



The Babylonian Genesis

Alexander Heidel

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Here is a complete translation of all the published cuneiform tablets of the various Babylonian creation stories, of both the Semitic Babylonian & the Sumerian material. Each creation account is preceded by a brief introduction dealing with the age & provenance of the tablets, the aim & purpose of the story etc. Also included is a translation & discussion of two Babylonian creation versions written in Greek. The final chapter presents a detailed examination of the Babylonian creation accounts in their relation to the Old Testament literature.

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The Babylonian Genesis Details

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Suha says

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David says

This book is primarily a comparison between the Enuma Elish and several fragmentary creation myths of the Babylonians with Genesis 1-2 and a few other Old Testament passages.

Chapter 1: Enuma Elish. My primary reason for purchasing this book was to read this myth, and I wasn't disappointed. Heidel precedes it with a helpful summary to orient the reader. The story itself celebrates the ascension of Marduk to the position of king of all the gods, a title awarded to him for his victory over the mother of all the gods Tiamat, who represents the primordial salt water whence everything else came into being. From her carcass, he creates the sky and the earth. He then creates the moon, the stars, and the planets. Finally, from the blood of Kingu (Tiamat's consort/general of her armies), Marduk creates man. The myth concludes with the celebration of Marduk's victory and the recital of his fifty names.

Chapter 2: Related Babylonian Creation Stories. These are framgentary but interesting stories that add details to the Enuma Elish or give alternate accounts.

Chapter 3: Old Testament Parallels. Heidel considers the similarities of the Babylonian stories with Genesis 1-2 primarily, but includes other Old Testament passages. His conclusion is that the similarities are definitely there but that they are overblown, and the differences between the two accounts are more striking.

Abdulsattar says

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Mark Matzeder says

As a lifelong reader of mythology I found the translations of the cuneiform texts fascinating. The last third of the book was disappointing as Heidel went through intellectual contortions to support the opinion he began with (to wit: that the Hebrew creation stories recorded in Genesis were not influenced by or drawn from the

Babylonian myths).

Also, Heidel seemed really dense about the concept of metaphor in poetry.

I wonder if there have been any cuneiform discoveries since 1951 which might fill out the texts lacunae.

Ethan says

A translation of the Babylonian creation epic Enuma Elish along with explanatory notes, additional creation stories found in Mesopotamia, and a thoroughgoing analysis of the comparison between the Babylonian stories and the Biblical story of creation.

The author provides a suprisingly robust defense of the Biblical creation narrative as being quite distinct from Enuma elish, more different than alike, in contrast to the standard "scholarly" view of the Biblical story as derivative of and yet polemical against the Babylonian tale.

A good resource for the Babylonian creation story and in terms of the comparison and contrast with the Biblical creation narrative.

Zoe says

To say that this is not the most exciting book I've ever read would be a vast understatement; when I was only 30 pages from the end, I put it down for two weeks because I just didn't care enough to go on.

The premise sounds interesting enough: this is a collection of Babylonian creation stories in translation, accompanied by "a detailed examination of the Babylonian creation accounts in their relation to our Old Testament literature". The creation stories themselves were certainly worth reading, if a bit repetitive and dry at times. But the comparison to the Old Testament was not at all what I had expected. I had mistakenly supposed that the focus would be on similarities between the Babylonian and Biblical accounts, and I find that unexpected connections between different cultures are always interesting to read about. Unfortunately, though, the emphasis here was mostly on differences. We would be presented with some details from the Babylonian story, followed by some details from the Biblical story, and told how the two were different. This was repeated several times, and it just didn't make for an engaging narrative.

There was some discussion at the end of structural similarities, but this had too much of a Christian emphasis to really appeal to me. One of the "problems" with the theory that the Bible might have been influenced by the Babylonian Enuma Elish was that this might contradict the doctrine of divine inspiration which "is, of course, indisputably taught in Scripture". So, Heidel explained how the concept divine inspiration could be understood in a way that would allow this influence. I'm just not concerned with reconciling history with the Bible; I wanted to know the historical facts on their own.

I don't mean to say that this is a bad book, just that I don't fit into its intended audience. If I had read the introduction rather than only the back cover before purchasing the book, I would have seen that it was intended for the "Old Testament scholar and the Christian minister". These are the people who might care most about preserving traditional views of the Bible in the light of fairly recently-discovered Near Eastern texts, and I'm just not one of them. Anyone who's interested more in the Near Eastern texts themselves can

probably find a more appropriate and more recent book; this one is almost sixty years old. I don't know of any alternatives to recommend, but I can't recommend this one.

Jonathan McGaha says

Heidel is frustrating to read, in that he alternates from a brilliant historian to common apologist. His typical bias is present in this work.

The first half is a very good survey of some of the Babylonian mythology as it pertains to their creation myths, of which there are several. Heidel carefully and meticulously analyzes important words and their translations, although not as much as he does in some of his other books which are more focused on a more minutia-focused approach.

I'd call this book accessible to the interested layman.

I appreciated how Heidel considered the nature of Tiamat's physical form, as I've also had some trouble with the common assertion that she was serpentine or dragon-like in shape. Heidel ends up asserting that she was shaped like a woman, an assertion which I find just as hasty and based on presupposition as those which make her bestial in form. Heidel dismisses a few points hastily in making his argument, largely due it seems to his determination to think his particular religion is special and the serpent-like interpretation of Tiamat is often used as one (of many) linkages between the religious myths of Hebrew Semites and Mesopotamian Semites. On the other hand, he very aptly dismisses some other arguments presenting Tiamat as a dragon which were poorly-founded and his analysis of these opinions was very good. I'd say it's wiser to leave Tiamat's nature as an open question, and while Heidel hedges, it's plain he's less intellectually-honest on this topic than he is on other parts of Babylonian mythology.

The logic leaps he makes and leaves unqualified in order to explain away references to Tiamat's horns and tail are disappointing.

The latter parts of the book, in which he compares and contrasts Babylonian and Hebrew creation myth is very frustrating. He declares Rahab (the mythical beast, not the prostitute) to be a poetic reference to Egypt only, which it often was, but uses this to dismiss the prehistory of the term and its connection with a chaotic sea entity. As he seems to often do, Heidel reduces the amount of context for a topic to that which best suits the argument he wishes to make. As he can find references to Rahab which probably indicate Egypt, therefore all references to Rahab (again, not the prostitute, Rahab in that context is spelled differently in Hebrew) in conflict with Yahweh are references to Egypt.

They plainly are not. And Heidel undoubtedly knew about the context which he left out of this book. This is very disappointing.

Heidel again, as he did in "The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels" treats the bible as an unified narrative, using portions written decades after the creation myth was formed as arguments for the uniqueness of the Hebrew Semitic creation myth.

Heidel dismisses the noteworthy similarity between the separation of the waters referenced by both Babylonian and Hebrew creation myths by referencing completely unrelated creation myths (Egyptian, Phoenician, Indian, etc) simply to obfuscate. He then drops the point after raising unsubstantiated doubts as if it were complete.

He regularly treats the bible, uncritically, as a fundamental truth which requires no criticism when comparing it to Babylonian myth, which he rightfully calls what it is: myth.

He also makes the absurd mistake of combining the two disparate Genesis creation narratives into one (in terms of the creation of man and woman) without the slightest of intellectual rigor, and does so immediately following the pointing out of the fact that the Babylonians had several different versions of the creation of humanity. This is very disappointing. He also claims that it's not apparent that the Babylonian gods gave mankind dominion over the land when Marduk plainly does so (and Heidel himself included the text in his book) when he sets man to work maintaining what we now call Mesopotamia, to work for his (Marduk's) glory, just as the Christian god Heidel himself worships commands human works be done for His glory.

It's plainly true that the Hebrew Semites had a different conception for the relationship between man and god(s) from that of Babylonian Semites, but Heidel doesn't approach the subject with the level of intellectual honesty and disconnection required for an honest comparison.

I'd recommend reading this book because it really is well written, but it's important to be aware of the author's obvious (and typical for his time) bias.

Jeffrey Aaron says

Like the biblical Genesis, which was written after the Babylonian Genesis, both creation stories are the surface of a much bigger story which goes back further in time before the Hebrews or the Babylonians ever existed. Heidel was a great scholar and we all owe him a great debt of gratitude for bringing Marduk's 11-day Akitu festival back to life. However we also must remember that Marduk was the son of Enki, from Eridu, which the archaeology and the Sumerian literature agree is the oldest city on earth. And that is where the story of the Babylonian and biblical Genesis really begins.

Shawn Brace says

Not only does this book present the full text of Enuma elish, and parts of other Babylonian creation myths, but Heidel spends the last third of the book disputing the view of much critical scholarship that the creation account in the Hebrew Bible is dependent upon the other ANE myths.

He does a good job of demonstrating how the Bible stands over and against these other myths.

For a writer who was at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, this is a very surprising yet refreshing view.

Daniel Chaikin says

ABANDONED

The Babylonian Genesis : The Story of Creation by Alexander Heidel

Published: 1942, 2nd edition 1951

format: 166 page Hardcover

acquired: from my library

read: 115 pages on Aug 5-6

rating: 2 stars

I stumbled into Heidel. He seemed knowledgeable in his intro, notes and translation, but once he started analyzing, he undermined any strengths he might have had. He comes across as manipulative, unreliable, and, ultimately for me, unreadable.

I've wanted to read the Enuma Eliš for a while. This year I have come across several references to Middle Eastern influences on Greek literature, and then read Diane Wolkstein's translation/re-telling of Inanna/Ishtar. So, this was a great time to read this and I was looking forward to it. A quick library catalogue search brought up this book.

The actual translation of the Enuma Eliš takes 43 annotated pages. The translation seemed OK. The story itself was interesting but not really a great read, as it's so painfully political. It tells of creation and the lineage of various Sumerian-regional gods and how Marduk, Babylon's own god, ended up becoming their leader. Creation begins with Apsû, who may represent fresh water, and his wife Tiamat, who represents the ocean, and, perhaps, chaos or the deep unknown. Their children include Anshar and Kishar, who give rise to Anu, who fathers Ea (Sumerian Enki), who fathers Marduk. After many odds and ends, Apsû is killed by Ea, but Tiamat can only be taken by a well-armed Marduk. In return for leadership over all the gods, Marduk slays Tiamat, splits her body into two, and use half to form heaven and the other half to form earth. He then has her general, Kingu, executed. From his blood comes mankind, whose purpose is only to serve the gods.

Heidel follows this up with various other Sumerian-era fragments and a couple old Greek accounts. The history of one goes like this:

The other Greek account is that of Berossus, a priest of Bel Marduk at Babylon. It is taken from his history of Babylonia, which he compiled from native documents and published in Greek about 275 B.C. His writings have perished, but extracts from his history have fortunately been preserved to us. The preservation of the Babylonian creation story we owe to a monk in Constantinople commonly known as Syncellus, or Sunkellos (eighth century A.D.), who derived his material from the lost 'Chronicle' of the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (ca A.D. 260—ca. 340); and Eusebius, in turn, derived it from the works of Alexander Polyhistor (last century B.C.)

And yet, this account has turned out to be remarkably accurate.

All this seemed mostly OK, although Heidel scattered a few odd comments, proclaiming a sense of certainty where it clearly doesn't belong. When he moved on to the Biblical comparisons he lost me. His use of words like "plainly" and "clearly" and "cannot" in contexts where nothing was plain or clear, and nothing as certain as "cannot" can possibly be said, drove me nuts. They are red flags. He plays a lot of other tricks too, confusing the issue to make his otherwise weaker points. I found that I started to doubt everything he has said. It *all* started to feel manipulated. I quit with maybe 25 pages of real text to read. I just saw no reason to keep going. Poor Heidel has been slashed from any future reading I might do on these subjects.

Peter J. says

This was a great read. I have long felt a suspicion that various aspects of the Old Testament were artifacts from when Abraham left Chaldea to monotheize that faith. Examples such as the battle of God with Leviathan, the flood, etc. Though I knew about the Enki flood parallels, I was unaware of the man from clay, prevalence of 7, lack of ex nihilo evidence, etc. I take the author's "scriptural acrobatics" at the end to try to rationalize the issue to still keep the OT as god breathed with a grain of salt. Most of his arguments were quite weak in my opinion.

E7boehm says

Great book, most complete Emuna Elish there is. Not as poetic as King but more complete, and very accurate translation. The essay at the end shows that there are parallels between bible and this poem but that they are mostly accidental a very compelling essay. Good solid scholarship and a pleasure to read. Takes some mental muscle to get through but worth the struggle.

wasan bahir says

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Abeerr Shiihab says

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Jerome says

Although a scholarly work, the translation of the *Enuma Elish* is quite readable, as is the chapter on related

creation myths. Anyone who is interested in reading translations of world mythologies will find this book quite accessible. The 3rd chapter on parallels in Genesis is somewhat technical, but also quite readable, however, since the text was first published in 1942, there may be more recent scholarship that takes into account contemporary archeological evidence or more modern methods of comparative analysis.
