

The Babylonian Creation

In Babylonia and Assyria, plenitude could be represented by the waters of ocean. Before ordered generation arose from these waters, there was a primal chaos, which Mesopotamian scholars understood in terms of undifferentiated possibility. The Babylonian priest Berossus, who lived and wrote in Greek most probably during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus, describes this primal chaos in terms which emphasise that it is a plenitude (this passage was preserved by Alexander Polyhistor):

There was a time in which there was nothing but darkness and an abyss of waters, wherein resided most hideous beings, which were produced of a two-fold principle. Men appeared with two wings, some with four wings, and two faces. They had one body, but two heads the one of a man, the other of a woman. They were likewise, in their several organs, both male and female. Other human figures were to be seen with the legs and horns of goats. Some had horses' feet; others had the limbs of a horse behind, but before were fashioned like men, resembling hippocentaurs. Bulls, likewise, bred there with the heads of men; and dogs, with fourfold bodies, and the tails of fishes. Also horses, with the heads of dogs: men, too, and other animals, with the heads and bodies of horses and the tails of fishes. In short, there were creatures with the limbs of every species of animals. Add to these fishes, reptiles, serpents, with other wonderful animals, which assumed each other's shape and countenance. Of all these were preserved delineations in the temple of Belus at Babylon.

The person, who was supposed to have presided over them, was a woman named Omoroca; which in the Chaldee language is Thalath; which in Greek is interpreted Thalassa, the sea: but, according to the most true computation, it is equivalent to Selene, the moon. All things being in this situation, Belus came, and cut the woman asunder: and, out of one half of her, he formed the earth, and of the other half the heavens; and at the same time he destroyed the animals in the abyss. All this (he says) was an allegorical description of nature. For the whole universe consisting of moisture, and animals being continually generated therein; the deity (Belus), above-mentioned, cut off his own head; upon which the other gods mixed the blood, as it gushed out, with the earth; and from thence men were formed. On this account it is that men are rational, and partake of divine knowledge. This Belus, whom men call Dis, (or Pluto,) divided the darkness, and separated the heavens from the earth, and reduced the universe to order. But the animals so recently created, not being able to bear the prevalence of light, died.

Alexander Heidel points out that *thalatth* in the foregoing passage, "... is obviously a scribal error." [i](#) He says that the form *thamte* corresponds to the Babylonian *tamtu*, denoting the sea, the ocean, or *Tiamat*, which is the personification of the primordial sea or ocean. Heidel notes that *Omoroka* is a title of Tiamat [ii](#) – Heidel also observes that the emended form of *Omoroka* in the Greek text is *Omorka*, which has the same numerical value (by gematria) as 'Selene' (the moon). [iii](#)

Belus upon this, seeing a vast space quite uninhabited, though by nature very fruitful, ordered one of the gods to take off his head; and when it was taken off, they were to mix the blood with the soil of the earth, and from thence to form other men and animals, which should be capable of bearing the light. Belus also formed the stars, and the sun and the moon, together with the five planets.

It is interesting to compare again Plato's account of the creation of the universe:

When He (Theos) took over all that was visible, seeing that it was not in a state of rest but in a state of discordant and disorderly motion, He brought it into order out of disorder, deeming that the former state is in all ways better than the latter. For Him who is most good it neither was nor is permissible to perform any action save what is fair. As He reflected, therefore, He perceived that of such creatures as are by nature visible, none that is irrational will be fairer, comparing wholes with wholes, than the rational; and further, that reason cannot possibly belong to any apart from Soul. So because of this reflection He constructed reason within soul and soul within body as He fashioned the All, that so the work He was executing might be of its nature most fair and most good. [iv](#)

These accounts are essentially consonant, in that they relate an initial state of discord in creation, as we read already in the text of Berossus:

... there were creatures with the limbs of every species of animals. Add to these fishes, reptiles, serpents, with other wonderful animals, which assumed each other's shape and countenance.

These were not to be tolerated as part of the creation, though they were implicit in the ground of Being. They do not make sense in terms of a rational creation. Note the sentence: "add to these fishes, reptiles, serpents, with other wonderful animals, *which assumed each other's shape and countenance.*" in the Babylonian account (my emphasis). This makes it clear that these animals are the product of a plenitude, a totality, in which all possible combinations are, at the least, potential and latent. But they are to be destroyed in favour of a rational creation. This might be taken to imply that they possess the same degree of reality as the rational creatures which are to succeed them. Though they can have no practical existence. By contrast the creation of men is due to the intervention of a god, who thereby made men rational. Berossus further connects this rationality with the ability to understand the workings of the divine:

the deity (Belus), cut off his own head; upon which the other gods mixed the blood, as it gushed out, with the earth; and from thence men were formed. On this account it is that men are rational, and partake of divine knowledge.

It is also worth noting that Plato refers to *theos* as the agent (acting through the *demiourgos*) who brought order to the chaos. It is a conception of the divine which stands beyond the pantheon of gods, and is a single divinity.

Plato is writing in a polytheistic culture within the frame of a model of creation which gives rise to many gods through the process of generation. This by itself ought to have given modern scholars pause for thought about the true nature of polytheistic thought among the Greeks, if not among other polytheistic cultures. Did Plato invent this detail for the Greeks, whereby a supreme god stands behind the creation of the world, and the pantheon of the gods? It is an aspect of Plato's theology which is not often discussed. Plato does not name him, so we cannot assume that this god is the head of the Greek pantheon. And there is little about the nature and character of Zeus which would fit him for the role.

In the Babylonian account reported by Berossus, the god who reduces the chaos to order is the head of the Babylonian pantheon, Marduk (known latterly in Babylon as 'Bel').

Heidel tells us that two Greek versions of the main Babylonian story of creation were known to classical scholars before the decipherment of cuneiform. One of the versions "we owe to Damascius, the last of the Neo-Platonic philosophers.... His chief work is entitled *Difficulties and Solutions of First Principles*. In this treatise he gives a brief summary of the Babylonian views concerning the origin of the gods and of the universe." The other Greek account is the one we have been looking at, by the priest of Bel at Babylon, Berossus. This account is taken from his history of Babylonia, "which he compiled from native documents and published in Greek about 275 B.C.E."

Damascius was born in Damascus around 480 CE, and one of the philosophers who famously sought sanctuary in Persia at the time of the closure of the schools. Damascius's account is as follows:

Of the barbarians the Babylonians seem to pass over in silence the one principle of the universe, and they assume two, Tauthe and Apason, making Apason the husband of Tauthe and calling her the mother of the gods. Of these was born an only-begotten son, Moymis, whom I conceive to be the mental world (noetos kosmos) proceeding from the two principles. From them another generation proceeded, Dache and Dachos. And again a third (generation proceeded) from them, Kissare and Assoros, of whom were born three, Anos, Illinos, and Aos. And of Aos and Dauke was born a son called Bel, who, they say, is the fabricator of the world (demiourgos).

There is much to comment on in this interesting passage. Heidel says that it is "remarkable how well this summary agrees with *Enuma elish*; it sounds almost like a passage taken directly out of the Babylonian epic." There are some textual details which require elucidation, particularly concerning the names. Later copying of Damascius' text has resulted in minor textual errors in copying. Heidel points out that *Dache* and *Dachos* are corruptions for *Lache* and *Lachos*, the Greek lambda and delta being easy to confound (Λ and Δ). And *Lache* and *Lachos* correspond to the Babylonian names *Lahamu* and *Lahmu* or *Lahha*. *Tauthe* and *Apason* correspond to *Tiamat* and *Apsu*. *Moymis* corresponds to *Mummu*, who is the son and vizier of *Apsu*. Further, *Kissare* corresponds to *Kishar*, and *Assoros* to *Anshar* (in the latter years of the Assyrian Empire, which several times controlled Babylonia, the Assyrian god *Assur* was often conflated with *Anshar*, or 'king of heaven', which conflation may have been reflected in a late version of the Babylonian creation available to Damascius). *Anos* equates with *Anu*, and *Illinos* to *Enlil* or *Ellil*. *Aos* is the god *Ea*, who presided over the *Apsu*, and was sometimes conflated with the trickster god *Enki*. *Dauke* is *Damkina* (Greek μ being confused with υ), and *Bel* is *Marduk*.

Heidel reflects that Damascius calls *Mummu* "an only-begotten son" or "a single son" (*monogenes pais*) of *Apsu* and *Tiamat*, contrasting this with the following pair of generations, *Lahmu* and *Lahamu*, *Anshar* and *Kishar*, which issued in pairs, while *Mummu* was born alone.

He comments on Damascius's conception of *Mummu* as 'the mental world' which exists in the mind of the creator before it comes into an external existence, and argues that Damascius' is reading this sequence of generations as an intellectual and subtle account of creation, paralleling to a significant degree the generations of the gods to be found in Greek mythology, adding along the way intellectual ideas (such as mind) which were never present in the original materials. Heidel's view is that reading *Mummu* as 'the mental world' may have been suggested to Damascius by Plato's conception of the logos. Which leaves Plato safe in the position of having invented the idea of a transcendent world of ideas. Or as it is spoken of in the text, 'cosmic mind'.

We have the great luxury of being able to compare this description of the creation with the account recovered from Mesopotamia on clay tablets, the *Enuma Elish*. This text was closely connected with the observance of the New Year's Festival at Babylon, and it was recited at the end of the fourth day of this celebration. This Festival lasted from the first to the eleventh of the month Nisan. The *Enuma elish* was recited in its entirety by the high priest before the statue of Marduk. Later in the course of the festival, the *Enuma elish* was recited again, or perhaps chanted, on another but undetermined day. Heidel suggests that parts of the epic may even have been dramatized, the king and the priests playing the roles of Marduk, Tiamat, Kingu, and the other characters who appear in the account of the creation.

It is curious that this text was not recited on the first day of the festival, and we are reduced to conjecture to explain this, since the reason is not given in any of the available cuneiform sources. It may be that the reason the fourth of Nisan was chosen for the recitation is that *Marduk* or *Bel*, as the fabricator of the world, is born in the fourth generation from pairs of gods and goddesses, and that the earlier days were associated with the preceding sequence of generations. That is to say, that the New Year's festival was concerned with the whole process of creation and generation, as described in the *Enuma Elish*, not simply with the story of Bel.

We do know however the reason for the second recitation of the epic, since it is explicitly stated in a cuneiform text: "Enuma elish which is recited before Bel, which they chant in the month of Nisan, (it is) because he is held prisoner." This is a problem for scholars: why is Bel said to be held prisoner? Heidel suggests that "the chanting of the epic is here apparently intended as a magical aid in Marduk's deliverance from imprisonment, the precise nature of which is not clear". The king and the priesthood would have by contrast understood their own role in what they were doing, which was re-enacting the creation in order, through reduplication of the sequence of events, as evident to the human understanding, to strengthen it. The gods are a human creation, a construct of the human mind; a set of conjectures about the nature of reality. According to this model therefore, the gods need to be called, in order for them to have a rational reality, as opposed to the irrational creatures which otherwise would populate the divine world. Lines 7 to 9 of *Enuma elish* make this clear:

When none of the (other) Gods had been brought into being,
(When) they had not (yet) been called by (their) name(s),
and their) destinies had not (yet) been fixed,
(At that time) were the gods created within them.

The gods need to be named, and have their characters defined before they have reality. The bracketed words which are helpfully added to the text by the translator, in order to make them make some kind of sense to us, only emphasise how far we are away from a proper understanding of what is being described. If we strip out the modern sense to the passage, we get this:

When none of the Gods had been brought into being,
They had not been called by name,
Destinies had not been fixed,
the gods were created within them.

This passage suggests very strongly that the earlier stages of creation represent properties and states of Being, rather than the generation of gods. Thus *Apsu*, *Mummu*, and *Tiamat* are not strictly

gods, in that they do not have to be called by name. It might be easier to imagine these as aspects of Being, the fields of reality which have a role in the realization of the gods. These are properties or powers present in Being, rather than gods (which require to be defined and called by name). The earliest stages of creation therefore represent not generation into existence, but *some kind of differentiation* within Being. The gods which are created live in the divine world, but the earthly, physical world does not yet exist.

In both cultures, the creation is spoken of in terms of a rational reality replacing an irrational one via the intervention of the divine. We are not accustomed to thinking about ancient Babylonians dealing in terms of rational thought and rational concepts. But that is what the text implies about how they saw themselves, and the nature of their picture of the world. Essentially Babylonian theology is built on the idea that a rational and intelligible reality is the successor of a primary irrational creation destroyed by the power of divine light. [v](#)

i Heidel, A. *The Babylonian Genesis*, p77, footnote 85

ii Op cit. footnote 84, p 77.

iii Op cit. footnote 86, p77.

iv Plato, *Timaeus*, 30a–b.

v The text of *Enuma Elish* ('When on High') and other related creation documents from Babylonia can be found in Heidel, Alexander, *The Babylonian Genesis*, University of Chicago Press, 1942.

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