

# **1. Interpreting Creation: Enuma Elish, Genesis, and Ancient Near Eastern Beliefs**

*Prof. Akinchan Xaxa*

## **Abstract:**

*This paper offers a comparative analysis of the Babylonian epic Enuma Elish and the biblical accounts of creation in Genesis 1-2. Enuma Elish, dating to the 12th century BCE, narrates a divine struggle culminating in Marduk's creation of the world. In contrast, Genesis 1-2 presents a monotheistic portrayal of creation by God. Despite differences, both narratives share common themes: a chaotic primeval state, the division of primordial waters, the creation of humanity, the concept of divine image, and the establishment of divine rest in a sacred space.*

*While Enuma Elish depicts chaos preceding the gods' presence, Genesis asserts God's primacy before chaos. The division of waters differs in origin; Genesis attributes it to divine command, while Enuma Elish portrays it as a consequence of divine conflict. Understanding these parallels and disparities enriches our comprehension of ancient religious beliefs and their influence on biblical narratives.*

## **Keywords:**

*Enuma Elish; Genesis; cosmogony; comparative study; Ancient Near East.*

## **Introduction:**

Previously, the Bible stood alone as the authoritative and predominant religious text, with evidence from sources beyond biblical texts deemed insignificant. This perception shifted with new archaeological excavations and explorations in regions like Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Syria, leading to significant discoveries.

These discoveries not only shed light on the civilizations and religions of the Ancient Near East but also help us understand the content of the Bible itself. This paper will briefly compare and contrast the Babylonian epic, Enuma Elish, with the account of creation given in Genesis chapters 1-2.

The aim is to highlight both the parallels and significant differences between the creation narratives in Enuma Elish and Genesis 1-2. However, a brief summary of Enuma Elish is needed before discussing the similarities and differences between the Babylonian text and the Biblical text.

The text receives its title from its initial phrase, “*enuma elish*,” which, in the Akkadian language, translates to “when on high.” It consists of seven tablets and was most likely written in the 12th century BCE. “The date of its composition remains open, but in any event, the poem no doubt existed and evolved for centuries before it achieved the form in which it was ultimately written down” (Holland, 123). The epic recounts the primordial chaos before the formation of the world and the rise of the gods. It begins with the union of *Apsu* (freshwater) and *Tiamat* (saltwater), from which the first generation of gods emerges. However, subsequent generations cause unrest and noise, disturbing *Apsu*’s rest. *Tiamat*, enraged, creates monstrous beings to destroy the younger gods. In response, *Ea*, one of the younger gods, slays *Apsu* to thwart the plan. *Tiamat* seeks vengeance and allies with *Kingu*, but the god *Marduk* offers to defeat her in exchange for kingship over the gods. *Marduk* succeeds by slaying *Tiamat* and using her body to create the heavens and the earth. He then forms humanity from the blood of *Kingu*. Hence, *Marduk* is elevated above all other deities to the highest rank as “lord” and “king.” His subordinates, out of respect, build a temple in Babylon: “In honour of *Marduk*’s victory, his temple is built on its massive, staged tower (*ziggurat*), ‘the Tower of Babel’ of early Hebrew legend (Genesis 11:1-9). This was the work of the great gods, the last of their labours” (Gray, 32). The epic creation ends with a great feast at *Esagil*, where the gods meet to celebrate the inauguration of *Marduk*’s new temple. While there are notable distinctions between *Enuma Elish* and the Genesis narrative, it is imperative to delve into the significant parallels that exist between the two.

In both cosmogonies, there exist at least five shared concepts, highlighting both parallels and distinct differences between them. In some way, both narratives describe:

- a. Chaotic Primeval World “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” (Genesis 1:2) “When none of the (other) gods had been brought into being, / (When) they had not (yet) been called by (their) names (and their) destinies had not (yet) been fixed,” (*Enuma Elish* I:7-8)
- b. Primordial Waters Divided into Two Spheres “And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. / And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.” (Genesis 1:6-7) “He split her (*Tiamat*) open like a mussel into two (parts); / half of her he set in place and formed the sky (therewith) as a roof. / He fixed the crossbar (and) posted guards; / He commanded them not to let her waters escape.” (*Enuma Elish* IV:137-140)
- c. The Creation of Humanity “And the Lord 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) “Blood will I form and cause to be bone; / then I will set up *Lullû*, ‘Man’ shall be his name! / Yes, I will create *Lullû*; Man.” (*Enuma Elish* VI:5-7) “They bound him (*Kingu*) and held him before *Ea*; / Punishment they inflicted upon him by cutting (the arteries of) his blood. / With his blood they created mankind.” (*Enuma Elish* VI:30-32)

- d. The Idea of “Image” “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. / So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” (Genesis 1:26-27) “And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth.” (Genesis 5:3) “And Anu begot Nudimmud, his likeness.” (Enuma Elish I:16)
- e. God/Gods Enter Divine Rest in a Temple “And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden.” (Genesis 3:8) “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.” (Revelation 2:7) Both references to the Garden of Eden as the resting place of God. “Come let us make (something) whose name shall be called ‘Sanctuary’. / It shall be a dwelling for our rest at night; come, let us repose therein!” (Enuma Elish VI:51-52)

Initially, both narratives depict a primeval state of chaos, presenting a shared thematic element. In Genesis 1:2, the author notes, “And the earth was without form, and void;” the world is characterized as an empty, unproductive, and uninhabited place, suggesting that the universe lacked divine order and creation. “I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form, and void; and the heavens, and they had no light.” (Jeremiah 4:23). Likewise, Enuma Elish describes a chaotic situation: “When none of the (other) gods had been brought into being, / (When) they had not (yet) been called by (their) names (and their) destinies had not (yet) been fixed,” (Enuma Elish I:7-8). Both Enuma Elish and Genesis depict an initial state of chaos, yet with significant differences. In Enuma Elish, chaos results from the absence of gods, while in Genesis, chaos exists within the context of God’s preexistence. The opening line in Genesis states, “In the beginning God ...” (Genesis 1:1). The biblical author claims God’s presence before any mention of a primeval state of chaos. On the other hand, Enuma Elish clearly reveals that the chaotic state is due to the gods’ absence.

The second parallel is perhaps the most interesting connection between the two narratives: both depict a division of primordial waters. In the biblical account, it notes, “... And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:2). Moreover, Genesis 1:6-7 explains the division of the primordial waters: “And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.” The separation of primordial waters is portrayed in Enuma Elish in the death of Tiamat, the personified primeval ocean, which is divided into two spheres: “He split her (Tiamat) open like a mussel into two (parts); half of her he set in place and formed the sky (therewith) as a roof.

He fixed the crossbar and posted guards; He commanded them not to let her waters escape.” (Enuma Elish IV:137-140). Both accounts describe the primordial waters divided into two realms, separating the sky and the earth (Genesis 1:6-8/Enuma Elish IV:137-140). However, their similarities are not free of major variations. In Enuma Elish, the division of primordial waters is created from the carcass of a dead goddess, which is substantially different from the biblical narrative, where the division of waters results from God’s creative word. The separation of the heavens and the earth in the biblical account is not created by a divine war.

Third, the creation of humans is described in both narratives. While the differences definitely outweigh the similarities between the two accounts, it is important to note that both speak about humanity being created as a result of the actions of God or the gods. However, the similarity between the two narratives seems to go no further than this. In the biblical narrative, mankind is created out of dust (Genesis 2:7), while in Enuma Elish, man is made out of Kingu’s blood vessels (Enuma Elish VI:30-32). In fact, literary features in the biblical narrative reflect the creation of man as having a heightened position in the story of creation. The account of biblical cosmogony reaches its crescendo with the creation of man on the sixth day. The creation of man on the sixth day is emphasized by using the verb “created” three times in verse 27 of Genesis chapter one. This is contrary to Enuma Elish, which includes only a brief description of the creation of man by Marduk in tablet VI (lines 1-10). Significantly, in Genesis, humanity is defined as being created in the “image” and “likeness” of God, but in Enuma Elish, humanity is called “savage” and created to relieve the deities from physical work. The central deity, Marduk, claims, “(Upon him) shall the services of the gods be imposed that they may rest.” (Enuma Elish VI:8). This is contradictory to the biblical narrative of the creation of man by God. Being made in the image of God, humanity assumes a priestly and royal role, both to “subdue” and to “have dominion” over life (Genesis 1:26-28). Though the creation story in Genesis reveals humans to be the servants of God (i.e., vice-regents), it is not so that God can be released from his duties over life.

Both accounts consider a fourth connection with the meaning of “image.” In Enuma Elish, it states, “And Anu begot Nudimmud, in his likeness” (Enuma Elish I:16). Similarly, Genesis describes the creation of humanity in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), as well as the continuity of progeny-bearing existence: “And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth” (Genesis 5:3). As Adam was created in the image of God, the same image is carried down to his son Seth. However, it is important to note that both Anu and Nudimmud are deities in Enuma Elish, not human beings.

Finally, the sacred temple-rest correspondence. Both myths portray the main deity taking up residence in their holy temple after the creation conflict. In Enuma Elish, “rest” is sought because of a cosmic dispute between the deities. Apsu speaks of the “divine brothers” (e.g., Anu and Nudimmud) and says, “Their ways have become painful to me, / By day I cannot

rest, by night I cannot sleep; / I will destroy (them), and put an end to their way, / That silence be established, and let me sleep!” (Enuma Elish I:37-40). Therefore, the gods seek out Marduk, who destroys the rebellious Tiamat and thereby ends the celestial war between the deities. In response, his subordinates (e.g., the Anunnaki) address him as “king” and create a throne for him within a holy temple city (i.e., Babylon), where he and the other deities rest. This is most clearly seen in Tablet VI, lines 47-54:

“The Anunnaki opened their mouth(s)/ And said to Marduk, their lord:/ “Now, O lord, who hast established our freedom from compulsory services,/ What shall be the sign of our gratitude before thee?/ Come let us make (something) whose name shall be called ‘Sanctuary’./ It shall be dwelling for our rest at night; come, let us repose therein!/ There let us erect a throne dais, a seat with a back support!/ On the day that we arrive, we will repose in it.”

The epic creation ends with the gods celebrating the kingship of Marduk and the dedication of his holy temple. “... all of them were gathered./ They sat in the elevated shrine which they had built as his dwelling./ He had the gods his fathers sit down to a banquet./ “Here is Babylon your favorite dwelling place./ Make music in (its) place (and) be seated on its square (?)” (Enuma Elish VI: 69-73) The dedication of Marduk’s holy temple in Enuma Elish culminates with a grand celebration among the gods, marking the establishment of Marduk’s kingship and the consecration of his divine dwelling. This scene underscores the significance of sacred space in ancient cosmologies, where the temple serves as the locus of divine presence and authority. Similarly, in the account of Genesis, while the term “temple” is not explicitly used, scholars have discerned profound temple imagery within the narrative, particularly regarding the Garden of Eden. Dr. Lifsa Schachter, among others, highlights the Garden as a sacred sanctuary where God’s presence dwells, drawing parallels between Eden, the desert Tabernacle, and later temples in Jerusalem and other Near Eastern sanctuaries. This shared understanding of sacred space underscores the deep-seated religious significance attributed to both the Babylonian temple of Marduk and the Garden of Eden in Genesis. Dr. Lifsa Schachter observes: “... the Garden is portrayed as the place where God’s presence abided. When They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day, they recognized Him (implicitly from other encounters), and Adam and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden (Gen. 3:8). This point is reinforced by linguistic parallels. The Hebrew *mithallekh* is precisely the verb used to describe both God’s “walking about” in the Garden and His moving about to protect the Israelites in the desert, where they are instructed to keep their camp holy (Deut. 23:15). ... The parallels between the Garden of Eden, the desert Tabernacle and the later Holy Temple in Jerusalem and other Near Eastern sanctuaries are striking.”

Likewise, John Walton argues, “The Garden of Eden was a holy space, and the temple/tabernacle held representations of the garden and the cosmos.”

Therefore, the tabernacle/temple is a microcosm of the universe. A temple is the holiest dwelling place, and its garden-like imagery refers to Genesis 1-2, where the garden is imagined as the sanctuary of God. The biblical account depicts God living in His holy temple, which is the universe. Additionally, on the seventh day, the notion of “rest” is clear and conceptually related to the temple motif. The chaotic conditions were organized, and the structure was created functionally/materially. By saying that God “rested” on the seventh day, the author implies that God took up residence in His temple and from His throne founded His sovereign rule. God is elevated over the world as “king,” and Genesis 1-2 represents the inauguration of His celestial temple. The word “rest” does not actually mean that God needed rest; it connotes that God ceased to create things as He had already created everything. “... in the ancient world rest is what results when a crisis has been resolved or when stability has been achieved when things have ‘settled down.’” (Walton, 72). “Thou, even thou, art Lord alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshipped thee.” (Nehemiah 9:6)

By recognizing the parallels between the creation myths of Genesis 1-2 and Enuma Elish, we gain insight into the semi-shared ancient worldview of the Near East and its impact on the formation of the Israelite faith. The similarities between these narratives suggest a common cultural heritage and shared theological concepts among ancient Near Eastern societies. This underscores the interconnectedness of religious beliefs and cosmological ideas in the region. Furthermore, the influence of ancient Near Eastern cosmology on Israelite faith becomes apparent through these parallels.

The adoption and adaptation of certain motifs and themes from surrounding cultures indicate a process of cultural exchange and theological borrowing. While the Israelite accounts maintain distinct theological emphases and monotheistic perspectives, they are nevertheless situated within a broader cultural milieu shaped by the cosmological ideas of the ancient Near East. Studying the parallels between Genesis 1-2 and Enuma Elish not only enriches our understanding of ancient Near Eastern religious beliefs but also sheds light on the development of Israelite faith within its cultural and historical context. It highlights the dynamic nature of religious thought and the complex interplay of cultural influences in shaping religious traditions.

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