**ENUMA ELISH**

**AN EPIC OF CREATION**

*Enuma Elish*, "when the skies above...", is one of the oldest written creation myths in existence, written principally in the twelfth century BCE to celebrate the city of Babylon. Probably already an ancient oral tradition, it recounts the creation of the universe and the violent events that lead up to the building of Babylon, home for the gods. It evolved from Sumerian myths and the text that it is taken from is Assyrian, an empire that followed the Sumerian.

The *Enuma Elish* is written in cuneiform on seven clay tablets, each of about 150 lines. In its original language, it is written with no rhyme or alliteration but with some assonance that lends it a hypnotic sound. It was recited on the fourth day of the New Year's Festival that occurred around the Vernal Equinox. The reciting of this tale, coupled with the re-enactment of the Hieros Gamos (sacred marriage), ensured the prosperity and fertility of the king and his lands.

The most familiar tablets were found in the ruins of the palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh. The basic story however has since been discovered in various forms throughout the Middle East. The most familiar version is written in Akkadian, an old Babylonian dialect, and stars Marduk, the patron deity of the city of Babylon. A similar earlier version in ancient Sumerian has Anu, Enil and Ninurta as the heroes, suggesting that the story was adapted to justify the religious practices in the cult of Marduk in Babylon. The many parallels with the later Genesis accounts, suggest that the metaphors and symbolism are drawn from a common cultural pool.

The translation of these tablets is not exact. In some cases, damage makes reading the text difficult. Some translators leave the gaps, while others attempt to reconstruct the text based on what remains. Inevitably, there are differing interpretations of the meaning of words or the reading of the cuneiform itself. Many translations of the tablets try to capture the sense of the text rather than a literal translation.

**Tablet I (beginning)**

The stage is set for the story. The various gods represent aspects of the physical world. Apsu is the god of fresh water and thus male fertility. Tiamat, wife of Apsu, is the goddess of the sea and thus chaos and threat. Tiamat gives birth to Anshar and Kishar, gods who represented the boundary between the earth and sky (the horizon). To Anshar and Kishar is born Anu, god of sky, who in turn bears Ea.

1. L.W. King Translator

(from *The Seven Tablets of Creation*, London 1902)

When in the height heaven was not named,
And the earth beneath did not yet bear a name,
And the primeval Apsu, who begat them,
And chaos, Tiamat, the mother of them both
Their waters were mingled together,
And no field was formed, no marsh was to be seen;
When of the gods none had been called
Into being,
And none bore a name, and no destinies were ordained;
Then were created the gods in the midst of heaven,
Lahmu and Lahamu were called into being...
Ages increased,...
Then Ansar and Kisar were created, and over them....
Long were the days, then there came forth.....
Anu, their son,...
Ansar and Anu...
And the god Anu...
Nudimmud, whom his fathers, his begetters.....
Abounding in all wisdom....'
He was exceeding strong...
He had no rival. . . .

2. Translation based on
E. A. Speiser in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*
with modifications from other translations

When on high the heaven had not been named,
Firm ground below had not been called by name,
When primordial Apsu, their begetter,
And Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,
Their waters mingled as a single body,
No reed hut had sprung forth, no marshland had appeared,
None of the gods had been brought into being,
And none bore a name, and no destinies determined--
Then it was that the gods were formed in the midst of heaven.
Lahmu and Lahamu were brought forth, by name they were called. (10)

Before they had grown in age and stature,
Anshar and Kishar were formed, surpassing the others.
Long were the days, then there came forth.....
Anu was their heir, of his fathers the rival;
Yes, Anshar's first-born, Anu, was his equal.
Anu begot in his image Nudimmud.
This Nudimmud was of his fathers the master;
Of broad wisdom, understanding, mighty in strength,
Mightier by far than his grandfather, Anshar.
He had no rival among the gods, his brothers. . . .(20)

3. N. K. Sandars translator (1960, 1972)
from *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*

When there was no heaven,
no earth, no height, no depth, no name,
when Apsu was alone,
the sweet water, the first begetter; and Tiamat
the bitter water, and that
return to the womb, her Mummu,
when there were no gods-

When sweet and bitter
mingled together, no reed was plaited, no rushes
muddied the water,
the gods were nameless, natureless, futureless, then
from Apsu and Tiamat
in the waters gods were created, in the waters
silt precipitated,

Lahmu and Lahumu,
were named; they were not yet old
not yet grown tall
when Anshar and Kishar overtook them both,
the lines of sky and earth
stretched where horizons meet to separate
cloud from silt.

Days on days, years
on year passed till Anu, the empty heaven,
heir and supplanter,
first-born of his father, in his own nature
begot Nudimmud-Ea,
intellect, wisdom, wider than heaven's horizon,
the strongest of all the kindred.

4. Barry B. Powell, translator
from Classical Myth (Prentice Hall 2000)

WHEN on high the Heavens had not been named,
Firm ground below had not been called by name,
Nothing but ‘Primordial Apsu’ the Begetter, [Fresh Water]
and ‘Mummu Tiamat’, She Who Bore them All, [Salt Water]
—their waters commingling as a single body—

No reed hut had been matted, no marsh land had appeared,
Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined—

THEN it was that the Gods were formed within Them.

Lahmu ['mud'] and Lahamu ['Mrs. Mud'] were brought forth,
by name they were called
Before they had grown in age and stature.

Anshar ['Upper Firmament'] and Kishar ['Lower Firmament'] were formed,
surpassing the others.
They prolonged the days, added on the years.

Anu was their heir, the rival of his fathers;
Yes, Anu, Anshar’s first-born, was his equal.

He begot in his image Nudimmud [ Ea ].
This Nudimmud was the master of his fathers;
Of broad wisdom, understanding, mighty in strength,
Mightier by far than his grandfather Anshar.
He had no rival among the gods, his brothers.