

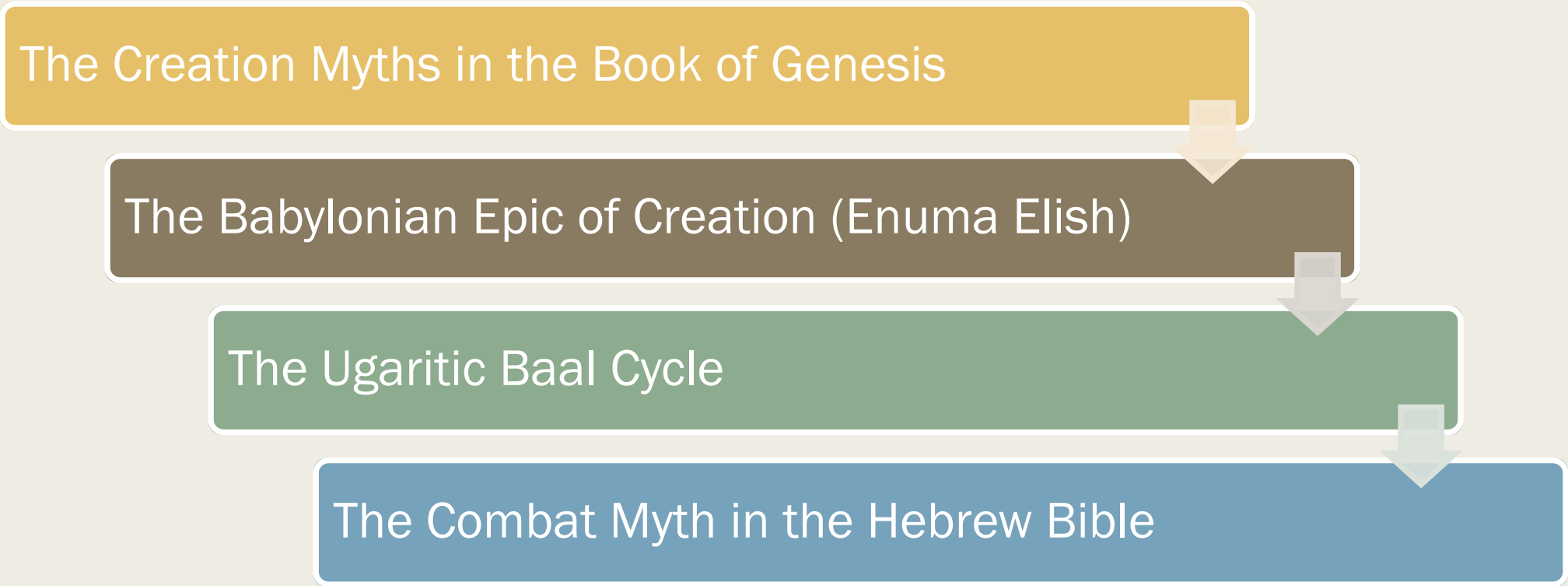


Creation Myths in the Hebrew Bible

HPHP4006 Myths and Mythology

Session Outline

The Creation Myths in the Book of Genesis



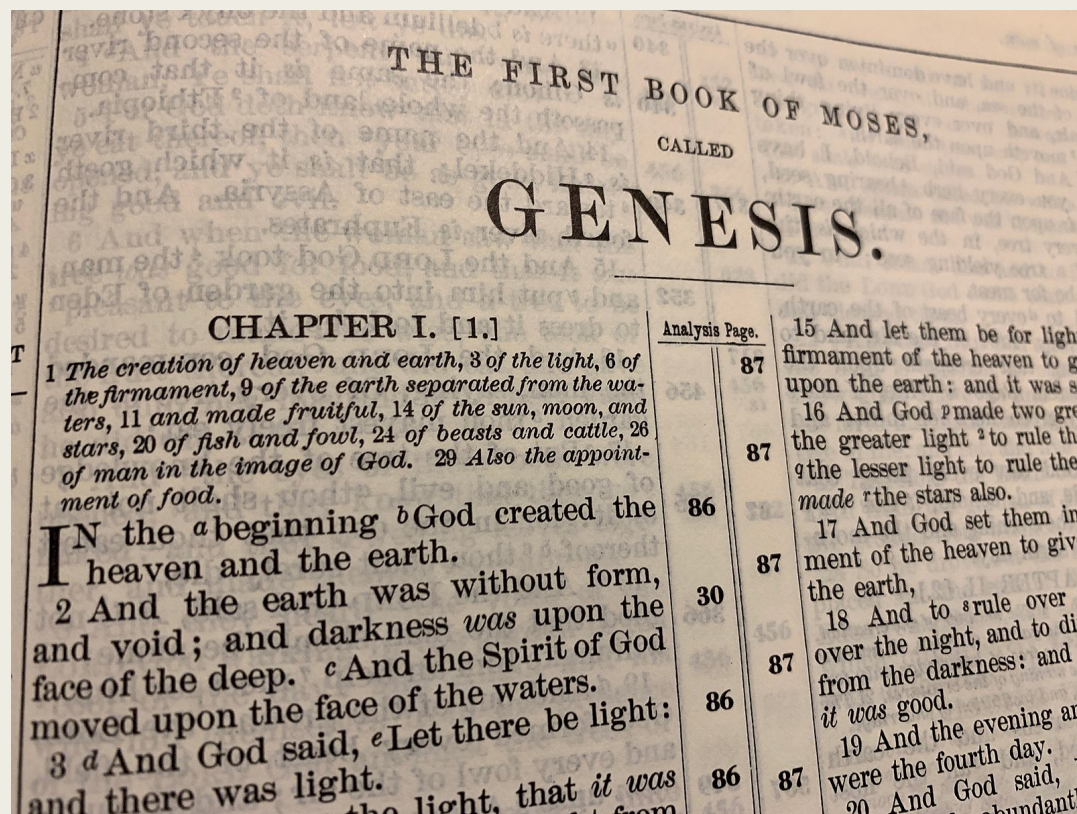
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graph TD; A[The Creation Myths in the Book of Genesis] --> B[The Babylonian Epic of Creation (Enuma Elish)]; B --> C[The Ugaritic Baal Cycle]; C --> D[The Combat Myth in the Hebrew Bible];
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The Babylonian Epic of Creation (Enuma Elish)

The Ugaritic Baal Cycle

The Combat Myth in the Hebrew Bible

Introducing the Book of Genesis



Introducing the Book of Genesis

Genesis 1-11: the primeval history (universal in scope).

Genesis 12-50: the ancestral or patriarchal narratives (with a narrower focus on Abraham and his descendants).

The book is almost exclusively composed of narratives (though note the genealogies and some poetry).

It introduces a number of significant themes (e.g., covenant, election, the nature of God, the relationship between God and humanity).

Introducing the Book of Genesis

Genesis is traditionally ascribed to Moses, but Mosaic authorship is now rejected by most biblical scholars.

Evidence suggests that the text, as part of the Pentateuch, draws on various sources and was edited over a long period of time.

The exilic and post-exilic periods were formative for the Pentateuch as a collection of five writings in their present form.

It is clear that the Pentateuch was recognized as an authoritative collection of writings by at least the 4th century BCE.

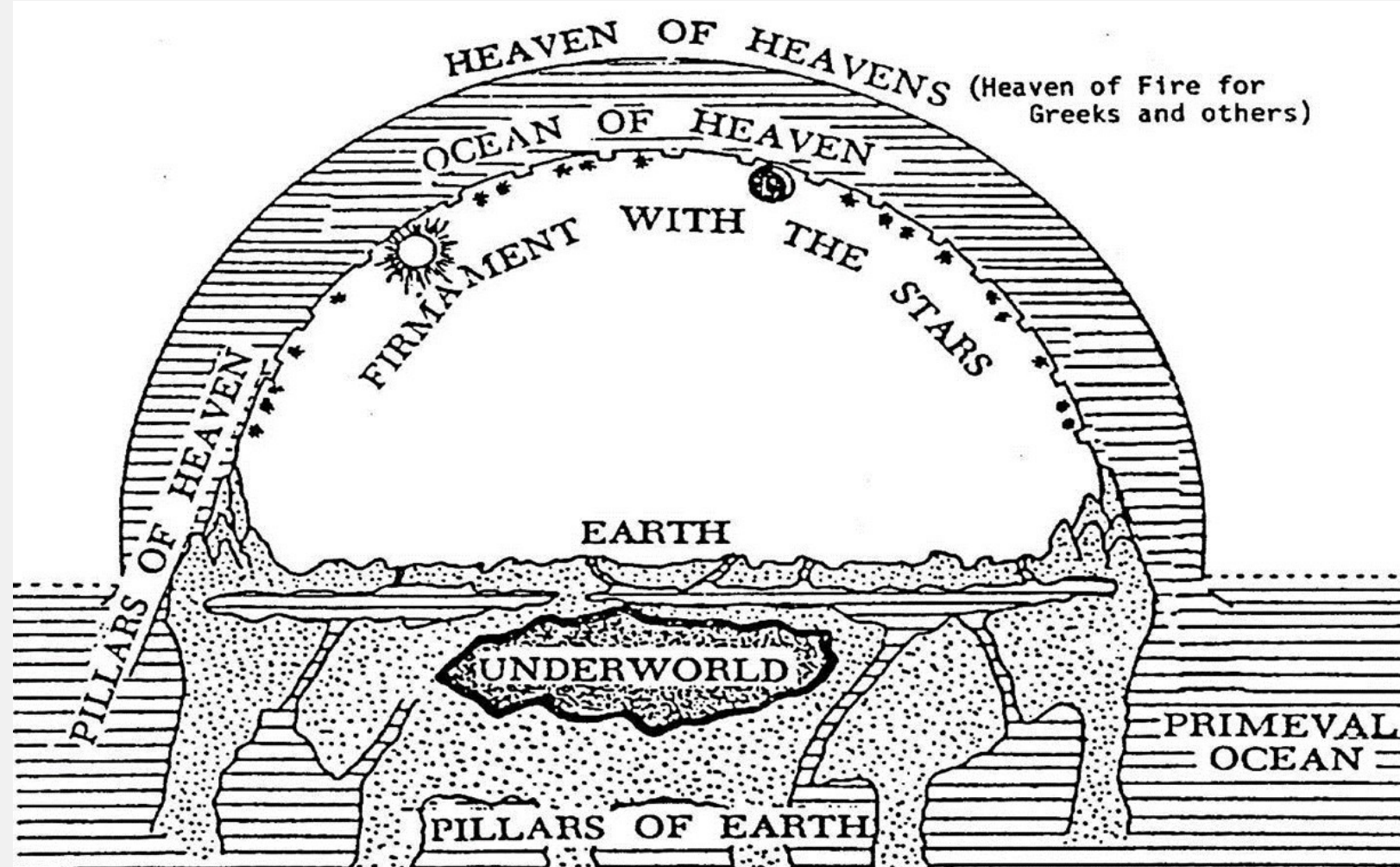
The Creation Stories in the Book of Genesis

- The creation stories in Genesis are not the only extant creation stories from the Ancient Near East (ANE).
- The Genesis creation stories are not even the only creation stories in the Bible. See, for example, Psalm 74:12-17; Proverbs 8:22-31; Isaiah 51:9 (we will return to some of these later in the session).
- The opening chapters of the Book of Genesis contain two creation myths: Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Genesis 2:4b-4:26.

Creation Story 1 (Genesis 1:1-2:4a)

- No explanation is given regarding God's purpose in creating the world, but the creation of humankind is clearly presented as the climax of the account (Gen. 1:26-30).
- The account conforms to a general ANE cosmology. Earth and sky are encircled by a cosmic sea.
- Genesis 1:1-2:4a is characterized by a repetitive and formulaic style ('And God said... Let there be... And it was so... And there was evening and there was morning, the *nth* day').

Hebrew Bible Cosmology



Creation Story 1: A Closer Look

Not a *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing) – the earth existed but was a ‘formless void’ (Genesis 1:1), without light and covered by the waters of ‘the deep’ (tehom). Image of watery chaos.

God creates by means of command – not so much a physical manufacturing as giving purpose and meaning to that which lacks order.

The acts of separating and naming suggest the activity of a sovereign deity.

Humankind is created in ‘God’s image’ and ‘likeness’ (Gen. 1:26, 27). The nature of the resemblance is not immediately apparent.



Creation Story 2 (Genesis 2:4b-4:26)

- This creation story works as an independent narrative.
- It is more 'colourful' and 'personal' than the first creation account. It is written in a more flowing narrative style, with speaking characters.
- Older scholarship has tended to characterize this account as more primitive than Genesis 1. Some scholars now propose that Genesis 2:4b-4:26 is later than Genesis 1:1-2:4a (which has nevertheless incorporated older motifs into the account).

Creation Story 2: A Closer Look

- The creation of the world occupies only a handful of verses (Genesis 2:4b-6).
- Man (*adam*) is created from 'the dust of the ground' (2:7). Compare this with the Egyptian and Babylonian myths in which human beings are created from clay.
- The creation of man precedes the creation of vegetation. Animals are created to be man's partner.
- The creation of the world occupies only a handful of the verses (2:4b-6) before a woman is created from one of the man's sides (traditionally: ribs).



	Genesis 1:1–2:3	Genesis 2:4b–25
Duration of Creation	• six days	• one day implied (<i>běyôm</i>, 2:4b)
Primordial Scenario	• dark, watery chaos	• desert-like oasis
Sequence of Creation	• light (nonsolar) • sky-dome (solid) • dry land • plants • lights set in the sky-dome • sea and sky creatures • land animals • humans	• man • garden with trees and river • land animals and birds • woman
Method of Creation	• God speaks, separates, names, and blesses	• Yahweh God forms, breathes, plants, puts to sleep, builds
Portrait of God	• transcendent • sovereign over creation • some anthropomorphism	• immanent • actively involved in creation • lots of anthropomorphism
Portrait of Humanity	• unspecified number of males and females created simultaneously • royals created in divine image, given dominion over the earth	• one <i>'ādām</i> from the <i>'adāmāh</i>; then one woman (<i>îššāh</i>) from the man (<i>îš</i>) in two separate acts • servants made caretakers of a garden

The Genesis Creation Stories: A Source- Critical Analysis

- What is the evidence that Genesis 1-2 represents the conflation of two (initially distinct) sources?
- There are contradictions about the order of creation.
- Genesis 5:1 seems to pick up where Genesis 2:4a left off. This points to a textual interruption.
- Duplications can also be detected (see, for example, the genealogies in Genesis 4:17-22 and Genesis 5).
- There are variations in style, vocabulary and theology.

Comparative (Ancient Near Eastern) Study

- Archaeological discoveries in the 19th and 20th centuries brought to light a number of creation myths from elsewhere in the ANE.
- These other creation myths originate from a similar geographical area and culture to the Genesis accounts. It therefore should come as no surprise that there are similarities between them.
- The comparative approach has been hugely successful in shedding light on the background and meaning of the biblical texts.

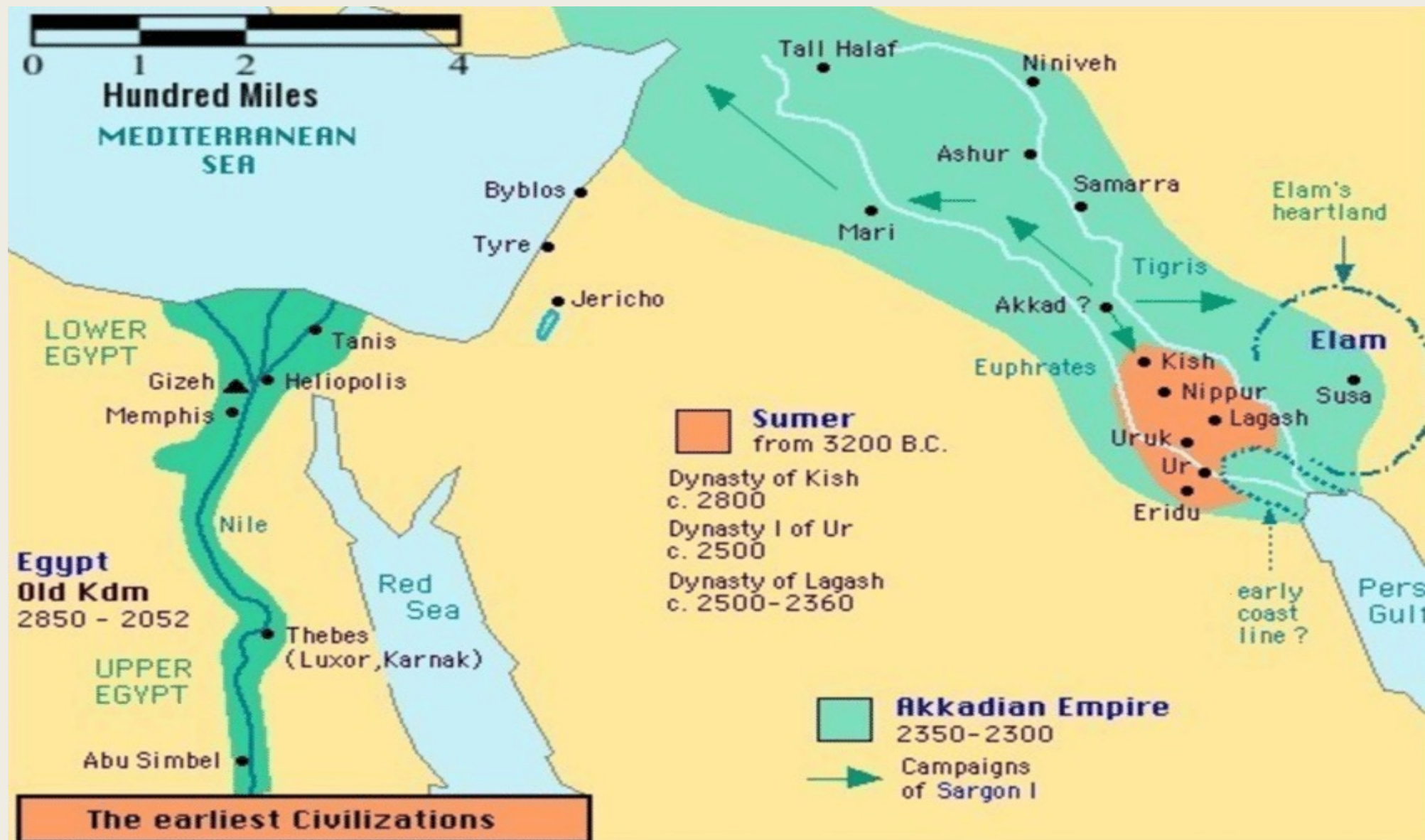
The Ancient Near East

Ancient Near East (ANE) is a loose term to describe the area of land stretching from the Mediterranean coast to modern day Iran and Iraq.

The Sumerian civilization was at its peak from the 3rd to the early 2nd millennium BCE.

Akkadians: a Semitic people whose influence began to increase towards the end of the 3rd millennium BCE.

The Akkadian Empire was replaced during the 2nd millennium by the Assyrians in northern Mesopotamia and the Babylonians in southern Mesopotamia.

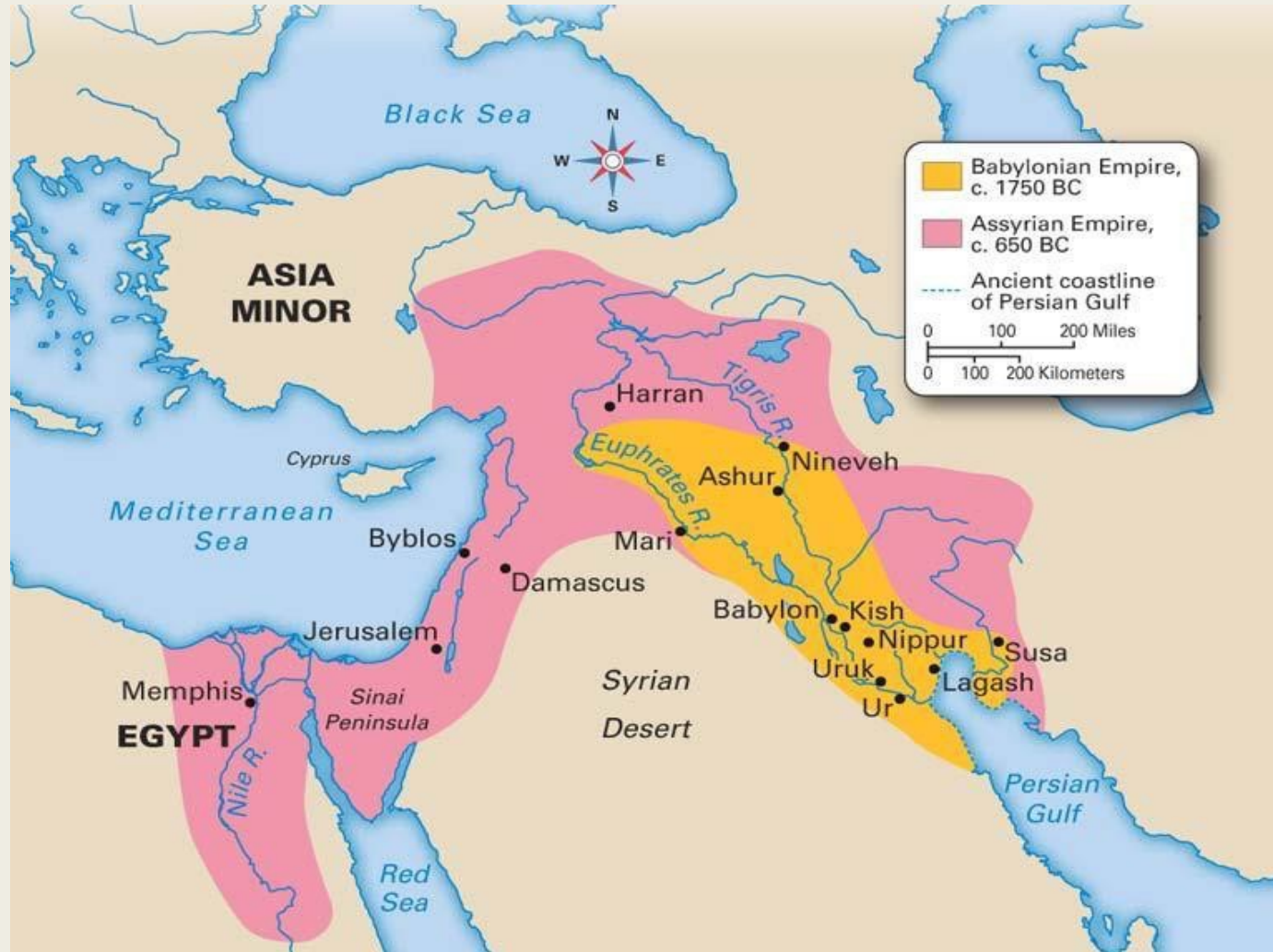


THE AKKADIAN EMPIRE, c. 2334 - 2218 BCE



WORLD HISTORY
ENCYCLOPEDIA

The Ancient Near East



Enuma Elish – ‘When On High’

- The Babylonian Epic of Creation – one of the fullest and most complex of the creation stories from the ANE.
- It was recovered in 1849 in the ruined Library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (Mosul, Iraq), though it was already known before this.
- This version is dated to the 7th century BCE, but the Epic likely dates to the late second millennium BCE (during the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar I?).
- There is some evidence that the myth was recited during the Babylonian New Year Festival, both in Assyria and Babylonia.



The Library of Ashurbanipal (British Museum)



Enuma Elish: Outline

- Story opens at a time when heaven and earth have not yet been created.
- The water of the sea (Tiamat) and subterranean fresh water (Apsu) mingle and give birth to the great gods. The children become too noisy, and Apsu dies when he plans to kill them.
- Tiamat rises up to avenge his death, and she creates an army of creatures representing chaos and evil. Their leader Qingu gains control of the Tablet of Destinies (source of the gods' power).
- The hero-god is Marduk who defeats (through magical spells and weapons) the forces of evil embodied in Tiamat and her army.
- Marduk regains the stolen Tablet, controls the army, *and then seeks to put the world in order*. He arranges the heavenly bodies, he builds Babylon and the centre of religion, and he creates humankind with the help of his father Ea (using the blood of Qingu).
- In celebration of his achievements, he is acclaimed with many names by other gods and receives epithets such as Bel and Lord (= leader of the assembly of great gods).

Enuma Elish: The Opening (Tablet I)

*When on high the heaven had not been named, Firm
ground below had not been called by name, Naught but
primordial Apsu, their begetter,*

(And) Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,

Their waters commingling as a single body;

*No reed hut had been matted, no marsh land had
appeared,*

*When no gods whatever had been brought into being,
Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined — Then it was
that the gods were formed within them. . .*

Enuma Elish: Marduk vs. Tiamat (Tablet IV)

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.*

*He released the arrow, it tore her belly,
It cut through her insides, splitting the heart.
Having thus subdued her, he extinguished her life.*

Enuma Elish: The Creation (Tablets IV- VI)

He cast down her carcass to stand upon it. . .

He split her like a shellfish into two parts:

Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky. . .

The Moon he caused to shine, the night (to him) entrusting.

He appointed him a creature of the night to signify the Days. . .

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!’

Marduk vs Tiamat

Relief drawing from Palace of Sennacherib, Nimroud, Nineveh -
cleaned-up version (1853)



Marduk (/Ninurta) vs Tiamat

Neo-Assyrian cylinder
seal, 10th-8th century BCE
(British Museum).

The seal probably illustrates a scene from the epic of creation in which the forces of chaos (led by Tiamat) are defeated by a god representing cosmic order (probably Ninurta).

- A snout-nosed and horned reptile that faces left (Tiamat as a dragon) runs along the bottom of the seal.
- A bearded god (Ninurta?) runs along the reptile's body, holding a six-pronged thunderbolt in his right hand and two arrows in his left hand.
- Behind him is a smaller bearded god (holding a spear) and on the tail of the reptile stands a goddess. To the left of her head is a small globe and to the right a crescent.



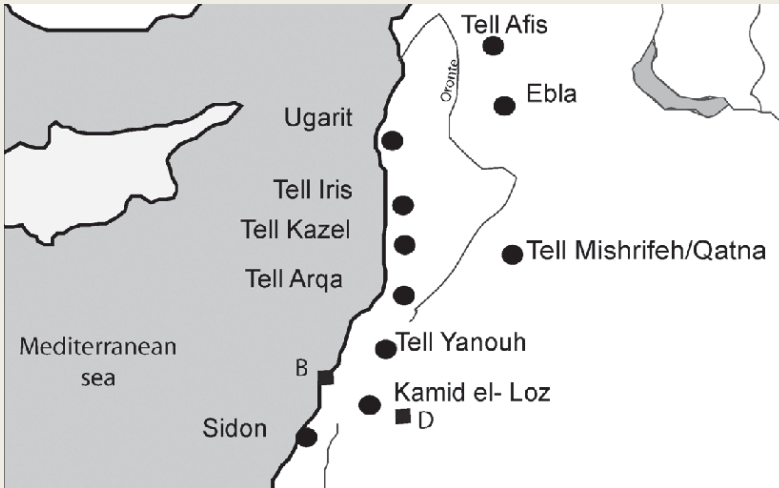
The Struggle Against Chaos

- The tension between order and disorder is a central theme in *Enuma Elish*.
- Cosmic and political order is established (and the creation of heaven and earth is made possible) through victory over primordial chaos, as embodied in the figure of Tiamat (watery chaos).
- The idea that primordial chaos takes the form of a 'monster' that must be defeated in order to establish order/creation is found throughout the ancient Near Eastern mythology.
- This pattern is known as the *Chaoskampf* ('struggle against chaos'). It is also known as the 'combat myth'.
- The *Enuma Elish* is a prime example of the *Chaoskampf*.

The Combat Myth in Genesis 1

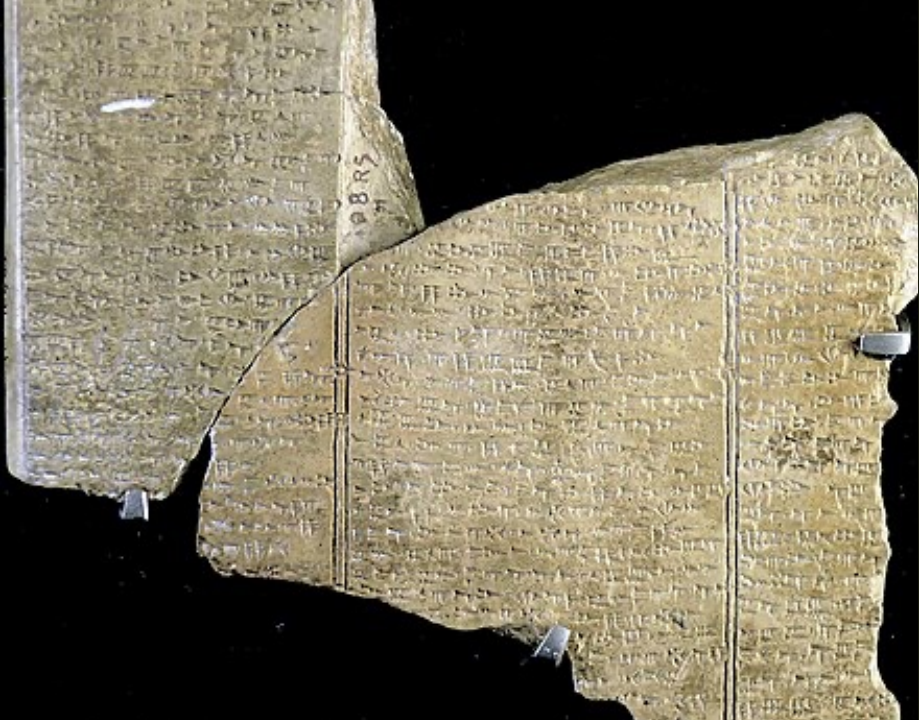
- The Akkadian *tiamat* and the Hebrew *tehom* likely derive from the common proto-Semitic root *thm* – an allusion to a mythic character?
- In both Genesis 1 and the Enuma Elish creation involves the separation of the waters of chaos and the formation of a ‘firmament’ (see Genesis 1:6-7). See also the ‘sea monsters’ of Genesis 1:21.
- While there are significant similarities between, the major differences between them cannot be overlooked.
- Genesis 1 deconstructs and re-presents the combat myth. It acts as a polemical repudiation of the creation myths of other ANE cultures.

The Ugaritic Baal Cycle



- The Canaanite myth cycle is centred on the rise of Baal (the storm deity, literally 'Lord') to kingship.
- Six tablets and various fragments were found over the course of three years (1930-33) in Ugarit, also called Ras Shamra (mid-to-late 2nd millennium BCE).





The Ugaritic Baal Cycle

Tablets I and II narrate Baal's conflict with Yam (literally, 'Sea').

The great gods live on Mount Zephon (north of Ugarit) and beneath it lies the source of the rivers (cosmic wellspring and the dwelling-place of the father of the gods). Baal rides the clouds and battles for supremacy with the help of the goddess Anat.

His enemies are Yam (Sea) and Mot (Death), both male.

Yam has allies in the form of serpent figures (including Litan).

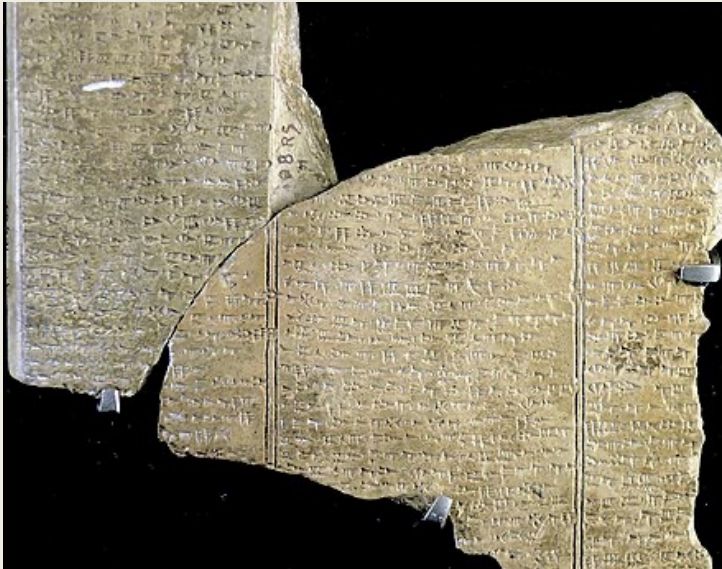
Baal's defeat of these opponents leads to the building of his new palace in Ugarit.





The Ugaritic Baal Cycle

- Tablets III and IV narrate Baal's attainment of a temple
- Tablets V and VI narrate Baal's conflict with Mot ('Death'). Baal is killed, which causes drought and sterility (=lack of life). Baal is brought back to life after his sister (Anat) defeats Death.



The central theme of the Baal Cycle bears resemblance to Marduk's battle with Tiamat.

The names of the enemies, including Yam and Tannin, are found in some of the Psalms (including Psalm 29) and are specific to the Ugaritic myths.

Versions of this myth were recited in temples in Syria and Palestine

The Baal Cycle as Cosmogony

The Baal cycle lacks an explicit description of the process of creation. For this reason, some scholars have argued that it cannot be described as a creation myth.

However, Baal's death highlights the necessity of his kingship to creation. Without Baal the earth withers. Baal seems to have responsibility for the maintenance of creation.

Baal's victory ensures political stability, while fertility is necessary for civilization. As it is concerned with the order of the cosmos, the Baal cycle can be regarded as a cosmogony (= regarding the origins of the cosmos).

The Combat Myth in the Baal Cycle

- Yamm ('Sea') = watery chaos
- 'When you struck down *Litan*, the fleeing snake, Annihilated the twisting snake, The powerful one with seven heads' (1.5 I 1–3).
- Litan (= the sea serpent - Leviathan) is another name for Yam and represents the power of chaos.
- As a chaos/sea monster, Yam poses a threat to the orderliness of the world.

Baal stele from Ugarit, mid 2nd millennium BCE (The Louvre, Paris)



The Combat Myth in the Hebrew Bible

- There is no full-blown combat myth (*Chaoskampf*) in the Hebrew Bible. That is not to say, however, that no version of this myth existed in ancient Israel.
- Fragments of the chaos myth can be detected in many parts of the Hebrew Bible.
- All instances of the combat motif within the Hebrew Bible reinforce the authority and dominion of YHWH.

The Combat Myth in Psalm 74:12-17

¹² Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the earth.¹³ **You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.** ¹⁴ **You crushed the heads of Leviathan;** you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. ¹⁵ You cut openings for springs and torrents; you dried up ever-flowing streams.¹⁶ Yours is the day, yours also the night; you established the luminaries and the sun.¹⁷ You have fixed all the bounds of the earth; you made summer and winter.

References to Leviathan occur six times in the Hebrew Bible: Isaiah 27:1 (twice), Psalm 74:14; 104:26; Job 3:8 and 41:1.

It is the cognate of the Ugaritic term 'Litan'.

The Combat Myth in Isaiah 27:1

On that day the Lord with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea.

- This can be compared with the Baal cycle - both Leviathan and Litan are 'fleeing' and 'twisting' serpentine creatures.
- Targum (Aramaic) translators replace 'Leviathan' with the names of Pharaoh, Sennacherib, and a third unnamed king.

*THE DESTRUCTION OF
LEVIATHAN*

GUSTAVE DORÉ (1865)



Conclusions

- There are two creation stories in the Book of Genesis
- Creation in the Hebrew Bible is described with the aid of metaphors and myths that resemble those found in other ANE cultures (especially Babylon and Canaan). God imposes order on the waters of chaos.
- We should not ignore or play down the similarities between the biblical creation stories and their Near Eastern counterparts.
- The similarities between them suggest a significant degree of cultural continuity among the civilizations and societies of ANE. The biblical texts certainly did not develop in a cultural vacuum.