

# **Archaic and Axial Age Religions**

## **Religion and Society: Fall 2009**

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**B. Akkadian: *Enuma Elish***

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# Oral and Literate Cultures

## The Development of Scripts

Cuneiform: ca. 3500 BCE

Egyptian Hieroglyphics: ca. 3000 BCE

Chinese Pictographs: ca. 1500 BCE

*Ideographs and pictographs encode ideas*

Alphabet: ca. 1500 BCE

Vowels (Greek): ca. 800 BCE

*alphabets encode phonemes*

## Literacy restricted until 900-500 BCE

## Features of Oral Cultures

You know what you can recall:

*Memory is precious!*

Cultural knowledge encoded in stories

Stories are concrete, close to “lifeworld”

Situational/practical not abstract

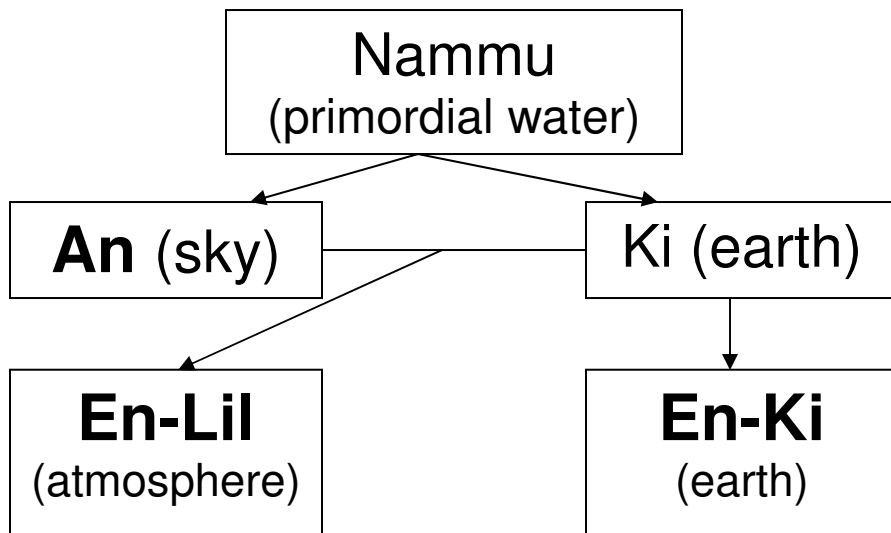
Homeostatic not historical

Embody struggle not detachment

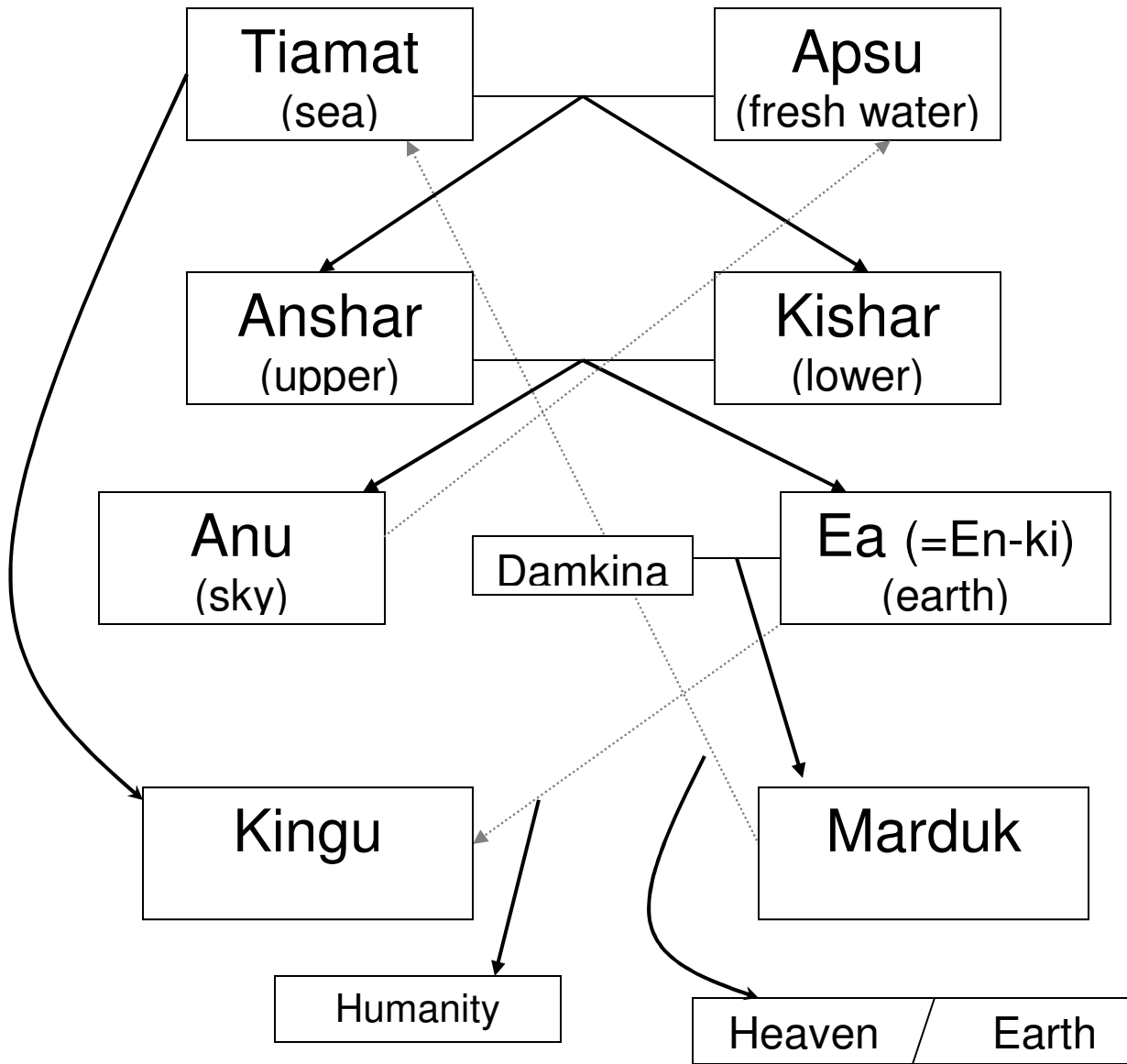
# Archaic Religion

Examples from Mesopotamia  
(Sumerian/Akkadian/Babylonian)

**Sumer (ca. 3500 BCE)**



# Akkad – *Enuma Elish* (ca. 2000-1800)



## Common Features in Archaic Religion

### Themes & elements *within* the narrative

Primordial water

Female divinity as primordial/chthonic

High god/sky god as male

Struggle between gods

### Themes *about* the narrative

History of the religion is partly erased

High god becomes a “deus otiosus”

Time is cyclical

Explanatory of natural and social order

(not prescriptive or critical)

## **Personages of the Axial Age**

Zoroaster (Zarathustra – ca. 1200?)

Lao Tzu (Laoxi – ca. 600)

Jeremiah (ca. 600)

Siddattha Gotama (Buddha – ca. 560-480?)

Confucius (Confuzi – 551-479)

Mahavira (ca. 497-425)

Socrates (470-399)

# Common Features of Axial Religion

## *Diminished concern with cosmogony*

- Confucius
- Buddha
- Hebrew prophets

## *Rise of linear time – eschatology*

- Zoroastrian “transfiguration”
- Second Isaiah

## *Concern with ethics and inner states*

- Taoist *wu-wei*
- Buddhist fourth noble truth
- Confucian virtue
- Socratic *aporia*

## *Order of the world prescribes behavior*

- The Tao
- First Buddhist noble truth
- Jeremiah, Isaiah
- Zoroastrian divinities: Spenta Mainyu (beneficent) and Angra Mainyu (destructive)