

**EAsy Does It:
The Subtle Influence of Ea in Mesopotamian Religious Thought**

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In ancient Mesopotamia, it is difficult to establish a hierarchy of gods for all times and in all places; their fortunes waxed and waned over centuries and differed from city to city. One god in particular, however, rarely appears to have been a deity who was the primary object of worship across Mesopotamia. Despite not having an abundance of temples, or even being a deity of primary worship in extant texts, the god Ea / Enki¹ remained a significant background figure across both time and space in Mesopotamian religions. The *Enuma Elish* provides an excellent example of this;² Even though Marduk is portrayed as the supreme god, Ea appears at significant points in the narrative and provides the means for Marduk's supremacy. This text will serve to structure the following examination of Ea's subtle role in Mesopotamian religious thought and practice.

¹ Ea is the Akkadian name for the Sumerian Enki, "god of the subterranean freshwater ocean (abzu), and was especially associated with wisdom, magic and incantations, and with the arts and crafts of civilization" (Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* [Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992], p. 75). Because I am using the *Enuma Elish* as my point of reference, I will primarily be using the name Ea in my discussion, only using the name Enki as I deal with Sumerian texts.

² The *Enuma Elish* "preserves a relatively late Babylonian conception of the creation of the physical world (including humanity), but its real focus is on the elevation of Marduk to the top of the pantheon in return for taking up the cause of the embattled gods, who build his great temple of Esagila in Babylon in recognition of his leadership. The composition could therefore be as readily called 'The Exaltation of Marduk'" (William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture, Vol. 1* [New York: Brill, 1997], p. 390).

Ea: To Serve and Protect

In the *Enuma Elish*,³ Marduk was not described as being one of the earliest gods; this honor was reserved for the primeval pair Tiamat and Apsu. Rather, Marduk was portrayed as the son of Ea: “The most capable, the sage of the gods, the Lord was begotten / In the midst of Apsu Marduk was formed / In the midst of holy Apsu was Marduk formed! / Ea his father begot him.”⁴ Marduk’s subsequent greatness⁵ stemmed from the greatness of his father: “Then Anu begot his own equal, Nudimmud [i.e. Ea], / Nudimmud was he who dominated (?) his forebears: / Profound in wisdom, acute of sense, he was massively strong, / Much mightier than his grandfather Anshar, / No rival had he among the gods his brethren.”⁶ Just as Ea had no equal among his contemporaries, so too was Marduk unequalled. Ea, in a sense, became a type for Marduk, the son owing to the nature and stature of his father. Even though this was not explicitly stated, one can see the significance of Ea lingering in the background of this piece of Mardukian⁷ propaganda.

While Ea was responsible for the existence of Marduk, he was also responsible for the continued existence of almost all of the gods. Earlier in the narrative, the primeval parents of the gods, Tiamat and Apsu, are disturbed by their children’s clamor. Apsu decides to take drastic measures and eliminate his children, thus “he plotted against the gods his children.”⁸ This plan,

³ All translations of the *Enuma Elish* are taken from Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2005).

⁴ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet I, lines 80-83.

⁵ See especially *Enuma Elish*, Tablet I, lines 87-88, 91-104.

⁶ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet I, lines 16-20.

⁷ This is a *hapax legomenon* in this text, and is quite possibly a *hapax legomenon* in all secondary literature dealing with Marduk.

⁸ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet I, line 52.

however, never came to fruition: “Surpassing in wisdom, ingenious, resourceful, / Ea was aware of all, discerned their stratagem.”⁹ Ea then kills Apsu and subdues his attendant,¹⁰ thus insuring the continued existence of his contemporary deities. In this sense, the Mesopotamian pantheon¹¹ owes its very existence to Ea.

Similarly, Ea was portrayed as being responsible for the continued existence of humanity. In *Atrahasis*,¹² Enlil becomes annoyed by “the clamor of humankind.”¹³ He sends a plague to diminish this noise (and wipe out humanity), but Enki learns of the plan and warns one of the humans. It reads: “But he, [Atrahasis], his god was Enki / [He was exceedingly wise]. / And his god [would speak] with him!...Enki made ready to speak, / And said to his servant, / ‘Summon the elders / At the usual time in your house.’”¹⁴ Enki then proceeds to tell Atrahasis how to prevent Enlil’s plague, and humanity is spared. The scene is repeated when Enlil sends a draught, and later a famine. The gods then put Enki under an oath not to reveal their subsequent plans for destroying humanity, which Enki cleverly circumvents in order to save his beloved devotee, Atrahasis, and preserves humanity by instructing him to build a boat. After a remnant of humanity survive, Enlil decides to spare them, allowing for their continued existence. From this mythological perspective, therefore, Ea / Enki’s subtle presence could be observed wherever humanity existed.

⁹ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet I, lines 59-60.

¹⁰ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet I, lines 61-70.

¹¹ With the notable exceptions of Apsu and later Tiamat, of course.

¹² All translations of *Atrahasis* are taken from Foster, *Before the Muses*.

¹³ *Atrahasis*, Tablet I, line 358.

¹⁴ *Atrahasis*, Tablet I, lines 364-375.

Ea: The Brains Behind the Brawn

In the *Enuma Elish*, we next see Ea as a significant background figure in his plan to install Marduk as the primary ruler among the gods. Even though Marduk was described earlier as being all-powerful,¹⁵ for some reason he is unable to gain ascendancy through his own means. Instead, it is Ea who concocts a plan that will ultimately put his son Marduk in a position to rule all other gods. We read: “The mighty firstborn, champion of his father, / Hastener to battle, the warrior Marduk / Did Ea summon to his secret place, / Told him his secret words, / ‘O Marduk, think, heed your father, / You are my son who can relieve [Anshar’s] heart! / Draw nigh, approach Anshar, / Make ready to speak. He was angry (?), seeing you he will be calm.’”¹⁶ Marduk is then nominated as ruler of the heavenly assembly, and receives a commission to conquer the threatening Tiamat.

This appointment as chief warrior against Tiamat was also part of Ea’s clever plan to install his son Marduk in the highest position of celestial authority, and not some unforeseen accident of circumstance. In the aftermath of Marduk’s successful battle with Tiamat, the narrator states: “Having captured his [Marduk’s] enemies and triumphed, / Having shown the mighty (?) foe subservient (?), / Having fully achieved Anshar’s victory over his enemies, / Valiant Marduk ha[d] attained what Nudimmud [i.e. Ea] desired.”¹⁷ Thus, while the battle with Tiamat was the expressed desire of Anshar, the results were ultimately foreseen and facilitated by Ea. While Marduk emerged as the preeminent heroic figure in this conflict, his status was dependent upon the subtle machinations of his father, Ea.

¹⁵ See *Enuma Elish*, Tablet I, lines 87-88, 91-104

¹⁶ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet II, lines 127-134.

¹⁷ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet IV, lines 123-126.

Ea: If You Build It, They Will Come

As part of his sovereignty over the gods, the *Enuma Elish* states that Marduk was responsible for commanding and overseeing all other gods. It reads: “Your command shall be steadfast, your word shall not be misleading. / Not one of the gods shall go beyond the limits you set. / Support is wanted for the gods’ sanctuaries, / Wherever their shrines will be, your own shall be established.”¹⁸ Thus, in order to physically illustrate his position of authority over the other gods, Marduk was provided with a shrine wherever another god’s shrine was built.

While the bestowal of innumerable sanctuaries is certainly an honor, the concept of sanctuaries harkens back to none other than Ea. After killing Apsu and binding Mummu (Apsu’s vizier), his first act was the creation of a dwelling place: “He founded his dwelling upon Apsu...In his chamber, in profound quiet, he rested. / He called it ‘Apsu,’ They Recognize Sanctuaries. / He established therein his chamber, / Ea and Damkina his wife dwelt there in splendor.”¹⁹ In fact, Ea’s firstborn son Marduk was conceived in this primeval sanctuary: “In the cella of destinies, the abode of designs, / The most capable, the sage of the gods, / the Lord was begotten, / In the midst of Apsu Marduk was formed.”²⁰ Thus, not only was Ea responsible for the creation of sanctuaries in general, but Marduk’s very existence can be traced back to this very first sanctuary.

In the *Enuma Elish*, the mythological heritage of the other divine dwelling places in heaven and on earth can *all* be traced back to Ea and his sanctuary established upon Apsu. After Marduk uses the corpse of Tiamat to create the sky, “He crossed heaven, he inspected (its)

¹⁸ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet IV, lines 9-12.

¹⁹ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet I, lines 71, 75-78.

²⁰ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet I, lines 79-81.

firmament, / He made a counterpart to Apsu, the dwelling of Nudimmud [i.e. Ea]. / The Lord measured the construction of Apsu, / He founded the Great Sanctuary, the likeness of Esharra.”²¹ Ea’s sanctuary became the prototype for Esharra, its counterpart created in the heavens by Marduk. Then, Marduk commands that yet another temple be built on the earth, again using the pattern of Ea’s Apsu sanctuary: “They [the Anunna-gods] raised the ehad of Esagila, the counterpart of Apsu, / They built the upper ziggurat of Apsu, / for [Marduk] they founded his... dwelling. / He [Marduk] took his seat in sublimity before them, / Its pinnacles were facing toward the base of Esharra.”²² Thus, the three greatest temples in the heaven, on earth, and under the earth ultimately owed their creation to Ea.

In addition to their *mythological* heritage, the *historical* heritage of Mesopotamian temples may also be traced back to Ea. The ancient Sumerian city of Eridu was “the site of e-abzu, temple of Enki (Akkadian Ea), god of the subterranean freshwater ocean.”²³ This temple of Ea was one of the most revered cult centers of ancient Mesopotamia,²⁴ and quite possibly its oldest. The site of Ea’s E-Abzu temple was occupied from the Ubaid to the Persian period.²⁵ The earliest temple “consisted of a small rectangular mud-brick building with a deep recess in its

²¹ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet IV, lines 141-144. Esharra means “House of the Universe,” and was the dwelling place of Enlil. See Foster, *Before the Muses*, p. 462, fn. 3. Ironically, the text goes on to explain: “(In) the Great Sanctuary, (in) Esharra, which he [Marduk] built, (and in) heaven, / He made Ea, Enlil, and Anu dwell in their holy places” (*Enuma Elish*, Tablet IV, lines 145-46). Marduk patterned this “Great Sanctuary” after Ea’s sanctuary, and then made Ea dwell in this holy place.

²² *Enuma Elish*, Tablet VI, lines 62-66. Foster notes: “Esagila is therefore a counterpart or replica of the abode of Ea (Apsu) and the abode of Enlil (Esharra)” (Foster, *Before the Muses*, p. 471, fn. 2).

²³ Eric Meyers, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East, Vol. 2* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 258.

²⁴ A. R. George, *House Most High: The Temples of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1993), p. 2.

²⁵ Meyers, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East, Vol. 2*, p. 258.

northwest wall. The building had a podium, perhaps an offering table, in the center of its main room and a second one—in all likelihood the pedestal on which the cult statue would have stood—in a niche in the northwestern wall.”²⁶ This temple served as the basis for a long series of subsequent temples built on the same site, each building becoming larger and more elaborate.²⁷

The main temple mound at Eridu is “dominated by a large ziggurat dated to the Ur III period...Construction of the ziggurat was initiated by Ur-Nammu (2112-2095 BCE) and completed by his grandson Amar-Suen (2046-2038 BCE)...The ziggurat can be viewed as the culmination of a long developmental sequence of Mesopotamian temple architecture stretching back to the Ubaid period.”²⁸ This site of Ea’s temple served as one of the earliest loci of worship in Mesopotamia, and later served as a reflection of temple-building innovations for hundreds of years. Thus, the impact of Ea’s temple-building enterprise was visible in both myth *and* history.

In a sense, Ea was the patron deity of temple building. In the “Ritual for the Repair of a Temple,” Ea features prominently: “When the wall of the temple of the god Anu falls into ruin...You shall light a fire for the gods Ea and Marduk, sacrifice [a sheep to Ea and Marduk], and make a libation...Set up three sacrificial stands for the gods Ea, Shamash, and Marduk.”²⁹ In addition to receiving these sacrifices, Ea was also addressed by the king during a ceremony of temple rededication: “On a favorable day, the king shall purify and cleanse himself and shall call out the admission of sin to the gods Anu, Enlil, and Ea.”³⁰ It is significant that Ea is the only

²⁶ Meyers, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, Vol. 2, p. 258.

²⁷ Meyers, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, Vol. 2, p. 258.

²⁸ Meyers, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, Vol. 2, p. 259.

²⁹ *ANET*, p. 339.

³⁰ *ANET*, p. 340.

God mentioned in both groups. His central role in temple building (and *re*-building) is illustrated in another version of the “Ritual for the Repair of a Temple.” This text records the words that a *bārū* priest recited during the re-dedication ceremony. It reads:

The god Nudimmud [i.e. Ea] created the *apsū* ocean, his dwelling, The god Ea pinched off a piece of clay in the *apsū* ocean, Created the (brick-god) Kulla for the restoration of [temples], Created the reed marsh and the forest for the work of their construction, Created the gods Ninildu, Ninsimug, and Arazu to be the completers of their construction work, Created mountains and oceans for everything...(Created) the abundant products (of mountain and ocean) to be offerings..., For making their revenues abundant..., Created the deities Umunmutamku and Umunmutamag to be presenters of offerings, Created the god Kusug, the high-priest of the great gods, to be the one who completes their rites and ceremonies. Created the king to be the provider..., Created men to be the makers.³¹

In this composition, it appears that all of Ea’s actions were directed towards the end of creating and administering to the needs of temples. As alluded to in the preceding piece, Ea was intimately involved in not just the establishment of temples, but in their daily activities. One daily ritual, the covering of the temple kettle-drum, invoked Ea during this procedure,³² a constant reminder that the temple itself and its very livelihood were only possible through his divine agency. Though not a solitary (or even necessarily a central) figure in Mesopotamian temple worship, Ea nonetheless remained in the background of Mesopotamian thought regarding temples.

Ea: Fashion King

Returning to the *Enuma Elish*, we next read of Marduk’s proposal to create humanity. It reads: “When [Mar]duk heard the speech of the gods, / He was resolving to make artful things: /

³¹ *ANET*, p. 341. Cf. the Hittite “Ritual for the Erection of a House [i.e. Temple],” where it notes that “the walls above the [foundations], Ea, the king of wisdom, has built (them)” (*ANET*, p. 356).

³² *ANET*, pp. 335-36.

He would tell his idea to Ea, / What he thought of in his heart he proposes, ‘I shall compact blood, I shall cause bones to be, / I shall make stand a human being, let ‘Man’ be its name. / I shall create humankind.’”³³ According to this text, it was Marduk’s idea to create humanity in order that the gods may rest. However, it is Ea who forms a plan for the execution of Marduk’s idea, and it is Ea who actually engages in this act of creation:³⁴ “Ea the wise had made humankind.”³⁵ The text goes to great lengths to affirm that while Ea was the creator god who fashioned humanity, it was Marduk who conceived the idea.

In understanding the *Enuma Elish* as a text whose purpose is to legitimate the rule of the Babylonian god Marduk over all other gods, it is natural that the most important acts in the universe would be attributed to him. By comparing other Mesopotamian texts, however, one sees a slightly different explanation for the creation of humanity. Foster explains that in the *Enuma Elish*, “the text assigns Marduk primacy in the creation of humans by giving him the ‘idea,’ since Mesopotamian tradition, established centuries before this text was written, agreed that Ea / Enki had been the actual creator, along with the Mother Goddess.”³⁶ A prime example of this tradition is found in the *Atrahasis* narrative. When the “birth-goddess, creatress of humankind” is approached by the gods to create humanity, she replies: “It is not for me to do it, / Th(is) task is Enki’s. / He is the one who purifies everything, / Let him give me the clay so that I

³³ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet VI, lines 1-7.

³⁴ See *Enuma Elish*, Tablet VI, lines 11-38.

³⁵ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet VI, line 35.

³⁶ Foster, *Before the Muses*, p. 469, fn. 4.

can do the making.”³⁷ While not the only god involved in creation, Enki / Ea was depicted as a central god whose action was required in order for creation to proceed.³⁸

It is interesting to note that even though the *Enuma Elish* sought to subsume the act of humanity’s creation under Marduk, the author did not choose to depict Marduk as actually hashing out the logistics or performing the creation itself. Ea remained responsible for both tasks. Thus, Ea was seen as being indispensable, even in the creation of humanity. His presence on the periphery remained constant.

Similarly, Ea was depicted as being responsible for the existence and validity of sacred images. In fact, one of his epithets, Nudimmud, means “image fashioner.”³⁹ In the ritual for enlivening a cult image (*mīs pî*), Ea played a central role. It was “through the craft of Ea,”⁴⁰ that the images were made in the first place. In this ritual, the image is addressed using the following language: “From today you go before your father Ea. Let your heart be pleased, let your mind be happy. May Ea, your father, be full of joy with you.”⁴¹ Thus, Ea was not merely portrayed as a

³⁷ *Atrahasis*, Tablet I, lines 200-203.

³⁸ Elsewhere, Enki / Ea is depicted as being the source of human culture as well. In the Sumerian text “Inanna and Enki,” Enki dwells in the Abzu at Eridu and possesses the *ME*, or the divine and cultural norms for society (see Hallo and Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture, Vol. 1*, pp. 522-26). Inanna removes these abstract elements of civilization and takes them to Uruk. This depiction likely served to legitimize the movement of the “cultural center” of Mesopotamia from Eridu (home of Enki / Ea) to Uruk (home of Inanna / Ishtar). It is interesting to note that in both of these accounts (the creation of humanity by Marduk and the acquisition of the elements of civilization by Inanna), even though another god (Marduk, Ishtar) is clearly portrayed as being superior, they cannot create *ex nihilo*, if you will, and cannot be portrayed as the *source* of humanity and its culture; they must both receive their legitimacy from Enki / Ea.

³⁹ Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian *mīs pî* Ritual,” in Michael B. Dick, ed., *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), p. 64, fn. 27.

⁴⁰ Walker and Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,” p. 62. It was also affirmed that “Ea the god of the carpenter” made the cult image. See Walker and Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,” p. 97.

⁴¹ Walker and Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,” p. 89.

fashioner, but also as a father figure. The ritual involved the presentation of the image “at the riverbank, which is the domain of Ea and where incantations relating to the *Apsû* are recited.”⁴² Each and every cult image, in order to be considered effective, required the involvement of Ea in its creation. Subsequently, Ea’s influence was felt, albeit obliquely, any time a worshipper appeared before a cult image.

Ea: Do You Believe in Magic?

At the conclusion of the *Enuma Elish*, Ea makes a final appearance. Marduk receives a series of divine names describing his attributes and roles, and at the end of this list, Ea adds his approval: “When Ea heard (them) [Marduk’s names], he was joyful of heart. / He said, ‘He whose name his fathers have glorified, / His name, like mine, shall be ‘Ea.’ / He shall provide the procedures for all my offices, / He shall take charge of all my commands.’”⁴³ In giving Marduk his own name, Ea also bestowed upon his son his own responsibilities.

In ancient Mesopotamia, Ea was “especially associated with wisdom, magic and incantations.”⁴⁴ This is illustrated by Ea’s actions at the beginning of the *Enuma Elish*, where he is the first being to use magic. After hearing of Apsu and his vizier Mummu’s plans to destroy the posterity of Tiamat and Apsu, Ea “fashioned it, he established it, a master plan, / He made it artful, his superb magic spell. / He recited it and brought (him) [Apsu] to rest in the waters, / He put him in a deep slumber, he was fast asleep, / He made Apsu sleep, he was drenched with slumber, / Mummu the advisor was drowsy with languor.”⁴⁵ In light of this depiction, Ea was

⁴² Victor Hurowitz, “The Mesopotamian God Image, from Womb to Tomb,” *JAOS* 123:1 (2003), p. 153.

⁴³ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet VII, lines 138-42.

⁴⁴ Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 75.

⁴⁵ *Enuma Elish*, Tablet I, lines 61-66.

viewed with reverence by diviners and exorcists, as evidenced by the following introduction to a bilingual prayer: “O Ea, king of the depths, finder of [good counsel], / I am the exorcist your servant. / Come to my right hand, hasten to my left, / Set your sacral spell for mine, Set your sacral utterance for mine, / Make my sacral word effective, / Make what I say successful.”⁴⁶ As god of wisdom, knowledge and skill, magic was one of Ea’s “special concerns.”⁴⁷

It was these powers of magic and incantation that Ea imbued Marduk with in the *Enuma Elish*. Both gods were frequently invoked in rituals whose purpose was to avert some kind of evil. For example, One prayer states: “O Ea, thanks to your life-giving spell, may everything evil, everything harmful retreat, / May the spell of Eridu [Ea’s city] undo the preparations of sorcerer and sorceress, / May Marduk, prince of the gods, undo their evil preparations.”⁴⁸

Elsewhere, as in the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk is depicted as being the chief god concerning magic and incantations. However, even in these texts, Ea maintains a position of primacy, in spite of the author’s attempts to downplay his significance. In one text, “Marduk ‘notices’ [the actions of demons] and goes to his father Ea for advice. Ea replies in a formulaic phrase, ‘My son, what is there that you don’t know? What can I add? All that I know, you also know,’ but goes on to give appropriate ritual advice.”⁴⁹ Even as Marduk’s supremacy is asserted, it is undermined by his need to receive wisdom from his father Ea. Thus, in spite of efforts to minimize his role, Ea remained a significant background element in the realm of magic and incantations.

⁴⁶ Foster, *Before the Muses*, pp. 642.

⁴⁷ Foster, *Before the Muses*, pp. 642.

⁴⁸ Foster, *Before the Muses*, pp. 643-44.

⁴⁹ Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 126.

Conclusion

Though subtle at times, Ea's influence on and significance within Mesopotamian religious thought remained relatively consistent across both time and space. Almost every area of life was affected in some way by this deity. Through his involvement in the creation and protection of humanity, the establishment of temples, the existence of cultic images, and the enterprise of magic, Ea was a significant background element in the Mesopotamian religious world. For the ancient Mesopotamians, Ea truly was a deity who "manages (all)"⁵⁰ from the periphery.

⁵⁰ *Atrahasis*, Tablet II, line 39.

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