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**“A Flare for Style and Depth of Allusion:
The Use of Fire and Water Imagery in Enuma Elish Tablet I.”**

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CARE FOR STYLE AND DEPTH OF ALLUSION: THE USE OF FIRE AND WATER IMAGERY IN *ENŪMA ELIŠ* TABLET I

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Abstract

A close examination of the language of the Akkadian creation myth *Enūma Eliš* (Tablet I) suggests that many of the lexemes used in reference to the god Apsū ("fresh water") and the goddess Tiāmat ("salt water") were chosen for their allusions to water. Similarly, the text often refers to the brazen god Marduk with words suggestive of fire. These allusions, which the text often achieves through puns and paronomasia (sound play), demonstrate an often unrecognized literary sophistication and bespeak an attempt by the scribes to portray these gods as physical manifestations of the elements they embody.

INTRODUCTION

The gap of several millennia that separates modern philologists from their ancient Mesopotamian counterparts often hinders a clear understanding of the more subtle nuances of Akkadian lexemes. While scholars have come a long way in isolating and defining thousands of words and their semantic ranges, it remains clear that what appear to us today as mere nouns and verbs, in antiquity were references alive with significance and allusion. This may be demonstrated by a close examination of allusive word choice in the first tablet of the ancient Mesopotamian creation epic, *Enūma Eliš* (lit. "When on high").¹

Enūma Eliš is probably the most significant expression of ancient Mesopotamian theology. The seven tablets which comprise the epic depict a primordial battle between order and chaos in which the watery forces, the gods Apsū and Tiāmat, are defeated by Marduk, the new chief of the Babylonian pantheon. Though the oldest copies of the text date to the first millennium B.C.E., they doubtless are an expanded form of an earlier Mesopotamian cosmology. While the text's theological and historical aspects have received much attention in the scholarly literature, an examination of the tablets' highly sophisticated poetic style remains a desideratum, especially with respect to its use of allusion and paronomasia.

The purpose of allusion and paronomasia is difficult to ascertain because the devices are an integral part of the elevated diction of literary texts. As *Enūma Eliš*

was ritually recited at the New Year's festival, however, we may opine that word and sound plays were understood as more than just embellishment. In Joshua Finkel's words, "the ancients probably took a more serious view of the situation and regarded the inherent duality of meaning as replete with marvelous and mysterious potentialities" (Finkel 1953:37). It is likely, therefore, that wordplay was more than just a method of enhancing a story, but a means of shaping a hearer's perception and conjuring images of the divine. As such, allusive language becomes a sophisticated method of character portrayal. In this respect, *Enūma Eliš* is a masterpiece.

THE WATERY GODS

An illustration of the epic's brilliant use of allusion occurs with respect to the divine couple Apsū and Tiāmat. The importance of recognizing that Apsū and Tiāmat represent the watery forces of chaos cannot be overstated,² for in portraying these characters the epic continually alludes to water and/or destruction by water. A host of examples refer to calm or rough seas. For instance, when we are told in l.26: ^dTiāmat *suqammumat ina mahrišunu*, "Tiāmat was serene before them,"³ we cannot help but envision the turbulent Tiāmat (Sea) calming before her stormy battle.⁴ Similar are lines 40: *qūlu lišakinma*, "let calm be established..." and 58: *qūlu išbatū saqummiš ušbū*, "they (the gods in Tiāmat's midst) seized silence, they sat calm." When it is said of Apsū *immerū pānūšu*, "Apsū's face lit up" (l.51), a picture comes to mind of the surface of the fresh water Apsū reflecting light.⁵ Similar is the god's rebuke against Tiāmat in l.114: *idsu lā tallikīma qalīš tusbi*, "And you did not go to his side, but lay calm." When we keep in mind that the verb *alāku*, translated "go," may be "said of the coming of a flood," and that *idu* may mean both "side" and "shore,"⁶ we may read instead: "And you did not flow to his shore, but lay calm." The importance of portraying the characters "true to form" may be linked to the aetiology behind the text. It should be

² Apsū="fresh water sea," CAD A/2 197, s.v. *apsū*; Tiāmat="Meer, Sea," AHw 1353-1354, s.v. *tiamtu*.

³ Unless otherwise noted, translations and transliterations are my own.

⁴ Storms often metaphorically represent battles in ancient Near Eastern literature. See, e.g., *Enūma Eliš* IV:35-60 and Job 20:23-25.

⁵ Cf. the use of "face" in Gen 1:1: "and the spirit of Elōhīm hovered over the face of the water."

⁶ CAD A/1 308, s.v. *alāku*; I/J 15, s.v. *idu*.

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¹ The definitive text edition remains that of Lambert 1966.

remembered that in dividing up the corpse of Tiāmat later in the epic, Marduk forms rivers.⁷ The flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates, therefore, may be the issue addressed by these allusions to water. In this way the epic continually builds its characters and impresses their images upon the hearer.

The verbs employed to describe the actions of Apsû and Tiāmat are filled with allusions to water. The verb *dalāhu*, "stir up, roil (water),"⁸ appears five times in the story, always in connection with Tiāmat, the Sea (ll.23, 108, 109, 116, 119). Possible translations of some of these lines might read:

23. *dalhūnimma ʔa dTiāmat karassa*
"They stirred up that which was Tiāmat's desire."

108. *uʔabʔi agamma udallah dTiāmat*
"He induced a flood wave and made Tiāmat turbulent."

116. *ʔudluhu karʔakima ūl niʔallal nīnu*
"...to stir up your depths, and now we cannot rest."

Similarly used is *dālu*, which while normally translated "wander around aimlessly" or "watch carefully," also may allude to *dalū*, "draw water."⁹ The allusion is underscored in lines 109 and 119 by a close association of *dālu* with *dalāhu* "roil (water)."

109. *dalhat Tiāmatama urra u muʔi idulli*
"Tiāmat stirred and churned day and night."

119. *ūl ummu atī dulluḥiʔ tadulli*
"Are you not a mother? Do you not swirl around astir?"

Apsû is referenced in similar terms in l.25:

25. *lā naʔir Apsû rigimʔun*
"Apsû could not diminish their din."

Also of note in l.25 above is that *naʔaru*, "diminish, cut off, remove," also means "pour out."¹⁰ The verse might be rendered more accurately with the watery nature of Apsû in mind, "Apsû could not douse their din."

Of interest also is *apû*, "appear" (l.7). Like *dalāhu* its secondary meaning is "blur the eyes (with water)."¹¹ The subtle allusion to water is perfect for a description of the birth of the gods, who are made to appear (i.e.,

"made to be seen with the eyes") by the mixing of the waters of Apsû and Tiāmat. This also foreshadows the great confrontation with Marduk in which the vision of the rival gods "blurs" (IV:70; so Heidel 1951:39).

An allusion to water also occurs with *sapāhu*, "disperse" (l.39), which also can mean "spill, diffuse."¹² Apsû threatens: *luḥhalliqma alkatsunu lusappih*, "Let me abolish their ways and disperse them." The picture presented here is one of destruction by flood. Further, *li-sa-ap-pi-iḥ* also may be read *li-ʔa-10-ab-bi-iḥ*, i.e., "let me sprinkle."¹³ The author ingeniously has portrayed Apsû as diffusing the rebellious gods like water drops. That "spilling" can mean "killing" may be seen in Tablet IV:18 of the same myth wherein the promise to find the agitator runs: *u ilu ʔa limnēti iḥuzu tabūk napsassu* "But as for the god who espoused evil, pour out his life!"

Still illusions run deep. In line 53 we read:

53. *dMummu itedir kiʔassu*
"Mummu embraced his (Apsû's) neck."

Translations do not do justice to the line's cleverness. The word *kiʔadu* means not only "neck," but also "shore."¹⁴ The idiom, which is akin to the English "hugged the shore," is one of the more creative examples of punning in the tablet. The wordplay occurs again in Tablet II:113 where Marduk promises Anʔar: *kiʔad Tiāmat urruḥiʔ takabba atā* "Soon you will trample upon the neck/shore of Tiāmat!"

Allusions to water do not end here. When Ea puts Apsû to sleep we hear:

64. *ʔittu irteḥiʔu ʔalil tubbatīʔ*
"He poured sleep on him so that he slept soundly."

65. *uʔaʔilma Apsām riḥi ʔittam*
"Put Apsû to rest drenched with sleep."

Here the III/1 conjugation of *reḥû*, "pour out" and its adjectival form *riḥi*, "drenched" are used appropriately to depict Apsû as sinking into deep sleep.

Shortly after this the epic relates how Mummu took advantage of Apsû's rest by *iptur riksiʔu iʔtaḥaʔ agaʔu*, "unfastening his belt and taking off his crown" (l.67). When we observe that *agû* means both "crown" and "wave," a pun rises to the surface.¹⁵ Fittingly, Apsû was crowned with water. That the secondary meaning of *agû* was known to the composer of the text is confirmed by the use of *agû* as "wave" in line 108.

⁷ *uparri ma uʔlāt damiʔa, ʔāru iltanu ana puzrat uʔtabil* (IV:131-132). Hence, the assembly's declaration following Tiāmat's defeat: "May she retreat without hindrance, may she recede forever!" (VII:134). So Heidel 1951:59.

⁸ CAD D 43, s.v. *dalāhu*.

⁹ CAD D 58, 59, s.v. *dālu*; CAD D 56, s.v. *dalū*.

¹⁰ CAD N/2 60, 64, s.v. *naʔaru*.

¹¹ CAD A/2 204-205, s.v. *apû*; CAD D 43, s.v. *dalāhu*.

¹² CAD S.151, 256, s.v. *sapāhu*.

¹³ CAD Š/1 3, s.v. *ʔabāhu*.

¹⁴ Note the example: *ana ki-ʔa-ad tiāmsim illik*. CAD K 450, s.v. *kiʔadu*.

¹⁵ CAD A/1 153, 157, s.v. *agû*.

Linked with the playful use of *agû* in line 67 is *iš-ta-hat*, from *šahātu*, "take off."¹⁶ If one instead reads *iš-ta-hat*, a reading permitted by the ambiguous orthography, another allusion to water emerges, for *šahātu* means "sprinkle, drain, or wash."¹⁷ In one breath we are told how Mummu "took off his crown" and "washed him with a torrent" (presumably of sleep).¹⁸

One play on Tiāmat's watery ways is unique in that it constitutes a Janus Parallelism. Janus Parallelism is a literary device in which a pun faces back to a previous stich of poetry in one of its meanings and ahead to a following stich in another. The polysemy can occur either in two stichs ("asymmetrical Janus parallelism") or three ("symmetrical Janus parallelism") and both types are attested in biblical Hebrew and Akkadian.¹⁹

43. *maršiš uggugat ediššiša*
"Delirious, she was beside herself with rage,

44. *limutta ittadi ana karšiša*
But the wickedness she suppressed inside,

45. *minā nīnu ša nibnū nušhallaq*
"How can we destroy what we ourselves made?"

While *karšu* is heard on the line's surface as "belly, guts," it echoes within *karšū*, "catastrophe, annihilation."²⁰ With its secondary meaning *karšu*, "desire, heart, mind," the text reminds us of Tiamat's rage mentioned in the previous line. As a metaphoric pun on *karšū*, "annihilation," the pun anticipates "shall we destroy?" in the next verse. Thus, it is a symmetrical Janus Parallelism. That Tiāmat's suppressed "desire" was to "annihilate" is made clear by the proximity of *karšu* to *nadū*, which means both "throw, hurl" and "let water flow, steep in liquid."²¹

It is perhaps in the light of such allusions to water that we should understand Tiamat's epithet:

133. *umma Ḥubur pātiqat kalamu*
"Mother Ḥubur fashioner of all things."

As noted by S. Dalley, the line contains a pun on the Ḥubur River, the river of the underworld.²² Moreover,

¹⁶ CAD Š/1 93, s.v. *šahātu*.

¹⁷ CAD Š/1 84, s.v. *šahātu*.

¹⁸ There may be another pun here in that *šahātu* also means "fear." The line would therefore read "Mummu feared his (Apsū's) torrent." CAD Š/1 86, s.v. *šahātu*.

¹⁹ For the discovery of Janus Parallelism see Gordon 1978:59-66; 1992:50-51. For examples in Akkadian and Ugaritic literature, see Noegel 1991:419-421; 1994:306-308; 1995:1-4; 1995a; Heintz 1994:59; Horowitz 1995:11-12.

²⁰ CAD K 225, s.v. *karšu*; CAD K 214, s.v. *karšū*.

²¹ CAD N/1 68, s.v. *nadū*.

²² Dalley 1989:274, n.8. CAD H 219, s.v. *ḥubur*. The line may also be hinting at Tiamat's role as the silencer of noise, as

a river seems a suitable place to envision the birth of snakes, as we find subsequently in lines 134-141.

Later, Tiāmat's omnipotence is boasted:

145. *gapša šērētūša lā mahra šināma*
"Her orders so powerful, (they) could not be changed."

The verb *šanū*, normally translated "change, alter," also means "flood with water."²³ The verb is used artfully here; the subtle message conveyed is that one is as likely to change Tiāmat's orders as one is to inundate her.

There may also be a reflection of water in the words of Tiāmat to her lover Kingu:

155. *lū šubatama ḥā'iri edū attā*
"You will be the greatest, for you are my only lover."

The fact that Kingu is actually Tiāmat's second lover, second to Apsū, is humorously alluded to by the use of *edū*, both "only, most notable" and "an on-rush of water."²⁴ Therefore, we may translate the verse as a metaphorical term of endearment: "You will be the greatest, my lover, you are an on-rush of water."²⁵

MARDUK AND FIRE

The flood of allusion in connection with Apsū and Tiāmat comes to a trickle with the appearance of the epic's main character, Marduk. His birth sets the stage for the closing of the flood gates of chaos, and the end of Tiāmat's unchecked rule. As Marduk grows in strength and stature the watery powers of Apsū and Tiāmat are subsumed into his being. Just as their power was embodied in liquid, so it is by liquid that Marduk absorbs his power. Born of Enki, the god of waters, and after having "sucked the breasts of the goddesses" (l.85), Marduk is *šusqu mā'diš elišunu atar mimušu*, "elevated far above them, and superior in every way" (l.92). Here *šusqu*, a III/1 stative conjugation of the verb *šaqū*, "be high," also can be rendered "he was made to drink."²⁶ The notion that powers formerly belonging to Tiamat could be bestowed by drinking is supported by a similar use of *šaqū* in reference to Kingu, upon whom Tiamat bestows her love and the command of her hosts.²⁷

ḥubur also means "din." CAD H 220, s.v. *ḥuburu*.

²³ CAD Š/1 403, 408, s.v. *šanū*.

²⁴ CAD E 35, s.v. *edū*. The allusion also may be to Marduk, who elsewhere is connected with *edū*. See *bēl kuppi naqbi e-di-e u šāmāti*, "(Marduk) lord of sources, springs, high waters and seas" (Gilg XI:297). CAD E 36, s.v. *edū*.

²⁵ The connection of torrents to love is not uncommon in ancient Near Eastern literature. Cf. Song 8:7: "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."

²⁶ AHW 1180, s.v. *šaqū* II "hoch sein"; AHW 1181, s.v. *šaqū* III "tränken."

²⁷ Elsewhere in *Enūma Eliš* (IV:77), Tiāmat's swelling

148. *ušaṣṣa Kingu ina birišunu šāšu ušrabbiš*
"She raised Kingu (made him to drink), made him
greatest among them."

159. *innanu Kingu šūšqu liqū Anūti*
"When Kingu was promoted (made to drink), he re-
ceived Anu's power."

Marduk's connection with water also may serve to foreshadow his eventual defeat of Tiāmat. Witness the following lines: "He who has opened the fountains (and) has apportioned waters in abundance" (VII:60); "He who crosses the wide sea in its anger" (VII:74); "The sea is his craft upon which he rides" (VII:77). In fact, in order to defeat Tiāmat, Marduk "raises the rain-flood" (IV:40; so Heidel 1951:38, 56-57).

Later, upon receiving his nourishment, the youthful Marduk is admired:

87. *šamḥat nabnitsu šarir nišī ēnīšu*
"Extraordinary his form, the glance of his eyes
sparkling."

The word *šarir* may be read three ways: as "frightening," "flickering," or "flowing."²⁸ Though it is commonly understood as "frightening" or "flickering," the possibility of it meaning "flowing," in light of other allusions to water, should not be discarded completely. Moreover, there is reason to view the double meaning as a literary embodiment of Marduk's transition to adulthood represented by a miraculous transformation of elements, i.e., from water to fire. Note that "flickering" and "frightening" are apt descriptions of fire, as "flowing" is of water.

When Marduk reaches maturity, allusions of water in reference to him completely evaporate, giving way to images of fire. Marduk is now in his element. The contrast between water and fire is developed further through an ironic twist of words wherein Kingu, who was filled with power by Tiāmat, is described with an allusion to the fiery Marduk. When Marduk is described we are told: *šaptišu ina šutabuli*^dGirru *istanpaḥ*, "when his lips moved, fire blazed forth" (I.96). When Tiāmat bestows her power on Kingu, she quips: *ipša pikunu*^dGirru *linihḥa*, "let the decrees of your mouth quench fire" (I.161). The exclamation is a subtle reference to Marduk which alerts the hearer to the ensuing battle between Tiāmat and Marduk, i.e., between water and fire. The reference is made clear later when Marduk is later called by the name ^dGirru, "fire" (VII:155).

Not only are Marduk's sensory organs aflame (I.96),

conceit and self-praise are described as a high tide: [*kātima ra*] *bāsi eliš našati* [*ma*], "[In you arrogance] you have risen (and) have highly exalted yourself." Interestingly, the verb *našū* can mean "to draw off water." CAD N/2 80, s.v. *našū*.

²⁸ CAD S 114, s.v. *šarraru*; CAD S 114, s.v. *šarru*.

but even when he rejoices, he *immir*, "ignites."²⁹ Moreover, Marduk's eminence is likened to that of the sun, a common symbol of heat and radiance:

102. *māri Yamšu Yamšu Ya*^dAni
"My son, majesty! Majesty of the gods!" (So Dalley 1989:236).

Here ^dAni also means "sky," allowing for the reading "My son, sun! Sun of the sky!" As many have pointed out, the words *māri Yamšu* are also a play on MAR.^dUTU, Marduk.³⁰ The metaphor and word play are quite in keeping with the brazen image of Marduk. Again, the allusions to fire may subtly foreshadow the final conflict. When Marduk billows his strength at the battle-line we are told: *iškun birqu ina pānīšu, nablu muštaḥ-miṣu zumušu umsalla*, "Lightning precedes him and fills his body with a blazing flame" (IV:39-40).

That Marduk embodies the element fire is perhaps best seen by another Janus Parallel in line 104.

103. *labiṣ melammē esrit ilāni Yaḡiṣ itpur*
"Clothed with the radiance of ten gods, worn high
above the head,

104. *pulḥātu ḥašassina eliṣu kamra*
An aura of fear covered him entirely,

105. *ibnima šāri irbetta wālid*^dAnum
Anu made the four winds, he gave them birth."

Pertinent here is the word "entirely," *ḥa-šat-si-na*.³¹ Though it offers no grammatical problem to the sense of the passage, other readings are possible. For example, we may read the word *ḥa-maṣ-si-na*, "fires," or *ḥa-šat-si-na*, "fifty."³² The reading "fires" is supported by the frequent association of *melammu* with fire.³³ As such, it puns on the previous line wherein Marduk's radiance is described. If we read instead "fifty," the line serves both as a Janus Parallelism between lines 103 and 105 by referring to a number and as an allusion to the fifty names of Marduk.³⁴ Indeed, as A. Heidel notes, one of Marduk's names was Fifty: "...the number of names proclaimed by the assembly of gods (for Marduk) was still fifty, which permitted the gods to call Marduk

²⁹ The verb *namāru* also means "burn, heat." CAD N/1 214, s.v. *namāru*.

³⁰ Jensen 1924:77-79. See also Lewy 1946:380, n.6; Speiser 1967; Zimmern 1923:239; Heidel 1951, and most recently Dalley 1989:274, n.6. Multiple meanings also have been suggested for the god Mammu. See Heidel 1948:98-105.

³¹ CAD H 68, s.v. *ḥammaru*.

³² CAD H 64, s.v. *ḥamāru*; CAD H 81, s.v. *ḥanā*.

³³ CAD M/2 10, s.v. *melammu*.

³⁴ The reading "fifty" is given for this line in CAD K 113, s.v. *kamāru*, although without reference to the fifty names of Marduk: "the fifty Fears are heaped upon him."

Hanshâ ("Fifty") (Heidel 1951:60, n.151).³⁵ Thus, just as in *māri lamšu* above, both Marduk's name and fiery nature were recited simultaneously. Moreover, the word *kamra*, "heaped," also means "annihilation."³⁶ Therefore we have reason to read line 104 in a number of ways:

- "An aura of Fear covered him entirely."
 "Fearful fire rays covered him entirely."
 "The Fifty fears are heaped upon him."
 "The Fifty, he is fear, he is annihilation."

CONCLUSION

The examples of allusion and paronomasia above illustrate the forethought with which words were chosen for portraying characters. The author(s) took great care to cast the story as an accurate depiction of a confrontation between two opposing elements, water and fire. That the element fire, i.e., Marduk, achieves victory in the end is meant to underscore the miracle behind the event. When water and fire meet in reality, water would naturally be expected to win. Here, however, the laws of nature are reversed. Marduk's victory is no less miraculous.

That *Enūma Eliš* was read before the populace on the fourth day of the New Year's festival suggests that literary allusions were meant to be described by those attending and that they were in some way important to the ritual (Dalley 1989:231). In this respect, it is interesting to note that fire and water figure prominently in the mythological explanatory works of Babylonian scholars, in particular, in those texts which make references to Apsū, Tiāmat, and Kingu (Livingstone 1986:120-121). It is also possible that such allusions served an oracular function, as symbolic manifestations of the divinity.³⁷ We are reminded again of the words of J. Finkel: "In contradistinction to 'poor us' nondescript philologists they were linguists of omen and portent by dint of uncanny coincidences of sound and meaning" (Finkel 1953:37).

Unfortunately, a sea of time between then and now drowns all possibility of knowing with certitude the purpose of such allusions. The epic's ritual context, however, suggests that they were regarded as more than just literary embellishments. Yet, despite a gap in our knowledge, we are able to appreciate the literary devices in *Enūma Eliš* for their profound depth and brilliance. It is hoped that future studies concerning other ancient Near Eastern nature deities will consider the language

³⁵ His comment is based on VII:143-144.

³⁶ CAD K 112, 113, s.v. *kamāru*.

³⁷ This may be connected with the well-known importance placed on names in the ancient Near East, especially the name of a god. The significance of Marduk's name is made clear in the epilogue: "Let his name be declared, uttered in the land!" (VII:50); "May this his name endure forever!" (VII:54).

employed to describe them.³⁸ In so doing, we will arrive at a better understanding of the literary and theological sophistication of the ancients.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AHw *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*. W. von Soden. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1959-1981.
 CAD *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. I.J. Gelb, et al. (eds.). Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1956-present.
 UT *Ugaritic Textbook*. C.H. Gordon. *Analecta Orientalia* 38. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965.

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³⁸ A similar concern for allusion in character portrayal appears in the Epic of Erra. See Machinist 1983:221-226. See also the Ugaritic epic of the storm god Baal (UT 51, VII:17-31) whose voice is thunder and whose house has a window through which light shines.

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