World Philology or Philology of the World: Commenting on *Enuma Elish*

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Abstract

The field of world philology relies on the comparability of philological practices across a wide set of periods and cultures. However, cross-cultural similarities in practice may belie radical differences in the underlying assumptions about texts and what it means to interpret them. This disconnect is illustrated by one of the two preserved commentaries on the Babylonian epic Enuma Elish, Commentary II, which develops the epic's already striking notions about the relationship between objects, their names, and their cosmic roles in an even more radical direction, challenging our understanding of what we are doing when we do philology.

Keywords: *World philology; philology of the world; Enuma Elish; commentaries; Commentary II; cuneiform hermeneutics*

Introduction

In his introduction to the volume, *World Philology*, Sheldon Pollock writes that "terminological dilemmas notwithstanding, we can legitimately speak of philology in the singular as a unitary global field of knowledge."[2] Philology, according to Pollock, can be thought of as a single discipline that has been present in many cultures, places, and periods: Nineveh, Alexandria, Rome, Baghdad, Agra, Beijing, Edo, Göttingen, and London, to name but a few of its most famous centers across the centuries. While Pollock acknowledges important

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[2] Sheldon Pollock, "Introduction," in *World Philology*, ed. Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-ming Kevin Chang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 22.

differences in terminology and disciplinary framing between the various traditions, he contends that philology is both a unitary and a global phenomenon.

In this article, I wish to test the limits of this claim. While I agree with Pollock's argument, I will use the case study of the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish* and a commentary on it—dubbed Commentary II by its most recent editor[3]—to illustrate the profound conceptual differences that can underlie similar-looking philological practices. When Babylonian scholars composed commentaries on *Enuma Elish*, they did so with an understanding of the relation between texts and the world that is radically different from some philologists (such as modern philologists) and structurally similar to others (such as Rabbinic philologists[4]). To explicate the epic was, according to the epic itself, to participate in the ongoing creation and maintenance of the universe. The Babylonian scholars may have commented on the text in ways we would now recognize as philological, but they did so with an understanding of what a "text" is and does that poses a serious challenge to the cross-cultural coherence of philology activities.

In short, while the field of "world philology" that Pollock helped found relies on a substantial degree of similarity between philological practices from different traditions, the "philology of the world" practiced by Babylonian scholars reveals an important set of differences within that similarity. My aim is not to reject world philology as an intellectual project but to showcase some methodological obstacles it will face going forward. I will suggest that the cross-cultural comparability of philological traditions—which is what makes "philology" a meaningful object of historical study—

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[3] The most recent editor is Wilfred G. Lambert, in *Babylonian Creation Myths*, Mesopotamian Civilizations 16 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 139–42.

[4] See Yaakov Elman, "Striving for Meaning: A Short History of Rabbinic Omnisignificance," in *World Philology*, ed. Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-ming Kevin Chang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 63–91; but note his bizarre dismissal of Babylonian philology on p. 64.

resides entirely in the realm of practice, since philological practices unfolded within conceptual frameworks that differ radically from one cultural context to another.[5] That does not mean that the Babylonian scholars were unique in pursuing what I will be calling a "philology of the world" (though I will suggest that they formulated a particularly strong version of it); and parallels to other philological traditions, especially the Rabbinic, would be a fascinating topic for future research. Rather, my argument is that Babylonian philological work represents a partial challenge to Pollock's assertion: the *work* of philology may indeed be unitary in a global perspective, but the *theory* of philology is not, so that different peoples may do philology while having fundamentally different notions of what that entails.

World philology

In 1989, Bernard Cerquiglini published *Éloge de la variante*, a scathing critique of Medieval philology as it was practiced at the time.[6] Cerquiglini argued that, in their pursuit of stable texts and reliable linguistic patterns, philologists imposed a predilection for consistency and homogeneity on a Medieval textual culture that was characterized by change, fluidity, and unending proliferation. Cerquiglini's critique proved welcome, but it also cemented an understanding of philology as a fundamentally Western, modern phenomenon. For Cerquiglini as for many other writers since, philology arose in Europe during the eighteenth century with leading figures such as Friedrich August Wolf and Karl Lachmann; and as such, the discipline of philology reflected the cultural assumptions of European modernity.

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[5] As I return to below, the focus on philological *practice* as a defining characteristic of philology as such is partly inspired by the forthcoming volume *Philological Practices*, eds. Glenn W. Most, Anne Eusterschulte, and Martin Kern (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming).

[6] Bernard Cerquiglini, *Éloge de la variante: histoire critique de la philologie* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1989).

This notion of philology has been challenged over the last decade, and the thrust of that challenge can be summarized by the heading "world philology."[7] This movement resists the view of philology as an academic discipline that may have had its predecessors in earlier cultures but that was essentially established some 250 years ago in Germany, presenting the field instead as an interlinked set of textual practices that can be found with equal ease in Assyrian, Babylonian, ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Arabic, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese cultures, and many others besides. These textual practices include, but are not limited to, the identification and evaluation of textual variants, the explication of obscure passages, the emendation of corrupt words, the restoration or marking of fragmentary text, the physical care for fragile manuscripts, the compilation of commentaries, and the translation of languages (or dialects) that are dead or obsolete into more accessible presentations.[8] Not all these practices are found in every philological tradition, and not every philological tradition conceives of these practices as a single field bearing a name we might translate as "philology." But there are enough resemblances between these bundles of activities to allow for meaningful comparisons between them. Some philological methods—such as critical editions or stemmata[9]—were indeed the products of European modernity, but there is no compelling reason to make those methods our benchmark for what does and does not count as "philology."

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[7] The concept of "world philology" was launched explicitly in the volume of the same name: *World Philology*, eds. Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-ming Kevin Chang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015). However, an interest in the history of philology as a discipline beyond the modern West is far older; an important antecedent was Christian Jacob, "From Book to Text: Towards a Comparative History of Philologies," *Diogenes* 47 (1999): 4–22. On philology's global and transhistorical turn, see Sophus Helle, "What Is Philology? From Crises of Reading to Comparative Reflections," *Poetics Today* 43 (2022): 611–37, especially the references collected in fn. 1, p. 611–12.

[8] See the overview of the field and its most recent developments in Helle, "What Is Philology?"

[9] For the "Westernness" of critical editions within global philology, see Glenn W. Most, "What Is a Critical Edition?" in *Ars Edendi Lecture Series*, vol. 4, eds. Barbara Crostini, Gunilla Iversen, and Brian M. Jensen (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2016), 162–80.

The term "world philology," as a designation for a cross-cultural understanding of philology, was coined by Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-ming Kevin Chang in the volume of the same name, but it is not universally accepted. Many features of this new movement were found already in an article from 1999 by Christian Jacob, and a new ambitious study of philological traditions from around the globe eschews the term "world philology" in favor of the more neutral—and, for the purposes of this article, particularly appropriate—title *Philological Practices.*[10] More generally, there has been a surge of publications about the cross-cultural history of philology since 2009. The tipping point came in 2015 and 2016, which besides *World Philology*, saw the publication of the landmark volumes *Philology* by James Turner and *Canonical Texts and Scholarly Practices* as well as the founding of the journal *Philological Encounters.*[11] In short, whatever one chooses to call it, the cross-cultural, transhistorical study of philology is a field in rapid growth.

Given this growth, it is not surprising that various definitions of "philology" have been put forth. Sheldon Pollock proposed a definition that is as simple as it is vague: he presents philology as "the discipline of making sense of texts."[12] The definition is useful for enfolding many kinds of practices under the spacious heading of "philology," but one might argue that it fails to give us a hard-edged sense of what distinguishes philological investigations from related fields such as literary criticism. At the other end of the spectrum, the editors of *Philological Practices*—Glenn Most, Anne Eusterschulte, and Martin Kern—set out a stricter and more technical definition of philology as

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[10] Most, Eusterschulte, and Kern, eds., *Philological Practices.*

[11] James Turner, Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Anthony Grafton and Glenn W. Most, eds., Canonical Texts and Scholarly Practices: A Global Comparative Approach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Islam Dayeh, "Introducing Philological Encounters," *Philological Encounters* 1 (2016): 1–3.

[12] Pollock, "Introduction," 22; see already Sheldon Pollock, "Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 934.

"the professionalized and institutionalized study of and care for authoritative texts."[13] The emphasis on "authoritative texts" stems from their explanation of why philology arose, often independently, in so many different cultures: manuscripts of canonical religious and literary works proliferated, introducing inevitable scribal variants and so necessitating a philological approach to manage the textual fluidity.[14] In a recent study, I define philology as a "systematic engagement with crises of reading," with the crises of reading in turn defined as any phenomena—variant readings, damaged manuscripts, textual obscurities, unclear references, the death or obsolescence of the source language, etc.—that hinder the readers' access to a text. Philology, in this view, seeks either to resolve such crises and so restore the text to readability or to engage with the crises and thereby draw new and unexpected meaning from the text.

What the three definitions have in common is that they foreground the text as the natural object of philology. Whether it is being made sense of, studied, taken care of, or having its crises engaged with, the text is presented as the default endpoint of philological labor. But of course, texts are never self-contained objects. By their very nature, texts point beyond themselves, by virtue of both their referential relation to the world and the intertextual, discursive realm from which they arise and within which they gain meaning. As is implied in all three definitions of philology, studying texts always means studying other things as well: languages, cultures, manuscript materials, literary history, archaeological artefacts, economy, religion, jurisprudence, and so on. The text is a centrifugal object, and as a result, philology is a methodologically centrifugal discipline.[15]

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[13] Most, Eusterschulte, and Kern, *Philological Practices.*

[14] Most, "What Is a Critical Edition?" 166.

[15] Helle, "What Is Philology?" 615.

This article focuses on one such moment of philological centrifugalism, whereby the slippery nature of texts invites philological engagement with objects that do not, at first sight, seem philological. More specifically, I will argue that the close relation between names and things in the Babylonian worldview allowed ancient scholars to extend their philological analysis to encompass the nature of the god Marduk, his creation and maintenance of the world order, and thus the structure of the world itself. Before I begin building this claim, I must note that Babylonian culture is now widely recognized as one of the earliest homes of philological study. Eckart Frahm explains the early origins of philology in cuneiform culture by its foundational bilingualism: the close contact between the linguistically unrelated Sumerian and Akkadian as well as the death of Sumerian as a native language around 2000 BCE "generated a sensibility for language-related problems and an abundance of philological activity that is unparalleled in other early civilizations."[16] The form and scope of this activity has recently been mapped out by Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum and Jochem Kahl in their book on philology in the cuneiform and ancient Egyptian cultures.[17] One finds in cuneiform sources a range of texts that are easily recognizable as "philological": lists of words, including Sumerian-Akkadian "dictionaries"; list of cuneiform signs, including paleographical studies; grammatical texts; text editions based on the inspection of multiple manuscripts; annotations of lacunae and variant readings; translations of whole works; and, finally, commentaries that seek to explain obscure words or reveal the deeper meaning of texts or religious rituals. It is to these commentaries and their potential for philological centrifugalism that I now turn.

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[16] Eckart Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries: Origins of Interpretation*, Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record 5 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag), 12.

[17] Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum and Jochem Kahl, *Erste Philologien: Archäologie einer Disziplin vom Tigris bis zum Nil* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

Enuma Elish and Commentary I

The Babylonian poem *Enuma Elish* begins by narrating the creation of the first generations of gods from the primordial seas Apsû and Tiamat.[18] The gods grow noisy and Apsû attempts to destroy them, but his plans are foiled by the god Ea. Ea kills Apsû, binds him, and turns him into the first separate part of the world (in contrast to the total fluidity that had previously reigned).[19] He then fathers the god Marduk, whose youthful play with the four winds disturbs a separate group of gods. These gods take their grievance to Tiamat, who, in a repetition of Apsû's actions, decides to kill her offspring. She raises an army to do so and the main gods, including Ea, are powerless to stop her. Marduk volunteers to oppose her but demands universal kingship in return, which the gods grant him. Midway through the epic, Marduk defeats Tiamat in a spectacular battle.

The following tablets are taken up with Marduk's creation of the world order out of Tiamat's corpse (mirroring his father Ea's creation of one part of the world out of Apsû's corpse).[20] Marduk creates, among other things, the regular movements of the night sky, the landscape of mountains and rivers, the city of Babylon, humanity, and the hierarchical arrangement of the gods. The poem culminates in a list of fifty names that the gods bestow on Marduk, with each name being accompanied by a destiny (*šīmtu*), that is, a mythical or recurrent activity by which Marduk creates and continues to maintain the world

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[18] The text is edited on the Electronic Babylonian Literature website, <https://www.ebl.lmu.de/corpus/L/1/2/>; the translation is my own. A detailed introduction to and translation of *Enuma Elish* will be presented in Enrique Jiménez, Johannes Haubold, Sophus Helle, and Selena Wisnom, eds. *Enuma Elish*, Library of Babylonian Literature 1 (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

[19] On Apsû being the first definite part of the cosmos (in contrast to the total cosmic order later created by Marduk), see Gabriel, Gösta. '*enūma eliš'—Weg zu einer globalen Weltordnung: Pragmatik, Struktur und Semantik des babylonischen 'Lieds auf Marduk'*, Orientalische Religionen in der Antike 12 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 190–2.

[20] See the previous note. On the general symmetry between the two parts of the epic, see Sophus Helle, "The Two-Act Structure: A Narrative Device in Akkadian Epics," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 20 (2020): 195–98.

order. Finally, the poem ends with a short prologue describing its own composition and laying out its ambitions for how it will be perpetuated through time.

The dating of *Enuma Elish* is a contentious issue, but most scholars now agree that it was composed toward the end of the second millennium BCE.[21] The poem is seen as a prime example of the interlinking of religion and politics in cuneiform cultures: by making Marduk the king of the gods, and by explicitly demoting the previous leader of the pantheon Enlil, the author(s) of *Enuma Elish* sought to position Marduk's city Babylon as the center of the cosmos. This political dimension is reflected in the fact that, when the Assyrian King Sennacherib destroyed Babylon in 689 BCE, the text of *Enuma Elish* was emended to replace Marduk with the god Ashur and Babylon with Baltil, a ceremonial name for the city Assur. This Assyrian recension was just one of many ideologically inflected reactions to *Enuma Elish* that were produced over the first millennium BCE.[22]

Among those reactions were two commentaries on the epic. Commentary culture became a widespread feature of cuneiform scholarship during the first millennium BCE: texts such as omen compendia, medical handbooks, literary works, and ritual instructions became the subject of an increasing number of commentaries.[23] These texts explained obscure words by offering more familiar synonyms, explained associations that appear in the source material by breaking them down into a sequence of connections, unfolded the ritual or mythological significance of a word or passage, or interpreted the text in various other—and sometimes surprising—ways.

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[21] The argument for a Middle Babylonian date is presented in Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 439–44.

[22] Eckart Frahm, "Counter-Texts, Commentaries, and Adaptations: Politically Motivated Responses to the Babylonian Epic of Creation in Mesopotamia, the Biblical World, and Elsewhere," *Orient* 45 (2010), 3–33.

[23] Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries*; see also the online database Cuneiform Commentaries Project (CCP) at <https://ccp.yale.edu/>.

An intriguing example of a cuneiform commentary is one of the two commentaries on *Enuma Elish*, Commentary I, which cites lines from the epic that it perceives as somehow noteworthy or problematic, and then explains the meaning of various words and lines—though unfortunately, many of these explanations are fragmentary.[24] For example, the commentary quotes the line, "Break this relentless yoke, so that we may sleep" (*ḫuṣbī abšāna lā sākipa i niṣlal nīnu*, I 122), and explains the rare word *abšānu*, "yoke," by its more common synonym *nīru* (l. 10).[25] However, the aims of the commentary go far beyond such direct explanations. It seeks to reveal connections between lines from *Enuma Elish* and actions in a variety of rituals, presenting those ritual events as reenactments of the foundational myth related in *Enuma Elish*. For example, when the ritual kettledrum is placed before a statue of the god Ea in the month of Addaru, this is to be taken, according to Commentary I, as a ritual repetition of Ea's speech to his son Marduk, in which he instructs him to volunteer to defeat Tiamat (*Enuma Elish* II 130; Commentary I l. 13). Some of these interpretations have a clear political dimension, as when the unnamed nurse who suckles Marduk in *Enuma Elish* I 86 is identified with the Assyrian goddess Ishtar of Nineveh (l. 7), bringing the highly Babylo-centric text of *Enuma Elish* closer to the Assyrian sphere of interest.[26] Occasionally, the commentary provides interpretations that are more surprising, revealing the hermeneutic skills of its composer(s). The word *mummu*, for example, is as obscure as it is central to *Enuma Elish*: it is an epithet of Tiamat in I 4, the name of Apsû's minister, the first word of direct speech in the text, and part of one of Marduk's destinies. Astutely, the

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[24] I take the names Commentary I and II from their edition in Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 135–42. In *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries*, 112–16, Frahm refers to them as "a commentary on *Enūma eliš* I-VII" and "a commentary on the names of Marduk in *Enūma eliš* VII"; their CCP sigla are 1.1.A and 1.1.B.

[25] Commentary I was edited by Eckart Frahm and Enrique Jiménez, "Myth, Ritual, and Interpretation: The Commentary on *Enūma eliš* I–VII and a Commentary on Elamite Month Names," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 4 (2015): 293–343.

[26] Frahm, "Counter-Texts, Commentaries, and Adaptations," 10–12.

commentary glosses it as both *nabnītu*, "creation," and *rigmu*, "noise" (l. 2 and 57'), bringing out the link between sound and creation that recurs in *Enuma Elish* and other cuneiform compositions—what Piotr Michalowski, adapting a phrase by Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel, calls the "creative murmur" of the poem.[27]

While Commentary I is unusual in focusing on a literary text (commentaries on divinatory texts are much more common), it gives us a clear sense of several aspects of cuneiform philology: explaining words that had become obscure and obsolete, interpreting passages to draw out their significance, and revealing associations that it takes to be implicit in the source text. The commentary can easily be seen as "making sense of texts" or resolving the "crises" that would prevent, for a Babylonian reader, a full appreciation of its import. In a nutshell, it is the kind of text that rewards integration in the realm of world philology. Of course, there are major difference between the philological practices of this text and those of contemporary scholarship: for example, modern philologists would suspect that the parallels between ritual actions and mythological scenes are coincidental, and that Commentary I is thus retrospectively establishing a link between the two rather than discovering a link that already existed. Still, its operations are evidently analogous to those practiced by philologists in other places and times, including the modern world, where philologists do often seek to uncover links

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[27] On the meaning of *mummu* in *Enuma Elish,* see Piotr Michalowski, "Presence at the Creation," in *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran*, eds. Tzvi Abusch, John Huehnergard, and Piotr Steinkeller, Harvard Semitic Studies 37 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 381–96. On the relation between sound and creation in Babylonian narrative poetry, see Peter Machinist, "Rest and Violence in the Poem of Erra," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103 (1983): 224–25; and Yağmur Heffron, "Revisiting 'Noise' (*rigmu*) in *Atra-ḫasīs* in Light of Baby Incantations," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 73 (2014): 83–93. The phrase "creative murmur" (*murmure créatrice*) is taken from Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel, *Les chantes du monde: le paysonage sonore de l'ancienne Mésopotamie* (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du midi, 2016), 204; and adopted to *Enuma Elish* in Piotr Michalowski, "The Sound of Creation: The Revolutionary Poetics of *Enuma Elish*," in *Enuma Elish*, ed. Enrique Jiménez, Johannes Haubold, Sophus Helle, and Selena Winsom, Library of Babylonian Literature 1 (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

between literary texts and the real-life practices that make up its *Sitz im Leben*, even as they go about the project differently. Besides, philological traditions in India, China, and medieval Europe all sought to link ritual actions to passages in holy texts, so this is a well-established practice in world philology.[28]

In short, the commentary allows for a comparative consideration of parallels and contrasts that recognizes it as belonging to a more-or-less coherent object of study, which we might term world philology. However, the commentary to which I now turn uses many of the same philological practices in a way that fundamentally challenges a modern notion of what a text is, thus stretching the limit of what "world philology" can encompass.

Auto-Philology and Commentary II

Enuma Elish provides a template for its own interpretation: it lays out in miniature the kind of textual operation it wants to be subjected to. The template is found in Tablet I, just after Ea's defeat of Apsû. Having paralyzed him with a magic spell, bound him, killed him, and made of him a cosmic region, Ea gives him a name: "he called it Apsû, that makes known the shrines" (*imbīšum-ma apsû u'addû ešrēti*, I 76). As noted by Jean-Marie Durand, the second part of the line is an interpretation of Apsû's name.[29] The word Apsû is written in cuneiform with the signs ZU-AB. The first is interpreted, according to its reading zu, as *u'addû*, "to make known"; the second, according to its reading eš₃, as *ešrēti*, "shrines." This procedure, by which two words or sets of words (here the name Apsû and the phrase "'that makes known the shrines") are linked to another through a series of equations at the level of writing, is so widespread in cuneiform commentaries and so

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[28] For an overview of these traditions, see for now the essays collected in Pollock, Elman, and Chang, *World Philology*.

[29] Jean-Marie Durand, "*Enûma Eliš* I 76," *Nouvelles assyriologiques brèves et utilitaires* 1994 (1994): 91, no. 100.

dependent on the cuneiform script itself that it is has earned the name "cuneiform hermeneutics."[30]

Cuneiform signs can be used to establish associations between seemingly disparate concepts because of their multiple meanings. Since each sign can refer to more than one word and sound, the signs can act as *nodes* between those words; especially when, as in the example of Apsû, sequences of signs are split up or recombined to yield new meanings. As a result, "each word can be interpreted in a virtually unlimited number of ways."[31] For example, Commentary I glosses a line that describes Marduk's movements through the night sky as the planet Neberu. In this line, it is said of the gods: "let them look upon him" (*šâšu lū palsūšu*, VII 127). The text then immediately moves into the gods' valediction of Marduk, and perhaps to explain this logical leap from looking to blessing, the commentary notes that *palasu*, "to look at," is near-synonymous and homophonous with *balāṣu*, "to stare," that the latter can bet written as kir_4-šu-gal_2, and that this sequence of signs can also be read *lāban appi*, "to pray" (l. 58'). These series of equations and near-equations proceed according to a transitive principle, so that if a = b and b = c, a = c, regardless of the number of steps involved. Within the logic of cuneiform hermeneutics, every word and especially every cuneiform sign thus has a double function: it carries a given meaning in context *and* acts as a node towards a new meaning.

In equating the name Apsû with the phrase "that makes known the shrines," *Enuma Elish* performs a kind of auto-philology, in that it sets out a principle of interpretation that the readers are then invited to

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[30] An introduction to cuneiform hermeneutics is given in Marc Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks: The Pursuit of Truth in Ancient Babylonia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); a more detailed treatment is found in Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries*, chap. 5. For the application of cuneiform hermeneutics to names in literary texts, see especially Enrique Jiménez, "'As Your Name Indicates': Philological Arguments in Akkadian Disputations," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 5 (2018): 87–105.

[31] Jiménez, "'As Your Name Indicates," 89.

apply, on a much bigger scale, to the fifty names Marduk receives at the end of the epic. This premise is made explicit in the epilogue, which says of Marduk's fifty names: "let the wise and the learned discuss them together, let the father repeat them and make the son grasp them" (*enqu u mūdû mithāriš limtalkū / lišannī-ma abu māra lišāḫiz*, VII 146–47). The object of the couplet—the "them"—are Marduk's fifty names, meaning that the text directly invites a learned analysis of, and the cross-generational transfer of knowledge about, these names. In the world of Babylonian scholarship, it would have seemed natural that this analysis should take the form of what we now call "cuneiform hermeneutics," of the kind we saw with Apsû's name. But in fact, the text makes this premise clear. As several scholars have argued, the narrative of *Enuma Elish* is divided into two acts that mirror one another's plot.[32] Ea's battle against Apsû parallels Marduk's battle against Tiamat in several key aspects (including precise lexical parallelisms), and crucially, they end the same way: Ea and Marduk use the corpses of their defeated watery progenitors to shape the world, yielding one world region in Ea's case and the entire world order in Marduk's. In both cases, this sequence of defeat and creation culminates in an act of naming—Ea's naming of Apsû and the god's naming of Marduk. The parallelism between the two moments of naming thus invites us to apply the logic established for Apsû's name to interpret Marduk's names as well.

This *invitation to interpretation* is carried out in Commentary II.[33] It is preserved in three manuscripts, all stemming from the royal libraries

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[32] See the references collected in Helle, "Two-Act Structure," 195–98.

[33] As noted above, the text was most recently edited by Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 139–42. The first edition and study of the text was by Jean Bottéro, "Les noms de Marduk, l'écriture et la 'logique' en Mésopotamie ancienne," in *Essays on the Ancient Near East in Memory of Jacob Joel Finkelstein*, ed. Maria deJong Ellis, Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences 19 (Hamden: Archon Books, 1977), 5–27. Other studies of Commentary II include Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, trans. Zainab

in Nineveh. It takes as its objects the names of Marduk listed in Tablet VII (ignoring those that appear at the end of Tablet VI) and explicates the links between the names and the destinies that accompany them, or, in Akkadian, between *šumu*, "name," and *šīmtu*, "fates." Some links are readily apparent from the epic itself. The clearest example is name no. 48: "Asharu, who, in accordance with his name, marshals the gods of fate" (*ašaru ša kīma šumīšū-ma īšuru ilī šīmā*, VII 122). The word *ašāru* means "to marshal," so the association between name and activity is straightforward and needs no elaboration. Likewise, some destinies begin as simple translations of a Sumerian name into Akkadian, as with name no. 18: "Shazu is he who knows the gods' hearts" (*šazu mūdê libbi ilī*, VII 35). We do not need Commentary II to tell us that ša₃ means *libbu*, "heart" or that zu can be linked to *mūdû*, "he who knows." Commentary II does trace out such obvious connections, but it also goes much further than that (David Danzig calls it a "hyper-commentary"[34]), in that it links *every single word* in the fates to some sign or sound in the corresponding name.

Take the name Tutu, no. 13, which is followed by the destiny, "Let him create a spell that the gods may be calmed: though they rise up enraged, let them turn back! (lit, let them turn back their chest)" (*libnī-ma šipta ilū linūḫū / aggiš lū tebû linēʾū* [*irass*]*un*, VII 11–12).

Bahrani and Marc Van De Mieroop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 87–102; Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks*, 7–10; Maurizio Viano, "Babylonian Hermeneutics and Heraclitus," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 80 (2021): 231–44; David Danzig, "Name Word Play and Marduk's Fifty Names in *Enūma Eliš*," master's thesis, Yale University, 2013; Antoine Cavigneaux, "Aux sources du midrash: l'herméneutique babylonienne," *Aula Orientalis* 5 (1987): 243–55.

[34] Danzig, "Name Word Play," 152.

Commentary II explains the links between name and fate as follows (l. 11–12):

tu	*banû*	"to create"
tu$_6$	*šiptu*	"spell"
dingir	*ilu*	"god"
ti	*nâḫu*	"to calm"
tu$_4$	*agāgu*	"to rage"
da	*lū*	"though"
tu$_4$	*tebû*	"to rise up"
tu	*ne'û*	"to turn back"
du$_8$	*irtu*	"chest"

Each word of the fate is listed in its grammatical base form and juxtaposed with some element of the name—either a syllable of the name (tu), a graphic variation on that syllable (tu$_6$, tu$_4$), or an aural variation (da, ti, du$_8$). The word dingir represents a determinative, that is, an unpronounced part of the name's spelling: the names of divine beings are preceded by the sign for "god," which is here used to link the name Tutu to the word "god." Some associations between signs and words are straightforward (tu$_6$ is a common sign for *šiptu*, as is dingir for *ilu*), while others rely on the polyvalence of cuneiform signs: DU$_8$ can have the reading gaba, in which it means *irtu*, "chest"; likewise TU$_4$ can be read ib$_2$, meaning *agāgu*, "to rage." Still others rely on more oblique associations: the sign tu can mean *walādu*, "to give birth," which is here treated as equivalent to *banû*, "to create."[35] The first editor of the commentary, Jean Bottéro, suspects that TI is equated with *nāḫu*, "calm," because it is taken to be an abbreviation of the sign tir, which in one lexical list is equated with *nāḫu*; the same principle applies to TU, which would be an abbreviation of tul, corresponding to

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[35] Or the text might be treating tu as homophonous with du$_3$, the conventional sign for *banû*.

ne'û, "to turn back."[36] But some associations are simply too obscure for us to follow, such as the one between TU$_4$ and *tebû*, "to rise up."

Sometimes, the commentary employs chains of associations of the kind we saw in Commentary I. To explain the link between the name Tutu-ziku and the word *tēliltu*, "purification," the commentary first links the sound /ku/ in Ziku to the sign ku$_3$; then that sign, by a conventional reading, to the word *ellu*, "pure"; and then that word, by semantic expansion, to *tēliltu* (l. 19). By a similar logic of expansion, the sign DINGIR, meaning "god," *ilu* (under the reading dingir) or "heaven," *šamû* (under the reading an), is also made to mean "lord," *bēlu* (l. 20); "administrator," *pāqidu* (l. 85); "head," *rēšu* (l. 92); "father," *abu* (l. 13); and "star," *kakkabu* (l. 130).[37] Unusual associations abound in Commentary II, as when the sign DU$_3$ is linked to the word *kakku,* "weapon," because that sign was called *kakku* by the scribes (l. 91). In one case, as Bottéro notes, the link between the sign SA and the word *bītu*, "house," is difficult to explain except by the visual similarity between the signs SA and E$_2$, with the latter meaning *bītu* (l. 21).[38]

What is stunning about Commentary II is how many different kinds of links it establishes: the names are linked to signs and signs to words by principles of synonymy, homophony, homography, aural abbreviations, semantic expansions, associations through both Sumerian and Akkadian,[39] and even graphic resemblance. The commentary multiplies not just the meanings of each sign (as when one sign is made to correspond to different words), but also their *modes of meaning*: within the logic of Commentary II, signs, words, names, and

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[36] Bottéro, "Les noms de Marduk," 22.

[37] Bottéro, "Les noms de Marduk," 22. It is unclear whether the cuneiform scholars of the first millennium BCE knew that the sign DINGIR began its life, in the third millennium, as a pictograph of a star, since it does not usually mean "star," *kakkabu* (for which the sign mul is used). If they did know, the equation in l. 130 would be another example of graphic association.

[38] Bottéro, "Les noms de Marduk," 21, fn. 48.

[39] Including the emesal dialect of Sumerian, as noted by Cavigneaux, "Aus sources du Midrash," 247–48.

sounds can signify in any number of different and simultaneous ways. Those multiple meanings and modes are then interlinked to form chains of association that create an endlessly branching semiotic system.[40] As always in cuneiform commentaries, signs are treated as nodes that connect meaning to meaning, but in Commentary II, these nodes are made even more multidimensional than they would otherwise be, since they are used to establish a burgeoning thicket of possible links (and links between links) that is constantly expanding our sense of how much meaning is contained in each of Marduk's names. As already noted by Marc Van De Mieroop, one may borrow a term from the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to say that Commentary II presents us with a *rhizomatic semiosis.* By this, I mean a non-hierarchical, ever-branching system of reference, where principles of association proliferate almost as fast as the associations themselves and where there is no inherent hierarchy between different forms of signification: various modes of meaning are assigned equal standing in the exploration of the links between names and fates.[41]

It is worth noting that, while Commentary II picks up on the epic's own invitation for philological analysis and runs with it, as it were, by developing a far stronger sense of the equivalence between names and fates. As shown by Anmar Abdulillah Fadhil and Enrique Jiménez, one can detect in the manuscripts of the epic and the later commentaries on it various stages of interpretation, as scholars became increasingly

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[40] For a study of this system of reference (though one that is not focused on Commentary II), see Eckart Frahm, "The Perils of Omnisignificance: Language and Reason in Mesopotamian Hermeneutics," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 5 (2018): 107–29.

[41] Marc Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks*, 222–23. The term *rhizome* was introduced to cultural studies in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). For the applicability of this concept to ancient Near Eastern studies, see also Markus Hilgert, "Von 'Listenwissenschaft' und 'epistemischen Dingen': Konzeptuelle Annäherungen an altorientalische Wissenspraktiken," *Zeitschrift für allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 40 (2009): 300–5.

interested in associations at the level of writing.[42] The example they give is the spelling of Marduk's name, AMAR-UTU, 'calf of the sun-god', which poses a puzzle because Marduk was not seen as a solar deity and had no obvious connection to the sun-god Shamash. In the original epic (I 102), the puzzle is explained as follows. Marduk is the son of the sun (*māri šamšu*) because he is the sun of the gods (*šamšu ša il*[*āni*]), meaning their king: he is the 'calf of the sun-god' in that he is the righteous heir to divine kingship. But the later manuscripts made a different kind of link between the sun and Marduk, based not on semantics but on spelling, by rewriting the name Shamash as $^{d}ša_3$-$maš_2$, which could also be read Shazu, one of Marduk's fifty names. The scribes of these manuscripts, like the author of the commentaries, were thus interested in a different set of associations than the author of the epic, even as they all had the same aim. Likewise, the epic makes a straightforward association between the name Asharu and the activity of *ašāru*, but Commentary II—whose comments on this name have unfortunately not been preserved—would presumably have made a much more thorough set of connections. As Jiménez notes, "it would have argued that each word of the couplet was derived from the name Ašāru. As is often the case, Mesopotamian commentaries over-elaborate a feature already present in the base text in order to demonstrate its internal coherence."[43]

Though its textual operations may appear surprising and sometimes surreal to modern readers, the links laid out in Commentary II are no mere wordplay. As noted by Jiménez, in a culture that is convinced of "the connection between names and their nominata, decoding the origin of a word is not simply an exercise in etymology: inasmuch as the names are related to the inner nature of things, etymology is a true

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[42] Anmar Abdulillah Fadhil and Enrique Jiménez, "Literary Texts from the Sippar Library II: The Epic of Creation," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 111(2012): 217–18.

[43] Jiménez, "'As Your Name Indicates,'" 101.

epistemological endeavor."[44] While the semiotic associations marshalled by Commentary II to make its argument may be constantly proliferating, it pursues its goal with single-minded dedication. It aims to show that the names and the fates that Marduk receives at the end of *Enuma Elish* are one and the same: the names *are* the fates. Every aspect of the latter is contained in the former, so that speaking Marduk's names is for all intents and purposes synonymous with speaking the sentences that accompanies them. Commentary II reveals that the names and the fates are linked by a thoroughgoing equivalence, whose full extent may not be obvious at first but which can be revealed through philological analysis. In short, Commentary II shows that the text being commented upon—the list of Marduk's names—is more than just a text: the names are also, according to a perfect if non-obvious equivalence, a set of activities by which the world is brought into being.

Elements of Existence

Commentary II is surprisingly explicit about its underlying logic. The fate that accompanies the name Tutu-ziku includes the word *imbû*, "they named" (VII 19), the base of which is *nabû*, "to name." The commentary first links the syllable /tu/ to the sign du₃, which it glosses, conventionally, as *banû*, "to create," before stating that *banû* is equivalent to *nabû*.[45] This is a striking assertion. Granted, the link between the two words is partly motivated by their aural similarity, but the equivalence of *nabû* and *banû*—naming and creating—is critical for the commentary's project. As Jean Bottéro puts it, the word *nabû*, "to name," must here and perhaps more generally be understood as, "faire exister selon les qualités exprimées par le nom que l'on énonce"

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[44] Ibid., 88.

[45] The word is in fact spelled NI-*bu-u₂*, but since it is glossing the word *imbû*, the base form *nabû* must be meant. The importance of the line is already noted by Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries*, 116.

("to bring into existence according to the qualities of the name one pronounces for it").[46]

But how can creation and names be thought of as related, let alone identical? Once again, Commentary II is here explicating and furthering a premise that is already present in *Enuma Elish*.[47] The epic draws a connection between three concepts, a connection that is crucial for understanding Commentary II. The three concepts are names, destinies, and visible existence. In its opening lines, the epic describes a world in which there are no definite shapes, words, names, or fates; all that exists is the fluid, formless mass of Tiamat's and Apsû's waters as they intermingle in a primordial, protean procreation. This "time before time" is described as follows: "when none of the gods had been brought forth, had not been given names and had not decreed destinies" (*enūma ilū lā šūpû manāma / šuma lā zukkurū šīmāti lā šīmū*, I 7–8). Through negation and alliteration, the text concatenates three features of existence in our minds, three features that it views as fundamental and connected: *šūpû*, *šumu*, and *šīmtu*. To exist, according to this view, is to have a visible shape (*šūpû*), a name or word (*šumu*), and a role to play within the world order (*šīmtu*).[48] This is the logic that structures the creation of Apsû, as described above. After killing Apsû, Ea binds him in place, so that, rather than a fluid and limitless sea, he becomes a definite location with an internal architecture (I 69–78). He

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[46] Bottéro, "Les noms de Marduk," 22.

[47] The following interpretation of *Enuma Elish*, and especially of the three elements of existence, is heavily based on Sophus Helle, "The Shape of Water: Content and Form in *Enuma Elish*," in *Enuma Elish*, ed. Enrique Jiménez, Johannes Haubold, Sophus Helle, and Selena Winsom, Library of Babylonian Literature 1 (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

[48] I translate the word *šūpû* as "to bring into being," but I also stress its connotations of bringing into *visible* form. As suggested by the entries in the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, the word can mean "to make manifest" or "to bring forth" in general, but it can also refer specifically to making something manifest visually or aurally, that is, making it perceivable: "to make appear," "to proclaim," to announce"; see *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1971), s.v. *šūpû*. My emphasis on bringing forth into not just visible but *definite* shapes in the logic of *Enuma Elish* draws on Helle, "Shape of Water."

then gives this location a name, Apsû, and in the same breath, a fate that is intimately linked to that name—the revealing of shrines. Only then can Apsû be said to have achieved existence, according to the logic of *Enuma Elish.*

This link between names, fates, and appearance is found throughout the text. For example, when Marduk creates the moon, he instructs it to wax and wane over the course of the month, saying: "You shine with horns to mark the naming of the days" (*qarnī nabâta ana uddû zakāri ūmī*, V 16). The line is a pun on the word *nabû*, which can, as we have seen, mean "to name," but here means "to shine," implying that one is the precondition for the other. It is because the moonlight keeps changing according to predictable patterns that days can be separated and thus named as the first, second, third, etc. day of the month. The visible appearance of the days (*šūpû*) allows for their naming (*šumu*), and it is the cosmic role of the moon, as established by Marduk, to provide this differentiation (*šīmtu*). Words, names, and language thus become essential to the world order described in *Enuma Elish*: the end point of Marduk's reshaping of the originally fluid seas is a cosmos organized by a linguistic logic. The constituent elements of our world—days, places, persons, gods, features of the landscape, and so on—all come into themselves by acquiring a name; and linguistic links (such as those between light and names or between names and creation) are essential for understanding how the world works. Language does not just describe the world in *Enuma Elish*; it is a fundamental part of its ontological structure.

The triple equation between names, destinies, and bringing forth is not only the template Marduk imposes on the world, as we saw with the moon; his own activities as cosmogonic creator also follow the same script (pun intended). That is the cosmic truth which the recitation of

the fifty names at the end of the epic reveals to the readers.[49] In the lines immediately before this recitation begins, the gods say: "Let us give him fifty names, so that his ways may be brought forth, and likewise his doings" (*i nibbī-ma hamšā šumīšu / alkatuš lū šūpât epšetuš lū mašlat*, VI 121–2). Once more, the triple association is made explicit. The gods declare that they will call Marduk by fifty names (*šumu*) to bring forth (*šūpû*) his role in the world order. While the text does not use the word *šīmtu* here, it seems clear that *alkatuš* and *epšetuš*, "his ways" and "his doings," work as a neat hendiadys—a symmetrical pair expressing the same idea. In short, the couplet that introduces the list of names announces that these will make manifest a set of corresponding activities, according to the logic of *šumu–šīmtu–šūpû.*

And that is precisely what we see in the list of names and fates. Some of these fates are one-time events associated with the creation of the world (as Marukka, he eased the gods' lives by creating humankind, VI 133–34); some are recurrent, ongoing activities associated with the maintenance of the civilized world (as Asari, he provides plants, farmland, and watering canals). But in each case, these cosmogonic roles are a reflex of the names they accompany, as stated at the outset of the list and made especially clear by names like Asharu. As Marc Van De Mieroop puts it, "[u]sing the same procedures of name analysis, Marduk was connected to agriculture, wisdom, warfare, and other areas of life—every aspect of civilization came into being at the time of creation through this naming process."[50] The existence of the world is thus directly predicated on, and shaped by, Marduk's names. This is the point that Commentary II seizes on and seeks to prove beyond doubt. The acrobatic equations it draws, which may seem baroque or bizarre to modern eyes, strain the limits of cuneiform hermeneutics to

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[49] For the language of revelation, see the epilogue to the epic, which describes the names as having to be "revealed," *likallim* (VII 145), by the author, and the text as a "revelation," *taklimtu* (VII 157).

[50] Mieroop, Philosophy Before the Greeks, 9

establish an absolute identity between names and fates, thereby proving that one is the expression of the other. The fates are Marduk's names and vice versa, in the same way that a sign is its reading. The two are mutual and simultaneous expressions: the names express the fates, the fates realize the names. If one were to doubt this, one can consult Commentary II to find every element of the names and every element of the fates assiduously interlinked.

What the commentary thus establishes is the linguistic structure that permeates the world. Studying Marduk's names with the techniques of cuneiform hermeneutics will thus unlock the patterns that structure the universe, because every aspect of the world around us can be linked to Marduk's cosmogonic activities, and every one of those activities can be linked to his names. The implication of Commentary II is thus that the whole word can be studied with the tools of philology.

Philology of the World

Many philological traditions from around the world have centered on the study of sacred texts. As Glenn Most notes, in many cultures philology begins with "a fundamental and potentially deeply unsettling paradox": it is precisely those texts that hold the greatest cultural authority that are copied the most, and so generate the most variants and misspellings, and so require most philological engagement.[51] While not inherently a religious activity, philology has thus often taken religious texts as its starting point and primary focus. The European philological tradition is no exception, as shown by the centrality of biblical and Talmudic exegesis up until the nineteenth century.[52] In turn, this history lent premodern philology a concern not just with sacred texts, but also with the revelations contained in those texts. Since religious texts are taken by the practitioners of their

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[51] Most, "What Is a Critical Edition?" 166.

[52] For the role of biblical criticism in Western philology, see Turner, *Philology*, chaps. 1–4 and 8.

respective tradition to reveal some essential truth about the workings of the divine, they are also generally seen as revealing a fundamental truth about the origin, structure, and proper maintenance of the universe we inhabit. A fuller understanding of the sacred text—achieved by the tools of philology—will thus yield a fuller understanding of the world, according to the sacred text itself and the philological tradition that emerged around it. In this sense, one may speak not just of world philology but also of a "philology of the world," especially but not only when the subject of philological analysis is a religious text that purports to uncover the true nature of the cosmos.[53]

However, there is a stronger sense in which a philological tradition may be thought of as practicing a "philology of the world," and Commentary II is an ideal example of that stronger sense. This commentary practices a philology of the world not just insofar as it assumes that a proper understanding of *Enuma Elish* will lead to a proper understanding of Marduk, but also insofar as it seeks to show that the list of fifty names is one manifestation of the workings of Marduk—the other manifestation being the universe that these workings bring about. If naming and creating are the same, and Commentary II postulates that they are, and if the names of the god are inextricably linked to the fates that compel Marduk to create and maintain the world order, then a philological study of Marduk's names represents a direct study of creation. Because the creation of the world has a textual nature, it is not that the text of *Enuma Elish* describes, unveils or allows us to glimpse a hidden truth about the structure of the world, as might be the case for some other religious texts: this text *is* the structure of the world; the two are intertwined on a deep

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[53] The same is arguably true of the philological study of philosophical texts, e.g., in the commentarial tradition of Latin, Arabic, and Jewish Medieval philosophy, which frequently blended the interpretation of obscure passages in ancient philosophical texts with the advancement of new philosophical arguments about the world. See e.g. the introduction in Andrea Falcon, "Commentators on Aristotle," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-commentators/>.

ontological level.[54] It is beyond the scope of this article to establish whether this stronger sense of a "philology of the world" is widespread or rare in the ancient world, but my suspicion is that it is more common than has been suspected so far.[55]

This set of assumptions yields a special form of philological engagement, in that it allows for the possibility of a philological relation to what we would see as the non-textual world—simply because there is, according to *Enuma Elish*, no such thing as a non-textual part of the world, except for the fluid, formless nature of Tiamat and Apsû.[56] The rest of the world can be, and indeed was, interpreted as a form of text, not just in *Enuma Elish* but in the cuneiform tradition more broadly. Take the night sky. As we already saw with the moon, *Enuma Elish* recounts how Marduk assigns positions and cyclical patterns to the astral manifestations of the gods (including himself: he is present in the night sky as the planet Neberu). Any deviation from these patterns was seen as a sign from the gods, an omen to be interpreted, and the practice of cuneiform astronomy-astrology developed around the interpretation of these perceived irregularities.[57] The movement of the stars thus came to be treated as a text to be interpreted, as made explicit in the expression *šiṭir šamê*, "the writing of the heavens," meaning the starry sky. The implication of *Enuma Elish* and cuneiform divination—both astrological and otherwise—is that the whole universe was a tablet on which the gods wrote messages for humans to interpret. As Piotr Michalowski puts it

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[54] One might compare the difference I am drawing to that between a user manual for a digital system, which merely describes the system, and the HTML code of a website, which *is* the website in another form: that is, a system of representation that determines how the website functions.

[55] See e.g. the comparison between Babylonian and Greek concepts of names in Jiménez, "'As Your Name Indicates,'" 87–88; see also the comparison in Viano, "Babylonian Hermeneutics."

[56] The following paragraph is based on the arguments of Bottéro, as presented in *Mesopotamia*, chap. 6.

[57] See e.g. John M. Steele, "Making Sense of Time: Observational and Theoretical Calendars," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Cultures*, eds. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 473–74.

in his study of *Enuma Elish*, by the first millennium BCE, "the universe had become a library, and a Babylonian one at that."[58]

The textual logic underlying the practice of cuneiform divination has been studied extensively by Jean Bottéro, who identifies a number of connections between the two, such as the pervasive polysemy that is characteristic of both the writing system and the omen system, or the word- and sign-based associations that recur in divinatory texts.[59] This association between omens and the writing systems meant that cuneiform scholars, who were trained in both, were taught to acquire a structurally similar hermeneutic relation to both obscure texts, which were to be interpreted with the tools of philology, and obscure objects, which were to be interpreted with the tools of divination. And since omens could be found everywhere (not just in the night sky or the entrails of sacrificed animals, but also in the movement of animals, the patterns of plants, malformed births, natural phenomena, the cityscape, and even human behavior), cuneiform scholars came to see the entire world in philological terms.

Building on Bottéro's argument, Van De Mieroop makes the more general claim that cuneiform was viewed by the ancient scholars as the key to understanding the world. In Van De Mieroop's study of what he controversially termed "cuneiform philosophy," Commentary II is the first text he unpacks in detail, since it exemplifies the centrality of the cuneiform script to Babylonian thought. The true focus of Van De Mieroop's book is not commentaries, but another genre that is found across philological traditions worldwide: the lexical list. These seemingly dry and chaotic lists of words represent, according to Van

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[58] Michalowski, "Presence at the Creation," 396.

[59] Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, chap. 6. See Marc Van De Mieroop, *Before and After Babel: Writing as Resistance in Ancient Near Eastern Empires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 193–94, who explicitly describes the cuneiform study of omens as a philological activity.

De Mieroop, the "keystone of Babylonian philosophy,"[60] as they are the clearest instance of how knowledge in the cuneiform world was organized: not according to hierarchies, taxonomies, classifications, theoretical paradigms, or random associations, but according to the cuneiform script. Lexical lists are structured by the polyvalent meanings, graphic similarities, and aural associations that inhere in cuneiform, providing a template by which one could organize all sorts of information—about plants and professions, birds and stones, pots and gods—and even generate new information, as scholars followed the patterns set up by the lists to create new terms that suggested new possible realities or new connections between seemingly unrelated entities.[61] The lexical lists were intellectually productive, because an exploration of links at the level of writing was thought to provide direct insight into links at the level of reality. As Van De Mieroop puts it, "Babylonian scholars grasped reality through its written form."[62]

As a result, practices that would be easily identified as philological in most other cultures—compiling lists of rare words, commenting on texts, making sense of obscure passages, drawing out their hidden associations, exploring the semantic range of a given phrase, and so on—take on a characteristic quality in the cuneiform tradition, because thinking about the texts and thinking about the world cannot be separated. Common philological practices such as commentaries, lexical lists, and hermeneutics therefore structured the scholar's relation to the world at large, with *Enuma Elish,* especially as interpreted by Commentary II, providing the clearest explanation for the link between the two.

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[60] Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks*, 83.

[61] Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks*, chap. 3.

[62] Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks*, 9.

However, many questions remain about the nature of this link.[63] Even a close examination of *Enuma Elish* leaves many questions unresolved. Consider again the line, "Asharu, who, in accordance with his name, marshals the gods of fate" (*ašaru ša kīma šumīšū-ma īšuru ilī šīmā*, VII 122). As pointed out by Jiménez, the phrase *kīma šumīšū*, "in accordance with his name," is a technical phrase used to introduce a philological interpretation of a (typically divine) name.[64] But what exactly does it mean? Much depends on the single word *kīma*, which is translated here "in accordance with." According to the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, it can mean "like, in the manner of, as, according to, corresponding to, instead of, in lieu of,"[65] with each translation having different consequences for our understanding of how word and world were linked in the Babylonian imaginary. Is the relation between them one of identity (e.g., the name Asharu and the fate of marshalling are somehow the same, just in different forms), formal analogy (e.g., the name Asharu and the fate of marshalling are similarly structured, but not the same), causality (e.g., Asharu's fate is to marshals because his name is "Asharu," or his name is "Asharu" because his fate is to marshal), common causation (e.g., the name Asharu and the fate of marshalling are the simultaneous manifestation of a third principle), or something else entirely? It is hard if not impossible to tell based on the sources we have, and different Babylonian scholars may have answered the question differently, assuming the question even made sense to them.

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[63] See especially the discussion in Viano, "Babylonian Hermeneutics," where he draws a distinction between the relation of equivalence posited by Van De Mieroop, the relation of analogy posited by himself, and the relation of arbitrariness posited by C. Jay Crisostomo in *Translation as Scholarship: Language, Writing, and Bilingual Education in Ancient Babylonia*, Studies of the Ancient Near Eastern Record 22 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 141–44. As suggested below, it is likely that different Babylonian scholars held different views on this matter, especially across different communities and periods.

[64] Jiménez, "'As Your Name Indicates.'"

[65] *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1971), s.v. kīma.

What is certain is that some *relation* between names and fates existed, that it permeated reality at a deep level, and that it imparted to cuneiform scholars a philological approach not just to their texts but to the cosmos at large. The resulting set of practices is what I have termed "philology of the world." As I noted, a philology of the world is not unique to the Babylonian sources; the same notion of philology is found, in various degrees of "strength," in several other traditions, especially those that are centered on religious revelation. Another example of philology of the world being practiced in a "strong" sense is, arguably, the Rabbinic tradition.[66] But crucially, while I see myself and my work as part of world philology, I do not practice a philology of the world. Few of my colleagues do. I believe that the underlying structures of physical reality are best studied by physicists, and the underlying structures of historical texts are best studied by philologists. Babylonian scholars would not have recognized that difference, and this makes their philology profoundly different from mine. In what sense and to what extent, then, are our practices comparable?

Summary: Comparing Worlds

The main argument of this essay is that similar-looking philological practices can hide profound differences in the ontological assumptions that underlie them. Commentary II is a particularly extreme case of a common philological practice—commenting on a base text to clarify its intentions by exploring the possible meanings of the words and signs in it—being put to an uncommon use. At its core, Commentary II seeks to resolve a basic "crisis of reading" in *Enuma Elish*: the text posits some relation between names and fates, but what is the nature of that relation? Starting from the idea that cuneiform signs have many

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[66] Another example of philology of the world being practiced in a "strong" sense is, arguably, the Rabbinic tradition; see the overview in Elman, "Striving for Meaning."

meanings and that names are inherently connected with the cosmic role of the things they name, Commentary II develops the much more radical claim that naming and creation (*nabû* and *banû*) are completely equivalent, meaning that there is an absolute isomorphism between Marduk's names and his fates—that is, between the text on which it is commenting (the list of names in Tablet VII of *Enuma Elish*) and the world order that Marduk created and continues to maintain. The two things, text and world, are as alike as Asharu and *asharu*, or as the sign dingir and its reading *ilu*, "god." Studying one is tantamount to studying the other, and philology thus escapes what we might see as the textual realm from which it arose, because everything, in the world of *Enuma Elish*, is encompassed and structured by the logic of texts.

What the case of Commentary II suggests is that, if it is to be a coherent field, world philology must rest its comparative weight on practices and not the conceptualizations of those practices. That is not to say that Commentary II is without parallel in the history of world philology; on the contrary, I have noted that some aspects of its "philology of the world" are widespread in the exegesis of sacred texts. Nor is it to say that comparative study depends on complete similarity: comparison, as an academic activity, relies on a mixture of similarity and difference to be meaningful.[67] Rather, the claim I am making concerns the transhistorical status of philology and the relation between that status and the nature of texts.

If we wish to claim that Babylonian commentaries can be seen as instances of ancient philology, we cannot base that claim on a terminological equivalence: there is no Akkadian concept or even set of concepts that can serve as a counterpart to the English word "philology." That is one reason why the forthcoming study of cross-cultural philology, the massive encyclopedic volume *Philological*

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[67] For a recent reflection on the epistemic foundations of cross-cultural comparison, see Sheldon Pollock, "Conundrums of Comparison," *Know: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 1 (2017): 273–94.

Practices, makes practice central to its comparative project: one cannot compare Indian, Chinese, and Babylonian terms for lexicography, for the latter does not exist; but one can compare the ways in which lexicography was practiced. In this essay, I have further argued that, aside from the problem of terminology, we also cannot base the claim that premodern, non-Western texts can be seen as "philological" on their having a similar understanding of texts or textual analysis.

In short, there is a profound difference between what the author(s) of Commentary II saw themselves as doing when they noted different readings of a cuneiform sign and what we see ourselves as doing when we carry out that exact same activity.[68] It is therefore the *activity itself* that allows us to call their work philological. Philology cannot have both a cross-cultural reach and a coherent theory of texts. If philology is a category that transcends the bounds of Western modernity—and I believe that it is—then this category must be divorced from a conceptualization of what texts are and what relation they have to the world. The practice of philology is cross-cultural and transhistorical; the theory of philology is local and context-dependent. Doing philology, in short, does not commit us to any specific understanding of texts or of philology itself.

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[68] For "modern" philological analyses of Marduk's names, see Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 147–68; and Danzig, "Name Word Play."