

# Does Genesis 1-11 share details with surrounding ANE mythology?

Absolutely. All throughout the ANE (ancient near east) we find creation mythology with direct parallels to that found in the Hebrew Scriptures. For many scholars, some of this literature predates the Hebrew scriptures by thousands of years. We will see some very significant overlaps of the first Genesis creation story with **Egyptian mythology** below. We will also look at the Gilgamesh epic and compare it to the garden story and see how Atrahasis is similar to both the garden and flood stories. The Canaanites had their own mythology as well, as reflected in the Ugaritic **Ba'lu Cycle**. That story features the Canaanite god Ba'al Hadad being repeatedly challenged by other characters and succeeding over and against them. In the first part he overcomes Yam, the Canaanite god of the sea, who sought to become the most powerful of all. Eventually he gains dominion and even after he dies his successors are not as kingly as he is. Then we have the **Enuma Elish**, which as we have seen, is an attempt at establishing Marduk as the chief Babylonian god. It features his battle and defeat of Tiamat (the sea) and subsequent creation of humans and our world out of the slain, divine carcass. It goes back further in story than any other creation myths in the region to a time before even the hierarchal ranks of the gods are established. As we saw, Genesis cuts right through all of this in short order.

**Atrahasis:** is an epic written in Akkadian, the language of Babylon. An old version survives on clay tablets usually assigned to the 1600s B.C. but this ancient story likely predates this time period. The first tablet describes the Sumerian gods of sky (Anu), earth (Enlil) and water (Enki). Enlil has lesser divine beings (dingirs) till the earth and build its water systems. Eventually they rebel, after digging up the beds for the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, refusing to do strenuous labor. Rather than punish them, Enki suggests humans are created to do such work. Mami the mother goddess is assigned the task and through a combination of clay, the spit of other gods and the flesh and blood of a voluntarily slain god, seven pairs of male and female humans are born. The second tablet features Enlil sending famine and drought at regular intervals to deal

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with overpopulation and the noisy humans. Eventually he decides to destroy these annoying humans with a flood. Tablet three depicts Enki warning Atrahasis, the hero of the story, to dismantle his house and build a multi-tiered boat of specific dimensions sealed with pitch. He is told to include two of each animals on board. He boards with his family and animals and the storm and flood, which lasted for seven days, was so severe even the gods were afraid. After the flood ends Atrahasis offers sacrifices to the gods. Enlil was of course upset that some humans survived but a bargain was struck. In order to control the population, women will now be barren, demons will cause miscarriages and steal babies and some women will remain lifelong virgins, consecrated to the gods. Atrahasis lives in paradise apart from these newly created humans.

The parallels to Genesis along with significant differences are obvious especially when it comes to the flood account and Noah's ark. Here one God (Enki) preserves life against the wishes of another (Enlil). In Genesis, we have one principle God who creates everything and has sovereign control over it. Atrahasis features a fully heavenly host and hierarchy of divine beings pertinent to creation. In Genesis 1, God creates humans in his own image, he wants us to be fruitful and multiply, and shares his creation with us and gives us dominion over the earth. In Atrahasis the creation of humans is result of a rebellious divine soap opera and accomplished through a recipe involving spit, flesh and blood of a slain god and clay. We are meant to be slaves or perform strenuous labor for the gods, at least one of which who engages in regular population control—which has the exact opposite effect of filling the earth. It is my contention that early Genesis should be understood as a Jewish-theological retelling of older myths using ancient literary topos.

**The Epic of Gilgamesh:** older than Atrahasis but some think it's flood account is thought to have been added later and possibly borrowed from its version. At any rate, tablet eleven features Utnapishtim (as opposed to Atrahasis or Noah) as the principal character. Gilgamesh is seeking eternal life and Utnapishtim explains how he was granted it. He was warned by Enki to build a boat of specific dimensions and seal it with pitch and bitumen (very similar to the

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Genesis version). His family, all the animals of the field and his craftsmen were taken on board. After 6 days and nights the storm ended and all humans turned into clay. His boat, like the Biblical version, lodges on a mountain and he releases a dove, swallow and raven. When the raven fails to return he opens the ark and releases its inhabitants. He offers sacrifices to the gods who are pleased by the aroma (as does Noah who's roasting animal flesh was a pleasing to the Lord). Ishtar vows never to forget this time. The parallels to Genesis are extensive and don't stop there. The story of Gilgamesh begins in tablet one with the people crying out about his oppression of them. As a solution, Enkidu was made from the dust/clay in the ground as a rival. He lives with the animals in the wild but a woman is put in his path. She seduces him and after a lot of sex he loses his animal strength and gains the ability to reason (becomes like one of us?). Like Adam motivated by Eve's voice to eat, Enkidu listens to Shamhat and eats bread which he did not know. After his encounter with Shamhat the animals are no longer comfortable with him. Upon leaving his prior residence, he first covers his nakedness. What is more is that much later, Gilgamesh has his plant which he hopes to bring him eternal life, stolen by a serpent as he bathed. There are, of course, tremendous differences between the two accounts but the common themes they share are scarcely coincidental.<sup>i</sup>

**The Sumerian version of the Gilgamesh Epic** has a similar flood story but features Ziusudra as opposed to Noah (Genesis), Atrahasis (Atrahasis) or Utnapishtim (Gilgamesh). **The Egyptians** had a story in, *The Book of the Heavenly Cow*, which features Ra sending the goddess Hathor to slaughter humans which had rebelled against him. He repented of his decision and basically intoxicated Hathor with beer dyed red to look like blood. She woke up and was now a loving goddess and friend of humanity. Flood or destruction of humanity stories were very common in ancient near east and several versions of many of these stories are evident as they evolved over time. For many scholars the seams and details creating friction within the story itself indicate the Genesis flood account was multiple stories about Noah put together. Of course, it is difficult to date most ancient works, or the first edition of them nor can we understand their full compositional histories but the flood story in the Hebrew Scriptures appear to be much later than the other one.<sup>ii</sup>

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In the **Instruction of Merikare**, there are many parallels to the first creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:3. John Walton cites a snippet of it from Miriam Lichtheim's translation:

Well tended is mankind—god's cattle,  
He made sky and earth for their sake,  
He subdues the water monster,  
He made breath for their noses to live.  
They are his images, who came from his body, He shines in the sky for their sake;  
He made for them plants and cattle, Fowl and fish to feed them. . . .  
He makes daylight for their sake, He sails by to see them.  
He has built his shrine around them, When they weep he hears.

Humans have the breath of life, are made in his image and seem to be the goal or the climax of creation as other things were made for them. Walton writes, "This is the best-known and oldest example of human beings in general being described as in the image of god."<sup>iii</sup> Arnold writes, "the deity subdued chaos (or "the water monster"), created heaven and earth for the sake of humanity, breathed life into their nostrils, created them according to his likeness ("images" from his body), and finally, that he created for them plants and animals, fish and fowl for food."

On the next several pages there will be charts from various scholars outlining the overlap of Genesis 1-3 and 6-9 with other ancient mythology. I took my own stab at creating the first chart for Genesis 1:1-2:3 as I wanted to list the source texts for each detail. Over time, I hope to build this to become a more extensive and comprehensive showcase of the breadth of ancient literary parallels to early Genesis, many of which appear to predate the Hebrew creation stories themselves. It is in this cultural context that we should seek to understand our own creation mythologies.

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## Genesis 1:1-2:3 Parallels:

### **Genesis: God creates by his mere command.<sup>iv</sup>**

**Memphite Theology** Egyptian god Ptah (creates by divine word and is satisfied (or rested).

**Enuma Elish:** Marduk conjures a star by his divine word and has it disappear the same way.

**Coffin Text II:** The word of Nun of Nu makes life . . . Autumns' command creates animal life..

**Ptah and Sekhmet:** In his mind Ptah says, 'Look, may they come into being'.<sup>v</sup>

### **Genesis: God separates the waters from above and below.**

**Coffin text:** The air god Shu holds up the sky and separated heaven from earth.

### **God rests from his creative work.<sup>vi</sup>**

**Memphite Theology** Egyptian god Ptah creates by divine word and is satisfied (or rested) after.

**Enuma Elish:** creation closes with the building of a temple as a place of rest. (Arnold pg. 48)

**The Ba'lu Cycle** also closes with a temple being created and though it does not explicitly state rest.

### **Genesis: Let a Dome Separate the Cosmic Waters**

**Enuma Elish** Marduk splits Tiamat's (sea goddess) carcass in half creating the heavens and earth

### **Genesis: We are created in God's Image**

**Instruction of Merikare:** We are made in god's image, from his body.

**Instruction of Ani:** Less direct but people are in the likeness of god if they listen to others.

### **Genesis: God names things (e.g. day and night).<sup>vii</sup>**

**Enuma Elish:** Absu and Tiamat exist before heaven, the netherworld below or any gods had names

### **Genesis: Humans are the climax or purpose of Gd creation:**

**Instruction of Merikare:** The sky, cattle, daylight, plants and material world was made for us.

The Chart below is transcribed from John Sodem and John Miller, "In the Beginning. . . We Misunderstood: Interpreting Genesis 1 in its original Context."

<b>Figure 10. Parallels Between Biblical, Egyptian and Mesopotamian Creation Accounts</b>		
<b>Genesis 1:1-23</b>	<b>Egyptian Accounts</b>	<b>Mesopotamian Accounts</b>
Formless, void, darkness, deep (1:2)	Watery, unlimited, darkness, imperceptibility	Infinite (?) watery chaos, (darkness?)
"The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (1:2)	The god of wind/breath on the waters	
God creates by divine command (1:3,6,9,11,14-15, 20, 24)	Atum (or Ptah) speaks creation into existence	Marduk destroys and restores a constellation with his word, creation is done by crafting
Light is created before the sun is in place (1:3)	Light is created before the sun rises in its place	Light, day and night exist before the luminaries are created
God creates by separating the waters to create an atmosphere (1:6-7)	The gods create by separating waters to create an atmosphere	The gods create by separating the waters to create the atmosphere
God creates by separating the land from the waters (1:9)	Initially in creation, the first little hillock of land (primordial mound) rises out of the water	
God creates plants (1:11-12)		
God creates the sun, moon, and stars for signs, seasons, days, and years, and to give light (day 4) after the light (day 1) (1:14-18)	The sun rises on the first day	The gods create sun, moon and stars for signs, seasons, days and years, and to give light
God creates fish, birds, and animal life (1:20-25)	The gods create plants, fish, birds and animal life	
God creates mankind in his image (1:26-28)	The gods create man in their image, formed out of clay	The gods formed man from clay (and blood of a god) to do their work
After completing creation, God rests (2:1-3)	Ptah rested after completing his work of creation (Memphite Theology)	The gods rest after man is created, and gods typically rest in temples they build
Out of desolate, empty, dark waters, God creates light, atmosphere, and plants, the luminaries in the heavens, creatures, and man, and then he rests (1:2-2:3)	Out of unlimited, imperceptible, dark waters, the god creates himself (including light), atmosphere, land and luminaries in the heavens (the sun rises), followed by plants, creatures, and man and then he rests	From primeval waters the gods create atmosphere, land, luminaries in the heavens, creatures, and man, and then they rest
God as creator claims sovereignty over all creation and so over all nations (1:2-2:3)	The creator god claims sovereign rule of state	The gods claim authority over their realm of creating

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**The Garden Story: Genesis 2-3.** John Walton offered the following “summary observations about humanity” as a chart describing contact points between the garden story and Enkidu in the Gilgamesh Epic. <sup>viii</sup>

	Humanity	Genesis 2–3	<i>Gilgamesh Epic</i>
STATUS	Composition	Man formed from dust (Gen 2:7)	Enkidu formed from clay
	Innocence	Man and woman naked and unaware	Enkidu naked and unaware
M/F	Male/female relationships	Woman shown to be ontological match	Woman provides sexual experience that civilizes Enkidu
ANIMALS	Relations to animals	Man names animals	Enkidu companion of animals
	Distinct from animals	Animals not suitable allies—man is not a beast	Animals reject Enkidu—he is not a beast
	Clothing provision	Man and woman clothed by God	Enkidu clothed by Shamhat to civilize
DIVINE RELATIONS	Connection to God through sacred space	Man and woman serve as priests in sacred space	Shamhat serves in sacred space and takes Enkidu back to sacred space <sup>13</sup>
	Acquisition of wisdom	Man and woman gain knowledge of good and evil	Enkidu gains reason and understanding
	Similarity to divine	Man and woman become like God in wisdom	Enkidu becomes handsome like a god

Later in the story Gilgamesh secures an herb that would either grant him eternal life or restore his youth -- his last chance at immortality and it is stolen by a serpent. Gilgamesh at last comes to his senses and reaches a reconciliation with his mortality. After the flood Uta-napishti is taken and sent to the mouth of the rivers which is an Eden like setting.<sup>ix</sup>

We have already witnessed how Genesis 1:1-2:3 turns ancient cosmogonies on their heads and we appear to have the same feature happening in Genesis 2:4-25. It is of note that whereas Enkidu is a companion to animals, none are suitable for Adam. Adam and Even were removed from the Garden for disobeying God whereas Enkidu appears to be settled in a garden like place after the flood. Sex is what “civilizes” Enkidu but in the Bible sex or marriages brings people back to their primordial whole. Unlike Shamhat, Eve was not just a mere plot device used to relocate Adam from inside Eden to outside of it. She was meant to be a co-laborer with him, sharing a sacred space and joined as one flesh. Walton writes, Again, Genesis turns the discussion upside down. Genesis is thus using common literary motifs to convey the truths about humanity that are the familiar topics of the conversation in the ancient world. They are operating in the same room of discourse, but Genesis has rearranged all the furniture. “ Ancient readers and listeners to this story would naturally get all of these cultural references we would not if we were unaware of the epic of Gilgamesh. enesis is far more interested in the theological dumping of ancient myths on their head and establishing the

primacy of the Jewish God than it is giving us a factual and precise scientific overview of how said Deity created the first two humans and the world.

Here is a list of **Garden Story and Flood Account Parallels** to the Atrahasis account in Genesis 2-3 and 6-9. The extant form of this list is from [Peter Enns](#) and it modified that found in Frank Batto's *Slaying the Dragon* (pp 51-52). This version is more condensed and it is not worth me reinventing the wheel. What is of special note is Batto's take on the Garden story overall where he rejects the typical interpretation: "The thesis I am expounding here stands, of course, in direct opposition to the opinion commonly encountered in commentaries on this passage, namely, that the garden was a place of sublime happiness for "our first parents" prior to their "fall.""<sup>x</sup>

Atrahasis	Genesis 2-9
Agriculture by irrigation	Eden watered by irrigation
Lesser gods (Igigi) are original laborers	Yahweh is original laborer (plants garden)
High gods (Anunaki) enjoy privileges of divine rank	Yahweh has a private garden with special trees of life and wisdom
Primeval humans ( <i>Lullû</i> ) created as laborers for gods --modeled from clay + rebel god's blood --implicitly immortal (no natural death)	Primeval human ( <i>ha-'ādām</i> ) created to care for Yahweh's garden --modeled from clay + divine breath --potentially immortal (tree of life)
Institution of marriage	Institution of marriage
<i>Lullû</i> rebel against the divine sovereign	<i>Ha-'ādām</i> rebels against Yahweh
<i>Lullû</i> punished: life diminished by plague, drought, and famine	<i>Ha-'ādām</i> punished: life diminished by exile from garden, hard labor, and denial of access to tree of life
The god Enlil sends a flood to drown out humanity's noise and control over-population	Yahweh sends a flood to punish humanity's wickedness and re-create the cosmos
The god Enki tells Atrahasis to build an ark to escape the flood	Yahweh tells Noah to build an ark to escape the flood
Atrahasis survives the flood and offers a sacrifice	Noah survives the flood and offers a sacrifice
The gods smell the sacrifice and bless the survivors	Yahweh smells the sacrifice and blesses creation
Enlil is reconciled to humanity	Yahweh is reconciled to flawed humanity
Limitations imposed on humans: <i>Lullû</i> become normal humans	Limitation imposed on humans: <i>ha-'ādām</i> has a 120-year lifespan
Sign of divine goodwill: the goddess Nintu's fly necklace	Sign of divine goodwill: duration of seasons (and Yahweh's bow [9:12-17])

Most aspects of the primeval history in Genesis 1-11 find many parallels to ANE literature and several of them occur as doublets in the Biblical accounts.



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<sup>i</sup> Now many conservative exegetes might be quick to posit a solution where the Biblical view gets creation right and all of these other stories are developments and perversions of the correct version. If you assume God has authored Genesis and it is infallible in all literal details then this solution is a natural corollary to take (or be force fit into!). The problem with this is from everything we have seen, the creation accounts have no real interest in modern science/history. They are theological statements about God and per the evidence that we do have, the Biblical stories appear later than some of these other stories. It is best simply to treat the Genesis creation accounts in their ancient context, rather than impose upon them ours.

<sup>ii</sup> Bernard Frank Batto, *Slaying the Dragon*, p. 40, “In *Slaying the Dragon*, wrote, “In each case, the authors of the three Babylonian epic myths, *Gilgamesh*, *Atrahasis*, and *Enuma elish*, were shown to have been highly creative thinkers who transformed their societies’ religio-politico-literary traditions into universal statements about reality, such that they became paradigmatic for all succeeding generations of that society. The story and intention may have been different in each case, yet all three employed a similar method. Each of these authors consciously and deliberately adapted prior mythic stories and motifs, and created new ones as well, as they crafted their own new literary compositions.”

<sup>iii</sup> Walton, *Genesis as Ancient Cosmogony*

<sup>iv</sup> Bill Arnold, *Genesis* (New Cambridge), p. 39: “God’s method of creation – divine *fiat*, or spoken word – is known elsewhere in the ancient world. The Babylonian lord of creation, Marduk, proves his worth as divine king by means of a star, which is created at his command and disappears at his command. Similarly in the Memphite theology of Egypt, the god Ptah creates by means of his heart and tongue, which is to say, by the word of his mouth. Like a king issuing a decree, the creative orders are given and fulfilled. In this case, however, there is no one else there to receive the command and carry out the order. This is truly a creative command unlike others, because the very speech of God brings something into existence that did not have independent, previous existence. It is also interesting that this is the only time in Gen 1 that creation occurs by *fiat* alone. Elsewhere in the chapter God speaks and then takes action to “make” or otherwise bring about the feature of creation.

<sup>v</sup> This and the Coffin text information were attained from John Walton’s, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*” pp. 168-169. He also notes on p 169, “In contrast to Egyptian literature, it is typically claimed that Mesopotamian cosmologies do not evidence creation by the spoken word. This assessment, however, is colored by what is understood as “creation.” If creation was viewed in terms of functional ontology, it would not entail deity calling material objects into existence by the spoken word but would refer to establishing and assigning functions by *fiat*. And if we grant this definition, Mesopotamian literature is replete with creation by the spoken word, in that the decreeing of the destinies is always accomplished in this way.”

<sup>vi</sup> Genesis is seen as a cessation of creation. These temple are places to worship these deities and Genesis invites us at the end to join in God’s rest just as the people join the gods in their temples. The function is the same.

<sup>vii</sup> Naming and existence were often equated in the ANE. The names give an object its function Arnold pg 40

<sup>viii</sup> John Walton in *the Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human origins Debate*, p. 111

<sup>ix</sup> Walton, *Lost World*, pg 114 “Not only is Adam “taken” as Uta-napishti is (Gen 2:15); he is also situated at the source of the rivers (Gen 2:10). In *Gilgamesh*, Uta-napishti is “settled”<sup>22</sup> there, whereas the word used for the placement of Adam is even more significant, since it is the causative form of the verb “to rest” (*nwh*). In God’s presence, Adam finds rest—an important allusion to what characterizes sacred space. Both Adam and Uta-napishti are placed in sacred space, where they have access to life.”

<sup>x</sup> Frank Batto, *Slaying the Dragon*, pg 52