

Bel as Trickster in Berossus' Creation Myth

According to the hellenized Babylonian historian Berossus, the god Bel-Marduk “takes off his own head” (*aphelein tēn heautou kephalēn*), and “the rest of the gods” mix the blood flowing from the head with earth to create human beings (*BNJ* 680 F 1b 7). Scholars have long seen a connection between Berossus' account and other Babylonian creation myths, including those found in *Atrahasis* (the god Ilawela is slain, and his blood is mixed with earth to create humans) and in *Enuma Elish* (the god Qingu is slain, and his blood is used to create humans) (Dalley 2013). What has puzzled scholars is that Bel removes his own head (Dillery 230). To deal with this difficulty, some have even posited textual corruption (De Breucker). In this paper I argue two things about this particular myth: first, that the key to understanding Bel's decapitation is to read him as a trickster figure; and second, that Bel takes on the mythic function of the trickster Ea, who plays such a prominent role in other Babylonian myths about human creation.

In the myth told by Berossus, Bel exhibits two trickster qualities. One, Bel has the type of malleable body that is characteristic of tricksters (Hyde 51-4). Much as Bel removes his head, tricksters can have body parts removed, even if it is usually others that do the removing. For example, the Hebrew Serpent (apparently) has his legs permanently removed (*Gen.* 3.14); the Greek Prometheus has his liver removed (by being eaten) on a daily basis, before it magically regenerates (*Hes. Theog.* 523-25); the Native American Raven has his gizzard temporarily removed (Swanton 14); and the West African Anansi has his head fall off—when he sings a song taught to him by river spirits—and then relocated to his behind (Rattray 66-71; Pelton 58). Two, as tricksters often are, Bel is tied specifically to human creation. Ea has a hand in creating humans in both *Atrahasis* and *Enuma Elish*. Prometheus not only leads to the creation of the first woman, Pandora, through his theft of fire (*Hes. Op.* 47-99, *Theog.* 565-616), but also is said to

create human beings himself out of earth and water (Ov. *Met.* 1.82-3). Even Raven (re)creates humans out of leaves (Swanton 18).

As Berossus tells the myth, Bel effectively takes over Ea's position as creator of human beings. If the creation myth in *Enuma Elish* is one step removed from that in *Atrahasis*, then Berossus' creation myth is two steps removed. In *Atrahasis* (Old Babylonian Version, Tablet 1; Dalley 2000: 14-6; Foster 235-36) it is Ea (Sumerian Enki) who proposes the creation of humans, and he then has the creator goddess Mami/Nintu carry out this creation. In *Enuma Elish* (Tablet 6; Dalley 2000: 260-62; Foster 469-70), which celebrates the ascension of the Babylonian patron deity Marduk to kingship of the gods, Marduk assumes part of Ea's responsibility: it is Marduk's idea to create humans, but Ea's to use the blood of Qingu to create them. In Berossus' account, Bel has fully assumed Ea's role as an agent of human creation; Ea is nowhere to be found, and Bel's own blood is used to create humans. Given this assumption of Ea's characteristics as a trickster by Bel, therefore, this particular passage (*BNJ* 680 F 1b 7) is unlikely to be corrupt.

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