HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Babylonia Epic

ENUMA ELISH: Epic of Creation (1894-1595 B.C.)

Clay tablets This epic creation story is preserved on seven clay tablets and runs to a little over a thousand lines. The first discovery of the tablets was made in the Library of King Ashurbanipal (668-630 B.C.) between 1848-1876, and subsequent finds, throughout ancient Babylonia and from dealers in antiquities, have enabled scholars to restore what they take to be a nearly complete (but often hard to interpret) version of the original. The date of the original is hard to determine, because the complete version we have constructed is based on many earlier tablet examples. It is probable, in any case, that the original dates back to at least l800 B.C.

The epic narrative The epic opens onto a time when nothing existed except the sweet water ocean and the salt water ocean and the mist rising up between them. These natural forces are personified as Ur-gods. Apsu and Tiamat are the names of the first two gods. This god pair begat a lively brood of Baby Boomer gods—including Enki, the god of magic and the master brain of the Mesopotamian divinities. The lesser gods made such a racket that Apsu decided to kill them, but instead—he was the master brain—Enki intervened to kill Apsu—he spared Tiamat—and to set himself and his wife up in a grand mansion. There they gave birth to Marduk, the supreme god to be, and the single hero of this entire epic, the figure whose radiance and splendor will dominate the remainder of the epic. (It will interest those familiar with early Greek cosmogony, as we find it in Hesiod, to compare the Kronos-Rhea, Ouranos-Gaia, Zeus-Hera sequence with the Babylonian: natural forces meld raucously into a humane personscape in the mythy generation of the cosmos. A conduit opens from the Ancient Near East to the Hellenic.)

The Power of Marduk On subsequent tablets we learn that Tiamat, seething at the destruction of her spouse, and spurred on by restless agitators, determines to avenge Apsu's death. Enki is informed of this threat, and goes to war against Tiamat, but in vain, and then, equally vainly, sends his son Anu to try peaceful reconciliation with Tiamat. Again no luck. At this point Marduk appears willing to destroy Tiamat, is acclaimed by the gods in a rowdy festival, and assumes supreme power over heaven. In bloody battle, egged on by his cohorts, Marduk wipes out the forces of Tiamat—the primal order of things—and goes even farther, creating man out of the blood of the most fractious rebel against his authority. At this point the modern reader, eager to see the birth of a kind of Genesis/humanism, is startled to see the emphasis of the epic turn back onto Marduk, praising his astounding power. No attempt is made to conceptualize Marduk himself; the tale turns back into the mythical divine.

Origins of the Creation Epic The origin of the text of the Enuma Elish is probably at least a millennium older than the date of the tablets we possess, and thus goes back into the founding efforts of the Babylonian State; in this case the effort to consolidate the supremacy of Marduk, as supreme god and ruler—and, conjecturally, as a model for the stability of the ruler of Babylon himself. The text was of course anonymous, but seems to have had a clear social function. The text—which was poetry, and rhythmic—was recited by the high priest before the central statue of Marduk, on the fourth day of the festival of the supreme god, and then again during that festival, for the express purpose of releasing the god from captivity. The chanting of the epic is here apparently intended as a magical aid in Marduk's deliverance from imprisonment. Though we don't know exactly what this means, we can guess that the purpose was to protect Babylon against its enemies—as Tiamat was subdued by Marduk—and perhaps to ward off the threat of the annual flooding of the Tigris/Euphrates rivers.

The language of the text The language of this text deals in awe with events in the heavens. Belief and hypothesis seem to blend in such language, where human destiny is sketching itself out across a long arc

of suppositions. What do we feel eventually about the role of the human, Marduk's offering to his culture? Is the language of this text a quest to isolate or refine the notion of the self? How we answer will depend on whether we are tempted to 'psychoanalyze' a text of such great antiquity and ritual rooting. From one perspective, at least, the Enuma Elish can be seen as an inquiry into the bloody throes of our human origins, and a reaffirmation of the power and violence of the elemental setting from which we set forth on life.

Reading

Heidel, Alexander, The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation

Origins: Creation Texts from the Ancient Mediterranean, edited and translated by Doria and Lenowitz, pp. 182-236.

Discussion Questions

1 What is the role of the human in this epic by which the human labors to portray its own origins? (After all, one purpose of the creation of the epic seems to have been to protect the human community.) Does the human, as portrayed in this creative text, have the interests of the human at heart?

2 What do you think of the portrayal of the assembly of the gods, in the present text? You will notice that on two occasions the gods are rowdy and noisy. Do they seem to behave like incorrigible teen-agers? If so, how do you explain this? Are they forces of nature, turbulent and needing control? What relation do you see here between nature and culture? Is this universe ruled by values or only by forces?

3 What do you see as the 'motivation' behind a creation story like Enuma Elish? Has that motivation to do with what we are calling the language peculiar to the Man/God relationship? Does that language rise from increasingly sharp self-definition of the individual, who—as part of a growingly self-aware society—thereby longs to address the progenitors he finds inside himself, as well as longing to define his ultimate sense of dependence? If these seem to you plausible accounts of creation-tale establishment, how do you explain the rough god-level conflicts that surge brutally through the Enuma Elish? Is conflict in heaven the path to characterizing the struggles within the self, to give a compelling account of its path into social consciousness?