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# The Babylonian and Biblical Accounts of Creation

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As an ancient Semitic book, the Old Testament naturally bears a close relationship to the environment out of which it sprang. The scene of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, recording the primeval history of mankind, is laid in the cradle of civilization, the Tigris-Euphrates valley. There human life began, and the earliest sedentary culture developed. From thence sprang the earliest traditions of the beginning of the world and of mankind, which, as would be expected, bear close resemblance to the Bible.

Preserved in the wedge-shaped or cuneiform characters of the language of Babylonia-Assyria and written in clay tablets, the recovery of a huge store of ancient documents from Mesopotamia has been one of the triumphs of modern archeology. Before the discovery of the trilingual Behistun inscription in 1835 by a young English officer in the Persian army, which proved to be the key that unlocked the strange cuneiform script, the Assyrian-Babylonian valley was a vast cemetery of buried nations and ancient civilizations. But with the decipherment of the language and consequent renewed zeal in digging up buried cities and long-forgotten cultures, the Tigris-Euphrates region, where human history was born, became one of the most dramatic areas of the earth's surface.

The decipherment of Babylonian-Assyrian cuneiform, and the opening up of the antiquities of those lands where the earliest Biblical history began, produced ardent expectation among Old Testament scholars that excavations of buried cities would yield records containing significant Biblical parallels. Their hopes were not disappointed.

Between the years 1848 and 1876 as a result of excavations at Nineveh, the ancient capital of the Assyrian Empire, Austen H. Layard, Hormuzd Rassam, and George Smith recovered from the library of Ashurbanipal (668-626 B.C.) the first tablets and fragments of tablets of the great creation epic current among the Babylonians and Assyrians. Because of its bearing upon the opening chapters of Genesis, few Semitic inscriptions have awakened greater general interest. The epic, recorded in cuneiform on seven clay tablets, consists of approximately one thousand lines, and was known to its ancient readers from its two opening words *Enuma elish* ("When above").

As a result of the discovery of new tablets and fragments of tablets since 1876, the epic has been almost completely restored. The only considerable portion which is still lacking occurs in Tablet V.

Although the bulk of the tablets, being from Ashurbanipal's library, are in their present form late (seventh century B.C.), they were nevertheless composed much earlier, in the days of the great Hammurabi (1728-1676 B.C.). It was at this time Babylon rose to political supremacy and Marduk, the hero of *Enuma elish*, became the national god. One of the main purposes of the creation epic is to show the preeminence of Babylon over all the other cities of the country, and especially the supremacy of Marduk over all the other Babylonian gods.<sup>1</sup>

## I. The Babylonian Account of Creation

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<sup>1</sup> For the latest translations and discussion of *Enuma elish* see Erich Ebeling in Hugo Gressmann's *Altorientalische Texte zum Alten Testament* (Berlin, 1926), pp. 108-29; Stephen Langdon, *The Babylonian Epic of Creation* (Oxford, 1923); E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Babylonian Legends of the Creation* (London, 1931); Anton Deimel, *Enuma Elish und Hexaemeron* (Rome, 1934); René Labat, *Le Poeme Babylonien de la Création* (Paris, 1935); Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago, 1942).

Tablet I presents in the opening scene the primitive age when only living uncreated world-matter existed, personified by two mythical beings—Apsu (male), representing the primeval fresh-water ocean and Tiamat (female), the primeval salt-water ocean.<sup>2</sup> This original pair became the parents of the gods.

1. “When above the heavens had not (yet) been named,  
(And) below the earth had not (yet) existed as such,  
(When) only Apsu primeval, their begetter, (existed),  
(And) mother (*mummu*) Tiamat, who gave birth to them all;
5. (When) their waters (yet) intermingled,  
(And) no dry land had been formed (and) not (even) a marsh could be seen;  
When none of the gods had been brought forth,  
Then were the gods created in the midst of them (Apsu and Tiamat).
10. Lahmu and Lahamu (deities) they (Apsu and Tiamat) begat.”

The brood of gods, which Apsu and Tiamat begot, became so annoying in their conduct that their father, Apsu, made up his mind to do away with them. In this, however, he was frustrated by the god Ea, “who fathoms everything” (I:60) and who discovered the plan and was thereby able to fetter and slay Apsu. Then Ea begat Marduk, the city god of Babylon, and the real hero of the myth. Meanwhile Tiamat, at the instigation of the gods, prepares to avenge the death of her husband, Apsu. She creates gruesome, monsters and appoints Kingu, one of her own offspring, as commander-in-chief of her armies.

Tablets II and III recount how Marduk was chosen as champion to fight against the raging Tiamat by his father Ea, and how the gods assembled at a banquet for the council of war to accoutre and commission him for battle. In Tablet IV Marduk is elevated to supremacy among the gods, the power to destroy and create being made the basis of his exaltation. He destroys and creates a garment. He is declared king and goes to battle against Tiamat with bow, arrow and club. The formal defeat of chaos and the victory of order is described graphically:

93. “Tiamat and Marduk, the wisest of the gods, took their stands opposite each other,  
They pressed on to the battle, they drew near in combat.
95. The lord spread out his net and enmeshed her,  
The evil wind, following after, he let loose in her face.  
When Tiamat opened her mouth to devour him,  
He drove in the evil wind, so that she could not close her lips.  
As the raging winds filled her belly,
100. Her belly was distended, and she opened wide her mouth.  
He shot off an arrow, it tore her belly,  
It cut through her vitals, it pierced (her) heart.  
When he had subdued her, he destroyed her life;  
He cast down her carcass (and) stood upon it.”

The helpers of Tiamat attempt to flee, but are captured and cast into prison. Meanwhile Marduk returns to Tiamat, to create the kosmos out of her corpse.

135. “The lord rested, to look at her dead body, (to see)  
How he might divide the colossus (and) create wondrous things (therewith).  
He split her open like a mussel into two parts;  
Half of her he set in place and formed the sky.  
He fixed the bar and posted guards.”

Then Marduk issued an order not to let the “water” escape which was in the one half of Tiamat’s body and which he used in the construction of the sky. Next he established the earth, poetically designated “Esharra,” in

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<sup>2</sup> Anton Deimel, *Enuma Elish und Hexaemeron* (Rome, 1934), p. 22.

the form of a great canopy and placed it over Apsu, the fresh-water ocean underneath the earth. The god Anu he placed in the sky, the god Enlil in the air, and Ea in the ocean beneath the earth.

140. “He commanded them not to let her water escape,  
He crossed the heavens! and examined (its) regions.  
He placed himself opposite the Apsu...  
The lord measured the dimensions of the Apsu,  
And a great structure, its counterpart, he established,(namely,) Esharra,

145. The great structure Esharra, which he made as a canopy,  
Anu, Enlil, and Ea he (then) caused to establish their residence.”

In Tablet V, which is fragmentary, Marduk sets up the constellations, marking the days and months of the year, and causes the moon to shine forth in its various phases to mark the principal time unit of Babylonia.

Tablet VI is important in that it describes the creation of man. Marduk declares:

“Blood I will form and cause bone to be;  
Then I will set up lullu,<sup>3</sup> ‘Man’ shall be his name,  
Yes, I will create lullu: Man!  
(Upon him) shall the service of the gods be imposed that they may rest...”

In the assembly of the gods guilt for Tiamat’s rebellion is laid at the door of Kingu, the commander-in-chief of Tiamat’s forces. Thereupon Kingu is slain, and the god Ea, at the instruction of his son Marduk, creates man from the blood let out of Kingu’s arteries.

31. “They bound him (and) held him in prison before Ea)  
They inflicted punishment upon him by cutting open (the arteries of) his blood,  
With his blood they fashioned mankind;  
He (Ea) imposed the service of the gods (upon man) and set the gods free.  
After Ea, the wise, had created man  
(And) had imposed the service of the gods upon him,  
That work was past understanding.”

After the creation of man, the Annunaki (gods) themselves labored for a year, burning brick in order to construct Esagila, the temple-tower of Marduk at Babylon. Then the gods gathered at a festive banquet in honor of Marduk. Tablet VII relates how Marduk is finally advanced from the chief god of Babylon to headship over the entire pantheon. Upon him are conferred fifty names representing the power and attributes of the various Babylonian deities.

In the Eridu story of creation,<sup>4</sup> discovered by Hormuzd Rassam in 1882 in the ruins of ancient Sippar, man’s creation is also attributed to Marduk, with the assistance of the goddess Aruru. It is colored by the same political propaganda as Enuma elish, justifying Marduk’s position as king among the Babylonian gods:

20. “He (Marduk) created mankind.  
The goddess Aruru created the seed of mankind together with him,  
He created the beast of the field (and) the living things of the field,  
He created the Tigris and the Euphrates and set (them) in (their) places:  
Their names he appropriately proclaimed.

25. He created the grass, the rush of the marsh, the reed, and the woods.

26. He created the green herb of the field.”

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<sup>3</sup> Sumerian word for ‘man’.

<sup>4</sup> See L. W. King, *The Seven Tablets of Creation* (London, 1902), I, 130–59; R. W. Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament* (New York, 1926), pp. 47-50; Erich Ebeling in Gressmann’s *A1torientalische Texte zum Alten Testament* (Berlin, 1926), pp. 130f.

Other creation fragments with various versions of creation have been found, the most important one of which recounts that the gods formed mankind with the blood of certain gods. In other accounts flesh and blood of a slain god are said to have been mixed with clay to form man.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Comparison of the Biblical and the Babylonian Accounts

It is commonly recognized by scholars that there are numerous interesting parallels between the account of creation given in Babylonian literature, particularly *Enuma elish*, and that in Genesis 1:1–2:3. Although these similarities are genuine, they are commonly exaggerated and erroneous conclusions are frequently drawn from them.

### 1. The Resemblances:

(1) *Both accounts know a time when the earth was waste and void.* In both there is an etymological equivalence in the names used to denote the dark, watery chaos which was later separated into heaven and earth. In *Enuma elish* it is a proper name, the mythical personality Tiamat. In Genesis 1:2 it is *tehom*, a common noun with no mythological connotations, but describing the vast watery mass from which the waters above the firmament were separated on the second day and out of which the dry land emerged on the third day. But while Hebrew *tehom* represents the entire chaotic watery mass, Tiamat represents only part of it, the other part being represented by *Apsu*.

Although Babylonian Tiamat and Hebrew *tehom* are cognate words in the two Semitic languages, the latter is not a derivative of the former indicating dependence of the Hebrew upon the Babylonian account. As the different gender of the words and other factors indicate, both rather go back to a common proto-Semitic form. On the other hand the Hebrew word for “firmament,” *raqia*, signifies “what is spread out” and corresponds in a much more refined way to the crude Babylonian idea of the half of Tiamat used by Marduk to construct the vault of heaven.

(2) *Both accounts have a similar order of events in creation.* Both open with the existence of divine spirit. In *Enuma elish* divine spirit consists of the primeval deities *Apsu* and Tiamat, who give birth to the first gods. In Genesis it is the one eternal God. Both narratives also begin with a watery chaos and end with the gods, or in the other case the Lord, at rest. In the sequence of creative acts there is a remarkable similarity between the two narratives, although light is created in Genesis and it merely emanates from the gods in the Babylonian version. The creation of the firmament, of the dry land, of the celestial luminaries and of man by Marduk follows the identical order of creation by God in Genesis.

(3) *Both accounts show a predilection for the number seven.* The Babylonian epic is arranged in seven tablets or cantos. The Hebrew creative events are grouped in seven periods called days. This likeness, which at first glance might appear singular, is in reality quite superficial. There is no evidence at all to attribute the seven days of creation in Genesis to the influence of the seven creation tablets of *Enuma elish*. The number seven had a common significance in the ancient Semitic thought reflected in the Babylonian literature as well as throughout the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> Besides there is little correspondence between the seven tablets and the seven creative days of Genesis. Tablets II and III do not deal with any phase of creation, neither do most of tablets I and IV. In Genesis, however, creative activity took place on all of the first six days, while the seventh is devoted to God’s rest.

Taking all factors into consideration, it may be concluded that the similarities between *Enuma elish* and the Genesis account of creation are in some respects striking. But in the over-all picture the likenesses serve to accentuate the differences, which are much more radical and significant.

### 2. The Differences:

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago, 1942), pp. 53-59.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Alfred Jeremias, *The Old Testament in the Light of the Ancient East* (New York, 1911), I, 198–203.

(1) *One account is intensely polytheistic, the other strictly monotheistic.* The Babylonian myth begins with a plurality of gods, Apsu and Tiamat, who as male and female deities give birth to the first gods. Genesis opens with that incomparable word “In the beginning God...” (1:1). As a result of the salient difference in the basic concepts of deity the religious ideas of the two accounts are completely divergent. The Babylonian story is on a low mythological plane with a sordid conception of deity. The offspring of Apsu and Tiamat are so ill-behaved that their father plans to destroy them. The great gods themselves plot and fight against one another. Ea clashes with Apsu. Marduk fights with Tiamat and her followers, and conquers only after a severe struggle.

Genesis, in striking contrast, is lofty and sublime. The one God, supreme and omnipotent, is in superb control of all the creatures and elements of the universe. As Creator there is an infinite gap between Him and the creature, or the creation. Although there is rebellion among the angelic creatures, revealed elsewhere in Scripture (Isa 14:12–17; Ezek 28:12–19) and among mankind also (Gen 3), yet God is in perfect control, the manifestation of evil being foreseen and a remedy provided (Gen 3:15).

The crude polytheism of the Babylonian creation stories mars the record with successive generations of deities of both sexes proceeding from Apsu and Tiamat, and produces a confusing and contradictory plurality of creators. This is true because Apsu and Tiamat are not merely the progenitors of divine beings; but since these divine beings in turn personify various cosmic spaces and natural forces, the parents of the gods directly partake of the role of creators as well.

Then other creators enter the confused picture. In war among the gods, Ea, the father of Marduk, kills Apsu, and from his carcass forms the subterranean sea upon which the earth rests. Marduk in turn in conflict with Tiamat brings kosmos out of chaos, and as the chief creator makes the heaven and earth, the heavenly bodies, grain and legumes, and together with Ea is credited with fashioning man.

Other fragmentary inscriptions add contradictory elements to the perplexing account in *Enuma elish*. One found by George Smith at Nineveh speaks of “the gods in their totality” as having created the world and its contents.<sup>7</sup> Another from the ancient Assyrian capital city, Ashur, lists “the great gods,” Anu, Enlil, Shamash, and Ea as creators of the universe and, together with the divinities called the Annunaki, as having formed the first two human beings named Ulligarra (“the establisher of abundance”) and Zalgarra (“the establisher of plenty”).<sup>8</sup> Another tablet from Babylon arts that Anu created the heavens and that Ea created various lesser deities and mankind.<sup>9</sup> Another inscription ascribes the creation of the sun and moon to Anu, Enlil, and Ea.<sup>10</sup> The Eridu story of creation ascribes mankind’s creation to Marduk with the assistance of a goddess,<sup>11</sup> while a mutilated and weather-worn tablet from the first dynasty of Babylon understands man’s creation by a goddess to be from clay mixed with a slain god’s blood.<sup>12</sup>

In the greatest possible contrast to the confusion and contradiction of these polytheistic narratives, the Genesis account with chaste beauty and simplicity, which are eloquent evidences of its divine inspiration, presents the one eternal God as creator and sustainer of all things. He creates all things out of nothing. By His omnipotent word He speaks worlds into being. As Creator He exerts supreme control over all the elements of the universe.

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<sup>7</sup> For a translation see L. W. King, *The Seven Tablets of Creation*, I, 122–25; Ebeling in Gressmann’s *A1torientalische Texte zum Alten Testament*, p. 136.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Heidel, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-59.

<sup>9</sup> For a translation see A. Ungnad, *Die Religion der Babylonier und Assyrer* (Jena, 1921), pp. 54f.

<sup>10</sup> Ebeling in Gressmann, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Ebeling in Gressmann, *op. cit.*, p. 130f.

<sup>12</sup> S. Langdon, *Sumerian Epic of Paradise, the Flood and the Fall of Man* (Philadelphia, 1915), pp. 25f.

(2) *One account confounds spirit and matter, the other carefully distinguishes between these two concepts.* Not only is the Babylonian version religiously unsound in being polytheistic rather than monotheistic, but—what is closely connected to this—it is philosophically unsound as well. It hopelessly confuses divine spirit and cosmic matter by an irrational and mythological identification of the two. Apsu and Tiamat, the parents of the gods, are personifications of cosmic matter (the primordial sweet- and salt-water oceans) and their offspring in turn personify cosmic spaces and natural forces. This leads to the false assumption underlying Babylonian thought that divine spirit and cosmic matter are coexistent and coeternal.

The Babylonian idea of the eternity of matter is, of course, foreign to Old Testament thought and at variance with an infinite Creator who brings the universe into being out of nothing, which is the clear implication of Genesis 1:1. The sublime and philosophically sound concept of an infinite eternal Spirit creating cosmic matter and existing independently of it, as the Genesis account sets forth, was utterly beyond a polytheistic mold of thought and man's reasonings unaided by divine revelation.

One of the sublimest features of the Genesis account is the power of the spoken word of the Creator. "And God said" (Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26) is the divine fiat that majestically brings the universe and all it contains into existence. A suggestive parallel, though on a much lower plane, is the spoken work of Marduk, which tests his creative power before the gods:

"He commanded with his mouth, and the garment was destroyed.

Again he commanded, and the garment was restored.

When the gods, his fathers, beheld the efficacy of his word,

They rejoiced (and) did homage, (saying) 'Marduk is king!'"

(Enuma elish IV, 25–28)

But this instance of creative activity by the efficacy of the spoken word is unique in Babylonian creation literature. The gods are consistently portrayed as craftsmen who create by physical toil, as it is done on the human level.

### **III. Explanation of the Biblical Parallels**

A comparison between the Babylonian epic of creation and the opening chapters of Genesis reveals that the similarities on the whole are not particularly striking, taking into consideration the close affiliation between Hebrews and Babylonians during the course of their history. The differences are, in fact, much more important and the similarities are, in fact, no more than one would naturally expect in two creation narratives more or less complete. Both have substantially the same phenomena to account for; and since men customarily think along similar lines, no dependence of one upon the other need be assumed.

However, in one aspect the similarity is of such a nature that it could hardly be accidental. This is in the matter of the sequence of events in creation. The order might easily have been altered with regard to the creation severally of the firmament, the dry land, the luminaries and man. It seems certain that there is some connection between the two accounts. Four possibilities may exist: The Genesis account is drawn from the Babylonian tradition. The Babylonian is drawn from the Genesis narrative. These traditions arose spontaneously. The two accounts go back to a common source.

(1) *The Genesis account is drawn from the Babylonian tradition.* Although this view has enjoyed widespread adherence and has certain historical, archeological, and religious factors in its favor, the simplicity and sublimity of the Biblical account in contrast to the complexity and crudity of the Babylonian version offer weighty reasons against it. The Scriptural record sets forth the authentic facts of creation, given in their purity by inspiration. Moses, of course, may have been conversant with these traditions. If he was, inspiration enabled him to record them as authentic facts, purged of all their crass polytheistic incrustations and made to fit the elevated mold of truth and pure monotheism. If he was not, the Holy Spirit could have imparted the revelation of these events to him apart from any need of oral or written sources. In either case inspiration was just as necessary whether to purge the crude account and to refine it to fit the mold of monotheism, or to give the original authentic story without oral or written sources.

The use of oral or written sources is not at variance with Biblical inspiration, as is evident from the prologue to the third gospel (Luke 1:1–3). Moreover, some Old Testament writers were acquainted with the literature of surrounding nations and modelled some of their inspired compositions after their secular literary masterpieces. This fact is clearly shown, for instance, by striking parallels between some of the earlier psalms and the epic literature discovered at Ras Shamra not long ago (1929–1937).<sup>13</sup> In addition, the Amarna Letters from Egypt and the Hittite documents from Boghazkeui in Asia Minor show that Mesopotamian commerce had widely disseminated Babylonian writing and literature around 1400 B.C., so that it was entirely possible that Moses who was “learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22) knew the masterpieces of Babylonian literature such as the myths of Adapa and Ereshkigal, which were current in the Egypt of his day.

Accordingly, it is not impossible from a historical and archeological point of view and from the standpoint of Biblical inspiration to assume that Genesis might in a measure be dependent upon Enuma elish. This, however, is not the true explanation of the parallels, we believe, and, while the doctrine of Biblical inspiration does not rule out the possibility of the dependence of the Genesis account, it renders such dependence wholly unnecessary. It seems inconceivable that the Holy Spirit could have used an epic so contaminated with heathen philosophy as this for a *source of spiritual truth*. The employment of a poetical form or a certain type of metre as the vehicle for the expression of spiritual truth, of which there are clear Old Testament examples taken from contemporary literature, is an entirely different matter.

(2) *The Babylonian is drawn from the Genesis narrative.* This view is extremely unlikely, if not historically impossible. Enuma elish antedates Genesis by almost four centuries, since the epic in the days of Hammurabi of Babylon (1728-1686 B.C.) almost certainly received the form in which it was discovered almost a millennium later, and much of its thought goes back to earlier Sumerian times. However, there is a possibility that the Hebrew account in one form or another may have been current, centuries before.

(3) *These traditions arose spontaneously.* They are the natural tendencies of the human mind in a process of evolution, it is contended. Like ways of thing and accounting for the universe and man could have spontaneously produced them. But then this is not an explanation. It simply refuses to account for the facts in a rational way.

(4) *The two accounts go back to a common source.* The Babylonian inscriptions and the records of Genesis evidently give us two distinct forms of primitive traditions and facts about the beginning of the universe and man. These are not traditions peculiar to Semitic peoples and religions which have developed out of their common characteristics. They are traditions common to all civilized nations of antiquity. Their common elements point to a time when the human race occupied a common home and held a common faith. Their likenesses are due to a common inheritance, each race of men handing on from age to age records, oral and written, of the primeval history of the race.

Early races of men, wherever they wandered took with them these earliest traditions of mankind, and in varying latitudes and climes have modified them according to their religions and mode of thought. Modifications as time proceeded resulted in the corruption of the original pure tradition. The Genesis account is not only the purest, but everywhere bears the unmistakable impress of divine inspiration when compared with the extravagances and corruptions of other accounts. It is, we conclude, the *original form* these traditions must have assumed.

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<sup>13</sup> See John Hastings Patton, *Canaanite Parallels in the Book of Psalms* (Baltimore, 1944), pp. 1-48; W. F. Albright, “The Old Testament and Archeology” in *Old Testament Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1948), pp. 156-59.

<sup>1</sup> *Bibliotheca Sacra* 109, no. 436 (1952): 303–317.