

Did Genesis Borrow from Babylonian Myths?

We saw in our study of Miller and Soden's book *In the Beginning. . . We Misunderstood* that they rightly discount the importance and influence of Mesopotamian myths upon the Genesis creation story. I do want to say something today, however, about Mesopotamian myths and why scholars no longer think that these were a significant influence upon the Genesis creation story. I think this is important not only for the sake of completeness but also because one does frequently still find (especially on the popular level) people saying that Genesis 1 is borrowing from ancient Babylonian myths of creation, particularly the myth called the *Enuma Elish*. The words *Enuma Elish* are simply the first words in Akkadian of this Babylonian epic poem. This has been referred to in the past as the Babylonian Genesis because of its creation account.

The poem tells of the god Marduk who becomes ascendant over the other gods – the head of the Babylonian Pantheon – by defeating and destroying the goddess Tiamat who is sometimes portrayed in the myth as a goddess (a woman) or, other times, apparently as a dragon. Let me just read to you the opening lines of the *Enuma Elish*:

When the skies above were not yet named
Nor earth below pronounced by name,
Apsu, the first one, their begetter,
And maker Tiamat, who bore them all,
Had mixed their waters together,
But had not formed pastures, nor discovered reed-beds;
When yet no gods were manifest,

Nor names pronounced, nor destinies decreed,
Then gods were born within them.

Lahmu and Lahamu emerged their names pronounced.

Here it describes the primordial condition in which the goddess Tiamat and the god Apsu mingled their waters together, which is probably a metaphor for sexual relations because Tiamat then, as a result of this commingling with Apsu, gives birth to the gods that are named in the epic. The story then tells of how the god Marduk battles against Tiamat, kills her, and then creates the world out of her carcass.

As I say, most scholars today, in contrast to past generations, would say that Genesis 1 does not exhibit the influence of this myth, but you will find on occasion scholars who assert the contrary. For example Peter Enns in his book *The Evolution of Adam*, published as recently as 2012, says that there are quite a number of commonly agreed-upon similarities (in his words) between Genesis 1 and the Babylonian epic. A similar position is taken by the biblical scholar Kenton Sparks in the book *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither?* published in 2015. So even in recent years there are still some scholars who are claiming that Genesis 1 bears significant similarity to the *Enuma Elish*. Here is the list of seven similarities that Peter Enns gives. I'd like to go through these with you this morning.

1. He asserts that in both accounts matter exists independently of the divine spirit.
2. In both accounts darkness precedes creation.
3. In the Genesis narrative, the Hebrew word *tehom* (which is the Hebrew word for “deep”) is linguistically related, he says, to the Babylonian word *Tiamat*. So *tehom* and *Tiamat* are linguistically

related, and this is the name of the goddess who symbolizes primordial chaos. 4. In both, light exists before the creation of the sun, moon, and stars. 5. In the *Enuma Elish* Marduk fillets the body of the slain Tiamat to form a barrier to hold back the waters above from escaping. He divides her body in two and with one half of the carcass he creates a sort of canopy or skin to keep back the waters above. In Genesis 1, the sky is depicted as a solid dome over the Earth to keep the waters above where they belong. 6. The sequence of days of creation is similar in both accounts, including the creation of the firmament, the dry land, the luminaries, and finally humanity. And finally, 7. All is followed by divine rest.

I'm sure you would agree at first blush that that's an impressive list of similarities. But the problem is that upon closer examination these alleged parallels are frequently questionable and in some cases downright spurious. Let's look at each one of them.

The first, you remember, was that matter exists independently of the divine spirit. The claim that matter exists independently of the divine spirit is not true in the *Enuma Elish*. It doesn't even mention the divine spirit. It just begins with the two gods associated with the primordial waters. Nor is this statement clearly true of Genesis because in Genesis God has already been said in verse 1 to have created the heavens and the earth "In the beginning." Enns is evidently thinking that creation begins with verse 3, but we've argued the creation begins with verse 1. Verse 1 is an independent clause, and moreover it is not simply a title of the entire chapter. Why? Well, for one reason the first verse is connected to verse 2 by the conjunction "and," or in the Hebrew *waw*. So it's not simply

a title; it is an independent clause followed by “and” and the second verse. Moreover, if it were a title of the chapter, it would be an inaccurate summary because the ensuing chapter does not, in fact, describe the creation of the Earth. Verse 1 says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth,” but in verse 2 the Earth is already there! The Earth was without form and void, etc., etc. So if this were a title, it's inaccurate because the chapter doesn't describe the creation of the Earth. So creation, I think, in Genesis begins with verse 1, and therefore it is simply false to say that matter exists independently of God's spirit.

What about (2)? That was that darkness precedes creation. Well, here it's exactly the same problem. If creation begins with verse 1 and not with verse 3 then it's false that darkness precedes creation because creation begins when God created the heavens and the Earth in the beginning. As if this weren't bad enough, even worse, in the *Enuma Elish* darkness isn't even mentioned, so that the parallel is completely spurious. The *Enuma Elish* says nothing about darkness existing in the beginning.

(3) is that the Hebrew word *tehom* or “the deep” is linguistically related to *Tiamat*. Now this is very misleadingly stated. *Tiamat* and *tehom* are underived from each other. You cannot show that the word *tehom* is derived from the Akkadian word *Tiamat*. Rather, since Akkadian and Hebrew are both Semitic languages, both of these words independently go back to a Semitic root word. So, yes, they're linguistically related. That's true. But they're not linguistically related in the sense of being derived from one another. They are independent derivatives from this earlier Semitic word. Moreover “the deep” is completely different in the Genesis

account than the waters in the *Enuma Elish*. We already saw this point in our study of Egyptian myths. What is described in Genesis is an earthly ocean. It's an ocean on the face of the Earth, whereas in the *Enuma Elish* what we have is a sort of primordial divine substance associated with this god and goddess. And this is prior to the Earth's existence, and something that gives birth to the other gods. So it's quite different than what you have in Genesis.

(4) was that light exists before the creation of the sun, moon, and stars. This would be such a novel feature, I think, of the narrative that that would be impressive as a parallel if that were true. But, in fact, in the *Enuma Elish* Marduk does not create light before he creates the sun, moon, and stars. What is true is that the primordial events in the *Enuma Elish* don't take place in the dark. That's true. But neither do they take place in the earthly realm. In contrast to Genesis (which describes the earthly realm), the *Enuma Elish* begins with the description of the divine realm – the realm of the gods. And it's true they're not walking around in the dark in the realm of the gods. There you have day and night in their realm. But this is not a description of the earthly realm, and therefore it's simply of no relevance to when light comes to exist on Earth.

What about number (5) – that Marduk fillets the body of the slain dragon Tiamat to form a barrier to keep the waters above from escaping while Genesis depicts the sky as a solid dome to keep the waters where they belong? This is actually a point of contrast between the two narratives! In the one you have this dissected corpse which is stretched out over the sky whereas in Genesis you have a firmament in which the stars and the sun and the moon are placed. This is very different. And this is wholly apart from the fact

that Genesis does not portray the firmament as a solid dome. That is reading between the lines. It's not in Genesis.

What about (6) – the sequence of the days of creation is similar? Again, this claim is mistaken because there is no sequence of days of creation in the *Enuma Elish*. There's no sequence of days of creation at all. As for the order of the events in the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk first creates the heavens by stretching out Tiamat's skin to keep back the waters. Then he creates the abodes for the various gods. Then he creates the constellations, and then the moon, which was so important for Babylonian astronomy and timekeeping. Then he creates the clouds and rain storms. Then he creates the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, and then the mountains and the springs. Then he creates what's called the great cosmic bond (whatever that is) and the supports for the heavens. And then he's done. The creation of men as slaves for the gods is a later incident related after the story of Babylon's creation. So this is scarcely similar to the sequence of events in Genesis 1, I think you'd agree.

Finally, what about the last alleged similarity (7) that all is followed by divine rest? Is that true? No, it's not true. Marduk does not rest after these works are done. Instead, he attaches guide ropes and hands these over to the god Ea while he goes to the god Anu. The only time that Marduk rests is immediately after slaying Tiamat *before* undertaking the creative works just mentioned. So the time he rests is prior to creation, not after it. He kills Tiamat, then he rests and surveys her dead body, and then he begins the work of creating the heavens and the constellations, the mountains and the rivers, and so forth.

When you look at this, you can't help but wonder how Peter Enns could have so seriously misread the *Enuma Elish*. I've warned in this class about the dangers of parallelomania – how difficult it is to show dependence or borrowing of one piece of literature upon another. But since men rush in where angels fear to tread, let me hazard a guess about where Peter Enns got this idea of these similarities between *Enuma Elish* and Genesis. It seems that Enns has simply followed the book by Alexander Heidel called *The Babylonian Genesis*.¹ *The Babylonian Genesis*, published in 1961, has been one of the most influential books on the *Enuma Elish* and the interpretation of Genesis. If you look on p. 129 of that book you will find a chart in which these same seven similarities are listed by Alexander Heidel.

I thought to myself, well, now, wait a minute! If these really were commonly accepted similarities, maybe it's just a coincidence that Enns would notice the same similarities that Alexander Heidel did. But here's the thing: Enns reproduces *the errors* in Heidel's list, like darkness being prior to creation or divine rest after creation. In the *Enuma Elish* there is no primordial darkness, and Heidel admits it on p.101 – that that is not part of the creation myth. So the fact that the very errors in Heidel's chart are reproduced by Enns makes me suspect that he has simply borrowed the chart from Heidel and reproduced these alleged similarities. Richard Clifton makes exactly the same allegation with respect to the well-known commentator on the book of Genesis, E. A. Speiser. This is what Clifton says: Speiser “simply adopted A. Heidel's chart of the

¹ Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961)

sequence of acts in *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1, assuming it proved borrowing.”² But, in fact, says Clifton, “the sequence of events in the two works are [*sic*] not truly parallel.”³ So the same critique that I’m exercising of Enns and Sparks has already been enunciated with regard to Speiser by Clifton.

Heidel, in his book, admits,

the divergences are much more far-reaching and significant than are the resemblances, most of which are not any closer than what we should expect to find in any two more or less complete creation versions . . . which might come from entirely different parts of the world and which might be utterly unrelated to each other.⁴

This is because, as he says, “both would have to account for the same phenomena and since human minds think along much the same lines.”⁵ So Heidel himself recognizes that the alleged similarities between the *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1 are not any closer than the similarities that you might find between a creation story in South America and one in the islands of the South Pacific.

Enns acknowledges that the Babylonian and biblical stories have many significant differences suggesting that something other than simple borrowing has taken place, but nevertheless he still remains

² Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 26 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1994), p. 140.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, p. 130.

⁵ Ibid.

guilty of alleging parallels on the basis of listing isolated elements of the narratives without consideration of context. They're simply listed without any consideration of the context in which they occur, and therefore these are little more than cherry-picking. When the two accounts are read as wholes they are far from parallel. The *Enuma Elish*, in fact, is only improperly characterized as a Babylonian creation epic. It really isn't. What it is is a panegyric of the god Marduk. It's the story of the exaltation of Marduk over the other Babylonian gods and how he became the supreme god. It is not a Babylonian Genesis at all. Therefore most scholars today no longer consider the *Enuma Elish* to be relevant in any direct way to Genesis 1.

W. G. Lambert is a very highly respected Assyriologist; that is to say, he studies the literature of ancient Mesopotamia. Lambert says the *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. In my opinion it is not earlier than 1100 BC. . . . The various traditions it draws upon are often perverted to such an extent that conclusions based on this text alone are suspect. It can only be used safely in the whole context of ancient Mesopotamian mythology.⁶

⁶ W. G. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis," *Journal of Theological Studies* 16/2 [1965]: 291; see further W. G. Lambert, "Mesopotamian Creation Stories," in *Imagining Creation*, ed. Markham J. Geller and Mineke Schipper, *IJS Studies in Judaica* 5 (London. Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 15-59.