

Enuma Elish: The Babylonian Epic of Creation. Edited by Johannes Haubold, Sophus Helle, Enrique Jiménez, and Selena Wisnom. Library of Babylonian Literature 1. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. Pp. xi + 337. \$100.00 (cloth), \$34.95 (paper), open access.¹

REVIEWED BY ELI TADMOR, *New Haven*

This volume begins with the following assertion: “*Enuma Elish* marks a turning point in Babylonian culture. It is no exaggeration to say that, in cuneiform literature and religion, there is a time before and a time after the composition of *Enuma Elish*” (p. 3). *Enuma Elish: The Babylonian Epic of Creation* marks a similar turning point in the study and teaching of *Enuma Elish* itself. This open-access collection—with its outstanding introduction, erudite textual edition, and thirteen illuminating essays, each written by a different expert and not only summarizing but advancing scholarship into the different dimensions of the poem—is set to become an indispensable aid to readers and researchers of the epic. It is an auspicious beginning to the *Library of Babylonian Literature* (LBL) of which it is the inaugural volume, and a new high point in the study of Mesopotamian literature.

Before analyzing the different parts of the book, two comments are in order. First, the editors—Johannes Haubold, Sophus Helle, Enrique Jiménez, and Selena Wisnom—should be commended in the highest terms for their work. For not only did they successfully solicit contributions from a veritable “dream team” of scholars, but they negotiated the book’s open-access publication with Bloomsbury Academic. In doing so, they have managed to make Assyriological literary scholarship more accessible than ever before and set an example for the field.

Second, the volume’s one structural weakness must be addressed. The book’s preface contains the following mission statement for the *Library of Babylonian Literature* series (p. x):

Babylonian literature is a treasure trove of poetic gems, but only a few are known outside the discipline of Assyriology . . . The *Library of Babylonian Literature* (LBL) aims to make the major works of literature in the Akkadian language more accessible to new readers, while helping scholars to study them and artists to adapt them . . . It is our hope that the series will expand our understanding of what Akkadian poetry is and reveal its treasures to contemporary readers.

This mission statement implies that the book is accessible to a broad, non-Assyriological audience. Yet, with the exception of the volume’s introduction, this is not the case. As discussed more fully below, the translation is geared not toward non-specialist readers encountering *Enuma Elish* for the first time, but rather specialists seeking to deepen their understanding of the poem. In this reviewer’s estimation, ten of the volume’s essays may be appreciated not only by Assyriologists but by scholars from adjacent fields—e.g., Classics, Biblical Studies, and Religious Studies. Three (nos. 1, 9, and 12) require extensive knowledge of ancient Mesopotamian languages, literature, and sciences to truly follow. And all thirteen are academic in content, structure, and style, and therefore not optimal for a general readership. That a book is meant for scholars of the ancient world, or even specifically for Assyriologists, is in itself no problem; it is rather the misalignment between the book’s avowed commitment to accessibility and its specialized contents that is, in this reviewer’s opinion, the only structural flaw in an otherwise exceptional volume.

The book’s introduction, penned by Helle, not only familiarizes readers with the volume but surveys the poem’s plot, themes, style, and reception ancient and modern. Eloquent and accessible, it serves as an outstanding overview of the text for Assyriologists and the general public alike. One may, however, point out two inaccuracies. First, to state, in discussing the language of the poem, that “Standard Babylonian is characterized by a free word order (as opposed to the subject-object-verb order that is the norm in Akkadian)” (p. 9) is inexact, since (relatively) free word order of the kind found in *Enuma Elish* is typical not of Standard Babylonian itself but of Akkadian poetry in general. Second, to write “*Enuma Elish* first gained notoriety in the modern world because Genesis was written in direct response to it” (p. 19) is inaccurate: Scholars have proposed, though not proven, that certain parts of Genesis, most importantly the first creation account, respond to *Enuma Elish*; yet no biblical scholar working today, at least in this reviewer’s knowledge, believes that Genesis in its entirety was composed in direct response to the epic.

¹ <https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/monograph?docid=b-9781350297425>. Accessed 22 July 2025.

The volume's edition of the text is made up of a normalized transliteration prepared by Adrian C. Heinrich accompanied by a translation by Helle. As a consequence of this division of labor, there are some misalignments between transliteration and translation, yet these are rare and invariably minor: For instance, *imtaršam-ma epšētāšun elišun* (I 27) is translated as "Her doings disturbed her" rather than "Her doings disturbed them."

In this reviewer's judgment, the translation is geared toward facilitating close reading by specialized readers, whose study of the text would also benefit greatly from Helle's numerous thematic, philological, and literary-critical notes, erudite and perceptive throughout. However, it may not be ideal for readers unfamiliar with Akkadian and encountering the poem for the first time, for they might require a more poetic, musical, and idiomatic style to appreciate this ancient masterwork. Therefore, it may not be the optimal vehicle to fulfill the mission statement quoted above. On the level of phraseology, such an evaluation may be illustrated by reference to renderings such as "Let silence be settled" for *qūlu liššakin-ma* (I 40); "And firmly established wickedness for the gods, my fathers" for *u ana ilī abbiya lemuttaki tukinnī* (IV 84); "He spoke the work of his words to Ea" for *[ep]šu pīšu ana ea iqabbi* (VI 3); and "He placed lightning at his front" for *iškun birqa ina pānīšu* (IV 39), where a more poetic rendition may still have served to convey the meaning (compare Foster [eBL]: "Thunderbolts he set before his face").

Moving on to more technical matters, this reviewer disagrees with the rendering of two Akkadian verbs, each used repeatedly in the poem. The first is *bullū*, "extinguish" or "bring to an end," which is consistently rendered with the more specific, and graphic, "smother," usually used in English to denote forced suffocation: "a plant to smother poison" for *šammi imta bulli* (IV 62); "smothered her life" for *napšatus uballi* (IV 103); and "who smothered all the wrongdoers" for *muballi napḥar raggī* (VII 45). The second is *kašāru*, which is translated throughout as having to do with weaving or braiding: "braiding battle for the gods her offspring" for *tāḥāza iktašar ana ilī nipriša* (II 2); "I will weave blood, I will bring about bone" for *dāmī lukšur-ma ešemta lušabši-ma* (VI 5); "Who . . . made Tiamat revolt and wove a war" for *ša . . . tiāmta ušbalkitū-ma iḫšuru tāḥāza* (VI 23–24, 29–30). The issue here is that the basic meaning of *kašāru* is not "to weave" but "to join together," with the former sense being a derivation of the latter. This is

shown by the fact that the verb, in addition to referring to the making of textiles, is routinely used in Akkadian sources of all kinds to describe activities as diverse as the construction of buildings, the assembly of soldiers, the collection of goods, the forming of herds, and materials becoming compact or dense (CAD, s.v. *kašāru*). Consequently, the above-quoted uses of this verb in *Enuma Elish* are likely not poetic metaphors related to weaving, but rather straightforward descriptions having to do with assembling for war and compacting blood.

As is inevitable in any translation, the sense of some lines is erroneously interpreted. Helle translates "Since that day, you have been making trouble, tossing about" for *ištu ūmi attī dulluḥiṣ tadullī* (I 119). Yet the grammar and context of the line militate against this translation. The grammar, because *dulluḥiṣ* is adverbial, and one would therefore expect "You yourself have been tossing about in agitation" or the like. And the context, because the line is spoken by a group of gods spurring Tiamat to destroy her other children for having murdered Apsū and unleashed winds disturbing her belly, and who would therefore have no cause to accuse Tiamat of "making trouble." Likewise, one would expect, in the same speech, not "Avenge them!" for *gimillašunu tirri* (I 123), but rather "Give them their due!" (that is, punish the troublesome gods as they deserve). Helle translates IV 120, *ikmāšūma itti uggē šuātu imnīšu*, which concerns Marduk's punishment of the defeated Qingu, as "He bound him and counted him among the gods of death." Yet *uggē* is rather "the dead gods" (on whom see Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* [2013], pp. 216–17). And, as part of the poem's summary of its own plot, Marduk is described as he "who bound Tiamat and received kingship," for *ša tiā[mta i]kmū-(ma) ilqū šarrūta* (VII 162), yet one would rather expect the conventional sense of "take" for *leqū*.

The volume's most notable innovation, and greatest strength, is its collection of thirteen deeply researched, rich, and innovative essays, which together make the book the best scholarly companion for the poem to date.

The essays are divided into three groups, the first of which is "The History of the Epic" and begins with Essay 1, "Marduk and the Battle with the Sea: On the Dating of *Enuma Elish*" (Enrique Jiménez). The essay opens with doubt, reminding readers that the various criteria used by scholars seeking to date not only *Enuma Elish*, but any cuneiform literary text, invariably

produce equivocal results open to conflicting interpretations. W. G. Lambert's dating of *Enuma Elish* to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (c. 1121–1100 BCE), though generally accepted, is consequently argued to be far from secure. Jiménez then offers a new argument, centered on the wording of curse-formulae found on 12th-century BCE Kassite-period kudurrus, which supports a late Kassite or Isin II date for the poem's composition and thus largely aligns with Lambert's chronology.

In studying ancient Mesopotamian mythological texts, one generally agrees with W. H. Auden's pronouncement: "Poets have learned us their myths / but just how did they take them? / That's a stumper." (*Archaeology*, 1974). The next three essays show *Enuma Elish* to be the major exception to this rule. Essay 2, "*Enuma Elish* in Cult and Ritual Performance" (Céline Debourse), discusses the poem's religious role in Babylonia and Assyria. The central question of the essay is the relationship between the text and the *akītu* festival, in which the poem famously came to be recited. Ancient sources, and consequently modern scholars, have argued that the festival's constituent actions have to do with Marduk's defeat of Tiamat and her allies. Yet Debourse seeks to historicize, and thus put into question, such interpretations, arguing them to be post-hoc and outlining the historical and religious contexts that may have helped give rise to them. Essay 3, "The Cuneiform Reception of *Enuma Elish*" (Frances Reynolds), offers a meticulous analysis of the sources responding to the poem: ritual, historical, poetic, and pedagogical (that is, deriving from school contexts). On a formal note, the essay may have profited from further editing to streamline its structure, which is sometimes repetitive. The title of Essay 4, "*Enuma Elish* outside the Cuneiform Tradition" (Eckart Frahm), undersells its contents: Since it analyzes the text's reception in Neo-Assyrian sources before continuing to texts not written in cuneiform, it might more accurately be called "*Enuma Elish* outside Babylonia." One can find no better synthesis on the subject.

In the enjoyable Essay 5, "Monstrous Mothers and Metal Bands," Gina Konstantopoulos discusses the modern cultural reception of *Enuma Elish*, diverse in kind yet modest in scope. This reception, the reader learns, has usually invoked certain elements of the text—including Tiamat, Apsû, and water, though conspicuously not Marduk himself—rather than engaging with the poem as a whole. There are exceptions: a small-scale 2016 play, staged in Germany, records of

whose text and performances appear to be available nowhere ("[m]uch must be divined from the few reviews of the production," p. 169), and a ten-track metal album (*Enuma Elish*, by ERIDU). The latter narrates the poem in its entirety, not neglecting even the listing of Marduk's names, and may therefore, at least in this reviewer's judgment, be the most faithful adaptation of *Enuma Elish* currently in existence.

The essay collection's next section is "Major Themes," which begins with Essay 6, "Marduk's Elevation: A Masterpiece of Political Thought" (Gösta Gabriel). Its central argument is that *Enuma Elish* constitutes the world's first recorded argument for "*contractarianism*, that is, the idea that a ruler's claim to power is based on a (sometimes implicit) contract with his subjects" (p. 181), with the poem consistently characterizing Marduk as the most suitable beneficiary imaginable of such a contract. The essay on the whole is convincing, yet one line of argumentation within it seems to have no basis in the text. According to Gabriel, the sacrifice of Qingu and the creation of humanity from his blood (VI 1–38) free from labor not all of the gods (as conventionally interpreted), but, as is "clear from the context," specifically the gods of Tiamat's defeated faction, while also affecting their absolution from guilt and thus allowing them to be "reunited" with Anšar's faction under Marduk's rule (p. 187). Yet these events are not evidenced in the passage, which makes no mention of Tiamat's vanquished faction, nor, in this reviewer's judgment, implies their involvement in any way.

The next two essays discuss conceptions implicit in the poem. Essay 7, "Divine Rhetoric: *Enuma Elish* on Communication and Emotion" (Johannes Haubold), discusses the text's implied views of communication and decision-making. The gods of "chaos," Apsû and Tiamat, communicate badly and decide faultily: They are impetuous, irascible, and easily manipulated. The gods of "order," most importantly Ea and Marduk, communicate well and decide wisely. In its telling of the triumph of the latter over the former, Haubold argues, *Enuma Elish* models and recommends efficacious rhetoric and self-restraining emotional conduct. The essay is notable for its elegant prose and sensitivity to the nuances of Akkadian terminology. Essay 8, Karen Sonik's "A Mirror for Queens: Gender, Motherhood, and Power in *Enuma Elish*," investigates the poem's views of politics and gender. Through its characterization of Apsû, Tiamat, and Qingu, Sonik argues, *Enuma Elish* shows how bad rulers act. Through that of Ea and

Marduk, it conveys how good kings should behave. And through that of Tiamat herself—bad wife, murderous mother, birther of monsters, failed queen, corpse—it negatively characterizes femininity in general and indicates how women should, and should not, conduct themselves. The essay is also useful for its concise summary of the poem's history of research (pp. 216–19).

Essay 9, “*Enuma Elish*, Knowledge of the Heavens, and World Order” (Francesca Rochberg), analyzes the poem's account of Marduk's creation of the ordered cosmos, contextualizes its implicit conception of the heavens within the history of Babylonian astronomy, and weighs in on the question of the identity of *nēberu*, Marduk's star. This reviewer, who is not a specialist in cuneiform astronomy, found this highly technical essay somewhat difficult to follow, yet still of great interest: The discussion of the importance of counterparts and correspondences in the ancient Mesopotamian worldview (pp. 249–50) was especially illuminating.

The final essay section is “Poetics and Hermeneutics.” It begins with Essay 10, “Soothing the Sea: Intertextuality and Lament in *Enuma Elish*” (Selena Wisnom), which skillfully advances two main arguments. The first is that *Enuma Elish*, via what one may describe as a campaign of intertextual warfare waged against older mythological compositions, demonstrates that whatever other gods have accomplished, Marduk has far surpassed. The second is that Tiamat's depiction in the poem is linked to Sumerian lamentations, especially the motif found in them of the “angry sea” (ab ḫul-luḫ), with this link setting up certain expectations in the reader's mind that the poem then subverts: Tiamat is not pacified like the divine addressees of lamentation, but summarily dispatched.

Essay 11, “The shape of water: Content and form in *Enuma Elish*” (Sophus Helle), is an insightful contribution to the study of the abstract and conceptual dimensions of the text. Helle outlines the poem's progression, effected through Marduk's power, from watery formlessness to myriad forms, each given a name and assigned a fate. The misogynistic anxieties reflected in this shift, involving as it does the violent binding of Tiamat and her perpetual confinement through the movements of *nēberu*, are discussed, and its symbolic undoing in Sennacherib's account of his (literal) dissolution of Babylon analyzed.

Essay 12, “The sound of creation: The revolutionary poetics of *Enuma Elish*” (Piotr Michalowski) may be the most innovative of the volume. Fittingly so,

since it argues the poem's “revolutionary project” to have “harnessed poetics to create a new vision of the world that sought to absorb, incorporate, and reimagine the whole Babylonian literary universe, including lexical, magical, narrative, and mythological traditions” (p. 312). Especially compelling to this reviewer are its discussions (pp. 300, 311) of the poem's bilingual punning involving the syllable “mu,” which, because it means “water” in Akkadian and “name” in Sumerian, encapsulates two of the poem's great themes.

The editors' choice to end this volume with a discussion of Marduk's fifty names, paralleling the conclusion of the poem itself, is a nice touch. Essay 13, “Marduk's Names and Cuneiform Hermeneutics” (Marc Van De Mieroop), takes as its case study a commentary linking the fifty names with elaborations accompanying them in the poem. In explaining how this commentary works—namely through the utilization of the polyvalence of cuneiform signs and the manipulation of their interconnected meanings—this contribution also serves as a lucid and succinct introduction to Mesopotamian hermeneutics in general.

Before concluding, it should be remarked that the book's essays conflict with each other on one interpretive question: Is *Enuma Elish* a *Chaoskampf*? Six authors implicitly support the proposition: Debourse (p. 124), Frahm (p. 152), Haubold (p. 201), Rochberg (p. 248), Wisnom (p. 264), and Van De Mieroop (p. 327). Sonik endorses it, albeit while noting that the “narrative is centered around quite different themes” (p. 215). Michalowski, meanwhile, writes: “For over a hundred years, the creation narrative of *Enuma Elish* has been characterized by many exegetists as one in which the ‘primeval sea, ocean’ represented primordial ‘chaos’, but both are chimeras of scholarly imagination” (p. 302). This reviewer can only agree with Michalowski (as well as other scholars, e.g., Foster 2012, 20). Tiamat, whose waters the younger gods disturb (*dalāḫu*), setting conflict and creation in motion, is, if anything, not an agent of chaos but a victim of it. Yet this is not chaos in its negative sense, but the disorder of young and vibrant life, favorably contrasting with the primordial silence. If Marduk's triumph over Tiamat can be described as a *Chaoskampf* at all, it is one involving not the defeat of chaos but its felicitous, life-enabling victory.

In conclusion, *Enuma Elish: The Babylonian Epic of Creation* is a masterful addition to the study of cuneiform literature, one set to be an indispensable aid to

students and scholars of *Enuma Elish* (though perhaps not an ideal introduction to *Enuma Elish* for the public at large). One awaits the coming volumes of *The Library of Babylonian Literature* with excitement.

Works Cited

Foster, Benjamin, "Enuma Elish as a Work of Literature," *Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Research* 7 (2012): 19–23.

The Shape of Stories: Narrative Structures in Cuneiform Literature. Edited by Sophus Helle and Gina Konstantopoulos. Cuneiform Monographs 54. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2023. Pp. xi + 354. \$155 (cloth).

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This volume is a rarity within the field of ancient Near Eastern studies, as it focuses on questions of narration and narrative theory in relation to cuneiform literature. The editors have brought together a diverse collection of eleven contributions from authors at different stages in their careers, offering a wide range of insights into narrative literature from various regions and epochs. As research into Hittite, Sumerian, or Akkadian narratives that makes use of literary studies and theory is a relatively new development within Assyriology, this diverse collection of approaches is all the more welcome. As both editors have extensive experience of dealing with Sumerian and Akkadian narratives, their brief introduction to the subject emphasizes the role of cuneiform artefacts in conveying both physical characteristics and content. Questions about the materiality of cuneiform tablets—their shapes and layout, the arrangement of text on one or several tablets, distinctive section markings and blank spaces—are usually dealt with in passing. However, promising insights into the design, origin, and use of narratives can be expected from their analysis, and these questions are understandably addressed in several contributions in this volume (Gadotti: Chapter 2; Marineau: Chapter 3, pp. 60–61; Helle: Chapter 5; Wisnom: Chapter 6; Sansone: Chapter 11). While not intended to be exhaustive, the editors' introductory overview rightly demonstrates the necessity of expanding the topic into an interdisciplinary discourse, particularly, as they dramatically state, "if Assyriology is to survive" (p. 17).

The contributions are presented in four sections: Stitching a Story, Medium and Emotion, The Shape of the Past, and Excavating Narratives, with the last section dedicated to a single, extended theoretical and practical presentation of the method of "hylistic analysis," which was developed by the *Collegium Mythologicum* and *STRATA* research groups in Göttingen, Germany, under the direction of Annette Zgoll.

Based on new structural considerations, in Chapter 2, Alhena Gadotti further develops her interpretation of a "Sumerian Gilgamesh Cycle" already presented in her previous monographic work, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* (Berlin, 2014). Her key observations concern the different locales in the five Sumerian stories about Gilgamesh, particularly the netherworld and the River Euphrates, which play a special role in linking beginning (*Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*) and end (*The Death of Gilgamesh*) of the overarching narrative. One obstacle to interpreting a "Sumerian Gilgamesh Cycle" conceived in literary terms seems to be the striking differences in language and style across the texts. For instance, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*, with its extended mythical prologue differs substantially from *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, which was designed as a bard's song. Such differences highlight the distinct origins and settings of each individual episode. Nevertheless, Gadotti's explorations, which further point out details of "mirroring" across individual compositions (e.g., Agga, Enmebaragesi, and Peshtur), provide strong arguments for linking all Sumerian Gilgamesh narratives in terms of content and structure. There is no doubt that, even for ancient scribes, the Sumerian Gilgamesh narratives formed part of an overarching story about the being and becoming of the hero and king.

In Chapter 3, Robert Marineau introduces a Hittite narrative by opening the discussion with a critical question that proves relevant throughout the volume: what constitutes a narrative? Aiming to determine whether the minimal definition—specifically, that a narrative is defined by a change in state—aligns with ancient Hittite texts, Marineau employs Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan's (1987) system of linguistic cohesion to analyze the Hittite *Tale of Zalpa* from grammatical and lexical perspectives. Through this approach, he reveals various narrative techniques used in