

## **The Enuma Elish**

Of all the Semitic inscriptions composed in cuneiform writing few have awakened as great a general interest as the epic known among the Babylonians and Assyrians as Enuma Elish (When above), which takes its name from the opening words of the poem. Aside from linguistic considerations, this widespread popularity of Enuma Elish is in part due to its great significance for the study of the theogonic and cosmogonic views of the Mesopotamians, and thus for a comparative study of ancient Near Eastern religion in general; but above all else it is due to the fact that Enuma Elish presents quite a number of analogies to the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis.

### **The Great Epic of Enuma Elish**

This great epic is recorded on seven clay tablets and covers in all a little over 1000 lines. The first fragments to come to light were discovered by Austen H. Layard, Hormuzd Rassam, and George Smith among the ruins of King Ashurbanipal's (668-ca. 630 B.C.) great library at Nineveh between the years 1848 and 1876. During their explorations at Ashur (the old capital of Assyria), from 1902 to 1914, the German excavators unearthed a number of fragments of an Assyrian version of the Babylonian story (especially of the tablets I, VI, and VII) which differs from the latter chiefly in that some copies substitute the name of Ashur, the king of the Assyrian gods, for that of Marduk, the king of the Babylonian deities, and in that they make Lahmu and Lahamu the parents of Ashur.

In 1924-1925 two almost complete tablets, I and VI, of a Neo-Babylonian versions of the epic were discovered at Kish by the joint expedition of Oxford University and the Field Museum of Chicago. And in 1928-1929 the Germans found quite a large Neo-Babylonian fragment of Tablet VII at Uruk (the Biblical Erech). thanks to these discoveries the epic has been restored almost in its entirety; the only tablet of which a large portion is still wanting is Tablet V.

The epic opens with a brief reference to the time when nothing except the divine parents, Apsu and Tiamat, and their son Mummu existed. Apsu was the primeval sweet-water ocean, and Tiamat the salt-water ocean, while Mummu probably represented the mist rising from the two bodies of water and hovering over them, particularly since in Tablet VII:86 he is brought in direct relation with the clouds. These three types of water were mingled in one, forming an immense, undefined mass in which were contained all the elements of which afterward the universe was made.

At the end of the fourth day of the New Year's celebration in Babylon, which lasted from the first to the eleventh of Nisan, Enuma Elish was recited in its entirety by the high priest before the statue of Marduk. Then in the course of the festival, on an undetermined day, it was again recited, or chanted. Parts of epic may even have been dramatized, the king and the priests playing the roles of Marduk, Tiamat, Kingu and other figures in the epic. It is possible that the recitation and the supposed partial dramatization of Enuma Elish were in honor of Marduk. For this was the festival of Marduk, the creator of the present world order; it was the season when the various gods of the land came to Babylon "to take the hands" of Marduk.

## **The Marduk - Tiamat conflict**

The first four tablets deal exclusively with the conflict issue between Marduk and Tiamat and the events leading to it, while the creation story occupies less than two tablets. The Hebrew account, on the contrary, deals almost exclusively with the creation, and not a trace is found anywhere in the first two chapters of Genesis of a conflict between God and some mythical figure. No one will deny that. Some of the poetical books of the Old Testament, however, do contain passages in which the idea of a conflict between God and some hostile elements is brought out very distinctly. Hermann Gunkel, in his book "Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit", published in 1895, points to the most outstanding examples of such conflict.

Isaiah 51: 9-10 "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the ancient days, in the generations of old. Art thou not it that hath cut Rahab, and wounded the dragon? Art thou not it which hath dried the sea, the waters of the great deep; that hath made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over?"

Isaiah 27: 1 "In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea."

Psalms 89: 10 "Thou hast broken Rahab in pieces, as one that is slain; thou hast scattered thine enemies with thy strong arm."

Psalms 74: 13-14 "Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength; thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness."

Job 26: 12-13 "He divideth the sea with his power, and by his understanding he smiteth through the proud. By his spirit he hath garnished the heavens; his hand hath formed the crooked serpent."

Here, then, we have unmistakable references to a conflict between God and some hostile beings--Rahab, Leviathan, the serpent. But what is meant by these terms, particularly by "Rahab" and "Leviathan" ?

Rahab, in these passages forms a parallel to Tannin (crocodile), which denotes a long-bodied creature and is used in the Old Testament for a serpent, the crocodile and sea monsters. Rahab, in these texts not only forms parallels to the sea but also to the fleeing serpent. Leviathan, on the other hand, not in reference to some mythical monster of the past but, as attested by the context, of an actual living animal of the present; which is described in poetic language. Leviathan, could be determined as something coiled or wreathed as it is clear in Isaiah 27:1 "In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent;....."

## **The Creation of the Firmament**

The next point of contact between Enuma Elish and Genesis, chapter 1, is found in connection with the creation of the firmament. Both accounts agree that this act was accompanied by a division of primeval

waters. Enuma Elish speaks of Apsu as the primeval sweet-water ocean, Tiamat as the salt-water ocean, and Mummu apparently representing the mist, the fog and the clouds, which rose from Apsu and Tiamat and hovered over them. In Genesis, God creates a firmament "in the middle of the waters" to cause a division between the waters under the firmament and the waters above it. The Biblical account appears to imply that the waters of the earth and those of the cloud originally commingled, like the waters of Apsu, Mummu and Tiamat, without a clear intervening air space, thus producing a condition like that obtaining during a dense fog on the water.

### **The Creation of the Earth**

The creation of earth as related in the first chapter of Genesis finds its counterpart in tablets IV:143-45 and VII:135 of the Enuma Elish, and in the excerpt from Berossus. After Marduk had fashioned the sky and thus had got rid of one half of the gigantic body of Tiamat, the way was clear for the formation of the earth. Thereupon Marduk measured the dimensions of the Apsu, i.e., the subterranean sea, and with the other half of Tiamat's body made a great structure in the shape of a canopy, or a vault, and placed this hemisphere over the sea, upon which the Babylonians imagined the earth to rest. The material out of which the earth was made had existed from eternity; but Marduk evidently separated this material from the primeval salt-water ocean, personified by Tiamat, and created the dry land. In the first chapter of Genesis the earth was created "in the beginning", but, as in Enuma Elish, it was covered with water, from which it was not separated until the third day, when the waters were "gathered together unto one place" and the dry land appeared.

### **The Creation of the Luminaries**

From the opening lines of tablet V we can derive another parallel. After Marduk had formed the sky and the earth, he turned his attention to the creation of the celestial bodies and to the regulation of time. He set up the signs of the zodiac, determined the year, and defined the divisions; for each of the twelve months he set up three constellations and determined the days of the year by means of the constellations. The moon he caused to shine forth and instructed the night to her, thus making her, in a sense, the "ruler" over the night; he appointed this beautiful ornament of the night to determine or make known the days of the month. The existence of the sun is assumed in the description of the moon's relations to the sun and in the reference to the "gates on both sides" (i.e., east and west), through which the sun was believed to pass each day.

The first chapter of Genesis, on the other hand, states that God created the sun, the moon, and the stars in the firmament of the sky to separate day from night, to serve as signs, as seasons, as days and years, and to shed light on the earth; the sun was to rule the day, the moon the night. In both accounts the main purpose of the luminaries are plainly stated; they were to yield light and to serve as time dividers and time regulators. In both accounts, moreover, the production of the heavenly bodies is described from the geocentric standpoint, as in all antiquity. But while Genesis follows the well-known order sun, moon, and stars, Enuma Elish refers to the celestial bodies in the reverse order--stars, moon, and sun, perhaps because of the great significance of the stars in the lives of the astronomically and astrologically minded Babylonians. Again, while the Babylonian narrative speaks of the luminary bodies and their purposes in astronomical terms interwoven with mythology, the Hebrew account uses

the language of the layman and is free from all mythological references. Finally, the idea of gates on the eastern and western horizon through which the sun entered and departed is, of course, foreign to Genesis.

### **The Creation of Plant and the Animal Life**

To date, no portion of Enuma Elish has been recovered which contain an account of the creation of vegetation, of animals, birds, reptiles, and fishes. The opinion is frequently voiced that this act may have been recorded on the missing portion of Tablet V, of which only about 22 lines out of probably 140 have been preserved. Worth mentioning here that in some other texts under the title "The Creation of Living Creatures" and some Sumerian fragments from Nippur, the creation of animals is briefly recorded. Moreover, Berossus says that Bel (Marduk) formed "animals capable of bearing the air."

### **The Creation of Man**

Of the creation of man we have a quite number of Babylonian versions. On Tablet VI:1-38 of Enuma Elish man's creation is ascribed to Marduk and Ea; Marduk conceived the plan and imparted it to his father, Ea, who put it into execution "in accordance with the ingenious plans" of his son. Kingu, the leader of Tiamat's host, was slaughtered, and with his blood, which was mixed with earth, Ea fashioned mankind, with the assistance of certain other gods, as shown by lines 31-33. On Tablet VII:29-32, however, it is stated that Marduk created mankind, whereas in reality he merely instructed Ea to do it. This diversity can quite easily be explained by the old Latin maxim *Qui facit per alium, facit per se* ("What our agent does we do ourselves"). In another tradition it is stated that Mami made mankind with the flesh and blood of a slain god, which she mixed with clay. Since man was fashioned with divine blood, Berossus says, he is rational and partakes of divine understanding. From this statement as well as from the further consideration that ancient oriental thought conceived of blood as being the seat of life, it is apparent, moreover, that the Babylonians traced the element of life in man back to the divine blood employed at his creation. Both in Enuma Elish and in Genesis 1:1-2:3 the formation of man constitutes the final act of creation, or the last entity brought into being. Moreover, both accounts contain clear indications of the high importance of this act. As it is stated after Marduk's victory over Tiamat that he examined her dead body "to create ingenious things" with it (Tablet IV:136), the contemplation resulting in the production of heaven and earth, so it is said that, before Marduk proceeded to the creation of man, his heart prompted him "to create ingenious things" (Tablet VI:2). Reading through the tablets we realize that in the Babylonian stories man's creation is told from the viewpoint of the gods, while in Genesis it is told from the viewpoint of man. One other point to mention here that man's purpose in life according to the Babylonian was to be the service of the god, while in the initial chapter of Genesis man was to be the lord of the earth, the sea, and the air.

### **The Seven Tablets and the Seven Days**

The existence of the seven days in the Hebrew narrative has been traced to the influence of the seven creation tablets. But that is lacking all evidence. To attribute the number seven in Genesis 1:1-2:3 to the fact that Enuma Elish is composed of seven tablets would be like the attempt, actually made, to establish a relation between the twelve sons of Jacob and the twelve months of the year. In the Genesis

accounts acts of creation were performed on all the first six days, and on the seventh day God rested; while in Enuma Elish Tablets II, III, and most of I and IV do not deal with any part of creation, and the story of Marduk's rest begins as early as the first half of Tablet VI and then extends over virtually all of Tablet VII.

## **Conclusion**

Looking at both stories it is apparent that each version displays a number of features which are not found in the other, but the order in which the point of contact follow upon one another is the same.

## **Comparisons**

Enuma Elish: Divine spirit and cosmic matter are coexistent and coeternal.

Genesis: Divine spirit creates cosmic matter and exists independently of it.

Enuma Elish: Primeval chaos; Tiamat enveloped in darkness.

Genesis: The earth a desolate waste, with darkness covering the deep.

Enuma Elish: Light emanating from the gods.

Genesis: Light created.

Enuma Elish: The creation of the firmament.

Genesis: The creation of the firmament.

Enuma Elish: The creation of dry land.

Genesis: The creation of dry land.

Enuma Elish: The creation of the luminaries.

Genesis: The creation of the luminaries.

Enuma Elish: The creation of man.

Genesis: The creation of man.

Enuma Elish: The gods rest and celebrate.

Genesis: God rests, sanctifies the 7th day.

There are those who seem to be convinced that Genesis 1:1-2:3 shows Babylonian traces, while others appear to be just as convinced that it does not. In my estimation, no incontrovertible evidence can for the present be produced for either side; I believe that the whole question must still be left open and there is no reason why anyone should be disturbed in his mind and lose his reverence for the opening chapter of the Bible. If certain features of the biblical account were derived from the Babylonian, this

was done in conformity with the will of Him who according to Heb. 1:1 revealed Himself "in diverse manners."

**Source:**

"The Babylonian Genesis"  
by Alexander Heidel