

The Babylonian Orion and Cetus

By Petros Koutoupis

Introduction

I once read not too long ago about the world's oldest archaeological discovery, the heavens, and every night I find myself gazing and wondering about these heavenly bodies that make up our universe. How did they help to mold and fuel our ancestors, their cultures and beliefs? What did they see every time they looked up at the heavenly vault? Early in the research for my book, 'An Adopted Legacy: Neo-Assyrian Origin to Hebrew Lore', I found myself fixated upon the constellation of Orion. Throughout history we know that this constellation played a major role in ancient mythology, some of which belonged to the ancient Egyptians as their god Osiris. Orion, the giant, first came up in my research on the Nephilim, where the Aramaic written Book of Job, part of the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumrân, held the translation of *n^ephila* for this same constellation¹. Oddly enough this view was not consistent throughout time; the Masoretic reading instead translates Orion to כסיל (*k^esîl*)². As my research progressed I knew there was something more to Orion than what met the eye.

An Epic Unfolds

As a side project, apart from my book, I decided to venture off into the understanding of constellations held in the ancient world. It had been well known in early interpretation of Mesopotamian literature that Cetus was identified with the primeval monster Tiāmat, who in the Enūma Eliš gave birth to the first gods and to whom the heavens and the earth were created from. Moving from Cetus backwards in time, allows us to properly understand this. Cetus corresponded with the Greek κητος (kee-tos), which was a very large sea creature (i.e. whale, serpent, etc.). When you look at the etymology and structure of the words forming the proper noun Tiāmat, it had evolved and by the time of Semitic domination in the Near East it meant nothing else but 'Serpent [of the] Sea'. The way it is broken down is 'ta/ tan' translates to serpent or snake while 'yam' translates to sea or ocean. The vocalization in Semitic grammar alters the 'Ta' to a 'Ti' and you now have the 'Tiyam'. This means 'serpent [of] sea'. As for the 'at' suffix, all Semitic tongues end a feminine (set of) noun(s) with an ending 'at/ it/ owt'. So we know that the 'Tiyamat' was a female serpent of the sea. Cetus's primeval role goes back further into Sumerian times when it was identified with the primeval Sumerian birth goddess Ninmah³ (also identified as Ninhursāga), who gave birth to the first generation of gods. This was also the same Ninmah who worked with Enki to create mankind as laborers to the gods⁴.

What of Orion? Orion went under a variety of titles in ancient times and with that a variety of roles. Every region in time had its own mythological story pertaining to Orion. In Sumeria and Old-Akkadia/ Babylonia, the constellation was known as SIPA.ZI.AN.NA which translates to 'The True Shepherd of Anu' or 'The Loyal

Shepherd of Heaven'. Later Akkadian has labeled Orion as Šitādālu where Šita means 'weapon' and Alû signified Taurus (a bull) which was situated to the right and above Orion.⁵ This hints at a possible connection between Orion and Taurus as the 'One with Weapon to the Bull' within certain cultic circles. According to the Mul.Apin tablets⁶ the first name was the one most commonly used up until the Neo-Babylonian era 2000+ years later. Now the question was who was this 'Loyal Shepherd of Anu (or Heaven)'?

In the 4th chapter of my book, *An Adopted Legacy*, I make a connection between the Mesopotamian Marduk and the Biblical Nimrod. Nimrod was identified with the Babylonian Marduk and was also a representation of the Old Babylonian Empire while Asshur, a patron deity of Neo-Assyria and a representative of the Assyrian state and nation, came from that land and established his own empire. Genesis 10:8-12 reads⁷:

And Cush begot Nimrod; he began to be a mighty one in the earth. He was a mighty hunter before YHWH; wherefore it is said: 'Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before YHWH.' And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. Out of that land went forth Asshur, and built Nineveh, and Rehoboth-ir, and Kālah, and Resen between Nineveh and Kālah--the same is the great city.

This connection was made with the roles both characters played in history, the structure and interpretation of the proper nouns, followed by Mesopotamian chronology which would have been a common understanding to the ancient Hebrew scribe. Early on in my research, I had a goal to connect Nimrod with Orion but after making the connection with Nimrod to Marduk I took another look at the constellation with Cetus/ Tiāmat still in the back of my head⁸. It was time to approach this from a different path.

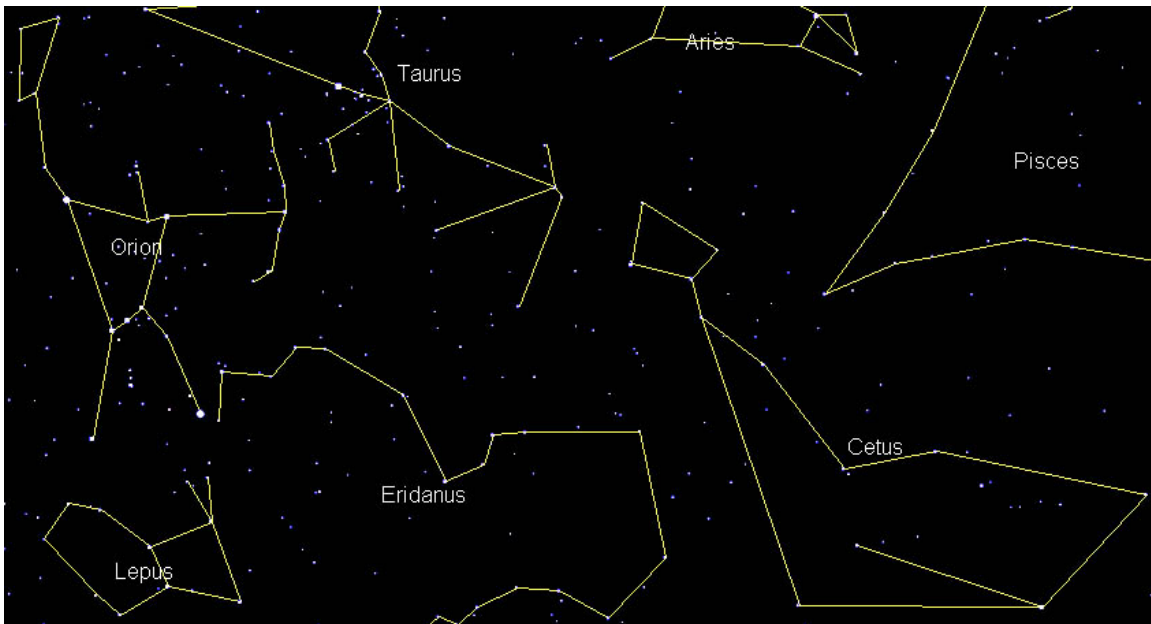


Figure 1 - The constellations of Orion and Cetus.

It then came to me; the ‘Loyal Shepherd’ was Marduk. The next step was to prove it. So I picked up my copy of the Enûma Eliš and began to reread it for more clues. My focus quickly turned to the fourth tablet of the same epic⁹:

He (Marduk)¹⁰ fashioned a bow, designated it as his weapon,
Feathered the arrow, set it in the string.
He lifted up a mace and carried it in his right hand,
Slung the bow and quiver at his side,
Put lighting in front of him,...
The lord raised the flood-weapon¹¹, his great weapon,
And mounted the frightful, unfaceable storm chariot.
...
The Lord (Marduk)¹² set out and took the road,
And set his face towards Tiamat who raged out of control.

I kept referencing back to the constellations of Cetus and Orion and images of Marduk, with a mace in his right hand and a bow (or a lightning bolt) in his left, chasing after Tiāmat began to appear. Marduk is embracing his weapons of choice and making his way towards Tiāmat who is possibly trying to escape (see Figure 2 below). His position taken in the constellation is that of a smiting one, a very familiar pose to the ancient world¹³.



Figure 2 - A cylinder seal impression bearing a scene of Marduk's battle against Tiāmat.

It was soon pointed out to me by a friend and fellow scholar¹⁴ that there was more to this ‘Shepherd of Heaven’. The seventh tablet reads:

And may he (Marduk)¹⁵ shepherd all the gods like sheep.
Let him defeat Tiamat, constrict her breath and shorten her life...

After Tiāmat's defeat and the establishment of the heavens and the earth followed by the creation of mankind, Marduk was appointed ruler of all the deities and everything that stood below them.

Conclusions and Implications

Was Marduk adapted to fit the role of the shepherd at the height of his cult worship in history? If that is the case, his symbolic link with SIPA.ZI.AN.NA could not have existed prior to the reign of the early 2nd millennium Amorite ruler Sumula-el. It was under his rule that Babylon, with Marduk as its patron deity, first achieved greatness. This is also believed to be the earliest possible date for Enûma Eliš, although this is speculation. The oldest copies that archaeology has unearthed all date to the 1st millennium BCE.

It is also interesting to note that the first day of the Babylonian/Jewish New Year occurs in March/April. Babylonian inscriptions have referred to this as the month of Nisannu (corresponding to the Jewish Nisan) and it is this month that the harvest begins. During the winters, Orion dominates the southern skies from the first trace of darkness to the late evening hours. As a result of its southerly position, the constellation is seen in the evening skies for a shorter and shorter period as each day nears the end of winter. By the time we reach the spring equinox, Orion's belt has sunk below the horizon which signifies the end of winter. It is at the Babylonian New Year that the Enûma Eliš is recited officially marking the end of death and the time of rebirth. Can the disappearance of the constellation signify the defeat of Tiāmat? Reaching to this conclusion, every night I make it a habit to view a scene from this epic battle immortalized in the heavens.

If you have any comments or questions regarding this article please direct them to comments@petroskoutoupis.com.

¹ Heiser, Michael S. 'Sitchin's Disciple: Clueless but Courageous.' <http://www.michaelsheiser.com/>.

² Ref. Masoretic Job 9:9, 38:31; Amos 5:8;

³ Black, Jeremy, and Anthony Green. 'Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia.' Austin: University of Texas P, 2000.

⁴ Ref. the Sumerian poem 'Enki and Ninmah'.

⁵ As mentioned in the introduction Orion went under a variety of roles and titles, later Aramaic writings referred to Orion as *n^ephila*, the Egyptians saw him as Osiris, while the Greeks were originals to have given the constellation the name of Orion.

⁶ Special thanks goes to Steven Philip Pyatt and his help for pointing the Mul.Apin tablets out to me. The Mul.Apin tablets contain the most complete Babylonian star and constellation catalogue from before 600 BCE.

⁷ JPS translation.

⁸ Image was taken from MEADE StarLocator Limited Edition Astronomy Software.

⁹ Dalley, Stephanie. 'Myths from Mesopotamia.' 4th ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.

¹⁰ Author's note.

¹¹ It is believed that the flood-weapon took on a form of a trident. Some translations have translated this weapon to 'thunderbolts'.

¹² Author's note.

¹³ Reference the Narmer Palette or various stelae depicting the Canaanite (Ugaritic) Ba`al Haddad. The Smiting position was a well known pose of power in the ancient Near East and was commonly used with images of deities and kings.

¹⁴ The same Steven Philip Pyatt mentioned in an earlier footnote.

¹⁵ Author's note.