

The Babylonian Akitu Festival: Rectifying the King or Renewing the Cosmos?

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The Babylonian Akitu festival has played a pivotal role in the development of theories of religion, myth and ritual; yet the purpose of the festival remains a point of contention among both historians of religion and Assyriologists. The historian of religion J. Z. Smith has suggested that the festival functioned as a piece of national-religious propaganda. He argues that the rite asserted the legitimacy of the foreigners who ruled Babylon during the Hellenistic age.¹ Smith thus rejects an older consensus, associated with scholars such as A. J. Wensink, M. Eliade, I. Engnell, H. Frankfort, T. H. Gaster, and W. G. Lambert, according to whom the Akitu rituals exemplify an archaic ideology of the center; through its ceremonies primeval chaos was again subdued, and the world was renewed.² In spite of Smith's stimulating challenge to the older consensus, several features of the Babylonian Akitu do show that the festival was intended to destroy and subsequently renew the cosmos. Oddly, the earlier scholars failed to cite these features and instead focused on extremely dubious data. A revised version of the older consensus best accounts for the Akitu festival described in Neo-Babylonian texts. The festival indeed exalts a sacred center, but its worldview cannot be portrayed as archaic, since it stems from a highly developed urban culture.

According to the older view, the festival (described in the ritual published by F. Thureau-Dangin in *Rituels Accadiens*³) represents a descent into chaos which

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1. See "A Pearl of Great Price and a Cargo of Yams," in *Imagining Religion From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, 1982), 90–101, 156–62. (This article originally appeared in *History of Religions* 16 [1976], 1–19.) A similar discussion appears in "Wisdom and Apocalyptic," in *Map is Not Territory* (Leiden, 1978), esp. 71–74.

2. See A. J. Wensink, "The Semitic New Year and the Origin of Eschatology," *Acta Orientalia* 1 (1923), 159–99; M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York, 1959), 51–62; I. Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1967), 33–37; H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, 1948), 313–33; T. H. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, NY, 1961), 61–64.

3. F. Thureau-Dangin published the cuneiform text with transliteration and translation in his *Rituels Accadiens* (Paris, 1921), 127–54 (hereafter *RAcc.*). A recent translation appears in M. E. Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda, MD, 1993), 441–47, replacing the older translation by A. Sachs in *ANET*³, 331–34.

ultimately led to the re-establishment of cosmic, theological, and political order. Some scholars asserted that the Akitu included a re-enactment of Tiamat's defeat by Marduk,⁴ an event that was explicitly mentioned during the festival when *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian epic of Marduk the creator, was recited. The festival presents an outstanding instance of what Eliade called "the periodic repetition of Creation and the periodic regeneration of time";⁵ it actuates the irruption of primordial—and hence dangerous or sacred—time into mundane time, an irruption that both threatens and enriches cosmic order.⁶ This interpretation of the Akitu has deeply influenced attitudes towards Babylonian culture and assessments of ritual and of festival calendars throughout the Levant.⁷

In his brilliant and penetrating articles, Smith denied the Akitu is related to any alleged abolition of time or re-anchoring of cosmic order. Rather, it reflects a religious phenomenon also evident in Jewish apocalypticism, Melanesian cargo cults, and, most especially, the West Ceramese myth of Hainuwele: namely, a native response to foreign domination. Smith's repudiation of the older interpretation rests, I think, on three factors. He makes much of the late date of the Akitu program published by Thureau-Dangin: the cuneiform tablets date to the Seleucid period. Ergo, for Smith, one would be wrong to assume that this ritual stems from what one might call classical (that is, pre-Persian) Mesopotamia; it must be read in the context of a later era in which Mesopotamia had come under the control of foreigners in the wake of Alexander's conquest.⁸ Second, Smith insists on a precise use of sources, and he notes that the consensus picture of the Akitu festival mixes evidence from a Seleucid tablet depicting a Babylonian festival with data culled from many different

4. See W. G. Lambert, "The Great Battle of the Mesopotamian Religious Year: The Conflict in the Akitu House," *Iraq* 25 (1963), 189–90. See also T. Jacobsen, "Religious Drama in Ancient Mesopotamia," in H. Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts, eds., *Unity and Diversity* (Baltimore, 1975), 73–74; Gaster, *Thespis*, 62.

5. This phrase appears in *Cosmos*, 111.

6. To be sure, various scholars handled this theme in different ways; for some (e.g., Frankfort; and note also G. Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 2nd ed. [Harmondsworth, 1980], 368), the re-ordering of the universe entailed first of all atonement by the king on behalf of the nation. Similarly, some regard the Babylonian Akitu not so much as renewing the cosmos but as renewing nature—i.e., they see the Akitu as a fertility festival related to the cult of Dumuzi; again, see Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 313–33, and Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 365. The interpretation of Akitu as a ceremony of atonement or fertility ritual is summarized (and subject to convincing criticism) by A. J. Black, "The New Year Ceremonies in Ancient Babylon," *Religion* 11 (1981), 48–49 and 54.

7. Especially in the work of the "myth and ritual school" concerning Israelite New Year's festivals, on which see the useful summary in A. R. Johnson, "Hebrew Conceptions of Kingship," in S. H. Hooke, ed., *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship* (Oxford, 1958), 220–22, 225–28. See also Gaster, *Thespis*, 17–19, 61–64. My concern in this article is not specifically with the questions raised by this school (e.g., what is the precise relation between myth and ritual? does myth generate ritual or vice versa?). It is clear from the recitation of *Enuma Elish* that the Babylonian Akitu ritual is related to a myth, but the one did not give rise to the other. Other Akitu festivals existed long before *Enuma Elish* (see below), and there is no reason to suspect that *Enuma Elish* was composed specifically for the Babylonian Akitu (differences between *Enuma Elish* and the Babylonian Akitu are mentioned below, p. 91; though minor, they would be inexplicable if the epic were composed specifically for the festival). For reservations regarding the myth and ritual school's treatment of the Akitu festival, see J. Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (Berkeley, 1959), 436–46.

8. See especially his article, "Wisdom and Apocalyptic," 68–72.

periods and several Mesopotamian cities. Finally, throughout much of his work, Smith questions, reformulates, or challenges the archetypal interpretation of religion associated with Eliade,⁹ and though he does not mention Eliade by name in his articles on Akitu, this larger object of his polemic seems clear.

Smith's analysis of the Akitu program focuses on a particularly odd feature—the negative confession of the king, which immediately followed his ritual humiliation on the fifth day of the festival:

When he (the king) arrives before Bēl [= Marduk], the high Priest leaves, taking the mace, the loop and the scepter. He (also) takes the crown of his kingship. He then brings them before Bēl and places them on a pedestal before Bēl. He leaves and strikes the king's cheek. He places [the king] behind him and brings him before Bēl. He drags him in by his ears. He forces him to kneel down on the ground. The king says the following only once.

I have not sinned, Lord of all Lands! I have not neglected your divinity!

I have not caused the destruction of Babylon! I have not ordered its dissolution!

[I have not . . .] the Esagil! I have not forgotten its rituals!

I have not struck the cheek of those under my protection!

. . . I have not belittled them!

[I have not . . .] *the walls* of Babylon! I have not destroyed its outer fortifications!

. . . .

After (the High Priest) has spoken, the king retains his dignity as usual. (The High Priest) retrieves the mace, loop, scepter, and crown and hands them back over to the king. He strikes the king's cheek. If, as he strikes his cheek, tears flow, Bēl is friendly. If tears do not flow, Bēl is angry. The enemy will arise and bring about his downfall.¹⁰

“What *native* king,” Smith asks,

ever contemplated, or was guilty of, destroying or overthrowing his capital city, smashing its walls, or neglecting or destroying its major temple, Ezida? These would be inconceivable actions for a native king. But these *were* the actions of *foreign* kings . . . who gained the throne of Babylon by conquest.¹¹

This insight, combined with his insistence on reading the ritual in the context of Seleucid times, leads Smith to his novel interpretation. The Babylonians of the Seleucid era, like their Jewish contemporaries, lived in what he refers to as a situation of incongruity: their map of the universe had been taken out of alignment by political events. In classical Mesopotamia as in pre-exilic Jerusalem, the structure of earth had been understood to imitate that of heaven; the institutions of kingship and temple below had reflected parallel institutions above. Thus, the *narām Marduk* (“Marduk's beloved one”) had sat on the throne in Babylon,¹² just as the *bēkôr* of

9. See, e.g., “The Wobbling Pivot” and “Map is Not Territory” in *Map is Not Territory*, 88–102 and 289–309, and *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago, 1987), 1–23.

10. Translation from Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 446–47. The Akkadian text occurs in *RAcc.*, 144–45, lines 415–28, 447–52.

11. “Pearl,” 91–92.

12. For examples of this and comparable terms, see M. J. Seux, *Épithètes Royales Akkadiennes et Sumériennes* (Paris, 1967), esp. 189–97.

YHWH (“YHWH’s first-born,” to use Psalm 89’s term) or the *ṣemaḥ ṣedeq* (“the righteous shoot,” as several Northwest Semitic writers called the ruler)¹³ had reigned in Jerusalem and elsewhere. However, in the Seleucid era, the wrong king sat on the throne, and thus the earth was out of balance with heaven. This situation applied for Babylonians at other times, as well: for example, when Assyrian and Persian kings ruled over southern Mesopotamia. Judeans found themselves in this situation from 568 B.C.E. onwards, with the exception of the Hasmonean era, though even then the Judean throne was occupied by what many saw as the wrong family.

Smith describes three responses to this situation of incongruity. In apocalypticism, one observes a longing for the right king’s sudden return, which will bring heaven and earth back into alignment. This response was, and is, widespread in Judaism, where it is combined with the expectation that the temple (the other institution linking heaven and earth) will be rebuilt. A second response Smith terms gnosticism: the belief that even in heaven the wrong king reigns. The third response is what Smith calls rectification: the assertion that the earthly king really is the right king after all.

It is this third response, rectification, that Smith finds in the Seleucid era Akitu festival. For Smith, the Akitu asserts or effects the legitimacy of the Greek monarch who rules Babylon. Thus the Akitu ceremony does not encode mythical beliefs (in the Eliadean sense of a myth as a narration of sacred history relating to primordial time)¹⁴ but endorses a political reality.¹⁵ In the negative confession the king denies that he is in fact a foreign ruler. By slapping the king, the High Priest warns the king of the fate that awaits him if he does not conduct himself as a true Babylonian king. All these actions prove that the ruler from far away is, contrary to appearance, the king of Babylon, the *narām Marduk*. The festival’s significance, then, is not cosmogonic; rather, it is nationalistic and political. Of course, Smith recognizes that a text called *Enuma Elish* is recited during the festival, but he is not sure that this is the same *Enuma Elish* that we know; moreover, he reminds us, even the *Enuma Elish* we know is not primarily a cosmogony but is “preeminently the myth of the establishment of Marduk’s kingship and the creation of his city (Babylon) and his central capital temple (Esagila).”¹⁶ It is this aspect of *Enuma Elish* that makes it

13. E.g., Jer. 23:5 and 33:15 (and cf. Isa 11:1 and 60:21) and a third-century Phoenician inscription from Cyprus (*KAI* 43:11). The comparison of a king to an eternal branch or shoot also occurs repeatedly in the inscriptions of Esarhaddon, a seventh century king of Assyria, though the language used there occurs in non-royal prayers for progeny as well; see the references in *CAD* K, 423, s.v. *kisittu* #3.

14. See Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. W. Trask (New York, 1963), 5–6, 13.

15. Other scholars also emphasize political dimensions of the Babylonian Akitu and of *Enuma Elish*; see K. van der Toorn, “The Babylonian New Year Festival,” in J. A. Emerton, ed., *Congress Volume Leuven*, SVT 43 (Leiden, 1991), 333–35; P. Michalowski, “Presence at the Creation,” in T. Abusch, J. Huehnergard, and P. Steinkeller, eds., *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (Atlanta, 1990), 393; and cf. B. Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina šulmi irub. Die kult-topographie und ideologische Programmatik der akitu-Prozession in Babylonien und Assyrien im I. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Mainz, 1994), 110–11 and 136. However, these scholars do not insist that the festival assumes the presence of a foreign ruler, nor do they require a very late dating of the ritual program preserved in the Seleucid text published by Thureau-Dangin. According to their interpretation, the festival asserts the legitimacy of the king, whoever he may be. Such interpretations are not incompatible with an understanding of the festival as a rite of cosmic renewal.

16. “Pearl,” 94–95. Cf. Michalowski, “Presence at the Creation,” 383–84.

relevant to the Akitu. Smith allows that this rectification ritual may have had its origins earlier than the Seleucid period; it may go back to the period of Assyrian rule in the seventh century, and, of course, it seems quite appropriate to the era of Cyrus and his successors.¹⁷

Smith's critique of the earlier scholars, especially their misuse of ancient texts unrelated to the Babylonian Akitu festival, is often appropriate, as we shall see below. Yet rightly critiquing the extremely relaxed standards of synthesis evident in the older work hardly demonstrates that the festival lacks cosmogonic significance. Further, Smith's reading rests on the alleged incongruity of the king's negative confession—i.e., on the assumption that no native king would need to deny overthrowing the city, demolishing its walls, or damaging its temples. In fact, however, some first millennium Babylonian texts do describe Babylonian kings who committed precisely these types of violations. Steven Cole shows that the language used to describe the actions of Nabû-šuma-iškun (a king who reigned from 760 to 748 B.C.E.) closely resembles the negative confession. This finding may indicate that something very close to the Seleucid era text already existed many centuries earlier, and it refutes the notion that the negative confession can only have come from the mouth of a foreign king.¹⁸ A careful rereading of the ritual instructions published by Thureau-Dangin (which I shall refer to as the "Akitu program") shows that the Babylonian Akitu does exemplify a cosmogonic New Year's festival: through its rites, the Esagila temple, and hence the world, are symbolically razed, purified, and re-created; kingship, and hence cosmic order, are abolished and renewed. Thus the Akitu festival also effects a return to the time of creation, which culminated in the enthronement of Marduk and the construction by the gods of Marduk's temple in Babylon, the Esagila. Somehow, however, neither historians of religion nor specialists in ancient Near Eastern studies who advocated this sort of view directed their attention to the evidence that most strongly supports it.

The crucial evidence in support of the idea that the Akitu festival restored order by temporarily undermining it stems from the events of the fifth day of the month of Nisan, which was the second day of the festival:¹⁹

Two hours after sunrise, when the preparations for the table of Bēl and Bēltiya have been completed, he [the *urigallu*-priest] summons the exorcist, (who) purifies the temple and sprin-

17. This is significant, since Smith is probably incorrect to doubt that the Seleucid text or copy preserves an older ritual. Black argues ("New Year Ceremonies," 42) that Thureau-Dangin's Seleucid text "records a ceremony which is of considerably older date and which cannot have taken place for at least 200 years." The temples of Babylon, he points, had already been destroyed in 482 by Xerxes; further, the Seleucid text describes the Akitu festival of Marduk, but the Akitu buildings known from Seleucid Babylon were dedicated to An and Ishtar, not Marduk. See further S. Cole, "The Crimes and Sacrileges of Nabû-šuma-iškun," *ZA* 84 (1994), 234, who finds that an eighth century reference to food offerings at a Babylonian Akitu matches the description in the text published by Thureau-Dangin; see also his comments on the negative confession, p. 246. Nonetheless, even if the ritual described in the Seleucid copy dates as early as the time of Tiglath-Pileser III, Smith's thesis would remain at least a possibility, for in 729 and 728 B.C.E. that Assyrian conqueror participated in the Babylonian Akitu in the role of king.

18. See Cole, "Crimes and Sacrileges," 220–52. On the potentially native origin of the rhetoric of Babylon's destruction, see also Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina šulmi*, 106, n. 125.

19. The festival's events essentially began on the fourth of Nisan; see van der Toorn, "Babylonian New Year," 332, n. 4.

kles the temple with water from a well along the Tigris and from a well along the Euphrates. He (the exorcist) makes the copper . . . (-instrument) sound forth shrilly in the temple. He moves the censer and the torch to the center of the temple. . . . does not enter into the chapel of Bēl and Bēltiya. When he has finished the purification of the temple, he enters the Ezida, to the chapel of Nabû, purifies the temple with a censer, torch, and holy water vessel, and sprinkles the chapel with water from a well along the Tigris and from a well along the Euphrates. He smears the doors of the chapel all over with cedar resin. In the center of the chapel court he sets a silver censer and scatters over it aromatics and juniper.²⁰

The fumigation and bathing of Marduk's temple, the Esagila, focus our attention on two powerful substances of destruction and recreation. The censer and smoke introduce a common figure of cosmic destruction, fire.²¹ Water (here taken from the two great rivers of Mesopotamia) serves as a figure of destruction in sources as familiar as the ancient Near Eastern flood stories, while water's connection to birth and new creation is sufficiently common to be self-evident.²² Thus this ritual on the second day of the festival amounts to a symbolic razing of the temple which allows for its re-creation. It is followed immediately by the decapitation of a sheep by a ritual slaughterer; the exorcist (^{amīl}*mašmaššu*) uses the carcass of the sheep to perform a purification (*kuppuru*) ritual for the temple (focusing, it seems, on the sanctuary of Marduk's son, the god Nabu). After cleansing (*tummû*, *hûppu*) the temple, the exorcist and slaughterer remove the carcass and head of the sheep, throw it in the river, and leave the city until the festival ends.²³ Here again we recognize figures of violent destruction. These activities comprise more than a cleansing ritual, even though elements of this sort of rite appear.²⁴ Rather, this ceremony represents the overthrow and rebuilding of Marduk's temple.

One might want to disregard my emphasis on the symbolism of fire and water here; after all, censers and torches appear frequently in Akkadian rituals.²⁵ Yet my suggestion results not from the application of anachronistic categories formulated by historians of religion, but from the attitude the text itself conveys in regard to this ritual. The Akitu program evinces the Babylonians' great anxiety regarding the purification through fire, water and the carcass of a decapitated sheep. The text insists that the high priest may not witness these destructive acts, and this insistence

20. Lines 338–52 of the Akitu program. Translation from Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 445. The Akkadian text occurs in *RAcc.*, 140.

21. On fire as an agency of destruction leading to rejuvenation, see C. M. Edsman, "Fire," *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, 1987), 5.344–45. On Hindu ideas of cosmic devastation through fire, see A. Hildebeitel, "Hinduism," in *ibid.*, 6.349, and note also the motif of eschatological fire as a figure of punishment or purification in Zoroastrianism; see G. Gnoli, "Zoroastrianism," *ibid.*, 15.585 and in western religions (see, e.g., Isaiah 66).

22. See, e.g., Eliade's discussion in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Sheed (New York, 1958), 188–97.

23. Lines 353–65.

24. For an example of a pure cleansing ritual, we might compare the *ḥaṭṭāt* sacrifice in Leviticus and Numbers. That rite, which purifies the altar in YHWH's temple, contains no elements of cosmic destruction or renewal. See further J. Milgrom, "Israel's Sanctuary: The Priestly 'Picture of Dorian Gray,'" *RB* 83 (1976), 390–99, and *idem*, "Sin Offering or Purification Offering?" *VT* 21 (1971), 237–39 (reprinted in J. Milgrom, *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* [Leiden, 1983], 75–84 and 67–69); and G. Anderson, "Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York, 1992), 5.879–80.

25. See *CAD*, N/2, 216–17 (s.v. *nignakku*) and G, 113–15 (s.v. *gizillû*).

underscores the sense that these actions are hazardous and perhaps distasteful: “The High Priest of the Etuša may not actually view the purification of the temple, (for) if he does watch (it), he is ritually unclean.”²⁶ The exorcist himself and the ritual slaughterer must go out of the city to the countryside for the remainder of the festival. The poem the high priest recited upon the exit of the exorcist and the slaughterer is called an *ikkillum*, or “cry of distress,”²⁷ which reflects the dismay engendered by these figurative acts of devastation. We might compare this *ikkillum* with city laments from Sumer, some of which were written long after the destruction of those cities. These laments, W. W. Hallo writes,

were designed as liturgical accompaniments to the royal rebuilding of the destroyed temples, which involved the inevitable razing of their remains—a possible sacrilege against their gods. . . . They seek to absolve the royal builder by heaping blame on the foreigners who caused the original devastation.²⁸

If I am correct, then the “cry of distress” in the much later Babylonian Akitu program functions in precisely the same way, disclosing the Babylonians’ apprehension at ritually destroying the temple even in order to rebuild it. All these intimations of apprehension reveal the text’s sense that the exorcist is doing something very powerful and very dangerous: to wit, symbolically demolishing the temple.

It is in this light that the negative confession, so important to Smith’s reading, must be understood. The negative confession occurs on the fifth day of Nisan, immediately after the purification and prayers I have just described. Its wording—“I did not overturn Babylon . . . I did not [tear down] Esagila” (lines 423–28)—points not to the foreignness of the king but to the fact that earlier that same day, Babylon and Esagila *had* been destroyed. But, as the ritual makes clear, it was the exorcist and the slaughterer who were responsible for the symbolic destruction, and they had already been banished. (A. J. Black speculates that two figurines smashed before Nabu on the sixth day of Nisan represent the exorcist and slaughterer who had purified Nabu’s sanctuary in Esagila.²⁹ If he is right, then the negative implications of their actions is made even more clear; however, Black offers no strong support for this suggestion.)

Moreover, the Akitu program insists that on a deeper level it was Marduk himself, along with the gods, who had purified the temple—which is to say, who had

26. Lines 364–65. Translation from Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 446. Akkadian in *RAcc.*, 140.

27. The word can mean merely “loud cry, clamor” as well as “rumor” (see *CAD*, I/J, 57); hence Sachs’ translation in *ANET*, “loud recital.” But when it follows verbs meaning “to say” or “recite” (as it does here), it always seems to mean “cry of distress” and often parallels a word like *bakû* (“weep”); see especially *CAD*, I/J, 58 §c (and cf. the references to loud cries of wailing in §b).

28. See “Lamentations and Prayers in Sumer and Akkad,” in J. Sasson, ed., *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (New York, 1995), 3:1872. As Edward Greenstein points out to me, Hallo’s comments are based on the insight of T. Jacobsen, “Review of *Lamentations over the Destruction of Ur*, by S. N. Kramer,” *AJSL* 58 (1941), 223. Cf. M. E. Cohen’s remarks on the use of laments and *eršemma’s* during the razing of temples in *The Canonical Lamentations of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Potomac, MD, 1988), 1.14. For a recent summary of the various liturgical settings of Sumerian laments, see S. Tinney, *The Nipur Lament* (Philadelphia, 1996), 47–53.

29. Black, “New Year Ceremonies,” 55.

razed it and rebuilt it, just as Marduk and the gods had waged war and built Babylon at the beginning of time. The exorcist and slaughterer merely act on behalf of Marduk, or they function symbolically *as* Marduk (i.e., they show what Marduk once did and is again doing). This is made clear in the prayer recited when the purification is completed: “they are purifying the temple, [the gods] Asarluhi . . . Kusu, . . . and Ningirim . . . Marduk purifies the temple.”³⁰ One might initially think that the exorcist and slaughterer are the subject of the plural verb “are purifying” (*ullalū*), but the next line identifies Asarluhi (another name for Marduk) along with the gods Kusu and Ningirim as the subjects. The emphasis is especially on Marduk as the one who purifies, as the singular verb in the next line (^d*Marduk ullal bīta*) makes clear. In this prayer the human participants in the ritual deny that they have done what they have done and attribute the action to the gods. Precisely the same sort of denial occurs in an Akkadian service for activating an idol, the *mīs pī* (“mouth washing”) ritual, in which the carpenter and goldsmith who made the idol assert that not they but the god Ea formed the idol.³¹ T. Jacobsen points out that during the *mīs pī* “the ritual has turned the clock back, thus nullifying all human work”—a situation quite comparable to the Babylonian Akitu as I understand it.³²

The next line of the prayer that follows the purification introduces architectural terminology: “Kusu designs the plans” (^d*Kusu*³³ *uṣṣir iṣuṣurta*).³⁴ Thus it connects the purification ritual with the theme of rebuilding the temple. It is the gods who, having destroyed the temple, now re-establish it on the fifth of Nisan. This rite re-enacts the activity of the gods at the beginning of time, for according to *Enuma Elish* it was they who had erected the Esagila *in illo tempore* as the pinnacle of creation.³⁵ Thus the prayer recited immediately after the purification alludes to the divine origin of the temple and its central role in the creation of the world. The rebuilding of Esagila, then, entails the renewal of the world as a whole. This linkage is also reflected in the High Priest’s blessing of the Esagila, which had been recited

30. Lines 374ff. Translation by Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 446. The Akkadian appears in *RAcc.*, 142.

31. For the Akkadian text and a translation of the relevant lines (from BM 45749), see C. Walker and M. Dick, “The Mesopotamian *mīs pī* Ritual,” in M. Dick, ed., *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth* (Winona Lake, 1999), 80–82, lines 51–52. See also the assertion that various gods fashioned the individual members of the idol, which appears in an incantation accompanying the activation ceremony (*STT* 200), translated in Walker and Dick, 98–100, lines 13–32. In both these texts, the arms of the human artisans who formed the idol are symbolically amputated; see p. 81, lines 49–52, and p. 100, lines 67–69. The human limb connected with the fashioning of the idol is removed to emphasize that in reality the idol was created by the gods. Similarly, the human agents are removed in the Akitu, when the exorcist and slaughterer are banished from the city.

32. See T. Jacobsen, “The Graven Image,” in P. D. Miller, P. D. Hanson, and S. D. McBride, eds., *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia, 1987), 23–29; the quotation is from p. 28. See the similar comments in Walker and Dick, “*mīs pī*,” 114–15.

33. E. Ebeling notes that the sign Thureau-Dangin read as “Azag” should be “Kusu” or “Kug.” See “Azag,” in *RLA*, 1.325.

34. For the noun *uṣurta* as an architectural term, see von Soden, *AHW.*, 1440 §A4 and cf. *CAD E*, 347 §b2. The noun can have other uses as well, but the word at the very least hints at the theme of construction.

35. On the link between temple building and the creation story in *Enuma Elish*, see V. Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House* (Sheffield, 1992), 93–96. On the links between creation and temple generally in the ancient Near East, see especially M. Weinfeld, “Sabbath, Temple Building, and the Enthronement of the Lord,” *Beth Mikra* 69 (1977), 188–93 [in Hebrew].

early that day, for in that prayer he had referred to the temple as “image of heaven and earth” (*tamšil šamê u iršiti*).³⁶ The linkage is further strengthened by his activity immediately after the exorcist and slaughterer completed their tasks. The high priest called artisans who cover the Ezida with the *šamê hurāši* (ll. 366f.), which can be translated both as “the Golden Heaven” and as “golden canopy.”³⁷ Both senses are intended in this context: the canopy that was physically present symbolized heaven. Hence it articulated the notion that the renewal of Esagila implies the renewal of the world.

The nexus between Esagila’s (re)building and the world’s creation must have been particularly clear to the ritual’s participants, who were well aware that Esagila had originally been built by the gods as capstone of the universe. After all, only one day earlier, at the outset of the festival, *Enuma Elish* had been recited. The relevance of this poem to the Akitu festival lies especially in the nature of the creation it depicts. B. Pongratz-Leisten points out that in tablet 5 of *Enuma Elish* Marduk forms the world from the corpse of Tiamat (= chaos), and hence chaos inheres in all creation. The world, then, contains both traces of primordial chaos (since the world *is* Tiamat) and order (imposed on it by Marduk). In light of this aspect of *Enuma Elish*, the Akitu festival does not merely commemorate an ancient and decisive triumph over chaos, for chaos always remains latent in the world. Rather, the festival actualizes an ongoing victory over disorder.³⁸

Pongratz-Leisten’s understanding of *Enuma Elish* also comes to bear on the activities of the last several days of the Akitu festival. The disarray inhering in the world created from Tiamat’s corpse was not spread out evenly through the cosmos: order was especially present in Marduk’s temple in Babylon, while the area outside Babylon’s walls was conceived ritually as a realm of chaos.³⁹ Topography, then, was understood to reflect cosmogony. Consequently, it is significant that on the eighth day of Nisan Marduk journeyed outside the walls of Babylon to a structure called the Akitu-house (i.e., the statue of Marduk was taken out of Esagila and brought by a barge to the building in question). Marduk returned in a triumphant procession on the eleventh day of the month, which was the last day of the festival.⁴⁰ The god’s journey outside the walls allows chaos to recur in the city. (At the same time, the journey either banishes Marduk temporarily to a realm of chaos or it represents him

36. Line 275 (RAcc. 136), translation in Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 444.

37. For the former, see Sachs, *ANET*³, 333; for the latter, see Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 446. “Heaven” or “sky” is much more common, but several clear cases in which the word means a canopy or covering occur. See *CAD* Š/1, 348.

38. *Ina šulmi*, 77–78. Incidentally, in light of Pongratz-Leisten’s point, it seems that *Enuma Elish* presents the converse of the cosmogony known from Lurianic kabbalah. For the latter, traces of the Godhead are trapped in the physical world and must be liberated by theurgic practice; for the former, traces of chaos linger in the world and must be periodically subdued through the Akitu ritual.

39. Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina šulmi*, 73–74.

40. See Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 439. Although the Seleucid era tablets of the Akitu program are broken and do not describe the last six days of the festival, it is clear from Neo-Babylonian inscriptions and chronicles that Marduk left Esagila and took up residence at the Akitu house (outside the city) on the eighth day, and he returned to Esagila in a splendid parade on the eleventh day. On the identity of the Akitu festival known from the Seleucid era tablets and the Akitu festival known from Neo-Babylonian sources, see further n. 43 below.

as asserting his ordering presence there.) His return to the city at the end of the festival represents the triumph of order.⁴¹ Thus in the Babylonian Akitu the processions away from and back to the city on the eighth through eleventh of Nisan serve the same function as the events of the fifth: they recalled Marduk's original and ongoing victory over chaos as narrated in *Enuma Elish*.

Smith might question this line of reasoning, since he doubts that the *Enuma Elish* referred to in the Akitu program is the same poem known to us,⁴² but the connections between the Akitu program and our *Enuma Elish* are manifold. Stephen Langdon has pointed out that the hymn recited on the second day of Nisan recalls the plot of the epic, and he notes that hymn recited on the morning of the fourth contains literary allusions to the epic.⁴³ Evidence regarding the course of the festival in the Neo-Babylonian period also correlates well with *Enuma Elish*.⁴⁴ Fates are decided at a location called Ubšukinna both in the epic (tablet 3:119) and during the Akitu festival (on the eighth and eleventh days of Nisan).⁴⁵ The epic (tablet 7:109–10) refers to Marduk taking up residence in *bit ikribi* (house of prayer); in

41. Cf. van der Toorn, "Babylonian New Year," 338–39, who describes the ritual processions and the humiliation of the king as rites of renewal "in which the old order is momentarily jeopardized, emerges intact, and is reaffirmed." For a sensitive discussion of the symbolism of the cultic procession to the Akitu house in the Babylonian festival, see Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina šulmi*, 75, who describes Akitu house, which is located outside the city, as a realm of liminality and paradigmatic chaos. Marduk's return represents the reestablishment of order.

42. See Smith, "Cargo," 93.

43. See S. Langdon, *The Babylonian Epic of Creation* (Oxford, 1923), 21, n. 1, and 23, n. 1. Cf. Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina šulmi*, 74.

44. On witnesses to the Neo-Babylonian festival (in addition to the careful discussion by Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*), see P. R. Berger, "Das Neujahrsfest nach den Königsinschriften des ausgehenden babylonischen Reiches," in A. Finet, ed., *Actes de la XVIIe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* (Brussels, 1970), 155–59; A. K. Grayson, "Chronicles and the Akitu Festival," also in Finet, *Actes*, 160–70; and Black, "New Year Ceremonies," 41–47. See further the references to *akitu* and *zagmuku* in S. Langdon, *Die Neubabylonsichen Königsinschriften*, VAB 4 (Leipzig, 1912); and references to the Akitu in S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Helsinki, 1993) and in idem, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1970, 1983).

One might initially suggest that the Neo-Babylonian festival described in these sources may not be identical with the festival described in the Seleucid era copy of the Akitu program we are discussing. In fact, there are sufficient areas of agreement between the Neo-Babylonian witnesses to the Akitu and the Seleucid tablet describing days 2–5 to allow us to conclude that they describe the same festival and hence to use evidence from the former here. (1) By the time of the Neo-Babylonian texts, the Akitu had become a festival of both Nabu and Marduk; see Black, "New Year Ceremonies," 55, and Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 439. This seems to have been the case already in the seventh century (as Cohen argues, pp. 441 and 450; for further examples of terminology emphasizing the role of both gods in the festival, see A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* [Locust Valley, NY, 1975], 127 and 131–32). Similarly, the Seleucid document points to the active participation of Nabu in its description of the third day of Nisan (when two idols were fashioned; these were to be destroyed in front of Nabu on the sixth day) and in some of the activities of the fifth day. (2) A Neo-Babylonian inscription from the reign of Nabonidus locates Marduk at the Akitu house on day ten; Langdon, *Neubabylonsichen Königsinschriften*, 282, lines 8–9; cf. also Berger, "Neujahrsfest," 157. Another Seleucid era text (*SBH*, 245, quoted by Cohen, 449, n. 3) also states that Marduk is at the offering house (*bit akribi*, identical with the Akitu house) on the tenth day.

45. See Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 439, and Langdon, *Neubabylonsichen*, 126 and 282; see also Black, "New Year Ceremonies," 50.

Neo-Babylonian inscriptions,⁴⁶ this term serves as a synonym for the Akitu house, where the statue of Marduk resided on the eighth through eleventh days of the month. To be sure, differences between the epic and the festival are also evident.⁴⁷ To cite the most obvious dissimilarity: Nabu plays a much more active role in the festival than in the epic.⁴⁸ But these differences do not require us to assume that during the Akitu some other text known as *Enuma Elish* was recited. The ritual (and possibly the myth as it came to be understood) changed to accommodate new theological developments, such as the increasing prominence in late Babylonian religion of Marduk's son, Nabu, while the text of *Enuma Elish* itself may have remained frozen.⁴⁹

I have argued that certain observances of the Babylonian Akitu's second day signified the destruction and rebuilding of Esagila, and these events served as a synecdoche for the annihilation and recreation of the whole world. In other words, ceremonies early on the fifth day of Nisan, echoed by the activities of the eighth through eleventh days of that month, represent the basic pattern of the return and banishment of chaos. (In addition to the rites I have emphasized, we should also note the ritual humiliation of the king and his symbolic re-investiture on the fifth of Nisan. Scholars representing the older consensus argue that this series of acts are to be explained not only as a rite of atonement by the king but also as a renewal of kingship which works both on mundane and cosmic levels.)⁵⁰ Thus the older consensus that Smith criticizes in fact represents a justifiable reading. Nonetheless, three qualifications regarding the older consensus must be emphasized.

46. See the Nabonidus inscription, Langdon, *Neubabylonsichen*, 282 (9:2), and cf. Langdon, *Epic*, 204, n. 3.

47. As Langdon notes, *Epic*, 21–23.

48. See Black, "New Year Ceremonies," 55–56.

49. I should respond to one more possible objection to my emphasis on using *Enuma Elish* to interpret the Akitu program. In Babylon *Enuma Elish* was read not only on the fourth day of Nisan (that is, on the first day of the festival) but also on the fourth of the month of Kislimu, according to a recently published late Babylonian text; see G. Çağırğan and W. G. Lambert, "The Late Babylonian Kislimu Ritual for Esagil," *JCS* 43–45 (1991–93), 96, lines 62–63 (my thanks to Dr. Wayne Horowitz for this reference). One might argue on the basis of this Kislimu ritual that the poem was read on the fourth of every month. Consequently, *Enuma Elish* may have no particular connection to the Akitu per se; so van der Toorn, "Babylonian New Year," 337, and H. Tadmor, "New Years in Mesopotamia," in *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (Jerusalem, 1955–1988) 7.308 [in Hebrew].

Against this objection, however, one may point out the following. First, even if the poem is read on another date during the ritual year (or perhaps even several other dates), its appearance in the Akitu ritual program requires us to understand it within that particular context. Since it was read during the festival, its content will have been in the mind of the ritual performers as they executed their duties. By way of analogy, one might point out that Exodus 15 provides the liturgical reading for the seventh day of Passover. It is also recited every day in Jewish liturgy as part of the preliminary morning service, but its daily appearance does not mitigate its special significance for Passover. Similarly, even if *Enuma Elish* was recited on several occasions during the liturgical year, it still may have a particular relevance to the Akitu. Second, Çağırğan and Lambert point out that a brief section of *Enuma Elish* V is relevant to the ritual of the fourth day of Kislimu (see p. 91). This finding diminishes the likelihood that *Enuma Elish* was recited each month; the poem may have been recited on the fourth of Kislimu and the fourth of Nisan for specific reasons relating to the rituals at hand. Consequently, it remains legitimate to connect the poem to the Akitu festival.

50. See Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 320; Gaster, *Thespis*, 61–63.

(1) Earlier scholars who argued that the Akitu exemplified the pattern of periodic re-creation or world-renewal supported this thesis with reference to extremely dubious evidence (as Smith rightly asserts), but they ignored the material stressed here. Eliade is a good example: his description of the ceremony includes some rituals that never took place and others that occurred only in ancient Near Eastern festivals other than the Babylonian Akitu. His reference to a scapegoat is no doubt based on the decapitation of the sheep on the fifth of Nisan (lines 353–59 of the Akitu program), but that is not really a scapegoat ceremony. It is rather part of the cleansing of the temple by means of fire, water, and blood. The sheep is simply the unhappy source of the blood; no reference is made to its absorbing the sins of the nation, in contrast to the genuine scapegoat ritual in Lev. 16:21–22.⁵¹ Evidence for a sacred marriage involving Marduk during the Babylonian Akitu is at best sketchy,⁵² though such a rite undoubtedly occurred in (much older) Sumerian holidays and other non-Babylonian New Year's festivals involving the gods Dumuzi, Nabu, or Anu.⁵³

Eliade's construction imports elements (such as mimes performed by actors) from cultures far afield (the Hittites, the Israelites);⁵⁴ further, he reconstructs the Babylonian festival in part on the basis of what allegedly happened during Israelite holidays, but his understanding of Israelite religious practice builds upon reconstructions rooted in Mesopotamian parallels and on patterns proposed by theorists from the myth and ritual school.⁵⁵ Elsewhere he relies on imagination alone: to a sacred marriage involving the king (itself a speculative reconstruction based on parallels elsewhere) "there certainly corresponded a period of collective orgy."⁵⁶ Eliade does mention the importance of water and the deluge motif in festivals of re-creation generally,⁵⁷ but he does not mention the crucial use of water from the Tigris and Euphrates in the Akitu program itself, a use which, quite significantly, occurs alongside the purification of the Esagila by fire and smoke. In short, he defends a basically strong thesis by referring to a variety of rites that probably did not occur during the Babylonian Akitu festival, while overlooking documentation stemming from rites that did.

Similarly, that the Akitu was not an example of a carnival or Saturnalia. *Contra* the overreading (invention?) of Eliade, there is no evidence that during the Akitu distinctions of social rank were abolished or that social norms were relaxed.⁵⁸ Pongratz-Leisten acknowledges that on a symbolic level the Akitu bolsters order through introducing disorder, but, she emphasizes, there is no reason to suggest that

51. Eliade refers to a scapegoat in the Akitu festival in *Cosmos*, 56. On the difference between this Akitu ritual and a scapegoat ceremony, see also J. Henninger, "Scapegoat," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 13.93.

52. See Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 449. Eliade refers to sacred marriage in *Cosmos*, 56–57.

53. See Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 235, 311–12, 324, 337.

54. *Cosmos*, 56.

55. *Ibid.*, 56, n. 6, and 60.

56. *Ibid.*, 57.

57. *Ibid.*, 57–59, where he refers to narratives about Utnapishtim and cites Jewish festivals in the month of Tishre.

58. *Ibid.*, 57. Eliade's overreading is perhaps based on the remarks of Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abridged ed. (New York, 1951), 328, where it is at least clear that the Akitu is not being discussed.

the symbolic disorder corresponded to any carnival behaviors among the Babylonian population.⁵⁹

Further, for Eliade, Frankfort, and other representatives of the older consensus, a text that allegedly described Marduk's death and resurrection during his stay in the Akitu house plays a crucial role; his passion is said to correspond to the return of chaos and the renewal of creation. However, later scholarship demonstrates that the text in question does not in fact recount the death, much less the resurrection, of Marduk. Further, this text lacks relevance to the Babylonian festival, since it is an Assyrian document concerned with the relationship between the gods Ashur and Marduk, not a Babylonian one concerned with a ritual.⁶⁰ Other alleged references to the resurrection of Marduk are similarly baseless. Although the phrase *tabû Marduk* ("the rising of Marduk") occurs as a synonym of "Akitu" and "New Year's Festival (*zagnuku* and *rēš šatti*)" in Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions, these words do not refer to the god's resurrection.⁶¹ They simply describe his "getting up" to walk in procession from the Akitu house to Esagila or his leaving his throne at Esagila to set out to the Akitu house.⁶² Granted, this term is used in the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh epic to refer to a person's getting up from death (in the Meissner tablet, II:7), but even there the word is not a technical term meaning "resurrection." Rather, Gilgamesh simply expresses the vain hope that the prostrate corpse of his friend Enkidu will rise up and turn out not to be a corpse at all.

(2) The representatives of the older consensus claimed to speak of ancient Mesopotamian Akitu festivals generally, whereas I follow Smith in limiting my remarks to a particular Babylonian festival. The purpose and meaning of Akitu festivals celebrated at other places and times must be analyzed separately, since the rites of one Akitu are not identical to the rites of another.⁶³ In his careful study of Akitus throughout Mesopotamia, Mark Cohen shows that the Akitu (*sic*) festival originated in second millennium Ur, where it was a biannual celebration of the arrival of that

59. On the absence of saturnalian or carnival elements in the Akitu, see especially the careful observations of Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina šulmi*, 75–77.

60. The notion that Marduk had died is based on a misreading of KAR 143/KAR 219 and related texts (= A. Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* [Helsinki, 1989], 82–91). See W. von Soden, "Gibt es ein Zeugnis, daß die Babylonier an Marduks Wiederauferstehung glaubten?" ZA 51 (1955), 130–66, esp. 157–66. T. Frymer-Kensky provides a history of this idea and presents an interpretation of the text that differs from that of von Soden, but she also emphasizes that it contains no reference to Marduk's death or resurrection; see "The Tribulations of Marduk—The So-Called 'Marduk Ordeal Text,'" JAOS 103 (1983), 131–41. For history and critique of the mistaken notion of Marduk's passion, see also Black, "New Year Ceremonies," 41–53.

61. Contra Langdon; see his references to the phrase's occurrence in the index of *Neubabylonsichen*, s.v. *tabû*.

62. Cf. *AHw*. 1342. Of particular relevance is the nuance cited there, "stehen auf Reise, Feldzug." It is this sense that appears in the Neo-Babylonian references to Marduk's *tabû* during the Akitu: he sets forth on a journey (one might compare the Hebrew idiom, *וייקם וילך*).

63. Cf. Tadmor, "New Years," 305. The distinct character of various Akitus has become even more evident since M. Cohen's work on ancient Near Eastern festivals has become available. See Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 400–453. On the need to analyze different Akitu festivals individually, see also Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina šulmi*, 79, 83, and esp. 147–48. The specific objections of A. R. George ("Studies in Cultic Topography and Ideology," *Bi.Or.* 53 [1996], 375–77) to Pongratz-Leisten's remarks on pp. 79–83 do not affect the more general methodological point she makes.

city's patron, the moon-god Nanna. The principal Akitu occurred at the fall equinox, for it is then that the moon begins to be visible longer than the sun.⁶⁴ The festival began at the new moon, when Nanna appeared again after his absence. The advent of Nanna (which, in mythopoeic terms, corresponded to the new moon and the fall equinox) was re-enacted through a parade of the god's statue into the city. Other Akkadian cities adopted this celebration of a divine king's entrance into his city, even though the theme was not quite as appropriate elsewhere as it was in Ur. (As a lunar deity, Nanna did leave and return quite often—both at the equinoxes and each month as the moon waned and waxed.) According to Cohen, the central act of the various Akitus (whether of Nanna, Marduk, Anu, or another god) was the god's exit from and reentry to his temple.⁶⁵ During his absence, he resided outside the city in a structure called the Akitu house, which was built for this purpose.

This basic pattern of exit and return does not necessarily support the theoretical reading imposed on Akitu festivals by Eliade, Frankfort, Gaster, and others. To be sure, the pattern of a god's absence and return may lend itself to the themes of disarray and subsequently re-established order. But it is only the late Babylonian Akitu program whose rhetoric makes clear that the disappearance and re-appearance of Marduk is being utilized in this manner.

(3) The Akitu festival described in the Seleucid-era tablet is indeed a re-enactment of creation, but we need to recognize that re-enactment can take many forms. Various proposals concerning cultic drama in the festival have been put forward, but evidence for these dramas is sketchy, and, moreover, these proposals divert our attention from the real forms of ritual re-enactment that did occur in the Akitu. For example, W. G. Lambert suggests that the last days of the Akitu festival included a drama depicting the battle between Tiamat and Marduk.⁶⁶ He points out that the Akitu house in Assyria included a relief that portrays how Ashur (who replaced Marduk as hero of the theomachy in Assyria) set out to battle Tiamat. In the relief he is preceded by ten gods, and these same gods, according to a cultic text, precede Ashur to the Akitu house. "A combination of these two items of information suggests, if it does not prove, that the procession of gods from the city to the Akitu house was construed as a setting out for battle with Tiamat. Presumably the battle took place inside the house," Lambert writes.⁶⁷

This inference is plausible but far from definite; and for our purposes it is of less relevance, since it describes the Assyrian Akitu. (In Babylon the Akitu house was not decorated.)⁶⁸ Further, we should recall that there was a very simple reason for the procession to the Akitu house: the high point of the holiday was the god's return, and to return he had to leave first. Thus the first procession did not necessarily have any

64. Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 401–2.

65. *Ibid.*, 404.

66. Lambert, "Battle," 189–90; cf. A. Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Oxford, 1986), 156–57.

67. Lambert, "Battle," 189.

68. The Akitu-house used in the Babylonian festival was a modest structure, not an opulent palace (in contrast to the Esagila temple to which the gods returned and the barges used for the processions between them). See Berger, "Neujahrsfest," 157.

dramatic function.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, a re-enactment of order's primeval victory over chaos did take place in the rituals of fire and water, in the humiliation of the king, and in the return of Marduk to Esagila. Recollection of theomachy and cosmogony further occurred through the recitation of *Enuma Elish*, which told the story of primordial events.

Smith's critique, then, is an astute and productive one. But it does not overturn the basic insight (better: intuition) of the older consensus: the Babylonian Akitu brought back chaos in order that chaos could be expelled. All this is not to deny Smith's contention that the festival has political importance. On the contrary, any ideology of the sacred center is necessarily a political ideology, for it exalts a particular earthly place as preeminent and that place's ruler as crucial to the harmony of the cosmos. But acknowledging the political implications of cosmic symbolism should not lead interpreters to claim that the festival was primarily a response to historical events (viz., the conquest of Babylon by foreigners) or to overlook the theme of world-renewal.⁷⁰

It is noteworthy that the evidence for the Eliadean reading does not come from the oldest Akitu festivals (i.e., from second millennium Sumer) but from one of the latest ones (from first millennium Babylon). The religious mentality evident in this festival exemplifies a worldview that valorizes the center, but (*contra* Eliade) this mentality cannot be portrayed as archaic. At least in this case the mentality in question stems from a highly developed urban culture, and it represents the culmination of a venerable Mesopotamian tradition. My disagreement with Smith regarding the Akitu, then, confirms another thesis of Smith's: in his own description of the ideology of center, Smith points out that such an ideology is not exclusively archaic but can be found in any period and any religion.⁷¹ My argument, then, confirms Smith's own revision of Eliade's theoretical model. By questioning one aspect of Smith's work, I have in fact corroborated another. To undermine is ultimately to reaffirm.⁷²

69. See Cohen, *Cultic Calendars*, 404. Against the suggestion that the Akitu rituals reenact scenes from *Enuma Elish*, see the shrewd comments of Fontenrose, *Python*, 438, and van der Toorn, "Babylonian New Year," 337–38. On this issue, see also Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina šulmi*, 74–75, who rightly points out the precise form of the representation of primordial combat (drama vs. reading of *Enuma Elish*) is unimportant.

70. Van der Toorn ("Babylonian New Year," 333–35) asserts that the festival's central theme is renewal, but he asserts that this renewal works on political and religious planes and does not involve cosmic regeneration or the revival of creation. In fact, there is no strong distinction between these categories. How far is the cosmic from the religious, or even, for an ideology of the center, from the political?

71. Smith's category of the locative is nearly identical with Eliade's archaic ideology of center, but Smith emphasizes that these two viewpoints are not simply early and late, ancient and modern. Rather, each may be available within a single culture; see especially "The Wobbling Pivot," in *Map Is Not Territory*, 101. On the problematic polarity between archaic/central and modern in Eliade, see further the cautious remarks of B. Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade* (Albany, 1996), 41–42, 78–83, 94–95.

72. According to my reading, Smith's interpretation of the Akitu festival is off the mark, but I hasten to add that the larger point he makes is not. Smith's goal is to delineate three responses to catastrophe: apocalyptic, gnosticism, and rectification. Akitu in fact does not exemplify the third of these categories; the festival is not a response to a historical catastrophe at all. But the heuristic value of Smith's conceptualization is not affected by this critique. His other example of rectification, a myth from Ceram, may well be legitimate.