

Three Ancient Near Eastern Creation Myths

This is an excerpt from a post made by Bryan Windle on his [website](#). You can find the full text of his article there.

Increasingly, people are claiming that the Genesis account of creation is remarkably similar to other Ancient Near Eastern creation myths. Usually, this is followed by one or more of the following assertions:

- God communicated his creation story using a common story template (i.e., literary framework) that the Israelites would have been familiar with
- Moses borrowed from earlier Mesopotamian or Egyptian myth literature when he (supposedly) wrote the book of Genesis
- A straightforward reading of Genesis 1-2 is not needed since it is just another Ancient Near Eastern creation myth
- Just as the Ancient Near Eastern myths are poetic accounts of creation, so Genesis is meant to be read as poetry, not as a narrative account of creation

Setting aside the unsubstantiated claim of how familiar Bronze-Age Israelites would have been with Assyrian or Babylonian literature, or the fact that [statistical studies of verb usage that have clearly demonstrated that Genesis 1 and 2 are not Hebrew poetry](#), are the Ancient Near Eastern creation myths really that similar to the biblical account?

Whenever I hear people make one of these claims this I'll ask, "Have you read any Ancient Near Eastern creation myths?" Almost always they'll admit that they have not. They are merely parroting an

academic-sounding argument, which they believe frees them to read Genesis 1&2 in a particular way. As an English major, I enjoy reading old literature and have read numerous Ancient Near Eastern creation myths. So, allow me to share three of the most famous ones with you, as well as my thoughts on how similar they actually are to the biblical accounts

1. The *Enuma Elish* (also spelled *Enûma Eliš*)

The Enuma Elish is an ancient Babylonian creation myth – perhaps the earliest – which describes the birth of the gods, as well as the creation of the universe and the forming of humans. It was discovered on seven tablets in 1849 in the ruins of Ashurbanipal’s library in ancient Nineveh. In this myth, the gods are birthed out of swirling waters, which divide into fresh water, becoming the god Apsu, and salty water, becoming the goddess Tiamat. From these two come a host of younger gods, whose noise annoys Apsu, and so he plans to kill the younger gods. The younger gods are warned of this and strike back by killing Apsu. Tiamat is enraged by the death of her mate, leading to a battle between Tiamat and Marduk, the champion of the younger gods. Marduk wins and creates mankind from the blood of the god Quingu, who is blamed for the conflict and executed.

SIMILARITIES TO GENESIS:

- The Enuma Elish has a “Biblical sounding” beginning: “When the heavens above did not exist, And earth beneath had not come into being...” (Tablet I, lines 1&2)
- Marduk creates the constellations to mark time (Tablet V, Lines 1-5), which is similar to Gen 1:14

- Order is created from chaos, which is similar to God creating everything from that which was formless and void in Gen 1:2ff

DIFFERENCES:

- The Enuma Elish is polytheistic; Genesis is monotheistic
- The Enuma Elish is primarily the story of the elevation of the Babylonian god Marduk to “kingship over the gods” (Tablet VI, line 99), and the creation of Babylon as his dwelling place (Tablet VI, lines 55, 72), whereas Genesis is primarily the story of the creation of all living things by Yahweh.
- The creation of the world is a result of Marduk’s defeat of Tiamat, whom he cuts in two, with the Euphrates and Tigris rivers flowing from her eyes, and the mountains and the heavens being formed from other parts of her body (Tablet V, lines 55, 57 & 61). In Genesis, God creates through his own power, saying, “Let there be...”
- Humans are created so that they could do the menial work, allowing the gods to rest (Tablet VI, line 8), whereas in the Genesis account, humans are created on the sixth day as the only creature made in the image of God Himself.
- There is no distinction between the creator and the creature in the Enuma Elish. Humans are made out of the same substance as the gods. Thus, Marduk is not a creator, in the biblical sense of creating something out of nothing; he fashions humans out of Quingu’s blood. This is not the same as being made *ex nihilo* in the image of God.

While there are a few similarities, this crude and bloody tale bears little resemblance to the orderly, sequential creation account in Genesis. One could pull some lines out of the Enuma Elish and

some Bible verses out of context in an attempt to claim they're similar. However, when one reads both accounts side-by-side, it becomes apparent how different they really are.

2. The *Atrahasis Epic* (also spelled *Atra-Hasis Epic*)

The Atrahasis epic is named after the primary character in the myth (Atrahasis means “*exceedingly wise*”). Tablets of this story, written in ancient Akkadian cuneiform script, have been discovered at various Mesopotamian sites. It tells the story of the Sumerian gods – the seven great Anunna-gods and the lesser Igigi-gods. The lesser gods were being burdened with the work and decided to rebel. Before the battle, a peaceful solution is proposed: create man to do the work. They agree to this and slaughter the god Aw-ilu, and mix his flesh and blood with clay to make man. Humans increase, and their noise disturbs the god Enlil, who decides to destroy all humanity with a flood. The god Enki warns Atrahasis, the hero of the story, who builds a boat to escape the flood. He, his family, and the animals enter the boat and seal the door, surviving the storm and the flood. After seven days, the flood ends, and Atrahasis exits the boat and offers sacrifices to the gods. While Enlil is initially furious with Enki for thwarting his plan, they eventually agree to control humans in other ways.

SIMILARITIES TO GENESIS:

- Clay is used to create man, similar to the Lord creating man out of the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7)
- The Atrahasis Epic generally follows the Flood narrative in Genesis: judgement on mankind, great flood, wise man and animals saved in a boat, sacrifices offered afterwards.

DIFFERENCES:

- The Atrahasis Epic is polytheistic; Genesis is monotheistic
- The creation of man is a solution to a battle between the gods for the purpose of doing the work the lesser gods find a “drudgery” (Lines 2 and 34)
- While clay is used in the creation of man, so is the flesh and blood of a god who is slaughtered (Lines 224-226), as opposed to the peaceful creation of man in Genesis through dust and the breath of God. Fundamentally, being made out of the same substance as a god (i.e., his flesh and blood) is a very different concept from being made in the image of God, despite how some might try to argue that one is metaphorically similar to the other.
- While there are obvious similarities between the flood accounts in the Atrahasis Epic and Genesis, there are notable differences: the judgement of the gods on mankind is because of their noise, whereas God’s judgement on mankind is because of their sin; Atrahasis is saved because he is wise, while Noah is saved because he is righteous.

The flood narrative in the Atrahasis Epic is certainly similar to the flood narrative in Genesis, although these similarities are just as logically explained by the fact that both refer to a common historical event, as they are by assuming Moses copied a Babylonian myth. Moreover, the point of this blog is to focus on the creation element of the myth, and here we see far more differences than similarities. The gods in the Atrahasis Epic are complaining, spiteful, warring beings. When one reads this creation myth alongside the Genesis account of creation, the differences are accentuated all the more.

3. The Egyptian Creation Myth from Heliopolis

In Egyptian mythology, the creation stories are usually associated with the primary god worshiped in a particular city. Thus, at Memphis, Ptah is the creator god, while at Hermopolis, the Ogdoad – their four main gods and their consorts – act as creators. These stories come primarily from the pyramid texts, decorations on the tomb walls that date back to the Old Kingdom (ca. 2780 – 2250 B.C.). At Heliopolis, the god Atum is said to have created everything. Atum is so closely related to the sun god Ra, who was worshiped at Heliopolis, where he eventually became known as Atum-Ra. In the Heliopolis creation myth, Atum emerges from Nu, the primordial waters, and creates the air god, Shu, and his sister Tefnut, the goddess of moisture/rain. These gods give birth to other gods, and eventually the world comes into being.

SIMILARITIES TO GENESIS:

- Atum emerging from the primordial water is reminiscent of God hovering over the face of the waters (Gen 1:2)
- Atum is said to have created himself, which perhaps hints at an eternal nature. On the other hand, Genesis presumes (and the Bible declares elsewhere) God's eternal, uncreated nature

DIFFERENCES:

- The Heliopolis creation myth is polytheistic; Genesis is monotheistic
- In the Heliopolis creation myth, Atum creates other gods, while in Genesis, God speaks the physical world into existence.
- The focus of Egyptian creation myths is on the formation of the gods, who represent various elements of nature. The focus in

Genesis is on the creation of the elements of nature themselves.

- While the creation of the gods/the world is described in the Heliopolis story, very little is said about the creation of animals and mankind in this or any other Egyptian Creation myths. The only hint at man's creation comes not from the written texts themselves but from Egyptian art, where Khnum, the god of the Nile, is sometimes depicted as fashioning man on a potter's wheel.
- Rather than being a sequential account of the creation of the world and mankind as in Genesis, the Egyptian myths are a scattered group of texts that one must piece together in order to understand their view(s) of creation.

Egyptian creation myths are often contradictory and, depending on which city the inscriptions come from, attribute creation to a different god. As with the ancient Mesopotamian creation myths, their purpose is clearly to elevate a particular god from the pantheon to the status of chief god. When one reads an Egyptian creation myth and then the creation account from Genesis 1 and 2, one wonders why certain scholars seem to see so many similarities. The differences are glaring.

Summary

In The Popular Handbook of Biblical Archaeology, Joseph Holden and Norman Geisler summarize the difficulties with the “literary-framework” hypothesis, and offer a four-point critique of scholars who make much of the similarities between Genesis and these Ancient Near Eastern creation myths:

1. First, the critical scholars' overemphasis on similarities has blinded their eyes to the many differences that set the accounts apart.
2. Second, the similarities may be accounted for by the fact that different groups were writing about the same original historical event (creation).
3. Third, we now know that the Genesis account is not dependent on, or identified with, any earlier Mesopotamian, Egyptian, or Assyrian creation tradition because of the recognized direction of myth (i.e., Myths can become more embellished over time, but never become more historical-sounding over time).
4. Some critical scholars forget that early creation myths are not necessarily concerned with creation per se; rather, they are attempts to justify or elevate the standing of particular deities or cities in the eyes of the people.⁷

My purpose has been to analyze the popular theory that the creation account in the book of Genesis follows the same literary framework, or is strikingly similar to other Ancient Near Eastern creation myths. No one is denying that there are some superficial similarities. However, when I read the Mesopotamian and Egyptian creation myths side-by-side with the book of Genesis, the substantial differences far outweigh the similarities.