

The Yahweh-Tehom Myth

Author(s): A. E. Whatham

Source: *The Biblical World*, Nov., 1910, Vol. 36, No. 5 (Nov., 1910), pp. 290+329-333

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3141790>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Biblical World*

JSTOR

## THE YAHWEH-TEHOM MYTH

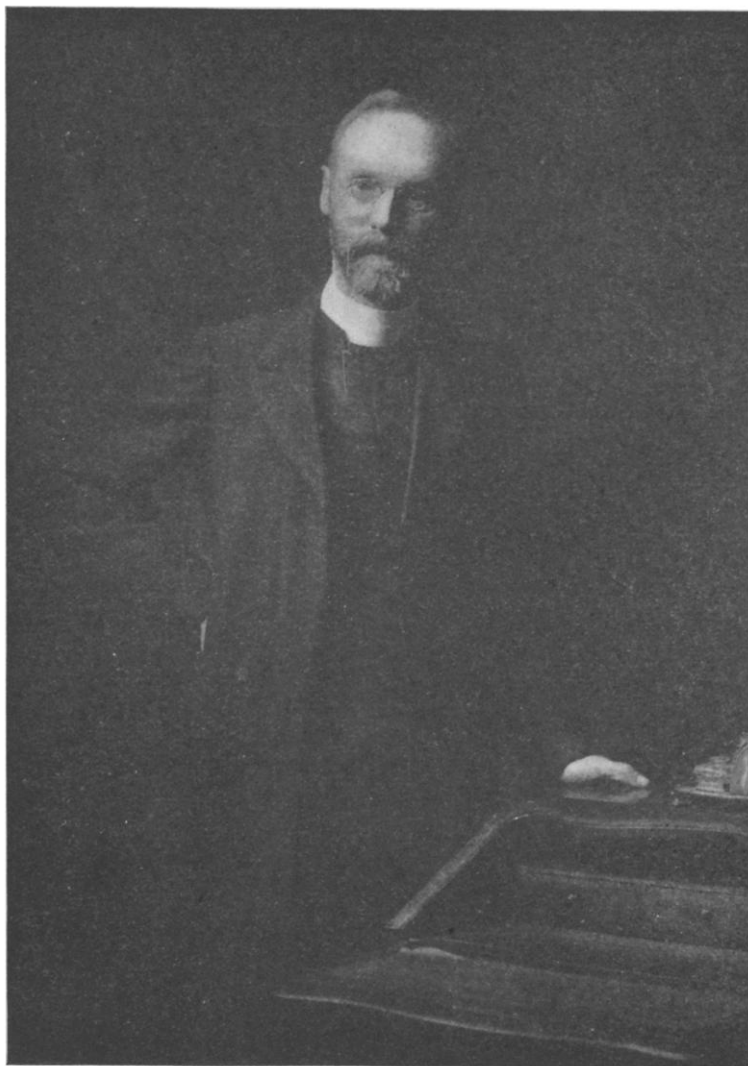
REV. A. E. WHATHAM

Louisville, Ky.

The Epic of Creation as given by the Babylonian tablets describing the conflict between the god Marduk and Tiamat, the dragon of the "deep," begins with a dark, turbulent, watery abyss as already existing, and impersonated by this female monster. Marduk wages war against her, and after a terrible conflict succeeds in killing her. He then divides her body into two halves. Out of one he makes a dome-shaped covering for the heavens, with the evident idea that by this means the upper waters of the now divided "deep" were to be kept from descending upon the lower waters. Nothing is said in these tablets as to what became of the other half, but the Babylonian priest, Berosos, informs us that out of it was made the earth. Here, however, the earth is made without any reference to the body of Tiamat, Marduk himself creating an earth structure which he places upon the face of the lower waters.<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew record of the Creation similarly opens with an already existing dark, turbulent, watery abyss named *tehom* (Gen. 1:2), a Hebrew word corresponding to the Babylonian Tiamat. After first creating light, Yahweh next proceeds to subdue, or bring under control, the surging waters of the turbulent abyss. He then divides it into two portions, making of the one the upper, and of the other the lower ocean. To keep the upper waters in their place, he creates a domelike support, *rakia*, correctly rendered in all our versions "firmament," since the original signifies something beaten out, hammered out of a hard substance. The earth is then formed and placed upon the face of the lower waters out of which its material had been gathered.

It is abundantly evident that in both accounts we have a similar conception of the heaven and the earth created out of a pre-existing personified watery abyss, or "deep," so that in both we have the same underlying myth. Thus, the only point to settle is, as to whether

<sup>1</sup> Jastrow, *Bab. Assy. Relig.*, 428 ff.



REV. JAMES HASTINGS, D.D.

there is to be seen in the Hebrew narrative any reference to an assumed personal conflict between Yahweh and Tehom. Sayce tells us, "we look for it in vain,"<sup>2</sup> and even Whitehouse speaks of "the complete obliteration of . . . the titanic struggle between Tiamat and Marduk," while accepting the view that the Hebrew scribe presents us with what after all is but a purified form of an original Babylonian tradition.<sup>3</sup> Other writers, however, while equally admitting that nothing *direct* is said in the Hebrew revision as to any personal conflict between Yahweh and Tehom, yet assert that it was not so completely obliterated but that traces of it are still to be seen. Thus, not only is Zimmern correct in claiming that with the mention of Tehom in the Hebrew narrative, together with the dividing of this watery abyss into the upper and lower oceans by means of the "firmament," we see a slight but a distinctly discernible trace of the original Babylonian story (*ibid.*, 13), but when this is compared with other allusions to a *personified* "deep" in other parts of the Old Testament, the lurking Tiamat hidden in Gen. 1:2, 6 stands out in clear light.

Throughout the whole of the Old Testament there is present the conception that the ocean or waters of the great "deep" possess a conscious power hostile to Yahweh, who has to keep it under restraint by "bounds" and "decrees," setting "watchers" that it should not break through these. With the passage where Job asks whether he is a sea monster over whom Yahweh has to set a watch should be compared Jeremiah's representation of Yahweh as placing "the sand for the bound of the sea . . . that it cannot pass it" (Job 7:12; Jer. 5:22); and both, with the statement in the Babylonian Epic. "Mero-dach a wide space on the face of the sea bound round; He made dust and poured it on the space . . . around the sea made an embankment." It is, however, when we come to a description of the active violence of the great "deep" that we see plainly the Hebrews had in mind an ancient Babylonian legend. The spirit of "the raging flood" is referred to as Rahab, the fierce dragon of the "deep," or sea. Job declares, "God will not withdraw his anger, the helpers of Rahab do (or did) stoop under him." This is explained by another passage, where we read, "He stilleth the sea with his power, and by

<sup>2</sup> *The Higher Criticism*, 73.

<sup>3</sup> Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, art. "Cosmogony," 506a; Ryle, *ibid.*, 13.

his understanding he smiteth through Rahab" (9:13; cf. 26:12). There can be little doubt, says Dr. Selbie, that we have here an allusion "to the mythical conflict in which the Creator was said to have vanquished the supposed dragon of the deep."<sup>4</sup> Zimmern quotes Ps. 89:9, "When the sea rageth, when the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them. . . . Thou hast broken Rahab as one that is slain." Here undoubtedly we have a reference to Marduk having broken the dead body of Tiamat in two, and scattered her followers. Zimmern then gives another passage (Isa. 51:9), "Is it not thou that didst cut Rahab in pieces, that didst pierce the monster?" (R.V.), adding those we have already referred to, and concludes, "We are justified, therefore, in speaking of an ancient Israelite Jahve-Tehom myth, as . . . bound up with the biblical story of Creation."<sup>5</sup> Surely he is correct, and is not Professor Driver also abundantly justified in his statements (1), that "Read without prejudice or bias the narrative of Gen., chap. 1, creates the impression at variance with the facts revealed by science; (2), that it is in its main outlines derived from Babylonia" (*ibid.*, 30)?

A new apologist, however, for the Hebrew cosmogony as an independent record has arisen in the person of the noted scholar, Rev. C. H. W. Johns. In an article entitled "The Influence of Babylonian Mythology on the Old Testament,"<sup>6</sup> he says:

The Babylonians spoke of a certain Monster Tiamat. But Tiamat may be nothing whatever but water, and the theory that all was once water is as really scientific as the opinion that all was once gaseous matter. Now, water in the form of an ocean was such a restless, fierce monster to early man that to speak of it as a dragon was natural. It does not follow, therefore, that the Babylonian myth is so different from the Hebrew explanation. It may be a matter of more or less mythological language.

He further holds that there is no necessity to go directly to Babylonian sources in order to account for the Hebrews having a Deluge story or a Cosmogony. All we have to do is to carry both back to some common Semitic ancestor. Dr. Johns, if I am not mistaken, has advanced nothing that contradicts the views of Dr. Driver. The assumption that the view that all have may been water at one time is as scientific as the view that all was once gaseous matter, even if

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, art. "Rahab."

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Essays on Some Biblical Questions of the Day.*

true, has nothing whatever to do with the order of creation as represented either in the Babylonian or Hebrew narratives. Both of these, picturing a mass of waters as existing before anything else, go on to describe our universe, with its sun, moon, and stars, its sky above, and its earth beneath, as created out of these waters without any change in their physical character. But this contemplates the existence of our earth with its sky and sea, not as the outcome of an evolutionary process, such as we know it to have gone through, but of a mere mechanical division of permanent elements. Now, no such process occurred, since it is utterly opposed to the generally accepted view of the formation of our universe. The whole idea of a dark, turbulent mass of waters as existing before the creation of our universe, is contrary to the facts as revealed by science.

The view of Dr. Johns, if I have correctly understood him, that the dragon Tiamat existed in the minds of the Babylonians as a mere mythological expression, without the belief in any concrete reality, may be dismissed, on the ground that it assumes that the belief in the real existence of supernatural monsters has never actually been held by anybody. Such a supposition is disposed of by Professor W. R. Smith in his dismissal of the notion that the fantastic monsters engraved by the Chaldeans and continued by the Phoenicians in the Cherubim and Sphinxes can be explained away as allegories. A belief in mythical creatures he holds to have been a *real* belief, and explains it as resulting from the primitive thought of savages in all parts of the world, which, he says, everywhere produces just such a confusion between the several orders of natural and supernatural beings as we find to have existed among the early Semites.<sup>7</sup>

In closing this paper, it may be well to point out that besides the cosmogony of Gen., chap. 1, which we have examined, there is another of an earlier period, and of an entirely different character in Gen. 2:4 ff. That in Gen., chap. 1, represents the earth as emerging from the lower waters, and therefore makes no reference to the lack of moisture for the growth of plants and herbs, such as we see in Gen. 2:5. This difference springs from the fact that the first account was originally composed in the region where the overflowing of a great river each spring was the cause of the later vegetation. This is one of the reasons for giving this narrative a Babylonian origin.

<sup>7</sup> *Religion of the Semites*, 89.

It is now time to ask, If the Bible presents a cosmogony which the teaching of science presumably shows to be contrary to fact, what is the use of retaining this as part of an inspired volume? Here I would recall the warning given in closing my first paper, viz., It is not in the body of information comprising the Old Testament that we are to see its revelation, but in the spirit which animates it throughout. Again it may be asked, How is this spirit to be definitely discerned, and in what manner is it manifested in this chapter? We reply first, It is discerned throughout the Old Testament in the description it gives us of the righteousness of Yahweh's character; it is manifested in the relationship it here establishes between man and his Maker. Confining ourselves, however, to the cosmogony of Genesis, the spirit is to be seen in the following divine message: As God made and rules the universe, so he made man to rule the earth (Gen. 1:26, 28), where, as his representative, he was to enjoy his companionship (cf. 3:8), all the repayment asked being obedience (Gen. 2:15-17; cf. I Sam. 15:22). How different is the message of the Babylonian epic. Here man is created simply to establish the service of the gods, and to build their altars.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the Babylonian epic exalts deity by the servile lowering of humanity; while the biblical narrative by the uplifting of humanity elevates deity. Now, the vital point in this chapter is not, as some writers have claimed, though Dillmann has correctly denied, the naming of God as creator of the universe, since deity is so named in other cosmogonies. Nor is it in the practically monotheistic tone that pervades it, as this also is seen elsewhere. But it is, as I have said, in the relationship which it establishes between God and man. Here is the vital point, the spirit, the divine element, to which is owing the fact that while Gen., chap. 1, contains traces of its pagan source, it is so purified from the grossness of its original version that the similarity between this and its Hebrew revision is not often recognized except by a student of comparative religion. Here then is the reason why we retain an unscientific cosmogony in an inspired volume. On its scientific side it is of little value, except for the study of primitive ideas. On its theological side, it is of *inestimable* value in teaching us of the true relation between God and man.

<sup>8</sup> Driver, *Genesis*, 30.