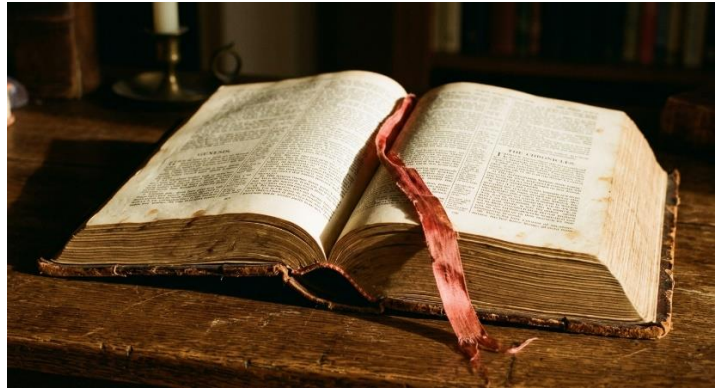




The 400-year silence

Malachi and the Hebrew Testament

Malachi, whose Hebrew name translates to “Jehovah’s Messenger,” was the final writing prophet of the Old Testament.¹ In the several hundred years preceding Malachi, the Jews had been conquered by Babylon, and most of them—the prominent citizens of Judah, professionals, priests, craftspeople, and the wealthy—had been placed in bondage and taken to Babylon. Israel ceased to be an independent nation. Traditionally dated to 586 BCE, the exile didn’t begin until 597 BCE and lasted until 538 BCE, when the Persians took over Babylonia and released the Jews, many of whom returned to their homeland.

The Jews, who had been brought to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar (r. 604–562 BCE²), were repatriated by Cyrus the Great (Cyrus II, born 590–580 BCE–died ca. 529³). Cyrus intended their release to be for theological reasons and ordered them to start rebuilding their temple (initiating the Second Temple period [516 BCE–70 CE]) and reconstructing the city walls.⁴ Under the direction of Zerubbabel (fl. sixth century BCE⁵) and later Ezra,⁶ the [temple](#) and the city were eventually rebuilt. The Jews had been turning to other gods in Babylon; now they were to worship their one God, Yahweh, and the nation of Judah thus became a theological state. At the same time, during the [Exile](#), they had attempted to “purify” their religion, returning it to the original Mosaic concepts.⁷

Malachi most likely wrote after the restoration of the temple under Zerubbabel but before the religious and political reforms of Ezra.⁸ By the time of Malachi’s prophecies, enough years had gone by after the building of the new temple that the Israelites, living with poverty, social injustice, and spiritual apathy, had become lackadaisical in their worship, disillusioned when the promised messianic kingdom failed to come to pass.⁹

When Malachi's prophecies were recorded is unknown. Malachi delivered them—and perhaps recorded them—ca. 430 BCE, probably in Jerusalem. In 47 of the 55 recorded verses in the book, the prophet speaks on behalf of Jehovah, Israel reacts either defiantly or dejectedly, then the Lord speaks in a combined confrontational and conciliatory way.¹⁰

After Malachi came the 400-year silence, known as the intertestamental period (by [Protestants](#)) or the deuterocanonical period (by [Catholics](#) and [Eastern Orthodox](#)).¹¹ This period extends from the closing of the [protocanonical books](#) (of the Hebrew Bible, *tanakh*, the Christian Old Testament) to the rise of the [New Testament](#). It began when the ministry of [Malachi](#) ended (ca. 420 BCE) and lasted to the appearance of [John the Baptist](#) in the early first century CE. It is roughly contiguous with the [Second Temple period](#) (516 BCE–70 CE) and includes the age of [Hellenistic Judaism](#).¹²

Right after Malachi or his recorders put the pen down, the 400 years of silence began. No prophets followed Malachi. No divine revelations. Some argue that *Maccabees 1* and *2* were added to the Old Testament, but these were historical, not prophetic books, recording the Jewish struggle for freedom from 167 to 63 BCE. Some of the existing books were tinkered with, but none were added.¹³ The prophets had gone silent.

And so had God.

Sumerian “religion”

The traditional take on Mesopotamian history is, of course, that the people worshipped a pantheon of gods—actually statues of gods. Ira Spars, writing for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, describes the “gods” of Mesopotamia as having “human or human-like forms” and explains that “most gods were conceived in human terms.” They were male and female, showed reason and emotion, and demonstrated unpredictability and capriciousness. They were rather like us humans, whom they created in their likeness. The “gods” needed to eat and drink, to sleep, to be housed. And they were immortal. They possessed a “splendor called *melammu*, a radiance.”¹⁴ This is pretty much in agreement with how Sitchin describes the Anunnaki in the *Earth Chronicles*.

Darci Clark describes the rituals, which mainly consisted of waking, feeding, dressing, and otherwise caring for a statue of the god or goddess. One two-day ritual in particular called for transporting a newly carved statue to the riverside and washing its mouth to allow the spirit of the god to enter it.¹⁵

I am sure that scholars of Sumerology can prove irrefutably that these statue-related rituals are right out of the inscribed tablets or visible on temple walls. That doesn't mean that the so-called gods were not, as described by Ira Spars, “human or human-like.” What made the

original translators concoct the notion that the gods were somehow resident in the statuary and, even as such, needed to be fed and clothed and housed was the adamant rejection of the notion that the gods could be anything but myth. (See *Listening to the Ancients: Before History Began* for the problems with translating an ancient language from fragmentary tablets, pp. 9–12, 62–65.) Such rituals could have well existed alongside actual service to “human or human-like” gods.

More to the point is that the original Sumerians believed that the “gods” had created them and that they owed the gods a lifetime of service, *not* worship as we understand the word today.

In the Bible, “worship” is commonly expressed as *avod* (“work”).¹⁶ Wikipedia supports this translation: “Avoda, or Avodah (Hebrew עֲבוּדָה : lit. ‘work, worship, and service’).”¹⁷ The Ancient Hebrew Research Center also affirms the meaning:

The verb ... עָבַד [avod] is used about 290 times in the Hebrew bible and is translated in the King James Version of the Bible with the following English words; serve (227), do (15), till (10), servant (5), work (5), worshipper (5), service (4), dress (2), labour (2), ear (2), bondage (1), bondmen (1), bondservice (1), wrought (1) The word עֲבוּדָה [avoda] is used about 141 times in the Hebrew bible and is translated in the King James Version of the Bible with the following English words; service (96), servile (12), work (10), bondage (8), act (2), serve (2), servitude (2), tillage (2), effect (1), labour (1).¹⁸

It is not hard to see how this emphasis on service over worship echoes the Sumerian relationship to the “gods,” as reflected in a statement by Samuel Noah Kramer, a renowned Sumerologist of the last century:

Sumerian thinkers ... were firmly convinced that man was fashioned of clay and created for one purpose only: to serve the gods by supplying them food, drink, and shelter so that they might have full leisure for their divine activities.¹⁹

The Sumerians didn’t have a religion. They didn’t have gods to worship. They didn’t even have notions of “religion” and “worship.” They were born into a world controlled by their creators whom they were born and bound to serve. That was their “religion.”

Marduk

From the Earth Chronicles viewpoint, Marduk was one of those creators. He was not personally responsible for the creation of humankind, but, according to Zecharia Sitchin and Mesopotamian sources, his father, Enki/Ea was.

Marduk served as the patron deity of Babylon for roughly 1,700–2,000 years, from his rise during the founding of Babylon's first dynasty in the eighteenth century BCE until the gradual decline of the “old” Mesopotamia around the first century CE.²⁰

Marduk was an obscure name in the third millennium BCE, but, by the first millennium BCE, it became the most prominent name in the Mesopotamian “pantheon.” He was the patron of Babylon, home to his ziggurat, Etemenanki, which translates to “Temple [that is] the foundation of the heavens and the earth.” In this period in his life, he was often referred to as Bel, the Akkadian word for “Lord,” as his personal importance increased with the city's growing influence in the region.²¹

That rise to supremacy didn’t come peacefully because Marduk had an axe to grind. A running theme in Sumerology is the bitter feelings between two brother creators: Enki and Enlil. At the heart of the bad blood is that Enlil was chosen for overall command of the Anunnaki—over his brother—by drawing lots (*12th Planet*, p. 102). Enki’s resentment rubbed off on his son, Marduk, who was determined to gain supremacy.

Marduk employed machinations and warfare to achieve his goal (as Sitchin explains in *The Wars of Gods and Men*, Chs. 8–14). And achieve his goal he did. He became the self-declared patron of Babylon and is today recognized by academics as the most prominent among the Anunnaki.²²

By 539 BCE (about the time of the end of the Babylonian Captivity), Marduk had long since achieved the divine supremacy he had sought for so long, but his victory brought him little satisfaction. A new player was on the scene, Cyrus the Great of the Persian empire. Marduk had befriended Cyrus, as evidenced by the Cyrus Cylinder. This inscription claims that the deposed Babylonian king, Nabonidus (ca. 626–539 BCE²³), had disrespected Marduk (the “king of the gods”) and perverted his cults, causing Marduk to wrathfully abandon Babylon and seek a Persian champion to restore order. According to the Cylinder:

The great lord Marduk, who loves Babylon, with great magnanimity, established it as my destiny. ... [He] inspected and looked through all the countries, seeking a righteous king. ... He took by the hand Cyrus, king of the city of Anshan [Persia], and called him by his name, proclaiming him aloud for the kingship over all of everything.²⁴

Yes, Marduk, who strove for eons to take control of Babylon, who became its patron deity, declared Cyrus, King of Anshan, king of the world, enabling Cyrus to extend his kingship over the tribes of Iran. Then Marduk ordered Cyrus to take Babylon, which he did after either a quick battle or no battle at all in 539 BCE.²⁵ The controversial Babylonian king, Nabonidus,²⁶ was deposed, and Cyrus replaced him and abolished the labor service

requirement of the population. Cyrus also claimed to have restored their temples and returned their once deported gods and people (as mentioned at the top of this post). Cyrus attributes the repair of sanctuaries, the return of cult statues, and the recall of exiled peoples back to their homes—all by the direct command and blessing of Marduk and his son Nabu. The cylinder text ends with an account of the rebuilding of Imgur-Enlil, the city wall of Babylon.²⁷

For the moment, Marduk was “the man.”

By ca. 400 BCE, Marduk was no longer the active warrior-god of independent Babylonian kings, but he was still the patron of Babylonian culture, which was under the rule of the Persian Achaemenid Empire (the first and largest Persian empire, founded by Cyrus the Great in 550 BCE²⁸). Ca. 482 BCE, Babylon had revolted against the Persian King Xerxes I, who punished the city by damaging parts of Marduk's grand temple complex, the Esagila.²⁹ This is hardly something even a powerful king could do with impunity without the backing of another, equally powerful “god,” other than Marduk.

By 400 BCE, the famous Achaemenid King Artaxerxes II Mnemon was ruling Babylon, recuperating there from wounds suffered at the Battle of Cunaxa in 401.³⁰ The spectacular New Year festivals had been heavily scaled back or skipped because the sacred statue of Marduk had been stolen and melted down, but Babylon's local priests had not given up on him.³¹

Ca. 400 BCE, Babylonian astronomy and astrology were all the rage. Marduk had become aligned with the planet Jupiter, and, instead of fighting astronomical monsters (as in the *Enuma elish* [Creation Epic]),³² his priests were writing *Astronomical Diaries*. Marduk had become the god of science and astronomy.³³

By 400 BCE, Marduk was just another patron “god.”

Babylon

After Babylon fell to the Persians under [Cyrus](#) the Great, it became the capital of the [Achaemenid Empire](#) (550–330 BCE). [Darius I](#) (“the Great,” r. 522–486 BCE) and his son [Xerxes I](#) (r. 486–465 BCE), both of the Achaemenid empire, dealt with one uprising after another during their reigns, largely due to heavy taxation. When tax increases led to rioting and rebellion in Babylon in 482 BCE, Xerxes sacked the city, leveled the temple, and melted down the gold-plated three-times-life-size statue of Marduk. (The gold was put to use funding Xerxes’ invasion of Greece in 480 BCE.)

In 401 BCE, Cyrus the Younger, Satrap of Lydia, [Phrygia](#), and Cappadocia (ca. 423–401 BCE³⁴), rebelled against his brother [Artaxerxes II](#) (404–358 BCE).

The coup failed, and the [10,000 Greek mercenaries who returned home](#)³⁵ paved the way for [Alexander the Great](#) (r. 359–336 BCE) in 334 BCE. By 331 BCE, Babylon had fallen to Alexander. After Alexander’s death in 323 BCE, Babylon persisted as a trade center of the [Seleucid Empire](#) (312–63 BCE; named after one of Alexander’s generals), the [Parthian Empire](#) (247 BCE–224 CE), and the [Sassanian Empire](#) (224–651 CE).

After ca. 400 BCE, however, Babylon was never the player that it was under Hammurabi or the Neo-Babylonian King [Nebuchadnezzar II](#) (r. 605/604–562 BCE).³⁶

Marduk’s abandonment of Babylon

During the First Dynasty of Babylon, King Hammurabi (r. ca. 1792–1750 BCE) united southern Mesopotamia and made Babylon the principal city, elevating Marduk from a minor agricultural and warrior deity to the city’s patron god.³⁷

But who was elevating whom? In the traditional paradigm, the achievements of the monarch enhanced the prominence of the patron deity. From the Earth Chronicles viewpoint, the “deity” ordered and enabled the monarch to make the conquests and have the achievements. In his famous *Code*, Hammurabi says:

When Marduk sent me to rule over men, to give the protection of right to the land, I did [sic] right and righteousness in . . . , and brought about the well-being of the oppressed.³⁸

Although Marduk established his local supremacy during the reign of Hammurabi, ultimately he achieved region-wide recognition, eclipsing older names, such as his uncle and father’s rival, Enlil. The name “Marduk” became synonymous with supremacy with the New Year celebration (*Akitu*, or *Zagmuk* in Sumerian³⁹) and the reading of the creation epic *Enuma elish*, wherein he is cast as the conquering hero over Tiamat and as the creator of the world.⁴⁰

Then something happened.

It is a recognized phenomenon of that time: divine abandonment. Andreas Johandi writes about it:

Divine abandonment is an important leitmotif in Mesopotamian literature and theology. It centres on the improper deeds of humans that infuriate a deity and upon which the deity abandons the city/land under his/her divine care. The deity’s departure results in calamitous times for the city that can be ended only with the deity’s relenting and returning, after he/she appoints a new ruler for the region and

returns to his/her temple. Subsequently, peace, order and well-being are restored for the city/land.⁴¹

Johandi explains how this plays out:

[T]he evil deeds of the ruler or the inhabitants of a city/land cause the god under whose safekeeping the city lies to abandon his/her dwelling (temple) and leave the city and its people. The absence of a god from his/her temple ushers in a period when, due to the lack of divine care, chaos rules and various forms of atrocities (ravages by enemies, natural catastrophes, illnesses, famines etc.) take hold of the geographical area (city or land) and its people. After this the god's anger relents, he/she selects a new ruler for the city and returns to his/her temple, after which peace, order, and prosperity are restored to the city/land.

This is what happened in the late sixth century in Babylon. According to one source, in the Cyrus Cylinder, King Nabonidus (555–539 BCE⁴²), the last native king of Babylon, committed misdeeds in the eyes of Marduk. According to the Inscription of Esarhaddon, the people of Sumer and Akadia were guilty of the misdeeds: lying in their daily dealings, abandoning the traditional rites and embracing new ones, stealing from the temple (Esagil), selling their silver, gold, and precious stones to Elam. In the Inscription of Marduk-apla-iddina II, one of the transgressions might have been letting the temple of Inanna (Eanna) to fall into serious disrepair, with its buckling walls and a collapsed parapet. And so on.⁴³

As a result of these transgressions, Marduk (“among those divine beings well-known for their furious side”⁴⁴) became angered and abandoned Babylon, along with other infuriated deities he had compelled to reside in the city. The Cylinder also refers to Marduk as “Enlil-of-the-gods,” which had come to be the term used for “premier god of the Babylonian pantheon, a position previously held by the god Enlil.”⁴⁵

In *The Seed of Kingship*, “[t]he lord (Marduk) became angry and (full of) wrath. He commanded and the land was abandoned by its gods.”⁴⁶

Without the protection of the gods, the city underwent slow ruin: “sanctuaries have become dilapidated, and the people go hungry. Another “distress and hardship” afflicts the inhabitants, perhaps of a social nature. Elamites from the east raided the land.”⁴⁷

At one point, a flood devastated the city, causing the residents to flee to foreign havens—and “[t]he gods dwelling in [the city to fly] up to the heavens like birds”—and it was ascribed to the wrath of Marduk. And that wasn't all.

In the *Prophecy of Marduk*:

I caused gods of cattle and grain to go away to heaven. The goddess of fermentation sickened the land, the people's corpses choked the gates. Brother consumed brother, comrade slew his comrade with a weapon, free citizens spread out their hands (to beg of) the poor! Authority was restricted, injustice afflicted the land, rebellious kings diminished the land, lions cut off travel, dogs [went mad] and bit people.⁴⁸

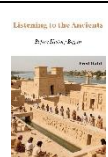
Ultimately, Marduk relented, shortened the length of the abandonment from 70 to 11 years, and allowed the reoccupation of Babylon. No particular reason is given for the abrupt turnabout. He appointed Cyrus the Great, as mentioned, as the new king and brought back peace, order, and prosperity to the city.⁴⁹

Aftermath

All this probably took place in the last quarter of the 500s BCE and the early years of the 400s BCE. Marduk never officially “retired” from being the patron of Babylon. For as long as the city and its traditional religious culture still existed, he remained the city's central patron through the Neo-Babylonian Empire and into the Seleucid and Parthian periods.⁵⁰

Instead of being deposed or replaced by another local “god,” Marduk’s worship faded out and eventually ended, alongside the decline and abandonment of ancient Babylonian religion itself. Eventually, cuneiform was no longer the colloquial tongue of Sumer-Acadia, becoming instead the lingua franca of Near Eastern diplomacy and state affairs, rather like Latin in the Middle Ages.

Marduk and his civilization had come to the end of the line. And the Hebrew God had gone silent.



For more on the feud between Enlil and Enki, see [Listening to the Ancients: Before History Began](#).

Takeaway

The Anunnaki are said to live for hundreds of thousands of years; for all practical purposes, they were/are immortal. Marduk was the patron of Babylon for 1700–2000 years, and we know that he is probably still around—after all, it’s been only 2,500 years or so since we last heard about him. For thousands of years, all the descriptions of Marduk’s involvement

in the affairs of Babylon and Persia are those of a physical ruler, not a statue in the “temple.” Where did he go? Where is he now?

Above all, it is curious, at the very least, that the cuneiform and biblical narratives went silent at more or less the same time—within a little more than 100 years, a blink of the eye among the immortals.

Notes

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⁴ “Babylonian Captivity,” *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Babylonian-Captivity>; “The Cyrus Cylinder: The Discovery and Creation of an Icon,” *Smithsonian*, n.d., https://www.si.edu/object/yt_Q2qKQngMszM; “The Rebuilding of the Temple,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, <https://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/after-the-babylonian-exile>

⁵ “Zerubbabel,” *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zerubbabel>

⁶ “Ezra-Nehemiah,” *BibleProject Guide*, n.d., <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-ezra-nehemiah/>

⁷ “The Jewish Temples: The Babylonian Exile (597–538 BCE),” *Jewish Virtual Library*, n.d., <https://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-babylonian-exile>

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- ²⁵ “Fall of Babylon,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_Babylon
- ²⁶ Eric A. Powell, “The Last King of Babylon,” Archaeology Magazine, March/April 2022, <https://archaeology.org/issues/march-april-2022/features/babylon-nabonidus-last-king/>. Nabonidus was the “last king” in that he was the last *native* king. Cyrus was Persian.
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- ²⁸ Peter Davidson, “Achaemenid Empire,” World History Encyclopedia, May 11, 2011, https://www.worldhistory.org/Achaemenid_Empire/. For an idea of the extent of the empire, visit the website for a map of the empire’s extent.
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- ³³ “Marduk (God),” Ancient Mesopotamian Gods and Goddesses, n.d., <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/amgg/listofdeities/marduk/>
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⁴⁵ Johandi, p. 145.

⁴⁶ Johandi, p. 147.

⁴⁷ Johandi, p. 155.

⁴⁸ Johandi, p. 157.

⁴⁹ Johandi, pp. 159–162.

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