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THE BABYLONIAN AND BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE CREATION

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Nearly thirty years ago Mr. George Smith, one of the most brilliant and successful pioneers of Assyriology, discovered the fragments of an Assyrian legend of the creation. It was in the form of a poem, and from the portions of it that remained he concluded that it had been composed in seven tablets or books. Between these seven tablets and the seven creation days of Genesis a comparison was natural, more especially as the order of creation in the Assyrian and biblical accounts seems to be the same, and there were, moreover, other points of resemblance between them.

After Mr. Smith's untimely death other fragments of the Assyrian poem came to light. It soon became apparent that it was really a sort of pæan in honor of the god Bel-Merodach who, in the eyes of the later Babylonians, was the creator of the world. Other gods had played that part in the earlier days of Babylonian history, but Merodach was the patron god of the city of Babylon, and when Babylon became the capital of the country it was needful that its god should be supreme. Merodach, accordingly, usurped the place which had previously been held by the older divinities, absorbing all the offices and attributes that had belonged to them. Among these the creative function naturally held a foremost position, and it

was therefore as creator of the world that the god of Babylon now stepped forward to the exclusion of his brother-deities. Henceforth in the eyes of the Babylonians Merodach alone was the creator of the world.

Hence it is that the work of creation necessarily occupies a large space in a poem the object of which is to celebrate the supremacy of Merodach. The poem, in fact, becomes an epic of the creation, since it was in virtue of his being the creator that Merodach proved himself to be the first of the gods. It was because he alone had made the world that he was supreme in both heaven and earth. Not only was the earth with its inhabitants the work of his hands; the heavens also, where the gods dwelt, were equally his creation.

The creation was conceived of by the Babylonians as the evolution of order out of chaos, of light out of darkness, of law out of anarchy. The present world with its law and order has been evolved out of an earlier and chaotic world in which the anarchic forces of nature were allowed full play. The evolution has been the result of a struggle; the anarchic elements have been subdued and confined within the limits of law only after fierce resistance, out of which the gods of light emerged triumphant and the demons of darkness were put to flight. In the Epic of the Creation the triumph of the gods of light is ascribed to Merodach. Other gods before him had essayed to fight with the dragon of chaos; he only had succeeded in overcoming her.

The dragon of chaos was a personification of the deep, of that abyss of waters over which the storms sweep, and which, unless checked and restrained, would swallow up the earth and all that it contains. In the deep the Babylonians saw the primeval origin of all things. The belief went back to days long before Babylon became the leading city of Babylonia and its god had usurped the creative functions of the older deities. But it was a belief deeply planted in the Babylonian mind, and all theories or stories of creation were required to presuppose it.

It was a belief that first grew up in the city of Eridu, which, some seven or eight thousand years ago, was the seaport of primitive Babylonia. Eridu then stood on the shore of the Persian Gulf, though the silting up of the coast and the retreat of the sea have long

since removed its site far inland. Its maritime trade made it the nursery and home of early Babylonian culture; its god Ea was the culture-god of Chaldea, to whom were ascribed the invention of writing and all the arts and habits of civilized life. For the inhabitants of Eridu and for the culture which emanated from it Ea was, therefore, the creator, and here accordingly the earlier Babylonian system of cosmology first grew up.

The maritime situation of this earlier home of the Babylonian story of the creation thus explains how the deep came to be regarded as that out of which the universe has been evolved. The deep was the Persian Gulf, and to the native of Eridu who saw the land growing, as it were, out of the sea by the accumulation of silt it was natural to suppose that this was the way in which the whole earth had come into existence. The fields reclaimed from the Persian Gulf at Eridu were a type and illustration of the world and its creation. As they were in a sense the gift of the sea, so, it was argued, the whole world must have had its origin in the deep.

Babylon was probably a colony of Eridu. At all events, its patron god Merodach was identified with the son of Ea of Eridu, and came in time to absorb the attributes of his adopted father. The creative functions of Ea passed to Merodach; Merodach and not Ea became the creator of the world. In the Epic of the Creation, accordingly, Merodach is the creator of the world, though the system of cosmology is still that of Eridu.

The first tablet or book is a philosophical introduction to the story which follows. It breathes the spirit of a later age when the old myths had ceased to be believed and the supernatural figures that moved in them had been transformed into cosmical principles and abstract symbols. Tiamât, the dragon of the deep, has become the impersonation of chaos and anarchy, the ocean which encircles the world has ceased to be divine and has been changed into the element out of which all things have been produced, and the gods themselves are resolved into material elements. And creation itself is represented as a process of development, instead of being the result of a war in heaven, as the rest of the poem declares it to be.

It is only in the introduction, however, that mythology thus makes way for the materialistic philosophy of the schools. Elsewhere the

poem knows only of the myths in which the Babylonian stories of creation were embodied and of the mythological figures with which they were connected. Tiamât assumes her mythological character, and the larger part of the epic is occupied with the legend of the war of the gods and the victory of Merodach over her. The introduction is, I believe, the work of an Assyrian who may have lived as late as the time of Assur-bani-pal; the rest of the poem is of Babylonian origin and of comparatively early date.

Much of the missing portion of it has recently been discovered by Mr. L. W. King, and we can now, therefore, follow the thread of the story in a way that was impossible before. Among the new fragments found by him are the beginning and end of the sixth tablet, in which the creation of the man is described. We now learn that the revolt of Tiamât had been preceded by an earlier revolt of Apsu, "the Deep," and Mummu, "Chaos"—evidently a variant version of the war of the gods in which Apsu and Mummu took the place of Tiamât.

The account of the war and of the final victory of Merodach occupies the first four books. At the end of the fourth we are told how the conqueror divided Tiamât "like a flat fish into two halves," forming out of them the waters above and below the firmament. Then in the fifth tablet comes the appointment of the heavenly bodies to illuminate the world, and to measure time. They were not created like the firmament, for in the eyes of the Babylonians the sun and moon and stars were deities, and consequently had come into being at the same time as Merodach himself. What the creator did, therefore, was to fix the places to be occupied by the signs of the Zodiac, to "ordain the year" and its divisions, assigning three stars to each of the months, to cause the moon-god to illumine the night and determine the length of the month, and to set the sun-god over the day. At the same time, the courses of the celestial bodies through the sky were laid down for them, and the whole universe was bound together by inviolable laws, "so that none might err or ever go astray." The reign of chaos was over; henceforward the world was to be governed by fixed law.

The latter half of the fifth tablet is wanting, and until Mr. King's fortunate discovery nothing was known of the sixth. We now find that it begins with a description of the creation of man.

When Merodach heard the word of the gods, his heart prompted him (and) he devised [a plan]. He opened his mouth and [spake] to Ea, what he had conceived in his heart he imparted [to him]: "Blood will I take and bone will [I fashion]; I will make man that man may [exist?]; I will create man to inhabit [the earth], that the service of the gods may be performed and their shrines [built]: I will also change the ways of the gods and reform [their counsels], that they may be all honored together and against evil [be protected?]."

The creation of man is thus connected with the overthrow of the powers of darkness, and its object is expressly stated to be the worship and service of the gods of light. Did man not exist, the gods would be deprived of their offerings, and the temples wherein they were adored would remain unbuilt.

The seventh and last tablet of the epic is a hymn of praise sung by the gods in honor of Merodach, in which the attributes and powers of the other "great gods" are transferred to him. It formed originally no part of the story of the creation, or even of the legend of Merodach; it was an independent poem, going back to Sumerian times and incorporated by the author of the epic into his work. Numerous explanatory commentaries of it existed, fragments of which have survived to us, and the author of the epic has connected it with the rest of his poem by explaining that it was chanted by the gods in their council chamber after the overthrow of Tiamât, and by adding to it at the end a few lines of epilogue.

The story of the overthrow of Tiamât, like the story of the creation itself, was primarily told, not of Merodach, but of another god, El-bil, the older Bel of Nippur. Hence it is that, after describing how the task of opposing Tiamât had been undertaken in vain by Anu and Ea, no mention is made of Bel of Nippur, the third member of the Babylonian triad. Bel, in fact, has been identified with his supplanter, the younger Bel-Merodach of Babylon. But the identification goes back to the age of Abraham. It was under Khammu-rabi, or Amraphel, that Babylon became the capital of a united empire and its god supreme in the divine hierarchy of Babylonia. When Abraham migrated to Canaan, the story of the creation and of the war in heaven must already have assumed much the same form as that which it has in the epic.

The importance of the fact becomes clear as soon as we compare the Babylonian story with the first chapter of Genesis. The resem-

blance that exists between them has been recognized from the first. Indeed, it is more than a resemblance; much that we find in the biblical cosmology presupposes the conceptions of the cuneiform story and meets with its explanation from them. Even the technical terms of the biblical narrative are Babylonian in origin.

But there is more than this. While the Babylonian story is polytheistic and mythological, the biblical account is intensely—we might almost say aggressively—monotheistic. Here and there, it is true, expressions have been left which imply a polytheistic source: *tehôm*, “the deep,” for instance, is used as a proper name, like Tiamât, without the definite article, and God is represented as saying, “Let us make man in *our* image;” but it is no less true that in most cases the polytheistic and mythological element in the Babylonian story is not only set aside, but implicitly contradicted. Let us take, for example, the account of the appointment of the heavenly bodies. In the Babylonian epic there is no mention of their creation, for they were divine beings who had come into existence like the other gods before the creation of the present world. In the book of Genesis, on the other hand, though the appointment of the heavenly bodies occupies the same position in the order of creation as it does in the epic, and though, too, God is represented as saying—not that they should be created, but, as in the Babylonian story—that they should be lights dividing the day from the night and regulating the seasons of the calendar, it is nevertheless added that God then “*made* two great lights” and “the stars also.” And not only so; the very names by which the “two great lights” were known are scrupulously avoided. They were names of deities, of the sun-god and the moon-god, and as such are excluded from the biblical narrative. The “stars” similarly take the place in it of the Babylonian Istar, the goddess of the evening star; for the biblical writer all alike are lights and nothing more, which have been created, as well as assigned their duties, by the one and only God. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the biblical writer had the Babylonian story of creation before him, and, while preserving it in the letter, intentionally changed it in the spirit. Vss. 14 and 15 in the narrative of Genesis read like an extract from the Babylonian legend; vs. 16 is the addition of the Hebrew monotheist which deprives them of their monotheistic sense.

The same features distinguish the rest of the biblical account from its Babylonian prototype. There is the same evidence of acquaintance with the Babylonian story, the same conscious elimination of its mythical and polytheistic elements. Nor is it only the mythical and polytheistic elements that are banished; the materialistic philosophy of the introduction to the epic is banished likewise. In place of matter generating itself and developing into the divine, we have God from the very outset creating all things, matter and chaos included. According to the Babylonian poet, "in the beginning" were the formless deep and chaotic matter which together were the source and origin of all things. Even the gods developed out of them, like the rest of the universe, in the slow course of time.

Against this doctrine the biblical writer protests in uncompromising tones. On the forefront of Genesis he declares that "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The earth was, indeed, a formless chaos resting on the dark waters of the primeval deep, but the chaos and deep were not the first of things; God was already there, and his breath or spirit brooded over the abyss. The cosmology of Babylonia is adopted which saw in the dark and formless deep the origin of the universe, but it was corrected and modified by the declaration that above and apart from the abyss was the divine creator.

Surprise has often been expressed that the biblical account should represent the light as having been created before the heavenly bodies, and that there should have been evening and morning before the sun was made. But the discovery of the Babylonian story of the creation explains why it should have been so. There, too, we hear of "day" and "night" even before the gods had been born, much more before the creation of the world, the reason being that the heavenly bodies were not made by the Babylonian creator, but only appointed to their work of measuring time. They were themselves divinities, and so had come into existence along with the creator himself.

The difficulty in the biblical narrative has arisen from the addition which asserts that not only were the heavenly bodies appointed to their work of measuring time, they were also created at the same time. Nothing can show more clearly that the assertion is an addition, and that the Babylonian story must have lain before the writer

who made it. The writer in Genesis accepts the statement that the heavenly bodies were appointed to measure time, but he qualifies it by adding that they were also made. The sting of polytheism and materialism is thus taken out of the Babylonian story, but it is at the expense of introducing into it a contradiction and a difficulty. There were evening and morning before there was anything to separate and distinguish them.

But this is not all. In the book of Genesis we are told that the sea and land were divided from one another and vegetation created on the third day, before the creation of the sun and moon. It is evident that we have here an inversion of the natural and necessary order of the creative acts. Vegetation implies sunshine; before it could have come into existence the sun must have been made. In the Babylonian epic, however, the formation of the sea, with its fixed boundaries, is, like the formation of the sky, closely connected with the creation of the firmament out of the two halves of Tiamât. The description of it is, therefore, deeply tinged with the fantasies of Babylonian mythology and superstition, and there was good reason for the different version that we find in the Old Testament. The formation of the firmament is, indeed, left in its original place and ascribed to the second day, but the formation of sea and land is separated from it and made a later and independent act.

It is needless to say that the dragon of the deep is banished from the cosmology of the Hebrew writer. The monster Leviathan may be met with in other passages of the Old Testament; in the first chapter of Genesis, where it could have only a mythological meaning, we look for it in vain. There is no Tiamât out of whom the firmament of heaven may be made, even though the Babylonian conception of a firmament is retained; and equally there is no impersonation of the deep whose waters should be gathered into seas. The God of the Hebrew writer creates by the mere utterance of his word; he speaks, and it is done.

Creation by the word is known also to the Babylonian poet. In the assembly of the gods Merodach proves his power to overcome the dragon by destroying and re-creating a garment through the power of his word alone. But in the actual creation of the world the word is not employed. Here the god works like a craftsman with pre-existing materials, fashioning them according to his will and

putting them, as it were, under bolt and key. Doubtless there was a version of the creation-story current in Babylonia which made the divine word the creative power, but it was used by the author of the epic merely to illustrate the superiority of Merodach to the other gods. In the book of Genesis, on the contrary, the creative power is exercised through the divine word alone; there may, indeed, have been pre-existing materials, but it was through the word of God that they took shape and became the world of today.

I need not carry any farther this comparison of the Babylonian and biblical accounts of the creation. It is sufficiently clear that the Babylonian story was known to the Hebrew writer, if not in the form of the epic, at all events in one very like it. It is also clear that between the two the contrast is profound. In the first chapter of Genesis the polytheism and mythology of the original are gone, or at any rate have left but few traces behind them; in their place we have spiritual conceptions and the emphatic assertion of the unity and omnipotence of God. Between the Babylonian epic and the Hebrew Scriptures there is a gulf which cannot be spanned.

When was it that the Babylonian story first became known to the inhabitants of Canaan, or could have been adapted and transformed by the writer in the book of Genesis? The answer to this question would need an article to itself, and the lines it would follow can only be briefly indicated here. The Tel el-Amarna tablets have shown that the legends and traditions of Babylonia were read and studied in Canaan in their literary form even before the Mosaic age, while Gunkel has pointed out that references to Tiamât and other characteristic features of the Babylonian story of the creation are to be found in the earlier portions of the Old Testament. It can further be shown that the Babylonian stories used by the author of Genesis have been, as it were, domesticated in Palestine, and have there received a local coloring before they were incorporated into his work. So far as we know at present, there are only two periods when a Hebrew could have had access to the literary productions of Babylonia and been able to read the cuneiform script—the age of Moses and the epoch of the exile. And in the epoch of the exile it is little likely that a Jewish monotheist would have borrowed the cosmological legends of his Babylonian oppressors, interpenetrated, as they were, with a polytheism and mythology which he abhorred.