

Enuma Elish



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANONYMOUS

Though the names of scribes who copied the text of the *Enuma Elish* are preserved on the recovered tablets, the identity of the original author is nowhere recorded. Most often, those with the training to write texts in the ancient Babylonian context would have been priests.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Around the time of Hammurabi's reign (1792-1750 BCE)—the ruler under whom the kingdom of Babylon expanded to conquer all of ancient Mesopotamia—the god Marduk began to be worshiped more than his Sumerian predecessor, Ea (or Enki or Enlil), who'd featured more prominently in earlier versions of the myth. Thus Marduk's rise corresponded historically with the emergence of Babylon from a city-state to an empire, something that is reflected in the epic itself. The text of the *Enuma Elish* was discovered in fragments by Austen Henry Layard in 1849, in the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (now Mosul, Iraq). The epic was recorded in the Old Babylonian language on seven clay tablets, written in Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform script.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

[The Epic of Gilgamesh](#), the best-known ancient Mesopotamian epic, shares the *Enuma Elish*'s Old Babylonian (2nd millennium BCE) origins, and its modern rediscovery and publication occurred around the same time, in the mid-19th century. The modern study of both these texts yielded insights for scholarship on the Bible, particularly the Old Testament's Book of Genesis, which contains accounts of the creation, human origins, and a primordial flood that have been thought to share common elements with the Babylonian texts. For another Ancient Near Eastern creation myth, Hesiod's [Theogony](#), also composed in epic poetic form (albeit written later, around 700 BCE), offers a point of comparison.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Enuma Elish*, or *The Epic of Creation*
- **When Written:** Various dates proposed, from 1900s BCE to 1100s BCE
- **Where Written:** Mesopotamia
- **Literary Period:** Ancient Near Eastern
- **Genre:** Religious text
- **Setting:** The gods' abode in the heavens; ancient Babylon

- **Climax:** Marduk slays Tiamat
- **Antagonist:** Tiamat
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Ceremonial Usage. Though the precise ritual use of the *Enuma Elish* is a point of contention among scholars, it may have been recited or performed during Akitu, the spring barley-cutting festival, or to mark the annual flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Old Babylonian Title. The epic's traditional title, the *Enuma Elish*, comes from the poem's incipit, or opening words: "When on high."



PLOT SUMMARY

Before anything else exists, two primeval gods, Apsu and Tiamat, dwell together. In time, more gods are begotten out of the mixing of the two gods' **waters**—notably Lahmu and Lahamu, Anshar, Anu, and Nudimmud, or Ea.

When the younger gods get together, their noisy clamor disturbs Apsu and Tiamat. Apsu proposes that the gods be destroyed so that he and Tiamat can get some sleep, but Tiamat is furious at this idea, wanting to indulge their offspring. However, behind Tiamat's back, Apsu's vizier Mummu wickedly urges him to destroy the gods anyway.

Ea, the wisest of the gods, finds out Apsu's plan, lulls him with a spell, and slays him in his sleep. He builds a dwelling atop Apsu's remains and, with his lover, Damkina, begets Marduk there. From his birth, Marduk is the most awesome of all the gods.

When Marduk plays with the winds, Tiamat's waters become restless, and none of the older gods can sleep. They beseech Tiamat to avenge Apsu's slaying and enable them to sleep. Tiamat is pleased by this suggestion, agreeing that Ea and those younger gods who dwell with him deserve evil in their turn. Tiamat begins creating fearful creatures, such as deadly snakes, dragons, and demons, to join her battle-force. She also appoints her lover, Qingu, as king and commander of her army.

Ea finds out about Tiamat's battle preparations and reports to his father, Anshar, who sends him to settle the conflict; however, Ea is intimidated by Tiamat and quickly admits defeat. Before the gods can despair, Marduk steps forward, offering to confront the fearsome goddess. Anshar agrees, but first, Marduk asks that the other gods recognize him in a special council.

Accordingly, the gods gather at a celebratory banquet, where they champion Marduk as their sovereign. They equip Marduk with an array of powerful weapons and send him off to subdue and conquer the chaotic Tiamat. Marduk quickly shakes off Tiamat's spell of deception and challenges her to single combat. Enraging Tiamat with accusations, Marduk quickly nets her, fills her with fierce whirlwinds, and slays her.

After triumphing over Tiamat, Marduk uses her remains to build the earth, making the Tigris and Euphrates rivers from the water that flows from her eyes. All the gods pay homage to Marduk as their King. Then he announces that he will build Babylon to be the home for the gods and the center of religion.

Marduk and Ea create humanity from the blood of Qingu and impose the labors of the gods—such as preserving order amongst creation—upon humanity. Then the gods get to work constructing shrines for themselves in Babylon. When their work is done, they all gather at a final banquet, where they solemnly recite the fifty titles and attributes of Marduk.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Marduk – Sometimes called Bel, Marduk is begotten by his father, Ea, and borne by his mother, Damkina, inside the dwelling Apsu. From his birth, Marduk is superior to all other gods. He has four all-perceiving eyes, four enormous ears, and lips that blaze forth fire. As a deity, he is associated with storms. At Ea's urging, Marduk steps forward to confront Tiamat, but not before a council of the gods gathers to declare him the sovereign King of all the gods. He uses his strength and cunning to overpower and kill Tiamat and wrest from Qingu the Tablet of Destinies, legitimizing his reign as the preeminent god. He then establishes order in the heavens and on earth, setting the stars in their courses and securing Tiamat's waters in place. He also oversees the construction of Babylon as the earthly residence of the gods, and is thus closely associated with the city. The gods then engage in a ritual declaration of his 50 titles and associated attributes.

Tiamat – Tiamat, one of the two primordial Mesopotamian gods, is known as the maker. As a deity, she is associated with **water** and with chaos. She dwells with her consort, Apsu, before anything else exists. She is disturbed when her offspring play noisily, but she indulges her children's behavior and becomes angry with Apsu for suggesting that they be destroyed. Later, after Apsu is slain, she is prevailed upon by her children to avenge him. She creates terrifying snakes, dragons, demons, and other creatures for her army and appoints Qingu, her new lover, to lead them in battle. Many gods, including Ea, shrink from confronting Tiamat, but Marduk finally faces her. She casts a spell of falsehood to confuse her enemies, but Marduk hurls accusations and takes advantage of

her rage to trap and kill her. Her remains are used by Marduk to fashion the world, including the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Nudimmud / Ea – Nudimmud, more often called Ea in the epic, is begotten of Anu. Originally a Sumerian deity, he is also sometimes known as Enki or Enlil. Nudimmud is “superior to his forefathers: / Profound of understanding,” and strong at arms. However, when Anshar sends him to confront Tiamat in her rage, he shrinks from the task and encourages Marduk to go instead, setting the stage for Marduk's ascendancy among the gods. This element of the story thereby dramatizes the emergence of Marduk as the preeminent deity in ancient Babylon and the decline of Ea. Ea continues to have an important role within the pantheon, however; for example, with Marduk, he fashions humanity from the blood of Qingu.

Apsu – Apsu, one of the two primordial Mesopotamian gods, is known as the begetter. He dwells with his consort, Tiamat, before anything else exists. When their offspring cause lots of noise, Apsu proposes to destroy them. Tiamat rejects this idea, but when his vizier, Mummu, urges him to go ahead with his wicked plan, Apsu heeds him. When Apsu's son, Ea, finds out his plan, he casts a spell and slays Apsu, leading to Tiamat's war with Marduk. “Apsu” is also the name of Ea's dwelling-place, since it's built on Apsu's remains.

Qingu – Qingu is Tiamat's consort after Apsu's slaying. Tiamat appoints him commander of her army and grants him the Tablet of Destinies. After Marduk defeats Tiamat in battle, however, he quickly wrests the Tablet from Qingu. For his role in the battle, Qingu is later bound and killed, his blood used by Ea to create humanity.

Anshar – Anshar is the offspring of Apsu and Tiamat. He begets Anu, who begets Ea. Anshar initially sends Ea to confront the raging Tiamat, but after Ea fails, he convenes a council to recognize Marduk as the greatest of the gods and send him off to battle with Tiamat instead. Kishar is his consort.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lahmu – Lahmu is an early Babylonian god—with Lahamu, the firstborn of Apsu and Tiamat. He and Lahamu lead the Igigi (the older gods) in recognizing Marduk as their king.

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Kishar – Kishar is the offspring of Apsu and Tiamat. Anshar is her consort.

Anu – Anu is Anshar's son, and he begets Nudimmud/Ea. Associated with thunderstorms, he gives Marduk the four winds to play with.

Mummu – Mummu is Apsu's vizier (adviser). He advises Apsu to destroy his and Tiamat's offspring even after Tiamat angrily rejects this idea. Consequently, Ea lulls Mummu into a daze and

vanquishes him.

Damkina – Damkina is the lover of Ea, with whom she lives within the dwelling Apsu, and the bearer of Marduk.

Igigi – In the epic, the Igigi is the collective name used for the gods of the younger generation.

Anukki / Anunnaki – In the epic, Anukki or Anunnaki is often used to refer collectively to the older generation of gods.

Ellil – In the Babylonian pantheon, Ellil is considered to be the head of the younger generation of gods. In Tablet VI, the gods take special care in constructing a shrine for him, as well as for Anu and Ea, but he doesn't otherwise feature prominently in the *Enuma Elish*.

Kakka – Kakka is Anshar's vizier (adviser). Anshar dispatches him to Lahmu and Lahamu to tell them the news of Tiamat's rejection of her children and Marduk's readiness for battle.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



ORDER, CIVILIZATION, AND RELIGION

In the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation epic likely written in the second millennium BCE, the reader is quickly thrown into the midst of a

community of gods, their identities hard to distinguish, and often at enmity with each other. Before long, the hero-god Marduk emerges to subdue chaos and establish order among the gods, soon bringing into existence the recognizable forms of the heavens, the earth, and the rudiments of human civilization—the city and the religious cult center. Through this gradual emergence of order from chaos, the anonymous author argues for the divine origins of the world and humanity and the goodness of the ordered patterns of life and Babylonian religion.

The goodness of order is first affirmed among the “civilization” of the gods themselves. The epic starts before anything of creation exists whatsoever (“When skies above were not yet named ... when yet no gods were manifest”), except for the gods Apsu (“the begetter”) and his consort Tiamat (“the maker”). Apsu and Tiamat then create several generations of gods out of their commingled essences (they “mixed their **waters** together”), each generation surpassing the last in greatness. The generation of additional gods is presented as a good and natural thing; it's better that things exist than that they don't.

However, the multiplicity of creation also leads to problems—the younger gods' play disturbs their mother,

Tiamat; accordingly, Apsu plots to destroy them. When the god Ea hears of this plan, he intervenes and slays Apsu. From within the slain Apsu, Ea and Damkina create Marduk. Marduk emerges already mature and powerful, so perfect and superior to every god that's come before that “his godhead was doubled.” This sequence in the epic suggests that communities are predisposed to chaos unless some sort of order is imposed on them. The emergence of Marduk, begotten out of the very midst of chaos, is a turning point toward the establishment of order.

Once Marduk defeats Tiamat, who is bent on revenge for the slaying of Apsu, he goes about setting both gods and earthly creation in order. After Marduk slays Tiamat, he divides her waters and secures them above and below the earth (a common ancient Near Eastern conception of the establishment of the earth). Because Tiamat was associated with water and chaos, this division and assigning of Tiamat to appointed places is a clear symbol for the establishment of order out of chaos. Marduk also establishes the constellations—which symbolize the many different gods—and divides up the year according to their movements. He sets the waxing and waning of the moon to mark the months. Having arranged water and sky, Marduk also designates Tiamat's leftover waters for the fashioning of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, so central to Mesopotamian civilization. Through all these actions, Marduk is setting in place the world that would be familiar to Mesopotamian readers/hearers of the epic, repeatedly taming chaos in order to facilitate human flourishing.

Marduk's laying the groundwork for civilization then proceeds into the work of creating religious cults and, almost as an aside, humanity. Marduk declares that the cult center for the god Apsu will be the assembly-place for all the gods. He names this place Babylon, “home of the great gods [...] the center of religion.” The gods spend two years shoveling and making bricks with which to build Babylon, and each god also builds his individual shrine within it. Thus Marduk is responsible for making Babylon the center of religion, and the gods themselves create it.

When this work is complete, the other gods give speeches in praise of Marduk, and Marduk is inspired to do something still greater—to create human beings. Ea imposes on humanity the toils of the gods so that the gods can retire to rest in the sky. The characteristics of human beings aren't elaborated upon, but people are obviously meant to inhabit Babylon and serve the gods there, especially Marduk, who has created the conditions, both in heaven and on earth, that make it possible for human beings to exist and live orderly lives—guided by stars, nourished by rivers, and able to live together in a divinely established city.

Unlike other ancient religious texts, the *Enuma Elish* doesn't go into great detail about the character of the divine, divine expectations of human beings, or a higher purpose for human

life. The intent of the text seems to be to simply account for the origins of the ordered world humans see around them, and to affirm a role for human beings within that world. As people heard the epic read or watched it being performed, they would be reminded of the centrality of Babylon within the broader world—as well as simply getting to enjoy a dramatic story.



THE SOVEREIGNTY OF MARDUK

Marduk, or “Lord” in much of the text of the *Enuma Elish*, is the patron god of Babylon. The central argument of the *Enuma Elish* as a whole is thus to elevate Marduk as the sovereign deity—to demonstrate that out of the Babylonian pantheon, he is the supremely powerful god; and not only that, he displaces older gods, like the Sumerian Ea, in importance. By portraying Marduk as a figure whose will is as formidable as fate, a god whom other gods honor, and a warrior who easily vanquishes his foes, the author commends Marduk to his Babylonian audience as worthy of their highest allegiance—at the same time reaffirming their civic pride and identity as Babylonians, whose empire overpowered the territories and gods of its Mesopotamian predecessors, like Sumeria.

When even the gods Anshar and Ea are too scared to face Tiamat and her terrible army, Marduk initiates a confrontation with her. Marduk approaches his father, Anshar, saying, “Convene the council, name a special fate: My own utterance shall fix fate instead of you!” Unlike Ea, whose antiquity is greater but whose strength is less formidable, Marduk doesn’t need to be “fated” into confrontation with the fearsome goddess or ordered by the council of the gods; his own will and declaration brings about his fate. The gods, then, are being gathered to approve of a foregone conclusion. Accordingly, Anshar has all the gods summoned to a banquet in order to “decree a destiny for Marduk the champion.” When Lahmu, Lahamu, and the rest of the gods hear about Marduk’s readiness “of his own free will” to confront Tiamat, they rejoice and assemble for conversation, enjoying grain, choice wine, and plentiful beer. They become “carefree and merry” as they “decreed destiny for Marduk their champion.” The council of the gods, in other words, doesn’t really need to decree a course of events, as they might do regarding other events in the universe; their gathering instead serves the purpose of celebrating the inevitable course of events set in motion through Marduk’s own will—to the point that, even though Tiamat still rages, the gods can “make merry,” knowing that she will be vanquished soon enough. This suggests that Babylonian hegemony, too, is a reliable “fate.”

In fact, as if to confirm the certainty of what’s to come, the council of the gods takes the time to proclaim Marduk’s sovereignty before the battle takes place, then crowns him with suitable weapons. Even before he’s confronted Tiamat, the rest of the gods erect a shrine for Marduk, praising him as

unequaled among the gods, because his command is unalterable, and the gods must obey him. At this point, they even grant him “sovereignty over all of the whole universe.” In doing so, they recognize him as not just one of their own, but one to whom they owe their allegiance. This assembly of gods, joyfully recognizing the Babylonian upstart as their sovereign, thus idealizes the relationships between Babylon and the territories, kingdoms, and cultures its growing empire had subdued.

The gods ask Marduk to cause a constellation to appear, vanish, and reappear through the power of his speech. When they see that his very utterance is effective in doing this, the gods all rejoice and grant him “an unfaceable weapon to crush the foe.” They also give him a bow and quiver, a mace, lightning, and a net (not to mention that “his body was filled with an ever-blazing flame”). Marduk’s ability to control the heavens—to cause things to come into being and cease to be—suggests that he will much more easily subdue an unruly goddess.

Marduk quickly triumphs over Tiamat in single combat. In fact, his showdown with her is almost an anticlimax, and his surplus of weapons seem to be more for show than for necessity. Though Tiamat casts her spell of confusion, Marduk seems to shake it off matter-of-factly, accusing the goddess of deception and wickedness. The spells that cause other gods to stumble are mere trifles to Marduk. When Tiamat loses her temper at his resistance, Marduk casts his net around her and blows his evil wind at her, causing her to become distended. Then he easily shoots the arrow that kills her. At this Tiamat’s regiments panic and scatter, and Marduk imprisons them all. He tramples on Tiamat and makes the wind “carry [her blood] off as good news.” Ultimately, Marduk doesn’t just win the showdown; he triumphs where other gods fail, and he dispatches Tiamat with a good deal of showmanship, suggesting that he has power to spare.

After Tiamat is vanquished and Marduk orders the building of Babylon, the gods confirm his mastery over all other gods. Tablet VII of the *Enuma Elish* consists entirely of the many names of Marduk, proclaimed by the other gods in order to “elevate” him at this celebratory banquet—“They sat in their assembly and began to call out the destinies, pronounced his name in all their rites.” The “elevation” of Marduk by the other gods implicitly summons the original readers/listeners of this drama to perform the same in their own rites. This ceremonial foundation of Babylon and its rites also has more than political ramifications; Marduk’s mastery would have been understood as inseparably tied up with both Babylonian religious dominance and the mechanisms of the newly emerged empire.



CHAOS VS. COUNCIL

Like many ancient texts giving accounts of creation, the *Enuma Elish* suggests patterns for how human beings should live their lives in imitation of the

gods. The structure of this particular text highlights several gatherings, or councils, of the gods, leading up to the showdown between Tiamat (the sea-goddess, representing chaos) and the champion Marduk, whose emergence as the head of the Babylonian pantheon is central to the epic. Early in the text, councils tend to have a secretive or chaotic character that ultimately gives way to monstrous violence; in contrast, councils where Marduk is involved are deliberative, triumphant, and even celebratory. Through this contrast, the anonymous author of the *Enuma Elish* commends orderly deliberative bodies as the ideal mechanism for human governance, one that leads to society's flourishing.

The assemblies that take place in the first half of the story are not quite worthy of the name, as they tend to be secretive and unilateral or else chaotic and tending to produce demonic violence. The first council in the story effectively takes place behind the backs of the other gods. When Tiamat is upset about the younger gods' noisy play, Apsu and his vizier Mummu get together to discuss these affairs ("They went and sat in front of Tiamat, / And discussed affairs concerning the gods their sons"). Apsu and Mummu decide to destroy the gods, and even when Tiamat is upset by this, urging patience instead, the two plot secretly to go ahead with their original plan. It's only because the wise god Ea finds out what they intend that he's able to preemptively slay Apsu. In this instance, Apsu only takes counsel from his personal adviser, and they act in secret, betraying Apsu's offspring.

The next council in the story consists of the gods nagging Tiamat with their grievances and Tiamat making trouble in response. The gods are aggrieved because when Marduk, the hero-god created out of the remnants of Apsu, plays with the wind and sea, he stirs up Tiamat's waters. The gods accuse Tiamat of not loving Apsu enough to protect him from Ea's violence, and of not loving them (her children) enough to protect them from Marduk's disturbing play. To avenge Apsu and stop Marduk, the gods "convene a council and create conflict." But Tiamat mainly reacts to her children's grievances ("Tiamat listened, and the speech pleased her. 'Let us act now, as you were advising!'") and goes along with the "evil" they "plotted...in their hearts" instead of engaging in any real deliberation. After listening to her offspring "scheming restlessly night and day," she fashions an army of snakes, dragons, and other fierce creatures to defend them. This council is instigated by murmuring and results in monstrous creations intended to wreak destruction.

In contrast, the assemblies that take place once Marduk steps into the picture are much more restrained in character, they take deliberate action, and they lead to celebration and triumph among the society of the gods. When Marduk and the gods allied with him get together, their gathering focuses on deliberation and countering an adverse fate. When Ea hears about Tiamat's agitation, he tells his father, Anshar, that Tiamat

"has convened an assembly and is raging out of control." Anshar then assembles the Anukki (the gathering of gods) to figure out if there is anything they can do, or if "fate [is] fixed." At first the group "sat silently," in contrast to the "restless scheming" seen among Tiamat's offspring. But when Marduk speaks up, he tells his father, "Convene the council, name a special fate: My own utterance shall fix fate instead of you!" In contrast to the type of assembly over which Tiamat presides, which is noisy and merely stirs up conflict, this more solemn, deliberative gathering declares a solution from the outset—imposing order on conflict.

Once order is established, the gathering gives way to celebration. When he hears Marduk's plan, Anshar has all the gods summoned to a banquet in order to "decree a destiny for Marduk the champion." When Lahmu, Lahamu, and the rest of the gods hear about Marduk's readiness "of his own free will" to confront Tiamat, they spend most of this assembly enjoying themselves over wine and beer, becoming "carefree and merry." From now on, little deliberation is necessary, much less infighting or the summoning of fearsome monsters; instead, the gods preemptively celebrate what their champion has decreed. In contrast to complaint, chaos, and violence among Tiamat's followers, Marduk's gathering is characterized by solemnity, decisiveness, and celebration. This stark contrast commends the latter example as the ideal model for human governance as well.

It's worth noting, too, that after Marduk's battle with Tiamat concludes in peace and the foundation of Babylon—the center of civilization for the epic's original audience—one more assembly takes place. In the final Tablet of the epic, the gods sit together and announce Marduk's various titles and extol his attributes, an activity that models ideal religious behavior for Babylonians in addition to ideal governance.



FEMININE POWER AND SUBJUGATION

In the *Enuma Elish*, much of the action is driven by the primordial goddess Tiamat, whose traits are associated with irritability, reactivity, and deception. This is because Tiamat is the sea-goddess—associated with a force (**water**) that, for ancient Babylonians, was unpredictable and prone to behave in ways that were hostile to human life. Therefore, the creation epic portrays Marduk's battle with her as key to the founding of human civilization. In doing so, it suggests that "feminine" traits are extremely formidable—only the greatest of the gods can overpower them—but also must be suppressed so that human life can carry on in an orderly way.

Tiamat is primarily portrayed as irritable and reactive. She is easily disturbed and riled up by the other gods' carryings-on. The original violence of the story is touched off by Tiamat's anger when the younger gods' play disrupts her sleep, and later, she "[heaves] restlessly" as a result of the newly created wind.

Though these disturbances are bad enough, Tiamat is piqued just as much by the nagging taunts of her offspring. Upset by the winds, her children demand, “Was your lover Apsu not in your heart? [...] No wonder you sit alone!” and “Are you not a mother? [...] Don’t you love us?” These somewhat humorous complaints don’t bear a clear connection to the issue at hand, almost suggesting that the younger gods know Tiamat’s sensitivity and are taking advantage of her weak spots to get their way.

At the same time, Tiamat is definitely not an ineffectual, passive character. She creates terrifying beings, commands obedience, and sets war in motion. Tiamat fashions snakes, dragons, and demons to fight against Marduk. She is a creator, even making an “unfaceable weapon” (the venom-filled, sharp-fanged snakes), and she commands obedience: “her orders were so powerful, they could not be disobeyed.” She utters curses that effectively scare away all the other gods except for Marduk (“Whoever looks upon [Tiamat’s creatures] shall collapse in utter terror!”). In short, Tiamat is a formidable force of nature.

Tiamat also takes the initiative to marshal an army and lead her forces into battle. She “[confers] leadership” on her consort Qingu, she musters her troops, and she bestows on Qingu the Tablet of Destinies so that his word will be law. She appoints Qingu in her stead because he is her “only lover,” but there’s no suggestion that she isn’t capable of occupying the same role herself. In addition, Tiamat’s ability to fashion a formidable army out of nothing and determine its course suggests that the feminine capacity to create life is viewed as extremely powerful, before which all but the greatest of gods must tremble.

In the end, however, Tiamat’s weakness is that she is easily angered, and this is what leads to her final defeat. At first, Tiamat appears to have the upper hand. When Marduk comes to confront her, Tiamat casts a spell of falsehood that confuses everyone who looks at her, causing their will and actions to become muddled. Even Marduk is momentarily unable to discern her strategy because Tiamat’s incantations are so powerful, showing again how formidable she is.

However, Marduk recovers himself and attacks Tiamat at a weak spot. He accuses her of being different on the surface than she is in her depths: “Why are you so friendly on the surface / When your depths conspire to muster a battle force?” She is a life-giving mother, but deep down, she lacks compassion (an allusion to the simultaneously life-giving and deadly powers of water). This is what provokes the goddess’s natural rage to surface once again, letting Marduk take advantage of her sputtering to disable and kill her. After Tiamat is slain, she is divided up into tame, manageable bodies—such as the Tigris and Euphrates rivers—that are amenable to human civilization and flourishing. However, even now, there’s the underlying threat of floods, and thus the need for continued appeal to gods like Marduk.

In the end, through Tiamat’s character, feminine traits are associated with forces—like floods and storms—that were unpredictable, threatening to people’s livelihoods and to society, and in need of harnessing. There’s never any question about the power of such forces to do deadly harm to even the mightiest of gods—that’s why Marduk must be triumphant in the end, reassuring audiences that the natural world can be subdued so as to allow people to live in peace, no matter how frightening its powers appear on the surface. This treatment of Tiamat’s femininity might also extend more broadly to society’s view of women and “female” traits at this time. As a more centralized civilization took shape, with the prominence of the city beginning to dominate over agrarian rhythms, patterns of male-dominated governance—viewed as more orderly and predictable—were starting to become weighted more heavily than those “feminine” rhythms associated with a more diffuse agrarian society.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



WATER

Water is the most significant symbol in the *Enuma Elish*. Water symbolizes chaos, an association that makes sense considering how, for ancient Near Eastern peoples as now, water is an element that must be forcibly contained to ensure human survival—but at the same time, is indispensable to human survival. At the opening of the epic, nothing but water exists—just the primordial gods Apsu and Tiamat, “mixing their waters.” Marduk’s stirring of Tiamat’s temperamental waters provokes the central conflict of the epic, the battle between Marduk (the god who imposes order) and Tiamat (the goddess of watery chaos). When Tiamat’s waters become restless and angry, she “rages out of control,” and Marduk slays her to ensure the survival of the gods. After Tiamat is subdued, Marduk takes care to secure her waters in place, notably by containing the flow from her eyes into the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which were central to the sustenance of Babylonian civilization. Thus the subduing and channeling of water is pictured as vital, both symbolically among the gods and literally in order for human life to flourish.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Enuma Elish* published in 2009.

Tablet 1 Quotes

☞ When skies above were not yet named
Nor earth below pronounced by name
Apsu, the first one, their begetter
And maker Tiamat, who bore them all,
Had mixed their waters together.
But had not formed pastures, nor discovered reed-beds;
When yet no gods were manifest.
Nor names pronounced, nor destinies decreed.
Then gods were born within them.

Related Characters: Tiamat, Apsu

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

These are the first nine lines of the *Enuma Elish*. They describe the state of things before anything had yet been created—nothing of earth or heaven has yet been named. Only two primeval beings, the god Apsu and the goddess Tiamat, exist. They dwell amidst a watery chaos with no recognizable landforms, absent the company of any other gods. In ancient Mesopotamian religion, Apsu was associated with fresh water and Tiamat with salt water. From the mixing of these waters, everything else will come into being. This quiet, undifferentiated scene sets the stage for the coming action in a couple of ways. Its harmony provides a contrast to the tumult that will arise once other gods come into being, bringing conflict with them. More broadly, it also contrasts with the dynamic, varied world that will emerge as creation becomes marked by complexity and community rather than simplicity.

☞ Apsu made his voice heard
And spoke to Tiamat in a loud voice,
'Their ways have become very grievous to me.
By day I cannot rest, by night I cannot sleep.
I shall abolish their ways and disperse them!
Let peace prevail, so that we can sleep.'
When Tiamat heard this,
She was furious and shouted at her lover;
She shouted dreadfully and was beside herself with rage,
But then suppressed the evil in her belly. 'How could we allow
what we ourselves created to perish?
Even though their ways are so grievous, we should bear it
patiently.'

Related Characters: Tiamat, Apsu (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes shortly after Apsu and Tiamat have created other gods. No sooner has this younger generation of gods come into being—divinities like Lahmu, Lahamu, Anshar, and Ea—than they begin to disrupt the peaceful environment in which Apsu and Tiamat have enjoyed quiet leisure up to this time. The upstart gods enjoy getting together and creating a clamor, which stirs up Tiamat's waters and prevents her and Apsu from resting. Apsu can't get them to quiet down, and Tiamat prefers to indulge them. Finally, Apsu and his vizier, Mummu, come before Tiamat, saying that something must be done. When Apsu proposes that their offspring be destroyed altogether, Tiamat passionately quells this discussion, arguing that devotion to their children should prevail over their own comfort. This exchange creates dramatic tension over the question of which of the two will ultimately have their way regarding their unruly descendants. And even this early in the epic, conflict between the older and younger generations of gods moves to the forefront of the action, creating the anticipation of a greater showdown to come.

☞ Inside pure Apsu, Marduk was born.
Ea his father created him,
Damkina his mother bore him.
He suckled the teats of goddesses;
The nurse who reared him filled him with awesomeness;
Proud was his form, piercing his stare.
Mature his emergence, he was powerful from the start.
Anu his father's begetter beheld him,
And rejoiced, beamed; his heart was filled with joy.
He made him so perfect that his godhead was doubled.
Elevated far above them, he was superior in every way.

Related Characters: Anu, Damkina, Nudimmud / Ea, Marduk, Apsu

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

After Tiamat refuses to destroy her children, Apsu resolves

to go ahead with the plan anyway, but Ea, wisest of the gods, finds out and slays Apsu before he can carry it out. Apsu then creates a dwelling for himself and his lover, Damkina, atop Apsu's remains ("Apsu" can also refer to a spring of fresh water, or a dwelling upon such a spring—the Sumerian god Ea/Enki's temple was called the "apsu"), and here Marduk is begotten and born. It's evident from the way Marduk is described in detail here—suckled by goddesses, powerful from his very birth, and evoking joy in other deities—that the epic is setting him up to be "superior in every way" to those gods introduced before him. Where his forebears may have been powerful gods, Marduk is *doubly* a god. In addition, the fact that Marduk literally comes into being out of the remains of other gods symbolizes the fact that he's going to surpass them in significance and prominence within the Babylonian pantheon.

☛☛ Tiamat was stirred up, and heaved restlessly day and night. The gods, unable to rest, had to suffer . . .

They plotted evil in their hearts, and
They addressed Tiamat their mother, saying,
'Because they slew Apsu your lover and
You did not go to his side but sat mute,
He has created the four, fearful winds
To stir up your belly on purpose, and we simply cannot sleep!
Was your lover Apsu not in your heart?
And (vizier) Mummu who was captured? No wonder you sit
alone!
Are you not a mother? You heave restlessly
But what about us, who cannot rest? Don't you love us?
Our grip(?) [is slack], (and) our eyes are sunken.
Remove the yoke of us restless ones, and let us sleep!
Set up a [battle cry] and avenge them!
Con[quer the enemy] and reduce them to nought!'

Related Characters: Mummu, Apsu, Tiamat

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

When the young Marduk plays with the winds, the older gods' rest is disturbed, prompting them to accuse Tiamat, whose own waters toss restlessly. They charge her with failing to defend her lover Apsu from the plotting of the younger gods; because she failed to love him as she should,

they say, she is now alone, at the mercy of Marduk's provocations. Not only that, but she evidently doesn't love her children enough to safeguard their sleep, they claim. These allegations prove to be enough to stir Tiamat to action against Marduk and her other younger offspring. Although Tiamat is presented as a formidable goddess and revered creator in her own right, it's also suggested that her chaotic nature inclines her to be readily swayed by external forces, as she's manipulated here by her wheedling offspring. This trait ultimately leads to her downfall, as she's later driven to uncontrolled rage by similar charges spoken by Marduk.

☛☛ They crowded round and rallied beside Tiamat.
They were fierce, scheming restlessly night and day.
They were working up to war, growling and raging.
They convened a council and created conflict.
Mother Hubur, who fashions all things,
Contributed an unfaceable weapon: she bore giant snakes,
Sharp of tooth and unsparing of fang.
She filled their bodies with venom instead of blood. [...]
She stationed a horned serpent, a *mushussu*-dragon, and a
lahmu-hero,
An *ugallu*-demon, a rabid dog, and a scorpion-man,
Aggressive *umu*-demons, a fish-man, and a bull-man
Bearing merciless weapons, fearless in battle.
Her orders were so powerful, they could not be disobeyed.

Related Characters: Tiamat

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the terrifying army of monsters that Tiamat creates and assembles in order to do battle against the gods. The quote gives evidence of Tiamat's formidable strength and creative power. Tiamat's monstrous assembly also contrasts with the more "civilized" gathering of the gods to proclaim Marduk their champion, according with the author's view of what orderly governance should look like. This passage is also significant because it is repeated a total of four times in the *Enuma Elish*—a sign of the ritual usage of this text. Such repetition served to create narrative tension for the audience before whom the epic was recited or dramatized, and it probably also helped hearers learn key details of the story, much as the repetition of elements in a fairytale, or the chorus of a song, might do for more modern audiences.

Tablet 2 Quotes

☞☞ 'Will no (other) god come forward? Is [fate] fixed?
Will no one go out to face Tiamat [...]?'
Then Ea from his secret dwelling called
[The perfect] one of Anshar, father of the great gods,
Whose heart is perfect like a fellow-citizen or countryman,
The mighty heir who was to be his father's champion,
Who rushes (fearlessly) into battle: Marduk the Hero!
He told him his innermost design, saying,
'O Marduk, take my advice, listen to your father!
You are the son who sets his heart at rest!
Approach Anshar, drawing near to him,
And make your voice heard, stand your ground:
he will be calmed by the sight of you.'

Related Characters: Nudimmud / Ea (speaker), Anshar, Tiamat, Marduk

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

After Ea observes the terrifying upheaval that Tiamat has stirred up and declines to face her, Anshar and the other gods briefly despair of ever defeating the angry goddess. Then Ea summons Marduk, who hasn't featured in the story so far beyond his birth and his playfulness with the winds which stirred up Tiamat's anger. Ea encourages Marduk to approach Anshar to offer himself as champion in battle against Tiamat. The significance of this passage is that it shows Ea—who, up to this point, had been more prominent in the story, reflective of his role as one of the most revered gods in the Mesopotamian pantheon—willingly giving way to his younger counterpart, Marduk, who is now coming to greater prominence in Babylonian religion. This quote thus legitimates a “changing of the guard” from the older Sumerian deity to the newer Babylonian one, showing how the ritual use of this text undergirded the dominant identity of the Babylonian empire.

☞☞ The Lord rejoiced at the word of his father;
His heart was glad and he addressed his father;
'Lord of the gods, fate of the great gods,
If indeed I am to be your champion,
If I am to defeat Tiamat and save your lives,
Convene the council, name a special fate,
Sit joyfully together in Ubshu-ukkinakku:
My own utterance shall fix fate instead of you!
Whatever I create shall never be altered!
The decree of my lips shall never be revoked, never changed!'

Related Characters: Marduk (speaker), Tiamat, Anshar

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

Just before saying these words, Marduk has assured Anshar that he will undertake what no other god has dared—doing battle with Tiamat—and that, therefore, Anshar will soon “set [his] foot upon the neck of Tiamat.” Anshar, rejoicing, urges Marduk on in his storm-chariot to undertake this task. Significantly, though, Marduk makes a request of Anshar before he goes forward. He asks that Anshar summon all of the gods to a council, not only to bless his errand, but to affirm him, Marduk, as the greatest of the gods. He does not need the gods to “fix fate” anymore; the power of his own utterance will do that, showing the degree to which his power dwarfs that of the other gods who populate the pantheon. This council creates a sort of pause in the action in the *Enuma Elish*—Tiamat still rages, but her furor can be put on hold while the gods recognize and celebrate Marduk's mighty deeds to come. This pause underscores Marduk's emergence as the greatest of the Mesopotamian gods.

Tablet 3 Quotes

☞☞ They milled around and then came,
All the great gods who fix the fates,
Entered into Anshar's presence and were filled with joy.
Each kissed the other: in the assembly []
There was conversation, they sat at the banquet,
Ate grain, drank choice wine,
Let sweet beer trickle through their drinking straws.
Their bodies swelled as they drank the liquor;
They became very carefree, they were merry,
And they decreed destiny for Marduk their champion.

Related Characters: Marduk, Anshar, Lahamu, Lahmu

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

This is another quote which highlights Marduk's emergence as the head of the Babylonian pantheon. All of the gods have been summoned to a banquet in order to recognize and celebrate Marduk before he even embarks on his great deed of vanquishing Tiamat. So assured is Marduk's victory

that the gods basically have time to indulge in a big party while Tiamat stews in her anger at a distance. The gods “[mill] around,” enjoy conversation, and savor sweet beer; only after they’ve had time to become “merry” from drinking and fellowship do they go about the business of “[decreeing] destiny” for their champion. As the foregoing action makes clear, however, Marduk has set his own destiny in motion; the other gods are there merely to affirm a foregone conclusion. This passage reinforces in readers’ minds just how powerful and dominant Marduk is, that the other gods in the pantheon so happily cede their authority to him and trust in his prowess to secure their collective fates.

Tablet 4 Quotes

☞ The Lord lifted up the flood-weapon, his great weapon
And sent a message to Tiamat who feigned goodwill, saying:
'Why are you so friendly on the surface
When your depths conspire to muster a battle force?
Just because the sons were noisy (and) disrespectful to their
fathers,
Should you, who gave them birth, reject compassion?
You named Qingu as your lover,
You appointed him to rites of Anu-power, wrongfully his.
You sought out evil for Anshar, king of the gods,
So you have compounded your wickedness against the gods my
fathers!
Let your host prepare! Let them gird themselves with your
weapons!
Stand forth, and you and I shall do single combat!
When Tiamat heard this,
She went wild, she lost her temper.
Tiamat screamed aloud in a passion,
Her lower parts shook together from the depths.

Related Characters: Marduk (speaker), Anshar, Qingu, Tiamat

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 252

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Marduk finally confronts Tiamat in single combat. Before he strikes out at her, however, he makes several pointed remarks to the goddess. He asks Tiamat why she is so deceptive—her outward friendliness masks the deadly turmoil within. She also acts in an unseemly way

for a mother, rejecting compassion for her children in favor of vengeance. These accusations make sense in light of Tiamat’s association with the chaos of the sea—the ocean’s outer calm and beauty do conceal danger in the depths, and the sea’s power can readily snuff out the lives of those whose livelihoods it also sustains. For a landlocked civilization such as Mesopotamia, it’s not surprising that the sea would claim a sort of dangerous mystique in people’s minds and that they would be mindful of both its sustaining and perilous potential for daily survival. It’s also noteworthy that Tiamat’s character is presented as tempestuous as well as powerful; her easily manipulated temper seems to be taken taken for granted as a “feminine” trait as well as her awe-inspiring strength.

☞ The Lord spread his net and made it encircle her,
To her face he dispatched the *imhullu*-wind, which had
been behind:
Tiamat opened her mouth to swallow it,
And he forced in the *imhullu*-wind so that she could not close
her lips.
Fierce winds distended her belly;
Her insides were constipated and she stretched her mouth
wide.
He shot an arrow which pierced her belly.
Split her down the middle and slit her heart.
Vanquished her and extinguished her life.
He threw down her corpse and stood on top of her.

Related Characters: Marduk (speaker), Tiamat

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, describing Marduk’s defeat of Tiamat, is the climax of the *Enuma Elish*. Before he left the gods’ banquet celebrating his sovereignty, Marduk had been invested with numerous fearsome weapons. After hurling accusations at Tiamat and provoking her wrath anew, Marduk deploys his weapons in rapid succession, easily defeating Tiamat. He first catches her in his net, then disables her by blowing fierce whirlwinds into her belly, and finally takes advantage of her distended belly to end her life with a well-aimed arrow. He then stands in triumph over her corpse. Marduk’s victory symbolizes the submission of the primordial Mesopotamian gods to Marduk’s preeminence, as well as

the subjugation of feminine power to that of a masculine god. It finally signifies Marduk's ability to subdue chaos and set the civilization of the gods in its proper order—a task he will next take up in earthly civilization and ultimately pass on to human society.

Tablet 5 Quotes

●● He opened the Euphrates and the Tigris from her eyes,
Closed her nostrils,
He piled up clear-cut mountains from her udder.
Bored waterholes to drain off the catchwater.
He laid her tail across, tied it fast as the cosmic bond.
And [] the Apsu beneath his feet.
He set her thigh to make fast the sky,
With half of her he made a roof; he fixed the earth.
He [] the work, made the insides of Tiamat surge,
Spread his net, made it extend completely.

Related Characters: Tiamat, Marduk

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis

After Marduk defeats Tiamat, he does not simply triumph over her corpse. Rather, he puts her remains to service in creating the world. Here he uses various parts of her body to raise mountains, hold up the sky, and buttress the earth. Perhaps most significantly for the epic's Mesopotamian context, he uses the flow of water from Tiamat's eyes to form the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the boundaries of Mesopotamia, and thus, in many ways, the borders of the known world for most who would read or hear the recitation of the *Enuma Elish*. This passage also shows that Marduk's triumph over the old gods is not simply a straightforward narrative of Babylonian cultural dominance, but a story of continuity with Babylon's cultural predecessors. The stuff of the older religion literally lays the groundwork for the new world; through Marduk's efforts, Tiamat's body makes Mesopotamian life and flourishing possible. (Thus, in a sense, Tiamat's death is necessary for human life, and Marduk's hero status is further confirmed because he brought it about.)

●● I shall make a house to be a luxurious dwelling for myself
And shall found ... [a] cult centre within it,
And I shall establish my private quarters, and confirm my kingship.
Whenever you come up from the Apsu for an assembly,
Your night's resting place shall be in it, receiving you all.
Whenever you come down from the sky for an assembly,
Your night's resting place shall be in it, receiving you all.
I hereby name it Babylon, home of the great gods.
We shall make it the centre of religion.

Related Characters: Marduk

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

After Marduk has done the work of vanquishing Tiamat's chaos and bringing about order within creation, he turns to the work of establishing human civilization. Central to this task is creating a means of communication between the human and divine worlds—that is, establishing religion. Marduk does this by building a dwelling-place for himself, which also serves as a place for the gods to reside when they descend from the sky to hold assemblies. This place will be called Babylon. This quote thereby suggests several interesting things about the epic's religious context. For one, religion is understood to be initiated by the gods themselves—a condescension to humanity—rather than as a human effort to reach the gods. For another, religion is pictured, in part, as an “assembly”—that favored form of deliberation throughout the *Enuma Elish*—in which deities periodically gather together in a certain place. Finally, that place is, not coincidentally, Babylon—the heart of human civilization, which the epic describes as having been not only specially favored but even founded by the gods themselves.

Tablet 6 Quotes

●● When Marduk heard the speech of the gods,
He made up his mind to perform miracles.
He spoke his utterance to Ea,
And communicated to him the plan that he was considering.
'Let me put blood together, and make bones too.
Let me set up primeval man: Man shall be his name.
Let me create a primeval man.
The work of the gods shall be imposed (on him), and so they shall be at leisure.'

Related Characters: Marduk (speaker), Nudimmud / Ea

Related Themes:**Page Number:** 260**Explanation and Analysis**

In the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk's final significant action is the creation of human beings. Marduk undertakes this task after the creation of the earth and the foundation of Babylon as the dwelling-place for the gods. After that, the gods once more do obeisance to Marduk, lauding him as their sovereign king. When he hears this latest adulation, Marduk's mind is turned to the working of "miracles," with

the implication that, as great as the creation of the world might be, the making of human beings, with their special mandate of taking up the work of the gods, is a far more monumental achievement. Significantly, Ea has a prominent assistant role in this project, again showing that older gods weren't being entirely displaced by Marduk, and suggesting that the cherished legacy of such gods was respected and built upon in epics like this one. As Marduk's final work in the *Enuma Elish*, humans are presented as the pinnacle of creation, and they will do work like his—subduing chaos and maintaining order within civilization—after he and the other gods retire to heavenly rest.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

TABLET 1

Before the skies or earth are named, Apsu, the “begetter,” and Tiamat, the “maker,” dwell together, “[mixing] their **waters**.” No pastures, reed-beds, or other gods exist; no names have been pronounced, “nor destinies decreed.”

Then, gods are born within Apsu and Tiamat: Lahmu and Lahamu, Anshar and Kishar. Anshar has a son named Anu, and Anu begets Nudimmud, also called Ea. Each successive generation of gods surpasses the previous one. Nudimmud is “profound of understanding” as well as strong.

The gods of this generation sometimes get together, and their noise disturbs Tiamat; “their clamor reverberated.” The noise of their play “[stirs] up Tiamat’s belly.” Apsu can’t quiet them down, and Tiamat indulges their noise, even though it upsets her.

Finally Apsu summons his vizier, Mummu. The two sit before Tiamat and discuss the gods’ behavior. Apsu tells Tiamat, “I shall abolish their ways and disperse them!” Then he and Tiamat will be able to sleep. But Tiamat becomes furious at this. She asks Apsu how they can allow their creations to perish, and argues that they should bear patiently with their children’s ways.

Mummu disagrees with Tiamat and counsels Apsu accordingly, urging him to put an end to the playful gods and their noisy ways. Apsu’s face lights up at this “evil” suggestion, and he embraces Mummu.

When the gods hear of Apsu’s plan to destroy them, they fall silent. Ea, “superior in understanding,” finds out everything about the plot, then concocts a spell of his own. The spell stills the tumultuous **waters** and causes Apsu to fall into a sound sleep and Mummu into a daze. Then Ea slays Apsu.

The epic begins before anything else in creation exists, only the two primordial gods, Apsu and Tiamat. None of the landforms that would be familiar to the Babylonian audience yet exists; nothing has been named, and no futures have yet been determined—just the two gods dwelling together.



The pantheon of Babylonian gods comes into being. As time goes on, the gods become better and better in both wisdom and strength.



Tiamat’s offspring like to engage in noisy play, which distresses Tiamat, but she lets the children do what they want.



This is the first instance in the epic of gods holding a meeting of some sort—something that will recur as the story goes on. In this case, Apsu selfishly wants to destroy their children, but Tiamat wants to bear with them, even though they’re behaving badly.



Mummu advises Apsu poorly, and Apsu goes behind the backs of Tiamat and the other gods with a wicked plot.



Ea, the greatest of the gods who exists so far, takes the initiative to find out what Apsu plans to do and to kill him preemptively in order to spare himself and the other gods. He is able to lull Apsu with a skillful spell and then slay him, using a combination of his wisdom and his strength.



After Ea's triumph over Apsu, he builds his dwelling atop Apsu's remains and gives a "triumphal cry." He rests inside his new quarters, which he calls "Apsu." He and his lover, Damkina, dwell there in splendor. Inside this "chamber of destinies," Marduk, "cleverest of the clever, sage of the gods," is begotten and born.

Marduk "[suckles] the teats of goddesses," which "[fills] him with awesomeness." He has a "proud" form and a "piercing" stare, and he is mature and powerful from the beginning. Anu, his grandfather, rejoices with pride when he sees Marduk, who is so perfect that "his godhead [is] doubled," "elevated [...] above" and superior to his predecessors "in every way." [He has four all-perceiving eyes, four enormous ears, and lips that blaze forth fire.](#)

Anu creates the four winds and gives them to Marduk to play with. Marduk then creates waves, which stir up Tiamat, who "[heaves] restlessly day and night," disrupting the other gods' rest. In response, the weary gods "[plot] evil" and tell Tiamat that because she did not stop Ea from slaying Apsu, they are now suffering. They ask her, "Are you not a mother? [...] Don't you love us? Our grip is slack, and our eyes are sunken." They beg Tiamat to avenge Apsu.

Tiamat listens to her children's speech and is pleased by it. She says they should do as the children say; the gods who dwell within Apsu "adopted evil for the gods who begot them," so they, in turn, should be disturbed. The gods rally around Tiamat, "fierce" and "scheming," and "working up to war." They also "[convene] a council and [create] conflict."

Tiamat—here referred to as "Mother Hubur, who fashions all things"—makes an "unfaceable weapon" of giant, venom-filled snakes. She also makes "ferocious dragons" and chants a spell over them. A variety of other creatures join this fearsome menagerie, including a dragon, demons, a fish-man, and a bull-man.

Tiamat then promotes her consort, Qingu, and gives him leadership of her whole army. She sets him on a throne and announces that he now rules over the gods and, as her only lover, will be the greatest of all. She grants him the Tablet of Destinies and declares that his word will be law. Qingu then "[decrees] destinies" for the gods.

In keeping with the pattern established so far in the epic, Ea's offspring surpasses him and all previous gods. Significantly, Marduk is begotten within the dwelling built atop his slain ancestor, suggesting he'll partake of his predecessor's strengths while also much exceeding them.



Marduk is awe-inspiring from birth, even more impressive in his divinity than the gods who've come before him. His celebrated superiority anticipates his dominant role in the rest of the story.



Marduk's delight in creation causes Tiamat's waters to become wild and restless, and the gods seem to seize upon this pretext to turn on Tiamat, accusing her of failing to defend her lover Apsu, as well as being an inadequate mother.



Tiamat is swayed by her offspring's suggestions, agreeing that because Ea and his fellow gods stirred up trouble for their ancestors, they deserve trouble in their turn. A showdown between the older and younger gods is imminent. The line about convening a council and creating conflict will become a refrain in the text, suggesting how councils can go awry to yield discord instead of order.



Tiamat's power as "maker" is deployed here in alarming and unsettling ways—forming creatures whose function is deadly and whose appearances become more and more distorted, in contrast to her divine progeny, who had become higher and higher specimens of divinity.



Tiamat essentially places her new consort, Qingu, in the roles once occupied by Apsu, granting him highest authority and the ability to appoint the destinies of all subject to him.



TABLET 2

Tiamat assembles the army of fearsome creatures, doing “even more evil for posterity than Apsu.” Meanwhile, Ea hears about what’s going on and is “dumbfounded.” After thinking for a while, Ea approaches his father, Anshar, and tells him what Tiamat is planning. Their mother Tiamat, he explains, has rejected her children—“she has convened an assembly and is raging out of control.”

Ea recites the precise words and sequence of events that took place in the previous tablet, recounting the gods’ “[convening] a council and [creating] conflict,” Tiamat’s creation of fearsome creatures, and her promotion of Qingu as commander. When Anshar hears this account, he is distraught. Anshar tells Ea that because he started the fight by slaying Apsu, he’s responsible for cleaning up the mess.

In reply, Ea speaks “soothing [...] words of appeasement” to his father Anshar, reasoning with him that, given the monsters’ existence, he doesn’t have a chance of defeating Qingu. But Anshar assures Ea that he’s unbeatable and sends him Tiamat’s way. Ea goes to observe Tiamat’s strategy, but soon reports back to Anshar that the goddess was too much for him; his spell was too weak for her, and Tiamat’s noise too frightening. He says that Anshar must send someone else and that, after all, “however strong a woman’s strength, it is not equal to a man’s.”

At this report, Anshar is speechless with despair. The rest of the gods assemble and consider the situation in silence, then wonder aloud, “Is fate fixed? Will no one go out to face Tiamat?” Then Ea encourages Marduk the Hero to approach Anshar. Marduk does, and Anshar’s mood immediately changes from trepidation to joy.

Marduk urges Anshar to send him to face Tiamat, even though Anshar is hesitant, reminding him how intimidating “Tiamat of womankind” can be. Marduk assures Anshar that he will soon “set [his] foot upon the neck of Tiamat.” Anshar then charges Marduk to “set forth immediately in the storm chariot.” Marduk, rejoicing, asks that, if he is to be the gods’ champion, Anshar “convene [a] council” and “name a special fate.” Marduk declares that “My own utterance shall fix fate [...] The decree of my lips shall never be revoked.”

While Apsu had intended evil by planning to destroy his offspring, Tiamat surpasses him by actively preparing for war against them. Instead of doing the work proper to a god by governing and preserving order among creation, Tiamat is “out of control”—instead of caring for her creation, she seeks to unmake it.



Ea’s recitation of events accords with a ritual, dramatic rendering of the creation epic—repeating key lines so as to instill the story of Tiamat’s actions in hearers’ memories. Anshar, in a markedly fatherly manner, tells his son that he needs to deal with the problem he’s created.



Even though women are categorically portrayed as being weaker than men, Tiamat is described as being incredibly powerful, too intimidating even for the wisdom, well-crafted spells, and strength of Ea, one of the greatest of gods. This exchange sets up the imminent rise of Marduk. Ea’s admitted inability to defeat Tiamat also supports the elevation of the Babylonian Marduk and the Sumerian Ea’s fading into the background.



The contrast between Anshar’s despair and his sudden joy at Marduk’s appearance sets the tone for the rest of the epic: the hero has entered the scene to rescue the other gods from their seemingly helpless impasse.



Though Anshar still quails before Tiamat’s terror, Marduk is confident, and Anshar willingly sends him forth in the storm chariot (storms were one of the things Marduk was associated with as a god). But first Marduk desires the recognition of the council of the gods. Significantly, though, Marduk doesn’t require the gods to “fix fate” on his behalf—his own speech creates his destiny, clearly demonstrating his superiority over the other gods.



TABLET 3

Anshar has all the gods summoned to a “conversation” and “banquet,” where they will eat grain, drink wine, and “then decree a destiny for Marduk their champion.” He sends his vizier, Kakka, to Lahmu and Lahamu to warn them about Tiamat’s rejection of her children.

Anshar instructs Kakka to recite the same lines which originated in Tablet I, regarding Tiamat’s conflict-stirring council, her “unfaceable weapon,” the gathering of other fierce creatures, and Qingu’s battle command. He also has him relay the glad news of Marduk’s desire “of his own free will” to face Tiamat. Kakka accordingly presents himself to Lahmu and Lahamu and proclaims the message word for word.

Lahmu and Lahamu, as well as the Igigi (the company of younger gods allied with them), are dismayed to hear this news, having been ignorant of Tiamat’s plans. They duly attend Anshar’s banquet, which is a joyful event: besides conversation, there’s “choice wine” and “sweet beer.” As the gods drink, they become “carefree” and “merry,” and they “[decree] destiny for Marduk their champion.”

TABLET 4

The other gods create a “princely shrine” for Marduk, and he “[takes] up residence as ruler before his fathers.” The other gods proclaim that Marduk is honored among them and that his “destiny is unequalled.” From now on, they say, his command can’t be altered, and no gods can surpass the limits set by Marduk. Marduk is their champion, with “sovereignty over all of the whole universe.”

The gods then set up a constellation in their midst and request Marduk to destroy and recreate it, through the power of his word. Marduk does—he speaks, and it vanishes; he speaks again, and it reappears. Seeing this, the gods rejoice, saying, “Marduk is King!” They give him a scepter, a throne, and a staff.

The gathering to which Anshar summons the gods has the air of a celebration as much as a deliberative council. This is in keeping with Marduk’s earlier declaration that his “own utterance shall fix fate.” He doesn’t need other gods to do that for him, but merely to ratify what he has already decreed. The variety of gods referenced in the text can be confusing, but it’s helpful to envision them as essentially two factions—the older gods (Tiamat and those allied with her) and the younger gods (Marduk and other offspring of Tiamat’s allied with him).



The repetition of this long passage is further evidence of the text’s use in a ritual context—its repeated recital (now for the third and fourth times) reinforces the key dramatic elements in the story and heightens tension.



Lahmu and Lahamu, as firstborn offspring of Tiamat, are particularly distraught to hear of their mother’s ill intentions toward them and the rest of the gods. At the banquet, however, everyone unabashedly celebrates together, since Marduk’s victory is a foregone conclusion.



The gods come to the purpose of their banquet, which is to proclaim Marduk’s sovereignty among—and above—them. By having the elder gods—his “fathers”—declare these attributes of Marduk, the epic’s author unequivocally champions Marduk’s status as the preeminent Babylonian god, the one that all readers/hearers of the epic should worship in their turn.



So far, Marduk has only made impressive utterances; he hasn’t actually performed anything in keeping with his self-proclaimed status. But now, at the other gods’ behest, he controls the stars by the power of his word. This power to create and destroy offers a tangible demonstration of Marduk’s unrivaled deity, which the gods quickly reward by investing him with the symbols of kingly office.



Having done this, the gods now grant Marduk weapons with which to confront Tiamat. They give him a bow and arrow, a mace, lightning, and an “ever-blazing flame” that fills his body. They also give him a net and harness seven winds to cause turmoil within Tiamat. He is also armed with a spell and a poison antidote. Marduk mounts his storm-chariot and sets off toward Tiamat, “who raged out of control.”

When Marduk draws near and tries to discern Tiamat’s strategy, he’s momentarily confused; his will and actions becoming “muddled.” Tiamat effortlessly casts a spell of falsehood that transfixes all who approach her. But Marduk isn’t hindered for long—he soon raises his “flood-weapon” and speaks to Tiamat “who feigned goodwill,” asking, “Why are you so friendly on the surface / When your depths conspire to muster a battle force?” He further accuses her of neglecting to show compassion to her own children, wrongfully granting power to Qingu, and scheming against the gods. He challenges her to single combat.

When Tiamat hears Marduk’s accusations, “she went wild” and “lost her temper.” She continues casting her spell. Finally she and Marduk come face to face in battle. Marduk encircles Tiamat with his net and blows his fierce winds at her; when she tries to swallow them, Marduk forces a more fearsome whirlwind down her throat, causing her belly to become distended. This gives him the opportunity to shoot her with an arrow, which splits her down the middle and kills her. Marduk stands atop her corpse, and Tiamat’s forces scatter in panic.

Marduk imprisons Tiamat’s allied gods and restrains the dozens of creatures who’d marched at her side. He also defeats Qingu and “wrested from him the Tablet of Destinies, wrongfully his,” which he seals with his own seal. After that, Marduk smashes Tiamat’s skull with his mace, causing the North Wind to “carry [...] off [her blood] as good news.” Marduk’s fathers rejoice and greet him with gifts.

Marduk then “[creates] marvels” from Tiamat’s corpse, placing half of it up “to roof the sky” and making sure her **waters** are securely contained. He then constructs a greater shrine in the pattern of Apsu, his birthplace, and creates cult centers in the sky for lesser gods, including Ea.

The gods equip Marduk with an array of menacing weapons with which to face down Tiamat. Tiamat is characterized as “out of control,” while Marduk is imagined as coming to bring order out of chaos by subduing her.



Marduk is briefly overpowered by Tiamat as well, but unlike the other gods, he is able to resist her spell and confront her. Because he can see through her spell, he’s able to not only characterize Tiamat’s threat as chaotic and terrifying, but also see that the outward face she presents is different from what’s on the inside—fitting for a goddess who’s associated with the deceptive potential of the sea. Marduk’s accusation finally brings the confrontation to a head.



As earlier in the epic, Tiamat reacts with fury to accusations hurled at her. She is so enraged that she doesn’t recover effectively so as to counter Marduk’s weapons, and he quickly gains the advantage, slaying her through a combination of cunning and strength. He’s so resourceful in battle that he doesn’t even need to resort to most of his weapons. With that, the ancient goddess—and the forces of chaos—are permanently vanquished.



Marduk mops up what remains of the opposition and takes from Qingu—who, despite the command granted to him by Tiamat, didn’t even figure in the battle itself—the Tablet of Destinies. When Marduk seals the Tablet with his seal, he’s symbolically legitimizing his reign as the preeminent god and overseer of fates, restoring things to their rightful order.



Marduk continues the work of setting creation in order and containing chaos by making sure that Tiamat’s waters cannot stir up conflict anymore. As the chief of gods, he also appoints places for the worship of lesser deities, including Ea, the one he’s particularly displacing. There’s continuity with former religious patterns, then, but there’s also no question about who now dominates.



TABLET 5

Marduk sets up constellations corresponding to the various gods. He designates the divisions of the year and the months, and he assigns the moon its monthly course. From the eyes of Tiamat's corpse, he also causes the **water** of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to gush forth. He uses the remaining portions of Tiamat's corpse to form mountains and gird up the earth.

After Marduk finishes his work, Anu, Ea, and other gods present him with gifts. The Igigi assemble and do obeisance to Marduk, and the Anukki kiss his feet. Together they all proclaim him King, and he puts on a crown and other royal garments. Lahmu and Lahamu tell the Igigi, "Previously Marduk was just our beloved son / But now he is your king."

The gods then speak in unison, declaring a Sumerian title for Marduk which means "King of the gods of heaven and earth." They pronounce a blessing upon him. Then Marduk speaks, announcing that he is creating his private quarters in a place called Babylon. The gods can stay there also, and it will be known as the "home of the great gods" and "the center of religion." The gods agree and rejoice at this.

TABLET 6

When Marduk hears the gods' praises of him, he decides to "perform miracles." He plans to combine blood and bone to form the creature called "Man." The "work of the gods shall be imposed" on man, allowing the gods to rest. When Marduk tells Ea this plan, Ea recommends that people be created from "one who is hostile" to the gods.

Marduk calls an assembly of the gods. He tells them that whoever started Tiamat's war and gathered her army shall be surrendered to him and bear the penalty for his actions. The gods reply that the war was Qingu's fault. They bind Qingu, and Ea creates humanity from his blood. The work of the gods is then imposed on humanity.

Tablet V contains a large lacuna (a missing section) which has never been found, and while the gap disrupts the flow of the narrative, the gist is that Marduk doesn't just triumph over Tiamat's body, but uses her remains to create the world as Babylonians know it—for example, causing the life-giving rivers, the very borders of Mesopotamia, to flow. The world is literally made out of the goddess, again emphasizing a measure of continuity with the older deities even after they're vanquished by the new.



Just in case it wasn't clear before, the ascendancy of Marduk is further established as the other gods, both young and old, give him gifts, do homage to him, and recognize that he is no longer their peer, but their lord.



Marduk creates Babylon as the home of the gods. This provides a mythic origin and legitimation of Babylon as the religious capital of the world.



Having finished creating the earth and the home of the gods, Marduk now decides that the labors of the gods will be transferred to new beings of his creation—humanity.



Tiamat's commander, Qingu, ultimately takes the fall for the war among the gods. Throughout the epic, the "work of the gods" has been to create order and keep chaos at bay; now these tasks will fall upon human society.



Marduk appoints places for all the gods in the heavens. The gods then request permission to construct shrines for themselves, so Marduk, “his face lit up greatly,” commands them to create Babylon. The gods spend a whole year shoveling and making bricks; in the second year, they build high dwellings for themselves and especially for Anu, Ellil, and Ea.

After all the shrines have been constructed, Marduk invites all the gods to a merry banquet, where they all drink beer. They establish all the “decrees and designs” for heaven and earth and for the religious cult. Finally they swear an oath and confirm Marduk’s kingship and mastery over all. Anshar gives him another new name, Asarluhi, and decrees that he will be “shepherd over the black-headed people, his creation,” who are to revere him and bring him offerings.

Though humans may worship many different gods, the gods themselves will have only Marduk as their god. They decide to proclaim Marduk’s fifty names and his ways and deeds, starting with “Marduk,” the one who saved the gods; “Majesty of the gods,” the creator of people; “Bel,” the king of all gods; and many more. The gods “sat in their assembly and began to call out the destinies, pronounced his name in all their rites.”

TABLET 7

Tablet VII consists entirely of the recitation of Marduk’s fifty titles and attributes by the assembly of the gods. Among these, Marduk is the “producer of vegetation,” the one “whose farmland makes a surplus for the country,” “the inspiration of his people,” “who created mankind to set them free,” “director of justice,” “lord of abundance and the luxuriance of great grain-piles,” the one “who waded into the broad Sea-Tiamat in his fury,” and who “[shepherds] all the gods like sheep.” With these and dozens of other names the gods exult Marduk. The tablet and the epic conclude with an exhortation to humanity to call upon Marduk’s name and remember his defeat of Tiamat and the kingship he won.

The gods are settled in the heavens instead of the earth, since the earth will be the realm of humanity. However, the gods themselves construct the earthly dwellings (shrines) in which they will sometimes stay, where humans will worship them. Religious practice is initiated and given shape by the gods, not by the invention of humans.



Another celebratory banquet takes place, at which the gods solemnly affirm all that they’ve done and decreed. While human beings haven’t featured significantly in the epic, here humans—specifically the “black-headed people,” the Babylonians—are charged to worship Marduk and receive his protection in turn. The title Asarluhi is often used for Marduk in religious incantations.



Though the text acknowledges that Babylonian society will be polytheistic, Marduk will have supremacy among the society of the gods. The assembly of the gods then models a religious rite, pronouncing the names and deeds of Marduk.



The epic’s final tablet is generally not considered to be essential to the overall story of the Enuma Elish. However, even a cursory survey of the names, titles, and attributes listed in this section gives an apt summary of Marduk’s role as it was understood within agrarian Babylonian society and his sovereign position among the Babylonian pantheon. This tablet, with the gods themselves enumerating Marduk’s praiseworthy traits, models the view that Babylonian worshipers are expected to hold regarding Marduk and the form their religious ritual should take.





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