

## THE MIDDLE EAST

The myths from the Middle East, which date from 2500 B.C., are the oldest recorded literature in the world. Yet they reveal a universe of gods and heroes who react to the human condition as we know it today. The gods of Sumer, Babylonia, and Egypt have human personalities and human needs, and they enjoy helping a favorite mortal.

In ancient Middle Eastern cultures, the ability to perform magic tricks was considered proof of the ability to govern the world. In the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation epic, a male divinity, Marduk, pits his great magical powers against the original female divinity, Tiamat. Because he possesses stronger magic, Marduk wins and becomes the new ruler of the universe.

Egyptian myths reflect Egypt's isolated culture and therefore are quite different from the myths of Egypt's neighbors, Sumer and Babylonia. The ancient Egyptian view of the universe included predictable, helpful divinities who combated an evil that could never be permanently conquered. The Egyptians also believed in resurrection for deserving human beings. The myth of Osiris, Isis, and Horus was so important that the Egyptians pictorially depicted it on the walls of their temples.

The Hittite myth about Telepinu addresses fertility. Possibly because the first part of the tablet is missing, the reason for the anger that Telepinu feels is not explained; the myth simply describes how the god must be appeased in order for life on earth to continue and flourish.

The Sumerian/Babylonian epic *Gilgamesh* presents what may be the first tragic hero. Gilgamesh wants what many other human beings wish to possess—the immortality of everlasting life. He takes a perilous journey in the hope of achieving his wish, but he learns that human beings are not destined to acquire this type of immortality. Despite his disappointment, Gilgamesh learns much from his journey. He learns to value the ordinary pleasures in life, and he decides to perform deeds that will bring him lasting fame—the only form of immortality that is available to human beings. This epic also reveals how the gods of Sumer and Babylonia, unlike the Egyptian gods, are unpredictable. Many of them are most memorable for their quick tempers and impulsive behavior.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Babylonian creation myth is the epic known as The *Enuma elish* from its opening words, which mean "when on high." It was recorded in cuneiform (wedge-shaped) script upon seven clay tablets that were found by British archaeologists in the 1840s in their excavations at Nineveh, in what is now Iraq. These tablets were part of the library of King Ashurbanipal, who ruled from 668 to 627 B.C.

German excavations at Ashur (not far from Nineveh), begun in 1902, uncovered another version of The *Enuma elish*. This version is identical to the one at Nineveh except for the substitution of the name of the Assyrian national god (Ashur) for the Babylonian national god (Marduk). Therefore, this epic appears to have been important to the Assyrians as well as to the Babylonians.

Although these cuneiform tablets date back only to about 1000 B.C., their content and style indicate that the story recorded on them may have existed as early as 1900 B.C. In the introduction to his famous legal code, Hammurabi, who ruled the Babylonians from 1728 to 1686 B.C., refers both to the *Enuma elish* and to Marduk:

*"At the time when Anu, king of the gods, and Enlil, lord of heaven and earth and the god who determines the destiny of the land, first made Marduk supreme among the gods, then assigned to Marduk Enlil's role as king over all human beings, and finally made Babylon supreme among the nations of the world, at that time Anu and Enlil chose me, Hammurabi, the religious and god-fearing prince, to enrich the lives of the people by causing justice to shine upon the land like the sun, thereby destroying all that is evil."*

Each year in Babylon, the *Enuma elish* was solemnly recited and dramatized as part of the ten-day New Year festival, which marked the beginning of the autumn season. The holiday was a serious one that emphasized the reestablishment of order in the universe, the renewal of life, and the determination of all human destinies for the coming year.

Scholars believe that the Babylonians pantomimed the battle depicted in the *Enuma elish* between the forces of chaos and the forces of order. Chaos would reign in the streets of Babylon until Marduk was freed. Then he would lead a procession, symbolizing the forces of the gods, against Tiamat and her demon forces. After Marduk

had defeated Tiamat and her rebellious forces in a mock battle and had established order in the universe, the Babylonians would carry his image in a triumphant parade through the streets. In this magical way, the people hoped to influence the gods who controlled human destinies and persuade them to usher in a year of fertility, abundance, and good fortune.

The people of Babylon may also have considered this myth to have magical power over the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. These rivers overflowed their banks each spring and often ravaged the countryside with severe flooding. Residents used the magic of incantation and dramatization to try to protect their community against the devastation of these terrible spring floods.

The myth honoring Marduk glorifies both the patron god of Babylonia—who had created the universe and brought order out of chaos—and the city of Babylon, for the gods built the temple of Marduk in Babylon to be their earthly home. The myth thus combines both religious and secular political aspects. Just as the destinies of human beings were determined in the course of the New Year holiday, so, too, the political fate of Babylonia was being decided.

Thus, the *Enuma elish* epic is more than a creation myth. The Babylonians took the traditional Sumerian creation myth and reshaped it to serve new national, religious, and political purposes. The explanation of the creation of the universe became the story of the rise to supreme power of the storm god Marduk and the glorification of his earthly city of Babylon.

## **BABYLONIAN RELIGION**

The three greatest Sumerian divinities—Anu, god of the sky, Enlil, god of the air, and Ea, god of the earth—still existed among the Babylonian divinities. Then Marduk, who possessed both a great birthright as Ea's son and extraordinary abilities of his own, was born. Once Marduk entered the assembly of the gods, they gave him Enlil's role in the universe, so that Enlil was a god in name only, without function or power. Marduk became the supreme god, given the honor of creating the universe and of keeping it functioning. Further, Marduk was responsible for the creation of human beings, whose purpose it was to serve the gods. All gods and all mortals obeyed Marduk's will.

Marduk achieved power by means of a religious revolution, and his victory established a new order and a new way of looking at the universe. The Sumerian gods had been the substance of the universe, not merely representing but actually being the land, the water, and the heavens. When Marduk gave them new roles, he created the universe as the Babylonians recognized it. He organized the elements that already existed (the gods) to bring order out of chaos.

It is also significant that Marduk built the new order upon the ruins of an order that was even older than that explained in Sumerian mythology. The earliest people of Babylonia were farmers. They worshipped the Great Goddess or Mother Goddess to ensure the fertility of their fields and themselves and, therefore, to ensure the survival of their community. Therefore, when Marduk is victorious over Tiamat, his victory represents that of a new male-dominated patriarchal religion over a female-dominated matriarchal religion, in which Tiamat was the Great Goddess or Mother Goddess.

Tiamat originally presided over a universe that was far from the chaos that Marduk is called upon to organize. As the Great Goddess, she functioned in three related forms. As Goddess of the Underworld, she controlled the three-stage cycle of life: first, the period of birth and childhood; then the fertile period of maturity and reproduction; and last, the sterile period of old age, with its decline and death. As Goddess of the Earth, she controlled the three-stage cycle of the seasons: first, spring (the period of birth or rebirth and budding growth); then, summer (the fertile period of blossoming and harvest); and last, winter (the sterile period of decay, barrenness, and death or dormancy). As Goddess of the Sky, she was the great Moon Goddess, who appeared in her three-stage cycle of phases: first, as the new and waxing moon (the period of birth or rebirth and growth); then, as the full moon (the period of maturity); and last, as the waning moon (the period of decline and death or dormancy).

However, the Babylonians transform Tiamat's earlier role in the *Enuma elish*. Tiamat, who originally was the Great Goddess or Mother Goddess and who had given birth to all of the original gods, now became their enemy. She who originally was good and protected the lives of her children now became evil and attempted to destroy those children. She who originally had given birth to the best of the gods now gave birth to

monsters and demons. She who originally was more powerful than her husband and her sons now was easily defeated by a new god who was immune to her potent magic.

Under Marduk, order emerged out of chaos, life emerged from dead matter, and nature was renewed each year. Nevertheless, the universe and the gods within it were not predictable or reliable. Even the powerful king Marduk was always dependent upon the goodwill and the help of the gods for success. Life after death promised no rewards for earthly achievements—just darkness, dust, deprivation, and eternal boredom. Therefore, the Babylonians believed that human beings had to make the most of their earthly lives, in a world that lacked security and hope.

## **PRINCIPAL GODS**

**TIAMAT:** Babylonia: Great Goddess or Mother Goddess; Mother Earth, who nourishes all life; wife of Apsu; mother of Anshar, Kishar, and Mummu; ruler of salt waters. Sumer: counterpart of Nintu

**APSU:** Babylonia: husband of Tiamat; father of Anshar, Kishar, and Mummu; ruler of all the gods and sweet waters. Sumer: counterpart of Anu

**MUMMU:** Babylonia: son of Tiamat and Apsu; god of mist

**ANSHAR:** Babylonia: son of Tiamat and Apsu; brother and husband of Kishar

**KISHAR:** Babylonia: daughter of Tiamat and Apsu; sister and wife of Anshar

**ANU (An):** Babylonia: god of the sky; son of Anshar and Kishar. Sumer: god of the sky; husband of Nintu; father and ruler of all the gods

**NINTU (Ki):** Sumer: a Great Goddess or Mother Goddess like Tiamat; wife of Anu; mother of all the gods; created the first human beings out of clay

**ENLIL:** Babylonia: god of the air between earth and sky. Sumer: son of Anu and Nintu; god of air and agriculture; became ruler of the gods along with Anu

**ISHTAR (Inanna):** Sumer: first, daughter of Anu, later of Sin; a Great Goddess or Mother Goddess; goddess of love and war

**EA:** Babylonia: son of Anu; husband of Damkina; father of Marduk; ruler of all the gods and sweet water after Apsu; god of wisdom, arts, and crafts. Sumer: son of Nintu; ruler of the earth; god of wisdom, arts, and crafts

**DAMKINA:** Babylonia: wife of Ea; mother of Marduk

**MARDUK:** Babylonia: son of Ea and Damkina; wisest and most accomplished god; becomes ruler of all the gods. Sumer: counterpart of Anu and Enlil

**KINGU:** Babylonia: commands Tiamat's forces against Marduk

**SIN:** god of the moon; father of Shamash

**SHAMASH:** son of Sin; god of the sun; protects the poor, the wronged, and the traveler.

\*For the most part, the Babylonians adopted the earlier Sumerian gods, with some significant changes to reflect the changing culture. Something similar happens when the Romans adopt Greek gods a few millennia later.