

THE ASSYRIAN STORY OF THE CREATION

TRANSLATED BY THE EDITOR

FRAGMENTS of a long epic poem, describing the creation of the world in a series of tablets or books, were discovered by Mr. George Smith among the cuneiform treasures of the British Museum which had come from the royal library of Kouyunjik or Nineveh. The tablets appear to be seven in number, and since the creation was described as consisting of a series of successive acts, it presented a curious similarity to the account of the creation recorded in the first chapter of Genesis.

The epic embodied certain of the ideas and beliefs current in Assyria and Babylonia regarding the creation of the universe. That there were other ideas and legends is evident from the existence of another story of the creation, which came originally from the library of Cutha, and differed entirely from that of the epic. The epic, as I have pointed out in my *Lectures on the Religion of the Ancient Babylonians* (p. 385), clearly belongs to a late date. The gods of the popular religion not only have their

places in the universe fixed, but even the period and manner of their origin is described. The elementary spirits of the old Accadian faith have passed into the great gods of Semitic belief, and been finally resolved into mere symbolical representatives of the primordial elements of the world. Under a thin disguise of theological nomenclature, the Babylonian theory of the universe has become a philosophic materialism. The gods themselves come and go like mortal men; they are the offspring of the everlasting elements of the heaven and earth, and of that watery abyss out of which mythology had created a demon of evil, but which the philosopher knew to be the mother and source of all things. The Tiamat of the first tablet of the epic is a very different being from the Tiamat of the fourth.

I much doubt, therefore, whether the epic in its present form is older than the time of Assur-bani-pal. It sums up under a poetical garb the teachings of mythology and philosophy about the origin of things. The Babylonians had always believed that the world had been created out of water, and that the present creation had been preceded by an earlier creation, an imperfect and chaotic prototype of that which followed. This earlier creation, in fact, had been the work of chaos, and the destruction of it by the younger gods of light and order ushered in the new creation of the visible world. Light and darkness, chaos and order, are ever struggling one against the other; but the victory of light and order was

assured ever since Merodach, the Sun-god, overthrew the dragon Tiamat, "the wicked serpent" as she is also called, who represented chaos and anarchy. Tiamat is the Assyrian equivalent of the Hebrew *tehôm*, "the deep," upon whose face, according to Gen. i. 2, darkness had rested before the universe was made.

The cosmological system of the first tablet found its way into the pages of a Greek writer, Damaskios, who lived in the sixth century of our era (*De Prim. Princip.* 125, p. 384, ed. Kopp). "The Babylonians," he tells us, "like the rest of the barbarians, pass over in silence the one principle of the universe, and they constitute two, Tavthê and Apasôn, making Apasôn the husband of Tavthê, and denominating her 'the mother of the gods.' And from these proceeds an only-begotten son Mumis, which, I conceive, is no other than the intelligible world proceeding from the two principles. From them also another progeny is derived, Lakhê and Lakhos; and again a third, Kissarê and Assôros, from which last three others proceed, Anos and Illinos and Aos. And of Aos and Davkê is born a son called Bêlos, who, they say, is the fabricator of the world."

Tavthê is Tiamat or Tiavat, Apasôn is *ap'su*, "the abyss," and Mumis is Mammu, who, however, is identified with Tiamat in the epic, Kissarê and Assôros being Ki-sar and An-sar, "the lower" and "the upper firmament." Lakhê and Lakhos, that is to say, Lakhmu or Lakhvu and Lakhamu or La-

khavu, must be read instead of the Dakhê and Dakhos of the manuscripts. Bêlos is Bel-Merodach, "the younger Bel," in contradistinction to "the older Bel" of the city of Nipur, one of whose Accadian names was Illil, the Illinos of Damaskios. It is probable that the name of Lakhamu was carried to Canaan along with those of other Babylonian gods such as Rimmon, Nebo, and Sin. At all events Lakhmi seems to be the name of a Philistine in 1 Chron. xx. 5, and Beth-lehem is best explained as "the house of Lekhem," like Beth-Dagon, "the house of Dagon," or Beth-Anoth, "the house of Anat."

Only the commencement of the first tablet (numbered K 5419) has been recovered, but the tablet was of no great length, as the larger part of the reverse appears to have been occupied by the colophon. It has been published by Mr. George Smith in the *Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, iv. 2 (1876), and by Professor Fr. Delitzsch in his *Assyrische Lesestücke* (1st edition, 1878), and has been translated by Mr. Smith in his *Chaldean Genesis*. Translations of it by Dr. Oppert, Dr. Schrader, and myself have subsequently appeared. A small fragment of the second tablet has been found by Professor Delitzsch, containing the colophon, "the second tablet (of the series beginning) 'when above.'" The third tablet was partly represented by the fragments numbered K 3473, Rm. 615. Lines 17-42 of the obverse have been

published by Professor Delitzsch in his *Assyrisches Wörterbuch*, i. p. 100, and portions of the text are translated in Smith's *Chaldean Genesis*. A fragment of the fourth tablet from the Library of Kouyunjik, numbered K 3437, has been published by George Smith (*Trans. Soc. Bib. Arch.*, iv. 2), and Delitzsch (*Ass. Leses.*, pp. 82, 83), and translated by Smith, Oppert, Lenormant, and others; but nearly the whole of the text has now been recovered from a tablet brought from Babylonia by Mr. Rassam (numbered 82-9-18, 3737), and published by Mr. Budge in the *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archæology* for 6th December 1887. A translation of it has been given by myself in my *Lectures on the Religion of the Ancient Babylonians*, pp. 379 seq. (1887), which I can now improve in several particulars. The fifth tablet (K 3567) was published by Smith (*Trans. Soc. Bib. Arch.*, iv. 2), and Delitzsch (*Ass. Leses.*, p. 78), and translated by Smith, Oppert, and Lenormant. About one-third of it is lost. Of the seventh (?) tablet only three small fragments remain (345, 248, 147), published by Delitzsch (*Ass. Leses.*, p. 79), and translated by Smith in his *Chaldean Genesis*. To the third tablet probably belongs an unpublished fragment (K 3449), describing the preparation of the bow of Merodach; an attempt at its translation will be found in Smith's *Chaldean Genesis*.

No fragments of the sixth tablet have as yet been noticed. According to Professor Delitzsch the fragment belonging to the second tablet concludes with

the prayer of Merodach to capture Tiamat and avenge the gods, after Anu and Ea had already declined to undertake the task (*Assyrisches Wörterbuch*, i. p. 65). The first line of the next tablet is stated to be, "An-sar (the upper firmament) opened his mouth." From this point onwards the ends of the lines are preserved on the fragment numbered K 3473, and from line 9 onwards the beginnings of the lines on fragment K 3938. They run as follows:—

1. "An-sar opened his mouth, and
2. unto him (Merodach) he speaks the word:
3. ('O lord, I) am yearning¹ in my liver;
4. (against Tiamat) let me send thee, even thee:
5. (with the snare?) thou shalt ensnare (Tiamat), thou shalt be *exalted* (?)
6. thy . . . to thy presence.
7. their divine porter.
8. let them dwell in feasting.'
9. The god went (saying), let them make the wine.
10. Humbly the god has . . . them; let them hear the report.
11. He has established and has fixed their . . ., (saying) thus:
12. 'Do thou . . . thy (word) repeat to them.
13. An-sar, moreover, . . . has urged me on;
14. the law of (his) heart has made me, even me, to ponder
15. thus: 'Tiamat . . . has seen us;
16. she has convened (*sitkumat*) an assembly, and is violently enraged.'

Here follows the passage translated further on. The last two lines of the tablet, as we learn from a

¹ *Khummulu*, from *khamalu*, "to be pitiful."

small fragment, concluded with the words, "(Merodach) ascended (from) their midst (and the great gods) determined (for him his) destiny."

It will be seen that a good deal of the poem consists of the words put into the mouth of the god Merodach, derived possibly from older lays. The first tablet or book, however, expresses the cosmological doctrines of the author's own day. It opens before the beginning of time, the expression "at that time" answering to the expression "in the beginning" of Genesis. The heavens and earth had not yet been created, and since the name was supposed to be the same as the thing named, their names had not as yet been pronounced. A watery chaos alone existed, Mummu Tiamat, "the chaos of the deep." Out of the bosom of this chaos proceeded the gods as well as the created world. First came the primæval divinities Lakhmu and Lakhamu, words of unknown meaning, and then An-sar and Ki-sar, "the upper" and "lower firmament." Last of all were born the three supreme gods of the Babylonian faith, Anu the sky-god, Bel or Illil the lord of the ghost-world, and Ea the god of the river and sea.

But before the younger gods could find a suitable habitation for themselves and their creation it was necessary to destroy "the dragon" of chaos with all her monstrous offspring. The task was undertaken by the Babylonian sun-god Merodach, the son of Ea, An-sar promising him victory, and the other gods providing for him his arms. The second tablet was

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