

Enki's Seven Sages (Adapa/Oannes and the *Apkallu*): Humanity's Cosmic Guardians¹

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Abstract

In contrast to the cruel and militant gods, who treated humans as pawns in their power struggle, Enki is remembered not just as a benevolent god who saved the human race from extermination, but who also imparted knowledge. Especially scholarly disciplines like divination, astrology, astronomy, lamentation and exorcism were considered a revelation by Enki. The *Catalogue of Texts and Authors* attests that a handbook of medical symptoms comes “of the mouth of Ea”, “Adapa wrote them down at his dictation.” Enki was helped by his Seven Sages – the *apkallu* (Adapa being the main one) – the cosmic guardians who disseminated his knowledge, and were remembered as teachers of humankind and laying the foundation of civilization. According to Berossus, “from that time nothing further has been discovered.” Sometime around the Flood they disappeared, descending to the abode of Enki. This transition is reflected in the change from semi-divine sages or culture-heroes (*apkallu*) to scholars (*ummanu*).

Keywords: Enki, Adapa, *apkallu*, Oannes, *ummanu*.

1. The cruelty of the gods. Enki

Ancient religions are abundant with examples of the cruelty of the gods – obsession and hunger for power, complete lack of compassion and periodical annihilation of the human race. In *Atrahasis* mankind is presented as a labor-force created to serve the gods, to “bear the yoke,” to “bear the load of the [Igigi] gods.” Plato (*Phd.* 62b) presents a view of mankind as the gods’ possession: “the gods are our guardians and we men are one of the chattels of the gods;” “I [Zeus] made them [humans] common property; they are at the service of every god” (Lucian *Prometheus* 14). Yet some gods clearly show benevolent attitude towards mankind. One of them is the Sumerian Enki.

In *Atrahasis*, after the Flood, Enlil notices the boat of *Atrahasis*:²

The warrior Ellil spotted the boat
and was furious with the Igigi.
“We, the great Anunna, all of us,

¹ I have borrowed the term “cosmic guardians” from Helge Kvanvig. He has used it numerous times to designate the role of the *apkallu* in human history. See Kvanvig, 2011: 83, 117, 145, 181, 452, 523.

² According to Irving Finkel (2014: 123-156), the boat was actually a coracle – the traditional river vessels still in use in 20th century Iraq.

agreed together on an oath!
No form of life should have escaped!
How did any man survive the catastrophe?” . . .

Enki made his voice heard
and spoke to the great gods,
“I did it, in defiance of you!
I made sure life was preserved [...]”³

- It is dangerous for the cosmic order when humans possess the knowledge of Heaven and Earth.
- The Adapa Myth not only marks Adapa’s initiation into maturity, into becoming a full-fledged human being, but further symbolizes the initiation of all humanity into civilization.
- There existed *ummanu* (guardians of the *apkallu* knowledge) of such a high rank that were included in a list of rulers.

In *Gilgamesh* XI.181-195, Ea chastises Enlil after the Flood, suggesting that the god should have employed more limited techniques of population reduction – ravenous lions and wolves, famine, and plague, i.e., some of the exact techniques that apparently failed in *Atrahasis*. In *Atrahasis*, in order to fulfill Enlil’s commands of depopulation, instead of a global disaster, Enki introduces individual death to regulate the increasing population: barren women, celibate priestesses, and demons who kill children at birth should further reduce the number of human beings.⁴ Following Enki’s counsel, the gods had promised that there would be no more Floods, no more threat of wholesale extermination of the human race. In a late Babylonian fragment of *Atrahasis*, Enki concludes with a plea for a more secure future:

From this day no Flood shall take place,
and the human race [shall] endure for ever!⁵

Enki not just saves mankind. He is also remembered as imparting knowledge. The earliest evidence shows Enki as the god of technical skills, organized planning, abundance, and knowledge.⁶ After the middle of the 3rd millennium BC, Enki is equated with the Akkadian god Ea, who’s benevolent attitude towards mankind firmly established his importance in incantations, purifying rites, and magic. Especially scholarly disciplines like divination, astrology, astronomy, lamentation and exorcism were considered a revelation by Ea, and described as secrets (*pirištu*, *nisirtu*) that should only be communicated within closed circles.⁷ This concept of esoteric lore is already attested in 2nd millennium BC Babylonia, and in Old Babylonian texts Ea is called *bēl pirištim* “Lord of secret lore.”⁸ From that time on, the Mesopotamian scribal elite thought of themselves as guardians of secret knowledge that had survived from antediluvian times. Although the Flood story speaks of total destruction, there had been survivors like Utnapishtim (*Atrahasis*

³ Transl. Dalley, 2000: 34.

⁴ Kilmer, 1972.

⁵ George, 2003: 527 (courtesy of W. Lambert).

⁶ Early-Dynastic (c. 2900-2335 BC) royal inscriptions describe Enki as king of the Apsu and king of Eridu. He is mentioned to have given to the rulers of Sumer *gēštu* – “understanding”, “knowledge”, “wisdom”. Old-Akkadian (2334–2147 BC) royal inscriptions associate Enki/Ea with Eridu and mention him in relation to irrigation canals and relate him to *gēštu*. Texts from the Second Dynasty of Lagash (c. 2260–2046 BC) portray him as a god who gives advice in temple construction (Espak 2006: 124-125). Sumerian mythological texts about Enki did exist during the 3rd millennium BC (Sallaberger 2004; Espak 2006: 49-52) but most of the compositions come from the scribal schools of the early 2nd millennium BC.

⁷ Galter, 2015: 67, 72.

⁸ Galter, 1983: 37; Pongratz-Leisten, 1999: 289-309.

or Ziusudra),⁹ who preserved the revealed knowledge. Gilgamesh, who visited him, was one of the persons held responsible for the revival of civilization after the Flood, because “he brought knowledge from before the Flood.”¹⁰

2. Enki’s seven sages – The *apkallu*

Within the scholarly circles at the Assyrian court, the idea evolved that this knowledge comprised the disciplines mentioned above and that it was revealed through a group of (mostly seven) sages (*apkallu*) in the entourage of Ea.¹¹ It was put down in writing, survived the Great Flood, and was passed on as written texts intended to be kept secret.¹² The Great Flood had put an end to the primeval world, and a new one evolved. This transition is reflected in the change from semi-divine sages or culture-heroes (*apkallu*) to scholars (*ummanu*). The first were connected with divine revelations and the second with conserving the knowledge. Nothing new was invented during that period – the original revelation is only transmitted and unfolded.¹³ Stone reliefs from the early 1st millennium BC show three groups of depictions of the *apkallu*: in the form of fish-man hybrids, bird-man hybrids, and fully anthropomorphic figures.¹⁴

⁹ Ziusudra is mentioned in the Sumerian *Flood Story* (ETCSL 1.7.4; see Lambert & Millard, 1969: 138-139) and in the Sumerian creation myth *Eridu Genesis* (found on a single tablet from c. 1600 BC; see Kvanvig, 2011: 84-89).

¹⁰ George, 2003: 538-539 (I.8), 526.

¹¹ Denning-Bolle, 1992: 48-64.

¹² Lenzi, 2008: 140-142. According to Berossus, all writings were preserved by being buried in Sippar (Eusebius *Chronography* 7, 10).

¹³ Kvanvig 1988: 201.

¹⁴ Wiggermann, 1994: 224. The first group of sages is rooted in 3rd millennium BC Mesopotamia, but the iconographic type was introduced only in the Kassite period (16th–12th century BC). The two other types are adopted by Assyrian iconography from a foreign source, and secondarily named “sages”. In magic all three types of sages perform purifying and exorcising functions (Wiggermann, 1994: 224). *Apkallu* figurines are among the statues that ritual texts prescribe to manufacture and bury at the strategic points in the house as protective deposits, serving as apotropaic guardians against protruding evil. The same groups of protective spirits served the magical defense of Neo-Assyrian palaces in reliefs along the walls, and sometimes in free-standing sculptural works made of precious metals or stone (p. 222). The fish-*apkallu* seem to have particularly strong associations with the southern cities of Eridu, Bad-tibira, Larak and Sippar (McInerney, 2017: 260). For the most detailed study of *apkallu* history in text and iconography, see Wiggermann, 1992: 65-86.

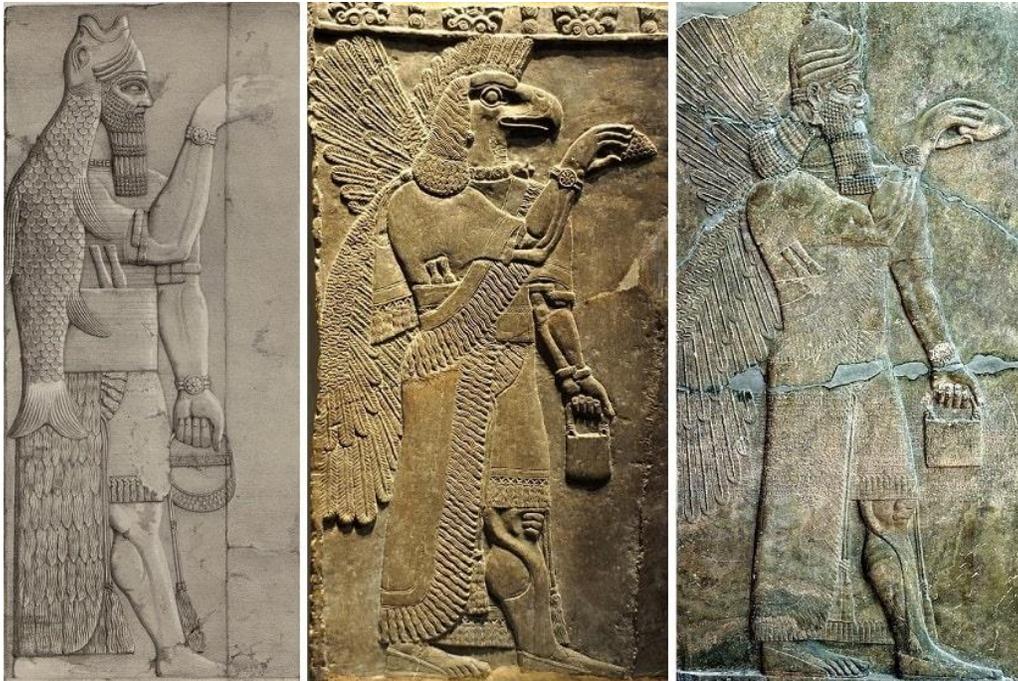


Figure 1. Human-looking figure dressed in the skin of a fish, holding a bucket and (originally) a pine cone. Drawn from a monumental stone relief, one of a pair flanking a doorway of the temple of Ninurta in Kalhu (Assyria; modern Nimrud, Iraq), erected by King Assurnasirpal II (883-859 BC). Layard 1853: Plate 6

Figure 2. Eagle-headed and winged figure. From the same place. The British Museum

Figure 3. Human-headed and winged figure. From the same place. Museum of the Ancient Orient, Istanbul, Turkey

The earth in antediluvian time was inhabited by three different classes of creatures: the gods, the ordinary human beings who served the gods without being able to comprehend their purpose in the cosmos, and the sages, coming from Enki to instruct humankind – the *apkallu*. We learn more about the *apkallu* from the oldest source – tablet III of the early 1st millennium BC *Biṭ Mēseri* (“protected house”) – an apotropaic incantation with a list of the seven *apkallu* followed by another four *apkallu* which are of human descent.¹⁵ The ritual involved hanging or placing statues of the sages on the walls of a house.

Incantation: *Uanna*, who completed the plans of heaven and earth;
Uannedugga, who is given broad understanding;
Enmedugga, to whom a good fate is decreed;
Enmegamma, who was born in a house;
Enmebulugga, who grew up on a river-flat;
Anenlilda, the purification priest from Eridu;
Utuabzu, who ascended to heaven;
the pure carps, the carps from the sea, the seven;
the seven *apkallus*, born in the river, who keep in order the plans of heaven and earth;
Nungalpiriggaldim, the *apkallu* of Enmerkar, who brought down Ištar from heaven into the sanctuary;

¹⁵ See Lenzi, 2008b: 144-153; Kvanvig, 2011: 107-158. The two other sources for *apkallu* are Berossus’ *Babyloniaca* (291 BC) and the Uruk List of Kings and Sages (165-164 BC).

Piriggalnungal, born in Kish, who angered the god Ishkur/Adad in heaven, so he allowed neither rain nor growth in the land for three years;
Piriggalabzu, born in Adab/Utab, who hung his seal on a “goatfish”¹⁶ and thereby angered the god Enki/Ea in the fresh water sea, so that a fuller struck him with his own seal;
the fourth, *Lu-Nanna*, two-thirds *apkallu*, who expelled a dragon from *E-Ninkiagnunna*, the temple of Ishtar and Shulgi;
the four *apkallus*, of human descent, whom the Lord Enki/Ea has endowed with broad understanding.¹⁷

There seems to be a connection in the cuneiform sources between the first *apkallu* from *Bit Mēseri* and the Uruk tablet – Uanna, or Uan, “the light of An” (U-an) – and Adapa known from the myth *Adapa and the South Wind*.¹⁸

3. Adapa

The largest and most important *Adapa* tablet – Fragment B, written in Akkadian, found in 1887 at Amarna, Egypt – is dated to the 14th century BC. The oldest *Adapa* tradition is from the Tell Haddad tablets from the Old Babylonian period (1900-1600 BC), written in Sumerian. But the myth itself is probably much older, because of the location of the story at Eridu, which was a center only in the early periods of the Mesopotamian civilization. Reference to the Anunnaki in the context of Eridu (Fragment A 8) may further bear witness to the antiquity of the text.¹⁹

The story of *Adapa*, Fragment B, is as follows: Adapa is a sage from Eridu. Enki “perfected him with great intelligence . . . (and) wisdom” and “made him his follower (disciple)”; Adapa is “foremost in understanding of the Anunnaki” (Frg. A 3-4, 6, 8). He is fishing on his sailboat in the middle of the sea, when suddenly the South Wind blows and Adapa is thrown into the water.²⁰ In his rage he curses the wind, its “wing breaks”, and does not blow for seven days.²¹ This enrages king Anu and he calls Adapa into heaven. But before that Ea warns Adapa that he will be offered food and water of death, so he should refuse them; but he can accept garment and oil.

When Adapa arrives before Anu in heaven, Anu understands that Ea has revealed his full knowledge to Adapa, since Adapa had the power to paralyze the South Wind simply through

¹⁶ The sacred animal of Enki/Ea.

¹⁷ Kvanvig, 2011: 108. Transl. Borger, 1994: 230-231 with English edition of E. Reiner. For the relationship between the first and the seventh *apkallu*, see Kvanvig, 2011: 128-129.

¹⁸ Reading the *Adapa* Myth from the Old Babylonian period clearly evokes the impression that Adapa was a proper name, and this proper name of the foremost wise among humans could very well have caused the use of the name as an epithet. There is a combined name that first seems to appear in the *Catalogue of Texts and Authors* (I. 6), *mūma-an-na a-da-pà*, which seems to play on both Uan and *adapa* in some mysterious way (Kvanvig, 2011: 117-118). Lambert (1962: 73) translates it Oannes-Adapa, while Kvanvig (2011: 148) prefers to use Uanadapa. For a summary of the occurrences of the name forms cf. Streck, 2003: 1-3.

¹⁹ Izre’el, 2001: 47, 7, 67. Wiggerman (2004: 396) dates the “Eridu stage” c. 3500-2500 BC.

²⁰ Cf. the 1944 *Iraq and the Persian Gulf* report of the British Naval Intelligence: “The north-west winds . . . are occasionally strong, but more usually very light . . . sometimes followed by a strong south-westerly gale which lasts for a few hours and is dangerous to small crafts” (Izre’el, 2001: 68).

²¹ The geographical and physical setting of the myth manifests intimate, firsthand knowledge of the location, since the role and behavior of the South Wind are very well known in the same area in the time before and up to our period. In a penetrating study, Roux (1961) has shown that the South Wind, when blowing “toward the land” (Frg. B 7), serves as a fertilizing means to the lands of southern Mesopotamia. It is a hot, humid, violent wind that brings most of the rain (Izre’el, 2001: 67).

his speech. Anu considers this as bad, because it is dangerous for the cosmic order when humans possess the same extensive wisdom as the Anunnaki, which Adapa clearly has demonstrated.²²

Why did Ea reveal to an imperfect human being
that of Heaven and Earth,
and endow him with an arrogant (*kabru*) heart?²³

Anu’s speech shows that *the way to operate nature* is the “secret of Heaven and Earth” (“secret” is implied by “reveal” in the previous line). Piotr Michalowski argued that Adapa’s power to paralyze the South Wind is of esoteric nature – the art of magic.²⁴ Adapa’s most potent weapon is language itself.²⁵

Now that Adapa knows the wisdom of the gods, he lacks only one – eternal life. Anu offers Adapa the food and water of immortality, which Adapa refuses, because he was previously told by Ea that they are lethal. So Adapa returns “to his earth.” But had Anu wanted Adapa die, he would have offered him only (lethal) food and drink, without garments and oil. Then why has Ea deceived its disciple? Because Adapa is “a seed of humankind” (Frg. D 12), he simply cannot have both wisdom and immortality – he is a symbol of humanity and its status on earth.²⁶

Had Adapa stayed in heaven, as attested in Fragment D, Anu would have “set Adapa at his service” (9), to be his protégé, introducing Adapa to the highest office any human was given, and establish “his freedom from Ea” (10). Adapa would have remained completely separated from mankind. And Ea cannot afford to lose his most promising disciple. Especially now, when the highest Anunnaki God, Anu, has attested and institutionalized Adapa’s wisdom. Now Ea would need Adapa, the future *apkallu*, even more, to further help him disseminate the knowledge of the gods to humanity.²⁷

The Adapa Myth, structured as a rite of passage, describes Adapa’s passage into full humanity, symbolizing humans becoming aware of their own knowledge. The Adapa Myth not only marks Adapa’s initiation into maturity, into becoming a full-fledged human being, but further symbolizes the initiation of all humanity into civilization.²⁸

Adapa and the other *apkallu* were sent to humankind in antediluvian time as “cosmic guardians” in order to teach them the basic cultural benefits.²⁹ That Adapa is the most important *apkallu* is attested in the *Catalogue of Texts and Authors* (c. 700 BC), found in the Neo-Assyrian library of Nineveh. It ascribes the authorship of many series of priestly wisdom to Ea:

²² Kvanvig, 2011: 126.

²³ *Adapa Nineveh* Fragment B 57-59, Wiggermann, 1999: 23, translation from Picchioni 1981. Preferred over Izre’el, 2001: 19 for the sake of simplicity.

²⁴ Michalowski 1980.

²⁵ Mesopotamian magic can be subdivided into four major categories: (1). Liminal – the ritual client or object is transformed and taken to another status. (2). Defensive – an evil that has (threatened to) beset the ritual client is removed and repelled. (3). Aggressive – the ritual client gains superiority, strength and attractiveness. (4). Witchcraft – an illegal and aggressive form of magic by which the ritual client has been harmed. (1) and (2) are white magic, (4) is black, (3) falls into a grey area in between (Schwemer 2014).

²⁶ Izre’el, 2001: 124, 121.

²⁷ Cf. Izre’el, 2001: 125-127 and the story of the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve ate from “the tree of knowledge-of-good-and-bad”. The story resembles the Adapa story in significant respects, notably the shared essence of humans and gods with regard to knowledge or wisdom (Genesis, 3:5, 22). Both gods, Ea and Yahweh, lie to the humans. But for the opposite reasons – Yahweh wants to keep humanity in a state of ignorance.

²⁸ Izre’el, 2001: 143, 147.

²⁹ Kvanvig, 2011: 523.

[The exorcistic] corpus, the liturgical series, the celestial omen series *Enuma Anu Enlil*, the physiognomic omens, the omens from monstrous births, the handbook of medical symptoms, [the interpretation] of utterances, the (Ninurta myths) of *Lugale* and *Angimdimma*: [all these] are of the mouth of Ea.³⁰

An explanatory passage toward the end of the text implies that Ea spoke these texts and that “Adapa wrote them down at his dictation”.³¹ All of the following texts say that the professional literature of the scholars springs from the subterranean deep (*apsu*), the “house of wisdom” that is the home of Ea:³² Sargon II (709-705 BC) refers to related calendars lore “which Niššiku [a name of Ea] the lord of wisdom wrote down on an ancient tablet”; a literary prayer to Marduk refers to an incantation for appeasing an angry god as “the writing of Ea;” a minor myth from the 1st millennium BC mentions Ea as the author of directions for preparing various medicinal poultices.³³

4. Oannes

A later source of the *apkallu* tradition is Berossus. His *Babyloniaca* (291 BC) consisted of three volumes, one on cosmology, one on ancient history, and one on recent history. The original book is lost, but excerpts and quotes survived in the works of Eusebius of Caesarea and Josephus Flavius. Book one explains how Mesopotamian culture was revealed to mankind by the creature called Oannes that came from the waters of the Persian Gulf.³⁴ Oannes is another name for Adapa,³⁵ or Uan(na) in *Bit Mēseri*, Uan in the Uruk List of Kings and Sages, and the revelation contains cosmology, astronomy/astrology, and probably also other domains of Babylonian wisdom. Book two deals with the antediluvian world, the Great Flood, and the early history of Mesopotamia showing how the revealed knowledge passed through critical and dangerous times.³⁶ It even survived the Great Flood being put down in writing and buried. According to Berossus, Oannes left a written account that contained all revealed knowledge. All later texts were just commentaries on this account.

It [Oannes] gave men the knowledge of letters and sciences and crafts of all types. It also taught the founding of cities, the establishment of temples, and the introduction of laws and land-measurement, and showed them seeds and the gathering of fruits. In general, it taught men everything that is connected with a civilized life. From that time nothing further has been discovered (*FGrH* 680 F1b).

³⁰ Annus, 2010: 286, quoting Lambert, 1962: 64-65, 70. *Enuma Anu Enlil* forms the basis for the astronomical calculations in the astronomical work MUL.APIN and the *Astronomical Book (1 Enoch)*. For commentaries on all mentioned texts, see Frahm 2011, 2018.

³¹ Lambert, 1962: 66-68, VI.16. According to van der Toorn (2007: 207-208), “the *Catalogue* lists the works of the cuneiform tradition in their order of presumed antiquity . . . it distinguishes three successive eras in the literary production. The earliest group of texts are “of the mouth of Ea,” the second group of texts are by sages before the Flood, most notably Adapa, and the third and the largest group of texts are by various postdiluvian scribes and scholars of great repute.” See also Rochberg, 1999: 419-20; Lenzi, 2008b: 151-52.

³² Van der Toorn, 2007: 208, quoting Lambert, 1980: 80.

³³ Mayer, 1983: 68; Lambert, 1959: 59, line 146 (*šitru ša dEa*); Lambert, 1980.

³⁴ Haubold, 2013.

³⁵ See n. 16.

³⁶ Lang, 2013. See also Galter, 2005: 292-294.

5. The disappearance of the *apkallu*

After the flood the *apkallu* disappeared,³⁷ descending to the abode of the god of the subterranean waters, Enki. This is also somehow attested in the 9th century BC Babylonian epic *Poem of Erra* (also *Song of Erra* or *Erra and Ishum*), where Marduk is not only the chief god of the pantheon, but he also caused the flood.³⁸ A tradition that otherwise belongs to Enlil. When Marduk got his “image” (statue) renewed after the flood, he removed those responsible for the care of his image, here called the *ummanu*, but clearly being a designation for the primeval *apkallu*:

I made those *ummanu* go down to the *Apsu*, and I said they were not to come back up. (I. 147)

Together with the *apkallu*, Marduk also removed all the objects and other craftsmen necessary to renew his statue. The sequence ends with yet an underlining: when the *apkallu* were gone, there was nobody to take care of his statue:

Where are the Seven *apkallu* of the *Apsu*, the holy carp, who are perfect in lofty wisdom like Ea’s, their lord, who can make my body holy? (I. 162)

The *apkallu* were under the domain of Ea, who was often at odds with the other gods.³⁹ From the Kassite Period (16th-12th century BC), Ea was more and more outshined by Marduk.⁴⁰ Any change in the political structure of the highest God also assumes change in his protégés. Perhaps it was uncomfortable for Marduk to rely on Ea’s *apkallu*? It seems Marduk, just as Enlil before him, was like most of the gods and had no interest in mankind’s wellbeing.

6. The *ummanu*

The disappearance of the semi-divine *apkallu* is marked by the emergence of the *ummanu*. The concept of *ummanu* changed over time. In the letters and administrative texts from the Assyrian empire, the term is specially applied to the scholars and experts that supported and advised the Assyrian king.⁴¹ From the end of the 2nd millennium BC there was a broad tendency to classify the written compilations of scholarly skills, the secrets of heaven and earth. This was done by the *ummanu* in order to legitimize and guard the lore of their guild. They created a mythology of scribal transmission where this secret lore at the beginning rested with the gods, then was brought to humankind by the *apkallu*, and thereafter was transmitted by the *ummanu*, who were the contemporary guards of the secret lore. The *ummanu* provided the royal family with medical

³⁷ See n. 29 and Dalley, 2000: 5.

³⁸ “Once, long ago, indeed I grew angry, indeed I left my dwelling and caused the deluge!” (I. 132; Kvanvig, 2011: 161). *Erra* is based on the idea, foregrounded in *Enuma Elish*, that Marduk should be the champion of peace and stability, but presents the god as unable, or unwilling, to preserve them. *Erra*’s claim about Marduk bringing about the deluge is in complete contrast to everything that is said in *Enuma Elish*. Thus, according to Frahm (2010: 7), *Enuma Elish* is “a kind of counter-text to *Erra*, a somewhat farce-like sequel produced at a time of political insecurity and widespread violence”.

³⁹ Yves Schemel (1999: 121 ff) tried to define the ancient Mesopotamian divine hierarchy in similar terms to the modern functioning of a state. Anu is described as “president” or the nominal head of the pantheon, Enlil represents the executive power as “prime minister” and Enki is pictured as a leader of the parliamentary opposition.

⁴⁰ Successively most of Ea’s functions were handed over to his son: the creation of man, the appointing of destinies and the saving of mankind. This is best documented in *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian text narrating Marduk’s rise to power. There Marduk plays the central role in creation – he shapes and organizes the universe and he creates mankind. Ea assists him like Ninmah had assisted Enki in the Sumerian tale (Galter, 2015: 71).

⁴¹ Pongratz-Leisten, 1999: 15-16.

care (physicians and exorcists), protection against demons and angry gods (exorcists and chanters), and insight into the future (haruspexes and astrologers).⁴² There existed *ummanu* of such a high rank that they were included in a list of rulers.⁴³

There was no difference between pragmatic and speculative knowledge in Mesopotamia. Ea himself was the best example of how knowledge and understanding enabled proper and clever action. Therefore the Assyrian kings made use of the revealed knowledge and of the men guarding its secrecy.⁴⁴ Beate Pongratz-Leisten termed this knowledge *Herrschaftswissen* (knowledge of dominance) and showed how its monopoly was a major instrument of Assyrian rule.⁴⁵ Ashurbanipal (669-631 BC), for example, praised himself being able to read inscriptions from before the Flood:

I have learned the art of the *apkallu*, Adapa, (so that now) I am familiar with the secret storehouse of all scribal learning, (including) celestial and terrestrial portents. I can debate in an assembly of *ummanu* and discuss with the clever *apkal šamni* (oil diviners) (the treatise) “if the liver is a replica of the sky.” I used to figure out complicated divisions and multiplications that have no solutions. Time and again I have read the cleverly written compositions in which the Sumerian is obscure and the Akkadian is difficult to interpret correctly. I have studied inscriptions on stone from before the Flood which are sealed, obscure and confused.⁴⁶

Ummanu's access to the secret knowledge was hereditary, from father to son – “a veritable scholarly ‘mafia’, which monopolized these offices from generation to generation.” During the reign of Assurbanipal there were sixteen *ummanu* forming the “inner circle” and only these few select “wise men” could be engaged in any sort of “regular” correspondence with the king.⁴⁷ No full exposition of the secret knowledge has survived for the simple reason that it was never committed to writing, except glimpses of it in a few odd esoteric texts defined as “secret of the great gods, for the initiate only.”⁴⁸ It is debatable whether the knowledge that Ea and his *apkallu* revealed was not initially intended to be open to the masses or declared as secret by the later *ummanu* in order to guarantee their high rank and influence in the royal court.⁴⁹ Enki and

⁴² In both Sargonid (722-606 BC) and Seleucid (305-364 BC) times existed a well-established “system” in which specialists in different branches of Mesopotamian learning cooperated for a common purpose, like medical doctors writing letters to the king jointly with exorcists. The scholars figuring in the Sargonid royal correspondence were not just any “soothsayers”, “magicians” or “wizards”. They represented the intellectual elite of their time (Parpola, 1993: 51-52).

⁴³ Kvanvig, 2011: 468; 103, 142-143.

⁴⁴ Parpola, 1993b: xiii-xxvii; Lenzi 2008: 70-77.

⁴⁵ Pongratz-Leisten, 1999: 286-320.

⁴⁶ Tablet L4 obv. I, 10-18, Kvanvig, 2011: 139, transl. Sweet, 1990: 55 and Hurowitz, 2008: 73.

⁴⁷ Kvanvig, 2011: 105, 143.

⁴⁸ Parpola, 1993: 57.

⁴⁹ For the similarities of the crafts being thought to humanity from the *apkallu* and the Watchers (*Book of Watchers*) see Annus, 2010: 289-290. Both Amar Annus and Helge Kvanvig independently reach similar conclusions about some *apkallu* and Watchers correlations.

Annus 2010, 280: “Not only direct borrowings took place, but also creative reinterpretations, especially on the Jewish side. Some of these creative reinterpretations must have occurred as *deliberate inversions* of the Mesopotamian source material . . . with the intention of showing the superiority of their own cultural foundations. In Jewish reinterpretation, Mesopotamian antediluvian sages [*apkallu*] became illegitimate and wicked teachers of humankind”.

Kvanvig, 2011, 527: “The Watcher Story was composed to refute the Babylonian imperial ideology. The writers do it in a subtle way by creating a different version of primeval history based on the main blocks of tradition in the Babylonian ideology. The primeval sages once securing the cosmic stability and laying the

his *apkallu* gave humanity hope that it could have a better future. Only through knowledge and wisdom it could eventually escape the cruelty of the gods.

7. Conclusion

In ancient times humans served the gods and were treated as “chattels”, “common property,” without being able to comprehend their purpose in the universe. Enki revealed the secrets of the gods to Adapa, marking his initiation into maturity, into becoming a full-fledged human being. The *apkallu*, the cosmic guardians, disseminated Enki’s knowledge and were remembered as teachers of humankind, laying the foundation of civilization. But Adapa was not the only sage to arouse the anger of the gods. Shlomo Izre’el concludes that “one does not need to look for an act of revolt on the part of the sages against the gods; the mere existence of wise human creatures brings forth divine anger.”⁵⁰

According to Wiggermann, the fish-*apkallu* are rooted in 3rd millennium BC Mesopotamia. In magic rituals all three types of *apkallu* – fish, bird and human – performed purifying and exorcising functions. *Apkallu* figurines were buried at strategic points in the house as protective spirits and as magical defense of Neo-Assyrian palaces in reliefs along the walls, and sometimes in free-standing sculptural works made of precious metals or stone. After the Flood, the functions of the *apkallu* related to imparting knowledge and divine revelations were inherited by the *ummanu*, but they were limited to only conserving the knowledge and keeping it secret from the masses. They represented the intellectual elite of their time and were attached to the royal court to protect and advise the king.

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foundation of civilization did not bring humanity cosmic stability and cultural benefits, but false and destructive knowledge.”

Hendel (2005: 24), although comparing a different set of similarities in the Hebrew Bible and the Mesopotamian civilization, called this process “appropriation, mimicry, and inversion” – ancient Israel knew that it was a relative latecomer in the ancient Near East, and that Mesopotamian civilization was far older and more glorious. The authority of origins had to be counterbalanced by a depreciation of the earliest era of human culture.

⁵⁰ Izre’el, 2001: 129-130. In *Bit Mēseri* “Piriggalnungal, born in Kish, angered the god Ishkur/Adad in heaven, so he allowed neither rain nor growth in the land for three years.”

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