

READING GUIDE: *THE EPIC OF CREATION (ENUMA ELISH)*

Prof. Stephen Hagin ⊗ *Symbolic Connections in WL* ⊗ 12th edition ⊗ Kennesaw State University

The Epic of Creation (Dalley, 228-277)

The duality of society/nature is a version of the male/female duality that we have been witnessing, and we see it delineated more clearly in *The Epic of Creation*. We will now add to this list another breakdown: order/chaos. We will see the more society-based Babylonians associate human societies with order and Nature as chaos, unlike the Sumerians who saw the natural world order as one of balance and harmony. The word “cosmos” is the ancient Greek word for “village,” which implies “order,” and this is opposite of “chaos” (“yawn,” or indifference to order). The ancient cultures struggled with the chaos of their lives, and they sought order in their societies as well as in nature.

As the population of Mesopotamia increased due to better farming practices, it became overcrowded to the point where they needed strong leadership to lay down the law. A village with more people becomes a harder area to control, therefore demanding stronger laws and more solid leadership. These, plus dramatic climate change, facilitated the transition from the Nature goddess cultures to the societal law-oriented kingdoms — ones that prioritized the male over the female (in this case, the mentalities of the Babylonians and Akkadians over that of the Sumerians).

If a king in 1800-1900 BCE wanted to assert his dominion over his subjects, one trick in his playbook would be to introduce a new creation story that shows a new god (Marduk) ascending over all the other gods in order to save the culture. By changing the roles and associations of the earlier Sumerian deities, the Babylonians were able to inject a pro-male agenda that shows power emanating from the males (who create from their mouths), not from the females (who create from their wombs).

TABLET I (233-238)

The opening lines of *The Epic of Creation* (or the *Enuma elish*) show a struggle between two powerful forces: the fresh groundwater (Apsu, well water) and the salt sea (Tiamat), which often encroached upstream during times when the ocean level increased or the currents were unfavorable (such as those caused by the southerly winds). Notice that Apsu (groundwater, male) is listed first, replacing the concept of the primordial ocean (female) that dominates the Nature mythology.

The characters Anshar and Kishar are versions of An and Ninhursag, who was also called “Ki” in very early Sumerian mythology, but notice that they are ranked much lower on the hierarchy. In this culture, the younger generations were given greater power than the previous ones, suggesting that the younger citizens were acquiring more power and wealth than their fathers and grandfathers. The collection of the older nature gods were referred to as the Anunnaki (Apsu, Anu, Tiamat, etc.), while the generations of younger gods were collectively called the Igigi (Ea, Marduk, Inanna, etc.).

In the first tablet, Apsu (fresh water) is annoyed by the noise created by their children, the various gods and goddesses of the region. His wife, Tiamat, becomes angered at Apsu for suggesting causing harm to their kids. Their vizier (the Arabic word for “advisor”), Mummu, sides with Apsu, and so the death of the children will soon begin. One of their children, Ea, overhears his forefather’s plan to exterminate the kids, so he takes action by killing Apsu himself, after conferring with the other younger gods. Remember that this story is a metaphor, and it is NOT about patricide.

Many of these Babylonian myths show that the older generations were somehow “out of touch,” and had to be overtaken by the younger, more capable children. The Mesopotamians understood that their children would inherit more wisdom from their ancestors, and therefore would have had a better chance of survival and success.

From the essence of these fresh waters, Ea and Damkina, his wife, give birth to a miraculous child, borne from the waters of Apsu (a virgin birth). His name is Marduk, and he is already a powerful newborn baby, being that he was created from the great creation fluids and the remnants of Apsu, not through the sexual relations of Ea and his wife. Notice that the sexual mingling of Apsu and Tiamat likewise did not promote creation.

This kid grows up in the course of a few pages of text to become a mighty boy wonder, and he grows stronger by the minute. Ea offers his son the mighty winds to blow over the ocean (Tiamat) and churn her up, thus causing her grief for not stopping Apsu’s murderous plot. The four winds appear to be Marduk’s toys, if you will, suggesting that he is going to become a powerful god in the near future. The association with wind also allows the Babylonians to praise Enlil (Ellil), god of wind, more highly than Anu (An), now viewed as a more passive sky figure.

Notice that Marduk is almost immediately referred to as “Lord.” Although he is a baby, he is being called a title that reflects his supreme power over the other gods, even though he has not yet accomplished anything. Marduk will become a creator god, and his name gives this away. This is the first time that we have seen a god referred to by this name, and it reflects the later Hebrew writings in *Genesis*.

Tiamat immediately takes on a new husband/lover, Qingu — an obscure, powerless, and unqualified lesser god whom Tiamat plucked out of nowhere. She offers him control over the armies and hands him the “Tablet of Destinies,” which gives him control over life and death (a sort of printed version of the *holy me*, representing a closer association with law than Nature).

Questions for *The Epic of Creation* (Tablet I)

1. Briefly describe the earth, as described in the first few passages.
2. How do Apsu and Tiamat react differently to the clamor of the gods?
3. What is Ea’s plan?
4. Describe Marduk.
5. What does Mother Hubur create that assists Tiamat’s battle against the younger gods?
6. Which of the lesser gods does Tiamat promote in an effort to win the battle?

TABLET II (239-244)

In Tablet II, Ea goes to his oldest heavenly forefather, Anshar, for advice and help, but his great grandpa tells him that he is too old to do anything about Tiamat, and that Ea himself should challenge her to a battle. Ea, however, knows that he is not powerful enough to defeat Tiamat and Qingu, so he

bestows this challenge onto his new son, Marduk, who now appears as a nearly-grown adult. Ea asks Marduk to fight for their side after convincing him to appear at the council of the gods.

On page 243, Marduk demands from the other gods supreme power if they want him to fight the now-evil Tiamat. The gods meet, have a few drinks, and decide to offer Marduk every power and weapon they own. Marduk is the savior figure in this story, and he seems born into this destiny. Qingu is not.

Questions for *The Epic of Creation* (Tablet II)

7. What emotion does Anshar display after he hears about Tiamat's power struggle?
8. After informing his father about Tiamat's plans, what advice does Anshar offer?
9. Why do the gods seek out Marduk to fight this battle?
10. On what condition does Marduk agree to fight against Tiamat?

TABLET III (244-249)

This section is very redundant. The happenings from the first two tablets are retold here twice, once by Anshar, and the second by Kakka, his advisor. If you have been confused thus far, then reading this section should clarify the plot.

Questions for *The Epic of Creation* (Tablet III)

11. Anshar devotes the first two pages of this section relaying the story to his advisor (vizier) Kakka, who then spends the following two pages relaying this information to Lahmu and Lahamu. Why does this story involve so much repetition?
12. After Kakka's speech, the Igigi "groaned dreadfully," since they "did not even know what Tiamat was doing." How can the gods be unaware of the actions taking place in their own "back yards"?
13. Before sending Marduk to battle, the council of the gods imbibe heavily on alcohol. Why do you suppose that they did this? Won't the alcohol make them less able to fight (or think rationally)?

TABLET IV (249-255)

This section provides the narrative of the great battle scenes between Marduk and Tiamat. This section is not as repetitive, and is action-packed. As you read, reflect on the symbolism of these characters and how they apply to a motif of creation.

Marduk begins to test his powers in Tablet IV, making the stars and constellations appear and disappear at will. He is now trained and ready for combat. Page 251 lists his various weapons, such

as bows and arrows, flame throwers, various winds, and the “flood-weapon.” Why would the wind or a flood-weapon be effective against Tiamat? Simple — the wind can control the ocean and floodwaters of a river will flush the salt waters back toward the sea, purifying and cleansing the rivers of the poison.

Marduk enters the battlefield, fully armed, and easily defeats Tiamat by forcing the *imhullu*-wind down her throat. She expands like a balloon, and that’s when Marduk shoots an arrow into her belly. Let’s look more closely at this. Notice that Marduk uses an arrow (that looks like a phallus) that he shoots into Tiamat’s belly (womb). Here is the male defeating the female in the very essence of her womanhood, her womb. Kill the womb and you kill the concept of the woman. Another interpretation here suggests that Marduk is raping or assaulting Tiamat, which again illustrates the male aggressiveness and dominance that the kings wished to convey. The imaginary active male force (wind) overpowers the old tangible womb fluid (female).

He ultimately slices her into two halves, one that is lifted up to form the firmament of the sky, and the other that creates the Underworld below. The henchmen run away in fear, leaving Qingu standing there shaking in his boots. Qingu looks to have been set up for failure here. Qingu is ensnared in the net, and Marduk goes home a champion.

Questions for *The Epic of Creation* (Tablet IV)

14. The gods give Marduk supreme power “over all of the whole universe.” Why do they bestow their authority onto Marduk before he has entered the battle against Tiamat?
15. How does Marduk test his newly acquired powers?
16. What types of weapons will Marduk use in the battle? Why does he need these if his voice alone can command the universe to move?
17. What items does Marduk bring into the battle to protect him against Tiamat?
18. Why has Tiamat “feigned goodwill” toward Marduk?
19. Describe how Marduk vanquishes Tiamat.
20. Why does Marduk allow Tiamat’s henchmen to live, merely destroying their weapons and confining them to prison?
21. Marduk slices Tiamat’s body into two pieces. What does he do with these halves?



TABLET V (255-260)

This section shows Marduk using the aftermath of the war to rearrange the earth and its cycles. In essence, Marduk is casting aside the “old world order,” rife with chaos, and has used its remnants to devise a new set of laws and relationships on earth. This section depicts the actual “creation” process, although Marduk does not create “something from nothing,” as is evident in many creation narratives from this culture.

In Tablet V, the new hero Marduk has just killed the chaotic ocean waters, and now sets his designs on the stars and constellations. On pages 255-256, Marduk creates the Zodiac. Notice the reference to the quarterly moon phases, with each new phase occurring every seven days. This is the origin of our seven-day week, and it also was shared by the Egyptians. Since the Babylonians were more advanced astronomers, they applied their astronomical knowledge into their literature all the time. No longer does divinity come from the ground — it now descends from the sky.

After Marduk further orders the universe, he is praised and given royal garments to wear (there’s nothing like wearing wool robes in the summer!). Shrines are built in his honor and accolades are showered on his ego. Marduk instructs his fellow gods to build temples for the gods before he creates the first people. Marduk wishes to relieve the gods by placing the yoke of the gods’ labor onto the shoulders of the men and women (another common theme in this culture).

Marduk then establishes the community of Babylon, giving these people a story about their city’s origin too. Of course, he orders the other gods to dig their own dirt and to build their own temples so that the people (who are yet to be created) can have a place to worship these nature gods.

Questions for *The Epic of Creation* (Tablet V)

22. How does Marduk begin to establish the earthly order with Tiamat’s body parts?
Generate a list of body parts and corresponding features of the earth.
23. For what purposes does Marduk establish the city of Babylon?

TABLET VI (260-267)

In Tablet VI, Marduk finally takes action against Qingu. Marduk asked the other gods who had started the war in the first place, and everyone says, “Qingu!” Of course, this is not true, but Qingu is the last remaining figure that must be brought to justice. Marduk uses the blood of Qingu to form the first human beings. Marduk says that he will “change the ways of the gods miraculously, / So they are gathered as one yet divided in two” (Dalley 261). In other words, men and women (a common duality) will be created by the blood of one god, Qingu.

Notice that Marduk himself was created from the Apsu, the fresh groundwater, and he was born from the force of Apsu in a new form, Marduk. Men and woman are therefore thought of as offspring of other godly materials, although technically we appear to be the descendants of scapegoats, perhaps setting humans up for further tribulations. But people in this story (and several others) were created solely to take over the labors and duties of the gods, who now believe that they deserve a bit of a rest. So now we know our purpose in life — to do the work of gods!

Questions for *The Epic of Creation* (Tablet VI)

24. What is symbolic about Marduk's use of Qingu's blood to create the first people?
25. For what purposes are the first people created?
26. Marduk is praised with "fifty names." Why does he have (or need) so many names? What do they represent (as a collection, not as individual monikers)? List a few of them.

TABLET VII (267-273)

The last tablet continues with the listing of the fifty epithets in honor of the new lord Marduk. This section is mostly a long list of names and praises of the god, and it does not advance the plot very far. Look at this last section as being more reverential in nature. Contemplate how far Marduk has come in a very short time.

Marduk receives 50 holy identities to reinforce that he is the new king of the gods and will rule over the people in a fairer manner than the earlier deities had done. The new has replaced the old, much like the Babylonians had replaced the Sumerians in history. The Sumerians eventually disappeared under the dominance of the Babylonians, but their influences were borne into the next interpretation of the society, hence Marduk rising from the Apsu.

If you are wondering why Marduk was granted 50 new names, think back to the on the Sumerian King List and the numerology embedded in the years of reign. If you recall, Marduk was assigned the value of 10. The lead god, the sky god Anu, was given the highest value: 60. If Marduk has now become the leader of the gods, then his numeric value must also be increased. Add 50 new names to his current value of 10 and you reach the sum total of 60, the highest value for the gods:

BEFORE MARDUK'S CONQUEST

Anu	60
Enlil	50
Ea	40
Sin	30
Shamash	20
Nergal	12
Marduk	10
Adad	6

AFTER MARDUK'S CONQUEST

Marduk	60
Anu	60
Enlil	50
Ea	40
Sin	30
Shamash	20
Nergal	12
Adad	6

As an historical connection, you will notice that one of Marduk's names is Bel (sometimes spelled Ba'al). Although he is a savior figure to the Mesopotamians, many neighboring cultures did not view him this way. The ancient Hebrews, for example, considered the "devil" to be called Bel (or Ba'al, where we get the name Beelzebub, or Baalzebub — the "Lord of the Flies" or Prince of the Devils).

Why would one culture consider another culture's great god to be a devil? Well, one culture's heroes are another's enemies, and the difference between gods and demons is often indistinguishable (recall the "Earth Diver" creation story where the two black geese cannot be distinguished from each other). Your own culture will make you feel good about your country while simultaneously demonizing the others. This idea is incorporated in an old Babylonian story, *The Cursing of Agade*, where the Gutian invaders were called "monkeys" and "dogs" by Babylonian authors.

Question for *The Epic of Creation* (Tablet VII)

27. List several important duties that Marduk has been given by the other gods. In other words, what duties or tasks does Marduk control or oversee? Are these more “masculine” or “feminine” qualities?

SOURCE:

<http://www.kirtland.cc.mi.us/honors/goddess/images/marduktiamat62.jpg>

READING GUIDE: ATRAHASIS

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Atrahasis* (Dalley, 1-38)*INTRODUCTION (1-8)**

In the Dalley text, on page 2 of the introduction, we learn that the name Atrahasis has parallels in the surrounding cultures. In Babylon, the survivor of the flood story is a man named Utnapishtim, whom we will see in the story of *Gilgamesh*. In Hebrew, we would pronounce this name “Noah.” Stephanie Dalley, your translator for these readings, further suggests that the name Odysseus (“the wanderer,” the hero of *The Odyssey*) derives his name as well from the abbreviation of Utnapishtim, Udzi (*Odyssey*).

Every literate culture tells a story about a great flood. Although doubtful that all of them are writing about a single flood event, extreme weather, both frequent and memorable, left powerful impressions on the people who suffered the wrath of Nature. Since most cultures lived beside a river, and since all rivers flood, we can say with reasonable assurance that hundreds of devastating floods inspired the hundreds of worldwide flood narratives. All of these stories, and dozens that are similar, seem to suggest that flood narratives were popular and pervasive in this place in the world, and most of it undoubtedly survived in oral form rather than written. Since merchants and other travelers shared these tales far and wide, there is little doubt that the creation tales and flood narratives from the Near East bear resemblance to each other.

NOTE: The god Enki is also called Ea (his Babylonian name). Both names are used in this story (because it is pieced together with fragments from both the Sumerian and Babylonian cultures).

TABLET I (9-20)

Tablet I of *Atrahasis* begins with the Anunnaki (the eldest creator gods) pawning off their labor to the lesser gods (the Igigi), who complain about their work being too difficult, digging endless canals and trenches. This rebellion of the younger generation is a theme that we have seen before in *The Epic of Creation*. This argument will encourage the gods to create mankind so that we may do this work