

Enuma Elish

The *Enuma Elish*, meaning "When on High" from its opening words in Akkadian, is the principal Babylonian creation myth and the only complete surviving account of ancient Near Eastern cosmology. It was recited on the fourth day of the ancient Babylonian New Year's festival.

Dating:

Scholarly consensus places the composition of the Enuma Elish in the late 2nd millennium BCE. Extant copies of the myth, found at sites like Ashur, Kish, Nineveh, and Sultantepe, date to approximately 1200 BCE.⁴ However, colophons on these tablets indicate they are copies of a much older version, predating the reign of Hammurabi of Babylon (1792-1750 BCE). The poem in its current form, featuring Marduk as the champion deity, is considered a revision of an even older Sumerian work.

Key Narratives, Deities, and Themes:

The Enuma Elish narrative is inscribed across seven clay tablets, detailing the creation story and conflicts among the gods.

- **Primordial State and Conflict (Tablets I-III):** The myth begins with the mingling of primordial fresh waters (Apsu, god of fresh water and male fertility) and salty waters (Tiamat, goddess of the sea, chaos, and threat), which gives birth to a pantheon of younger gods, including Lahmu, Lahamu, Anshar, Kishar, Anu, and Ea. The boisterous activities of these younger gods disturb Apsu, leading him to conspire with his minister Mummu to destroy them. Ea, a god of wisdom, learns of the plot, preemptively kills Apsu, and establishes his dwelling upon Apsu's body. From Ea and his wife Damkina, Marduk is born, a powerful deity associated with spring, light, and lightning, who later becomes the patron god of Babylon. Enraged by Apsu's murder, Tiamat vows vengeance, creates eleven monstrous creatures, and appoints Kingu as her new consort and commander of her army. The fearful gods seek a champion, and Marduk agrees to confront Tiamat on the condition that he is proclaimed supreme among them and his decrees become unalterable.
- **Cosmic Battle and Creation (Tablet IV):** After proving his immense power, Marduk is enthroned as high king. He arms himself with winds and a storm-chariot, engaging Tiamat in a violent cosmic battle. Marduk ultimately defeats Tiamat, ensnaring and killing her with an arrow through her heart. He then dismembers her corpse, using half to form the heavens and the other half to create the earth, complete with bars to contain the chaotic waters.
- **Establishing Order and Humanity (Tablets V-VII):** Following creation, Marduk organizes the celestial bodies, establishes the days, months, and seasons, and founds the city of Babylon as his sacred dwelling. A pivotal moment is Marduk's decision to create human beings to relieve the gods of their menial tasks. Ea, upon Marduk's instruction, uses the blood of Kingu (who is identified as the instigator of Tiamat's rebellion and subsequently killed) to fashion mankind. The myth concludes with the gods constructing a house for Marduk in Babylon and reciting his fifty throne names, celebrating his dominion and the new cosmic order he established.

Key Deities:

- **Apsu:** God of fresh water and male fertility, primordial begetter.
- **Tiamat:** Goddess of the sea, chaos, and threat, Apsu's wife, and later the vengeful mother of monsters.
- **Ea (Nudimmud):** God of wisdom and strength, son of Anu, who kills Apsu and later creates mankind.
- **Damkina:** Wife of Ea and mother of Marduk.
- **Marduk:** The central hero, god of spring, light, and lightning, patron god of Babylon, who defeats Tiamat and creates the cosmos and mankind.
- **Kingu:** Tiamat's new consort and commander of her army, whose blood is used to create mankind.³

Key Themes:

- **Cosmic Order vs. Chaos:** The central conflict between Tiamat (chaos) and Marduk (order) drives the narrative, culminating in the establishment of a structured cosmos.
- **Creation through Conflict:** The world and humanity emerge from a violent struggle and dismemberment rather than a peaceful, deliberate act.
- **Divine Hierarchy and Kingship:** The myth justifies Marduk's supremacy within the Babylonian pantheon and, by extension, Babylon's political dominance.
- **Humanity's Purpose:** Humans are created to serve the gods, alleviating their labor.
- **The Power of the Word/Decree:** Marduk's authority is demonstrated through his ability to create and destroy by his command.

The *Enuma Elish* is significant not only for its religious implications but also for its influence on later creation narratives in other cultures, including aspects seen in Genesis. It served a clear political purpose by promoting Marduk as the patron deity of Babylon, legitimizing the city's supremacy.