

The Origin of Man in Mesopotamian and Biblical Sources

Arguably, no greater issue exists than the one elicited in the questions, “Where did we come from, and what is our purpose?” This paper will examine ancient works that presumed to answer these two questions regarding the creation of mankind. Kenton Sparks lists several such works with a brief description. Here are three of them.

Atrahasis – Lower echelon gods are tired of digging canals for the elite gods. They rebel and threaten to overthrow the supreme god of the pantheon, Enlil. But a solution is found by the goddess Nintu who creates humanity to take over these laborious tasks.

The Eridu Genesis – Similar to Genesis 1-11, and the oldest exemplar dating to 1600 BCE, Nintur pities humans who live a nomadic life. She builds cities and provides kingship.

The Bilingual Creation of the World by Marduk – Preserved on a Late Babylonian tablet from Sippar, it most likely goes back to an earlier Sumerian tale where Enki is the creator. The primeval cosmos includes only the sea and a water pipe which connects the upper world to the waters of the earth. Marduk creates Eridu (Babylon) and his temple (Esagil), dry land, humans-animals-and geographic features. He sets boundaries between earth and sea, then forms bricks, brick molds, cities, and temples.¹

What should one make of such works, especially because they predate the composition of Genesis, at least in the way we have it in the canon? It hardly needs to be documented that a common understanding is that the Bible, particularly Genesis 1-11, is merely another collection of myths about human origins. Various theories are proposed to explain such ancient documents. Jacobsen, for example, sees the myth celebrating “... the economic possibilities of Southern Mesopotamia—the potential of irrigation agriculture and the dependence of the latter on strong governmental organization for its success.”² He calls it a charter for the city-state.³ One wonders

¹ Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005, 306-314.

² Thorkild Jacobsen, “The Eridu Genesis,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 100/4, (1981), 513-529, 526.

³ *Ibid.*, 526.

if it was originally a propaganda piece for the city-state structure. Walton adds, "...the hierarchy among the gods of the pantheon mirrored the sorts of bureaucratic structures that dominated the nations and cities of the ancient world."⁴ Again, one wonders if ancient myths were created, and retold, to justify those who had gained power. Walton says, "Kings were likewise eager to affirm at every opportunity the evidences that the gods supported their reign, claiming continuing good omens and favorable dreams and prophecies."⁵ Jacobsen also notes that the Eridu Genesis represents "... not one, but several different versions, some more, some less full in their renderings of the original story."⁶ In other words, these types of stories were circulating throughout the ancient world. But when one comes to the biblical account, one sees a vastly different approach to the world.

The composer of Genesis 1-9 had reinterpreted the cosmology and the early history of Man.... He has used a framework that is at least as old as the Epic of Atrahasis ... and has retold the story in such a way as to reinterpret an ancient tradition to illuminate fundamental Israelite ideas, i.e., the biblical ideals that law and the "sanctity of human life" are the prerequisites of human existence upon the earth.⁷

Jacobsen says, "...We must also note how decisively these materials have been transformed in the biblical account, altering radically their original meaning and import."⁸ Thus, while we have similar stories of creation, long-life, city building, temple building, a flood, flood

⁴ John H. Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians: From Ancient Context to Enduring Belief*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2016, 36.

⁵ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Bible*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, 283.

⁶ Jacobsen, 514.

⁷ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Genesis 1-9," *The Biblical Archeologist*, 40 no 4, Dec 1977, p 147-155, 154.

⁸ Jacobsen, 529.

survivors, and changes in society, the biblical account presents a unique worldview in antiquity and should cause skeptics of the Bible to pause and ask, “How did such differences arise?”

The obvious and well-known difference – the pagan pantheon and biblical monotheism – has a less-known corollary. In ancient myths, a great conflict among the gods led to the creation of humanity. There were ranks of gods, and the lesser gods, the Igigi, were assigned laborious tasks by Enlil, digging canals, of which they grew tired leading to a rebellion against him. "Let us face up to our foreman the prefect, he must take off our heavy burden upon us! Enlil, counsellor of the gods, the warrior, come, let us remove him from his dwelling."⁹

The *Enuma Elish* presents a heavenly battle in a different form.

Tiamat cried aloud and fiercely, all her lower members trembled beneath her. She was reciting an incantation, kept reciting her spell, while the (battle-)gods were sharpening their weapons of war. Tiamat and Marduk, the sage of the gods, came together, joining in strife, drawing near to battle.¹⁰

Marduk prevails against Tiamat and from her carcass creates the heavens and the earth. The defeated gods are given tasks that become burdensome. To solve this problem, Marduk slays Tiamat's general, Kingu. From his blood and clay, Ea and Nintu create humans to take over the labor that the defeated gods found burdensome.¹¹

Finally, in the *Eridu Genesis*, one discovers a variation. The text begins on Line 37, the first 36 being lost from the Nippur text dating to 1600 BCE.¹² “Nintu was paying attention: Let me bethink myself of my humankind, all forgotten as they are; and mindful of mine, Nintur's

⁹ *Atrahasis*, Lines 41-44, <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/anet/104-106-the-epic-of-atrahasis/>.

¹⁰ *Enuma Elish*, Lines 89-94, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/225/enuma-elish---the-babylonian-epic-of-creation---fu/>.

¹¹ “Marduk Creates the World from the Spoils of Battle,” <http://www.gly.uga.edu/railsback/CS/CSMarduk.html>.

¹² Jacobsen, 513.

creatures let me bring them back, let me lead the people back from their trails.”¹³ It is clear that humanity already exists. Perhaps the 36 lost lines recount humanity’s creation. But in what exists, Nintur teaches wandering humanity how to build cities, and she gives kingship to guide humans. But even this is to carry out the will of the gods and to build temples so the gods might be refreshed, worshiped, and their will discerned.¹⁴

Two differences, thus far, between the biblical account and ancient mythology have emerged: the obvious – a pantheon vs. monotheism – and the lesser-known warfare motif vs. a peaceful creation of all things. Walton lists five types of warfare in which the gods are involved.

1. Dissatisfaction of a class of inferior gods against superior gods seen in *Atrahasis* and *Enuma Elish*,
2. Gods fighting against chaos monsters seen in *Enuma Elish* and one line of *The Instruction of Merikare*,
3. Gods fighting each other for supremacy seen in *Enuma Elish* and many other sources in Egypt, the Levant, and among the Hittites,
4. A younger generation of gods seeking to supplant an older generation seen in the *Theogony of Dunnu*, and
5. The gods engaging in battle on behalf of their people who are fighting enemies.¹⁵

When one looks at the creation account in Genesis 1-2, however, one does not see warfare. All that is made is good. At the end of the sixth day, the creator looks upon all he has made by the word of his authority and pronounces it very good. If one thinks that the first-person plural in Genesis 1:26 alludes to other “divine beings,” they are not in conflict. Humans are made in their image as well. The great sea creatures (Genesis 1:21) are not chaos monsters but are

¹³ This excerpt is taken from "The Harps That Once...: Sumerian Poetry in Translation" by Thorkild Jacobsen. Yale University Press, 1987, <http://www.piney.com/EriduGen.html>.

¹⁴ Ibid., “May they come and build cities and cult places, that I may cool myself in their shade; may they lay the bricks for the cult cities in pure spots and may they found places for divination in pure spots!”

¹⁵ Walton, 2016, 78-80.

made by God and are good. The heavenly lights are not deities fighting for supremacy but are impersonal objects that serve God's and mankind's purposes on earth.

What, then, of humanity? This is the third difference, and it pertains to man's purpose. In antiquity, one sees two reasons for the creation of humans. First, the gods make humans to take over the laborious slave labor that the lesser gods, the Igigi of the *Atrahasis* epic, or the defeated gods of the *Enuma Elish*, found too difficult. Humans are slaves for the hard work of providing food for the comfort of the gods. Second, humans are to create places (through hard labor!) of cultic activity to please the gods and where the will of the gods can be discerned by divination, as it says in the *Eridu Genesis*, "May they lay the bricks for the cult cities in pure spots and may they found places for divination in pure spots." But in the biblical record, we find these words.

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:26-28 NIV)

Mankind is not a consequence of war but a divine, thoughtful plan. He is not an after-thought, but the first thought. He is not Plan B to stop the whining of inferior gods but the apex of creation. He is not a slave to bring shade and refreshment to the gods but a co-worker in God's enterprise to express his infinite and matchless glory through what he has made, and which is most brilliantly expressed in those made in his image and likeness who are the objects of his love.

King David may have expressed this difference best when he said, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor!" (Psalm 8:3-5 NIV).

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