

Genesis 1–3

The Biblical Creation Stories

Readings: Genesis 1–3

This chapter examines the opening chapters of Genesis. Our goal is to illustrate the way in which biblical writers (later we will be more precise about who these writers probably were and when they may have lived) drew upon the cultural and religious legacy of the ancient Near East (its stories, imagery, motifs) even as they transformed what they borrowed so as to align it with a new vision of a nonmythological god. The scholar who has written extensively and eloquently on the adaptation of ancient Near Eastern material by the composers of the book of Genesis is Nahum Sarna. This chapter draws heavily upon his work.¹ Sarna and others have shown that the comparison of biblical and ancient Near Eastern stories reveals the features they share as well as the chasm that divides them so deeply.

A study of Genesis 1–2 requires familiarity with the Babylonian epic known by its opening words “*Enuma Elish*,” meaning “when on high.” This epic begins prior to the formation of heaven and earth, when nothing existed except water in two forms. The primeval freshwater ocean is identified with the male god Apsu; the primeval saltwater ocean is identified with the female goddess Tiamat. Tiamat is also represented as a fierce dragonlike monster.

When on high the heaven had not been named,
Firm ground below had not been called by name,
Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter,
(And) Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,
Their waters co-mingling as a single body;
No reed hut had been matted, no marsh land had appeared,
When no gods whatever had been brought into being,
Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined—
Then it was that the gods were formed within them. (I, pp. 60–61)²

The sexual union of Apsu and Tiamat begins a process of generation producing first demons and monsters and eventually gods. In time, however, Tiamat and Apsu are disturbed by the din and tumult of the younger gods.

The divine brothers banded together,
They disturbed Tiamat as they surged back and forth,
Yea, they troubled the mood of Tiamat
By their hilarity in the Abode of Heaven.

.....
Apsu, opening his mouth,
Said unto resplendent Tiamat:
“Their ways are verily loathsome unto me.
By day I find no relief, nor repose by night.
I will destroy, I will wreck their ways,
That quiet may be restored. Let us have rest.”

.....
Then answered Mummu, [Mummu Tiamat] giving counsel to Apsu;
[Ill-wishing] and ungracious was Mummu’s advice:
“Do destroy, my father, the mutinous ways.
Then shalt thou have relief by day and rest by night.”

When Apsu heard this, his face grew radiant
Because of the evil he planned against the gods, his sons. (I, p. 61)

Apsu decides to destroy the gods, but he is killed by Ea, the earth-water god. Tiamat is bent on revenge and makes plans to attack all the gods with her assembled forces. The gods need a leader and turn to Marduk, who agrees to lead them in battle against Tiamat and her general, Kingu, but only on condition that he be made sovereign when the battle is over.

His heart exulting, he said to his father:
"Creator of the gods, destiny of the great gods,
If I indeed, as your avenger,
Am to vanquish Tiamat and save your lives,
Set up the Assembly, proclaim supreme my destiny!
... Let my word, instead of you, determine the fates.
Unalterable shall be what I may bring into being,
Neither recalled nor changed shall be the command of my lips." (III, p. 65)

The agreement is struck. Marduk is successful in the fierce battle that follows and in a memorable passage, he fells Tiamat.

In fury, Tiamat cried out aloud,
To the roots her legs shook both together.
... Then joined issue, Tiamat and Marduk ...,
They strove in single combat, locked in battle.
The lord [Marduk] spread out his net to enfold her,
The Evil Wind, which followed behind, he let loose in her face.
When Tiamat opened her mouth to consume him,
He drove in the Evil Wind that she close not her lips.
As the fierce winds charged her belly,
Her body was distended and her mouth was wide open.

He released the arrow, it tore her belly,
It cut through her insides, splitting the heart.
Having thus subdued her, he extinguished her life.
He cast down her carcass to stand upon it. (IV, p. 67)

What does one do with the carcass of a ferocious monster? One builds a world. Marduk slices the carcass into two halves and with one half he creates the heaven and with the other half he creates the earth.

He split her like a shellfish into two parts.
Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky,
Pulled down the bar and posted guards.
He bade them to allow not her waters to escape. (IV, p. 67)

Marduk has used the upper half of Tiamat's body to press back her waters on high. This is the sky or firmament, which is understood to be a physical expanse that holds back the upper waters. Rain occurs when openings are made in this physical barrier. With the bottom half of Tiamat's body, Marduk forms the land, which presses down and holds back the monster's lower waters. These waters emerge in the form of springs and rivers, seas and lakes.

Marduk doesn't stop with the creation of the earth. He goes on to create various heavenly bodies.

He constructed stations for the great gods
Fixing their astral likenesses as constellations.
He determined the year by designating the zones;
He set up three constellations for each of the twelve months.

... The moon he caused to shine, the night to him entrusting. (V, p. 67)

Immediately, the complaints roll in. The gods are unhappy that they have been assigned duties in the maintenance of the cosmos. For example, the moon god must come up and shine each night—a tedious fate. They want relief from laboring at their stations, and Marduk accedes to this demand. He takes blood from the slain general Kingu, the leader of Tiamat’s army, and fashions a human being—with the express purpose of freeing the gods from menial labor.

Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.
I will establish a savage, “man” shall be his name,
Verily, savage man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods
That they might be at ease. (VI, p. 68)
.....
“It was Kingu who contrived the uprising,
And made Tiamat rebel, and joined battle.”
[So] They bound him, holding him before Ea.
.... [And] Out of [Kingu’s] blood they fashioned mankind
[And] Ea imposed the service and let free the gods. (VI, p. 69)

The grateful gods recognize the sovereignty of Marduk. They build him a magnificent shrine in Babylon (“Bab-el,” which means “gateway of the god”). A banquet follows in which Marduk is praised and his kingship confirmed.

Enuma Elish was the great national epic of Babylon, recited during the all-important New Year Festival. Nahum Sarna (*Genesis*, 7–8) points out the four main functions of the epic. First, it had a theogonic function describing how the generations of the gods came into being. Second, it had a cosmological function explaining the origins of cosmic phenomena. Its third function was sociopolitical. The portrait of the created universe in the epic corresponded to and legitimated the structural forms of Babylonian society. The position and function of the humans in the scheme of creation paralleled precisely the status of the slave in Mesopotamia, while Marduk’s position paralleled that of the Babylonian ruler. The epic also both mirrored and legitimated Marduk’s rise from an obscure city-god to a position at the head of the Babylonian pantheon and Babylon’s rise as one of the greatest cities of the region. Finally, the epic served a cultic function. According to Sarna and other scholars, the conflict of Tiamat and Marduk symbolized the conflict between the forces of chaos and the forces of cosmic order, a perpetual conflict repeated each year in the cycle of the seasons. The epic served as a kind of script for the reenactment of the primeval battle in a cultic setting. This reenactment of the victory of the forces of cosmos over the forces of chaos was believed to play a critical role in the renewal of nature each spring.

Recalling now the theories of Kaufmann, the worldview expressed in *Enuma Elish* might be described this way. First, the gods are amoral and limited. They emerge from an indifferent primal realm (water) that is the source of all being and ultimate power. The gods age, mature, fight and harm one another, and die. They are not wholly good, and they are not wholly evil. Their will is not absolute. Second, humans are unimportant menials. They are the slaves of the gods, who have little reciprocal interest in or concern for them. The gods create humans to do the hard work of running the world and look down upon them as slaves and pawns. Third, the world is morally neutral, which means that for humans it can be a difficult and hostile place. One’s best bet is to serve the god of the day (i.e., the god who is ascendant) as best one can so as to earn his favor, but even that god has limited powers and abilities and may turn on his devotees if he so desires.

If the creation story of Gen 1:1–2:4 is read in light of these same three categories, a different picture emerges.³

The Divine

The god of the first biblical creation story is supreme and unlimited. There is a corresponding lack of mythology in Gen 1 (or rather, as we shall see, a suppression of mythology). Mythology refers to stories that deal with the birth and life events of the gods, demigods, and legendary heroes of a particular people. The biblical creation account is nonmythological because there is no story about the deity—he simply is. There is no theogony—that is, no account of the birth of the god—and no biography. The deity is preexistent, and there is no realm of power beyond him. In the Mesopotamian account, the gods themselves are created (there is a theogony), and their generation is sexual. Indeed, the first beings to

emerge from the union of the primeval waters are demons and monsters, and the gods appear only after several generations. The god of creation (Marduk) is born rather late in the process.

The absence of mythology in Genesis is not to be understood as an absence of myth. Mythology and myth are quite distinct. In contrast to mythology, which deals with the lives of gods, a myth is generally defined as a traditional story—often fanciful and imaginative—that relates events in historical time, usually in order to explain a custom, institution, natural phenomenon, religious rite, or belief. It is a story invented as a veiled explanation of truth, a parable or allegory. The Bible may not present stories of the births, lives, and deaths of gods (mythology), but it certainly does contain myths—traditional stories and legends that attempt to explain how and why something is as it is.

To return to Gen 1, the absence of theogony and mythology means the absence of a metadivine or primordial realm from which the biblical god emerges. It also means the absence of the idea that this god is immanent in nature, natural substances, or phenomena. Therefore, the biblical god's powers and knowledge are not limited by the existence of any superior power or substance. Nature is not divine. The created world is not divine. It is not the physical manifestation of various deities. There is no intrinsic, material connection between the deity and creation. The line of demarcation is clear.

In short, and as Sarna notes (*Genesis*, 12), Gen 1 reflects the view that there is one supreme god who is creator and sovereign of the world. He simply exists. He appears to be incorporeal, and the realm of nature is subservient to him. He has no life story (mythology), and his will is absolute. This god creates through the simple expression of his will. "Elohim said, 'Let there be light' and there was light" (Gen 1:3). The deity expresses his will, and it comes to be—so different from ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies in which creation is always a form of procreation, the combination of male and female principles.

Humans

In Gen 1, humans are said to be created in the divine image (Gen 1:27). Being created in the divine image implies that human life is unique, sacred, and deserving of special care and protection. Thus, in Gen 9:6 we read, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, in exchange for that man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of Elohim was man created."⁴ This verse suggests that because human life is sacred, there is no way to compensate for murder. Murder requires the forfeiture of the murderer's own life.

The concept of the divine image in humans is a clear break with other ancient conceptions of the human. For example, as Sarna points out (*Genesis*, 15), in Gen 1, humans are not the menials of the gods. In fact, Genesis expresses the antithesis of this idea: It is the creator who cares for his creatures. The creator's first communication is concern for the physical needs of his creatures as well as their continued growth and welfare. "Elohim blessed them and Elohim said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth' " (Gen 1:28–29); and "Yahweh Elohim commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat' " (Gen 2:16). Humans in Genesis are not presented as the helpless victims of the blind forces of nature, the playthings of capricious gods. On the contrary, they are creatures of majesty and dignity, of central importance and value to the god who has created them.

At the same time and in line with the assertion that humans are made in the divine *image*, humans are not said to actually *be* gods or even the kin of gods. In the biblical view, humans are still creatures—in the sense of "created things"—dependent on a higher power. And so in the second creation story, which begins in Gen 2:4, the first human is formed when the god fashions it from the dust of the earth, or clay. There are numerous ancient Near Eastern stories of gods fashioning humans from clay (Sarna, *Genesis*, 14; Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 14). Even so, the biblical account, while borrowing this motif, takes pains to distinguish and elevate the human. First, the fashioning of the human from clay is a dramatic moment in the story (though the final and climactic creative act is the creation of gender by means of the separation of the female from the male). Second, and significantly, the deity himself blows the breath of life into the *adam*'s nostrils (2:7). Thus, in the second creation story, just as in the first, there is a sacred imprint of some kind that distinguishes the human from other creatures. The idea of the human as a being that is molded from clay yet enlivened by the divine breath conveys the paradoxical mix of earthly and divine traits—of dependence and freedom—that mark humans as unique.

In the first creation account, there is no implication that man and woman are in an unequal relationship before the deity. The Hebrew word designating the creature—the *adam*—is a generic term meaning simply "the human," or more literally "the earthling" since the word *adam* derives from *adamah*, meaning "earth," and thus denotes something made from the earth. Genesis 1:27 describes the creation of the *adam* this way: "And Elohim created the *adam* [the earthling] in his own image, in the image of Elohim he created it; male and female he created them."⁵ This line, with its definite article

("the earthling"), its reference to both genders, and its switch to a plural object in the final clause, has vexed commentators for centuries. Contrary to popular belief, the verse seems to tell of the creation not of a single man with the personal name of Adam, but of a species of earthlings consisting of males and females, together and all at once. Moreover, this earthling that includes both male and female is said to be created in the divine image, suggesting that the ancient Israelites did not conceive of their god as gendered male or female. Even in the second creation account, where the woman is built from a rib taken from the sleeping man, it is not clear that the woman is subordinate to the man. Medieval Jewish commentators hint at this when they playfully suggest that the woman was not made from the man's head—lest she rule over him—or from his foot—lest she be subservient to him—but from his side so that she might be a companion to him. Indeed, the creation of woman is the *climactic* creative act in the second Genesis account. With the emergence of woman, creation is finally complete.

Thus, the biblical creation stories individually and jointly present a portrait of humans as the pinnacle and purpose of creation, godlike in some way and in possession of distinctive faculties and character traits that equip them, male and female, for stewardship over the created world.

The World

In the Gen 1 creation story, there is an emphasis on the essential goodness of the created world and a rejection of the principle of a primordial evil. Kaufmann asserted that in polytheistic systems, evil is a permanent necessity built into the cosmic order because the primordial realm spawns both gods and demons, locked in eternal conflict. Consequently, the universe is not essentially good. By contrast, in the first biblical creation story, each act of creation is followed by the declaration that "it is good" (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). After the creation of living things, the text states that the creator found all that he made to be "very good." There are seven occurrences of the word *good* in Genesis. The sevenfold or tenfold repetition of a word (a *leitwort*) is a favorite literary technique of the biblical author to emphasize an idea. Genesis 1 creates in its reader a tremendous rush of optimism. The world is good; humans are important; they have purpose and dignity. The biblical writer rejects the concept of an inherent primordial evil, a concept found in the literature of the ancient Near East. For the biblical writer, evil is not a metaphysical reality built into the structure of the universe. Hence all signs of a cosmic battle—between the forces of chaos and evil and the forces of cosmos and good—are eliminated. In *Enuma Elish*, cosmic order is achieved only after a violent struggle with hostile forces. In Genesis, creation is not the result of a struggle between antagonists. The biblical god imposes order or cosmos on the demythologized and inert elements of chaos. A closer examination of Gen 1 will show this to be the case.

The chapter begins with a temporal clause often translated "In the beginning." This translation implies that what follows is an account of the ultimate origins of the universe. The reader of such a translation expects to hear of the first act in time: "In the beginning, X happened as the first act in time." Thus many English translations read: "In the beginning, Elohim created the heaven and earth." This is, however, a poor translation of the Hebrew. The Hebrew phrase in question is similar to the opening phrase in other Near Eastern cosmologies and is best translated "when Elohim began creating the heavens and the earth," just as *Enuma Elish*'s opening phrase is best translated as "when on high." This more accurate translation suggests that the story is concerned not to depict the ultimate origin of everything, but rather to explain why and how the world is the way it is. The full translation of verses 1–2 is: "When Elohim began to create heaven and earth (the earth being unformed and void and darkness on the face of the deep and the wind of Elohim hovering over the face of the water) Elohim said, 'Let there be light' (Hayes's translation).

Thus when the story opens, we find that the physical elements exist but have no shape or form. Creation in Gen 1 is described not as a process of making something of nothing (creation *ex nihilo*) but as a process of organizing preexisting materials, of imposing order on chaos. The story begins with an existing chaotic mass and "the *ruah* of Elohim" (sometimes translated anachronistically as the "spirit" of the deity, but better as his "wind" or breath) sweeps over the deep. It will be recalled that in *Enuma Elish*, creation followed upon a cosmic battle in which Marduk the god of the storm released his wind against Tiamat—a divine monster, the primeval sea or "deep" who represents the forces of chaos. The similarities here are immediately apparent. Our story opens with a temporal clause and a wind that sweeps over the chaotic waters or deep (like the wind of Marduk released against the chaotic waters of Tiamat). The Hebrew word for "deep" is *Tehom*, the Hebrew equivalent of *Tiamat*. In fact, a better translation of verse 2 might read "darkness was on the face of Deep," without a definite article and capitalized almost as if *deep* were a proper name.

The storyteller has set the stage for a retelling of the cosmic battle story, a story near and dear to the hearts of any ancient Near Eastern listener. All the elements are there—wind, a primeval chaotic watery mass or deep. But then—surprise! There is no battle. There is only a word. The ancient Near Eastern listener would prick up his ears.

Where's the battle, the violence, the gore? Something new and different is being communicated in this story.

It cannot be argued that the biblical writers were unfamiliar with the motif of creation as a sequel to a cosmic battle. Many poetic passages of the Bible contain clear and explicit allusions to the myth of a cosmic battle preceding creation, suggesting that it was a well-known motif in ancient Israel.

O Elohim, my king from of old, who brings deliverance throughout the land;
it was you who drove back the sea with your might, who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters;
it was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan [a sea monster]. (Ps 74:12–17)

And again:

It was you that hacked Rahab [the name of a primeval monster] in pieces, that pierced the Dragon. It was you that dried up the Sea, the waters of the great deep.... (Isa 51:9–10)

In a similar vein, Job 26:12–14; Ps 74:12–17; 89:10–11; and Ps 104 all depict the Israelite deity engaged in a primeval battle. Clearly, cosmic battle stories at the dawn of creation—stories of a god who violently slays the forces of chaos, represented as watery dragons, as a prelude to creation—were known and recounted in Israel. The rejection of this idea in Genesis 1's demythologized creation account therefore appears to be pointed and purposeful. The Genesis account establishes a single uncontested god who by the power of his word or will creates cosmos out of chaos. He follows this initial ordering by establishing the celestial bodies, which are not themselves divinities but merely his creations.

After felling Tiamat with his wind and dividing her carcass like a shellfish, Marduk separates her waters above and below, posting guards so that they cannot escape. Similarly, according to the biblical conception, the world consists of a space (an air bubble) between water above and water below. The water above is held up by a thin firmament. The firmament seems to be a beaten sheet inverted like a bowl over the earth (the Hebrew word for *firmament* means “beaten flat,” invoking the image of metal beaten into a thin sheet). By opening windows in this firmament, the deity lets in water as rain, as we will see in the story of the flood.

The first biblical creation story takes place over a period of seven days. There is a logical and parallel structure in the description of the six days of actual creation. The deity's actions on Days 1, 2, and 3 create the necessary conditions, physical spaces, or habitats for the natural phenomena and creatures created on Days 4, 5, and 6, respectively. Thus, on Day 1, light and darkness are separated—the necessary condition for the creation of the heavenly bodies that give off light, on Day 4. On Day 2, the firmament is established by assigning water to its appropriate place and opening up the space of the sky and, on Day 5, the inhabitants of sky and water are created (the birds of the air and the fish of the sea). On Day 3, the land is separated from the sea, and on Day 6, the inhabitants of the land are created—land animals. But Days 3 and 6 each have an additional element, and the pairing of the other elements suggests that these excess elements are also to be paired. On Day 3, vegetation is created, and on Day 6, humans are created. The implication is that the vegetation is for the humans, and indeed it is expressly stated by the deity that humans are given every fruit-bearing tree and seed-bearing plant for food (1:29). No mention is made of animals as food. Moreover, in Gen 1:30 animals are given the green plants (grass, herbs) so that there is no competition between humans and animals for food, and thus no excuse to live in anything but a peaceful coexistence. In short, in the biblical creation story, humans are created vegetarian, and in every respect the original creation is imagined as free of bloodshed and violence of any kind.

On the seventh day, the creator is said to rest from his labors, and for this reason he blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, that is, belonging to the deity. Part of the purpose of the Gen 1 creation story, then, is to explain the origin of the observance of the Sabbath and the seven-day weekly cycle.

The Israelite accounts of creation contain clear allusions to and resonances of ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, but they are best characterized as a demythologization of what was a common cultural heritage. There is a clear tendency toward monotheism in this myth and a pointed transformation of widely known stories so as to express a monotheistic worldview and to deny the presence of a primordial evil. Genesis 1–3 rivals and implicitly polemicalizes against the myths of Israel's neighbors, rejecting certain elements while incorporating and demythologizing others.

Whence Evil?

Kaufmann argued that in the Hebrew Bible, evil has no independent existence. Yet evil and suffering are experienced as a condition of human existence, a reality of life. How can this state of affairs be explained? The Garden of Eden story seeks

to answer that question, asserting ultimately that evil stems not from the activity of an independent demonic force but from the exercise of human free will in defiance of the creator. The created world is a good world; humans, however, in the exercise of their moral autonomy, have the power to corrupt the good. According to Kaufmann, the Garden of Eden story communicates this basic idea of the monotheistic worldview: Evil is not a metaphysical reality; it is a moral reality. Ultimately, this means that evil lacks inevitability. It lies within the realm of human responsibility and control.

Nahum Sarna (*Genesis*, 26) points out that there is a very important distinction between the Garden of Eden story and its ancient Near Eastern parallels. The motif of a tree or plant of life is widespread in ancient Near Eastern literature, myth, and ritual. The quest for such a plant and the immortality it promises is a primary theme of the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. By contrast, we know of no parallel in ancient Near Eastern literature to the biblical tree of the knowledge of good and evil.⁶

What is the significance of the fact that the Bible mentions both trees only to then focus on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil while virtually ignoring the tree of life so central to the myths of other ancient Near Eastern cultures? Sarna argues that the subordinate role of the tree of life in this story signals the biblical writer's dissociation from the ancient world's preoccupation with immortality (*Genesis*, 27). The biblical writer insists that the central concern of life is not mortality but morality. The drama of human life revolves not around the search for eternal life, but around the moral conflict and tension between a good god's design for creation and the free will of humans that can corrupt that design.

The serpent tells Eve that if she eats the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, she will become like the deity. His words are both true and false. The humans will become like gods knowing good and evil, not because of some magical property of the fruit itself. By choosing to eat of the forbidden fruit, the humans learn that they have the power to disobey the deity, that they have moral freedom to conform their actions to the divine will or to defy it. To know good and evil, to know that one has moral freedom, is no guarantee that one will choose or incline toward the good. This is what the serpent omits in his speech. The serpent implies that it is the power of moral choice alone that is godlike. But true godliness is not simply the power to choose good and evil (Sarna, *Genesis*, 27). True godliness—imitation of the deity—is the exercise of one's power and free will in a manner that is good and life-affirming. For it is the biblical writer's contention that the god of Israel is not only morally free but also essentially and necessarily good.

According to Sarna (*Genesis*, 27–28), the Garden of Eden story conveys an idea central to Kaufmann's description of the monotheistic worldview: that

evil is a product of human behavior, not a principle inherent in the cosmos. Man's disobedience is the cause of the human predicament. Human freedom can be at one and the same time an omen of disaster and a challenge and opportunity.

The humans learn that the concomitant of their freedom is responsibility. Their first act of defiance is punished harshly, teaching that the moral choices and actions of humans have consequences that must be borne by the perpetrator. One of these consequences is the loss of access to the tree of life. Prior to the discovery of their moral freedom, humans—it is implied—could eat freely from the tree and live forever. But Gen 3:22 makes it clear that humans cannot have both immortality and the capacity for evil. The deity must retain the upper hand against the agents of evil if his creation is to survive. Were humans to add immortality to their newly discovered capacity for evil, they would be true rivals to their creator. And so he expels the first human pair from the garden and blocks access to the tree of life. Human moral freedom is therefore gained at the cost of eternal life; human mortality is a necessary concomitant of moral freedom.

The Garden of Eden story in Gen 2–3 attempts to account for the paradoxical and problematic existence of evil and suffering in a world that, according to Genesis 1, was created and is governed by an essentially good god. But other perspectives on this story are possible—as will be seen in the next chapter.