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**The Creation of the Universe.** There exists no single Mesopotamian text solely devoted to the topic of creation. Rather, there are many, often conflicting, accounts embedded within larger works. None is similar to the account in Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, with its ordered creation culminating in the formation of mankind. Perhaps the most-detailed Mesopotamian creation account is to be found in the so-called Babylonian Genesis, *Enuma elish*. The poem opens with the creation of the first gods, male and female, from the mixing of the waters of the primeval ocean, Tiamat, with the primeval fresh waters, Apsu, her consort. As a result of this union, a second generation of gods is born. Their clamor is disturbing to Tiamat and Apsu. When Apsu and his vizier Mummu attempt to destroy the young gods, one of them, Ea, magically defeats Apsu and Mummu. On Apsu’s corpse, Ea builds his home, where he and his wife, Damkina, give birth to Marduk. Tiamat, who has taken a new spouse, Kingu, and given him the Tablets of Destinies, now undertakes to avenge the death of Apsu. In exchange for supreme and undisputed authority over the gods, Marduk faces Tiamat and her hordes in battle and defeats them. From her corpse, Marduk erects the heavens and the earth; her eyes become the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Marduk also arranges the stars, moon, and sun in the visible heavens and sets them on their courses. He completes his task by fashioning the cosmic bonds that hold the universe together and its parts in place.

**The Structure of the Universe.** Despite diverse traditions that treat of the creation of the heavens and the earth, the ancient Mesopotamians, throughout most of their history, maintained a remarkably consistent picture of the universe itself. They envisioned it as consisting of a series of superposed levels separated from each other by open spaces. The uppermost levels were where the gods of heaven lived. Beneath them were the starry sky, then the earth’s surface, then the underground fresh waters of the Apsu, and, at the bottom, the underworld of the dead. Presumably the floor of each level served as the roof for the level beneath it. A first millennium B.C.E. Neo-Assyrian text identifies the floors of each level as being made of specific stones. The floor of the starry sky was said to be made of jasper, which can vary in color from sky blue to sunny yellow to the reds of sunrise and sunset to cloudy gray—all the colors of the sky as seen from the earth’s surface. A similar tradition is found in the Hebrew Bible, where the heavenly floor is described as made of (blue) sapphire bricks. The fixed stars were inscribed onto the undersurface of the sky, which rotated once a day. The sun, moon, and five visible planets moved about beneath this floor, although no preserved Mesopotamian text says precisely how. The Assyrians described the “disk” of the sun as being sixty beru in diameter while that of the moon was forty beru. (One beru is over ten kilometers or somewhat more than six miles.)

**The Earth.** First millennium B.C.E. cuneiform sources provide a fairly consistent picture of the Mesopotamian conception of the earth’s surface as a single circular continent amid a surrounding ocean. These texts include an incised map of the world with explanatory captions; a description of the realm of Sargon of Akkad, the third millennium B.C.E. “king of the world”; and descriptions of foreign lands listed in itineraries, especially of military campaigns undertaken by several Middle and Neo-Assyrian kings from the fifteenth to seventh centuries B.C.E. At the center of the world are the lands of Assyria and Babylonia, which are traversed by the great Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. To the north are the mountains of Anatolia, where the Tigris and Euphrates rise, and beyond, the Black and Caspian Seas. To the northeast are the lands of Urartu encircling Lake Van, and beyond, the Caucasus Mountains. To the east lie the Zagros Mountains, and beyond, the vast Iranian plateau. To the southeast, the Lower Sea (the Persian Gulf) leads to Dilmun, the island of Bahrain in the Gulf, and across the sea, to Magan and Meluhha. To the west lies the Upper Sea (the Mediterranean) with its coastline reaching south to Egypt; in this sea lie the islands, foremost Cyprus and Crete.

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