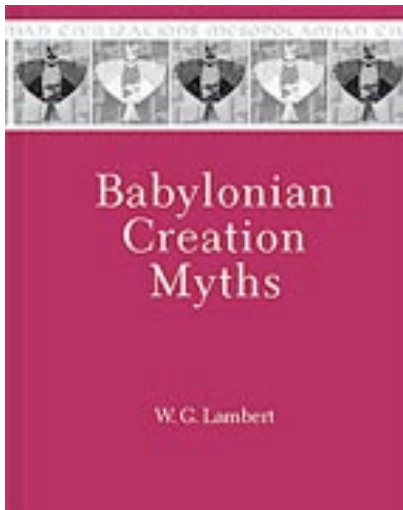




W. G. Lambert

Babylonian Creation Myths

Mesopotamian Civilizations 16

Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013. Pp. xvi + 640 + 72 plates. Cloth. \$99.50. ISBN 9781575062471.

Michael S. Moore
Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona

This posthumously published volume represents the culmination of a long, illustrious career captivated (some would say obsessed) by the ancient Near Eastern “song” (*zamāru*, Enuma Elish 7.161), heretofore proven to be the only “systematic treatment of cosmology in Sumero-Babylonian literature” (169). As one has come to expect from Prof. Lambert (*Babylonian Wisdom Literature* [Oxford, 1960]; *Enūma Eliš: The Babylonian Epic of Creation* [Oxford, 1966]; *Atra-Ḫāsis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* [Oxford, 1969, with A. Millard]), this is an authoritative, highly factual, no-holds-barred, straight-to-the-point *tour de force* (even more so than the volumes just listed). Not only does it provide a fully annotated transliteration and translation of the cuneiform texts at his disposal (with extensive philological notes engaging a wide variety of contemporary texts, many unpublished), it also includes concisely updated editions of seventeen additional “creation tales,” including Enmešarra’s Defeat, Enki and Ninmah, The Slaying of Labbu, and The Theogony of Dunnu. The volume concludes with seventy-two plates (photographs and beautiful hand-drawings of all these creation-themed texts) followed by extensive indices. Whereas Andrew George’s *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (Oxford, 2003) represents his magnum opus on the Gilgamesh Epic, this volume represents W. G. Lambert’s magnum opus on Mesopotamian creation myth, most thickly distilled in the Babylonian Creation Epic commonly referred to by its Akkadian incipit, Enuma Elish.

Previous discussions about Enuma Elish, one of the prime examples of ancient Near Eastern “great literature” (E. Reiner, “Die akkadische Literatur,” in *Neues Handbuch der*

Literatur-Wissenschaft: Altorientalische Literaturen, ed. W. Röllig [Athenaion, 1978], 1:151–210) tend to suffer from variable degrees of literary-historical turbulence (some more than others), and one of the goals of this volume is to sweep away some of the darker clouds. First, Lambert attempts to sweep away all the lingering arguments for an Old Babylonian date, that is, (1) that Marduk's elevation concurs with Hammurabi's decision to crown Babylon his southern capital, (2) that the language of the poem "proves" its origin to be in the Old Babylonian period (a theory indebted to von Soden's now-abandoned notion of a "hymno-epic dialect"), and (3) that the monsters depicted on the palace doors constructed by Agum II circa 1550 BCE presuppose the literary existence of Enuma Elish. Instead, relying on "a careful study of the content and style of the Epic compared with related material of more certain date" (442), Lambert argues for a *terminus a quo* sometime near the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (d. 1104 BCE) and a *terminus ante quem* sometime near 900 BCE. In this he follows the lead of A. Schmidt, who in 1911 challenged the 1876 opinion of George Smith, who put the date of composition "somewhere around 2000 BCE" (Smith, *TSBA* 4:363–64). Rejecting Smith's date (which Lambert here calls "a round figure based on an informed guess"), Schmidt observes that Marduk in the older texts is still a relatively unimportant god—even in the Code of Hammurabi he is subordinate to Anu and Enlil. Thus his usurpation of Enlil's place in the pantheon could not occur until circa 1200 BCE, and Enuma Elish cannot be earlier than this. Admiring Schmidt's argument, Lambert remarks that "much penetrating judgment is shown in the brief presentation of this case, and while some of his reasoning is no longer acceptable ... his method and certain observations are well ahead of his time, and later scholars ignore them to their detriment" (440–41).

Second, Lambert rejects as "capricious" any proposal that would attempt to scan Enuma Elish metrically into (groups of) strophes (e.g., Vanstiphout, Kinnier Wilson, Talon), deferring instead to what he calls "the indications of the scribes" themselves (30), namely, that the 2/2 couplet is the basic unit of Akkadian poetic meter (including Enuma Elish). "The opinion has been expressed," he comments, "that Babylonian meter has the same kind of orderly sequence of syllables that becomes popular in the West from Greek and Roman poetry.... For our part, we are skeptical about this whole approach, since precise results can only be got by all kinds of license which have no basis in grammar. The one basic and unmistakable element of Akkadian poetry is the line" (17; for further reflection on metrical possibilities, see my review of P. Talon's contribution to the SAACT series, *The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth enūma eliš*, *CBQ* 69 [2007]: 800–802).

Third, following up on a 1943 suggestion of Langdon and his own 1986 essay, Lambert argues that the story of Tiamat's defeat in Enuma Elish is closely modeled after (if not altogether dependent upon) the Anzû myth, a "Babylonian work known from two OB tablets from Susa and later Assyrian copies from Nineveh, Assur, Sultantepe, and

Tarbišu” (449). The basis of his argument is that each myth features a challenger threatening the established order, as well as a hero strong enough to meet this challenge. “In each case the gods are in danger from an evil-intending being. In each case, two well-esteemed gods are invited to deal with the threat but decline. Then a deity suggests his own son, who, with promises of reward, agrees to go. At his first meeting with the foe he fails, but on the second time, succeeds. It is impossible to suppose that these two accounts are entirely independent, and certainly the Anzû myth is the earlier of the two. The evidence for conscious dependence consists of a number of points, some of which alone would be inadequate, but in combination their force is great” (450). The most significant of these is the inclusion of the Tablet of Destinies. “When the gods gather around to congratulate Marduk after his arrangement of the universe, he promptly hands over the Tablet of Destinies to Anu, who is most commonly considered the god to hold it. Marduk is certainly not parting with any of his supreme power in this disposition of the Tablet, and one is left with the feeling that the author does not take it too seriously. Why then does he bring it in at all? If the story of Anzu is the model on which he is forming his own account of Marduk’s heroic deed, then everything is understandable. That story hinges on the recovery of the Tablet of Destinies from the enemy, so the thing has to be brought in somehow” (451).

Fourth, Lambert identifies in *Enuma Elish* four separate “mythological threads drawn together into one event”: (1) that Marduk succeeds Anšar as king of the gods, (2) that Marduk defeats Tiamat, (3) that Marduk overcomes Qingu and his progeny, and (4) that Marduk slaughters monsters. Noting how *Enuma Elish* “interweaves this material together” like “no other Babylonian epic” (448, 457), Lambert cautiously describes this multilayered complexity not as the “tale of a simpleminded storyteller” but as a compositely written masterpiece,” one in which Marduk “has to be victor and hero of most of the major mythological themes at the same time” (458). Of all these mythological threads, however, one in particular stands out. “Enlil, of the great triad, is Marduk’s real rival, and here the author shows his spite. When Enlil’s presence may detract from Marduk’s glory, he is ignored. When he can contribute to Marduk’s greater glory, he comes forward. Up to the last line of Tablet 4 his name is not even mentioned, which is a studied insult.... Enlil’s tardy appearance after Marduk’s victory to receive his location in the universe at Marduk’s bidding (*Ee* 4.145–46), to take a subordinate place in the sky under Marduk (5.8), and to bestow gifts on his benefactor (5.80) only serves to indicate his demotion” (458). It is difficult to prioritize, but this understanding of *Enuma Elish*’s multilayeredness is one of the volume’s most significant contributions.

Unlike many other studies, this analysis of *Enuma Elish* boasts the advantage of being as literary-historically aware as it is linguistically competent. Not many scholars give equal attention to both, and Prof. Lambert’s death marks something of a milestone, the end of a

golden age of scholarship in which such methodological balance is not only championed but expected. Nowhere in the book, for example, does Lambert devote a single line to the ever-smoldering “maximalist-minimalist” debate so popular in many scholarly circles today (a preoccupation R. Kratz curtly dismisses as a “great error,” *Die Komposition der erzählenden Bücher der Alten Testaments* [Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000], 5), not to mention the nauseating pseudo-political debates masquerading as serious scholarship among many “biblical” scholars. Carefully modeling an alternative, this scholar refuses to abandon his post, deciding instead to devote his mind to the deeper—and therefore more difficult—questions of linguistic, historical, and literary inquiry.

Worthy of particular mention in this regard is the admirable discipline with which Lambert pursues every word and idea even marginally related to Enuma Elish’s production and transmission. Philologically, for example, it is not enough for him to refer the reader to the already thorough list of passages detailing the various known orthographies of Tiamat posted in *CAD* (s.v. *tamtû*). Lambert characteristically goes deeper, updating *CAD* by listing several more of the Sumerograms used to reference this surprisingly shadowy PN, then its Middle Babylonian referents, then several of its Middle Assyrian mutations (469). Again, on the identity of Šakkan (^dAMA-*kan*-dù) in the Theogony of Dunnu (BM 74329 line 5), a deity familiar to most scholars as a theophoric component of the name of the author of Ludlul bēl nēmeqi (Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan, 4.119), Lambert could have said little or nothing. Instead, he writes a comprehensive ten-page encyclopedia article on “the attributes and history of this god and his names” (513), one that I have not been able to find anywhere else with anything even approximating this kind of depth.

The philological notes on pages 469–526 are indeed a treasure trove of information, a brilliant example of how Semitic philological analysis should be pursued. Of course, some will question Lambert’s “old school” skepticism about the relative applicability of recent linguistic, syntactical, and metrical analyses to this or any other Akkadian poem, but no one familiar with the actual text of Enuma Elish can doubt for a second whether (1) later scribes manipulate earlier forms to suit their own purposes or (2) that the “persistence of traditional forms” (443) constantly looms before them as a viable option. With regard to the discipline of historical inquiry, Lambert demonstrates here a fervent interest in the tradition histories underlying the major characters, themes, and motifs not only in Enuma Elish but also in the corollary “creation tales” synergistically interfacing it, thereby producing a cross-referenced intertextual analysis densely layered into a thick tapestry. Tanak students will doubtless complain about the level of attention overtly directed toward the Hebrew Bible here, but anyone able and willing to use the comprehensive indices at the back will quickly abandon such “murmuring” (Exod 16:2!).

Much more might be said about this magnum opus, but suffice it to say in conclusion that just as Prof. Lambert's *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* enables a generation of students to understand better the Hebrew books of Job, Proverbs and Qoheleth, so his *Babylonian Creation Myths* will help future generations of students understand better the creation-themed texts in Genesis, Job, the Psalter and the Prophets. Students around the world will find it difficult to measure their depth of gratitude not only for this volume but also that Prof. Lambert lived long enough to complete it.