

CREATION IN THE NEAR ANCIENT EAST: THE BABYLONIAN POEM 'ENUMA ELISH'

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The Language of Myth

Creation history and myth: this juxtaposition has long aroused the interest of scholars and even simple readers of the first eleven chapters of Genesis: the creation of the world, Adam and Eve, the flood, and the tower of Babel. Are we dealing with texts of a mythical nature, or are we dealing with the memory of stories that actually happened? At this point, it should be clear that this question is wrong. To speak of 'myth,' in fact, is not to speak of legendary or even false realities. Myth is a way of telling the story and discovering those truths that underpin our existence. While philosophy and science try to rationally explain reality, myth rather tells it and highlights its dramatic aspect. So, it is no wonder that Scripture uses this kind of language to express its truths about the world and man:

..., the term "myth" does not designate a fabulous content, but merely an archaic way of expressing a deeper content. Without any difficulty we discover that content, under the layer of the ancient narrative. It is really marvellous as regards the qualities and the condensation of the truths contained in it.¹

Myth is thus a 'symbol in action,'² a way to grasp the profound meaning of our history in a sapiential way. This is why, in order to better understand the texts of Gen. 1–11, it is necessary to realise how the authors of these tales make use of the very language of myth with which the cultures close to Israel at the time expressed their convictions about the origin of the world. By comparing the biblical text with Ancient Near Eastern traditions relating to creation, we will be able to grasp the differences and originality of the Genesis narrative.

¹ John Paul II, "General Catechesis," November 7, 1979; https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19791107.html

² Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

Among the many creation myths known to us from the ancient Near Eastern world, we choose the Babylonian poem composed in praise of the national god Marduk as one of the most significant texts for comparison with the first page of Genesis.

What is the Enuma Elish

The text of Gen. 1:1-2:4a confronts us with the great poem of creation; scholars have noted that one of the ancient texts that could certainly have been known to the writer of Gn 1 is the famous Babylonian poem called Enuma Elish, "when on high," from the first two words which opens the poem. It is a text written on seven tablets, in the Akkadian language, with a total of about 900 lines; the text was discovered in the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal in Nineveh in 1850 and probably dates back to the time of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar I (about 1100 BC).³

The poem was re-cited in Babylon, in honour of the god Marduk, on the fourth day of the New Year's festival, to celebrate Marduk's victory over Tiamat and the foundation of the world; it is, therefore, not the 'Mesopotamian Genesis,' as has sometimes been said, but a poem in praise of Marduk.

The poem opens with a description of the primordial universe, formed by fresh waters (the god Apsu) and salt waters (the goddess Tiamat); from their mixture came the gods.

When above was not [yet] named the sky,
below the firm [earth] had not [yet] a name,
the first Apsu, their generator,
Mummu and Tiamat, the generator of them all,
their waters together mingled..." (I,1-15).

A conflict then breaks out between the gods; the god Ea kills Apsu, who had planned to kill the young gods, and Tiamat plans revenge but is killed by the god Marduk, son of Ea, who thus acquires supremacy over all the gods. With Tiamat's body divided in two, he constitutes

³ Z. El Bey and L.W. King, eds., *The Seven Tablets of Creation* (Lexington, KY: iLife Publisher 2010); Izaak Rapaport, *The Babylonian Poem Enuma Elish and Genesis Chapter One* (Melbourne: Hawthorn 1979).

the universe, creating with the upper half of her body the firmament and placing the stars in it, the moon, in particular, with its seven-day cycle:

...he [Marduk] split it in two parts like an oyster;
half of it he shucked and covered the sky with it.
He stretched out its skin and placed a guard over it (IV,137-139).

Marduk places guards so that the waters can escape; with the lower half of Tiamat's body, the earth is created. This is an idea, that of pre-existent chaos and the abyss of waters, common to many Near Eastern Antique traditions and not foreign to Scripture. We note, however, that in the light of the Babylonian poem, the world appears as something divine and cannot yet be called 'creation'.

In the sixth table, another important episode is narrated, the creation of humas, formed from the blood of a rebellious god,

...that man may bear the burden of the gods and that they may rest (VI,8-9):

When they had bound him [Kingu] and brought him before Ea, they imposed punishment on him and cut off his blood. With his blood he built humanity for the service of the gods and set the gods free... (VI, 31-34).

Human, then, is created out of the death of a rebel god, is in some sense the son of an evil god, and is created to serve the gods, to be their slave, and to guarantee their freedom. As a sign of thanks, the gods erect the temple-tower Esagila in Marduk's honour and grant him lordship over humanity. The poem closes with the proclamation of Marduk's name and an invitation to praise him.

A Comparison with the Poem of Gen. 1

Even this superficial glance, which should be extended to several other creation texts known to us from the Mesopotamian environment, allows us to understand that the author of Gn 1 had in mind images typical of these cultures. If one then considers that in Babylon this poem was actually sung in honour of the local god Marduk, we can easily imagine the impact such texts must have had on the exiled community; perhaps Marduk is indeed stronger and more powerful than YHWH, the God of Israel!

The beginning of the Enuma Elish we quoted above is not dissimilar to the opening of the story in Gen. 2:4b-6; but the text of Gen. 1:1-2 is not far from it either. In these verses, it is imagined that at the origin of the world there was a situation of chaos, the abyss of waters (in Hebrew *tehôm*) that closely resembles the goddess Tiamat. God's first action, after the creation of light, is the creation of the firmament (Gen. 1:6-7) as the physical element separating the earth from the waters, just as Marduk creates heaven and earth from the two halves of Tiamat's body. It is interesting to note how in the context of Gen 1 the separation of the waters by the firmament is reinterpreted by the priestly tradition in a cultic key, as the foundation of the ritual separations that underpin the Israelite cult and guarantee the permanence of creation. As is also the case in the Mesopotamian account, the firmament is adorned with stars in Gen. 1:14-18. Later, the second creation account (Gen. 2:7) takes up an idea known from other Mesopotamian texts, man was created from clay (in Gen 2:7 from dust).

Those who composed the first pages of Genesis, therefore, had this and other Ancient Near Eastern poems in mind; but the differences are equally obvious. First of all, at the origin of the world, there is no trace in Genesis 1 of a sexual union of two divine princes, male and female, as occurs in Enuma Elish. Furthermore, while Gen. 1:1-2 agrees with the Babylonian texts in describing a situation of primordial chaos that God orders and organises, there is no trace of a struggle between the gods in the biblical narrative, although in other texts of Scripture this idea is not entirely absent (cf. e.g. Ps. 74:13-17; 89:10-11). The sea monsters of Gen. 1:21 and the stars of Gen. 1:14-18 are mere God-made creatures. At the origins of the world, there is, therefore, the free initiative of one God, who has no need to win battles with other gods. The God of Israel creates alone and dominates over all those elements that in the Mesopotamian conception were instead other gods.

From this point of view, references to the Enuma Elish acquire a polemical value and become a way of instilling hope in the Israelites who were confronted with an apparently stronger culture.

Man, Freedom, and History

In the description of the creation of man (Gen. 1:26-28), another major difference is evident: in the Mesopotamian account, man is created

from a re-born god and, a common tradition in many other accounts, he is created to be a slave of the gods. Another Mesopotamian tradition states that "to make the gods dwell in a dwelling that would satisfy their hearts, he [Marduk] formed mankind" (Rite for the Washing of the Mouth of the Statue). The God of Israel, on the other hand, creates mankind "in his own image" and dialogues with humans (Gen. 1:28). Man is thus a free being before his God; there is no trace in him of a rebellious God from whom he would have been created.

More profoundly: the comparison with the Enuma Elish and the other creation texts of the Ancient Near East makes it clear that Gn 1 intends to affirm that the world is not divine, but a created reality, and that outside the one God of Israel there is no other reality with which man must confront himself; the polemic with the Babylonian poem thus creates a space of autonomy, we might even say secularity, in which human freedom can be exercised.

Perhaps, however, the main difference between the Enuma Elish and the poem of Gn 1 lies in the different conceptions of history that the two texts reveal to possess: in the Mesopotamian tale, history begins before mankind, with a story about what the gods have done. Their actions have repercussions on the subsequent history of humanity, which will forever be marked by the primordial struggle of the gods and the triumph of the 'liberator' Marduk. In the Genesis poem, by contrast, history begins with a creative act of God, a 'beginning' before which there is no other history. Human freedom is thus not conditioned by any precedent but is established directly by God within a world in which evil does not dominate; everything came 'good and beautiful' (*tôb*) out of the Creator's hands.

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