

A Mesopotamian Creation Myth The Battle Between Marduk and Tiamat (ca. 2000-1000 B.C.E.)

Origins to 1200 B.C.E.

By 3000 B.C.E., two contrasting agricultural societies had developed in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Mesopotamia was located between the great Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, which were a challenge to navigate and needed to be channeled into complicated irrigation systems. The area possessed few natural defenses against invasion. Egypt, in contrast, was largely protected by desert, and the flooding of the Nile was fairly regular and could be managed with relative ease. The pharaohs were able to create a unified kingdom at an early point in Egypt's history, in part because the current of the Nile made travel up and down the river feasible. In Mesopotamia, various city-states warred against one another for domination. The writings these cultures left are among the earliest records of Western society. The following documents are, for the most part, concerned with two basic questions: how did the gods create and govern the world, and what sort of life should mortals lead to 'fulfill their duties to the gods and one another? As you read the documents, compare the answers Egyptians and Mesopotamians gave to these questions. What might explain the similarities and differences you note?

Mesopotamian Creation Myth The Battle Between Marduk and Tiamat (ca. 2000-1000 B.C.E.)

Creation myths offer supernatural explanations for the origins of the earth, heavens, and life in the natural world. This Mesopotamian creation myth, known as the Enuma Elish, portrays the struggle of the sun-god Marduk, the patron god of Babylon, with Tiamat, the sea goddess and mother of all gods. As Babylon came to dominate the other cities of the Euphrates Valley Marduk defeated Tiamat to become the chief of all the gods.

Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter,
[And] Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,
Their waters commingling as a single body;
No reed hut had been matted, no marsh land had appeared,
When no gods, whatever had been brought into being,
Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined- Then it was that the gods were formed within them

[Several generations of gods were descendants of Tiamat and Apsu, some of whom, particularly the gods Anu and Nudimmud, surpassed the other gods in strength.]

The divine brothers [Anu and Nudimrnud] banded together.
They disturbed Tiamat as they surged back and forth,
Yea, they troubled the mood of Tiamat
By their hilarity in the Abode of Heaven.
Apsu could not lessen their clamor.
And Tiamat was speechless at their [ways].
Their doings were loathsome ...
Unsavory were their ways; they were overbearing.

[And so begins a war among the gods. Apsu was killed during the war, so Tiamat created monsters to help her destroy her rivals. Ea, a leading god among Tiamat's opponents, as his son Marduk to join the war.]

"My son, thou who knowest all wisdom,
Calm [Tiamat] with thy holy spell. ... "
The lord [rejoiced] at the word of his father.
His heart exulting, he said to his father:
"Creator of the gods, destiny of the great gods,
"If I, indeed, as your avenger,
Arn to vanquish Tiamat and save your lives,
Set up the Assembly [of gods], proclaim supreme my destiny!
When jointly in Ubshukinna 1, you have sat down rejoicing,
Let my word, instead of you, determine the fates.
Unalterable shall be what I may bring into being;
Neither recalled not changed shall be the command of my lips!" ...

[Marduk defeats Tiamat's army and then finally battles the goddess herself.]

They strove in single combat, locked in battle
He released the arrow, it tore her belly,
It cut through her insides, splitting the heart.
Having thus subdued her, he extinguished her life. He cast down her carcass to stand upon it.
...
He split her like a shellfish into two parts:
Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky,
Pulled down the bar and posted guards.

He bade them to allow not her waters to escape.
He crossed the heavens and surveyed the regions

Opening his mouth, he addresses Ea
To impart the plan, he had conceived in his heart: "Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.
I will establish a savage, man shall be his name. Truly, savage-man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods That they might be at ease!"

READING QUESTIONS

1. According to this account, how is the world created?
2. Central to this creation story is a struggle to the death between two gods. What might the focus on battle reveal about Mesopotamian beliefs?
3. How and why are human beings created?
4. What does this story reveal about how Mesopotamians understood the relationship between humans and the gods?

1 Ubshukinna: The meeting hall of the gods.