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Cosmogony in ancient Mesopotamia

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I. Introduction

This essay considers ancient Mesopotamian ideas relating to the creation of the world. It is based, according to conventional Assyriological methodology, on the evidence contained in the corpora of cuneiform texts that have been deciphered over the last 150 years. The paper is also a reaction to two modern works: W. G. Lambert's edition and exegesis of Sumerian and Akkadian mythological narrative poems in his monumental posthumous volume, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (2013), and Michael Witzel's historical approach to comparative mythology, *The Origins of the World's Mythologies* (2012). Lambert's book is a comprehensive presentation of the sources relating to the mythology of creation in ancient Mesopotamia. Witzel's is an analysis of mythology from all over the world that applies to myth the cladistic models of biological taxonomy. He attempts to reconstruct the development of mythology in the historical context of man's emergence from Africa about 65,000 years ago. In particular he seeks to differentiate "out-of-Africa" mythology from older mythology, and calls them respectively "Laurasian" and "Gondwana" mythologies, using geological terms for early landmasses. "Laurasian" mythology is typical of Europe, Asia and the Americas, while "Gondwana" mythology is found mainly in sub-Saharan Africa. Both writers share a view that the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia attested in the historical period is a development of much older material. Lambert places its origins in the Neolithic, while Witzel attempts to situate it in a more extended evolution. In what follows I make much use of the sources collected by Lambert. I do not offer a critical appraisal of Witzel's "Laurasian" hypothesis (which is controversial) but deploy it to provide a comparative perspective.

The usual point of departure in discussing Babylonian ideas about the creation of the world is the narrative poem called *Enūma eliš* "When on high", often referred to as the Babylonian Epic of Creation. This composition is central to Lambert's *Babylonian Creation Myths*, and has been the subject of much commentary.¹ It is used by Witzel, as by others before him, as if it were the definitive statement of ancient Mesopotamian creation mythology. Lambert cautions against this, observing that, "in modern times the fundamental misunderstanding has been the common assumption

¹ See the bibliography in A. Seri, The role of creation in *Enūma eliš*, in: *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religion* 12 (2012) 4–29; further Maul (2015).

that this text contains *the* Babylonian cosmology ... It appears that toward the end of this millennium² the author, either starting or following a new trend among the priests of Marduk, composed a highly original work which ran counter to previously accepted opinion in most of the country.”³ The mythological traditions utilized and adapted by the composer of *Enūma eliš* in constructing his poem to the glory of the god Marduk have been fully explored by Lambert, but the poem itself naturally takes centre stage. Instead of topicalizing *Enūma eliš*, this essay will take a historical approach to the subject of creation, in order that any evolution and innovation in ideas may be more clearly seen. It will end by tracing the presence of those ideas in *Enūma eliš* and assessing the poem’s place in the history of Mesopotamian cosmogony.

There is no extant antecedent of *Enūma eliš*, no older narrative of creation. Instead the data must be culled from many different sources from the third and early second millennia, written in Sumerian and Akkadian. In alluding to accepted facts about the primeval history of the cosmos, these early sources have much to say about cosmogony and creation. Being diverse in language, date and function, they do not necessarily report a uniform tradition: inconsistencies and contradictions can be expected. This older mythology falls into two topics: the emergence of the primeval universe and the subsequent separation of sky and earth.

II. *The emergence of the primeval universe*

Cosmogony gives a theoretical account of the creation and evolution of the universe. The cosmogonic data from ancient Mesopotamia have been discussed by many scholars, especially in relation to the cosmogony presented in *Enūma eliš*.⁴ In some sources cosmogonies occur as lists of names of gods, generation by generation, usually in pairs but sometimes singly. These are, in fact, theogonies, and they give the ancestry of the important gods Enlil and Anu. The ancestry of Enlil is already present in god-lists and other texts from the era of the oldest intelligible literature in human history, the Early Dynastic period, i.e. the mid-third millennium BC.⁵ It is next well attested in the Old Babylonian period, at the beginning of the second millennium BC, when versions occur in a literary text and a list of gods but more commonly in

² i.e. the second millennium BC.

³ Lambert (2013) 464.

⁴ In recent times most notably by van Dijk (1964), Komoróczy (1973), Wiggermann (1992), and especially, Lambert (1975), (2008), (2013) 169–201, 405–426. See also id., *Göttergenealogie*, in: *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie* 3, 6 (1969) 469–470; id., *Kosmogonie*, in: *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie* 6, 3–4 (1981) 218–222. The Sumerian material has been studied by Lisman (2013).

⁵ van Dijk (1964) 6–8; B. Alster, en-ki nun-ki, in: *Revue d’Assyriologie* 64 (1970) 189–190; Lambert (2013) 412.

liturgical texts and incantations.⁶ Recently an incantation tablet from the end of the third millennium has partly plugged the gap in evidence.⁷

Enlil's ancestry comprises a list of pairs, each male + female, whose names are distinguished by the prefix ^den “divine lord” for males and ^dnin “divine lady” for females. A typical example of four pairs and a summary is (1):

Enki–Ninki
Enul–Ninul
Endashurimma–Nindashurimma
Endukuga–Nindukuga
The mothers (of) Ninlil, the fathers (of) Enlil

Not all members of the list occur on every attestation, and many names are not readily translatable, so that it is not possible to construct from them any firm ideas of cosmological evolution. However, the list always begins with Enki and Ninki (sometimes Nunki, Numunki) “Lord and Lady Earth”, which suggests that Earth was Enlil's oldest ancestor. Some versions of the list, from the Old Babylonian period onward, prefix it with a further pair, An–Urash “Sky and Urash [another name for Earth], where barley sprouted”. Lambert argued that only Earth is meant by this pair, which would certainly make the epithet reporting fertility more compelling.⁸ But another Old Babylonian incantation prefaces a version of the Enki–Ninki list with An–Ki “Sky and Earth”,⁹ and a later bilingual incantation includes both pairs.¹⁰ These prefixed pairs show the influence of another idea, that in the beginning, before the Enki–Ninki gods, there was a union of Sky and Earth, a union which, via a chain of successive pairs beginning with Enki–Ninki, eventually produced Enlil and his female counterpart, Ninlil. This idea will be explored in the next section.

The other theogony in play in ancient Mesopotamia gave the ancestry of Anu. Anu is a sky-god, an evolution of primordial An. There are two quite different versions of his ancestry. One is embedded in an Old Babylonian list of the pantheon. It has the names of individual deities, not pairs, and these names mostly bear explicit meaning (2):

⁶ To the sources surveyed by Lambert (2013) 405–417, add several more instances in Old Babylonian incantations, e.g. A. Cavigneaux / F. Al-Rawi, *Charmes de Sippar et de Nippur*, in: H. Gasche (ed.), *Cinquante-deux réflexions sur le Proche-Orient ancien offertes en hommage à Léon De Meyer* (Leuven 1994) 74 Z. 9–11; eid., *Textes magiques de Tell Haddad* (Textes de Tell Haddad II). Troisième partie, in: *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 85 (1995) 197.

⁷ Published by J. Peterson, A list of ancestral deities in the pre-OB en₂-e₂-nu-ru incantation CBS 13408, in: *Nouvelles assyriologiques brèves et utilitaires* 2009: 91–93 no. 68.

⁸ Lambert (2013) 408.

⁹ MS 3090 iii 4'–8' = No. 16 in: A. R. George, *Mesopotamian Incantations and Related Texts in the Schøyen Collection* (Bethesda 2016): An–Ki, Enki–Ninki, Endashurimma–Nindashurimma, Endukuga–Nindukuga, mothers and fathers [of Enlil], then Enlil, etc.

¹⁰ K 3179 i 1–8 (E. Ebeling, *Sammlungen von Beschwörungsformeln*, in: *Archiv Orientalní* 21 (1953) 381): An–Ki // *šamû-eršetu*, Anu–Urash // *Anu–Antu*; theogonies of Anu and Enlil follow, presented as (iv) by Lambert (2013) 410, 417.

Anu	
Anshar-gal	“Great Whole Sky”
En-uru-ulla	“Lord of the Primeval City”
Urash	“Earth”
Belet-ili	“Queen of the Gods”
Namma	
Amatud-anki	“Mother who Bore Sky and Earth”

This list is to be read as a progression back into the past, with the obviously parental Amatud-anki the first in time. Most commentators agree that not all the entries are primary: some are simply epithets. A later version of the list is set in two columns of counterparts, beginning An = Anu, i.e. “An ‘Sky’ is a name of Anu”.¹¹ It explains that Amatud-anki is a name of Namma, so that Namma, the parent even of Sky and Earth, is identified as the oldest deity of Anu’s theogony. In mythology Namma is the mother of the water-god Enkig,¹² and her name is written with a logogram that denotes the cosmic waters, so it is certain that she represents primeval Ocean.¹³ I shall return to the four intermediate names, between Anu and Namma, below.

The other version of Anu’s theogony is known chiefly from first-millennium incantations but, as we shall see from (4), its antiquity is considerable. It consists of pairs, evidently male and female (3):

Duri–Dari
Lahmu–Lahama
Alala–Belili

These two theogonies of the sky-god do not contain any names in common. However, there is some Old Babylonian evidence for traditions in which the various theogonies of Enlil and Anu were joined. One incantation, mostly in a foreign language or abracadabra, seems to invoke in the same line Duri–Dari and Enlil.¹⁴ More informative is a newly deciphered Old Babylonian tablet that presents a sequence of pairs of gods, probably embedded in an incantation, which presents an extended cosmogony reading down in time (4):

(a)
Ki–An “Earth–Sky”
(b)
Enki–Numunki

¹¹ R. L. Litke, *A Reconstruction of the Assyro-Babylonian God-Lists*, *An: ^da-nu-um and An: Anu šá amēli* (New Haven 1998). See below, n. 26.

¹² Usually rendered Enki, but the full form of his name is used here to avoid confusion with Enlil’s ancestor Enki. Enkig was also known as Ea.

¹³ Wiggermann (1992) 283.

¹⁴ Quoted in Lambert (2008) 32, id. (2013) 411.

Engeresh–Ningeresh
 Lord(s) Enlil and Numun
 (c)
 Dur–Dar
 Luhmu–Luhumu
 Anshar–Dumushar
 Alala–Belili
 (d)
 Anu–Antu
 Enlil–Ninlil
 Ninhursanga–Shulpae
 Enkig–Damgalnunna

The seniority of (a) Ki and An (respectively Earth and Sky) has been met already, in the pairs An–Urash and An–Ki prefaced to some versions of Enlil’s ancestry. Here it is undoubtedly an expression of the primacy of the pair Father Sky and Mother Earth. The order Ki–An, female–male, is typical of the third millennium rather than the second,¹⁵ and speaks for the antiquity of the traditions that inform the list. The first two pairs of (b) represent an abbreviated account of Enlil’s ancestors (1), summarized in a line that is a corrupt version of “Lord-fathers of Enlil, Lady-mothers of Ninlil”. The four pairs (c) are a conflation of the two different theogonies of Anu: the three pairs of (3) with Anshar intruding from (2).¹⁶ The last four (d) are a common quartet, the deities who in historical times head the cultic pantheon of gods and are active in mythology, each with spouse attached. Anu and Enlil we have already met. Anu lived in heaven, envisaged as a solid structure, impossibly remote. Enlil’s cosmic role was to rule the inhabited surface of the earth, which he did from Nippur, at its centre. His big sister Ninhursanga “Lady Mountain” was the mother-goddess, and young Enkig, Anu’s son by Namma, controlled the cosmic waters from his domain below the earth. In this way the list (4) makes a statement of cosmogony and cosmology, starting at the beginning, combining three different ancestral traditions, and ending with the chief deities in the Sumero-Babylonian pantheon, listed according to their seniority, but also by the location of their cosmic domains on a vertical axis, top to bottom.

The people of ancient Mesopotamia, in unwitting conformity to modern physics, believed that nothing could come of nothing. There had to be something there from the beginning. To the question, “what was there first, before the world came to be as it is now?”, the theogonies of Anu and Enlil provide answers. The theogony of Anu in which Namma is the “Mother who Bore Sky and Earth” offers “water”. The other ancestry of Anu begins with either Dur(i)–Dar(i) or Alala–Belili, depending on whether the sequences of (3) and (4c) run up or down in time. As Lambert has argued,

¹⁵ Lambert (2008) 31.

¹⁶ The female counterpart of Anshar is usually Kishar (as in *Enūma eliš*); Dumushar in (4c) is unparalleled and perhaps corrupt.

Dur(i)–Dar(i) makes a more compelling pair, for they denote eternal unmeasured Time, while Alala and Belili seem without cosmogonic significance.

While Anu’s ancestries thus suggest that either Water or Time was the origin of all things, Enlil’s theogony insists on the primacy of the Enki–Ninki gods, and so asserts that Earth was there first. But some versions of his ancestry suggest that Sky and Earth were primal, and the newly discovered cosmogonic list (4) also puts forward this view. To learn more about Sky and Earth, it is necessary to explore their mythology.

III. *The mythology of Father Sky and Mother Earth*

The early mythological narratives from Mesopotamia present An “Sky” and Ki “Earth” as a primeval male–female pair containing the potential for procreation.¹⁷ This cosmogonic pair occurs in many mythologies from all over the world, but is not, Witzel asserts, indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa. Witzel accordingly identifies “Father Heaven, Mother Earth” as characteristic of “Laurasian”, out-of-Africa mythology.¹⁸ Like many others, he points out that much mythology about the beginning of the world speaks more of emergence than creation — the first things are not made by some superhuman agent, but just are, and so it would seem with Sky and Earth.

The continuity and evolution of cosmogonic ideas in ancient Mesopotamian mythological narratives are best observed by placing the evidence diachronically, starting with the oldest intelligible literary texts, which are Sumerian.

IIIa. *Early Dynastic period (mid-third millennium)*

- (5) Barton cylinder: “In those days”, i.e. in primeval mythical time, a violent cosmic storm in Nippur led to a “conversation” (inim dab₆) between An “Sky” and Ki “Earth”. The result of this intercourse is lost in a short lacuna, but seems to be the birth of the two sibling deities Enlil and Ninhursanga, for they are present when the text resumes. They copulate, expressed in human terms (giš mu-ni-dug₄), and the mother-goddess Ninhursanga conceives.
- (6) Ukg. 15: An “Sky” and Ki “Earth” emerged, then “Earth was making (her) vulva manifest in her left (hand), . . . Lord Sky was there, standing ready in the manner of a young male. Sky and Earth made noise together”.¹⁹ The text goes on to observe that this was before the Enki–Ninki gods were born, and before sun and moon gave light.
- (7) *OIP* 99 113 ii and 136 iii: Enlil separated Sky from Earth and Earth from Sky.

¹⁷ For a recent discussion of An and Ki see J. Westenholz, Heaven and Earth: Asexual monad and bisexual dyad, in: J. Stackert, B. N. Porter and D. P. Wright (eds.), *Gazing on the Deep: Ancient Near Eastern and Other Studies in Honor of Tzvi Abusch* (Bethesda 2010) 293–326.

¹⁸ Witzel (2012) 128–132.

¹⁹ i 2–ii 2: ki-e gal₄ gáb-na dalla ha-mu-ak-e, . . . an en-nam šul-le-éš al-gub, an ki téš-ba šeg₁₂ an-gi₄-gi₄. My interpretation draws on (but also departs from) Wiggermann (1992) 282, Sjöberg (2002) 230–231, Rubio (2013) 5.

Sky and Earth were not static, for these texts report two myths at the start of creation: the intercourse of Sky and Earth, and their separation.²⁰ The intercourse of Father Heaven and Mother Earth is a story element that Witzel finds characteristic of “Laurasian” mythology: still unseparated, they are in “permanent sexual union, so that their children were kept in permanent darkness between them”.²¹ In the oldest Mesopotamian texts their intercourse is described in terms of conversation (5) and noise (6). The explicit allusion to Earth’s genitals and Sky’s virility in (6) indicates that the intercourse is sexual, as it clearly is later (14–18). The separation of Sky and Earth occurs through the agency of a third party, Enlil (7), and takes place in Nippur (5), later Enlil’s cult-centre and traditionally the centre of the world. The attribution of this development to an agent indicates that a crucial question which much occupies modern physicists seems already to have arisen. Where now we ask, “If there was a Big Bang, what caused it?”, the Babylonians speculated on how primeval matter came to be flung apart and, already in the third millennium, identified the agent as the god Enlil. His name, whatever it originally signified, came to be understood in cosmic terms as “Lord Air”, identifying him as the matter that filled the void between Sky and Earth. Thereafter sexual relations between gods became anthropomorphic, and the mother-goddess immediately became pregnant (5).

IIIb. *Ur III period (late third millennium)*

(8) NBC 11108: Sky and Earth both existed. It seems that light was imprisoned in Sky: “Day was not bright, Night lay round about. Sky surrounded his (Day’s?) heavenly abode”.²² As a result vegetation did not grow.

This text seems to speculate on conditions at the beginning of things. The idea of primeval darkness is common and has already been met in Mesopotamia (6). At an early stage in the evolution of the cosmos, the sun was confined in the solid Sky and its rays did not penetrate through to Earth. Comparative mythology offers many examples of the captivity of the sun, and they are widespread in Witzel’s “Laurasian” mythology.²³

IIIc. *Old Babylonian period (early second millennium)*

A selection of the material, in Sumerian unless otherwise identified:

- (9) Ewe and Grain 1: Sky and Earth exist together as a “mountain massif” (hur-sag), i.e. in a state of unity, and beget the Anunna-gods.
- (10) Enkig and Ninmah 1–2: Sky and Earth were separated at the beginning, before the Anunna-gods were born and goddesses married and gave birth.

²⁰ Lambert (2013) 169–171.

²¹ Witzel (2012) 128.

²² Obv. 8: u₄ nu-zalag gi₆ àm-mu-lá, an-né da-ga-an-na-ka-ni mu-ni-íb-kár. kár is difficult: see Sjöberg (2002) 242–243, Rubio (2013) 7 “lit up”; I defer to later lexical evidence, *Antagal* III 208^{ka-ár}kár = *ni-i-tum šá la-me-e* “encirclement, as in to surround”.

²³ Witzel (2012) 139–148; note also the mytheme of the sun’s disappearance in ancient Anatolia, e.g. H. Hoffner Jr, *Hittite Myths* (Atlanta 1990) 26–29.

- (11) Song of Hoe 1–7: Enlil separates Sky and Earth at Nippur-Duranki, in order to let “seed come forth from Earth”.
- (12) Gilgamesh and the Netherworld 8–9: Sky separates from Earth and vice versa.
- (13) *KAR 4* etc. (one Old Babylonian ms.) 1: “When Sky and Earth, faithful twins, became separated”, goddesses came into existence.
- (14) Dispute between Tree and Reed 5–6: “In a holy place, a pure place, she made herself lovely for holy Sky, and Sky, lofty An, mated there with broad Earth”, and they produced the dispute’s antagonists.
- (15) Inanna and the *numun*-grass 10: “Sky impregnated Earth, Earth gave birth”, to the eponymous plant.
- (16) *Lugale* 26: “Sky copulated with lovely Earth”, and she bore the monstrous Azag.
- (17) Akkadian incantation: “the sky inseminated the earth”.
- (18) Reinterpreted in other Akkadian incantations, e.g. *YOS XI 5*: 1: “Anu impregnated the sky, the sky bore the earth”.

The idea that Sky and Earth were once one but then parted company is prominent in these second-millennium passages too. While some ancient Mesopotamian sources attribute the separation to Enlil (7, 11), another tradition is apparent, that it occurred spontaneously, without the intervention of a third party (10, 12, 13). The emergence and marriage of goddesses specifically (10, 13), emphasize the new potential for procreation and allude to the initial pregnancy of the mother-goddess (5). The idea that new generations of gods were born to Sky and Earth, already met in (5) and (6), is strongly present (9, 10, 13). The separation of Sky and Earth was necessary for other life to start (11), evincing a belief that when they were joined together as one, it was too dark for growth (8); only when light was introduced could the seed sprout.²⁴ Earth grows beautiful, and she provokes desire in Sky (14). The result is procreation, which is sexual (14–18). Their union is not limited to a single momentous event (5–6) but recurs, producing beneficial things, such as plant life (14–15), but also malign entities that the gods will later have to subdue (16). Passage (11) is followed by an episode relating how Enlil himself cultivated the spot in Nippur where Sky and Earth were finally sundered so that mankind could grow like grass from the wound. The place of sundering was named Duranki “Bond of Sky and Earth”, and the ground where mankind sprouted under Enlil’s husbandry was Uzu-mua “Flesh-Grower”.²⁵

The last two passages are in Akkadian. This language has the vocabulary to differentiate the cosmic entity of Sky (*šamû* “the sky, heaven”) from the sky-god (Anu), a subtlety not possible in Sumerian. The old idea of the intercourse of An and Ki can now be expressed in more impersonal terms (17). More importantly, Akkadian permits an evolution in cosmogonic thought: in (18) Anu impregnates not Earth but

²⁴ In later Anatolian mythology Sky and Earth are separated not by Air but cut “with a copper cutting tool”, probably the sun-god’s saw (The Song of Ullikummi: Hoffner (n. 23) 59). In this way the sun itself brought light into the space between them and things could grow.

²⁵ T. Jacobsen, Sumerian mythology: A review article, in: id., *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. W. L. Moran (Cambridge, Mass. 1970) 112–114; A. R. George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts* (Leuven 1992) 259.

Heaven, and between them they produce Earth anthropomorphically. In this view Sky has become a male–female pair, able to procreate without Earth. In later Akkadian texts Anu’s wife is Antu, a female version of himself. Theologians untangled the matter by equating Antu with Sky, to match the derivation of her name, but also with Earth, in accordance with the old mythology.²⁶

III d. *Akkadian texts in first-millennium copies*

- (19) First Brick obv. 24: “When Anu created the sky”, the god Ea (Enki) created his cosmic domain (cf. *Enūma eliš*).
- (20) Worm and Toothache 1–2: “After Anu created the sky”, the sky created the earth.
- (21) *AMT* 42 4 Rs. etc.: “When Anu impregnated the sky,” Ea established plant life on earth.

The distinction between matter and agency is by this time orthodox. The sky is a cosmic entity, but also a divine personality who created it (19, 20), and fertilized it to set in motion a chain reaction that created new life on earth (20, 21, already in 18).

The material presented thus far shows a clear rupture between the theogonies of Enlil and Anu and the mythology gleaned from literary texts and incantations. The theogonies suggest as first things variously Earth, Water and Time. The mythology is insistent upon the primacy of Sky and Earth.

In an attempt to uncover the essential facts of third-millennium cosmogony, Frans Wiggermann excluded the theogony of Anu descendant of Time, on the basis that this ancestry contains Semitic vocabulary and derived from another culture, and argued that the god-lists could be interpreted to assert that primeval Ocean was the oldest entity.²⁷ In the presence of several mythological traditions it is unnecessary to insist on a reconciliation of the remaining candidates, Earth, Water and Sky–Earth, but the application of simple narrative logic to the known mythology in the company of the known primeval entities supports Wiggermann’s hypothesis.

If the oldest entity in the universe was the pair Sky–Earth, the question has to be asked, where were they? Since empirical observation persuaded any Babylonian that there was water all around — at the ends of the earth (sea), beneath the earth (groundwater), and somewhere above the sky (rain) — the obvious answer was that what obtained in the known world had always been so: Sky–Earth were surrounded by water.²⁸ This water was their parent, the primeval ocean Namma, Mother who Bore Sky and Earth. Sky and Earth, being male and female, cannot help but reproduce, and within them grow successive generations of gods, the Enki–Ninki

²⁶ *An* = *Anu* and another god-list begin their statements of the Babylonian pantheon with three fundamental cosmic equations: *An* = *Anu*, *An* = *Antu*, *An*–*Ki* = *Anu* and *Antu*; quoted by Lambert (2013) 418–419.

²⁷ Wiggermann (1992) 300.

²⁸ The idea finds formal expression in a late bilingual incantation which asserts that before anything was created, “all the lands were sea” (Lambert (2013) 370: 10).

gods, who dwell in darkness. After an unstable number of pairs, two other gods are born who, unlike the Enki–Ninki gods, are important in mythology: Enlil and his big sister Ninhursanga. Ninhursanga’s name means “Lady of the Mountain Massif”, which suggests that she represents the potential for evolution in the fabric of Ki that will later model the face of Earth into its familiar shape and contours. Enlil is “Lord Air”, and the act of his birth has the obvious consequence of pushing Sky and Earth apart and separating the primeval Ocean into the waters above and the waters below.

The place of Anu in this scheme is expressed in the theogony that begins with him and ends with Namma (2). The intermediate names in that list, read upward, are two females and two males. Urash, the first female, is another name for Earth and in this context, a theogony beginning with the parent of Sky and Earth, she can be none other than a divine personality embodying cosmic Ki. The name that follows is her epithet “Queen of the gods”, which in the late list of the pantheon, *An = Anu*,²⁹ is explained as the “wife of An” and befits her position as the oldest of all goddesses. The first male in the theogony, Anshar-gal “Great Whole Sky”, is by name an embodiment of Sky, and En-uru-ulla “Lord of the Primeval City” is plausibly an epithet marking him out as the ruler of the place where the first deities lived (within Sky–Earth).³⁰ Anu’s theogony is thus laid bare as much simpler than it looked: Namma — Earth–Sky — Anu. The order Earth–Sky again suggests a tradition reaching back to the third millennium. This theogony records not three generations, but two, for Anu is himself the divine embodiment of Sky who comes into being when An “Sky” and Ki “Earth” are forced apart by Enlil. He is thus not the son of Sky and Earth, but the evolved form of half of them. Urash is the similarly evolved form of Ki “Earth”, but in this theogony the name is used anachronistically.

The kinship terms used of the gods of mythology in Sumerian literary and religious texts record how the cosmos evolves after the separation of Father Sky and Mother Earth. Sky, now Anu, is thus free from the embrace of Earth, now Urash, and so able to mate with another partner, his mother Namma. From their union is born Enkig, who takes control of the waters below the earth. Enlil mates with his sister Ninhursanga (also with Ninlil = female Enlil), and they beget (among others) Nanna the moon-god and Ninurta the warrior-god. The moon, ancient and pale, fathers Utu the sun-god and a third celestial light, Inanna (Venus). All main elements of the current cosmos, the oecumene, are now in place: there is remote sky (“heaven”), earth shaped in its contours, between them air to breathe, water in the necessary places to feed rain and springs, light to bring forth food from the soil, and a lunar cycle to measure time.

The gods multiply in mythical time. Allusions in late texts tell of wars between them, how Enlil and Ninurta establish their power by killing Enlil’s uncle Enmesharra and other forefathers and despatching them to the Netherworld, where they dwell captive in the dark with the Enki–Ninki gods. Warrior gods defeat monstrous enemies. Junior gods are put to the task of modelling the mountains to channel their

²⁹ Litke (n. 11), Lambert (2013) 418.

³⁰ On which see Wiggermann (1992) 284.

meltwater on to the plain, digging the rivers Tigris and Euphrates to irrigate the land, and building cities to live in. Later, mankind emerges from Duranki or is created from clay to take over this menial work, and Ea (Enkig) sends sages to civilize them. Enlil brings a great flood to wipe them out, the survivors re-establish human society and the modern era begins. There were various competing versions of all these myths, some well known, others surviving only by allusion.

The narrative told above is a composite mythology that necessarily obscures the variety and contradictions of early Mesopotamian mythology. In doing so, it comprises a logical sequence of mythemes of cosmogony and creation: watery chaos—Sky+Earth—generations of gods inside them—separation of Sky and Earth—release of sunlight—conflicts of the gods—monster-slaying—creation of mankind—civilization—Flood—post-diluvian age. These ideas are all found to a greater or lesser degree in the historical mythologies of Europe and Asia, as documented at length by Michael Witzel.³¹ Without knowledge of this old Mesopotamian mythology, he identified a very similar sequence of mythemes as part of a “Laurasian Story Line”, and summarized it as follows: “Creation from nothing, chaos, etc. Father Heaven/Mother Earth created —Four (five) generations/ages: Heaven pushed up, sun released—current gods defeat/kill predecessors: killing the dragon, use of sacred drink—Humans: somatic descendant of (sun) god . . . punished by a flood—Trickster deities bring culture”.³² The two sequences are very similar and it is clear that the early myths of Mesopotamia tell, from a comparative perspective, a familiar story.

IV. *The Babylonian Epic of Creation*

Having surveyed the evidence, across two millennia, for ancient Mesopotamian ideas about the origin and evolution of the cosmos, we come to *Enūma eliš*, the Babylonian Epic of Creation. I have already quoted Lambert’s characterization of this poem as unorthodox in its cosmogony and theology. In an older paper he warned, “The *Epic of Creation* is not a norm of Babylonian or Sumerian cosmology. It is a sectarian and aberrant combination of mythological threads woven into an unparalleled compositum.”³³ Wiggermann puts it more pithily in stating that the poem “rebuilds mythology from the debris of previous ages”.³⁴

Enūma eliš is a poem of a little over one thousand lines, nearly all recovered, written in Babylon toward the end of the second millennium BC. Its agenda was to exalt the god Marduk and his city Babylon to be king of the gods and centre of the world at the expense of Enlil and Nippur. It is the work of a learned man, whose mastery of theology and mythology is combined with expert deployment of elevated

³¹ Witzel (2012) 105–185.

³² Witzel (2012) 183.

³³ W. G. Lambert, A new look at the Babylonian background of Genesis, in: *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 16 (1965) 291.

³⁴ F. A. M. Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits: The Ritual Texts* (Groningen 1992) 156; id., Mischwesen. A. Philologisch. Mesopotamien, in: *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie* 8, 3–4 (1994) 229.

literary language in carefully wrought poetry.³⁵ As a poem, however, it lacks all emotional impact, and falls far short of matching the appeal to modern readers of other major works of Babylonian literature. Here I shall quote from it only passages that have particular reference to cosmogony (22).

The poem begins at a time when Sky and Earth did not exist.

When sky above had not been called to being,
 and solid ground below not given name,
 there was primordial Apsû, who sired them,
 and demiurge Tiamat, who bore the whole of them.
 Though mingling their waters together,
 they were not matted with reedbed, nor padded with canebrake.³⁶

Enūma eliš I 1–6

This passage asserts that before there was any heaven and earth, there existed two watery masses: Apsû (groundwater) and Tiamat (sea). These waters are respectively masculine and feminine, and are identified as the parents of “sky” and “solid ground”. These last are literary expressions for “heaven and earth”. Accordingly, the most ancient structures in the universe, Sky and Earth, were the creation of water, in accordance with the theogony of Anu (2).

The male and female components of this water were mingling in a dynamic interaction. There is a clear dependence here on ancient beliefs about human procreation. The Babylonians understood the connection between ejaculation by the male of the species and pregnancy in the female,³⁷ and perhaps believed that a human foetus was created after semen combined with a fluid produced by the womb: the “female seed” identified by Leviticus 12:2 and common knowledge among the Greeks.³⁸ They could not help noticing that a foetus grew in a large body of amniotic fluid, a fact that gave rise to popular imagery of the unborn baby as a boat floating on

³⁵ See most recently B. R. Foster, *Enuma Elish as a work of literature*, in: *Journal of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 7 (2012) 19–23.

³⁶ Philological notes: 4 “the whole of them”: *gimrišun* refers to Sky and Earth, as yet unmade but already mentioned in ll. 1–2, rather than the gods, as yet unborn and not mentioned until l. 7. 5 “mingling”: *iḫiqqū* durative, with MS K (C. Wilcke, *Die Anfänge der akkadischen Epen*, in: *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 67 (1977) 166 n. 16; W. L. Moran, *Enūma eliš* I 1–8, in: *Nouvelles assyriologiques brèves et utilitaires* 1988: 15–16 no. 21). 6: two matching clauses, comprising stative verbs qualified with accusatives, with Apsû and Tiamat as subject; “reedbed”: *gipāru* is here a loan from Sum. *gi-èn-bar* “reed” (Wilcke (op. cit.) 167 n. 17) and synonymous with *šusû*; “padded”: *šē’ū* is from *šē’u* “to upholster” not *še’ū* “to seek” (with M. Held, *Two philological notes on Enūma eliš*, in: B. L. Eichler *et al.* (eds.), *Kramer Anniversary Volume* (Kevelaer/Neukirchen-Vluyn 1976) 231–239; Wilcke (op. cit.) 167; Moran (op.cit.); *CAD* Š/II = E. Reiner *et al.* (eds.), *The Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. 17, Š Part II (Chicago 1992) 364; B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses. An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (2 vols., Bethesda² 1996) I 353); *pace* Lambert (2013) 51; Maul (2015) 22.

³⁷ R. D. Biggs, *Conception, contraception and abortion in ancient Mesopotamia*, in: A. R. George / I. L. Finkel (eds.), *Wisdom, Gods and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honour of W. G. Lambert* (Winona Lake 2000) 1–13.

³⁸ M. Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible* (Groningen 2000) 7–8; Biggs (n. 37) 2.

water.³⁹ The mingling of the two mythical bodies of water, Apsû and Tiamat, thus had obvious procreative potential. Strange beings duly formed in the mixture of male and female fluid:

When no gods were manifest at all,
 none given name nor found a function,⁴⁰
 gods were created within them,
 Lahmu and Lahamu became manifest and given name.
 They grew and grew until full grown,
 Anshar and Kishar were created, larger still than them.

Enūma eliš I 7–12

Pairs of gods appear inside the fertile water: first Lahmu and Lahamu, then Anshar and Kishar. Their emergence is spontaneous, for the verbs employed are passive.⁴¹ It is not clear from this passage whether both pairs are produced by Apsû and Tiamat or the second by the first, but later in *Enūma eliš* Anshar is explicitly identified as the son of Lahmu and Lahamu (III 67–71). As we have seen, the theogonies preserved in ancient god-lists and incantations also suggest a succession of generations and make clear that these pairs each comprise one male and one female.⁴² Thus their emergence enlarges the potential for procreation.

Anshar and Kishar are Sumerian names meaning respectively “Whole Sky” and “Whole Earth”. Their appearance at this stage in the plot does not indicate that the twin cosmic structures of sky and earth have materialized, for that occurs only when Marduk, the hero of *Enūma eliš*, organizes the universe later on. But the potential of these structures exists: their names are now pronounced, so their future functions are determined. If Anshar and Kishar are Sky and Earth, born out of the watery mix of Apsû and Tiamat (Groundwater and Sea) as anticipated in ll. 3–4, what of the intermediate pair of Lahmu and Lahamu? In the theogonies (3, 4) this intermediate pair occurs as Lahma (male) and Lahama (female), usually between Duri–Dari and Alala–Belili, and among other ancestors of the sky-god Anu. Various ideas have been put forward in regard to their composition. The most compelling is that they were mud, midway in composition between bodies of water and the potentially solid structures of Anshar and Kishar.⁴³ Another is that they were twin giants functioning as “pillars of the universe”.⁴⁴ The Atlas-function, as we might call it, is a mythological theme that occurs in the folklore of many cultures, and features in the “Laurasian” narrative of how the world was made, as Witzel notes: “The propping up

³⁹ Stol (n. 38) 62.

⁴⁰ “Function”: *šīmāti* is accusative, with MS K.

⁴¹ See most recently Seri (n. 1) 8.

⁴² Lambert (2013) 405–426.

⁴³ T. Jacobsen, Mesopotamia, in: H. Frankfort *et al.*, *Before Philosophy. The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Harmondsworth 1949) 185–187; id., *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven/London 1976) 169; F. A. M. Wiggermann, *Exit talim! Studies in Babylonian demonology, I.*, in: *Jaarbericht Ex Oriente Lux* 27 (1981–82) 90–105.

⁴⁴ W. G. Lambert, The pair Laḫmu–Laḫamu in cosmology, in: *Orientalia* n.s. 54 (1985) 189–202.

of the sky is brought about in various ways ...: by a pole or pillar, a tree, a mountain or giant”.⁴⁵ A third idea is that they were huge bovine composite monsters that inhabited the sea and represented an early stage in the “evolution of the anthropomorphic gods from the first watery beings”.⁴⁶ Given the learning and intellectual capacity of the poet, it is possible that he selected Lahmu and Lahamu from the ancient ancestral deities not at random, but as the pair that held the most potential for multiple explanations.

To move on with the poem, Anshar and Kishar (the potential for Sky–Earth) have a son Anu (Sky as a divine personality), thus perpetuating the old theology in which Anu derived from Urash and Anshargal (2). Anu in turn has his own son Nudimmud (a name of the water-god Enkig-Ea).

They lived many days,⁴⁷ added year to year,
 Anu was their son, a match for his fathers.
 Anu, his son, was the image of Anshar,
 and Anu begot Nudimmud, his likeness.

Enūma eliš I 13–16

It has been observed before that these gods reproduce actively, unlike their forebears. The verbs chosen flag up the family likeness seen in human reproduction, and express normal procreation.⁴⁸ In this way, as in the older mythology (5), the gods begin to behave like mankind. It is no accident that, of all the divine beings so far mentioned, Anu and his son are the first to belong to the historical pantheon of anthropomorphic gods who resided in temples and were accorded a cult.

The opening of *Enūma eliš* is thus a cosmogony which describes the earliest evolution of the cosmos from water to a place populated with gods who behave like humans. In doing so it constructs a family for Anu that combine names from the two traditions of his theology (like 4c, but with two pairs not four). The new theology (a) adds Ea, who must be included in order to embed his son, Marduk, in the old lineage of Anu (b):

(a)
 Apsû–Tiamat
 Lahmu–Lahama
 Anshar–Kishar
 Anu
 (b)
 Ea (Nudimmud)
 Marduk

⁴⁵ Witzel (2012) 131.

⁴⁶ W. Heimpel, Anthropomorphic and bovine Lahmus, in: M. Dietrich / O. Loretz (eds.), *Dubsar anta-men: Studien zur Orientalistik, Festschrift für Willem H. Ph. Römer* (Münster 1998) 129–156.

⁴⁷ Lit. “they made long the days”. The subjects are Anshar and Kishar (Z. 12).

⁴⁸ They are *muššulu*, literally “replicate” (Z. 15), and *alādu* “to beget, give birth” (Z. 16).

The remainder of the poem describes how first Ea kills Apsû and sets up his dwelling on his corpse, and then how Marduk, his son, defeats the vengeful Tiamat and establishes himself as king of the gods in perpetuity. From these two acts of violence emerge the basic structures of the cosmos, three in number. Ea's home on Apsû is the cosmic domain of freshwater that lies beneath the earth. Having slain Tiamat, Marduk makes Sky and Earth from her corpse:

He divided her in two like a fish at the drying place,
 he set half of her in place, made the heavens a roof.

...

[He set up] her hindquarters to fix the heavens in place,
 he made [half of her] a roof, fixed firm the earth.

Enūma eliš IV 137–138, V 61–62

The two halves of Tiamat are each employed as cosmic decks: the sky is a cover for the earth, retaining the waters above it, and the earth is a cover to hold down the waters below it. The poem adds other details concerning the creation and regulation of the celestial bodies and the construction of the earth's physical features, and the creation of mankind. All this work is done by Marduk himself, and then the junior gods build a city in which to honour him: Babylon.

It remains to measure the achievement of the poet of *Enūma eliš* against the older material. In *Enūma eliš* things begin with primeval Ocean, not in its old name as Namma but reimagined as the mingling waters of male Apsû and female Tiamat. The sexual congruence of this pair is modelled on the old myth of the intercourse of Sky and Earth. A distant echo of the noise created by their intercourse (6) survives, for Tiamat bears the epithet "Mother Noise".⁴⁹ *Enūma eliš* makes further use of the cosmogonic myth of Sky and Earth by incorporating Anshar "Whole Sky" and Kishar "Whole Earth" as the third generation of its opening cosmogony. It adapts the theogony of Anu to provide a suitable ancestry for his grandson Marduk. But because the poem glorifies Marduk, god of Babylon, at the expense of Enlil, god of Nippur, it makes no use of Enlil's theogony. The generations descendant of the Enki–Ninki gods, each supplanting another inside An–Ki, are ignored. Their place in cosmogony is taken by specially constructed generational conflicts inside Tiamat, first between Ea and Apsû and then between Marduk and Tiamat. Both conflicts are cosmic adaptations of the monster-slaying myth that Witzel finds a common element in "Laurasian" mythology,⁵⁰ and the story of Marduk vanquishing Tiamat ultimately derives from Syrian myths in which the storm-god battles the Sea.⁵¹ Because *Enūma*

⁴⁹ P. Michalowski, Presence at the creation, in: T. Abusch *et al.* (eds.), *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (Atlanta 1990) 381–396; Rubio (2013) 5.

⁵⁰ Witzel (2012) 148–154.

⁵¹ D. Schwemer, *Die Wettergottgestalten Mesopotamiens und Nordsyriens im Zeitalter der Keilschriftkulturen* (Wiesbaden 2001) 226–237.

eliš ignores Enlil, it cannot retain the myth of separation unchanged. Instead of Enlil, it is Marduk who parts Sky and Earth. He does so by creating them out of his watery ancestor Tiamat, who is thus seen to contain the matter needed to make the solid structures of the cosmos, in accordance with the old mythology. Marduk goes on to create the world as known to mankind since its creation.

In short, the poem retains the old idea that Sky and Earth were once a single entity, which floated in water and somehow split apart so that life could begin, but situates it in an unconventional and eclectic plot. The new plot contains the essential mythemes of the old narrative, but with some violence to their sequence. In *Enūma eliš* they have the order: watery chaos—Father Sky+Mother Earth—generations of gods inside them—conflicts of the gods—monster-slaying—separation of Sky and Earth—release of light—creation of mankind. The sundering of Sky and Earth and the creation of the sun occur much later here, not between the generations of the gods and their conflicts but between the monster-slaying and the creation of mankind. This is a consequence of the poet's rejection of the mythology of Enlil. The poem deliberately sets out to impose a new order on traditional mythology, to fashion an unmatched heroic career for a new king of the gods, Marduk. The survival in it of the essential narrative of the old mythology, with only slight adaptation, is testament to the elemental cogency and enduring power of this story as an explanation for how things began.

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All translations from primary sources are the author's own.

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