

Creation Accounts and Ancient Near Eastern Religions

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Over the past two hundred years, the science of archaeology has developed and given us direct access to documents and artifacts from the lands of the Bible. While often fragmentary and difficult to interpret, these ancient writings flesh out the cultures that surrounded and influenced ancient Israel. Of particular interest are ancient near eastern religious texts, because they allow us to compare the gods of Canaan, Mesopotamia, and Egypt with the God of the Bible.

Since their discovery, many scholars have claimed that the religious views found in these ancient documents are hardly different from those in the Bible; in fact, the ancient Israelites simply borrowed the beliefs of their neighbors. Nowhere are these scholars more assured that Israel parroted others than in the creation account and early history found in Genesis 1–11.

While years of study are necessary to read these creation accounts in the original languages, good English translations are now available, so that I [JB] can pass along some good advice that I received some years ago. In a class discussing the canon of Scripture—which books should be included in the Bible, and which ones should not be—the instructor made this comment: “It’s actually very easy to tell: just read them.” When investigating claims that the biblical creation account is just borrowed from elsewhere, my advice is the same: read the other accounts, noting not only the slight similarities but also the significant differences between them, and the Genesis account will clearly stand out as superior.¹ In fact, many scholars today recognize that these creation stories, from which earlier scholars thought Israel had borrowed, actually have very little in common with the Bible.

A BABYLONIAN GENESIS?

No ancient creation account is cited more for its supposed parallels to early Genesis than the Babylonian poem called *Enuma Elish* (from its two opening words in Akkadian, “when on high”).² This story includes a description of the conflict between the younger god Marduk and the older goddess Tiamat; after Marduk slew Tiamat, he used her body to make the world.

Part of the appeal for this comparison comes from the simple fact that *Enuma Elish* was one of the first texts discovered from the ancient Near East that covers the making of the world. Further, the Akkadian name Tiamat seems to be parallel to the Hebrew word for “the deep,” *t’hôm* (Gen. 1:2), which led some scholars to think of Genesis 1 as describing a conflict of sorts between God and the forces of nature, or even a sea monster; this gains some traction from the possibility that “without form and void” is a paraphrase for “chaos.” The opening words of the Akkadian story, “when on high,” also influenced some to argue that the opening words of Genesis should be translated “when God began to create” (see the alternate translation of the RSV).³

Although some biblical scholars continue to make these comparisons, Assyriologists are now less likely to endorse the comparison than formerly.⁴ Partly this is due to the work of W. G. Lambert, who argued: “The first major conclusion is that the *Epic of Creation* [another name for *Enuma Elish*] is not a norm of Babylonian or Sumerian cosmology. It is a sectarian and aberrant combination of mythological threads woven into an unparalleled compositum.”⁵

Many have come to acknowledge that the supposed parallel between Babylonian Tiamat and Hebrew *t’hôm* (“the deep”) is very unlikely. The linguistic details show that there

is no way that Hebrew *t’hôm* can be a borrowing from Akkadian Tiamat; likewise, “without form and void” (Gen. 1:2) is a phrase, not for “unruly and disorderly chaos,” but for “an unproductive and uninhabited place.”⁶ Further, nothing in Genesis 1 can be reasonably said to imply any kind of struggle on God’s part: Psalm 33:9 (“for he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm”) is an excellent summary of the creation story.

A BABYLONIAN ADAM?

The *Adapa Epic* is a Babylonian story about a man whom many compare with the biblical Adam. In this tale, Adapa was fishing one day in the Persian Gulf when the south wind suddenly overturned his boat. Adapa cursed the wind, breaking one of its wings so that it could not blow for seven days. Hearing of this, Anu, the sky god, summoned Adapa to give account for himself; but before Adapa went, the god Ea (whom Adapa served) instructed him on how to conduct himself in the heavenly court, and warned him that they might offer him the food and water of death, which he must not eat or drink. Adapa followed Ea’s instructions and found favor with Anu, who decided to offer him the food and water of life—which would have conferred immortality. But Adapa heeded Ea’s warning and refused, much to Anu’s astonishment, and was sent back to earth as a mortal to live among mankind, apparently bringing illness to those among whom he lived.

It is possible that Adapa actually existed; he is listed as the first of the seven Mesopotamian sages who lived before the great flood. No one knows when the story was first composed: the earliest tablets we have date to the fifteenth to fourteenth century BC, but the story appears to have an early Sumerian origin.

Some have argued that the name Adapa could be linguistically related to Adam, since there are other examples of the p/m connection.⁷ One difficulty with this idea is that forms of the proper name Adam (with an *m*) are attested as far back in West Semitic materials as we can look;⁸ this makes it harder to explain why anyone could have “borrowed” a figure named Adapa (with a *p*) into a West Semitic language (such as Hebrew). Indeed, the name Adapa might actually be Sumerian (and thus non-Semitic), rather than Akkadian (a Semitic language, related to Hebrew).⁹

Another hindrance to an easy parallel with Adam is that Adapa is a sage, an advisor to king Alulim (the first king of Sumer, according to the Sumerian King List), so Adapa is not the first or only male human, or even the foremost leader of humanity. Some interpreters suggest that Adapa had some kind of representative role for other people: they translate line 6 as “Ea created him [Adapa] as a *leader* (or *model*) among mankind,”¹⁰ while others call him a “protecting spirit (?)” among mankind.¹¹ But even if Adapa was a leader of sorts, there is nothing in the text that implies that he had the opportunity to gain immortality for anyone other than himself. Those he may have represented (the residents of the city of

Eridu) are not mentioned, and there is definitely no reason to suppose that he represented all humanity.

The stories are different thematically as well. Adapa had a chance to gain immortality for himself (he was clearly *not* the first human),¹² but he missed it out of obedience to instructions given him by the god he served. There is no indication that his “transgression” (breaking the wing of the south wind) was the first offense committed by a human being, and it is certainly not the reason he was condemned to remain mortal. On the other hand, Adam fell from his pristine state of moral innocence by disobeying God’s command.

The only real thematic parallel is the question of personal faith: Adapa exercised it, while Adam failed. As Giorgio Buccellati observed, “This [story] is, I would submit, one of the few cases where Babylonian mythology presents us with a phenomenon of what one may properly call ‘faith.’ Adapa has a personal relationship with Ea that prompts him to bear witness to his god even in front of other gods and even at the

implying that the biblical story “goes back to cuneiform literary sources.”¹⁵ Later study of this complicated text led others to conclude that this omen is not referring to a past golden age that was ended by the confusion of tongues, but just the opposite: it looks forward to a future glorious time when all people will praise Enlil in the same language.¹⁶

A GOLDEN AGE

The biblical idea of a past golden age for humans is not as prevalent in ancient literature as was once thought.¹⁷ In most accounts, the first people are primitive, and then later the gods give them culture so that they might better serve the gods. Interpreting the story of *Enki and Ninhursag* as a golden age myth is now seen as a figment of scholarly imagination. The search for similarities between Genesis and other literature led scholars to misinterpret the idioms in the opening lines of this myth so that they fit the Garden of Eden story.¹⁸ Once again we find that seeking parallels can be misleading: one must never forget to look for differences and to keep the broader context of the passages in view.¹⁹

THE CREATIVE WORD

In an Egyptian creation account from Memphis, the god Ptah speaks new things into existence: “All the divine order really came into being through what the heart [of Ptah] thought and the tongue commanded.”²⁰ This method of creation is certainly in line with the God of the Bible commanding, “Let there be,” and is a step above the standard sexual procreation method of creation found elsewhere. However, it seems strange to assert that Israel borrowed this unique concept from one among dozens of different Egyptian creation accounts, when the decrees of a king would be more familiar to the audience. There is no need to appeal to the similarities in a pagan creation account when the commands of any powerful leader will do.

As already hinted, the standard model of creation in the ancient Near East is sexual procreation (or masturbation, if only one god is involved): Pre-existing, primordial water is the first god(s) and through procreation new generations of gods are produced, bringing greater differentiation in the material (land, sky, air, rivers, etc.) with each succeeding generation. Strikingly, the *ex nihilo* creation of the material world by a transcendent, immaterial, pre-existing God is unique to the Bible and has no parallel in the ancient Near East.²¹ Even the Egyptian god Ptah, who offers the closest parallel when he creates the other gods by thought and speech, is himself created from primordial water.²² Scholars who claim that Genesis 1:1 does not teach this run afoul of the many other passages that repeat the point that God spoke the universe into existence out of nothing (Ps. 33:6, 9; John 1:3; Rom. 4:17; Heb. 11:3).

HUMANS FROM CLAY

Another oft-cited parallel with Egyptian literature is the creation of people from clay on a potter’s wheel by the god

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risk of dangerous consequences.”¹³

Here again we see a situation where superficial similarities (in the names “Adam” and “Adapa” and in the topic of immortality) led scholars to presume that the biblical story was borrowed from a Mesopotamian source, but on closer inspection the minor parallels are washed out by the very substantial differences between the narratives. The most we can say is that all people yearn for immortality and offer various explanations for how it escaped them. The Adapa story, like much Mesopotamian material, identifies a human problem but gives an utterly inadequate explanation.¹⁴

UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE AND THE CONFUSION OF SPEECH

Another example of a proposed Hebrew borrowing from Sumerian literature that has dissolved on closer inspection is a passage in *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, which Samuel Noah Kramer believed “puts it beyond all doubt that the Sumerians believed that there was a time when all mankind spoke one and the same language, and that it was Enki, the Sumerian god of wisdom, who confounded their speech,”

Khnum, which his consort Heket animates with the “breath of life.”²³ But it appears that Khnum creates every person and animal in this manner, not just the first man.²⁴ Although the creation of people from clay mixed with the breath or blood of a god also occurs in many Mesopotamian texts, the clay theme itself is not universal: one text speaks of people springing up from the earth like grain, seeded by the blood of two gods;²⁵ another relates how people simply emerge from the ground as Enlil hoes it.²⁶

DID ISRAEL BORROW MYTHS AS THEIR PRE-HISTORY?

Despite the great variation in creation accounts, there are some significant similarities between Genesis and Mesopotamian accounts (especially the *Atrahasis Epic*) regarding early human history: after people are created, they multiply, are nearly destroyed by a catastrophic flood, and afterward the survivors multiply again. Is this sequence something that the Hebrews borrowed from Mesopotamian sources, or is there a common memory from prehistorical times (i.e., before writing), which the two cultures preserved? Most secular biblical scholars dismiss the idea of a great deluge as myth and can only imagine that Israel borrowed the story. It is interesting that many Assyriologists are willing to allow that the deluge stories may reflect an actual catastrophic historical or pre-historical event.²⁷

In reviewing ancient texts for writing this article, I [JB] found it interesting that all of the stories relating to the creation of humans treat people generically or in groups (cultured/uncultured, learned/unlearned, Sumerian/barbarian). No text presents the creation of a single person such as Adam, or a first couple, from whom all other people are descended. The most detailed creation account regarding humans is the *Atrahasis* epic, where the gods create seven couples from clay and the blood of a god. Given this generic creation of groups or of whole populations by the gods, most cultures apparently saw no need to explain how all races and peoples are descended from one couple. Thus Sumerian genealogies trace political leaders (kingship) in one region,²⁸ but we find nothing like the Table of Nations (Genesis 10) or the origin of language diversity (Genesis 11) in ancient near eastern literature. The other races and languages that any ancient people encountered were presumably explained as the creation of other gods, or as variant creations by their own gods.²⁹

The Uniqueness of the Biblical Creation Account

Creation accounts served important functions in ancient cultures, telling people what their purpose in life was, justifying their political structure, and establishing their local god as the head of the pantheon. Outside of Israel, the purpose of humans was clear and simple: to supply the needs of their gods through the leadership of their king and priests. Beyond this universal theme, however, these creation

accounts show such great variety and imagination that it does not appear their authors are intending to present as history the creative steps that their gods took to form the world: the creation story only serves as a backdrop to justify and establish the current sociological setting.³⁰

The secular scholar views Genesis in a similar way, noting that it is an eclectic text, strangely borrowing themes from Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and possibly Canaanite sources (the Canaanite documents that would confirm this melting-pot thesis are conveniently lacking) to weave a monotheistic creation myth. However, reading these other creation accounts with an eye to spot their differences and not merely their similarities paints a different picture: Genesis tells of one transcendent God, who alone made and rules the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them; there is nothing left for any other god—if it exists—to do. And far from mankind being made to relieve God of work He did not like doing, they are dignified with His image, and with the task of

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ruling the creation in a wise and benevolent way. The painful toil people now experience is not a proper part of the creation; it results from human disobedience, which requires divine redemption. By affirming human unity in Adam and Eve, Genesis lays the foundation for Israel’s calling to bring light to the world.

The goal of early Genesis is not to entertain its listeners nor to justify the political *status quo*, but to convey a history of God’s actions in creating the world for man, its caretaker, to enjoy in fellowship with his Creator. Of course Genesis uses language and imagery that made sense to the original audience, but these images are universal, timeless, and transcultural, conveying a sequence of creation events both to primitive cultures and to modern scientific ones. It is only the presumption that Genesis cannot be relating history and revelation from God³¹ that leads many to seek other ways to account for the text. For those who do not have these biases, the uniqueness of Genesis is readily apparent if they read the other ancient accounts for themselves. Ancient near eastern parallels provide some helpful cultural insights, but they do not explain the Genesis creation account away.

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- 1 An excellent anthology is Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible*, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 26, 1994, although his comments on the biblical texts include more theologically liberal assumptions than we feel are justified or helpful. Selected texts with a minimum of commentary are available in Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East* (Baker Academic, 2002). A classic anthology is James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton University Press, 1969), although some of the translations and interpretations there have been updated in later sources.
- 2 The classic study is Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951 [1942]).
- 3 For an example, see Cyrus H. Gordon, "Ancient Middle Eastern Religions: The Cultural Context," in Philip W. Goetz et al., eds., *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 24:60-64, at 61b.
- 4 Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 425, says, "Most Assyriologists have long since rejected the idea of any direct link between Gen. 1-11 and *Enuma Elish*." Millard, "New Babylonian 'Genesis' Story," 4, summarizes some of the reasons for this new attitude. (Millard's title, "A New Babylonian 'Genesis' Story," refers to Heidel's earlier book, giving Millard's view that *Atrahasis* is a more likely context for Genesis.)
- 5 W. G. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 16:2 (1965): 291.
- 6 On these points see C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (P and R Publishing, 2005), 44-45, nn. 15-16, drawing on linguistic work by Heidel and more recently by David Tsumura.
- 7 E.g., William H. Shea, "Adam in Ancient Mesopotamian Traditions," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 15, 1 (1977): 27-41.
- 8 See Richard Hess, "Adam," in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 21a.
- 9 See William W. Hallo, "Adapa Reconsidered: Life and Death in Contextual Perspective," *Scriptura* 87 (2004): 272.
- 10 Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 148; Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 101.
- 11 Stephanie Dalley, ed., *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 184. Question mark in the original.
- 12 A point acknowledged by Shea, "Adam in Ancient Mesopotamian Traditions": "the Sumerians believed that Alulim and Adapa belonged to the first significant generation of mankind" (36).
- 13 Giorgio Buccellati, "Adapa, Genesis, and the Notion of Faith," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 5 (1973): 63. Although Buccellati compares Adam and Adapa, he makes no claim of any direct dependence.
- 14 Niels-Erik Andreasen, "Adam and Adapa: Two Anthropological Characters," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19, 3 (1981), 179-94, is more cautious than Shea's article, though he still supports it. He is more aware of the differences between the two figures than Shea seems to be. He sees them as two representations of the same actor, which we do not; but he makes the interesting suggestion that "Adam and Adapa represent two different characterizations of human nature" (194). But we prefer to say that, if there is any real connection between the two stories, the two give different analyses of the human situation.
- 15 Samuel N. Kramer, "The 'Babel of Tongues': A Sumerian Version," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, 1 (Jan.-Mar., 1968), 108-111.
- 16 Berndt Alster, 1973 "An Aspect of 'Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta.'" *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 67, 101-10, translated in J. A. Black, G. Cunningham, E. Plückiger-Hawker, E. Robson, and G. Zolyomi, *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://www-etcsl.lorient.ox.ac.uk/>), Oxford 1998-. Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta: translation, <http://etcsl.lorinst.ox.ac.uk/section1/tr1823.htm>, lines 134-55, retrieved 9/22/2011.
- 17 Cf. W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 18: "From Sumerian literature to Berossus it is everywhere assumed that the human race was at first and naturally barbarous. Civilization was a gift of the gods, and that is the way to understand kingship coming down from heaven [as in the Sumerian King List]. The gods gave it as an institution for regulating society."
- 18 Keith Dickson, "Enki and Ninhursag: The Trickster in Paradise," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 66, 1 (January 2007): 1-32, esp. 4-6; Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 35, n. 52.
- 19 Unfortunately, many evangelical scholars run afoul with this one-sided approach also. For example, John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), admits (p. 104): "The view presented in this book has emphasized the similarities between the ways the Israelites thought and the ideas reflected in the ancient world, rather than the differences" (though Walton himself is well aware of these differences). That is, Walton's approach does not allow an Israelite author (who may or may not represent the ways the rest of the Israelites thought) to challenge the ideas found in other peoples. Only by attending to the Hebrew text, to reflections on it in the rest of the Bible, and to the differences with neighboring cultures, do we actually see what specific message the biblical writer had.
- 20 Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 5.
- 21 Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 104-5, 114; Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, 2nd printing with corrections and addenda (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998, 2011), 335.
- 22 Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 105.
- 23 Barbara Watterson, *Gods of Ancient Egypt* (Godalming, Surrey, UK: Bramley Books Limited, 1996), 191.
- 24 Cyrus H. Gordon, "Khnum and El," in *Scripta Hierosolymitana: Egyptological Studies*, ed. Sarah Israelit-Groll, vol. 28 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), 208.
- 25 KAR 4, cf. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 51.
- 26 "Praise of the Pickax," cf. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 31.
- 27 For a more detailed discussion, see Appendix One in C. John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Were and Why You Should Care* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 See *Enki and Ninhmah*, who create disabled people while drunk. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 39-42.
- 30 Cf. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 98. It is important here to distinguish a creation account from the early human history that may follow. As previously noted, many Assyriologists recognize some prehistorical value to the king lists and deluge story, but these differ from the stories that relate to the construction of the world itself.
- 31 Walton makes this comment in *Lost World*, 15: "Genesis 1....represents what the Israelites truly believed about how the world got to be how it is and how it works, though it is not presented as their own ideas, but as revelation from God." This could be taken to imply that Walton views Genesis simply as what ancient Israel believed about their origins and history, which they present as revelation from God, though it may or may not be. A bit later he asserts (19): "Through the entire Bible, there is not a single instance in which God revealed to Israel a science beyond their own culture. No passage offers a scientific perspective that was not common to the Old World science of antiquity." But surely Walton would agree that God could reveal some details of human origins and pre-history to ancient Israel, and do so in a way that also conveys truth to them and to us today? If early Genesis is nothing but borrowed myths, why trust any of its spiritual claims?



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