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Myth, Meaning, and the Work of Life: Enuma Elish and the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:4–3:24) on the Value of Human Labor and Memory

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Abstract: This article offers a new comparison of the ancient Mesopotamian story Enuma Elish and the biblical Garden of Eden story (Genesis 2:4–3:24) as a case study that demonstrates how attention to myth theory and comparative method might improve studies of ancient Southwest Asian literatures. This comparison illustrates the connection between myth, meaning making, and the lived experiences that produced and perpetuated these myths by focusing on the cultural value of work and memory as expressed in both narratives. In contrast to previous modes of comparison that conclude with claims to the Bible’s superiority, this comparison uses tools from myth studies and comparative religion toward a clearer understanding of the cultural messaging of both myths regarding the purpose of human life.

Keywords: creation myths; myth and Bible; ancient Near East; myth theory; labor; memory; comparative method; comparison; comparative mythology



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“[I]n many societies worldwide, certain narratives are accorded a status that allows them to set the ideological, cultural, and cognitive categories necessary for discussing what is, and what is not, true.”

(Thompson and Schrempp 2020, p. 2)

1. Introduction

The mythology of other times and places is strange, so we often fail to see the familiar stories of our own time and place as mythology (Thompson and Schrempp 2020, p. 27). This has historically been the case within the academic field of biblical studies, which inherited the perspective that the Bible is normative, but that is beginning to change with advances in knowledge and theorization from biblical studies, religious studies, and a variety of tangential fields. It is becoming more common to view myth as a component of religion rather than a distant religion that “others” practice (Thompson and Schrempp 2020, pp. 18–20), making myth and myth theory integral aspects of the study of any religion or sacred text.

This article begins with a brief section on what myth *is* and *does* and how that relates to the field of biblical studies today, drawing from prominent and emerging scholars in support of the methodological claim that myth and myth theory are important tools for improving historical and comparative studies of the Hebrew Bible in its ancient Southwest Asian context. The majority of the article is dedicated to a practical application of myth theory and comparative method that takes the ancient Mesopotamian myth of *Enuma Elish* and the ancient Judahite myth of the Garden of Eden as its comparative subjects, analyzing each of the stories individually before bringing them into conversation with one another. The result is an example of the kind of fruitful comparison one can make if one is willing to understand myth anew and apply that new understanding to familiar stories. If we take myth seriously and Bible-as-myth seriously, it opens a new world of interpretive possibilities that value not only ancient voices, but modern ones as well.

In my analyses, I focus narrowly on the value of human labor and memory. This focus allows me to maintain a manageable comparison and to dive deeply into the myths at hand rather than skimming the surface. This approach is suitable for myths because myths are multi-layered, a characteristic that is best understood by analogy to archaeological or geological strata, where one can see the various levels of occupation by digging a narrow cross-section in the surrounding environment. This analogy is doubly apt since myth invites us to inhabit other worlds, often ancient worlds, full of possibilities and alternative ways of life. In order to get to one layer, we must travel through several others and in so doing learn more than what we set out for, making the journey of analysis just as important as the destination.

The thesis that emerges in the process of individual and comparative analysis is that, for both *Enuma Elish* and the Garden of Eden, human labor and memory are essential aspects of being that are necessary for self-understanding, social cohesion, and divine connection. Each narrative iteration of this point is delivered in a way that is specific to the culture of its original author(s) and audience(s), making the differences between the two tellings just as important, if not more so, than their similarities. Through comparison, we see that there is a paradox underlying both myths: humankind is designed by their Creator to be in connection with the divine realm, but that same deity constructs reality in such a way that humankind cannot access that realm. This message and its related paradox continue to impact audiences today, as the stories do what myth does: they speak across space and time, relaying or perhaps reflecting a meaningful truth about the human condition.

2. Myth in Biblical Studies: What It Is (Not) and What It Does

It is difficult to write about a term that has more definitions than authors writing about it, and it is fitting that myth is one of these terms, with “the quest for a single overarching definition having long been given up” (Callender 2014b).¹ Myth is flexible by nature because it addresses an issue that demands flexibility: individuals and societies are compelled to make sense of their ever-unfolding experiences. Definitions of myth often include keywords such as belief, narrative, false, true, truth, meaning, metaphor, interpretation, cultural, and symbol, and has until recent decades been contrasted with history, Truth, monotheism, and the Bible.

The way an author defines what myth *is* and *does* affects how they analyze it (e.g., Lorenz 2016; Avis 1999, p. 58; Callender 2014a, p. 9). Here, I define myth as a narrative in which those who adhere to it find some aspect of truth (although not necessarily universal Truth) about the nature of their experience, often by appeal to supernatural events or beings. There are numerous layers and nuances that can be added to this definition depending on the myths, theories of myth, and points of argumentation one has in mind; the definition I present here is in no way designed to be a single overarching one. It is simply a point from which to begin and end the present analysis, and a guide to help along the way.

When it comes to what myth *does*, that is its own book, as practical theorists like Wendy Doniger (2011) have shown, yet most scholars agree that myth serves an explanatory function (Casanova 2020, pp. 8–11). It offers “ways of interpreting the world,” as Mary Midgley (2003, p. 1) writes, “functions to order or explain the world for the society in which it was produced,” according to Tammi Schneider (2011, p. 35), and is “particularly useful for ideology production,” as demonstrated by Debra Ballentine (2015, p. 4). One function of myth that is foundational to this study is myth’s unique ability to create community, which often results in the demarcation of boundary lines between adherents of different myths or even different interpretations of the same myth (Thompson and Schrempf 2020, pp. 6, 167). In this way, myth simultaneously explains worlds and creates them—a theme that is woven throughout this article (e.g., Cho 2019, pp. 217–27; Thompson and Schrempf 2020, pp. 2, 24, 180).

In recent years, a movement has emerged that reads the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible, as myth (e.g., Casanova 2020; Cho 2019). This interpretive move is founded on

reassessments of once common definitions of myth that, in retrospect, were informed by apologetic agendas and are too limited from a global, postmodern perspective. For example, to define myth as stories about deities or phenomena that can now be explained by science, such as the creation of the cosmos, not only excludes countless myths that are foundational to cultures around the globe, but also promotes the stereotype that myth is only for “primitive” polytheists. As many scholars now demonstrate, myth is for everyone and is not limited to stories of the supernatural for the pre-scientific mind. On the contrary, it is a form of extended metaphor that is critical to our thinking (Cho 2019, p. 13; Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

Such reassessment of the relationship between myth and the Bible is part of the dissolution of a series of dichotomies that have been used historically to distinguish the Bible from other ancient Southwest Asian traditions: monotheism vs. polytheism, history vs. nature, linear time vs. cyclical time, and the Bible vs. myth, often with the implication that one set of items is “true”, while the other is “false” or at least “fiction.”² The claim that the biblical authors shifted away from the polytheistic, nature-based, cyclical, and mythical (i.e., false) religious systems of their neighbors by promoting a new, divinely revealed system that is monotheistic, history-based, linear, and anything but mythical (i.e., true) has been challenged by scholarship that focuses on the development of monotheism and Israelite ideas of time and nature, essentially blurring or in some cases erasing the boundary lines demarcated by this theological claim and either-or thinking.

It is now common knowledge among historians of religion that the emergence of monotheism was a slow and difficult process that never took hold fully in ancient Israel or Judah and that the term “monotheism” itself was not coined until the seventeenth century CE.³ Other studies show that the biblical authors are not solely concerned with history and linear time but with the natural world and cyclical time as well (e.g., Simkins 1991, pp. 32–75; 2020; Casanova 2020, pp. 18–27). After all, Israel was an agrarian and pastoral society with important holidays scheduled around the agricultural calendar and those who worshipped Yahweh did so as a bringer of rain and plenty in its season (e.g., Deut 28:1–14; Ps 135:5–7, 147:8–9). They lived and kept time by the cycles of nature—as did all pre-modern societies—and this orientation informs the text at every turn.

This leaves the dichotomy of myth and the Bible. On my definition of the form and function of myth, the Bible is the most powerful example of myth today. Billions of people continue to find meaning and truth in its stories, despite or perhaps because of their antiquity, and it has certainly been used to create and demarcate communities wherever it has been adopted. If we define myth another way, perhaps as a story about the activities of gods and goddesses, then resistance increases because most who ascribe to the Bible hold that its god is God, singular, universal, and True, unlike the “false gods” of other traditions. By adopting a more encompassing definition of myth, one expands the possibilities of what readers of the Bible can gain from its stories (Rogerson 2014, p. 20).

Another challenge that scholars face is the common assumption (originating with Plato and Aristotle) that myth is “false,” which is another way of saying that a myth is (1) anti-truth or at least fictional and (2) valuable only to the degree to which the narrative is a literal representation of past events (Doniger 2011, pp. 2–3; Thompson and Schrempf 2020, pp. 2–3). Like the definition of myth, connecting myth to history in the sense of a precise account of events is, again, too narrow and ignores the complexity of myth, history, and historiography, which is rarely a precise bias-free accounting of events. Rather, myth is history in the sense that it portrays a specific culture’s ideas about issues that matter to them, many of which matter to us today because they are fundamentally *human* issues. Myth and history are not at odds with one another unless we make them so; when understood properly, they exist in a symbiotic relationship. In fact, “Sometimes only fiction can make reality real” (Doniger 2011, p. 27).

For this reason, the historical context of a myth is essential for understanding why it was composed, repeated, and deemed valuable. As Doniger writes, “The context of history can explain why some narratives take hold and spread, while others do not; stories take

root only when they become important to people at a particular time, when they connect to something that those people care about” (Doniger 2011, p. xiii). I would like to add that a story’s ability to connect to something people care about in perpetuity is the key to a story’s longevity, which is why some myths affect only their culture of origin and eventually disappear, while others spread and persist for millennia, as is the case for both *Enuma Elish* and the Hebrew Bible.

This brings me to the topic of the future: Myth not only responds to historical events, it drives them; it not only describes reality, it creates it (Doniger 2011, pp. xiv–xv; Cho 2019, p. 12). The thoughts and ambitions that one encounters in a myth may profoundly affect one’s own thoughts and ambitions, and thus inform how individuals and communities act in real time. The impact of a successful myth is incalculable as its influence ripples through space and history. While the flap of a butterfly’s wings cannot create a hurricane miles away (contrary to a saying that is attributed to numerous people), the effects of a myth can continue to be amplified long after its original audience is gone and in ways that its composer(s) could not have anticipated. This is, in large part, because myths require interpretation. Their narratives are not “straightforward charters of how to live” and are entrenched in the systems and symbolisms of their respective cultures (Thompson and Schrempp 2020, p. 32).

This is where the scholar steps in, as the past and future of myth are connected by the present. The task of a comparative analysis of myths (or any two comparands) is to mediate a conversation between the two culturally embedded stories, a conversation that centers around the line of inquiry that the comparativist brings to it. This line of inquiry is, in turn, honed in relation to the data (Doniger 2011, p. 40). Here, I focus on the value of human labor and memory. This is not precisely the third term with which I chose to compare *Enuma Elish* and the Garden of Eden narratives at the outset, but it is where my interest gravitated as I reread the stories for the umpteenth time and back-to-back for the first time, and it is a set of interests that transcends this or that culture.⁴ I say this not only to inform my reader, but to model the benefit of self-reflection in the interpretive enterprise: that I not confuse the goal of the ancient writers or performers with my own goal (Miller 2014).

Interpretation and comparison are subjective processes that embrace cultural relativity, but so is myth.⁵ Myth calls upon our creative subjectivity to make sense of our experience, but we do not have to do it alone. As Thompson and Schrempp state, “[M]yths are all in the same employ, yet display at the same time the sublime diversity of human responses to the human condition” (Thompson and Schrempp 2020, p. 181). Myth connects us to communities and individuals who had similar experiences, *human* experiences, and created stories to express how they processed them. Through engaging their process, we are better equipped to engage ours, and along the way we learn more about the nature of both mythology and humanity (Thompson and Schrempp 2020, pp. 99, 179).

The authors of the Garden of Eden story and *Enuma Elish*, like all authors of myth, use the symbols and mores of their respective cultures to encode culturally specific viewpoints and narrate them as if they were agreed upon universals. In so doing, myth provides meaning, either by offering it to its audience to accept as is, or by prompting a line of questioning and dialogue by which one arrives at their own interpretation of the matter. Thus, myth not only shows us what the world may have been in the past or might be now, but encourages us to envision what it could, or perhaps should, be in the future—to re-envision the world through the eyes of myth and thus construct the world anew in its own image.

This is perhaps the most important aspect of the relationship between myth and history because it focuses on the lived experiences that go into and have their origin in these ancient stories, not irretrievable events and persons. Myths compel people not because of the facts they offer but because they intersect with our lives in the here and now, prompting our engagement in support or in contestation of its particular viewpoint (Doniger 2011, p. 26). The life of a story is in the dialogue it creates.

One task of cross-cultural comparison is to make the foreign familiar; another is to make the familiar foreign. For most modern readers, *Enuma Elish* is the foreign of the two stories analyzed here, and the Garden of Eden is all too familiar—or so one thinks. In what follows, I focus narrowly on the value of human labor and memory. By keeping the focus narrow, we can dive deeply into the narratives and, perhaps, catch a glimpse of their ancient adherents at work as they construct a complex narrative woven of experience, meaning, self, symbolism, and so much more. Even if one does not catch such a glimpse, there is still much to learn, and in so doing we learn to find the familiar in the foreign and the foreign in the familiar.⁶ The journey of analyzing myth is just as important as the destination.

3. Enuma Elish

The value of human labor and memory is not a topic one often thinks about upon first reading or hearing *Enuma Elish*, nor is it obvious that labor and memory ought to be coupled together as a single item of study. The more time one spends with the story, however, the more insights emerge. By the end of *Enuma Elish*, the cosmic importance of human memory, human labor, and the formative connection between the two is made clear by the narrator. In order to arrive at our destination, we must first journey through the myth's history and narrative.

The title *Enuma Elish*, “When on high,” or “When above,” is simply the first two words of the narrative, following an ancient Mesopotamian convention for referring to texts using the first few words as a catchphrase. Soon after its archaeological rediscovery in 1875, *Enuma Elish* became known as “The Babylonian Epic of Creation,” although scholars now know that it is neither uniquely Babylonian, nor the sole creation story of Babylon (let alone Mesopotamia), nor concerned only with the creation of the world. While it does contain the most developed treatment of Babylonian cosmology known today, its overarching foci are the ascension of Babylon's chief deity Marduk and the cosmic centrality of Babylon.

The story's origin is difficult to pin down. Most witnesses of the narrative were excavated from the 7th century BCE library of Assyrian king Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, but there are additional textual witnesses from other Mesopotamian sites (e.g., Assur, Sultantepe, Nimrud) dating as early as 1300–1100 BCE and perhaps as late as the Seleucid (312–64 BCE) and Parthian (247 BCE–224 CE) periods (Lambert 2013, pp. 3–4). It exists in various scripts and recensions, often with variant names or spellings that speak of political motivation, and there are quotations, allusions, and references to it in many other texts beginning in the second millennium BCE, as well as commentaries from the first millennium BCE, all of which attest to its wide cultural reception (Lambert 2013, pp. 4–7, 135–44).

Some speculate that the story may have originated during the reign of Sumu-la-el (r. 1936–1901 BCE) when the cult statue of Marduk, then patron deity of Babylon, was returned to the city after being taken as booty by the Hittites (Schneider 2011, pp. 42–43). Such a return could have been the occasion for creating or writing such a story, but evidence is circumstantial. What is important here is that *Enuma Elish* was a culturally important story across Mesopotamia for somewhere between one and two thousand years, reaching countless individuals until its influence waned during the Greek and Roman periods. Since its 1875 rediscovery, *Enuma Elish* has been read by millions across the globe and is the center of much scholarship—a completely new audience who has given the myth a second life.

Although the details are debated, historians generally agree that the myth's popularity seems to have reached its climax during the Neo-Babylonian empire (6th century BCE). *Enuma Elish* was recited publicly on the fourth day of the week-long springtime Babylonian New Year festival, known as the *Akitu*. The cult statue of Marduk, the story's central deity, was paraded through the city streets and out into his country palace known as *Akitu*, where he met with other chief deities (i.e., their cult statues) from other political entities before returning to the inner chamber of his main temple, Esagila, “House whose top is high.” For Marduk, the aim of the festival was to survey his domain and determine its fate for

the following year, reassert his and Babylon's position in the cosmos, and to be seen by his people (Balogh 2018, pp. 18–22; Pedersén 2011). Thus, the myth became not only a literary text but a *lived* text, one that infused the ritual and agricultural cycle with layers of significance and symbolism.

The myth begins,

When the heavens above did not exist,
And earth beneath had not come into being—
There was Apsû, the first in order, their begetter,
And demiurge Tiāmat, who gave birth to them all;
They had mingled their waters together
Before meadow-land had coalesced and reed-bed was to be found—
When not one of the gods had been formed
Or had come into being, when no destinies had been decreed,
The gods were created within them;
Laḥmu and Laḥamu were formed and came into being.

(I, 1–9)⁷

These opening lines are the most often analyzed of the seven-tablet myth due to the popularity of comparing them to Genesis 1:1–2, but the two narratives soon go in different directions. The opening scene of *Enuma Elish* is of a primordial time, before the cosmos was shaped, when two pre-existent amorphous bodies of water, Tiāmat the sea and Apsû the subterranean freshwater, “mingled their waters together” and conceived the gods. The euphemism of mingling waters (I, 5) possibly alludes to the fertile Shatt al-Arab delta where the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers empty into the Persian Gulf. Out of this mingling, the first of the gods are born and they are called Laḥmu and Laḥamu (I, 10), which mean something akin to “mud” and “muddy.” They are the precursors of both land and all other gods, preparing the way for the reed-bed and meadow-land that the author anticipates in line six, as well as the many deities that follow. Already, the myth—and its many deities—are tied to the geography of the land and the lived experience of its river-dwelling citizens. The theme of the land, particularly its fertility, fecundity, and abundant waters, continues throughout the story while additional themes are added.

As the plot continues, Apsû, the primordial father, and Tiāmat, the primordial mother, are innervated at the clamor of their offspring; Apsû seeks to kill them, while Tiāmat will not (I, 21–54). Ea finds out about Apsû's plot and kills him, taking the subterranean freshwater as his domain (I, 55–79). There, Marduk is born, his figure “lofty and superior in comparison with the gods” with a superior nature and the four winds at his disposal (I, 80–106), a point that is important for his later role as a weather deity. Meanwhile, some of the gods take issue with Tiāmat's callousness toward Apsû's death and set out for war (I, 109–32). Tiāmat gives birth to eleven kinds of monsters to serve as her army and makes Qingu both their general and her husband (I, 133–II, 3).

The only rebellious god willing (eventually) and equipped to go against Tiāmat is Marduk. With one great blow of the Evil Wind, he distends her belly then pierces it with an arrow before slitting her open (IV, 95–104). “He bound her an extinguished her life, He threw down her corpse and stood on it” (IV, 103–4). Marduk and his company imprison Tiāmat's monsters, including Qingu, before returning to the corpse (IV, 105–28). From Tiāmat's body, Marduk fashions the celestial realm and the earth in all their detail (IV, 129–V, 62). Tiāmat is almost universally held to have the body of a dragon or other foreboding serpentine animal, but there is no conclusive evidence from *Enuma Elish* or elsewhere that this is the case (Heidel 1951, pp. 83–88), aside from a single mention of her tail, which Marduk twists to make Durmaḥu, the bond that holds together heaven, earth, and the underworld (V, 59). Whatever the case, it is clear from the narrative that her body is much larger than Marduk's—large enough to build the universe out of—and a force to contend with.

In gratitude, the gods make Marduk king and offer to do whatever he commands. He chooses to create an earthly resting place for the gods that shall be named *bābili*, Babylon,

“gate of the gods,” where deities can move between heaven, earth, and the subterranean waters of the Apsû, where Marduk will establish his kingship for all time, and where a festival will be held (V, 119–30). The labor, however, is burdensome, and the gods soon complain. Their speech is fragmentary, yet the impact is clear—“When Marduk heard the gods’ speech he conceived a desire to accomplish clever things” (VI, 1–2). He created humankind, which brings us to the topic of human purpose.

Here, six tablets into the seven-tablet narrative, the myth briefly narrates the creation of *lullû*, “humankind,” “on whom the toil of the gods will be laid that they may rest” (VI, 8). Marduk wants humankind to be made of blood, but whose? Ea suggests that the blood ought to come from Qingu, Tiāmat’s now captive general and lover, and all agree. The gods sever Qingu’s blood vessels before Ea and “from his blood he (Ea) created mankind, on whom he imposed the service of the gods, and set the gods free” (VI, 33–34).

The fact that humankind is made of the blood of an enemy general does not sit well with most readers, leaving us with a pessimistic and violent first impression of ancient Mesopotamian anthropology. However, this image is designed to create tension; it is a gruesome detail that the author(s) pairs with the fact that the term *lullû*, “humankind,” has more than one meaning. As a noun, *lullû* means “humankind,” but as a verb it means “to provide with beauty, happiness, pleasure,” and as an adjective, it means “abundant, beautiful” (CAD I, 242). The fact that blood is used to make *lullû* is not pessimistic but a paradox—one that the narrator does not elaborate but leaves his audience to ponder.

The creation of humankind is where most retellings of *Enuma Elish* end, but this is not where the story ends. To end here is to leave the audience with the wrong impression that the myth is anthropocentric, and humans are the capstone of Marduk’s activities. For *Enuma Elish*, the nature of humankind, our bloody beginning, and the etiology of labor are not the *raison d’être* of the myth. Although humankind does have a clear place in the story, it is only in relation to the divine realm, which soon includes Babylon.

The story continues: In direct connection with the creation of humankind, Marduk reorganizes the divine realm into upper and lower groups, assigning 300 Anunnaki to the heavens to guard divine decrees and 300 more to the netherworld, the Apsû, which Marduk reorganizes in light of *lullû*’s existence (VI, 9–10, 39–44, cf. 69 reconstructed). This is a sizeable alteration in the order of the divine realm, one that demonstrates anxiety over the possibility that humankind might transgress its limitations regarding knowledge of divine matters and mortality—a theme we will see again in our comparison with the Garden of Eden story.

Given that *lullû* is created in response to complaints about how hard it is to build the great city, one might expect humankind to build Babylon, but here the narrator subverts our expectations. It is the Anunnaki who build Babylon and its numerous temples, not humankind.⁸ The Anunnaki build the city as a favor for their freedom, and the gods take up residence in their assigned places, all the while exalting Marduk. The great gods assemble to set curses on themselves (likely as a pledge of allegiance), to grant Marduk the right to rule over them, and to confirm him as lord (*bel*) of the gods. The myth ends with Anšar calling the divine assembly to recite Marduk’s fifty names, all of which attest to multiple facets of his personage. This takes approximately 185 lines of poetry, spanning tablets six and seven, to accomplish before the narrator concludes with an epilogue. Although fragmentary, the final lines of the myth present a summary of its most important plot points: “Here now is the song of Marduk, [Who] defeated Tiāmat and took kingship. [. . .]. the temple of . . . [. . .]. Babylon [. . .]” (VII, 161–4).

For those interested in questions such as the nature and purpose of humankind, the plot of *Enuma Elish* leaves us wanting. If humans are created to build Babylon but do not, what then does it mean to bear “the toil of the gods” to the point that they are free and at rest? The answer is in Marduk’s fifty names.⁹

In ancient Southwest Asia, where a name constitutes one’s identity, the fact that the key to understanding our species is to study the names of Marduk is a point whose full weight is unlikely to be felt by an audience outside of the myth’s early temporal and geographic

context. The epilogue proclaims that these names should be remembered and expounded, taught from generation to generation, and explained to all members of society, which is precisely why they are written down (VII, 145–8, 157–8). In venturing to understand oneself using this specific text and its record of Marduk's names, the myth's audience enters a world that offers particular answers to questions regarding human nature and the purpose of life that may or may not resonate with other people across space and time. *Enuma Elish* is where its adherents find the meaning of their reality. It is also where identity and memory come together, as it is only in remembering Marduk's names that the purpose of human life comes to light.

When Anšar calls the assembly to recite the fifty names, he begins by calling Marduk *Asalluḫi*, the patron god of exorcism (CAD a2, pp. 435–36), and offering a speech that is by far the longest passage of the myth to deal with the question of human purpose. All later mentions of humankind are a mere one to four lines long and serve only to enhance what is in Anšar's speech, here quoted in full:

At the mention of [Marduk's] name, let us show submission!
When he speaks, let the gods heed him,
Let his command be superior in upper and lower regions.
May the son, our avenger, be exalted,
Let his lordship be superior and himself without rival.
Let him shepherd the black-heads, his creatures,
Let them tell of his character to future days without forgetting.
Let him establish lavish food offerings for his fathers,
Let him provide for their maintenance and be caretaker of their sanctuaries,
Let him burn incense to rejoice their sanctums.
Let him do on earth the same as he has done in heaven:
Let him appoint the black-heads to worship him.
The subject humans should take note and call on their gods,
Since he commands they should heed their goddesses,
Let food offerings be brought [for](?) their gods and goddesses,
May they(?) not be forgotten, may they remember their gods,
May they ... their ... , may they ... their shrines.
Though the black-heads worship some one, some another god,
He is he god of each and every one of us!
Come, let us call the fifty names
Of him whose character is resplendent, whose achievement is the same.
(VI, 102–22)

Starting with Anšar's speech, *Enuma Elish* uses the term *ṣalmat qaqqadi*, "black-headed," as a poetic expression referring to humankind in its totality, as it was created. This term is much more common than *lullû*, "humankind; beautiful," emphasizing the paradoxical use of *lullû* in the earlier account of humankind's creation. Here, *ṣalmat qaqqadi* are likened to a herd of pastoral animals and Marduk to a shepherd, with the goal that humans are to speak of his nature "to future days without forgetting" (VI, 107–8), meaning that a certain degree of precision is required when educating others about the nature of the deity, and, on the analogy of a shepherd to his flock, this precise knowing comes only in relationship with the deity himself.

These two lines are set within a span of text (VI, 102–111) that is mostly concerned with the activities of Marduk and other deities, but there is a line in the exact middle of Anšar's twenty-one-line speech that impacts how one understands the role of humankind, not only on Earth but in the cosmic order. In the first half of the speech, Anšar clarifies that the gods are to exalt and submit to Marduk, while he is to lead them, provide them with food, incense, and other maintenance, and see to their sanctuaries (VI, 102–6, 108–11). Then, Anšar proclaims, "Let him [Marduk] do on earth the same as he has done in heaven:" (VI, 112) and spends six lines delineating what *ṣalmat qaqqadi*—not Marduk—is to

do: worship Marduk, “take note and call on their gods,” heed the goddesses, bring food offerings to the deities, remember the deities, and tend to their holy places (VI, 113–118).

By tending to the divine realm in honor of Marduk, humankind participates in Marduk’s own actions, his own being, as king of the gods. This clarifies why it is important that *lullû*, “humankind; beautiful,” be made of divine blood. Although humankind is indeed of lesser standing as a created being designed for servitude, it does share a vital essence with the divine that unites the two species. The narrator does not clarify how this bond plays out in life, but it does give humans a certain standing in the cosmos. This ambiguates Anšar’s closing lines (VI, 119–22). Who is “us”? While one can read the black-heads and deities in opposition, meaning that humans ignorantly worship many gods while the gods know that Marduk is chief deity, one is also justified in reading the black-headed and deities as being in unison. That is, while humans serve a variety of gods, everyone in heaven and earth knows this is done in service to Marduk (VI, 110, 120), both in accordance with Anšar’s speech (VI, 114–18) and as a reflection of Marduk’s deeds in heaven (VI, 109–11). This more nuanced approach acknowledges that whoever is reading or hearing this passage is doing so because they have now come to the end of *Enuma Elish*, which details Marduk’s rise to divine kingship. It is also in line not only with the claim that Marduk and humankind ought to act in parallel (VI, 112), but with what follows.

With the claim that human action is to parallel Marduk’s action, the rationale for understanding his names becomes clearer since most of them explain Marduk’s nature by proclaiming what he *does*. Of these fifty names, only twelve mention humans explicitly and usually only for one line.¹⁰ Most of these lines simply repeat what is already communicated in the narrative of *Enuma Elish* and Anšar’s speech—that humankind was created out of a deity (VII, 90) to serve the gods so they may rest (VI, 129–30, 133–4; VII, 29) and ought to extol Marduk (VII, 24–5)—but there are a few elaborations that further one’s understanding of the myth’s take on human purpose.

Throughout *Enuma Elish*, especially in the confrontation with Tiamat, Marduk is described as having command over various winds and the weather (e.g., I, 105–8, 113–16; IV, 41–50, 95–104, 132; V, 50–52). This is part of a robust tradition in which Marduk is clearly portrayed as a weather deity who controls storms, winds, and water flow, among other natural elements, all of which need to be in balance for the one item necessary for humankind to serve the gods as required: agriculture. If humankind is to offer sacrifices of grain, animal products, libation, and other produce of the land, they must first produce them, and to produce them, they need a reliable storm god whose nature they can understand that they may please him in turn.

In the list of Marduk’s names, agricultural activities are a central theme. To give a few examples, Marduk is he “who provides bounty, who enriches human habitation” (VII, 66) through the profusion of grain and “who accumulates abundance for the peoples” by “raining down” riches and supplying “abundant vegetation” (VII, 68–9). He even adjusts the strength of storms “that he may give sustenance to the peoples below” (VII, 121), and it is because of his support of land, city, and peoples alike that they worship him (VI, 135–6). By participating in agricultural activities for their own sustenance and, more importantly, the sustenance of the gods, humankind lives Anšar’s proclamation that Marduk is to do on earth as he does in heaven using the labor of humankind to grant the gods rest (VI, 112). By working alongside Marduk, people participate in Marduk in his role as king and keeper of the gods. This connection, however, is easily forgotten in the day-to-day work of existence.

The theme of human memory appears occasionally throughout Marduk’s fifty names, preparing the audience for the epilogue where the command to remember is heavy-handed. Marduk and his act of creating the heavens, including the celestial timekeepers (i.e., constellations, sun, moon), are not to be forgotten among mortals (VII, 18), neither are his words to be forgotten from human lips or even lose their certainty (VII, 31–2). This is important to the myth-writer not only because Marduk’s identity is bound up with humankind, but because “no one but [Marduk] accomplishes clever things” (VII, 112; cf. VI, 1–2) and “apart from him no god knows the measure of their days” (VII, 114). The only other time the term

“clever things” appears in *Enuma Elish* is when Marduk “conceived a desire to accomplish clever things” (VI, 1–2) and created *lullû* as a result. Marduk is superior among the gods, and his superiority manifests in his ability to create humankind. This is not to be forgotten, for it is the ‘why’ of human life.

The importance of memory and its connection to human labor becomes more explicit in the epilogue (VII, 143–62[?]). Regarding Marduk’s fifty names, the narrator proclaims,

They should be remembered; a leading figure should expound them,
The wise and learned should confer about them,
A father should repeat them and teach them to his son,
One should explain them to shepherd and herdsman.
If one is not negligent to Marduk, the Enlil of the gods,
May one’s land flourish, and oneself prosper,
(For) his word is reliable, his command unchanged,
No god can alter the utterance of his mouth.

(VII, 145–52)

The names of Marduk are to serve as tools for learning, remembering, and teaching about him across generations and across social location. It is no coincidence that the narrator specifies that everyone from the “wise and learned” (VII, 146) to the “shepherd and herdsman” (VII, 148) needs to know the details of Marduk’s nature, which includes his direct involvement in the cult and agricultural and pastoral activities. Remembering Marduk is a collective project that requires everyone’s participation, hence the annual *Akitu* festival during which *Enuma Elish* is performed.

It is also important to note that there are consequences for failing to incorporate what one learns from Marduk’s fifty names into one’s work life. The narrator states that one’s land will flourish, and one will prosper “if one is not negligent to Marduk” (VII, 149–50). Marduk’s willingness to do on earth as he does in the heavens is conditional, dependent on humankind’s willingness to understand Marduk’s names and to labor from that understanding. The narrator also implies that to forget Marduk is to bring disaster upon the community. Marduk is reliable in this and all other matters; not even the gods can change his utterance (VII, 151–2).

Taken together with Anšar’s speech, the narrator suggests that what is at stake with remembering or forgetting the fifty names is humankind’s individual and collective sense that what they do has an impact not only on the earth but in the heavens. Under this belief, all work is meaningful as long as it relates to some aspect of Marduk’s nature. One does not need to be literate or a scribe or an officiant in the cult to contribute to divine well-being if one understands how their work fits within Marduk’s identity. For example, as a god of sustenance, any work related to food growth and preparation falls under Marduk’s domain; that means that almost all members of society—men, women, and children—emulate Marduk in his role as provider just as much as a priest emulates Marduk in his role as keeper of sacred spaces. What concerns the narrator is whether his audience knows of this connection and takes it to heart.

The relationship between *Enuma Elish* and the lived experiences of the cultures that created and sustained it in antiquity and *continue* to sustain it today reminds us that myth compels people because of its ability to intersect with their lives across space and time. In *Enuma Elish*, the modern reader finds much that is foreign and much that is familiar, which is why it stands out among the vast corpus of Mesopotamian literature available today. From the “mingling” of primeval waters to the king of the gods fashioning the cosmos out of slain goddess carcass, to the paradox of *lullû*, “humankind; beautiful,” being fashioned of blood, to the fifty long names of Marduk, the myth requires much of its reader if one is to understand all of its complexities.

For the narrator, it is enough that the audience learns about Marduk and remembers him well, but at the same time, it is impossible to heed the narrator’s call to study Marduk’s nature with only a single reading of *Enuma Elish*. Knowing Marduk through *Enuma Elish*,

including his fifty names, is a lifelong project, so a leading figure (perhaps the author) took it upon themselves to write the list of his names: “He wrote it down and stored it so that generations to come might hear it” (VII, 158). Ideally, the ancient audience did not need to be literate to access knowledge of Marduk’s names since they were supposed to be passed down by oral tradition (VII, 145–9), yet having them available in written form is still of great cultural importance because it provides a reference point for all that Marduk would have one remember. It also ensures that if Marduk were ever forgotten, there is a chance he might be remembered again someday—which is exactly what happened when *Enuma Elish* was rediscovered in 1875.

In the last line of the story, the narrator calls the Igigi gods to sing a song of Marduk “How he defeated Tīamat and took kingship” (VII, 162; Foster 2003, p. 402), taking the audience back to the main story and thereby reminding us of the most simplistic version of Marduk’s identity: he is lord of the gods. From here, Marduk’s adherents are to build their understanding and in so doing, find relationship, identity, and security in their work as laborers on behalf of the divine.

4. Garden of Eden

The Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:4–3:24) is a story familiar to billions of people around the globe, and endless commentaries, homilies, and other interpretations of it have been offered for well over two thousand years. Starting with the theologian Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE), this story is popularly known in many Christian traditions as “The Fall” wherein Eve, the first woman, is tempted by a serpent (often understood as Satan) to eat forbidden fruit from the “Tree of Knowledge” or “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil” and her husband, Adam, the first man, eats of it after her. This is known as the “Original Sin” that caused all humans to fall from God’s grace. As punishment, the serpent becomes a legless snake, and the first couple are cast out of the garden, into the uncultivated wild where they must toil for food and women must bear children in pain and be subservient to their husbands. A cherub is stationed near the entrance of the garden so that humans cannot return, lest they take part of the “Tree of Life,” and successive generations migrate further and further eastward—away from God’s paradise.

There is another antique line of tradition, popular in Judaism and non-Augustinian forms of Christianity, that sees the story not as a fall from grace but as a story of human becoming, wherein the acquisition of “knowledge of good and evil” is what enables the first couple to succeed in the world beyond the garden and raise children capable of civilization (e.g., Simkins 2020). The interpretation that I offer here is a nuanced version of this line of tradition, one that draws out the myth’s message regarding the value of human labor and memory. Along the way, the story becomes much less familiar than the abbreviated version of Augustine’s interpretation known in popular culture.

Scholars generally agree that the Garden of Eden narrative is the work of the “J-Source” or “Yahwistic Source”, which is an abbreviated way of saying that it came from a literary source that is presumed to have originated in Judah and to be the oldest of the Torah’s four (or five) sources, dating somewhere between 1200–722 BCE, although the oral tradition behind the written narrative is likely much older (Friedman 1987, pp. 50–51, 61–63). It is called Yahwistic because the narrator uses the proper name of the biblical deity—Yahweh—in addition to the generic term *elohim*, “gods, God, deity,” commonly used alone in other sources. In Genesis 2:4–3:24, the deity is referred to with the combined name *yahweh elohim*, represented in English translation as “the LORD God” with small upper-case letters denoting the divine name Yahweh.

The use of the Garden of Eden story in ancient Israel is unknown, but it has certainly been used liturgically since Judaism’s formative Second Temple Period (516 BCE–70 CE) and was later adopted by Christianity and Islam. As stories of human origins, the two creation stories of Genesis 1–3 (1:1–2:3 and 2:4–3:24) are particularly important to their adherents because they offer a foundational understanding of the cosmos, its Creator, and the place of humankind, while also setting the stage for how to understand the remainder

of the Bible and its associated traditions. Although the two myths conflict in their details, the compiler(s) of Genesis ultimately decided to place them back-to-back. After all, myth is not history in the sense of an accurate representation of past events, but history in the sense of culturally embedded narrative expressions of complex ideas about how the world works. Thus, even conflicting stories can be complementary, and the compiler(s) seems to understand this.

I begin my analysis with a correction that launches us into the topic of human labor. In the Hebrew story, Yahweh creates Adam in the ancient Israelite equivalent of “a land far, far away,” a strange place that precedes humankind with no plants or rain but a lot of subterranean water spraying the surface of the earth. Yahweh creates the first human out of the dust (*afar*) of the ground (*adamah*), but this human is not named Adam within the story. In fact, the deity never names him; he refers to the human only as *ha-adam*, which is not a personal name but a pun on the noun *adamah*, “arable ground, earth,” accompanied by the definitive marker *ha-* “the,” resulting in the proper translation, “the earthling” although most translations prefer “the man.”

The pun begins in Genesis 2:5 when the narrator clarifies that the absence of plants is because “there was no *adam* to work (*avad*) the *adamah*,” a foreshadowing statement issued before humankind is even created.¹¹ *Ha-adam*, however, is made not only of the dust of the earth but divine breath as well, as Yahweh “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man [*ha-adam*] became a living creature” just after Yahweh formed him (Gen 2:7). This makes *ha-adam* unique among all other living creatures Yahweh forms from *adamah* (2:19). The man does not begin to work the *adamah*, “earth, arable land,” right away, though. Instead, Yahweh plants a garden (*gan*) in Eden (another otherworldly land; 2:8–14) and assigns *ha-adam* to work (*avad*) and protect (*shamar*) it (2:15). The pun is revisited at the end of the story when Yahweh sends *ha-adam* out of the garden “to work the ground (*adamah*) from which he was taken” (3:23).

The fact that ancient Southwest Asian cultures assigned great significance to a person’s name, as well as the act of naming, makes the absence of a proper name for *ha-adam* significant. The man’s lack of name contrasts with his role as he who names all the animals Yahweh creates (Gen 2:19–20) and later his wife Eve (*chavah*) “because she was the mother of all living” (3:20; though she had not yet given birth). “Silence too is a statement, but one that we can only hear when we compare it with other sounds” (Doniger 2011, p. 43). In comparison, the lack of name becomes audible. It is not until Yahweh is about to punish *ha-adam* that the narrator begins to call him Adam (3:17; cf. 3:21), although Yahweh continues to refer to him as *ha-adam*.¹²

What I would like to suggest is that the lack of proper name for *ha-adam* is an intentional feature of the myth that draws our attention to the collective aspect of the story. *Ha-adam*, “the earthling, human,” is not one historical man who lived under strange circumstances once upon a time but “every man,” meaning humankind as a whole and each individual human. By withholding *ha-adam*’s name and delaying his naming of the woman—neither of whom Yahweh calls by name—the story encourages its audience to see its mythical properties. Ultimately, the story is not about Adam and Eve but about what it means to be an *adam*, and that is a question every person and society must face.

In the Garden of Eden story and the culture that created it, being an *adam* is to be of the *adamah*, the earth or arable land. Neither the deity nor the narrator specifies what working and keeping the garden entails, neither do they specify how *ha-adam* is to work the *adamah*. It is assumed that the audience knows what these tasks entail and rightly so since ancient Israel was a mix of overlapping agricultural and pastoral communities linked together by kinship bonds and a few urban centers. They knew what it meant for Yahweh to build a great garden, albeit on a smaller scale, what it means to maintain an existing garden, and what it means to work unworked land. They also knew that there was a time before agriculture was the norm and thus incorporated the gradual move from gathering to agriculture in their myths.

What this story offers is a narrative connection between oneself, *ha-adam* as the first gardener, forager, and fieldworker, and the divine Gardener who provided *ha-adam* the opportunity to learn the art of domestication before sending him out. In working the *adamah* beyond the boundaries of Eden, *ha-adam* and his offspring further the work of creation that Yahweh started when he formed *ha-adam*, the garden, and all non-human life “out of the ground (*adamah*)” (Gen 2:7, 19; cf. 2:7). When the serpent speaks to the woman about the forbidden fruit, he tells her “when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:5). The serpent’s prediction—which Yahweh did not specify when he prohibited the fruit (2:17)—is fulfilled when *ha-adam* becomes the first human to work *adamah*. In working the ground, *ha-adam* becomes like Yahweh, something he could achieve only by knowing good and evil.¹³

On this reading, humankind was never meant to stay in the Garden of Eden, making the myth not an account of humanity’s fall but an account of humanity’s becoming. The first man’s nature as *adam* from *adamah* who works the *adamah* comes to fruition only after he is sent out of the garden “to work (*avad*) the *adamah* from which he was taken” (Gen 3:23). In order to become his true self, *ha-adam* must transgress Yahweh’s one rule, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (2:16–17). While *ha-adam* and the woman do not actually die on that fateful day, they do transition away from the divine garden toward a more mundane mode of existence, one that the story’s audience is all too familiar with. They also lose their chance at immortality (3:22–24).

The transition from the garden to the *adamah* is instigated by a figure known only as “the serpent,” who some later Christian communities associate with the tempter Satan. This interpretation, however, is not supported by the text but rather is an extension of Augustine’s interpretation of Genesis 2:1–3:24 as “The Fall” and the eating of the fruit as “Original Sin.” In the actual text, the narrator describes the serpent only as “more crafty (*arum*) than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made” (Gen 3:2). The term *arum*, “cunning, crafty, clever,” appears only once here, twice in Job (5:12; 15:5), and eight times in Proverbs (12:16, 23; 13:16; 14:8, 15, 18; 22:3; 27:12). In the book of Job, *arum* is an attribute used toward negative ends, while in Proverbs, it is favorable and contrasted with being a fool. Being *arum* is positive or negative depending on the context and how one uses it. Thus, whether the serpent is acting for good or ill depends on the value judgment one makes about the outcome of the story.

The monologue Yahweh speaks after finding *ha-adam* and his wife hiding among the trees (Gen 3:14–19), wearing the fig loincloths they sewed upon realizing they were naked (3:7), directly addresses the topic of human labor and its connection to one’s individual and collective identity. The passage includes a few etiologies, a common feature of myth, as well as layers of mythical significance that require deeper analysis. The snake is reprimanded first, cursed to move on its belly, eat dust, and inspire hostile reactions from future humans (3:14–15). The man and woman are not cursed, unlike the serpent, but do receive harsh words.

Yahweh’s address to the woman, who interpreters often blame for the situation, is the briefest of the reprimands. It translates literally as, “I will surely multiply your hardship (*itsvon*) and your pregnancy; in pain (*etsev*) you shall birth children and your longing shall be toward your husband and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16, author’s translation). This outcome was foreshadowed when Yahweh created the woman from *ha-adam*’s side as a “helper corresponding to him” (2:18, 20), and in this new world order she will take on that role fully as the assistant-wife and mother of *ha-adam*’s children, although none of their three sons have yet been conceived.¹⁴ There has been no conception, pregnancy, birth, or child-rearing in the garden, but reproduction is important here because *ha-adam* and the woman are alone and mortal. This is another indication that the first couple was never meant to stay in the garden. For the woman, bearing and rearing children in hardship is her new reality, an aspect of becoming specific to her.

In Yahweh's reprimand of *ha-adam* for his disobedience, he does not curse the man but the *adamah* (Gen 3:17–19).

Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'
cursed is the ground (*adamah*) because of you (*ba'avurecha*);
in pain (*itsvon*) you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants (*ashev*) of the field (*sadeh*).
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground (*ha-adamah*),
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust (*afar*),
and to dust (*afar*) you shall return.

There are more ambiguities in this passage than most translations convey. First, the phrase translated by the English Standard Version and others as "cursed is the ground *because of you*" is equally likely to mean "cursed is the ground *on your behalf*," which makes Yahweh's curse of the ground a benefit to *ha-adam* although it certainly does not make his work easier. The word often translated as "pain," *itsvon*, is more precisely translated as "hardship" and is not limited to physical suffering. The same word is also used in Yahweh's speech to the woman (Gen 3:16), where it appears in parallel with childbirth and, by extension, child rearing; a different word (*etsev*) from the same root is used for physical pain (3:16). Reading *ha-adam* as a creature of the *adamah* designed to work the *adamah* allows the audience to entertain the idea that perhaps the hardship Yahweh describes to both the woman and the man is a valuable part of human identity. It is not easy to live in hardship, work the *adamah*, or bear and raise children, and in that struggle, many find meaning, identity, and community.

It is also ambiguous as to whether *ha-adam* is to be a forager, farmer, or both. The plants (*eshev*) Yahweh says *ha-adam* will eat are unspecified and can include grasses, herbs, weeds, animal fodder, cereals, and vegetables depending on context, although it is more likely that this particular noun was chosen because of its auditory similarity to *etsev*, "pain," and *itsvon*, "hardship," than any precise meaning. It is also not clear how *ha-adam* is to acquire such plants—cultivation or foraging? The term *sadeh*, "field," also has a variety of meanings from pastureland to arable land to an open meadow. This complicates the audience's understanding of the precise nature of *ha-adam's* new reality, but for the myth-writer, that is beside the point. Being an *adam* is now a complex, difficult endeavor.

As with many myths, the answers to the questions posed by one story are answered in another. The question of what kind of work *ha-adam* is to do is answered in the following story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1–16). Like his father, Cain is a "worker of the *adamah*" (4:2; cf. 2:5) and his younger brother a keeper of sheep (4:2), both of whom are prosperous enough to offer firstfruits to Yahweh (4:3–4). What *ha-adam* learns about cultivation and domestication during his stay in the garden prepares him for life outside its boundaries and quickly becomes intergenerational knowledge in support of a growing human population and in service to the divine through sacrifice. Within one generation, *ha-adam*, Eve, and their descendants learn how to turn hardship into livelihood and divine worship.

Yahweh's reprimand does not end with thorns and thistles but with the statement that *ha-adam* will work the *adamah* until he returns to it, until he becomes dust once more, and his life comes full circle (Gen 3:19). Upon death, *ha-adam* becomes *adamah* that can be worked again, and that has the potential to yield sustenance for a new generation of plants, animals, and humans. Thus, *ha-adam* learns of his mortality but also his eternity as one whose existence is inextricably linked with the ground as the very source of life. The deity does not mention what happens to the "breath of life" (2:7) upon *ha-adam's* return to the

ground. That is a different myth for another time. The absence of this detail underscores just how important *adamah* is at this point in the narrative.

The narrative concludes in quick succession, and in the end, disrupts the popular assumption that the exile from Eden is punishment for disobedience regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil. After *ha-adam* names Eve (Gen 3:20), Yahweh clothes the couple with “garments of skin” (3:21), shares his rationale for exiling the humans from the garden (3:22), sends out *ha-adam* so he can “work the ground from which he was taken” (3:23), and installs cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life.

As the serpent said, *ha-adam* and the woman do not die when they eat the forbidden fruit, even though Yahweh said they would (Gen 2:17; 3:4). The one thing Yahweh and the serpent do agree on is that *ha-adam* and the woman became “like God/gods, knowing good and evil” (3:4, 22).¹⁵ It is clear from earlier in the story that eating of the forbidden fruit is an act of disobedience worthy of grave punishment (2:17; 3:11–13, 17), so the audience assumes disobedience is the problem. However, Yahweh’s final rationale introduces another variable, one that was mentioned in passing in the beginning of the story (2:9) and is only now retrieved: the garden also contains a tree of life whose fruit grants immortality (3:22–23).

Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.

When Yahweh realizes the possibility that the same *adam* who is now *like* a deity in knowing good from evil might also become immortal, he does not take time to finish his sentence but instead jumps into action (Gen 3:22–23). There is no time to waste—*ha-adam* must leave and never be able to access the tree of life. The suddenness of Yahweh’s decision to exile the couple (but not the serpent) begs the question: Was Yahweh’s initial plan upon their eating the forbidden fruit for *ha-adam*, the woman, and the serpent to live out their respective punishments within the garden? To introduce the hardships of labor and reproduction into this otherworldly land, that they might be god-like creatures knowing good and evil while still in Yahweh’s midst? The story does not say, but myth encourages its audience to explore the negative spaces of a story and to bring the what-ifs into dialogue with the imagination. In so doing, the audience breathes new life into the story and moves it one step closer to immortality.

The connection between labor and identity is woven throughout the Garden of Eden narrative, as demonstrated, but where does memory come into the story? *Ha-adam* and the woman are not told to remember because they cannot forget. Labor is part of their identity from their very creation as *ha-adam* from the *adamah* designed to work the *adamah* and as a helper for *ha-adam*, respectively. This identity is amplified the moment Yahweh sends them beyond the garden. Just as Yahweh upgrades their clothing from fig leaf loincloths to garments of skin to suit the new reality (Gen 3:7, 21), so too does *ha-adam* upgrade the application of the knowledge he gained as worker and keeper of Yahweh’s garden when he moves out of the comfort of Eden. He then passes this knowledge on to Cain and Abel, who exist and succeed thanks to *ha-adam*’s memory.

At some point between exile from the garden and the story of the first brothers, someone implements the practice of offering firstfruits. This is another negative space in the mythology of ancient Israel that piques the audience’s interest, but it is not a far stretch to connect sacrifice to the memory of Eden. What precisely is being remembered—Yahweh’s reprimand, the importance of obedience, the status of *adam* with respect to Yahweh, the knowledge gained in the garden, all of the above, or something else entirely—is not explained. It is up to the audience to fill in the narrative gap using what the narrative has impressed upon them.

The existence of the story itself is also where memory comes in. In sharing this narrative, the author reminds the audience that there was once a reality other than the agricultural and pastoral reality of the day, and that life could be different were it not for a chain of events that brought *ha-adam* to its current state. *Ha-adam* and his offspring cannot

touch that other reality, but they can remember it and perhaps find in its myth some aspect of truth about the nature of their experience. In remembering humankind's process of becoming, the audience connects with *ha-adam* and the woman and all of their descendents as workers of the *adamah*, past, present, and future. They also connect with Yahweh, the first gardener who stewards *ha-adam* in preparation for what is to come, and the ground out of which Yahweh formed the first *adam* to work the *adamah* before returning to the *adamah* from which he came. Thus, the myth of Eden connects humankind to the divine, the earth, and itself across space and time, all while expressing profound cultural ideas about hardship and labor.

5. Comparison

If myth invites us into other worlds, then comparative mythology invites us into the space between worlds that we construct together with them. As Doniger states, "We are always moving between worlds, trying to make sense of and orient our lives, and the trick of comparison is the trick of translating between these worlds" (Doniger 2011, p. 5). Doniger's metaphor of comparison as translation reminds us of the mediatory role of the comparativist and the subjectivity inherent in the analytical process, although that subjectivity is tempered by that which is being compared. "[A]s every translator knows, we can't really translate, but we do" (Doniger 2011, p. 4). We translate—we compare—not because it can be done perfectly but because we have to. It is how we know what things are (e.g., good and evil) and an integral part of how our species thinks.

Both *Enuma Elish* and the Garden of Eden story fit the definition of myth as "a narrative in which those who adhere to it find some aspect of truth about the nature of their experience," and analyzing them alongside this definition brings fresh insight to the chosen topic: what these myths contribute to our understanding of the value of human labor and memory. To engage ancient perspectives on this topic, one must answer myth's invitation to enter the narrative worlds of others and dwell there until the foreign becomes familiar and the familiar foreign. This process is hastened by comparison, which defamiliarizes what we take for granted (Doniger 2011, p. 36).

Most readers will not agree with every aspect of the culturally embedded worldviews reflected in the myths chosen here, and there are some aspects of these worldviews that even their authors seem to critique. It is important, however, not to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, but to learn to sit with difference. Difference is as important, if not more so, to the comparative enterprise as similarity, and discomfort about it often suggests more about the audience than it does about the myth itself. If one can sit with difference, then one can also sit with new ideas or new takes on old ones, and that is where myth comes in.

Myths are complex because in expressing ideas about one aspect of the human experience, they also speak to many others. The result is a narrative that is layered, and when two layered narratives are compared, even with a focus as seemingly narrow and mundane as the nature of human labor and memory, it is often possible to gain insight beyond a single focal point. In comparing *Enuma Elish* and the Garden of Eden story with a specific focus in mind, we also learn about their respective cultures' anthropologies, cosmologies, theologies, ways of being, and values systems, among other subjects.

Memory is a central theme in both narratives but not "memory" in the conventional sense of remembering what one had for dinner yesterday. The audience is tasked to remember worlds, words, and events that one could not have witnessed or heard themselves, items so deep in the past that they predate the existence of humankind. Yet, remembering these items are somehow important for self-understanding. This form of remembrance is often the call of myth. As Nick Wyatt (2010, p. 90) writes,

A number of writers past and present have written of "the arrow of time," which only ever travels in one direction. It may be useful to propose that history and myth, in so far as they engage the memory of a people, actually serve to halt if not reverse its trajectory, or are believed intuitively to do so, in order that the past,

mythic or historical, may be dwelt upon, re-experienced, and “remembered” in the radical sense of put back together again.

Wyatt’s comment about myth’s relationship to the past, historical or mythical, draws our attention back to the idea that myth is concerned with experience, both sharing and creating it. Myth’s aim is not for its audience to inhabit a precise recreation of the past, but to inhabit an experience that prompts us to compare our lives with another mode of existence and in so doing, to learn something about who we are and who we are not, to “put back together again” the past in a way prompts us to re-envision our current state and our future. Engaging others’ ideas about what it means to be human, *lullû*, or *adam* is an integral part of this process, as what one believes about human purpose and potential informs how one exists and behaves.

As layered stories, *Enuma Elish* and Garden of Eden yield insights of varying complexity, which is part of what makes them appealing to such diverse audiences. One of the more accessible layers of significance that emerges from my analysis of *Enuma Elish* and Garden of Eden relates to myth’s explanatory function. By explaining the role of human labor and memory in their works, their respective authors provide adherents with a sense of meaning regarding the purpose of human life and labor. The narrative common to both myths that work is part of the deity’s design for humankind and perpetuates the work of the divine realm imbues the mundane with divine significance. The myth elevates the everyday tasks of food production, for example, to labors of great impact, whereas without the myth, they might be perceived as meaningless. By imbuing hardship and work with significance, these myths offer their audiences tools toward meaning and, ultimately, satisfaction, however difficult their experience might be (Harari 2017, pp. 296–306).

Enuma Elish and Garden of Eden further support human flourishing by offering a narrative that grants humankind special status as a species that shares the divine essence, although to a limited extent and what exactly that means is left to the audience’s interpretation. Marduk’s creation of *lullû* from the blood of Qingu—divine general and husband to the primordial mother Tīāmat—is not trivial to those who adhere to *Enuma Elish*, nor is the idea that the earthling became a living creature only after Yahweh breathed into his nostrils “the breath of life” (Gen 2:7) trivial to those who adhere to the Garden of Eden story. This divine aspect is part of *lullû*’s and *adam*’s heritage, granted by their Creators and passed on unconditionally in perpetuity, regardless of what comes to pass in this limited life. The inherent connection to the divine is a myth that provides much meaning to those who hold to it.

Myth also works to support collective well-being by offering a shared narrative that creates social cohesion among its adherents, while also addressing their shared experience. At the same time, myth creates boundaries between communities, as each offers a different account of how the present came to be. A community raised with the idea that humankind is made from the blood of a slain warrior god may find the idea that humankind is made from the ground to be too mundane and thus portray the community that adheres to the soil idea as strange, whereas the ground community may find the blood idea to be repulsive and thus caricature its adherents accordingly. In fact, it is a long-standing theory in biblical scholarship that the seven-day creation myth (Gen 1:1–2:3) was created by Judahite priests in Babylonian exile (6th century BCE) to counter *Enuma Elish*. This theory implies that the much older Garden of Eden narrative was not sufficiently different from *Enuma Elish* to satisfy the priests’ concern, so they created a new story to reflect and shape their community anew. It is much easier for an audience outside of either community to make sense of the differences between myths, and “[c]omparison is our way of making sense of difference” (Doniger 2011, p. 30).

Comparing *Enuma Elish* and Garden of Eden with respect to human labor and memory brings to light a paradox that is common to both myths but described in different ways. This is a deeper layer of the myths’ significance, one that requires repeated analytical engagement with the texts individually and is then enhanced by comparison. In comparison, the nuances of each telling are revealed, and this increases the potential for the

comparativist to gain insight into the cultures connected to the myths. The paradox is this: humankind is and always has been inextricably bound to the divine realm, but the deity ordered reality in such a way that humankind cannot access that realm. Both stories address the anxiety caused by this paradox by attending to two areas of limitation: special knowledge and mortality.

Enuma Elish and Garden of Eden illustrate the paradox of inclusion/exclusion in their respective treatments of human labor and memory. When Marduk “pondered in his heart” (VI, 4) to create *lullû* “on whom the toil of the gods will be laid that they may rest” (VI, 8), he ends his thought with the declaration that he will also “skillfully alter the organization of the gods” (VI, 9). The narrator describes the reorganization in more detail when Marduk accomplishes the work. Immediately after creating *lullû*, Marduk divides the Anunnaki, the gods descended from the sky god An or Anu, into upper and lower groups. He assigns 300 “in the heavens to guard the decrees of Anu” and appoints them as guard (VI, 41–42), then reorganizes the netherworld to incorporate another 300 Anunnaki, whose job is not specified, although we might infer from the job of the heavenly Anunnaki that they too serve as guard (VI, 43–44). Marduk then arranges “all the decrees” and distributes the Anunnakis’ income before they offer to build Babylon on his behalf (VI, 45–58).

The guarding of the decrees of the Anu, god of the heavens, and the guarding of the netherworld are mentioned briefly in the narrative, yet they illustrate an important facet of the myth’s worldview. Marduk preemptively reorders the divine realm so that *lullû* cannot access the decrees of heaven or pass to and from the netherworld. What kind of information the decrees of Anu contain is not clarified by the text, but it is just as well because *lullû* can never know them anyway, just as they can never come back from the afterlife. In *Enuma Elish*, Marduk places limits on *lullû*’s knowledge and renders them mortal, keeping humankind human. *Lullû* is bound up with Marduk in their vital function as Marduk’s parallel on earth (VI, 112) and in ensuring his names are remembered; at the same time, Marduk guarantees from the very beginning that humankind remain separate in two important matters: divine knowledge and immortality.

The paradox of inclusion/exclusion in the Garden of Eden story also centers on matters of knowledge and mortality, but the plot surrounding these issues is much more complex. Unlike Marduk, Yahweh is not proactive in guarding the forbidden knowledge other than his statement to *ha-adam* that he may eat of every tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, lest he die (Gen 2:16–17). By the time the woman receives the message, the tree is simply known as “the tree that is in the midst of the garden” and the prohibition extends to touching it (3:3). However, there are two trees in the midst of the garden: the tree of life, which grants immortality, and the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil (2:9; 3:22). *Ha-adam* could have become immortal had he eaten of the tree of life and kept Yahweh’s command, but he did not. Yahweh could have placed supernatural guardians at the trees before placing *ha-adam* in the garden, but he did not. If either had acted differently, it would be a different story.

Instead, *ha-adam* and the woman acquire the forbidden knowledge and become “like God” (Gen 3:5; possibly gods 3:22), which prompts Yahweh to guard against their becoming immortal with the implication that this is the last step toward becoming divine (3:22). Now that the couple is “like God,” *ha-adam*, the creature formed of the *adamah* and the “breath of life” (2:7), is now responsible for emulating Yahweh, who formed *ha-adam*, plants, and animals of the same *adamah* he assigns *ha-adam* to work (2:7, 9, 19). *Ha-adam* is indeed “like God” but also *not* like God because he remains mortal. The cherubim and flaming sword that Yahweh stations in the garden “guard the way to the tree of life” (3:24), but it is not clear whether they guard the garden as a whole. This leaves open the possibility that *adam* might one day return to Yahweh’s garden. Whether *adam* wants to is another question.

In addressing the limitations placed on human knowledge and longevity, both *Enuma Elish* and the Garden of Eden story grant humankind an aspect of eternity through its labor. In both instances, the species referred to collectively as *lullû* or *adam* lives on in perpetuity, furthering the work of its respective deities as it was designed to do. For the

authors of *Enuma Elish*, individual humans are immortal in the sense that all the work they do contributes to the well-being of the divine realm. While every person goes to the netherworld eventually (and stays there, thanks to the Anunnaki), what a person does in life has a cosmic impact for good or ill. For the authors of the Garden of Eden myth, individual humans are immortal in the sense that they are formed of *adamah* and return to *adamah*, which is eventually used by those who work the *adamah* to produce more life. The only version of eternal life that humankind, individually and collectively, is able to access is bound up in its work.

Remembering and sharing are important aspects of the work of myth. In *Enuma Elish* and Garden of Eden, the work of myth involves writing accompanied by periodic oral recitation and explanation, ensuring knowledge of the story across time, space, and social position. Naming is also important to both myths because it clarifies what the audience is supposed to pay attention to and, in these stories, emulate. If *ha-adam* were named, he would be one particular human rather than a stand-in for all humankind; if Marduk had only one name, he could not be known to the extent that his fifty long names allow. Additionally, none of this would be available to us today had it not been for those keepers of culture who wrote them down, and the dedicated audiences who kept them alive generation after generation, breathing new life into old narratives from antiquity to the present day and beyond.

6. Conclusions

Since *Enuma Elish* and the Garden of Eden myths emphasize agricultural work as the work of *lullû* and *ha-adam*, one might expect that they would fall out of use as humankind becomes less and less agrarian in orientation, yet that has not proven to be the case. In fact, since *Enuma Elish* was excavated and remembered in Wyatt's sense of being put back together again in the late 19th century, it has been read and analyzed worldwide by countless scholars, students, and other interested persons, possibly impacting more people than it did during its first run in the second and first millennia BCE, albeit not as profoundly. The Garden of Eden myth continues to impact billions of people worldwide and is a foundational story for all communities who value the ancient collection of texts known as the Bible. The longevity of the stories is not reliant on the type of society they originated in—agricultural, pastoral, urban, or otherwise—but instead on their ability to contribute to our collective and individual understanding of the human condition. *Enuma Elish* and Garden of Eden offer thoughtful answers to the question of the value of human labor and memory, a timeless topic that everyone wrestles with at some point in their lives.

In the process of individual and comparative analysis, we find that both *Enuma Elish* and the Garden of Eden view human labor and memory as essential aspects of being that are necessary for self-understanding, social cohesion, and divine connection. Each myth delivers this message in a way that is specific to its wider culture, which helps the comparativist see what patterns of thought might be innate to humankind and which might be culturally mediated. The paradox evidenced in both myths that humankind is designed to be in connection with the divine realm but simultaneously cut off from access speaks to an internal tension that both communities share, and that many communities since have shared with them. These myths continue to impact people today because they narrate an experience that people have struggled with for longer than these myths have existed. They also invite us to re-envision the world anew, a world in which the paradox of divine belonging reaches its full potential through human labor and memory.

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Notes

- ¹ On myth as an unstable category, see (Callender 2014a, p. 3). For a brief overview of the history of myth as an academic subject, see (Thompson and Schrempf 2020, pp. 37–98). For a brief overview of the use of the term myth in biblical studies, see (Callender 2014b) or (Rogerson 2014, pp. 16–17).
- ² Brevard Childs is often cited as an example of a scholar whose work defines and then works from such dichotomies. See (Childs 1960) and, for example, (Avis 1999, p. 52).
- ³ For examples of seminal works on the slow development of monotheism, see (Smith 2002; Dever 2005).
- ⁴ For more on third-term comparison, see (Smith 1990, pp. 51, 99; Doniger 2011, pp. 39, 44; Frankfurter 2012, pp. 83–98). The concept of “third-term” is accredited to Smith, but he does not offer a full explanation and it appears to change throughout his writings.
- ⁵ “There is no value-free comparison, but you do the best you can” (Doniger 2011, p. 38). On the importance of relativity, see (Thompson and Schrempf 2020, p. 30).
- ⁶ Here I allude to Doniger’s metaphor of the implied spider (i.e., the author) from whose web (i.e., the myth at hand) we can learn much about spiders in general (i.e., myth’s composers), yet it is unlikely we will ever see one in action. See (Doniger 2011, pp. 67–71).
- ⁷ All translations of *Enuma Elish* are taken from (Lambert 2013) unless otherwise noted. Most translations begin “When on high . . . ”
- ⁸ It is a common misunderstanding of those who read the myth only in summary or cursory fashion, including many who introduce *Enuma Elish* in the classroom, that humankind builds Babylon. This is, in part, because many treatments of *Enuma Elish* conflate it with another famous ancient Mesopotamian story, Atrahasis, in which it is stated that humankind is created of divine blood to do the work of the gods, specifying that these duties include digging canals and the riverbeds of the Tigris and Euphrates. This, however, is not the case in *Enuma Elish*.
- ⁹ Depending on how one counts Marduk’s names, there may be more than fifty in the list.
- ¹⁰ Names 1–3, 14–16, 26–7, 35, 45, 47–8. Here I follow the numbering of Lambert (2013).
- ¹¹ All biblical translations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.
- ¹² Some text-critical commentators suggest that the appearance of the proper name for Adam in 3:17, 20 is a scribal error and should still be read as *ha-adam*. For example, see Weil’s apparatus in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.
- ¹³ It has long been debated what “good and evil” means in this story, i.e., whether the phrase refers to morality or knowing the difference between what is beneficial and what is harmful. It is also possible that the ambiguity of the phrase is intentional, covering both possibilities.
- ¹⁴ The gender roles portrayed in Genesis 2:4–3:24 have been a point of contention for many modern readers and much feminist interpretation has re-examined what exactly is being presented in this narrative. For a brief overview of feminist scholarship on the issue, see (Meyers 2021).
- ¹⁵ The English words “gods” and “God” are the same word in Hebrew, *elohim*, which is grammatically plural. It can be read either way, depending on context.

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