

Creation and Covenant: Contrasting Judaic Theology with Mesopotamian Mythology

This study challenges the widespread misconception that the biblical account of Genesis and the creation mythology of ancient Mesopotamia are directly connected as precursor and adaptation, or, in the most extreme view, that both narratives are variations of a single myth transmitted through different cultural traditions.¹ By contrast, several biblical scholars have argued that Genesis serves as a deliberate polemic against the creation myths of the ancient Near East, emphasising its distinctiveness in both form and content.² This essay contends that the Hebrew Genesis account of creation (Gen. 1:1–2:4) and the renewal of humanity through the flood narrative (Gen. 6:9–9:17) fundamentally differ from the ostensibly similar narratives found in Mesopotamian mythology. This divergence underscores a profound theological, ontological, and eschatological disparity between the traditions, ultimately expressed in the relationship between God and creation—a concept central to the Judaic tradition.

To elucidate this distinction, this study references four Mesopotamian myths: *Enūma Elīš*, *Atrahasis*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and *Erra and Išum*. These narratives provide a framework for contrasting Mesopotamian cosmologies with the distinct theological vision of Genesis, analysed through the lenses of cosmology and anthropology.

The first section of this essay presents a comparative analysis of creation narratives, highlighting how, in Genesis, creation is characterised by divine tranquility, in contrast to the violent conflict depicted in Mesopotamian accounts. Unlike the perpetual strife between deities in *Enūma Elīš* and *Atrahasis*, the God of Genesis creates through the intelligible and harmonious Word, in an act of deliberate and peaceful speech. Anthropologically, Genesis further distinguishes itself by elevating humanity as the pinnacle of creation: human beings are divinely appointed representatives, entrusted with the task of uniting creation in harmony with God. Formed peaceably out of divine love, humanity's role is to fulfil God's plan in intimate communion with Him. Thus, the Judaic worldview introduces a linear conception of time, presenting creation as a purposeful act progressing towards an ultimate eschatological culmination.

The second section of this essay examines the flood motif present in both the Genesis and Mesopotamian traditions, with particular focus on its restorative purpose for humankind in the biblical narrative. This stands in stark

¹ Hermann Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*, trans. by K. W. Whitney (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), p. 77. Gunkel linguistically links the Hebrew term *těhôm* with *Ti'āmat*, ultimately concluding that *těhôm* was derivative of *Ti'āmat*, and that both narratives are therefore 'the same myth received in two distinct recensional families'.

² N. M. Sarna, "Understanding Creation In Genesis", in *Is God a Creationist?*, ed. by R. M. Frye (New York: Scribners, 1983) 155-75, p. 157.

contrast to the purely destructive, god-centric motivations found in *Atrahasis*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and *Erra and Išum*, driven by divine frustration with overpopulation.³ This comparison underscores differing theological perspectives on divine purpose and human nature, setting Genesis apart as both unique and theologically profound. In *Atrahasis*, humanity's survival hinges on a clandestine act of disobedience by the subordinate deity Enki/Ea, who undermines the decrees of the chief god Enlil/Ellil. By contrast, Genesis portrays God Himself as sparing the remnant, aligning with the Judaic conception of linear time in setting the stage for what is to come. The Noahide flood prefigures the eschaton, wherein the Church becomes an ark of salvation that ushers in a new heaven and a new earth.⁴ The flood narrative of Genesis, therefore, functions typologically, embodying a salvation narrative with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end.

In summary, this study demonstrates that Genesis offers a transformative and revolutionary perspective, distinct from neighbouring ancient traditions. While notable parallels exist, the biblical and Mesopotamian narratives are shaped by fundamentally different religious and theological frameworks. The author of Genesis,⁵ with a clear awareness of surrounding cosmological myths, presents a text that reinterprets these motifs, articulating a uniquely Judaic worldview. Upon closer examination, what initially appears to be superficially similar reveals itself to be a wholly distinct and transformative conception of creation and the relationship between God and humanity.

In Genesis, creation originates from God's sovereign and unencumbered will, entirely free from conflict or opposition, and reflective of His absolute dominion. This stands in marked contrast to *Enūma Eliš*, wherein creation emerges as the outcome of violent strife and discord among competing deities. The divine realm is characterised by a perpetual cycle of primordial conflict and rebellion, culminating in Marduk's creative impulse, which arises only after a period of profound unrest. Humanity is created specifically to bear the burdens previously shouldered by the gods, thereby enabling their rest.⁶ Moreover, the origins of human life are inseparably linked to this turmoil, as humans are created from the blood of Qingu/Kingu, a rebellious and war-faring god, thus reinforcing the chaotic and violent nature of Mesopotamian creation.⁷ Conversely, the Genesis account portrays creation as a peaceful and orderly act, wherein everything is brought into existence through the harmonious command of the divine Word, entirely devoid of opposition or struggle. Unlike

³ Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 313, n8.

⁴ See Revelation 21:1; Isaiah 65:17.

⁵ It is traditionally believed within Jewish and Christian traditions that Moses wrote the Torah at God's dictation. However, to avoid any potential points of contention that are not central to the focus of this study, the essay will refer to 'the author of Genesis'.

⁶ W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, ed. by Jerrold S. Cooper (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2013), p. 111.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

the chaotic and conflict-ridden cosmology of *Enūma Eliš*, Genesis presents a radically distinct worldview in which creation emanates from God's intelligible Word, inherently good and orderly, and reflective of His immutable nature. The absence of chaos as a rival force further underscores the uniqueness of Genesis, where creation occurs effortlessly through divine speech, contrasting sharply with the fragmented and antagonistic narrative of *Enūma Eliš*. This act of speaking existence into being—imbued with peace and order—stands in stark contrast to the mixing of the blood of a slain god to form bone, as depicted in both *Enūma Eliš* and *Atrahasis*.⁸ These divergent paradigms reveal two fundamentally distinct theological perspectives: one defined by chaos and violent strife; the other grounded in harmony and sovereign intentionality.

This intentionality is further expressed in Genesis through the structured sequencing of the days of creation. While these days are poetically expressed, imbued with mythological motifs, they follow a clear and logical progression, as tabulated below⁹:

Day	Regions	Day	Occupants
1.	Day—Night.	4.	Sun (for Day)—Moon with stars (for Night).
2.	Sea—Sky (Air).	5.	Fishes (for Sea)—Birds for Sky (Air).
3.	Land under water.— Land over water, with concomitant vegetation.	6.	[No occupants for land under water, because insignificant or unknown.]-Animals and Man for Land over water.

This structured framework makes the Genesis account more amenable to a scientific interpretation of creation, in contrast to the purely mythical approach found in *Enūma Eliš*.¹⁰ The days of creation in Genesis follow a distinct and methodical sequence, with the first three days setting the stage for the following three. Specifically, the creation of regions or domains precedes the placement of their respective inhabitants. This deliberate and ordered process underscores a carefully planned sequence, where the foundational elements

⁸ Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 111; Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 15.

⁹ Michael Sheehan, *Apologetics and Catholic Doctrine: A Course of Religious Instruction for Schools and Colleges* (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, Ltd., 1962), p. 29.

¹⁰ It is important to note that *Enūma Eliš* serves primarily as an exaltation of Marduk's kingship and only secondarily as a creation text, while Genesis is first and foremost presented as a creation narrative, with its emphasis on monotheism and divine order.

are established first, followed by the creatures or beings that inhabit them.¹¹ Creation arises from God's asserted rational will, expressed through the divine speech-act. This speech forms the foundation for a predictable order in which creation operates according to intelligible laws. In contrast, in Mesopotamian thought, there is no such reliability—cosmic events unfold according to the capricious will of the gods, whose moods, conflicts, and grievances dictate the course of creation and life. While it is certainly the case that both accounts share common structural features,¹² they are expressed in different ways with different implications for each tradition.

In both creation accounts, humankind is created last,¹³ followed by a period of rest for the creator.¹⁴ In *Enūma Eliš*, the placement of humanity's creation last underscores its subordinate role within the divine hierarchy, almost an afterthought,¹⁵ tasked with toiling for the gods in perpetual servitude, thereby allowing them to rest from their labour¹⁶; whereas Genesis presents humanity as the intentional and desired culmination of creation, entrusted with a priestly duty to harmonise the rest of the created order with God's will. Just as in a liturgical context, where the priest's position at the end of the procession symbolises the culmination and unification of the preceding elements, humanity in Genesis is portrayed as the final, unifying act of creation, tasked with bringing all things into harmony with God's will. The theological and ontological implications of this for humanity are starkly different from the mere superficial similarity that both narratives feature humanity's creation last. This contrast highlights deeper differences concerning the diversity of creation and its relationship to the divine.

¹¹ While the inclusion of a detailed account of cosmological elements, presented in a similar sequence, positions *Enūma Eliš* as a key point of reference for comparative analysis, the notable differences in the pacing and structure of creation in Genesis underscore its revolutionary nature. Genesis offers a more unified, orderly, and peaceful cosmology, standing in stark contrast to the fragmented, conflict-driven narrative of *Enūma Eliš*.

¹² As creation unfolds in Genesis 1:1–2:4, clear parallels emerge with Mesopotamian descriptions of divine acts establishing cosmic order. In *Enūma Eliš* IV:136, the waters are separated to divide the primordial chaos, similar to Genesis 1:6–7, where God creates a firmament to divide the waters above and below. In both Genesis 1:8 and *Enūma Eliš* IV:136, this division results in the creation of "Heaven" or 'the heavens', respectively. The next step in both texts involves the gathering of waters: in Genesis 1:9, this allows dry land to appear, while in *Enūma Eliš* IV:140, Tiāmat's body is divided with the instruction to prevent her waters from escaping. Moving forward, Genesis 1:14–15 describes the creation of lights to separate day from night, marking time, which corresponds to Marduk's organisation of celestial bodies in *Enūma Eliš* V:2–7, where he sets up constellations, appoints the year, and organises the divisions of the heavens. Both texts describe divine actions to establish cosmic order through celestial bodies, with Genesis 1:16–18 focusing on the creation of the sun and moon to govern day and night, while *Enūma Eliš* V:12–22 emphasises the moon's phases for establishing a calendar system. Finally, in both Genesis 1:26 and *Enūma Eliš* VI:5–8, humankind is created, followed by a period of rest for the creator, as described in Genesis 2:2–3 and *Enūma Eliš* VI:74–76.

¹³ Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 111.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁵ Sarna, "Understanding Creation In Genesis", p. 166.

¹⁶ Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 111.

In the Mesopotamian myths, the plurality of creation frequently engenders conflict and disorder. In *Enūma Eliš*, the disruptive behaviour of the younger gods provokes Apsû's frustration, resulting in competition and strife.¹⁷ Similarly, in *Atrahasis*,¹⁸ *Erra and Išum*,¹⁹ and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*,²⁰ the overpopulation of humanity leads to divine dissatisfaction, necessitating large-scale devastation to restore cosmic order. In stark contrast, Genesis presents a distinctive account in which the proximity of creation to God fosters increasing harmony and peace, as demonstrated in the Garden of Eden. God remains intimately present within the world He has created and is not threatened by the existence of other wills. Rather than existing in opposition to God, humanity is invited to collaborate with Him, serving as the manifestation of God's inner majesty through the multiplicity of creation—the exaltation of diversity—thus producing a fuller expression of divine perfection. Just as a stained-glass window, illuminated by light, reveals its fullest beauty through its complex, intricate, and diverse components, so too does creation reflect the full majesty of God's glory through its multiplicity. This non-competitive relationship between the creator and creation stands in marked contrast to the Mesopotamian narratives, in which plurality tends to incite disorder.

While plurality in the Mesopotamian myths often leads to discord, in Genesis, it fosters unity, reflecting God's harmonious relationship with creation. God forms humanity from the dust of the earth, breathing life into it to create a living soul (Gen. 2:7). This intimate connection between God and humanity stands in stark contrast to *Enūma Eliš*, where humanity emerges from blood and violence, born from the violent conquest of the god Qingu/Kingu. In Genesis, plurality does not threaten God; rather, He purposefully and intimately shapes it, guiding it towards unity, using time, history, and the material world as the stage for His divine plan. This portrayal of God's intentional and harmonious shaping of creation presents a marked contrast to the divine attitude in the Mesopotamian myths, where both creation and humankind are inextricably rooted in conflict and violence.

One of the most prominent distinctions between Genesis and the Mesopotamian myths is the portrayal of divine justice and mercy, particularly illustrated through the flood motif. In Genesis, God's justice and mercy are harmoniously united within Himself, demonstrated through His singular actions and judgements: the god who floods is also the god who saves. This is not the case in *Atrahasis*, where the god who floods (Enlil²¹) is not the god who saves (*Atrahasis*²²), creating a dualistic depiction of divinity with gods working in

¹⁷ Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 51.

¹⁸ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 20.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 286, 288, 298, 313, n8.

²⁰ N. K. Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: An English Version With an Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 105.

²¹ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 33.

²² Ibid., p. 30.

opposition to one another. The sparing of humanity in *Atrahasis* is portrayed as clandestine—a consequence of subordinate deities conspiring against the chief god. In contrast, in Genesis, it is God Himself who spares the remnant to be saved. Furthermore, the subsequent establishment of the Noahide covenant facilitates a more intimate relationship between God and humanity, marked by His promise never to flood the earth again. Through this covenant, humanity is not only renewed but also once again entrusted with the purpose of glorifying creation, emphasising the deep connection between divine glory and human life. As St Irenaeus writes: 'For the glory of God is a living man'.²³

While the flood motif appears in both Mesopotamian and Hebrew traditions, it is important to distinguish the purpose of the event in each. Within *Atrahasis*,²⁴ *Erra and Išum*,²⁵ and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*,²⁶ the flood is depicted as a means to curb overpopulation and restore tranquillity to the gods by annihilating a noisy and disruptive humanity. These narratives lack any restorative intent for humankind, focusing solely on re-establishing divine peace. By contrast, the flood in Genesis serves a transformative and redemptive purpose, purging humanity of sinfulness to prepare it for renewal and glorification. This divine act seeks to replace human corruption with holiness, prefiguring both the sanctification of the individual soul through the salvation of Jesus and the renewal of creation brought about through the eschaton. In this sense, Noah is presented as a typological precursor to Christ, with the ark prefiguring the Church as a vessel of salvation. The procession into the ark, with Noah entering last, parallels the order of creation, in which humanity is formed last, symbolising the culmination of God's plan and the renewal of creation through the righteous. Thus, the biblical flood narrative frames the event not merely as destruction but as a theological symbol of renewal and redemption, highlighting a fundamental contrast in purpose and symbolism between the Hebrew and Mesopotamian accounts. This distinction in purpose—destruction versus renewal—sets the stage for a more profound theological reflection in the Genesis account, where the flood emerges not merely as an act of retribution, but as a divine restoration with eschatological significance.

The Genesis account of the flood presents God's wrath as restorative, aimed not only at purging sin but also at setting the stage for the eventual glorification of humanity. This understanding is deeply rooted in the Judaic conception of linear time, where history progresses towards a definite end and purpose, marked by the ultimate unification of divinity and humanity. Within this framework, the flood serves as a pivotal moment in a broader narrative arc that spans from creation to redemption, ultimately culminating in the eschaton—the final fulfillment of God's plan. By contrast, the Mesopotamian

²³ Irenaeus of Lyons, "Against Heresies", IV.20.7, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 1, ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1887), p. 490.

²⁴ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 5.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 286, 288, 290, 298.

²⁶ Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 105.

flood narratives—such as those in *Atrahasis*, *Erra and Išum*, and *the Epic of Gilgamesh*—are devoid of a future-oriented vision, instead presenting divine actions as reactive measures aimed at restoring peace in the present. These stories, more cyclical in nature, lack a discernible trajectory towards an ultimate fulfillment for humanity. The Genesis flood, however, emerges as a transformative act, guiding humanity towards a future endpoint: the renewal of creation and the establishment of an eternal covenant. Just as the ark preserves Noah and his family for the creation of a new world, so too does the Church, as the new ark, carry humanity towards a new heaven and a new earth, awaiting the eschaton. In this way, the Genesis flood narrative aligns with a linear, unfolding history of salvation, wherein past, present, and future are inextricably linked within a purposeful divine plan—distinguishing it from the more static, cyclical conceptions of time found in the Mesopotamian traditions.

The theological differences between the Genesis flood narrative and the Mesopotamian accounts are most evident in the aftermath of the flood, where their distinct views on humanity's role and divine purpose are further demonstrated. In Genesis 9:7, God commands Noah to "multiply" and "fill the earth"—a clear affirmation of His intention for humanity to once again repopulate and steward the world. While the gods in *Atrahasis* seek to annihilate humanity due to their noise, disruption, and excessive reproduction, the post-flood God of Genesis encourages procreation. This command mirrors the original mandate given to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28, reaffirming humanity's ongoing role in God's plan and the renewal of His relationship with creation. In contrast, following the flood in *Atrahasis*, the Mesopotamian god Enki takes measures to control human reproduction, limiting childbirth and increasing infant mortality to curb population growth.²⁷ For the gods of Mesopotamia, overpopulation is a threat to be subdued; whereas in Genesis, God commands multiplication as part of His redemptive plan. This divergence highlights not only contrasting theological views but also differing conceptions of divine purpose in relation to human life. Whereas the Genesis narrative is situated within a linear progression of creation, fall, and redemption, the Mesopotamian accounts unfold within a cyclical framework, where divine actions respond to immediate crises rather than guiding humanity towards a defined endpoint. This difference in worldview reflects a broader contrast between the cyclical, repetitive patterns found in ancient traditions and the Judaic conception of linear time as a progression towards ultimate eschatological fulfillment.

In conclusion, the divergence between the biblical Genesis account and ancient Mesopotamian creation mythology goes beyond mere narrative differences, reflecting a profound shift in theological perspective. Genesis presents creation as a purposeful, peaceful act, with humanity as the intended culmination of God's design, in stark contrast to the chaotic, conflict-driven origins in Mesopotamian myths. Similarly, the Genesis flood narrative transcends divine retribution, becoming a redemptive event where God's justice and mercy

²⁷ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 35.

coexist within a coherent, forward-moving plan for creation's ultimate glorification. By contrast, the Mesopotamian flood serves only to restore peace in a cyclical, crisis-driven process, reflecting the transient and adversarial nature of the gods. These divergences reveal radically different eschatological visions: while Mesopotamian myths emphasise ongoing divine interventions, Genesis points towards a final redemptive purpose for humanity. Ultimately, Genesis does not merely present an alternative interpretation of ancient creation and flood myths; it reveals a radically distinct vision of God's relationship with creation—one that calls humanity into a redemptive partnership with their creator, with profound significance for both their ontological purpose and eschatological destiny.

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