

In the Beginning: A Brief Essay Regarding the Biblical Account of Creation (Genesis 1-2)

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the similarities and dissimilarities between the biblical account of creation (Genesis 1-2) and creation myths of Egypt and Babylon from the extant sources currently available in an effort, to assess the comparability of literature of the ancient Near Eastern texts with the texts of Scripture, and to demonstrate their major difference. This article contains two sections: Comparative Methodology—Polemical Theology and The Biblical Account of Creation (Genesis 1-2) Versus Other Creation Accounts (Egyptian and Babylonian). The differences between these creation accounts are more significant than their similarities.

Keywords: Old Testament, the Creation, Genesis, comparative methodology, polemical theology

INTRODUCTION

A Monsignor once said, “Did you know that the Creation narrative in Genesis is just a myth? It is like the Filipino legend of creation.” It was alarming to hear this from a Roman Catholic priest. However, there are Bible critics who deem that biblical narratives, like the Creation narrative in Genesis 1-2, are myths or legends. It is because they found similarities between the ancient texts of the ancient Near East and the Old Testament passages. Too much parallelism between biblical texts and

other ancient Near Eastern texts can lead to heresy. Hence, Samuel Sandmel wrote about the dangers of parallelomania.¹

As stated in the Abstract, the article contains two sections. The first section involves the pattern or comparative methodology chosen for assessing the comparability of literature from ancient Near Eastern texts with the texts of Scripture, which is polemical theology. The second section involves applying the chosen methodology by discussing the similarities and dissimilarities between the biblical account of creation (Genesis 1-2) and that of at least two other creation stories, which are Egyptian and Babylonian creation myths. Although there are certain similarities between these creation stories, the differences between them are significant. While the creation stories of Egypt and Babylon involve several gods, the creation account in Genesis 1-2 is monotheistic, and this monotheistic God (יהוה or אֱלֹהִים) is the only true God and Creator of the universe.

COMPARATIVE METHODOLOGY: POLEMICAL THEOLOGY

Polemical theology has been chosen for this paper because its main purpose is to exhibit definitely and explicitly the differences between the perspective of the Hebrews and the beliefs and customs of the other people in the ancient Near East.² Polemical theology refers to the practice that the biblical writers utilized by involving philosophical forms and stories that were common in ancient Near Eastern civilization, while supplying them with fundamentally new connotations and significances.³ It emphasizes the nature and the characteristics of the one true God. Thus, polemical theology steers away from the dangers of parallelomania. This kind of methodology is what John Currid considers “one of the most neglected areas of

¹ Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81, no. 1 (1962.): 1-13.

² John D. Currid, *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 25.

³ *Ibid.*

research.”⁴ Currid defines polemical theology as “the use by biblical writers of the thought forms and stories that were common in ancient Near Eastern culture, while filling them with radically new meaning.”⁵

THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNT OF CREATION (GENESIS 1-2) VERSUS OTHER CREATION ACCOUNTS (EGYPTIAN AND BABYLONIAN)

The prologue section of the book of Genesis presents the Creator. He is the principal character of the book and the whole Scripture. The creation narrative is monotheistic. There is only one God. It is theocentric. The creation narrative focuses on God and not on His creation or the creatures. The purpose of the book of Genesis is to glorify the Creator by worshiping and exalting Him through the grandeur of the created order.⁶

Genesis 1:1–2 declares:

בְּרֵאשִׁית^a בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

² וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תֵהוֹ וּבְהוּ וְהַשָּׁד עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וַיְרוּם אֱלֹהִים מִרְחֹק עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:⁷

Genesis 1:1-2 can be translated to “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness over the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (my translation).

The phrase בְּרֵאשִׁית contains a preposition (בְּ) that can be defined as “in” or “at” and a noun (רֵאשִׁית) that is common, feminine, singular, absolute, and it denotes “beginning, what comes first;

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, vol. 1A, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 113.

⁷ *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: SESB Version.*, electronic ed. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2003), Ge 1:1–2. Unless otherwise noted, all Hebrew biblical quotations are from the BHS: SESB Version.

starting point.”⁸ In the Dead Sea Scrolls, בְּרֵאשִׁית was written as בְּרֵאשִׁית. In the LXX Septuagint, it was translated as Ἐν ἀρχῇ (“In the beginning”), while in Targum Onqelos as בְּקִדְמִין, which includes a preposition and adverb.

This word “beginning” is similar to an Egyptian creation manuscript from Thebes that conveys about the god Amun, who developed in the beginning or during the first occurrence. Egyptologists describe this not as an abstruse concept but as an allusion to a first-time occasion.⁹ This is one of the similarities between the biblical creation account and the Egyptian creation stories. There are more than one Egyptian creation story that were passed on orally, such as *Atum and Heliopolis*, *Ptah and Memphis*, and *Ra and Thebes*.¹⁰ However, there is one manuscript that has been discovered, which includes an Egyptian creation story. This manuscript is archived as the British Museum Papyrus, No. 10, 188.¹¹ The Egyptian story of creation is located in the last section of the papyrus. The papyrus is titled the *Book of Overthrowing Aapep, the Enemy of Ra, the Enemy of Un-Nefer* (that is, Osiris). Two copies of the *Book of Knowing How Ra Came into Being and of Overthrowing Aapep* are found in the center of the magical spells of this papyrus.¹²

It states in the *Book of Knowing How Ra Came into Being, and of Overthrowing Aapep*:

⁸ *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), רֵאשִׁית.

⁹ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ge 1:1.

¹⁰ Bruce Riding, “The Garden of Eden: Genesis and Ancient Myths Contrasted,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 79, no. 3 (Spring 2020): 164.

¹¹ J. K. Jackson, ed., *Egyptian Myths* (Ashland: Flame Tree Publishing, 2018), 63.

¹² *Ibid.*

Nebertcher says: 'I am the creator of what has come into being. I myself came into being under the form of the god Khepera. I came into being under the form of Pautti (or, in primeval time), I formed myself out of the primeval matter, I made myself out of the substance that was in primeval time.' Nothing existed at that time except the great primeval watery mass called Nu, but in this there were the germs of everything that came into being subsequently. There was no heaven, and no earth, and the god found no place on which to stand; nothing, in fact, existed except the god. He says, 'I was alone.'¹³

As for the Babylonians, most of their creation stories were taken from *Enūma Eliš*, although there are other creation stories besides that one. There are about 95 fragments of this epic in the Babylonian script. However, only seven were discovered in standard excavations, three from Kish, two from Uruk, one each from Sippar and Tell Haddad.¹⁴

One can find similarities between Genesis 1–2 and these creation stories from Egypt and Babylon. For example, in the Egyptian creation story, one god, Nebertcher, created the universe. "Nothing existed at that time except the great primeval watery mass called Nu," and "there was no heaven, and no earth, and the god found no place on which to stand."¹⁵ However, one can find substantial differences between these creation stories and the biblical creation account.

First of all, no one created the one true God (אלהים and יהוה). However, the Egyptian god, Nebertcher, was created ("came into being under the form of the god Khepera"¹⁶) although he is

¹³ Ibid., 63–64.

¹⁴ Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2013), 4.

¹⁵ Jackson, *Egyptian*, 64.

¹⁶ Ibid., 63.

supposedly the creator of everything. He first created himself by pronouncing his name as an expression of authority, and then his physical form materialized. The Babylonian sun-god and creator of the cosmos, Marduk (or Bēl), was produced by Ea (son of Apsū and Tiāmat) and his wife, Damkina.¹⁷ These Egyptian and Babylonian creator-gods are very different from the God of the Hebrews, the true God who created the universe. Unlike Nebertcher, יהוה was not created. Unlike Marduk, יהוה was not produced into a dynasty of gods. יהוה is a grand and exceptional God and Creator because He is original, who has already lived from the beginning and remained to the end. ¹⁸ God proclaims in Isaiah 43:10: “Before Me there was no God formed, And there will be none after Me” (NASB1995).

Second, the biblical creation account is monotheistic, while the Egyptian and Babylonian creation stories are polytheistic. As the Egyptian creation story continues, out of the body of Nebertcher or Kheper, two gods (Shu and Tefnut) were produced. All three gods formed the first triad of gods. The folklore concerning the procreation of Shu and Tefnut is as old as the pyramids because it is cited in the text of Pepi I.¹⁹ Eventually, Nebertcher or Khepera emerged as the Eye of Nebertcher, who was also recognized as Ra, from the primeval watery mass (Nu), and then light glimmered on its waters. Afterward, Shu and Tefnut bonded. They delivered Keb, the god of the earth, and Nut, the goddess of the sky. Consequently, five gods and goddesses were formed, specifically Osiris, Horus, Set, Isis, and Nephthys.²⁰ This presentation of the polytheism of the Egyptian belief is somewhat similar to the Babylonians’ *Enūma Eliš*. The only difference is that the gods of Egypt were produced from one god, of Nebertcher or Kheper, while in *Enūma Eliš*, a

¹⁷ Lambert, *Babylonian*, 55.

¹⁸ Joseph Riordan, “Of Gods and Men: Creation and Divinity in Deutero-Isaiah and *Enūma Eliš*,” *Conversations with the Biblical World* 36 (2016): 65.

¹⁹ Jackson, *Egyptian*, 64.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

god (Apsû) and a goddess (Tiāmat) were involved in producing gods and goddesses. It states in *Enūma Eliš* I:1-4,

When the heavens above did not exist,
And earth beneath had not come into being—
There was Apsû, the first in order, their begetter,
And demiurge Tiāmat, who gave birth to them all.²¹

Each of the created gods symbolized a significant and fundamental element of nature (for example, sky, water, and earth). These gods craved for order, while Apsû and Tiāmat preferred dormancy. This caused chaos. A cosmic clash developed between the gods of order and the gods of chaos.²² Marduk overpowered and slaughtered Tiāmat in a vicious combat. After killing her, Marduk utilized the corpse of Tiāmat to create the heavens for the gods and then the earth. This made him supreme over other gods.²³ Thus, Babylonian belief involves polytheism and theogony, just like the Egyptians.

Bernard Batto, a religion professor and bible critic, claims that the theme of the creation account in Genesis was brought about from a sacred marriage between Yahweh and a divine consort, Asherah.²⁴ This is heretical against biblical doctrines and blasphemous against Yahweh. The Babylonian and Egyptian beliefs are very different from Hebrew theology. In contrast to the Egyptian and Babylonian creation stories, the writer of Genesis 1:1 proclaims that the Hebrew God is the one who created the heavens and the earth, and He is only one. The verse itself emphasizes monotheism. There are no other gods before or after Him. The fundamental doctrine of Genesis is that the world is created. As John Skinner, an Old Testament scholar,

²¹ Lambert, *Babylonian*, 51.

²² Currid, *Against the Gods*, 36.

²³ Lambert, *Babylonian*, 71–99.

²⁴ Bernard F. Batto, *In the Beginning: Essays on Creation Motifs in the Ancient Near East and the Bible*. Winona Lake: Penn State University Press, 2013), 44.

explains, “It originates in the will of God, a personal Being transcending the universe and existing independently of it.”²⁵ Thus, the pagan belief of a Theogony—a production of the gods from the basic cosmic substance—is eliminated.²⁶ יהוה declares in Isaiah 44:6: “I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me” (NASB1995).

There are different explanations concerning what God said in Genesis 1:26, which proclaims: “Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness.” Traditional Christian bible scholars, including John Calvin, observe this expression as a reference to the Trinity.²⁷ However, Skinner argues, “God is represented as taking counsel with divine beings other than Himself, viz. the angels or host of heaven.”²⁸ The present author agrees with the traditional scholars that Genesis 1:26 denotes the Triune God. Nevertheless, whether the plurality here is the Triune God or the divine counsel of God, there is only one God, who is the Creator of the universe.

Third, although the watery chaos or primeval watery mass of the Egyptian and Babylonian creation stories seems similar to the description of chaos (a formless watery mass in which the foundations of the future land and sea were amalgamated) in Genesis 1:2 (וְהָאֲרֶזְ הָיְתָה תְהוֹ וְנִבְהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ), God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing. The primeval watery mass (Nu) in the Egyptian creation story existed even before Nebertcher or Khepera was created. The watery chaos in the Babylonian creation story is comprised of three gods, Apsû, Tiāmat, and their procreated gods.²⁹ These descriptions of chaos present a direct contrast to Genesis 1. The Hebrew verb used in Genesis 1:1 is בָּרָא. This can be utilized as *creatio ex nihilo*, which means

²⁵ John Skinner 1851-1925, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis, International Critical Commentary* (New York: Scribner, 1910), 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁹ Skinner, *Genesis*, 17; Currid, *Against the Gods*, 36.

“to create out of nothing,” unlike *עָשָׂה*, which refers to *creatio ex materia*, where someone creates from something, like a potter forming clay out of mud. The verb *בָּרָא* is parsed as *Qal*, perfect, third person, masculine, singular, which means “shape, create.”³⁰ This is similar to the DSS (ברא), LXX (ποίησ), and TgO (בְּרָא). Thus, the writer of Genesis 1 declares that God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing.

The traditional translation, “In the beginning God,” which is similarly grammatical, is upheld by all the ancient versions, and confirms explicitly the truth set down elsewhere (for example, Hebrews 11:3) that “until God spoke, nothing existed.”³¹ The ancient versions and many modern ones identify Genesis 1:1 to be an independent sentence, which serves as the general headline for the whole creation narrative and acknowledges the creation of the earth in the formless state described in verse 2. Since ancient times, this has been the view of most Jewish and Christian interpreters. These are observed in modern versions, such as the *RSV*, *REB*, *FRCL*, *NIV*, *GECL*, *NJB*, *BJ*, and *SPCL*.³²

Fourth, light came out in the Egyptian creation story, as Ra, the sun god, emerged from the primeval watery mass.³³ As for the Babylonian creation story, light was emitted from Marduk because he is the sun-god of the Babylonian gods.³⁴ The contrast of light and darkness is staged as a battle between the god (Marduk) and the Chaos monster (Tiāmat).³⁵ These are again contrasted to Genesis 1:3–4, when God said, “Let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good,

³⁰ Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 135.

³¹ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 47–48.

³² William David Reyburn and Euan McG. Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis*, *UBS Handbook Series* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1998), 28.

³³ Jackson, ed., *Egyptian*, 64.

³⁴ Lambert, *Babylonian*, 104–05, 112–13, 116–17.

³⁵ Skinner, *Genesis*, 19.

and God separated the space between the light and the darkness” (my translation). The writer of Genesis conveys that through God’s spoken command, light appeared. Moreover, the Egyptian sun-god, Ra, had issues with darkness. He had to wage war against the dragon, Apophis, when he entered the realm of darkness in the evening.³⁶ This is very different from the Hebrew God. God did not have any issues with darkness that He had to wage war against it. He separated light and darkness to create mornings and evenings. He created the sun, the moon, and the stars (see Genesis 1:3–5 and 14–19). The writer of Genesis proclaims again that there is no god like the Hebrew God.

Fifth, in contrast to the biblical creation account, where יהוה (or אֱלֹהִים) calmly creates the universe by His word (Genesis 1), the Babylonian creation epic is filled with violence.³⁷ A cosmic war arose between the gods of order and the gods of chaos.³⁸ Marduk killed Tiāmat and created the cosmos with her corpse.³⁹ There was no indication of struggle or war during God’s creation in Genesis 1–2. The writer of Genesis conveys that God created the universe peacefully.

There are major differences between the Hebrew God and the Egyptian and Babylonian gods. As Currid states, “These gods were not omnipotent but were restricted in power to the capacity of the natural elements they personified.”⁴⁰ The Hebrew God is depicted in Genesis 1–2 as transcendent, which means that He is distinguished from the universe. He acts

³⁶ Bernard F. Batto, *In the Beginning: Essays on Creation Motifs in the Ancient Near East and the Bible* (Winona Lake: Penn State University Press, 2013), 15.

³⁷ Robert Reed Lessing, “Yahweh versus Marduk: Creation Theology in Isaiah 40–55,” *Concordia Journal* 36, no. 3 (2010): 236.

³⁸ Currid, *Against the Gods*, 36.

³⁹ Lambert, *Babylonian*, 71–99.

⁴⁰ Currid, *Against the Gods*, 40.

within the cosmos, but He is not part of it. God created the universe, but the universe is not God.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

After an examination of the creation stories of Egypt and Babylon and the biblical creation account of Genesis 1-2, polemic theology is observed as the best choice for the comparative methodology of this article since it exhibited definitely and explicitly the differences between the perspective of the Hebrews and the beliefs of the Egyptians and Babylonians. Polemical theology emphasizes the nature and the characteristics of the one true God, who created the universe. God (יהוה) is transcendent (e.g. 2 Chr 2:6; Isa 55:8-9), but He is also imminent (e.g. Job 33-34; Jer 23). He is omniscient (e.g., Pss 139:1-5; 147:5; Isa 40:28), omnipotent (e.g., Isa 14:27; 43:13; Dan 4:35), and omnipresent (e.g., 1 Kings 8:27; Prov 15:3; Jer 23:24). God (יהוה) is sovereign.

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⁴¹ Ibid.

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