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## A Possible Babylonian Precursor to the Theory of *ecpyrōsis*

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**Abstract.** It has repeatedly been proposed that the classical theory of the Great Year had its origins in Babylonia. Attempts to substantiate this connection were frustrated by the absence of the motif of an *ecpyrōsis* or 'world fire' in Mesopotamian literature. The Neo-Babylonian text *Erra and Išum* may fill this gap.

#### The Great Year

The Great Year was a widespread concept in classical times. Cicero's spokesman, Balbus the Stoic, defined it as follows:

On the diverse motions of the planets the mathematicians have based what they call the Great Year, which is completed when the sun, moon and five planets having all finished their courses have returned to the same positions relative to one another. The length of this period is hotly debated, but it must necessarily be a fixed and definite time.<sup>1</sup>

It was believed that the turning points of the Great Year were marked by cosmic disruptions. During the Hellenistic period, two such turning points were recognised and interpreted as the 'solstices' of the Great Year: the world would be destroyed in a flood at the onset of the cosmic winter and in a fire at the onset of the cosmic summer. The *locus*

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 2. 20 (52). Compare the definitions given in *Somnium Scipionis*, apud Macrobius, *In Somnium Scipionis Commentarius*, 2. 11. 2; Plato, *Timaeus*, 39C-E; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca*, 2. 47. 6; Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, 2. 6. 40; Manilius, *Astronomica*, 1. 287-288; Censorinus, *De Die Natali*, 18; Heraclitus, *Homeric Allegories*, 53. 3-4; also Campion, N., *The Great Year: Astrology, Millennarianism and History in the Western Tradition* (London: Penguin 1994) [hereafter Campion, *Great Year*].

*classicus* for this belief is an excerpt from the *Babyloniaca* of the Babylonian priest Berossus (third century BCE), as cited in Seneca:

Berossus ... affirms that the whole issue is brought about by the course of the planets. So positive is he that he assigns a definite date both for the conflagration and the deluge. All that the earth inherits will, he assures us, be consigned to flame when the planets, which now move in different orbits, all assemble in Cancer, so arranged in one row that a straight line may pass through their spheres. When the same gathering takes place in Capricorn, then we are in danger of the deluge.<sup>2</sup>

### A Babylonian Origin?

As Berossus was a Babylonian priest of Bēl, Seneca's citation of him suggests that the theory of the Great Year originated in Babylonia.<sup>3</sup> The validity of this claim depends on the authenticity of the passage cited in Seneca. Vociferously refusing to accept that the 'Babylonians' could really have been interested in cosmic cycles defined by planetary motion, Felix Jacoby and his followers ascribed the crucial passage as Fragment 21 to a hypothetical 'Pseudo-Berossus of Cos', who would have been Greek and would have lived later. Lambert typifies the critical position:

So far as the present writer has been able to ascertain, no cuneiform text expresses any such idea. Of course Berossus may have so believed, whether the opinion was obtained from his Babylonian training or from the Greek world, but in lack of any evidence that this was a Babylonian

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2 Berossus, *Babyloniaca*, apud Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, 3. 28. 7 – 3. 29. 2, tr. Burstein, S.M., *The Babyloniaca of Berossus* ('Sources from the Ancient Near East', 1. 5; Malibu, 1978); compare Bidez, J., 'Bérose et la Grande Année', in *Mélanges Paul Frédéricq* (Brussels, 1904) [hereafter Bidez, 'Bérose'], p. 12; F. X. Kugler, *Sibyllinischer Sternkampf und Phaëthon in naturgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung* ('Aschendorffs Zeitgemässe Schriften', 17; Münster, 1927), p. 52; Gundel, W., 'Weltperioden und Planetenlauf', in *Sternglaube und Sterndeutung: die Geschichte und das Wesen der Astrologie*, eds. Boll, F., C. Bezold & W. Gundel (Darmstadt, 1977), 200-205 [hereafter Gundel, 'Weltperioden'], p. 201; Champion, *Great Year*, p. 66f., 516. In the 'age of Aries', Cancer and Capricorn were the constellations through which the sun passed at the summer and the winter solstice respectively. Aristotle, apud Censorinus, *De Die Natali*, 18. 11, was the first to use the terms 'summer' and 'winter' in this context.

3 Jeremias, A., 'Ages of the World (Babylonian)', in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, I, ed. J. Hastings (Edinburgh, 19594), 183-187, p. 184.

view, it is justified to inquire whether the source is genuine Berossus or Pseudo-Berossus.<sup>4</sup>

An additional, implicit objection raised by critics is the understanding that the Babylonians did not have sufficient knowledge of planetary orbits to enable calculations of the Great Year. Even if this were the case, one has to bear in mind that Berossus' Babylonian sources need not have been as old as the Neo-Babylonian period or earlier; they may well have been products of the Hellenistic era, when the planetary periods were well established. During this time, diffusion of knowledge must have occurred on a large scale and in multiple directions, so that it may often be impractical to distinguish between strictly Greek and 'foreign' concepts.

As to the theme of universal destructions through fire and water, it has sometimes been thought that it had originated with the Pre-Socratic natural philosophers of Greece, then reached Hellenistic Babylonia, where further speculation connected it with planetary motion; the outcome of this fusion of ideas would then have bounced back into Greece by means of the work of Berossus and possibly others.<sup>5</sup> In this

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4 Lambert, W.G., 'Berossus and Babylonian Eschatology', *Iraq*, 38 (1976), 171-173, p. 172. Lambert further objected: 'Drews adopts the view that Berossus, like Seneca, is teaching periodic cataclysms after each of which there would be a fresh start. This is based on a careless reading of the passage. Seneca does indeed adhere to this Stoic doctrine of recurring cataclysms, but not Berossus. On the subject of this doctrine Berossus is quoted as saying that "they occur because of the movements of the planets (*ista cursu siderum fieri*). No great literary perception is required to see that this is someone else's summary of the general drift of Berossus (or, Pseudo-Berossus) on this matter.' *Ibid.*, p. 172. I cannot see this; an unprejudiced reading of the passage in Seneca irrefragably shows that Seneca cited Berossus precisely on account of the planetary conjunctions in Cancer and Capricorn. Without that, either the whole point of citing Berossus would be lost or Seneca would have erred in everything he said regarding his source. Such a view is too narrow and irresponsible. What Lambert means by 'literary perception' is elusive; Seneca cited in the usual manner and in so doing simply conveyed into Latin what he found in his Greek source; the Greek was presumably based on an earlier Akkadian original.

5 Plato expressed a degree of uncertainty about the correctness of the concept of the Great Year, due to the inability to calculate its exact duration: '... it is still quite possible to perceive that the complete number of Time fulfils the Complete Year when all the eight circuits, with their relative speeds, finish together and come to a head ...', *Timaeus*, 39C-E. What this shows is not that the notion of

vein, Joseph Bidez confidently posited a Babylonian origin for the concept of the Great Year, pointing out that, although Pre-Socratic philosophers had discussed universal destructions through fire and water, it was only under the Babylonian influence that a conjunction of all planets was identified as the specific astrological cause of such disasters.<sup>6</sup> But this convoluted and rather circuitous approach is still too conservative. More recent research suggests that the Pre-Socratics, specifically Anaximander and Anaximenes, relied on Babylonian ideas,<sup>7</sup> undergirding the possibility that *all* aspects of the theory of the Great Year were originally conceived in Mesopotamia. Indeed, several authorities speculated that not only the notion of the great conjunction of planets, but also that of the accompanying destructions of the world had indigenous roots in Mesopotamia.

That the Sumerians and the Babylonians had several traditions of a world-ravaging flood is well known. The absence of the flood motif from Hesiod may indicate that it was secondarily imported into Greece from Egypt or Mesopotamia.<sup>8</sup> As in Berossus' theory, the oriental tradition saw this flood as marking the principal dividing point between mythical eras.<sup>9</sup> It is of great significance, then, that the same Berossus who discussed the Great Year had also devoted sections of his work to the flood. This

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the great conjunction could not have arisen with the Babylonians, but that if it had, the transmission occurred not long before Plato's time, and the concept itself arose in the East as the fruit of speculation rather than calculation of planetary orbits.

6 Bidez, 'Bérose', p. 12. 'L'idee qu'il suffit aux planètes de se mettre toutes en conjonction pour provoquer un bouleversement universel est sûrement d'origine chaldéenne', idem, *Eos ou Platon et l'Orient* (Brussels, 1939), p. 83.

7 Halpern, B., 'Late Israelite Astronomies and the Early Greeks', in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past; Canaan, Ancient Israel, and their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina; Proceedings of the Centennial Symposium W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research and American Schools of Oriental Research; Jerusalem, May 29-31, 2000*, eds. W. G. Dever & S. Gitin (Winona Lake, Indiana, 2003), 323-352, p. 345.

8 Campion, *Great Year*, p. 251f.

9 West, M.L., *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford, 1997) [hereafter West, *Helicon*], p. 378.

underscores the reliability of the ‘Berossus’ passage in Seneca.<sup>10</sup> In an illuminating article, Robert Drews successfully repudiated Jacoby’s ascription of the Berossus-passage to the hypothetical Pseudo-Berossus<sup>11</sup> and observed that ‘Berossus’ belief in a coming conflagration corresponded exactly to his lengthy account of a past Deluge, the two catastrophes marking the Great Year’s solstices in Cancer and Capricorn. There is to date no evidence that the Great Year originated in Greek philosophy ...’.<sup>12</sup> Along similar lines, Bartel van der Waerden proposed that a part of the Babylonian Great Year may have been represented by the period of the kings who ruled before the flood; this period can be calculated to have lasted 432,000 years,<sup>13</sup> which is exactly a tenth of the time assigned to the cycle in the Indian *Manava Dharma Śāstra* or *Laws of Manu* (first or second century CE, original ±500 BCE) and the *Sūrya Siddhānta* (±400 CE), and exactly the same span of time given to the *Kālīyuga* in the *Mahābhārata* (fourth century CE).<sup>14</sup> This coincidence suggests that the Indian estimate was ultimately derived from a Babylonian source.

Van der Waerden has done more than anyone else to corroborate the Mesopotamian provenance of the theory of the Great Year and to rebut

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10 Champion, *Great Year*, p. 73f., strikes a good balance: ‘Babylonian mythology certainly contained the ingredients for belief in endlessly recurrent cataclysms. Until such time as the necessary tablets are found and translated, the existence of a Babylonian myth of recurrent cataclysm must be treated as pure speculation, and it is quite possible that Berossus’ ideas about a future world fire and of astronomical regulation of both the fire and flood were adopted either direct from Greek tradition or from a tradition that was common to both cultures. In a sense such quibbles are not important. What was significant is that for Seneca it was the stamp of Babylonian authority that gave the theory its significance.’

11 Drews, R., ‘The Babylonian Chronicles and Berossus’, *Iraq*, 37 (1975), 39-55, p. 51.

12 *ibid*, p. 52.

13 Van der Waerden, B.L., *Die Astronomie der Griechen; eine Einführung* (Darmstadt, 1988), p. 236.

14 Van der Waerden, B.L., ‘The Great Year in Greek, Persian and Hindu Astronomy’, *Archive for History of Exact Sciences*, 18. 4 (1978), 359-383, p. 361-363.

the objections raised by opponents such as David Pingree.<sup>15</sup> He discussed some material indicative of a Babylonian interest in the periodicity and the spatial distribution of the planets<sup>16</sup> and traced the notions of the periodicity and calculability of planetary motions, the existence of a 'great cycle', and the periodicity of the flood to Babylonian sources.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, none of these were available in Greece in the fifth century BCE.<sup>18</sup>

The flood certainly loomed large in Babylonian mythology, but did the Babylonians also believe in a universal destruction through fire? As far as I know, no positive evidence for this has been brought into court so far. Van der Waerden himself admitted defeat on this score:

Die meisten Grundvorstellungen, auf denen die Lehre vom Großen Jahr beruht, haben wir auf Grund der Keilschriftquellen als altbabylonisch nachweisen können. Nur ein fremdes Element kommt dazu: es ist die Vorstellung von der Feuerkatastrophe bei Berossos, vom weisen göttlichen Feuer bei Herakleitos. ... Wo kommt sie her?<sup>19</sup>

Van der Waerden proceeded to argue that Persian eschatology was responsible for the fiery aspect of the theory of the Great Year, at the cost

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15 'The idea of a Great Year with Flood and Ekpyrosis seems to be of Babylonian origin.' (van der Waerden, 'The Great Year, p. 360). 'Wir werden weiter zeigen, daß die Lehre von den Planetenperioden und vom Großen Jahr babylonischen Ursprungs ist', idem, 'Das grosse Jahr und die ewige Wiederkehr', *Hermes; Zeitschrift für klassische Philologie*, 80 (1952), 129-155, p. 129, compare p. 149.

16 'Vermutlich haben die Babylonier sich die Planeten in verschiedenen Entfernungen von der Erde vorgestellt, sicher ist es aber nicht.' *Ibid.*, p. 140f.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 138. 'Wir haben die Vorstellungen von der Periodizität und Berechenbarkeit der Himmelserscheinungen vom großen Jahr, von der Sintflut und von der Feuerkatastrophe als babylonisch nachgewiesen.' *Ibid.*, p. 142.

18 'Die genauere Kenntnis der Planetenperioden, der astrologische Fatalismus, die Flutlegende, die Anbetung des Feuers, alle diese Voraussetzungen waren in Griechenland zur Zeit des Hippasos und Herakleitos nicht vorhanden. Man hat also den ganzen Mythos aus dem Zweistromlande importiert.' *Ibid.*, p. 143.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 143, compare p. 138.

of the elegance and the integrity of his model. But on a fresh examination there is evidence that the Babylonians regarded floods and fires as parallel ways in which the universe can be brought to an end.

### *Erra and Išum*

It is crucial to bear in mind that a potential Babylonian template for traditions such as the one recorded by Berossus needs not necessarily have been of a purely astronomical nature. Perhaps more than in Greece, astronomical ideas would have tended to blend with mythological beliefs in ancient Mesopotamia, certainly before the so-called ‘Era of Nabonassar’, when astronomy proper had barely taken off. As the flood myths show, some of the concepts that informed the speculative astronomy of the Hellenistic era may once have been encapsulated in mythological sources. I propose that *Erra and Išum* is just such a source.

*Erra and Išum* is the title currently given to the work of a Neo-Babylonian scribe who identified himself as Kabti-ilāni-Marduk somewhere between the twelfth and the seventh centuries BCE – the authorities disagree as to the date. In this composition, the wrathful god Erra is primarily depicted as a rebel who seized the power of the supreme god Marduk upon the instigation of his band of followers, but voluntarily concluded his brief reign under persuasion of his counsellor.<sup>20</sup> Seizing upon Marduk’s decision to temporarily abandon his throne to refurbish his dirtied garments, Erra obtained permission to take over the reins, which he would then no longer cede.<sup>21</sup> That the story of this transfer of power really conveyed a deeper message of cosmic upheaval on an apocalyptic scale follows from Marduk’s initial response to Erra’s arrival. In this speech, Marduk reminded Erra that the stability of the country was indissolubly tied up with his remaining seated on his throne. The mechanical consequence of abandonment of this seat would be disaster

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20 Edzard, D.O., ‘Irra (Erra-)Epos’, in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, ed. D. O. Edzard (V; Berlin, 1976-1980), 166-170 [hereafter Edzard, ‘Irra’], pp. 168-169.

21 Kabti-ilāni-Marduk, *Erra and Išum*, I. 125 – II. 1 (5), tr. S. Dalley, ‘Erra and Išum (1. 113)’, in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. W. W. Hallo (I of III; Leiden, 1997), 404-416 [hereafter Dalley, ‘Erra’].



on a global scale.<sup>22</sup> On an earlier occasion, this act had brought about the deluge with devastating consequences:

The king of gods made his voice heard and spoke,  
Addressed his words to Erra, warrior of gods,  
'Warrior Erra, concerning that deed which you have said you will do:  
A long time ago, when I was angry and rose up from my dwelling and  
arranged for the Flood,  
I rose up from my dwelling, and the control of heaven and earth was  
undone.  
The very heavens I made to tremble, the positions of the stars of  
heaven changed, and I did not return them to their places.  
Even Erkalla quaked; the furrow's yield diminished, and forever after  
(?) it was hard to extract (a yield).  
Even the control of heaven and earth was undone ...'<sup>23</sup>

As Marduk recalled, his outfit had been defiled as a direct result of the flood:

As for the finery which had been pushed aside by the Flood, its surface  
dulled:  
I directed Gerra to make my features radiant,  
and to cleanse my robes.  
When he had made the finery bright, and finished the work,  
I put on my crown of lordship and went back to my place.  
My features were splendid, and my gaze was awesome!<sup>24</sup>

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22 '... the three elements of the verse (the anger of Marduk; his rising from his chair; deluge) are strictly connected among themselves in the precise order in which they are given ...' L. Cagni, *The Poem of Erra* ('Sources and Monographs on the Ancient Near East', I. 3; Malibu, 1977) [hereafter Cagni, *Erra*], p. 33 (91) note 36.

23 *Erra and Išum*, I. 129-136 (5), tr. Dalley. Cagni (*Erra*, p. 32 (90)) translated 'from my seat' instead of 'from my dwelling'. Erkalla was a term for the underworld.

24 *Erra and Išum*, I. 140-144 (5), tr. Dalley. Marduk concluded this speech with the words that he 'made those (original) Craftsmen go down to the Apsu' I. 147 (5), tr. Dalley. These 'craftsmen' were the seven *ummânū* or 'sages', Dalley,

Were Marduk now to vacate his seat again, disaster would surely ensue once more:

I shall rise up from my dwelling, and the control of heaven and earth will be undone.  
 The waters will rise and go over the land.  
 Bright day will turn into darkness.  
 A storm will rise up and cover the stars of heaven.  
 An evil wind will blow, and the vision of people and living things will [be obscured (?)].<sup>25</sup>

When Marduk finally went down to the underworld, darkness fell straightaway:

[The winds (?)] rose up, and bright day was turned into darkness.<sup>26</sup>

Cagni noted that ‘Marduk speaks of the flood not so much in terms of the devastation caused by the waters ... as rather in terms of the cosmic disturbances ...’.<sup>27</sup> As a god with a penchant for utter demolition, Erra would have revelled in such large-scale catastrophic consequences that would simultaneously facilitate the permanent overthrow of Marduk’s government and pave the way for his own assumption of power. Overweening, Erra proclaimed:

I shall make Erkalla quake, so that the skies billow,

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‘Erra’, p. 407 note 19. The episode is comparable to Hesiod’s account of the Titans being hurled into Tartarus upon Zeus’ assumption of power. Just as the heavens and the underworld trembled in Marduk’s speech, so Hades and the Titans in Tartarus were shaken during the battle with Typhon: ‘Hades trembled where he rules over the dead below, and the Titans under Tartarus who live with Cronos, because of the unending clamour and the fearful strife.’ *Theogony*, 820-874; compare West, *Helicon*, p. 302f.

<sup>25</sup> *Erra and Išum*, I. 170-174 (5), tr. Dalley

<sup>26</sup> *Erra and Išum*, II. 5 (6), tr. Dalley. In Cagni’s translation, ‘the wa[ters] rose ...’, IIA. 8 (6), *Erra*, p. 36 (94), but Dalley has dropped this.

<sup>27</sup> Cagni, *Erra*, p. 33 (91) note 36.

I shall fell the rays of Shulpae and throw away the stars of heaven  
...<sup>28</sup>

The episode in which Erra would actually have performed his evil deeds is unfortunately no longer extant, but a combination of his projected and his retroprojected thoughts provides sufficient material to form a picture of what must have happened according to the mythographer. In the poem, Erra boasted:

In the reed-thicket I am Gerra, in the grove I am the *magšaru*-axe.  
...  
I blow like the wind, I rumble like Adad,  
I can see the rim of everything like Shamash.<sup>29</sup>

Here, Erra literally identified himself with Girra, the Sumerian god of fire, along with Adad, the storm god, and Šamaš, the sun.<sup>30</sup> He promised to plunge the land into kilter, partly through the agency of fire:

I shall finish off the land and count it as ruins.  
I shall devastate cities and make of them a wilderness.  
I shall destroy mountains and fell their cattle.  
I shall stir up oceans and destroy their produce.  
I shall dig out reed-thickets and graves and I shall burn them like Gerra.  
I shall fell people and [I shall leave no] life ...  
From city to city I shall seize the one who governs.  
...  
I shall let a rogue sit down in the dwelling of princes.<sup>31</sup>

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28 *Erra and Išum*, IV. 122-123 (15), tr. Dalley.

29 *Erra and Išum*, I. 109-117 (4), tr. Dalley. This passage is part of a speech in which Erra identifies himself with various gods, animals, and forces of nature.

30 Cagni, *Erra*, p. 31 (89) notes 27-29.

31 *Erra and Išum*, II. 52'-60', 64 (8), tr. Dalley. Instead of 'like Gerra', Cagni ('Erra', p. 40 (98)) translates: 'like fire'.

As soon as Erra was put into charge, he ‘plotted evil, to devastate the land, to destroy people [...]’.<sup>32</sup> Later, Erra explained: ‘When I am enraged, I devastate people! / ... / Like one who plunders a country, I do not distinguish just from unjust, I fell (them both).’<sup>33</sup> The narrator reiterated:

How Erra became angry and set his face towards overwhelming  
countries and destroying their people,  
But Ishum his counsellor placated him so that he let a remnant!<sup>34</sup>

Instead of ‘became angry’, Cagni more literally translated ‘had burned with wrath’, strengthening the fiery nature of the event. After Erra had ravaged the world with fire, his advisor Išum convinced him that he had perpetrated enough evil. Touched by these words, Erra repented and voluntarily abdicated to make place for Marduk once more.

Erra is generally seen as a god of pestilence, war and destruction, but there are good grounds to believe that these attributes originated as aspects of a wider association with fire. His very name was most likely derived from a Proto-Semitic root *\*hrr-*, ‘to scorch, char’.<sup>35</sup> His auxiliary, marching before him, was a certain *Išum*, whose name means ‘fire’.<sup>36</sup> He was accompanied by a retinue of seven warriors, the Šebitti or ‘seven’,

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<sup>32</sup> *Erra and Išum*, II. 29, tr. Dalley.

<sup>33</sup> *Erra and Išum*, V. 7, 10 (17), tr. Dalley.

<sup>34</sup> *Erra and Išum*, V. 40-41 (19), tr. Dalley. Compare Išum’s words: ‘Lord Erra, why have you planned evil for the gods? / You have plotted to overthrow countries and to destroy their people ...’ *Erra and Išum*, I. 102-103, tr. Dalley.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Erra’ would have derived from an earlier *\*hīrra*, *\*harra*, or *\*harira*, ‘scorching’ or ‘scorched’, from the root *\*hrr-*, ‘to scorch, char’. Cognates are Akkadian *erēru*, ‘to scorch, char’, and Hebrew *hrh*, ‘to scorch’, Roberts, J.J.M., ‘Erra – Scorched Earth’, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, XXIV. 1-2 (1971), 11-16 [hereafter Roberts, ‘Erra’], p. 13 and note 27; compare Cagni, *Erra*, p. 16; Wiggermann, F.A.M., ‘Nergal. A.’, in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, ed. D. O. Edzard (I-; Berlin, 1998-2001), IX 215-223 [hereafter Wiggermann, ‘Nergal’], p. 217. A Proto-Semitic *\*ḥ* disappears in Akkadian.

<sup>36</sup> Compare Roberts, ‘Erra’, p. 13. The word is related to Hebrew *’ēš*, ‘fire’.

who functioned as his weapons.<sup>37</sup> The concept must surely be identical to the Ugaritic tradition of Ba'al's *šab'atu baraqī-*, 'seven lightnings', that 'appear to have been personified at Ugarit as "seven servitors ...".<sup>38</sup> Thus, Erra's principal entourage – consisting of his vizier and his train – was of a distinctly fiery nature. But how does this relate to Erra's well documented taste for destruction? A crucial and undoubtedly archaic passage in the text describes the nature of Erra's anger in astronomical terms as the increased radiance of the Fox Star, which was equated with Erra:

Erra among all the gods [...]  
 Among the stars of heaven the Fox Star [...]  
 Was twinkling and its rays [...] to him.  
 The stars of all the gods were dazzling [...]  
 Because they were angry with each other and Prince Marduk [...] put [...].  
 'The star of Erra is twinkling and carries rays, [...] of Anunitu.  
 His mantle of radiance will be activated (?) and all people will perish.  
 As for (?) the dazzling stars of heaven that carry a sword (?), ...'.<sup>39</sup>

The full significance of this curious comment emerges against the background of the cult of Nergal, who was an *alter ego* of Erra.<sup>40</sup> Nergal

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37 'When Anu had decreed the destinies of all the Sebitti, / He gave them to Erra, warrior of the gods, / "Let them march at your side! / ... / These shall act as your fierce weapons, and march at your side!"' *Erra and Išum*, I. 39-44, tr. Dalley.

38 KTU2 1. 101. 1-4; 1. 5. V. 8. 9, in J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea, Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 33f.; *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* ('Journal for the Study of the Old Testament', Supplement Series 265; Sheffield, 2000), p. 95-97; compare Clifford, R.J., *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* ('Harvard Semitic Monographs', 4; Cambridge, MS, 1972), p. 77. Compare Yahweh appointing fire and flame as his messengers, *Psalms* 104. 4, or 'plague' and 'pestilence', *Habakkuk* 3. 5, the latter being the god Rešeph.

39 *Erra and Išum*, II. 5'-12', tr. Dalley.

40 Dalley, 'Erra', p. 404. In *Erra and Išum*, V. 39, Erra is eulogised as 'the great lord Nergal', tr. Dalley, but in III. 100', Erra and Nergal are mentioned as

was identified as a planet and an enhanced glow of this object was taken as a sure sign that the fire falling down from it would wreak havoc on earth, destroying cattle and bringing plague and disaster.<sup>41</sup> Just so, *Erra and Išum* held the ‘twinkling’ of the ‘star of Erra’ directly responsible for the eradication of the human race.<sup>42</sup> Apparently, the plague and the ravages of war were both regarded astrologically as effects of the flaring up of Erra’s star. Following up these clues, it seems that Erra, once in power, was thought to have laid the land low by means of destructive fire coming down from the sky.

Erra’s itinerary remains confined to the ground. Cagni pointed out that Erra’s journey from his own domain to the abode of Marduk was

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separate persons, both identified with Girra, the fire god. As Cagni observes (*Erra*, p. 44 (102), 45 (103) note 100, 15), there were apparently ‘two diverse Mesopotamian traditions: the one which distinguishes the two divinities and the one, also rather solid, especially in more recent times ... which identifies them. ... the close connection between Erra and Nergal, which, it seems, is more the result of a relatively late historical evolution than an original conception.’ What we are looking at is probably a gradual convergence – from the Old Babylonian period onwards – of two cults that had originally been separate, Erra being the Semitic equivalent of the Sumerian Nergal, Roberts, ‘Erra’, p. 11; Edzard, ‘Irra’, p. 168; Wiggermann, ‘Nergal’, p. 217.

41 ‘Wenn der Mars aufleuchtet, geht das Vieh des Landes Amurru zugrunde’; ‘Wenn das Aufleuchten des Mars gesehen wird, ist (Fall)en im Land: Fall des Viehes’. E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (‘Alter Orient und Altes Testament; Veröffentlichungen zur Kultur und Geschichte des Alten Orients und des Alten Testaments’, 11, 11; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1971), p. 77, compare note 3, 84f. ‘When the light of the planet Mars will be seen, there will be (lit. ‘fall’ ...) a pestilence in the land, there will be an epidemic against the cattle’ M. Weinfeld, ‘Divine Intervention in War in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East’, in *History, Historiography and Interpretation; Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures*, eds. H. Tadmor & M. Weinfeld (Jerusalem, 1983), 121-147, p. 129 note 40, compare 128 note 37. The planet Mars or *Šalbatānu* was identified with Nergal.

42 For these reasons I digress from Roberts’ proposal (‘Erra’, p. 13) that Erra ‘was originally seen as the personification of the natural phenomenon resulting from a grass or forest fire – “scorched earth.”’ The god’s equation with Nergal and the ‘Fox Star’ militate against the primacy of the scorched earth; the astral origin of the fire was primary, whilst scorched earth, famine, strife, and pestilence were secondary effects. Wiggermann (‘Nergal’, p. 217) characterised Erra principally as a god of death.

envisioned as one between his own temple, Emeslam, and Marduk's temple, Šuanna.<sup>43</sup> The Babylonian author clearly envisioned the respective temples of Marduk and Erra as the geographical setting against which the events took place and must have based his story on a real, historical episode of destruction in Babylon, notably the incursions of foreign peoples into Akkadian territory.<sup>44</sup> Still, this is not to say that the tale was invented as a literary perspective on regional politics alone. The repeated allusions to celestial disturbance, Erra's asseveration that, in Marduk's stead, he would govern both the sky and the underworld,<sup>45</sup> and the statement that Erra had assumed the form of a human being to destroy Babylon demonstrate that Kabti-ilāni-Marduk was adapting an existing and probably well-known myth to the particular historical conditions of his age, scaling the events down from a cosmic to a local level. This retelling involved a mythological variant on the motif of the cosmic rebel adapted to accommodate the theme of contemporary political instability in the land; the temples of the gods symbolically double as metaphors for cosmic abodes. An illuminating analogue for this procedure is seen in the Biblical book of *Job*, where Satan is given free reign for a short time to intervene in the life of a mortal man: the trials and tribulations experienced by an allegedly real person are instrumental in the mythological motif of the strife between God and Satan. Just so, the point of *Erra and Išum* appears to be that the perils experienced in Babylon were due to cosmic circumstances adapted from myths of far earlier date.

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43 'It is certain that he moves from his temple Emeslam, to which it is said that he later returns (II C, 8; V, 22). The very fact that Erra goes toward the city of Babylon implies that he leaves another city: so he ought to be in the Emeslam of the city of Kutha, sacred to Nergal and himself. It is not excluded, though, that Šuanna here indicate the part of the city of Babylon sacred to Marduk, that is, the Esagila-complex, especially in consideration of the fact that there was also in Babylon a temple Emeslam, sacred to Nergal and to Erra, as at Kutha ...' Cagni, *Erra*, p. 31 (89) note 32.

44 For a discussion of the possible historical precedents of Erra's destructive activity, see Edzard, 'Irra', p. 168-169.

45 'Prince Marduk, until you re-enter that house and Gerra cleanses your robes, and you return to your place, / Until then shall I rule and keep firm control of heaven and earth. / I shall go up into heaven, and give orders to the Igi; I shall go down to the Apsu and direct the Anunnaki.' *Erra and Išum*, I. 181-184 (5), tr. Dalley.

In his insightful monograph, Cagni noted that remarkably little ‘real history’ is going on in the text. The portion of the text in which Erra should be described as actually having executed his detailed plans is missing and cannot have taken up much space anyway. Direct speech prevails over actual narrative.<sup>46</sup> Cagni seems mystified by this unbalanced state of affairs, but in combination with his observation regarding the cultic destination of the text it seems evident that the poem’s *Sitz im Leben* may have been the performance of a tragedy,<sup>47</sup> perhaps but not necessarily enacted as part of a propitiatory cult in the temple of Erra. Admitting that *Erra and Išum* ‘contains many “mythical traits”’ Cagni nevertheless gave short shrift to the mythological nature of the text, mainly because ‘its action is situated in a precise time in Mesopotamian history.’<sup>48</sup> This observation is valid, but is nullified by the hypothesis that *Erra and Išum* was the choreography of a dramatic adaptation of a myth. It was not a direct narration of the myth, but it incorporated parts of the myth. Thus, the speeches sung by actors playing Marduk, Erra and Išum in Kabti-ilāni-Marduk’s composition, perhaps accompanied by some dramatic acts, would have derived their content from a political interpretation of a rebellion myth that was in itself much older, in the same way that the Greek tragedians adapted well-known myths to make certain political points. The original myth on which *Erra and Išum* was based will have been a variation on the widespread theme of the cosmic rebel, to which Cagni was entirely oblivious. Parallels are the rebellion of Anzu and of the Canaanite god Hēlēl, as well as the temporary reign of ‘Attar.

### **A Babylonian *ecpyrōsis*?**

The story of Erra bears a number of striking resemblances to the theory of the Great Year as evinced by Berossus. Despite the fragmentary character of the text, enough is preserved to warrant the conclusion that a nascent

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46 ‘But in the poem of Erra, there is no proportion between the direct discourses and the true and proper narration because its characters do nothing, as it were, but talk.’ Cagni, *Erra*, p. 11.

47 ‘Possibly the poem shows features of ritual drama ... the composition may offer information on the ancestry of true drama ...’ Dalley, ‘Erra’, p. 404.

48 Cagni, *Erra*, p. 12f.



catastrophist scheme of cosmic history formed the backbone of the composer's work. Marduk reflected on an earlier episode *in illo tempore*, when abandonment of his royal seat precipitated the deluge. Cagni justifiably concluded 'that Marduk means to refer to the universal deluge which is also the subject of *Atra-ḫasīs* and Tab. XI of *Gilgameš* ...'.<sup>49</sup> Marduk's second departure from his throne had the inexorable result of renewed disaster on a similar scale.<sup>50</sup> But this was hardly a destruction through the force of water. The considerations given above suggest that this second disruption of world history was dominated by war-inducing fire rather than water. This leads to the double conclusion that *Erra and Išum* is the oldest attestation of the belief that the world was first destroyed through water and later through fire and that it was also the first enunciation of this belief outside Greece.

As a second point, Marduk recalled that the sky had shaken and the stars had abandoned their fixed positions at the time of the deluge. The intended parallelism between Marduk's first 'uprising' from his seat and the second one, exploited by Erra, suggests that just such cosmic upheaval ensued during Erra's interregnum. The permanent displacement of stars and planets, caused by excessive shaking of the sky, remind one of Critias' statement that catastrophes such as the deluge and the conflagration of the world are really caused by *tōn perì gēn kai kat' ouranōn iōntōn parállaxis*, 'a shifting of the bodies in the heavens which move round the earth':

There have been and there will be many and divers destructions of mankind, of which the greatest are by fire and water, and lesser ones

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49 Cagni, *Erra*, p. 33 (91) note 36. 'The term *abūbu* is also often used metaphorically in Akkadian literature to indicate a "devastation" comparable to but different from the deluge. In the poem of Erra, however, the term which occurs three times ... seems always to refer to the flood itself.' 29 (87) note 12. In the original versions of the myth, it was the god Enlil who sent the flood, not Marduk. This is not an absolute contradiction, because in the process of suppressing earlier cults, Marduk is known to have absorbed many of Enlil's attributes.

50 The analogy is all the more striking as Marduk's speech contains the only allusion of this kind in all of Mesopotamian literature: 'Die Anspielung auf eine frühere Weltkatastrophe und auf Marduks verunreinigte Juwelen ist nur hier überliefert.' Edzard, 'Irra', p. 168.

by countless other means. For in truth the story that is told in your country as well as ours, how once upon a time Phaethon, son of Helios, yoked his father's chariot, and, because he was unable to drive it along the course taken by his father, burnt up all that was upon the earth and himself perished by a thunderbolt – that story, as it is told, has the fashion of a legend, but the truth of it lies in the occurrence of a shifting of the bodies in the heavens which move round the earth, and a destruction of the things on the earth by fierce fire, which recurs at long intervals ... And when, on the other hand, the Gods purge the earth with a flood of waters, all the herdsmen and shepherds that are in the mountains are saved ...<sup>51</sup>

The themes of a cosmic fire and a wholesale displacement of stars and planets were complementary facets of the apocalypse, especially in the Stoic perception as epitomised in the writings of Seneca. This champion of Stoicism combined the motifs in his famous sketch of the *ecpyrōsis*, alternating with a worldwide flood:

... it [fate] will cover with floods the face of the inhabited world, and, deluging the earth, will kill every living creature, and in huge conflagration it will scorch and burn all mortal things. And when the time shall come for the world to be blotted out in order that it may begin its life anew, these things will destroy themselves by their own power, and stars will clash with stars, and all the fiery matter of the world that now shines in orderly array will blaze up in a common conflagration.<sup>52</sup>

The notion of a fall of all stars ensued by utter darkness was central to Seneca's philosophy. It was alluded to in various other parts of his work, including this illuminating passage from *On benefits*:

Let all the heavenly bodies, separated as they are by vast distances and appointed to the task of guarding the universe, leave their posts; let

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51 Plato, *Timaeus*, 22C-D. This passage has traditionally been related to the Great Year as it occurs in the same dialogue as Plato's definition of the Great Year. Gundel, 'Weltperioden', p. 93 interprets this *parállaxis* as 'Störungen in den Planetenbewegungen ...'.

52 Seneca, *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, 26. 6.

sudden confusion arise, let stars clash with stars, let the harmony of the world be destroyed, and the divine creations totter to destruction; let the heavenly mechanism, moving as it does with the swiftest speed, abandon in the midst of its course the progressions that had been promised for so many ages, and let the heavenly bodies that now, as they alternately advance and retreat, by a timely balancing keep the world in a state of equipoise be suddenly consumed by flames, and, with their infinite variations broken up, let them all pass into one condition; let fire claim all things, then let sluggish darkness take its place, and let these many gods be swallowed up in the bottomless abyss.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, *Erra and Išum* contains the most salient elements of Berossus' theory in a nutshell:

- #1. The world or a large part of it was once destroyed by the fire of Erra.
- #2. This destruction was viewed as an analogue to the flood and both episodes, placed in the same cosmological framework, were assigned the same cause, namely Marduk's rising from his seat.
- #3. Displacement of the heavenly bodies was involved.

In these elements it is not difficult to detect a possible mythological antecedent to what would eventually evolve into the full-fledged astronomical theory of the Great Year. Apart from the notions of cyclicity and planetary conjunctions, which are absent, *Erra and Išum* is therefore the closest Babylonian approximation to Berossus' report to date. Indeed, Babylonian eschatology appears to have been more closely related to Plato than to Berossus, in the sense that it did not yet regard flood and fire as the exclusive means to bring the world to an end; the *Atra-ḫasīs* epic includes the flood in a series of attempts to destroy mankind, along with plague and famine,<sup>54</sup> whilst in the *Gilgameš Epic*, Ea reproached

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53 Seneca, *De Beneficiis*, 6.22; compare further *Thyestes*, 776-878; *Sibylline Oracles*, 3.

54 'Enlil said: Command that there be plague, / Let Namtar diminish their noise. / Let disease, sickness, plague and pestilence / Blow upon them like a tornado. / They commanded and there was plague, / Namtar diminished their noise. / Disease, sickness, plague and pestilence / Blew upon them like a tornado.'

Enlil after the flood for not having sent a lion, a wolf, a famine, or ‘Erra’ to strike the people.<sup>55</sup> This brings to mind Critias’ notion of ‘divers destructions of mankind, of which the greatest are by fire and water, and lesser ones by countless other means.’

The reference to an alternating destruction through flood and fire in *Erra and Išum* eliminates the need to identify Pre-Socratic ideas regarding a return to fire or water as the ultimate source of Berossus’ theory; it may well be that the Babylonians were responsible even for these aspects of the theory of the Great Year. The concept of universal destruction through various means, though predominantly fire and flood, may have arisen as a primarily mythological motif, that was incorporated into Kabti-ilāni-Marduk’s composition *Erra and Išum*. In this form, it could have reached the Pythagoreans and, through them, Plato. Later, perhaps as late as the Hellenistic era, fire and flood were selected as the exclusive types of destruction and astronomers may have added planetary conjunctions and the cyclicity of the alternation to the picture as a mechanism to pin such disastrous events down in time and establish detailed chronologies.

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*Atrahasīs*, Assyrian recension (K3399 + 3934 (S)), reverse IV. 9-16, tr. W. G. Lambert & A. R. Millard, *Atra-hasīs; the Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford, 1969), p. 106-107. Note that the word used for ‘plague’ is not *Erra*.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Instead of your causing the Deluge, / a lion could have risen, and diminished the people! / Instead of your causing the Deluge, / a wolf could have risen, and diminished the people! / Instead of your causing the Deluge, / a famine could have happened, and slaughtered the land! / Instead of your causing the Deluge, / the Plague God could have risen, and slaughtered the land!’ *Gilgameš Epic*, 11. 187-194, tr. George, A., *The Epic of Gilgamesh; the Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian* (Allen Lane, 1999), p. 95; compare West, *Helicon*, p. 491.