

Origins of Biblical Motifs and Myths

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Introduction

Many biblical narratives are reinterpretations of much older stories from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Canaan, Persia, and the wider Indo-European world. This document lists the main motifs and their known antecedents, with historical references and a scholarly bibliography.

1. The Great Flood (Noah's Ark)

Biblical: Genesis 6–9 — Noah builds an ark and survives a divine flood.

Older sources:

- *Sumerian Ziusudra Epic*¹
- *Atrahasis Epic*²
- *Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet XI*³

2. Divine Triads and the Trinity

Biblical: Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

Parallels:

- Egyptian triads — Osiris–Isis–Horus⁴; Amun–Mut–Khonsu.
- Babylonian — Anu–Enlil–Ea (sky, air, water)⁵.
- Hindu — Brahma–Vishnu–Shiva⁶.

3. Divine Hailstorm and Battlefield Miracles

Biblical: Joshua 10 — hailstones defeat the Amorites.

Older analogues:

¹Fragment from Nippur, dated c. 2100 BCE. See Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, 1961.

²Old Babylonian tablets from Sippar, c. 1700 BCE. See W. G. Lambert & A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, 1969.

³Standard Babylonian version, discovered at Nineveh; translation by Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Penguin Classics, 1999.

⁴Memphis and Abydos cults, Old Kingdom onwards. See E. A. Wallis Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, 1911.

⁵See Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 1976.

⁶See Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, 2009.

- Hittite storm-god Teshub⁷.
- Ugaritic Baal Hadad⁸.

4. Walls of Jericho and the Power of Sound

Biblical: Joshua 6 — trumpets and shouting collapse city walls.

Older motifs:

- Canaanite and Sumerian myths where divine thunder destroys fortresses⁹.
- Egyptian “trumpet of victory” symbolism¹⁰.

5. Virgin Birth and Divine Conception

Biblical: Mary conceives by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1, Luke 1).

Earlier versions:

- Egyptian — Isis conceives Horus from Osiris’ spirit¹¹.
- Greek — Danaë, Semele, Leda, etc.¹².
- Persian — virgin mother of the Saoshyant savior¹³.

6. Creation by the Word

Biblical: “God said, ‘Let there be light.’”

Older parallels:

- Egyptian — Ptah creates by speaking names¹⁴.
- Mesopotamian — Enki shapes world through divine decrees (*me*)¹⁵.
- Vedic — universe arises from sacred sound (*vāc*)¹⁶.

7. Moses and the Basket in the River

Biblical: Exodus 2 — infant Moses placed in a reed basket on the Nile.

Older source: *Legend of Sargon of Akkad*¹⁷. Identical phrasing: “My mother placed me in a basket of reeds, sealed with bitumen, and set me upon the river.”

⁷Depicted on Yazılıkaya reliefs, 13th century BCE. See Gary Beckman, *Hittite Myths*, 1999.

⁸KTU 1.2–1.4 tablets from Ras Shamra (Ugarit), 13th century BCE. See Mark S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, 1994.

⁹See J. Day, “Echoes of Canaanite Myth in the Hebrew Bible,” *Ugarit-Forschungen*, vol. 23, 1991.

¹⁰Eighteenth Dynasty depictions of Thutmose III’s campaigns. See Toby Wilkinson, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt*, 2010.

¹¹Pyramid Texts (Utterance 364); translated in Raymond O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 1969.

¹²See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 1955.

¹³Described in the *Bundahišn* (Zoroastrian cosmology). See Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 1979.

¹⁴Memphite Theology, Shabaka Stone, British Museum EA 498.

¹⁵Sumerian myth “Enki and the World Order,” ETCSL 1.1.3.

¹⁶*Rig Veda* 10.125; translation by Ralph T. H. Griffith, 1896.

¹⁷Neo-Assyrian fragment, Ashurbanipal Library, 7th century BCE copy of earlier 23rd century tale; see B. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2005.

8. Divine Law on Stone Tablets

Biblical: Ten Commandments (Exodus 20).

Prototype: *Code of Hammurabi*¹⁸. King receives laws carved in stone from sun-god Shamash.

9. Heaven, Hell, and Afterlife Judgment

Biblical: Heaven for the righteous, hell for the wicked.

Precursors:

- Egyptian — weighing of the heart before Osiris¹⁹.
- Persian — Zoroastrian Chinvat Bridge separating good and evil souls²⁰.

10. Dying and Rising God Motif

Biblical: Jesus dies and rises after three days.

Parallels:

- Osiris (Egypt)²¹, Tammuz / Dumuzi (Mesopotamia)²², Baal (Ugarit)²³, Adonis and Dionysus (Greece)²⁴.

¹⁸Stele discovered at Susa, Iran; now in the Louvre (Sb 8). Dated c. 1750 BCE. See Martha Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 1997.

¹⁹*Book of the Dead*, Spell 125; Papyrus of Ani, British Museum EA 10470.

²⁰See Yasna 19 and the Pahlavi *Dadestan-i Denig*.

²¹Mainly in Coffin Texts and the *Book of the Dead*.

²²Sumerian poem "Dumuzi's Dream," ETCSL 1.4.3.

²³KTU 1.6–1.7 tablets.

²⁴See Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 1985.

11. Summary Table

Biblical Motif	Earliest Known Source	Culture of Origin	Approx. Date BCE	Parallel / Theme
Great Flood	<i>Epic of Gilgamesh</i> , Atrahasis	Mesopotamia	2100–1700	Divine flood survivor
Divine Triad	Osiris–Isis–Horus	Egypt / Sumer	2500–1500	Three-in-one deity
Divine Hailstorm	Baal Hadad vs. foes	Canaanite	1200	Storm-god battle
Walls of Jericho	Divine thunder myths	Sumer–Canaan	2000–1200	Sound destroys walls
Virgin Birth	Isis–Horus, Greek myths	Egypt, Greece, Persia	2000–500	Miraculous conception
Creation by Word	Ptah theology	Egypt	2500	Speech as creation
Moses in Basket	Legend of Sargon	Akkadian	2300	Infant on river
Law Tablets	Code of Hammurabi	Babylon	1750	Divine stone law
Afterlife Judgment	Book of the Dead	Egypt	1500	Moral weighing
Resurrection	Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis	Egypt–Greece	2500–500	Dying–rising god

Conclusion

The Bible did not emerge in isolation but as part of a long continuum of Near-Eastern mythic thought. Through centuries of cultural exchange and reinterpretation, older symbols—floods, divine speech, virgin births, and resurrections—were reshaped into a monotheistic framework that continues to influence global spirituality today.

“History becomes legend; legend becomes myth.” — J. R. R. Tolkien

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