

Legend of Etana, king of Kesh

(Sumerian text, about 2600 BC)

(Tablet 1)

They planned a city.
The gods laid its foundations.
They planned the city of Kish.
The Igigi gods founded its brickwork.

"Let be their people's shepherd,
Let Etana be their architect... ."

The Great Anunnaki gods, ordainers of destinies,
Sat taking their counsel concerning the land.

The creators of the four world regions, establishers of all physical form,
By command of all of them, the Igigi gods,
Ordained a festival for the people.

No king did they establish, over the teeming peoples.
At that time no headdress had been assembled, nor crown,
Nor yet scepter had been set with lapis.

No throne daises whatsoever had been constructed,
Against the inhabited world they barred the gates...

The Igigi gods surrounded the city with ramparts,
Ishtar came down from heaven to seek a shepherd,
And sought for a king everywhere.

Innina came down from heaven to seek a shepherd,
And sought for a king everywhere.

Enlil examined the dais of Etana.
The man whom Ishtar steadfastly... She has constantly sought....

"Let kingship be established in the land,
Let the heart of Kish be joyful".

Kingship, the radiant crown, throne
He brought and ...
The gods of the lands....
(large gap....)

(Tablet 2)

... which he called ... the High Water
... he had built a tower ...
... shrine for Adad, the god.

In the shade of that shrine a poplar was growing,
In its crown an eagle settled,
A serpent settled at its root.

Daily they watched the wind beasts.
The eagle made ready to speak, saying to the serpent,
"Come, let us make friendship,
Let us be comrades, you and I."

The serpent made ready to speak, saying to the eagle,
"If indeed ... of friendship and ...
Then let us swear a mighty oath of Shamash,
An abomination of the gods.

"Come then, let us set forth and go up the high mountain to hunt.
Let us swear an oath by the netherworld."

Before Shamash the warrior they swore the oath.

"Whoever transgresses the limits of Shamash,
May Shamash deliver him as an offender into the hands of the executioner."

"Whoever transgresses the limits of Shamash,
May the mountains remove their praises far away from him."

"May the oncoming weapon make straight for him,
May the trap and curse of Shamash overthrow him and hunt him down!"

After they had sworn the oath by the netherworld,
They set forth, going up the high mountains,
Each day by turns watching for the wild beasts.

The eagle would hunt down wild oxen and gazelle,
The serpent would eat, turn away, then his children would eat.

The eagle would hunt down wild sheep and aurochs,
The serpent would eat, turn away, then his children would eat.

The serpent would hunt down beasts of the field, the creatures of earth,
The eagle would eat, turn away, then his children would eat the food,
The eagle's children grew big and flourished.

After the eagle's children were grown big and were flourishing,
The eagle's heart indeed plotted evil,
Evil his heart plotted indeed!
He set his thoughts upon eating his friend's young!

The eagle made ready to speak, saying to its children:
"I will eat the serpent's children, the serpent ..."

"I will go up and dwell in heaven,
If I descend from the crown of the tree, ... the king."

The littlest fledgling, exceedingly wise, said these words to the eagle, his father:
"Do not eat, my father!"

"The net of Shamash will hunt you down,
The mesh and oath of Shamash will overthrow you and hunt you down."

"Whoever transgresses the limits of Shamash,
Shamash will deliver him as an offender into the hands of the executioner!"

He did not heed them, nor listen to his sons' words,
He descended and ate up the serpents' children.

In the evening of the same day,
The serpent came, bearing his burden.
At the entrance to his nest he cast down the meat.

He looked around, his nest was gone,
He looked down, his children were not ...!

The eagle had gouged the ground with his talon,
The cloud of dust from the sky darkened the sky.

The serpent.... weeping before Shamash,
Before Shamash the warrior his tears ran down.

"I trusted in you, O, warrior Shamash,
I was the one who gave provisions to the eagle.

Now my nest ...!
My nest is gone, while his nest is safe,
My young are destroyed, while his young are safe,
He descended and ate up my children!

You know, O Shamash, the evil he has done to me.
Truly, O Shamash your net is the wide earth,

Your trap is the distant heaven.

The eagle must not escape from your net,
That malignant Anzu who harbored evil against his friends!"

When he had heard the serpent's lament,
Shamash made ready to speak, and said to him:
"Go your way and cross the mountain,
I have captured for you a wild ox.
Open its insides, rend its belly,
Set an ambush in its belly."

"Every kind of bird of heaven will come down to eat the meat.
The eagle will come down with them to eat the meat.
As he will not know the evil in store for him,
He will search for the juiciest meat ..., he will walk about outside.
He will work his way into the covering of the intestines."

"When he comes inside, seize him by his wings,
Cut off his wings, his pinions and tail feathers.
Pluck him and cast him into a bottomless pit,
Let him die there of hunger and thirst."

As Shamash the warrior commanded,
The serpent went and crossed the mountain.

Then did the serpent reach the wild ox,
He opened its insides, he rent its belly.
He set an ambush in its belly.

Every kind of bird of heaven came down to eat the meat.
Did the eagle know of the evil in store for him?
He would not eat the meat with the other birds!

The eagle made ready to speak, saying to his children:
"Come, let us go down and we too eat the meat of the wild ox".

The little fledgling, exceedingly wise, said these words to the eagle, his father:
"Do not go down, father, no doubt the serpent is lurking inside the wild ox".

The eagle said to himself,
"Are the birds afraid? How is it they eat the meat in peace?"

He did not listen to them, he did not listen to his sons' words.
He descended and perched on the wild ox.
The eagle looked at the meat, searching in front and behind it.

A second time he looked at the meat, searching in front and behind it.
He walked around outside, he worked his way into the covering of the intestines.

When he came inside, the serpent seized him by his wings,
"You intruded... you intruded...!"

The eagle made ready to speak, saying to the serpent:
"Have mercy on me! I will make you such a gift as a king's ransom!"

The serpent made ready to speak, saying to the eagle:
"If I release you, how shall I answer to Shamash on high?
Your punishment would turn upon me,
Me, the one to lay punishment upon you!"

He cut off his wings, pinions and tail feathers.
He plucked him and cast him into a pit.
That he should die there of hunger and thirst.

As for him, the eagle, ...
He kept on beseeching Shamash day after day:
"Am I to die in a pit?
Who would know how your punishment was imposed upon me?
Save my life, the eagle!
Let me cause your name to be heard for all time."

Shamash made ready to speak and said to the eagle:
"You are wicked and have done a revolting deed.
You committed an abomination of the gods, a forbidden act.
Were you not under oath? I will not come near you.
There, there! A man I will send you will help you."

Etana kept on beseeching Shamash day after day.
"O Shamash, you have dined from my fattest sheep!
O Netherworld, you have drunk of the blood of my sacrificed lambs!
I have honored the gods and revered the spirits.
Dream interpreters have used up my incense.
Gods have used up my lambs in slaughter."

"O Lord, give the command!
Grant me the plant of birth!
Reveal to me the plant of birth!
Relieve me of my burden, grant me an heir!"

Shamash made ready to speak and said to Etana:
"Find a pit, look inside.
An eagle is cast within it.
He will reveal to you the plant of birth".

Etana went his way.
He found the pit, he looked inside.
The eagle was cast within it.
There he was for him to bring up!

(Tablet 3)

The eagle looked at him....
He said to Etana:
"You are Etana, king of the wild beasts,
You are Etana, ... among birds.
Bring me up from this pit,
Give me ... your hand,
..... ,
I will sing your praises for all time".

Etana said to the eagle these words:
"If I save your life,
If I bring you up from the pit,
From that moment we must be"

"... to me ..."
"From sunrise till ...
.....
"I will grant you the plant of life".

When Etana heard this,
He filled the front of the pit with ...
Next he threw in
He kept throwing in ... in front of him.

The eagle ... from the pit
As for him, he flapped his wings.

A first time and a second time ... the eagle in the pit.
As for him, he flapped his wings

A third time and a fourth time... the eagle ... in the pit
As for him, he flapped his wings,
A fifth and a sixth time....

(fragmentary lines, then gap)
(from another version)

He took him by the hand in his seventh month in the pit.
In the eighth month he brought him over the edge of his pit.

The eagle took food like a ravening lion,
He gained strength.

The eagle made ready to speak and said to Etana:
"My friend! Let us be friends, you and I!
Ask of me whatever you desire and I shall give it to you."

Etana made ready to speak and said to the eagle:
"My eyes ... open up what is hidden.

(gap)

Etana and the eagle become friends. Etana has dreams, which he relates to the eagle.
... above
... at my feet
The eagle made Etana understand the dream.
... seated before him.

" ... your dream is propitious. "
" ... burden is brought. "
" They will give ... "
" You have done ... of the people."
" You will seize ... in your hand."
" The sacred bond ... above
... at your feet."

Etana said to him, to the eagle:
"My friend, I saw a second dream."
"... reeds ... in the house,
In all ..., the whole land."

"They heaped up loads of them in piles."
" ... enemies, they were wicked serpents."
" ... were coming before me,
they were kneeling before me."

The eagle made Etana understand the dream.
... seated bore him
" ... your dream is propitious."

(gap)

(Tablet 4)

The eagle made ready to speak, saying to Etana:

"My friend ... that god...."

"We passed through the gates of Anu, Enlil and Ea.

We passed through the gates of Sin, Shamash, Adad and Ishtar."

"We did obeisance together, you and I."

"I saw a house with windows, it had no seal

I... and went inside".

"A remarkable young woman was seated therein,

She was imposing ... beautiful of feature.

A throne was set out, the ground was trodden down.

Under the throne ... lions were crouching.

As I went in, the lions sprang at me.

I awoke with a start and shuddered ..."

The eagle said to him, to Etana:

"My friend, the ... are obvious.

Come, let me take you up to heaven.

Put your chest against my chest,

Put your hands against my wing feathers,

Put your arms against my sides."

He put his chest against his chest,

He put his hands against his wing feathers,

He put his arms against his sides,

Great indeed was the burden upon him.

When he bore him aloft one league,

The eagle said to him, to Etana:

"Look, my friend, how the land is now.

Examine the sea, look for its boundaries

The land is hills ...

The sea has become a stream".

When he had borne him aloft a second league,

The eagle said to him, said to Etana:

"Look, my friend, how the land is now!

The land is a hill".

When he had borne him aloft a third league,

The eagle said to him, said to Etana:

"Look, my friend, how the land is now!"

The sea has become a gardener's ditch".

After they had ascended to the heaven of Anu,
They passed through the gates of Anu, Enlil and Ea,
The eagle and Etana did obeisance together.
At the gate of Sin,
The eagle and Etana did obeisance together.

(gap, fragmentary lines)
(another version of this episode)

"Through the power of Ishtar,
Put your arms against my sides,
Put your hands against my wing feathers".

He put his arms against his sides,
He put his hands against his wing feathers.

When he had borne him aloft one league:
"Look, my friend, how the land is now!
The land's circumference is become one fifth of its size.
The vast sea is become like a paddock."

When he had borne him aloft a second league:
"Look, my friend, how the land is now!
The land has become a garden plot ...,
And the vast sea has become a trough."

When he had borne him aloft a third league:
"Look, my friend, how the land is now!
I looked but could not see the land!
Nor were my eyes enough to find the vast sea!"

"My friend, I won't go up to heaven,
Set me down, let me go off to my city".

One league he dropped him down,
Then the eagle plunged and caught him in his wings.

A second league he dropped him down,
Then the eagle plunged and caught him in his wings.

A third league he dropped him down,
Then the eagle plunged and caught him in his wings.

Within three cubits of earth he dropped him down,
The eagle plunged, and caught him in his wings.
The eagle ... and.... while he, Etana ...