

Gods Creating Gods

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The year was 1876, and at last it seemed that the Bible really was finished — exposed as nothing more than a mass of legends, myths and folklore. George Smith of the British Museum had issued his “Chaldean Account of Genesis”, and immediately scholars proclaimed far and wide that they now had a copy of the original on which the Genesis stories of creation and the flood had been based.

This had followed some fifty years of criticism in which the veracity, historical trustworthiness and literary style of the Old Testament documents had been attacked as no other book had ever been attacked. Yet strangely, in that same fifty years, remarkable findings had been taking place, especially in old Assyrian palaces which had given up their secrets. At point after point they seemed to show that the Old Testament narrative sections were historical after all. But now from one of those same Assyrian palaces had come what many scholars thought was the final blow, for here was an Assyrian copy of the Babylonian version of creation and the flood, and it was seriously claimed that it pointed to earlier records than the accounts in Genesis.

Drama and Strange Coincidence

The story of the recovery of these tablets is itself full of drama and strange coincidence. An Englishman, Henry Layard, found a large number of valuable documents in the palace of the Assyrian King Sennacherib in 1850, and three years later his former associate, Hormuzd Rassam, found the famous library of another Assyrian King, Ashur-bani-pal, on the same ancient mound of Nineveh, though in a different palace building. It turned out that Ashur-bani-pal had sent scribes all over the known world collecting documents from such places as building foundations and ancient libraries, and he had amassed some 24,000 clay tablets. Included among them was this Babylonian creation story, in an Assyrian translation.

To complete the rather dramatic part of this story, in 1872 George Smith had published a translation of fragments of the Babylonian flood story, and it caught the imagination of the public in no uncertain way. Incredible as it sounds, this man who had not had first-hand experience in archaeology, was prevailed on to do the impossible. An English newspaper arranged for him to go to Nineveh to find the missing parts of the story. It has often been said that this was even worse than asking someone to find the proverbial needle in a haystack, but the amazing fact is that George Smith found what he was looking for, and both records — of creation and the flood — were acclaimed as coming from a version earlier than the Bible records.

First it should be stated that these tablets from Ashur-bani-pal's library dated to about 650 B.C. and we have seen that these were Assyrian translations based on earlier Babylonian records. Earlier copies have since been found, but the basic story is the same, being a legend that goes back to the beginning of creation on the one hand, and telling the story of the flood on the other. The two accounts are actually on separate series of tablets. The creation record is known as "Enuma Elish", which literally means "when from above" — these being the first two words of the epic. The poem which includes the flood story is "The Epic of Gilgamesh".

The Battle of the Gods

The "Enuma Elish" has about a thousand lines, and is on seven clay tablets. The narrative states that in the beginning there existed only the god Apsu, who was supposed to be the male personification of the fresh water ocean, and the goddess Tiamut, supposed to be a female personification of the salt water ocean. They created many other gods, but these displeased Apsu, and he decided to kill them all off. One god, Ea, became aware of the plan, so he got in first and killed Apsu. Then Ea himself begat another god, Marduk, who was the patron god of Babylon. Now it was Tiamut's turn, and she determined to avenge the death of her husband. So she created other monster gods, and put one of these newly created gods called Kingu at their head.

Eventually fighting broke out among the gods when the goddess Tiamut and her group of rebel deities prepared for total war against the prevailing gods. At first Tiamut was successful against the gods Ea and Enu, but then the powerful young god Marduk was proclaimed king of the gods. Soon he had defeated Tiamut and cut her in two, then forced the rebel gods into servitude.

Consequently Marduk was confirmed as king in the assembly of the gods — "the king of the gods of heaven and earth, the king of all the gods."

In describing Marduk's successful battle against Tiamut, the grotesque language used points to the inhuman practices ascribed to Babylonian gods. Having shot the arrow which pierced Tiamut's mouth, her stomach and her intestines, Marduk rested for a while, and then he conceived the idea of creating a new heaven:

“He rested, the lord, examining her body:
He would divide up the monster—create a wonder of wonders!
He slit her in two like a fish of the drying yard,
The one half he positioned and secured as the sky .

(Therein) traced he lines for the mighty gods,
Stars, star-groups and constellations he appointed for them:
He determined the year, marked out its divisions,
For each of the twelve months appointed three rising stars . . .

The great (Sun) gates he opened in both sides of her ribs,
Made strong the lock-fastening to left and right:
In the depths of her belly he laid down the ‘elati’.
He made the moon to shine forth, entrusted to him the night.”

The Euphrates and the Tigris Flow Through Tiamut’s Eyes

The story goes on to show how Marduk then reshaped the earth out of the lower half of Tiamut’s body, after the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers had been made to flow through her eyes. Then followed an assembly of the rebel gods who did obeisance and fully recognized Marduk as their king.

This is all very different from the record in the early chapters of Genesis. There we do not read of such barbarity as gods fighting, nor of immoral activity, primitive superstitious nonsense whereby two rivers flow through the eyes of a goddess. The Bible account is dignified and noble, acceptable as a record of divine activity — provided we accept the great fact of the one true God Who is all-powerful, able to create from nothing.

The Bible concept of God’s purpose in the creation of man is also very different. In the Babylonian account man is to be merely a slave, brought into being by Marduk at the plea of the defeated rebel gods, so that these gods themselves need not be subjected to servile labour — man would be a puppet, a lowly primitive creature. In the Bible we read of man who is made in the image of God, to live in fellowship with God.

The Babylonian story goes on to tell how the gods persuaded Marduk against his plans of making man for such an entirely lowly purpose, which was really a form of punishment. They suggested that instead the god Kingu, who incited Tiamut to revolt, should be punished. And so Kingu was bound and the crime was blamed on him, the punishment including the letting of his blood by his cutting his own throat. Marduk then created man from Kingu’s blood instead of from nothing as originally planned. Thus Kingu the evil one, the chief of the rebels against divine authority, bore the full punishment of the revolt. And man, as the offspring of Kingu — made from his blood — could only be evil, and must be subject to every whim of the gods.

Gods, not Men, Created

In the Babylonian story it is the gods, not men, who are really created: those “gods” are the creation of a fallen man. Instead of God making man in His own holy image we have man making corrupt gods after his own depraved image.

Another point which touches on the Genesis record is that the penalties against the rebel gods were ultimately revoked. The rebels were given the task of rebuilding Babylon. Soon they sought permission to make great changes to the original plans, so that Babylon would be not only Marduk’s home, but a great religious sanctuary for gods and men alike. Permission was given, and so the great temple of Marduk was built.

This highlights another difference between the “Enuma Elish” and the Bible account — this Assyrian copy of the Babylonian epic was clearly political in purpose, showing why Babylon should be accepted as the leading city because it was the home of the great god Marduk. It is relevant to mention that a later Assyrian account was found in which the name of the Assyrian god Ashur was substituted for Marduk, the political purpose there being to demonstrate the supremacy of the Assyrian city of Ashur which was named after the god.

We have seen that Marduk was confirmed by the full assembly of gods as king for ever. As the other gods yielded him homage, they swore their loyalty in blood drained from their own throats, yielding him eternal power to rule over them as king. They recognized that “his command shall be pre-eminent above and below”.

Again, contrast all this with the Bible record which so magnificently introduces us to God Who is eternal. He does not need to be made eternal, as with Marduk, who himself had to be brought into existence by an act of creation.

There are other substantial differences that could be elaborated: thus in the Babylonian story the formation of the earth is not discussed until the fourth tablet whereas it is described very early in the Bible record; even the basic approach is different, for the Babylonian epic is a hymn to Marduk whereas Genesis is a revelation by God to His creature man. And of course the Bible account allows for no polytheism or crude mythology as in the Babylonian epic.

Another recently translated Babylonian record of creation is the so-called “Epic of Atrahasis”. Until 1965 only about one-fifth of this was known, but now about four-fifths of this epic have been restored. This particular version dates to about 1630 B.C. and fragmentary copies of it were found in the Assyrian libraries of Nineveh, dating about 1000 years later. Other fragments have been found at Babylon, at Nippur, and at the ancient Hittite capital of Boghazkoy — this last copy dates to about 1000 B.C.

There are interesting points of comparison with the Biblical account. Perhaps the most obvious is that here again we have an early story of creation, etc., dating to the first half of the second millennium — hundreds of years before Moses included the orthodox Biblical account as part of the Sacred Record. Secondly, this is the only Babylonian parallel in which a continuous narrative is given covering the first era of human existence — until now scholars have usually looked on the creation and flood stories as separate records. However, it should also be said that there are those who also accept the concept of both the creation and flood stories being included in the Epic of Gilgamesh as a unity, being part of a continuous narrative of man's early history.

Man Created to Save the Gods from Working

In similar vein to the “Enuma Elish,” one of the main ideals underlying the Atrahasis Epic is that man was created by the gods so that they themselves need not work on the earth to produce their own food. Some scholars have suggested that this same thought is carried over into the Biblical account where man is put into a garden which he is to tend. But there is an essential difference. According to the Biblical account man is not created to feed the gods, but he is put into a garden where he will know the dignity of work.

Another similarity to the “Enuma Elish” is in the making of man, and the Atrahasis Epic tells how this was accomplished:

“Let them slaughter one god,
So that all the gods may be purified by dipping.

With his flesh and blood
Let Nintu mix clay.

So let god and man be mingled
Together in the clay.

After she had mixed the clay,
She called the Anunna, the great gods,
The Igigu, the great gods,
Spat upon the clay.

Mami opened her mouth
And said to the great gods,
'You commanded me a task
And I have finished it.

I have removed your toil,
I have imposed your load on man.”

The points of similarity to the Bible story are supposed to be in the use of clay, and in the fact that man is made in the image of a god, but what a difference from the Biblical account! In this Babylonian epic we again have grotesque absurdities as a god is slaughtered so that the mother-goddess (Nintu) can mix his flesh and blood with clay and so produce man. We saw that this is strikingly similar to “Enuma Elish”, but in the Bible we read that man was made in the image of God. Thus man was capable of HEAVENLY communion while he lived on the EARTH — for God “formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2: 7). The most that could be said as to a similarity is that the Babylonian epics are gross distortions of the original — and the more we study these other records the more we are led to the conclusion that the original is to be found in the first chapters of the Bible.

Man’s Noise Interrupts the Sleep of a God

The Atrahasis Epic also tells of men multiplying on the earth, and the great god Enlil was annoyed because of the noise they made — noise so great that he was losing his sleep. A series of visitations against mankind followed, with Enlil seeking to destroy man while the God Enki who had created him sought to protect him.

When man’s noise continued to annoy Enlil, a flood was sent on the earth. Again the god Enki was able to intervene to some extent, for his special devotee Atrahasis — the Babylonian Noah — was saved from destruction.

When the flood ended, Atrahasis, like Utnapishtim in the Epic of Gilgamesh, offered sacrifices to the gods. They were hungry because men had not fed them during the time of the flood.

Another point of interest is that after the flood the gods resolved that they would control the number of mankind, and this dimly reminds us of the statement in Genesis that man’s days would be limited from that time onwards. We will expect some measure of similarity such as this — as there is in other ways, including the fact of the ark being used to save representative man, the sending out of birds, the ark being grounded on a mountain, and then a man sacrificing after he had come out of the ark.

The Superiority of the Genesis Record

A. R. Millard, in the “Tyndale Biblical Archaeology Lecture for 1966, concludes his survey on this new Babylonian Genesis story as follows:

All who suspect or suggest borrowing by the Hebrews are compelled to admit large-scale revision, alteration, and reinterpretation in a fashion which cannot be substantiated for any other composition from the ancient Near East or in any other Hebrew writing. . . . Careful comparison of

ancient texts and literary methods is the only way to the understanding of the early chapters of Genesis. Discovery of new material requires reassessment of former conclusions; so the Epic of Atrahasis adds to knowledge of parallel Babylonian traditions, and of their literary form. All speculation apart, it underlines the uniqueness of the Hebrew primaeval history in the form in which it now exists.

The more we study these ancient records the more we are impressed with the superiority of the magnificent presentations of Scripture.

We have looked at the very great differences between Babylonian accounts of creation and that found in the Bible. The similarities do suggest a common source — clay is associated with the creation of man, possibly the fact of seven tablets has some relationship to the seven days of creation in the Bible, especially as the creation of man appears on the sixth of the Babylonian tablets and man is created on the sixth day in the Bible story. But on purely academic grounds, if we are to choose an original from these two old documents the Bible record will be selected. It does not allow for polytheism or crude mythology or grotesque amoral activity, as in the Babylonian epic, and it can be strongly argued that the simple yet magnificent Bible record uniquely bears the spiritual imprint of the holy God.

The comment of Kenneth Kitchen of the University of Liverpool is relevant as a conclusion at this point:

The common assumption that the Hebrew account is simply a purged and simplified version of the Babylonian legend (applied also to the Flood stories) is fallacious on methodological grounds. In the Ancient Near East, the rule is that simple accounts or traditions may give rise (by accretion and embellishment) to elaborate legends, but not vice versa. In the Ancient Orient, legends were not simplified or turned into pseudo-history (historicized) as has been assumed for early Genesis.¹

And so George Smith's "Chaldean Account of Genesis" did not finally destroy the Bible after all. "That Incredible Book" has again shown itself capable of withstanding attack and turning defense into attack. The Chaldean records have been revealed at their true worth —grotesque distortions which are clearly inferior to the records of Genesis.

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¹ *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, K. A. Kitchen, p. 89.

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