
$$C^2 = RE(A) \text{t} > IO + \frac{2}{N}$$

in Ancient Near Eastern Thought

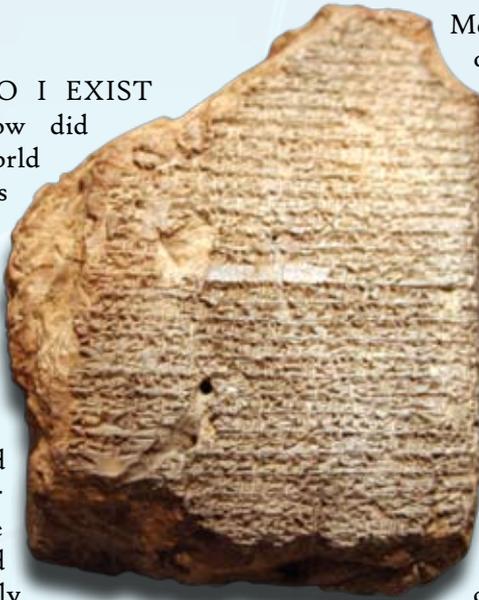


BY T. VAN McCLAIN

“WHY DO I EXIST and how did the world

begin?” Those questions have always perplexed man. Without divine revelation, man is left to speculate for himself about his creation and purpose in this world. Apparently most if not all cultures have provided stories designed to answer these questions. These stories are often referred to as myths. A generally accepted definition of a myth would be “a story about gods or supernatural beings.”¹ Such a definition suggests an absence of true stories about supernatural beings. A better definition of myth would be a “traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon.”²

The earliest civilizations that left written materials were Sumerian and Egyptian. One of the earliest creation accounts is from Sumer and is called the “Eridu Genesis.” Eridu was one of the earliest known cities in southern



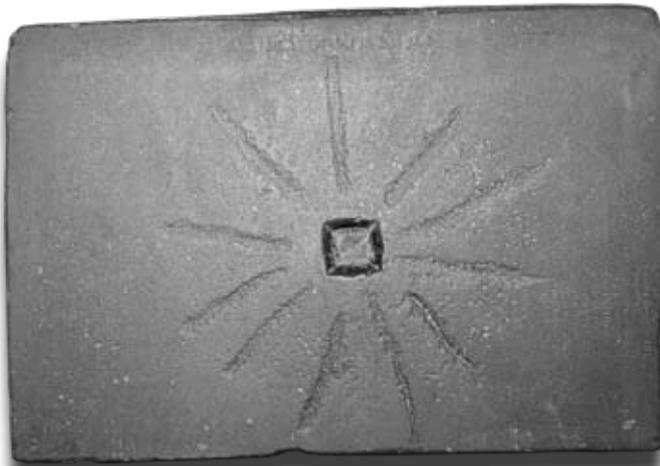
Above: Tablet containing “Enki and Ninmah,” a Sumerian creation myth. This story explains how mankind was created. Before the creation of man, the gods had to work for their food, cleaning rivers and canals. The god Enki, who himself had been born from primordial clay, fashioned humans out of

clay with the help of his mother Namma, the goddess Ninmah, and some other lesser goddesses. The destiny of humankind was to serve the gods.

Below: Euphrates River at Doura Europa in Syria. The Euphrates is one of four rivers mentioned in the description of Eden.

Mesopotamia. The fragments of this creation account date to about 1600 B.C. The mother goddess Nintur was portrayed as instrumental in the creation of mankind; she said, “May they [the people] come and build cities and cult places, that I may cool myself in their shade.”³ Humans being created to serve the gods was a common theme in Mesopotamian and Egyptian myths. The “Epic of Atra-khasis,” a Babylonian creation story dated to the seventeenth century B.C., records that the gods were unhappy, because “the toil of the gods was great, the work was heavy, the distress was much.”⁴ The solution of this problem was for the goddess Nintu (referred to as Nintur in Sumeria), to create humanity. The goddess said, “I have removed your heavy work, I have imposed your toil on man.”⁵ This seemed to be a good solution, until humankind became too noisy. Enlil, one of the chief gods, then said, “The noise of humankind [has become too intense for me, with their uproar] I am deprived of sleep.”⁶ The myth tells that eventually the





ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/BRITISH MUSEUM/LONDON (493/29)

Left: Black basalt mythological text from Egypt's 25th Dynasty. This text, commonly referred to as the Shabaka Stone, was inscribed by order of Pharaoh Shabaka to preserve its contents for eternity. It contained an account of the creation of the world in which Ptah, chief god of Memphis, played a decisive role. The text has been dam-

aged by use of the slab as a millstone in later times.

Far right: Temple precinct of Ptah at Memphis.

Lower right: Statue of the Egyptian god Ptah, considered to be the chief god of the city of Memphis. Ptah was worshiped as the creator of the world and the father of all gods.

Bottom: This tablet is one of three that contained the "Epic of Atra-khasis," the hero of the Babylonian flood story. Written in year 12 of the reign of Babylon's King Ammisaduqa (1635 B.C.).

gods caused a flood to destroy all mankind, except Atra-khasis. The god Enki told Atra-khasis to build a boat to save his life.⁷

The "Epic of Atra-khasis" explained the creation of humanity as the work of the goddess Nintu and involved the slaughter of a god named We-ila, whose blood was then mixed with clay. Nintu (also called "Mami") then uttered an incantation and used the clay to produce seven males and seven females.⁸ There is no borrowing of any of this material by Moses in the Genesis creation account. Nintu's creation of man by clay is nothing like the creation of man from the dust of the ground recorded in Genesis. Of course, the "Epic of Atra-khasis" does mention a great flood. It was a flood of total destruction, except for Atra-khasis and those with him in his boat. Nintu came to regret causing the flood saying, "How did I, with them, command total destruction?"⁹

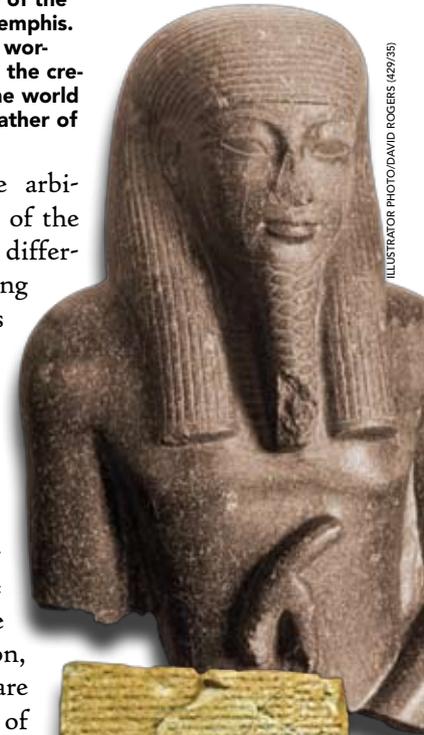
Genesis accurately records God flooding the earth. Many ancient cultures retained some knowledge of a great flood and incorporated it into their myths. The few similarities between the Genesis account of the flood and the flood account in the "Epic of Atra-khasis" pale, however, in comparison to the differences. The Epic of Atra-khasis reveals supposed deities who made bad decisions and came to recognize their mistakes. The biblical account of the flood indicates that God was completely righteous in bringing a flood upon the world.

While the similarities of ancient Near Eastern creation myths with the creation account in the Book of Genesis are interesting, the differences between these accounts are striking. The Book of Genesis places man at the apex of God's creation; humanity is made in the image of God; and he is placed in authority over the garden. Mesopotamian accounts of creation make mankind the servants of the gods, so the gods do not have to work so hard. The cause of the flood in the biblical account is humanity's sinfulness; the Mesopotamian accounts

attribute the flood to the arbitrary and capricious nature of the gods.¹⁰ Many other striking differences are also present, leading one scholar to write, "It is difficult to discuss comparisons between Israelite and Mesopotamian literature concerning creation of the cosmos because the disparity is so marked."¹¹

Although Egyptian creation myths have some occasional similarities to the biblical account of creation, many striking differences are evident. The existing text of the Egyptian creation story called "The Theology of Memphis" dates to 700 B.C.; the original text likely dates to about 2700 B.C. The story contains the statement that by the work of the god Ptah "all the divine order really came into being through what the heart thought and the tongue commanded."¹² Such a statement is reminiscent of the Genesis creation account where God spoke the world into existence.

However, beyond that similarity the Egyptian creation story is radically different. "The Theology of Memphis" depicts the god Ptah as first creating the Ennead, which perhaps was a council of gods (who were then involved in



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS (429/35)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM/LONDON (317/8/33)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (15/28/8)

further creative acts). How these gods came into being is described differently in different texts. “His [Ptah’s] Ennead is before him in (the form of) teeth and lips. That is (the equivalent of) the semen and the hands of Atum. Whereas the Ennead of Atum came into being by his semen and his fingers, the Ennead (of Ptah), however, is the teeth and lips in this mouth, which pronounced the name of everything.”¹³ Such a crude depiction of creation diverges starkly from the biblical account. God did not create lesser deities who then created even lesser things. Rather, God created all things, forming humanity specially in His own image.

The Egyptian myths are not the only ones that contain crude and vulgar actions on the part of the gods. The Sumerian myth that supposedly tells about a loss of paradise is named “Enki and Ninhursag.”¹⁴ Some scholars have suggested that the story is not really about a loss of paradise, but that the place named Dilmun in the story is “a virginal and inchoate place, lacking life, fresh water, and human culture.”¹⁵ In the story, Enki, the god of wisdom, incestuously fathered a series of goddesses. He first had relations with Ninhursag, then with their daughter Ninmu, then with Ninkurra, his daughter with Ninmu, and so forth.¹⁶ Nowhere in the story is there any hint of any immorality on the part of the god Enki. The Book of Genesis does record incestuous relationships, like that

of Lot with his daughters, but such events are clearly indicated as being immoral.

An Akkadian account of creation, the “Enuma Elish,” also known as the “Epic of Creation,” dates to the eleventh century B.C.¹⁷ The most notable similarity between it and the Genesis account of creation is the mention of two spheres of water in Genesis created by God, and the mention of Marduk splitting the carcass of the dead goddess Tiamat into two halves, with one half constituting the earth and the other the sky. Furthermore, the name Tiamat is linguistically related to the Hebrew word *tehom*, the “deep.” Yet, any minor similarities are greatly dwarfed by the great disparity between the accounts. According to one modern scholar the theory that the Babylonian Marduk could create the heavens and earth by splitting the dragon goddess Tiamat into two halves is so preposterous that “no one but a lunatic under the influence of hashish could ever arrive at the theory.”¹⁸

The Babylonian myth of the creation of heaven and earth resulting from the splitting of a divine being’s carcass is indeed ridiculous, but so is the claim of some modern scientists such as Francis Crick that life began on earth as a result of directed pan-spermia, the dissemination of microorganisms by extraterrestrials using spaceships. Ancient people would probably also find other aspects of evolutionary theory to be laughable.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/LOUVRE/PARIS (268/28 &32)

Above: An Akkadian seal and impression offering an account of the creation of vegetation; dated about 2350–2200 B.C.

700–550 B.C. This bronze dragon is the sacred animal of Marduk, the primary god of Babylon.

myth, the god Anshar summons the gods together for a banquet, to celebrate Marduk's appointment as champion of the gods following his defeat of Tiamat, primeval Chaos.

Left: Bronze dragon, dated about

Below: In this episode of the Babylonian creation



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM/LONDON (31/21/67)

As Phillip E. Johnson wrote, “Those (evolutionists) who are tempted to ridicule directed pan-spermia should restrain themselves, because Crick’s extraterrestrials are no more invisible than the universe of ancestors that earth-bound Darwinists have to invoke.”¹⁹

Without divine revelation, mankind is left to his own devices to try to explain the existence of the universe and his place in it. Some similarities between the Genesis account of creation and the creation myths should be expected. Israel shared much of the same culture as that of the Egyptians and Mesopotamians. If the Israelites were aware of the religious claims of those who lived around them, then they possibly knew some of the myths of those religions. Clearly, however, none of those myths made their way into the biblical account of creation. The differences are too vast. The gods of the Mesopotamians and Egyptians of the ancient Near East did not deserve worship. Humanity in those creation myths appear to have more wisdom

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM/LONDON (31/9/67)



and morality than the gods. The true God revealed in Scripture is vastly different from those gods, and He is indeed worthy of worship. **B**

1. Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 306.)
2. “Myth” in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2005), 822.
3. Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, eds. *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 13.
4. *Ibid.*, 21.
5. *Ibid.*, 24.
6. *Ibid.*, 26.
7. *Ibid.*, 29.
8. *Ibid.*, 24-25.
9. *Ibid.*, 30.
10. For a comparison of Biblical and Babylonian creation accounts, see. John H. Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament*, rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 80.
11. John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels Between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 26.
12. “The Theology of Memphis” in “Egyptian Myths, Tales, and Mortuary Texts” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 5.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Arnold and Beyer, 15-19.
15. Sparks, 307.
16. Arnold and Beyer, 16-17.
17. *Ibid.*, 31-50.
18. F. M. Cornford, *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays*, ed. W. K. C. Guthrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 111.
19. Phillip E. Johnson, *Darwin on Trial* (Washington DC: Regnery Gateway, 1991), 108.

T. Van McClain is professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Northeast Campus, Schenectady, New York.