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The Near Eastern Context

Key Points

The ancient Near East produced some of the world's earliest cultures of writing and literature. Canaan, where Israel would carve out its territory, lay in between two major regional societies. Mesopotamia (Assyria and Babylonia) to the northeast and Egypt to the south were vibrant and enduring civilizations with far-reaching impact in antiquity. A historical understanding of the Hebrew Bible requires an appreciation of these influential cultures, religions, and literatures.

The Mesopotamian myths share robust features with biblical stories, but they deserve attention in their own right. They present the creation of the world, the council of the gods, and primordial humans, to name a few comparative topics. *Atrahasis*, a text named for its flood hero, recounts the creation of humanity and the polytheistic drama of a divine flood. The *Enuma Elish* describes the supernatural conflicts that established the divine council of Babylonian gods. After creating order out of watery chaos, the high god creates the earth and humans. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* recounts escapades of a legendary hero. He journeys to the end of the world to receive wisdom from the Sumerian flood hero, who tells him a flood story.

Our sources of Canaanite myths come from a number of fourteenth-century BCE tablets discovered at Ugarit, an ancient port city in what is now northern Syria. The *Baal Cycle* features a divine pantheon of familiar biblical names, including El (which means “god” in Hebrew) and Baal. The myths reflect fertility and seasonal changes.

Egyptian creation myths offer weaker parallels with the Bible than Mesopotamian and Canaanite literature. However, Egyptian literature, art, and religion provide an important conceptual background for understanding certain aspects of the Hebrew Bible. For instance, the history of Egyptian religion furnishes a striking comparative case in the development of monotheism with the reign and religious reforms of Akhenaten.

One marked distinction between ancient Near Eastern myth and the Hebrew Bible is the presence of goddesses. They frequently appear as creator deities and play a large role in polytheistic plots. With the exception of Ishtar, the second millennium saw the decline of goddesses into smaller roles, being supplanted or replaced by male deities.

Key Terms

Atrahasis *Atrahasis* is an Old Babylonian myth of creation and flood (c. 1700 BCE). Anthropomorphic deities represent spheres of the natural world and meet in council to achieve balance. Conflicts arise because of labor and population. Enki helps Atrahasis, the flood hero, avoid multiple divine destructions.

Enuma Elish *Enuma Elish* was popular at a high point of the Babylonian kingdom (c. 1100 BCE). It recounts the ascendancy of Marduk as king of the divine council after defeating Tiamat (watery chaos). Marduk then creates the world, humans, and receives a temple in Babylon.

Epic of Gilgamesh The *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2000–800 BCE) comprises legends of an ancient Sumerian king focusing on the human condition. One-third mortal, two-thirds divine, Gilgamesh goes on adventures with Enkidu, a primordial man. In grief after the death of his friend, Gilgamesh journeys to the ends of the earth to consult the flood hero, Utnapishtim, about eternal life.

Canaanite mythology Best represented by the texts from Ugarit, Canaanite mythology features gods also mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, especially El, Baal, and Asherah. The famous *Baal Cycle* sees the divine warrior's leadership challenged by Yamm (sea) and Mot (death).

The myths reflect seasonal changes and various threats to the survival of life.

Akhenaten An Egyptian Pharaoh (reign c. 1353–1336 BCE), Akhenaten is often called the first monotheist. He asserted the sole worship of Aten, the solar disc, over the other gods, especially Amun. His religious reform involved political moves, changing the capital city, and socially marginalizing competing priests. His son and successor, Tutankhamun, reversed Akhenaten's reforms.

Key Personalities

Marduk

A divine warrior and leader of the Babylonian pantheon, Marduk's rise to power is recounted in the *Enuma Elish*. As god of the national state, he became the creator and ruler of the universe. He defeated Tiamat and created a world of order with his artful works and supreme decrees.

Baal

Baal ("lord" or "owner" in Hebrew) was the son of El and a powerful Canaanite deity. He is known as a storm god, "rider on the clouds." His battles with Mot (death) reflect cycles of fertility and drought. His battles with Yamm (sea) reflect more general threats of chaos over heaven. In both cases, Baal must defend his reign, sometimes aided by the warrior goddess Anat.

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. Many biblical stories borrow themes, motifs, and even character types from other ancient Near Eastern texts. What might this indicate about how biblical literature was written?
2. Goddess worship is very important in most ancient Near Eastern religions. Within the Hebrew Bible, however, goddess worship is given very little attention, and in some cases it is flatly condemned. What might have brought about this rejection of the goddesses?
3. How is the creation account in Genesis 1:1—2:3 similar to *Enuma Elish*? The *Baal Cycle*? How do you explain both the similarities and the differences?
4. In the *Baal Cycle*, Baal's death and resurrection are closely tied in to agricultural and fertility motifs. What does this suggest about how ancient Near Eastern people understood the relationship between the "natural world" and the "divine world"? Do you see a similar understanding in the Hebrew Bible?
5. This chapter provides a definition of myth that is quite different from its normal definition in everyday language. Myth refers to "sacred stories, or traditional stories deemed to have religious import." Based on that definition and your own knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, do you think that the Hebrew Bible contains "myths"?

Primary Texts

Enuma Elish

Source: excerpted from Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd edition (Princeton University Press: 1969).

CLOSE READING TIPS

- ▶ Note the character of Marduk and the marks of his power, especially in IV:1-30.
- ▶ Tiamat is introduced in IV:31. She is part of the original primordial couple who gave birth to all the gods (theogony) and signifies the watery beginnings of the world (cosmogony). Her name is cognate with the Hebrew word *tehom*, which means "the deep" (Gen. 1:2). Earlier in the story, the gods kill their father, Tiamat's husband, and then plot to kill Tiamat because she is enraged and poised for battle.
- ▶ Note the images used to describe Marduk's preparations for battle against Tiamat (especially in IV:35-64)?
- ▶ Kingu is introduced in IV:66. He plays a role in both the battle and post-battle drama.
- ▶ Note the accusations Marduk levies against Tiamat (IV:77-86).
- ▶ Note the Tablets of Fate in IV:121.
- ▶ After Marduk's post-battle actions, he creates the world starting in IV:135.

- ▶ Marduk and Ea (primordial god of the deep waters) plan out how to create humans in VI:1-34.
- ▶ The high gods decide how to honor Marduk in VI:49-58.
- ▶ The *Enuma Elish* was read annually during the New Year's Festival in Babylon to celebrate spring (April).

TABLET IV

They erected for him a princely throne.
Facing his fathers, he sat down, presiding.
“Thou art the most honored of the great gods,
Thy decree is unrivaled, thy command is Anu.
Thou, Marduk, art the most honored of the
great gods,
Thy decree is unrivaled, thy word is Anu.
From this day unchangeable shall be thy
pronouncement.
To raise or bring low—these shall be (in) thy
hand.
Thy utterance shall be true, thy command shall
be impeachable.
No one among the gods shall transgress thy
bounds! (10)
Adornment being wanted for the seats of the
gods,
Let the place of their shrines ever be in thy
place.
O Marduk, thou art indeed our avenger.
We have granted thee kingship over the uni-
verse entire.
When in Assembly thou sittest, thy word shall
be supreme.
Thy weapons shall not fail; they shall smash thy
foes!
O lord, spare the life of him who trusts thee,
But pour out the life of the god who seized
evil.”
Having placed in their midst a piece of cloth,

They addressed themselves to Marduk, their
first-born: (20)

“Lord, truly thy decree is first among gods.
Say but to wreck or create; it shall be.
Open thy mouth: the cloth will vanish!
Speak again, and the cloth shall be whole!”

At the word of his mouth the cloth vanished.
He spoke again, and the cloth was restored.
When the gods, his fathers, saw the fruit of his
word,

Joyfully they did homage: “Marduk is king!”
The conferred on him scepter, throne, and
vestment;

They gave him matchless weapons that ward
off the foes: (30)

“Go and cut off the life of Tiamat.
May the winds bear her blood to places
undisclosed.”

Bel's destiny thus fixed, the gods, his fathers,
Caused him to go the way of success and
attainment.

He constructed a bow, marked it as his weapon,
Attached thereto the arrow, fixed its bow-cord.
He raised the mace, made his right hand grasp
it;

Bow and quiver he hung at his side.
In front of him he set the lightning,
With a blazing flame he filled his body. (40)
He then made a net to enfold Tiamat therein.

The four winds he stationed that nothing of her
 might escape,
 The South Wind, the North Wind, the East
 Wind, the West Wind.
 Close to his side he held the net, the gift of his
 father, Anu.
 He brought forth Imhullu “the Evil Wind,” the
 Whirlwind, the Hurricane,
 The Fourfold Wind, the Sevenfold Wind, the
 Cyclone, the Matchless Wind;
 Then he sent forth the winds he had brought
 forth, the seven of them.
 To stir up the inside of Tiamat they rose up
 behind him.
 Then the lord raised up the flood-storm, his
 mighty weapon.
 He mounted the storm-chariot irresistible
 [and] terrifying. (50)
 He harnessed (and) yoked to it a team-of-four,
 The Killer, the Relentless, the Trampler, the
 Swift.
 Sharp were their teeth, bearing poison.
 There were versed in ravage, in destruction
 skilled.
 On his right he posted the *Smiter*, fearsome in
 battle,
 On the left the Combat, which repels all the
 zealous.
 For a cloak he was wrapped in an armor of
 terror;
 With his fearsome halo his head was turbaned.
 The lord went forth and followed his course,
 Towards the raging Tiamat he set his face. (60)
 In his lips he held a spell;
 A plant to put out poison was grasped in his
 hand.
 Then they milled about him, the gods milled
 about him,

The gods, his fathers, milled about him, the
 gods milled about him.
 The lord approached to scan the inside of
 Tiamat,
 (And) of Kingu, her consort, the scheme to
 perceive.
 As he looks on, his course becomes upset,
 His will is distracted and his doings are
 confused.
 And when the gods, his helpers, who marched
 at his side,
 Saw the valiant hero, blurred became their
 vision. (70)
 Tiamat emitted [a cry], without turning her
 neck,
 Framing savage defiance in her lips:
 “Too [imp]ortant art thou [for] the lord of the
 gods to rise up against thee!
 Is it in their place that they have gathered, (or)
 in thy place?”
 Thereupon the lord, having [raised] the flood-
 storm, his mighty weapon,
 [To] enraged [Tiamat] he sent word as follows:
 “*Why* are thou risen, art haughtily exalted,
Thou hast charged thine own heart to stir up
 conflict,
 . . . sons reject their own fathers,
 Whilst thou, who hast born them, hast fore-
 sworn love! (80)
 Thou hast appointed Kingu as thy consort,
 Conferring upon him the rank of Anu, not
 rightfully his.
 Against Anshar, king of the gods, those seekest
 evil;
 [Against] the gods, my fathers, thou hast con-
 firmed thy wickedness.

[Though] drawn up be thy forces, girded on
thy weapons,
Stand thou up, that I and thou meet in single
combat!"

When Tiamat heard this,
She was like one possessed; she took leave of
her senses.
In fury Tiamat cried aloud.
To the roots her legs shook both together. (90)
She recites a charm, keeps casting her spell,
While the gods of battle sharpen their
weapons.
Then joined issue Tiamat and Marduk, wisest
of gods.
They strove in single combat, locked in battle.
The lord 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. (100)
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.
After he had slain Tiamat, the leader,
Her band was shattered, her troupe broken up;
And the gods, her helpers who marched at her
side,
Trembling with terror, turned their backs
about,
In order to save and preserve their lives.
Tightly encircled, they could not escape. (110)

He made them captives and he smashed their
weapons.
Thrown into the net, they found themselves
ensnared;
Placed in cells, they were filled with wailing;
Bearing his wrath, they were held imprisoned.
And the eleven creatures which she has
charged with awe,
The band of demons that marched [. . .]
before her,
He cast into fetters, their hands [. . .].
For all their resistance, he trampled (them)
underfoot.
And Kingu, who had been made chief among
them,
He bound and accounted him to Uggae. (120)
He took from him the Tablets of Fate, not
rightfully his.
Sealed (them) with a seal and fastened (them)
on is breast.
When he has vanquished and subdued his
adversaries,
Had . . . the vainglorious foe,
Had wholly established Anshar's triumph over
the foe,
Nudimmud's desire had achieved, valiant
Marduk
Strengthened his hold on the vanquished gods,
And turned back to Tiamat whom he had
bound.
The lord trod on the legs of Tiamat,
With his unsparing mace he crushed her skull.
(130)
When the arteries of her blood he had severed,
The North Wind bore (it) to places
undisclosed.
On seeing this, his fathers were joyful and
jubilant,

They brought gifts of homage, they to him.
 Then the lord paused to view her dead body,
 That he might divide the monster and do artful
 works.
 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. (140)
 He crossed the heavens and surveyed the
 regions.
 He squared Apsu's quarter, the abode of
 Nudimmud,
 As the lord measured the dimensions of Apsu.
 The Great Abode, its likeness, he fixed Esharra,
 The Great Abode, Esharra, which he made as
 the firmament.
 Anu, Enlil, and Ea he made occupy their
 places.

TABLET V

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.
 After defining the days of the year [by means]
 of (heavenly) figures,
 He founded the station of Nebiru to determine
 their (heavenly) bands,
 That none might transgress or fall short.
 Alongside it he set up the stations of Enlil and
 Ea.
 Having opened up the gates on both sides,
 He strengthened the locks to the left and the
 right. (10)
 In her belly he established the zenith.

The Moon he caused to shine, the night (to
 him) entrusting.
 He appointed him a creature of the night to
 signify the days:
 "Monthly, without cease, form designs with a
 crown.
 At the month's very start, rising over the land,
 Thou shalt have luminous horns to signify six
 days,
 On the seventh day reaching a [half]-crown.
 At full moon stand in opposition in
 mid-month.
 When the sun [overtakes] thee at the base of
 heaven,
Diminish [thy crown] and retrogress in light.
 (20)
 [At the time of disappearance] approach thou
 the course of the sun,
 And [on the twenty-ninth] though shalt again
 stand in opposition to the sun."
 [The remainder of this tablet is broken away or
 too fragmentary for translation.]

TABLET VI

When Marduk hears the words of the gods,
 His heart prompts (him) to fashion artful
 works.
 Opening his mouth, he addresses Ea
 To impart the plan he had conceived in his
 heart:
 "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!
 The ways of the gods I will artfully alter.

Though alike revered, into two (groups) they
shall be divided.” (10)

Ea answered him, speaking a word to him,
Giving him another plan for the relief of the
gods:

“Let but one of their brothers be handed over;
He alone shall perish that mankind may be
fashioned.
Let the great gods be here in Assembly,
Let the guilty be handed over that they may
endure.”

Marduk summoned the great gods to
Assembly;
Presiding graciously, he issues instructions.
To his utterance the gods pay heed.
The king addresses a word to the Anunnaki:
(20)

“If your former statement was true,
Do (now) the truth on oath by me declare!
Who was it that contrived the uprising,
And made Tiamat rebel, and joined battle?
Let him be handed over who contrived the
uprising.
His guilt I will make him bear. You shall dwell
in peace!”

The Igigi, the great gods, replied to him,
To Lugaldimmerankia, counselor of the gods,
their lord:

“It was Kingu who contrived the uprising,
And made Tiamat rebel, and joined battle.”
(30)

They bound him, holding him before Ea.
They imposed on him his guilt and severed his
blood (vessels).
Out of his blood they fashioned mankind.

He imposed the service and let free the gods.
After Ea, the wise, had created mankind,
Had imposed upon it the service and let free
the gods.

That work was beyond comprehension;
As artfully planned by Marduk, did Nudim-
mud create it—

Marduk, the king of the gods divided
All the Anunnaki above and below. (40)
He assigned (them) to Anu to guard his
instructions.

Three hundred in the heavens he stationed as
a guard.

In like manner the ways of the earth he
defined.

In heaven and on earth six hundred (thus) he
settled.

After he had ordered all the instructions,
To the Anunnaki of heaven and earth had
allotted their portions,
The Anunnaki opened their mouths
And said to Marduk, their lord:

“Now, O lord, thou who hast caused our
deliverance,
What shall be our homage to thee? (50)
Let us build a shrine whose name shall be
called

‘Lo, a chamber for our nightly rest’; let us
repose in it!

Let us build a throne, a recess for his abode!
On the day that we arrive we shall repose in it.”
When Marduk heard this,
Brightly glowed his features, like the day:

“Like that of *lofty* Babylon, whose building you
have requested,
Let its brickwork be fashioned. You shall name
it ‘The Sanctuary.’ ”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What similarities do you note between the creation of the world in the *Enuma Elish* and the Priestly creation in Genesis 1?
2. The *Enuma Elish* recounts how Marduk became the high god of the Babylonian pantheon. How do his character and his actions justify his status among the divine council?
3. The *Enuma Elish's* conflict in heaven showcases Marduk as divine warrior. While the Genesis creation does not recount a similar conflict, where do we see the biblical God characterized as a warrior?
4. Focusing on Tiamat and Marduk, how does gender function in the *Enuma Elish*? How does this compare to the gender of God in the Hebrew Bible?
5. Knowing the *Enuma Elish* was read during the New Year's festival, what aspects of the myth seem to refer to ritual?