Enūma eliš*.⁸⁵

* * *

In Babylon, *Enūma eliš* had a fate quite different from what happened to the text in Uruk. During the Chaldaean period, the religious ideology advanced in the epic was in almost complete harmony with the political realities of the times. The Neo-Babylonian dynasty ruled virtually everywhere in the ancient Near

East, just as Marduk, in *Enūma eliš*, ruled over all the gods. And yet, there existed, probably from fairly early on, a certain tension between the epic's focus on Marduk on one hand, and the ever increasing popularity of the god Nabû, Marduk's son, on the other. Even though nowhere mentioned in *Enūma eliš*, Nabû played an important role in the ritual acts performed during the Babylonian *Akitu* festival, and a number of Late Babylonian texts feature Nabû, and not Marduk, as the true vanquisher of Tiamat.⁸⁶ There was even a tradition, known from a tablet originally stored in the Ezida temple in Borsippa, Nabû's main sanctuary, according to which it was Nabû, in his warrior-like Ninurta-aspect, who resided in Babylon's *Akitu* house.⁸⁷

The growing devotion towards Nabû, a first millennium BCE phenomenon attested both in Assyria and Babylonia, deserves further study. It is, however, of limited concern for this article, since Nabû's rise was probably not immediately caused by political factors. It rather sprang from a popular yearning to worship a younger god, a divine son.⁸⁸ To be sure, this is exactly the position Marduk holds in *Enūma eliš*. But it seems Marduk had aged together with the text, he had become, over time, a little bit too much like Enlil, the immobile and remote archetypal king of the Mesopotamian pantheon, and had lost his Ninurta-like qualities of a dynamic and approachable youthful deity. All this may have contributed to the increasing popularity of Nabû.

Marduk was also very much a god associated with essentially only one specific place, the city of Babylon, which made him a rather odd patron deity for an empire that strove to expand its borders in all directions. The religious reform implemented by Nabonidus (555-539 BCE), the last independent Babylonian king, may well have had its roots in exactly this deficiency. By relegating Marduk to second rank and promoting instead the moon-god Sîn, a deity that was visible and approachable everywhere, Nabonidus may have tried to integrate the numerous people ruled by the Babylonians in a way more appealing to them.⁸⁹

Yet despite such rifts, *Enūma eliš*, in its canonical version, continued to be recited in Babylon's official cult, and to be faithfully studied in its schools, not only during the Chaldaean period but also afterwards. The discovery, in Babylon, of several manuscripts of the epic dating to the final centuries of cuneiform civilization demonstrates that the epic remained popular in Babylon until very late times.⁹⁰

The epic is also touched on, even though not referred to by its name, in the *Babyloniaca* of the Babylonian priest Berossus, who wrote this Greek account of Babylonian history at the beginning of the Seleucid period.⁹¹ Berossus gives a

detailed description of Tiamat, called by him “Omorka,” and of the host of monsters accompanying her, and he reports how Bēl killed her and used her body to create heaven and earth. All of this is very much in line with the *Enūma eliš* we know. However, at the very end of his narrative, Berossus introduces a rather strange motif, not to be found in the canonical version of the text:

When all had been thus gathered together (into a chaotic mass), Bel rose up and split the woman in two. One half he made earth and the other sky; and he destroyed the creatures inside her. But this, he says, is to talk about nature allegorically (namely that when) everything consisted of moisture and creatures came into existence in it, this god took off his own head and the other gods (gathered up) the blood with earth and formed men. For this reason men are intelligent and have a share of divine wisdom.⁹²

It may be that this passage is corrupt, and that Berossus had originally referred to the blood of Qingu, and not of Marduk. It cannot be excluded, however, that there really was a significantly revised version of the epic in which Marduk sacrificed himself to create human beings. If this were the case, the version in question would be oddly reminiscent of the Assyrian “Marduk Ordeal,” which presents a suffering Marduk as well,⁹³ and it would, in an equally odd way, foreshadow the Christian idea that “the blood of Jesus ... cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).⁹⁴

VII. The late reception of *Enūma eliš* outside Babylonia

Revised versions of *Enūma eliš* seem to have been in use in various ancient cities outside Babylonia until remarkably late times. The evidence for this does not come from actual manuscripts of the epic, but from archaeological remains, stone inscriptions, and references in secondary sources.

In the Syrian desert town of Palmyra, where both Bēl and Nabû were worshipped in temples of their own, a bas-relief from the first century AD seems to depict a battle fought by Bēl-Marduk and his son Nabû against Tiamat. The relief shows two male deities, one on horseback and the other on a chariot, as they attack a female monster. The deities are accompanied by various local gods, which suggests that the cultic legend behind the image had been a version of *Enūma eliš* that had been adapted to the specific needs of the citizens of Palmyra.⁹⁵

Fig. 1: The Palmyra bas-relief (from Dirven 1997, 98). According to Dirven, it depicts Bēl (on the left, in a chariot) and Nabû (on horseback) attacking Tiamat.

Aramaic inscriptions from Assur from the late second and early third century CE document that Aššur and his wife Šerua continued to be worshipped in this city with particular fervor during the traditional days of the *Akītu* festival in the month of *Nisannu*, suggesting, but of course not proving, that some version of *Enūma eliš*, perhaps now in Aramaic, was still in use in Assur during this time. And various sources mention that as late as AD 500, Bēl and Nabû were honored on the eighth day of *Nisannu* in the city of Edessa, on the occasion of a festival “at which the pagan myths used to be recited,” a remark that might very well refer to some sort of reading from a late version of *Enūma eliš*.⁹⁶

The Palmyra relief, the evidence for the *Nisannu* festivities in Edessa, and — if the arguments advanced in this article apply — the Primeval History of the Hebrew Bible demonstrate that the story of the great battle between Marduk and Tiamat left rather deep traces not only in Mesopotamia, but also in more Western traditions. It is difficult to assess whether it also influenced the Greek succession myths told by Hesiod, or certain verses in Homer’s *Iliad*,⁹⁷ an idea first established by none other than the British Prime Minister William Gladstone.⁹⁸ There is no doubt, however, that some later classical authors, very late ones, in fact, knew *Enūma eliš* remarkably well. The Neo-Platonic philosopher Damascius, who was born around AD 460 in Damascus, gives us a remarkably accurate description of the beginning of the epic in his *Treatise of the First Principles*:

Among the Barbarians, the Babylonians seem to be silent on the unifying principle of the universe and pose two principles, Thaute

[Tiamat] and Apasôn [Apsû], considering Apasôn as the husband of Thaute, whom they call mother of the gods. From Apasôn and Thaute has been engendered, they say, an only child, Môümis [Mummu], who is, I think, the intelligible world produced from the two principles. Then, from the same, another generation proceeded, Dache [Laḥamu] and Dachus [Laḥmu], then, from the same, a third one again, Kissare [Kišar] and Assoros [Anšar], from whom were born three gods, Anos [An], Illinos [Enlil], and Aos [Ea]. Finally, from Aos and Dauke [Damkina] a son was born, Belos [Bēl-Marduk], who, they say, is the demiurge.⁹⁹

While there are some small deviations (note, for instance, the reference to Anu, Enlil, and Ea), this account is remarkably close to the “theogony” described in *Enūma eliš* I 1-88, even though it provides an allegorical reading that is inspired by Neo-Platonic ideas.¹⁰⁰ Damascius is said to have visited the great philosophical centers of Syria before going to Athens, where he became the last director of the Platonic School,¹⁰¹ and it may well be that it was in these Syrian cities that he learnt most of what he knew about the Babylonian epic.¹⁰² At the end of his life, after the Platonic School had been closed in AD 529, Damascius is believed to have moved to Ḥarrān, where Neo-Platonic ideas seem to have thrived until the tenth century CE. It cannot be excluded, even though there is no specific proof, that the story told in *Enūma eliš* was still known in Ḥarrān towards the end of this period. At that time, however, it would have been studied by a small circle of marginalized philosophers only, and no political agenda would have shaped the understanding of the text any more.

VIII. Conclusion

The Babylonian epic of creation was more than a religious treatise about the origins of the world; it was also a text that could trigger deeply felt political passions. War and peace, chaos and order, occupation and independence, were the factors that determined to a significant extent how the people of the ancient world read it and adapted it to new political situations. The epic was used again and again, both in Babylonia and abroad, to express, legitimize, or delegitimize ideas of absolute power, divine as well as human. To call *Enūma eliš* a Babylonian Bible may be somewhat anachronistic, but if one considers both its contents and the fervent discourse it elicited, there is no other Mesopotamian text better suited to bear such an epithet. In the course of its history, a great variety of hermeneutical strategies were applied to the text to adjust it to new

religious viewpoints and political needs. The epic was interpreted, rewritten, paraphrased, and repressed, and it provoked the creation of several counter-texts. The most important one of those was the Primeval History of the Hebrew Bible, which became eventually the target of its own counter-texts: the beginning of the Gospel of John, which reinterprets the first line of Genesis by claiming that “in the beginning was the Word (*logos*),”¹⁰³ and the story in the Acts of the Apostles on how, at Pentecost, God put a temporary end to the confusion of tongues. It is certainly not by chance that this account mentions, among others, the Medes, the Elamites, and the people of Mesopotamia (Acts 2:9-11).¹⁰⁴

Notes

*The present article is a revised and expanded version of the lecture I gave during the 19th World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions in Tokyo in the March of 2005. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Akio Tsukimoto for inviting me to the conference, a venue that gave me a chance to experience the shift in perspective that derives from looking at Mesopotamia as the “ancient Near West.” I am also most grateful to Daisuke Shibata for facilitating my travels and chaperoning me during my stay in Japan, and for the fruitful discussions we had. To Kathryn Slanski I am indebted for her willingness to read this paper and provide a number of critical suggestions. Another version of the paper, which focuses more on the hermeneutical and less on the political dimensions of the history of the Babylonian epic of creation, will appear as chapter 11 in my forthcoming study of Mesopotamian text commentaries, which is based on my 2007 Heidelberg Habilitationsschrift “Origins of Interpretation: An Introduction to Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries.”

¹ See, for example, their joint essay on the myth of the Divine Child and the mysteries of Eleusis (Jung and Kerényi 1949).

² For details, see Goody 1968, 33.

³ For a discussion of how literacy affects the cultural identity of ancient societies, see Assmann 1992, 87-129.

⁴ No modern critical edition of the text is available. The most recent “pedagogical” edition, which is supplied with a French translation, is Talon 2005, a book that should be used together with the review article by Borger (2008). For a recent translation into English, see Foster 2005, 436-486. My own translations are to some extent based on Foster’s, but go their own ways wherever I understand the text differently. Another important new translation is Lambert 2008, 37-59. A comprehensive bibliography for *Enūma eliš*, compiled by John Jacobs for his 2006 Yale MA thesis on the epic, will hopefully be published soon.

⁵ Borger (2008, 272-273) has pointed out that Tiamat’s name should rather be rendered as *Tiāmtu*. “Tiamat,” however, is so well established that I continue to use it here.

⁶ For details and additional sources used by the author of the text, see Lambert 1986. Possible West Semitic precursors of the motif of a heroic god battling the sea are discussed by Durand 1993.

⁷ A new edition of the text can be found in Linssen 2004, 215-237. For a discussion of what happened in the course of the festival, see *ibid.*, 78-86, as well as Black 1981 and Zgoll 2006.

⁸ Thus most recently Dalley 1997.

⁹ For such a late dating of the text, see, for example, Abusch 1999, 547-548. Abusch argues that the epic was not written when Babylon was strong but rather in a phase when it was under political pressure and needed to reassert its claims for greatness. Grammatical arguments for a late date of the text are provided by Schott 1926, 123 n. 28. See also Dietrich 2006.

¹⁰ This is the date suggested by Lambert 1997a, 77 for some of the Assur manuscripts.

- ¹¹ S. M. Maul has suggested that the *Enūma eliš* manuscript KAR 317 can be dated to the turn from the second to the first millennium (see George 2005-06, 87 n. 15). Because both Lambert's and Maul's arguments are based on paleography and not on explicit date formulas, there remains much uncertainty.
- ¹² For detailed arguments for such a scenario, see Lambert 1964.
- ¹³ For the political history of Nebuchadnezzar I's reign, see Brinkman 1968, 104-115.
- ¹⁴ For an edition of this text, now slightly outdated, see Cagni 1969. A new English translation and references to additional manuscripts can be found in Foster 2005, 880-911.
- ¹⁵ See van Dijk 1962, 44-45.
- ¹⁶ Oppenheim 1977, 267-268.
- ¹⁷ Von Soden 1971, 255-256.
- ¹⁸ Gössmann 1958, 85-90. The date suggested by Gössmann is improbable because the text of the Erra epic seems to be alluded to in an inscription from the reign of the Babylonian ruler Marduk-aplu-iddina II from the time of Sennacherib's predecessor Sargon II; see Frame 1995, 136.
- ¹⁹ See Lambert 1957-58, 396-400.
- ²⁰ On the astronomical and astrological dimensions of the *Erra* epic, and their relationship with *Enūma eliš*, see now Cooley 2008.
- ²¹ See, for example, Fuchs 1994, 38, l. 39 (cf. *Enūma eliš* III 35) and 71, l. 82 (cf. *Enūma eliš* V 9).
- ²² See Weissert 1997 and Frahm 1997, 86, 254, 279.
- ²³ For Sennacherib's religious reform, see Frahm 1997, 282-288 and (with more details but often rather different conclusions) Vera Chamaza 2002, 71-167. For an earlier assessment, see Machinist 1984-85.
- ²⁴ See Lambert 1997a. None of the tablets inscribed with the Assyrian version of *Enūma eliš* includes a date formula, which means that their origin from the reign of Sennacherib remains conjectural. That Sennacherib was behind the new version of the text is, however, very probable. K 1356, a clay tablet that describes the images and reproduces the texts adorning the doors of Sennacherib's new *Akitu* house in Assur, demonstrates that the mythologem of Aššur/Anšar confronting Tiamat does go back to the time of Sennacherib and was ritually enacted during the later years of his reign (see Pongratz-Leisten 1994, 207-209, Frahm 1997, 222-224).
- ²⁵ In fact, the earliest attestation of this writing can be found in an inscription on a bead from the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I (see Frahm 1997, 283, with bibliography), but this is an isolated instance.
- ²⁶ This manuscript represents tablet III of the Assyrian version of *Enūma eliš*.
- ²⁷ According to Lambert (1997a, 79), "the use of the signs an.šár for Ashur put the whole plot of the myth in confusion."
- ²⁸ For this and the following, see also Frahm 1997, 284-285.
- ²⁹ *ba-an dingir-meš ad-meš-[šu]*. Foster 2005, 481 translates "fairest(?) of the gods, [his] fathers," apparently assuming that *ba-an* is a verbal adjective derived from *banû* II "to be(come) good, beautiful," and not the active participle of *banû* IV "to create." Such an understanding poses significant grammatical problems and seems therefore unlikely.
- ³⁰ Note that Marduk receives the name of his own father, Ea, in *Enūma eliš* VII 140, and the name of Mummu, the force that drove the creation process forward from the very beginning, in VII 86. With regard to the relationship between Marduk and Anšar, it is interesting that KAR 142, an explanatory text on groups of *esoterica* organized in heptads, claims in i 1 that Marduk's name was An-šár when he sojourned in his cella. KAR 142 is edited in Pongratz-Leisten 1994, 221-227.
- ³¹ K 5413a (= Luckenbill 1924, 149) addresses Aššur (an-šár) in l. 1 as *šar kiššat ilāni bānû ramānišu ab ilāni* "king of all the gods, the one who created himself, father of the gods," assigning to him, in accordance with Sennacherib's reform theology, both political and genealogical primacy. For a discussion of Aššur in his new role as *creator absolutus*, see Vera

- Chamaza 2002, 146.
- ³² A more elaborate discussion of this matter will be included in my forthcoming study on Mesopotamian text commentaries.
- ³³ See Frahm 1997, 225-226. On the travels of Marduk's divine bed, see also Porter 2002.
- ³⁴ See Maul 1998, text F. It should be noted that there is yet no proof that the prayer was recited in Assur on the eleventh day of the *Akitu* festival. As pointed out to me by Daisuke Shibata, the respective restoration in Maul's edition is probably incorrect. The Babylonian version of the prayer, however, was definitely used on this day.
- ³⁵ The letter in question, ABL 1336 (Parpola 1993, no. 365), was probably written by Mār-Issar, Esarhaddon's "agent" in Babylonia. In obv. 11'-12', it reads: [...] *-ia ma-a DIŠ an-šár ša tak-lu-ka / [napištašu gi-mi]l-ma* "[...] ... as follows: O An-šár, spare [the life] of the one who puts his trust in you." This seems to be a quote from *Enūma eliš* IV 17, but with an-šár replacing *bēlu* "lord," a title of Marduk (see Lambert 1997a). In the lines preceding the quote, the letter seems to refer to a dream in which the sender saw the king sitting on his throne and dealing with tablets placed before him on a table, but due to massive breaks, it is impossible to fully grasp the context.
- ³⁶ For an edition of the two main manuscripts of the commentary, see Bottéro 1977. The third manuscript is BM 134499, an unpublished fragment identified as a commentary to *Enūma eliš* VII in Lambert and Millard 1968, 73 and transliterated by me in 1998. The commentary uses the hermeneutical techniques of synonymy, homonymy, and etymology.
- ³⁷ The commentary, K 4657 + K 7038 + K 9427 + K 9911 + K 10008 + K 12102 + K 16818 + Sm 747, transliterated by me in 1998, has been assembled from numerous small fragments; most of the joins seem to go back to Lambert. The only fragment published in handcopy is Sm 747 (CT 13, 32). For a few quotations from the commentary, see Lambert 1997b, 53 and Da Riva and Frahm 1999-2000, 173-174, 181-82.
- ³⁸ For remarks on the cult Ištar of Nineveh received in Babylon, see Da Riva and Frahm 1999-2000, 169-182.
- ³⁹ See also Livingstone 1989, no. 35, l. 39.
- ⁴⁰ Kataja and Whiting 1995, no. 87 mentions an oracular query probably to be dated to the reign of Sennacherib that had asked if Zababa was the son of Aššur. The request received a positive response, which put Zababa into the same position that Nabû held with regard to Marduk in Babylon. See Deller and Donbaz 1987, 226-228 and Frahm 1997, 240-241, 286-287.
- ⁴¹ Dirven 1997, 112, especially n. 64.
- ⁴² For a partial publication of this text, see Pinches 1908.
- ⁴³ Livingstone 1989, nos. 34 and 35. There is also a small fragment from Nimrud (GPA 268).
- ⁴⁴ The libraries where the manuscripts were found were still operational during the reign of Assurbanipal. For an overview of the various modern attempts to date the composition of the "Marduk Ordeal" and to interpret the text, see Vera Chamaza 2002, 160-164. In the following, I cannot, due to restrictions of space, fully engage with the various other approaches towards this difficult treatise.
- ⁴⁵ Livingstone 1989, no. 34, l. 34.
- ⁴⁶ Livingstone 1989, no. 34, l. 15.
- ⁴⁷ An apparently pro-Babylonian Assur commentary on "Marduk's Address" (a text recently discussed by Lambert 1999 and Geller 2007, xv) provides indirect evidence for this when it explains the line "(I am) Asalluḫi(-Marduk), who is clothed with splendor (*namrīru*) and filled with fearfulness" as a reference to the red clothes worn by the exorcist (who performed his rituals under the tutelage of Ea and Asalluḫi-Marduk). The commentary entry reads: "*He* (Marduk or some scholar) said (this) with regard to the exorcist, who is equipped with a red *nahlaptu*(?) garment" (A 163, rev.¹ 1-4, see Lambert 1959-60, pl. XXVI). The "Marduk Ordeal" effectively tried to eradicate such conventional theology.
- ⁴⁸ Livingstone 1989, no. 34, ll. 18, 19, 36, 58, 59, 72.
- ⁴⁹ Livingstone 1989, no. 34, ll. 54-55.

- ⁵⁰ For a discussion of the passage, see Frahm 1997, 223-224. Lambert 1997a has argued that ll. 54-55 of the Marduk Ordeal represent an actual quotation from a significantly modified second Assyrian version of *Enūma eliš*, but since no traces of such a version have yet been found, it seems preferable to regard them as a tendentious summary of the beginning of the epic.
- ⁵¹ Livingstone 1989, no. 34, ll. 70-75. The reference to Bēl-Marduk and Nabû in this curse formula comes of course rather unexpected, but does not indicate, in my view, that the Marduk Ordeal is, in the final analysis, a text with a pro-Babylonian message (thus Frymer-Kensky 1983). Marduk had been demoted but not eliminated in the course of Sennacherib's religious reform (see Frahm 1997, 287-88), and since he remained a member of the pantheon, he had to be called upon whenever divine support was needed.
- ⁵² See, for instance, the colophon of KAR 307, another Assyrian cultic commentary (which includes some critical reflections on Babylonian Marduk theology as well); a recent edition of the text can be found in Livingstone 1989, no. 39. See also Livingstone 1989, no. 38.
- ⁵³ For a thought-provoking discussion of this issue, see Assmann 1997, 1-54.
- ⁵⁴ See Gesche 2000, 173-179, 808.
- ⁵⁵ See Weidner 1939 and Pedersén 2005. According to the book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar decided that some of the Judean princes "were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans" (Dan. 1:4), and even though *Daniel* received its final shape at a much later date, there may well be some truth in this statement. Note, furthermore, that the story of "Bel and the Dragon," a Greek addition to the book of Daniel, presupposes a knowledge, on the part of its author, of the conflict between Bēl-Marduk and the dragon-like Tiamat, described in *Enūma eliš*. Certain motifs from *Enūma eliš* seem, furthermore, to have found their way into other Biblical texts as well as later *Midrashim*. Fishbane 2003, 112-31 has pointed out that the verb *kabšan*, which is employed in *Midrash Shohar Tov* in the section on Psalm 93:3 to describe how god defeated the primordial waters, may go back to Akkadian *kabāsu*, used in *Enūma eliš* IV 129 to refer to Marduk "trampling" on the frame of Tiamat.
- ⁵⁶ Thus, Sasson (1980) talks about the "unlikelihood that a Hebrew priest would have access to, or information about, a highly secret account, recounted in the late afternoon, in the holy temple of Marduk, during the Akitu festival" (pp. 214-215 n. 8). In my view, the picture Sasson paints here of the way *Enūma eliš* circulated in sixth century Babylon is not a realistic one. For an equally skeptical assessment of the question of genetic links between the Primeval History and *Enūma eliš*, and additional literature, see Arnold 2009, 29-52. The enormously complex question of the editorial history of the book of Genesis, and the Primeval History in particular, cannot be addressed here, but however far apart their conclusions, few scholars would deny that the latter draws heavily on Mesopotamian models. Hendel 2005 claims that the authors of Genesis 1-11 responded to their encounter with Mesopotamia by using three main strategies: appropriation (for instance, the story of the flood), mimicry (the Nimrod episode), and inversion (the story of the Tower of Babel). These are useful categories, similar to the ones employed in this paper.
- ⁵⁷ Modern scholars following the so-called "documentary hypothesis" ascribe the first of these stories to the priestly author and the second to the Yahwist. There is, unfortunately, no consensus on how to date these sources, even though individual Bible scholars often present their hypotheses on this matter in a rather apodictic manner. The long held opinion that the Yahwist belongs to the pre-Josianic period has become more and more problematic in recent years (see Gertz et al. 2002), and it is therefore possible that both sources include materials assembled during the time of the Babylonian exile.
- ⁵⁸ The fifty names bestowed upon Marduk in tablet VI and VII of the epic have no parallel in the Biblical account, but are, strictly speaking, not part of the narrative. Most Bible scholars claim that the various episodes of the Primeval History were put together long after the exile, yet even if this were the case, *Enūma eliš*, a text that was widely studied all over Western Asia (see below, section VII), may still have provided a model for the structure of Genesis 1-11.
- ⁵⁹ *e-nu-ma e-liš la na-bu-ú ša-ma-mu / šap-liš am-ma-tum šu-ma la zak-rat / ZU.AB-ma reš-tu-ú*

za-ru-šu-un / mu-um-mu Ti-amat mu-al-li-da-at gim-ri-šu-un / a-meš-šu-nu iš-te-niš i-ḫi-qu-ú-ma / ib-ba-nu-ú-ma dingir-dingir qé-reb-šu-un. The translation of this syntactically difficult passage follows, for the most part, Foster 2005, 439; cf. Talon 2001, 266.

- ⁶⁰ For the possible link between *rēštū* in *Enūma eliš* I 3 and *b^e-rēšit* in Gen. 1:1, see Bremmer 2008, 4.
- ⁶¹ The syntax of the Hebrew text is just as difficult as that of its Akkadian counterpart in *Enūma eliš*. My translation is largely, but not exclusively, based on Arnold 2009, 27 (see also Bauks 1997, 310).
- ⁶² The idea that there is some link between Gen. 1 - 2:3 and *Enūma eliš* goes back to Gunkel 1895 and has since then been discussed, and often dismissed (see n. 56), many times. For a detailed recent attempt to explore the ancient Near Eastern background of the very beginning of Genesis (Gen. 1:1-3), with extensive discussions of *Enūma eliš* and many other Mesopotamian and Egyptian creation myths, see Bauks 1997. Bauks is, however, more interested in structural parallels (and differences) between the various traditions than in possible genetic links. Bremmer (2008, 339-345) has suggested that the Ahuramazda theology introduced by the Persian king Darius I (521-486 BCE) had an impact on the first lines of Genesis, but since the parallels adduced by Bremmer are not particularly specific, this stimulating suggestion remains, in my view, less persuasive than the assumption of a link with *Enūma eliš*.
- ⁶³ To my knowledge, the correspondence between *mummu* in *Enūma eliš* I 4 and *rū^ah* in Gen. 1:2 has not yet been discussed in the vast secondary literature on ancient Near Eastern and Biblical creation stories. A detailed justification of why I believe there is a genetic link between *rū^ah* in the Primeval History and *mummu* in the Babylonian epic of creation, of my translation of *Enūma eliš* I 4, and of my understanding of *mummu* in general, will appear in a forthcoming Festschrift article I am currently preparing.
- ⁶⁴ The Hebrew word is etymologically related to Akkadian *ittu*, the technical term for ominous signs. Astronomical and astrological ideas play a significant role in *Enūma eliš*, especially in its — still not completely recovered — fifth tablet.
- ⁶⁵ The analogy is not as superficial as it may appear at first glance if one takes into account that the first six tablets of *Enūma eliš*, and the first six days of the Biblical creation account, are both devoted to divine action, while tablet VII of the epic, with its hymnical praise of Marduk, and the seventh day in the Biblical story are associated with contemplation and rest.
- ⁶⁶ The Babylonian and the Biblical flood stories have a similar function. They use the image of a divinely ordained flood to account for the great caesura that occurred between the world of the beginning and the world as the people of Mesopotamia and Israel knew it. Incidentally, as has often been observed, the Biblical Noah episode, with its focus on the divine command to be fruitful and multiply, is again a counter-story. It inverts the notion, most prominently expressed in the Babylonian *Atramḫasis* epic, that the gods, after the flood, implemented various methods of birth-control to keep the human population from growing too much.
- ⁶⁷ ^dA-nun-na-ki it-ru-ku al-la / šat-tu iš-ta-at li-bit-ta-šú il-tab-nu / šá-ni-tu mu-an-na ina ka-šá-di / šá é-sag-íl me-eḫ-ret ZU.AB ul-lu-u re-ši-šú / ib-nu-ú-ma ziq-qur-rat ZU.AB e-li-te ... / ul-tu é-sag-íl i-pu-šu ši-pir-šú ... / be-lum ina bára maḫ šá ib-nu-u šu-bat-su / dingir-dingir ad-meš-šú qé-re-e-ti uš-te-šib / an-nam ba-ab-i-lí šu-bat na-ár-me-ku-un / nu-ga-a áš-ru-uš-šu ḫi-du-ta-šu taš-ba-a-ma.
- ⁶⁸ The parallels highlighted by me, as well as others (some of them based on incorrect translations of *Enūma eliš*), have already been pointed out by Speiser 1955-56. Speiser, however, dates the composition of the Tower of Babel episode to the ninth century BCE, which seems far too early. I do not wish to conceal that Speiser's ideas have met considerable opposition from Hebrew Bible scholars. One of the most elaborate recent studies of the Tower of Babel episode, Uehlinger 1990, regards the parallels as “zu unspezifisch” (p. 253) to be really relevant. Uehlinger sees the origins of the Biblical story, in stark contrast to what we propose here, in a polemic against the building of the royal residence of Dūr-Šarrukīn under the Assyrian king Sargon II (721-705 BCE). He argues that the location of the story in Babylon is the product of a

“*satirische relecture* jener älteren Vorlage” (p. 548), whose goal was to turn the story into a critical assessment of the imperial politics of Babylonian kings such as Nebuchadnezzar II. *Enūma eliš*, according to Uehlinger, did not have any impact on the rewriting of the story, which he believes was instead inspired by the building work carried out in Babylon during the period of the exile. While I have no problem in accepting that such building work did impress the authors of the story, Uehlinger’s overall interpretation of the Tower of Babel episode seems unlikely to me. Since its final version does not include any clear references to Assyria, I find it more probable that Babylon was the focus of the story in the first place.

- ⁶⁹ Esarhaddon’s “Assur A” inscription (Borger 1956, 1-6) offers in v 1-2: *šattu ištēt ilbinū libittu* “One (full) year they made bricks” and in v 27-32: *šanītu šattu ina kašādi ša Ešarra mūšab Aššur bēliya ana šamē ulli rēšišu* “When the second year came, I raised towards heaven the head of Ešarra, the dwelling place of Aššur my lord.” The discovery of the parallel goes back to Speiser (1955-56, 321).
- ⁷⁰ For a discussion of the “axial theology” that lies behind this story, see Maul 1997. The omphalic character of Babylon is also stressed in other cuneiform texts, most prominently in the topographic series Tintir, edited in George 1992, 1-72.
- ⁷¹ The *topos* of the confusion of tongues might have its background in the multicultural atmosphere the Judeans experienced in Babylon during the period of the exile; see Pedersén 2005.
- ⁷² Not surprisingly, Jacques Derrida, the founding father of “deconstruction,” was interested in the implications of the story of the Tower of Babel; see Derrida 1997.
- ⁷³ For the most recent discussion of the link between the processions and the Isaiah passage, see Schaudig 2008, with earlier literature.
- ⁷⁴ See Dalley 1997.
- ⁷⁵ See Sallaberger 2000.
- ⁷⁶ Schaudig 2008. The connection was already made in my 2007 Heidelberg Habilitation (p. 290, n. 1588).
- ⁷⁷ For references, see Frahm 2002, 96.
- ⁷⁸ See Oelsner 1994, 490.
- ⁷⁹ See Beaulieu 1992, 56, 67-68.
- ⁸⁰ For a discussion of the evidence, see Kessler 2004.
- ⁸¹ Thus Beaulieu 2006, 208 n. 54.
- ⁸² The tablet inscribed with the lament has been published by Lambert 1983; for a new translation, see Foster 2005, 952-953. It was written in 287 BCE in Babylon, but, as Lambert has argued, the text seems to reflect the standpoint not of Babylon but rather of Uruk. It mentions the Ištars of various cities, but Uruk is referred to at the beginning of the text and is clearly most important.
- ⁸³ See, for example, Livingstone 1989, no. 39, obv. 19.
- ⁸⁴ See Livingstone 1986, 194, 198-199. Note that Mummu, Tiamat’s “creative spirit” and later Apsû’s vizier, who is defeated in *Enūma eliš* by Ea, is listed among the “defeated gods” as well.
- ⁸⁵ In the passages on war and destruction, he may also have taken up motifs from the *Erra* epic; see Foster 2005, 952.
- ⁸⁶ For details, see Dirven 1997, especially 111-115.
- ⁸⁷ See Frahm 2006.
- ⁸⁸ This brings us back to ideas articulated by Jung and Kerényi in their 1949 study, referred to above, of the mythology of the divine child.
- ⁸⁹ This explanation was first advanced by Lewy 1949. There is no proof, of course, that political considerations were indeed the main reason why Nabonidus was so devoted to the moon-god, and modern scholars remain very divided in this regard. For the most recent monographic treatment of Nabonidus’s reign and his religious reform, see D’Agostino 1994.
- ⁹⁰ See Lambert 1997a, 77. The most recent list of *Enūma eliš* manuscripts can be found in Talon 2005, xiii-xviii (with additions and corrections by Borger 2008). Note, furthermore, that a

- number of late explanatory texts on astral theology with explicit references to the Babylonian epic of creation were found in Babylon (see Landsberger 1924-25; a new and fuller edition by Frances Reynolds is forthcoming).
- ⁹¹ Introductions to Berossus's work and editions of the remaining fragments of the *Babyloniaca* have been provided by Burstein 1978 and Verbrugghe and Wickersham 1996, 13-91.
- ⁹² Burstein 1978, 157.
- ⁹³ It seems, however, highly unlikely that the Marduk Ordeal circulated in a Babylonian version during the time of Berossus.
- ⁹⁴ I should mention that I have profited from discussing these matters a couple of years ago with Stefan M. Maul. Note that modern scholars like Zimmern (1918) had originally interpreted the Marduk Ordeal in the light of Jesus's death and resurrection, an idea that was refuted by von Soden (1955). While the Marduk Ordeal does not purport that Marduk was killed, Berossus seems to claim just that.
- ⁹⁵ For a more detailed discussion, see Dirven 1997. As noted by Dirven, the depiction on the Palmyra relief is in several respects comparable to the depiction of the battle between Aššur/Anšar and Tiamat described in K 1356, a tablet briefly discussed above in n. 24.
- ⁹⁶ See Dirven 1997, 113, n. 71 for specific references.
- ⁹⁷ For a positive assessment of this question, see Burkert 2004, 29-33, 50-51, 61-64 (with references to earlier literature). Others have been more skeptical, and it is hard to arrive at a final judgment on the issue.
- ⁹⁸ Gladstone, in his *Landmarks of Homeric Studies* (London 1880), pointed out that there are strong parallels between the way the Iliad, in XIV: 201, refers to "Okeanos, begetter of the gods, and mother Thetys," and the portrayal of Apsû and Tiamat in *Enūma eliš* I 3-4; see Bremmer 2004, 2.
- ⁹⁹ Quoted after Talon 2001, 272-273. For an edition of the *Treatise of the First Principles*, see Westerink and Combès 1991.
- ¹⁰⁰ Note that such an allegorization of the text is also behind the Berossus passage quoted above.
- ¹⁰¹ Talon 2001, 271-272.
- ¹⁰² Damascius claims, however, that he had received his knowledge about the Babylonian theogony from Eudemus, a student of Aristotle; see Burkert 2004, 31, 50.
- ¹⁰³ For rabbinical re-interpretations of Genesis 1:1, see Schäfer 1995, 169-172.
- ¹⁰⁴ For the afterlife of the story of the Tower of Babel in general, see the classical study by Borst (1957-63), as well as Glassner 2003 and, for Josephus's version of the episode, Inowlocki 2005.

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