

“In the Beginning...”

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In the beginning, man wanted to create stories explaining where he came from and how the world came into existence. Stories of creation can be found in almost every culture. In the Babylonian Enuma Elish and the book of Genesis—which originated in the same part of the world—one finds two very different stories about the creation of man. These two stories of creation contrast the two societies that created them: the chaotic lives of servitude of the Babylonians and the lives of the recently freed Jewish people.

The gods of Enuma Elish do not seem very “God-like” to a Western reader. These gods are continuously quarreling and feuding and do not seem to be omniscient. In addition, in Tablet 1 we see that the gods are not immortal: “Ea unfastened his belt, took off his crown, Took away his mantle of radiance and put it on himself. He held Apsu down and slew him” (Enuma Elish 12). These gods seem willing to accept leadership from another god as when “they rejoiced, they proclaimed ‘Marduk is King’” (Enuma Elish 13)! Though Babylon is where written law was first introduced the government was still despotic. A strong leader and a very unorganized remainder of government characterize the despotism form of government; the disorder that must have existed in Babylonian government is reflected in this story.

The God of Genesis is portrayed very differently. God is a forgiving God. One sees this when God states, “of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not

eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Genesis 2:17). However, when Adam and Eve do eat the apple—though he does make them mortal—God allows them to live. God also does not strike down Cain. The God of Genesis is also a personable God. God talks directly to the humans and Adam and Eve "hear god walking through the garden in the cool of day" (Genesis 3:8). Not only does this passage show a God who interacts directly with humans, it also shows a God who created a comfortable place for the humans to live. It is believed that the book of Genesis was written at the time of the Exodus. The book of Genesis seems consistent with writing a people recently released from servitude would produce. For a people who were en route to create a new independent culture, a rational and forgiving God would be an excellent role model for his followers to try to emulate.

The Enuma Elish focuses almost completely on the god side of the story.

Man's only mention comes in the final tablet:

"Let me put blood together, and make bones too.
Let me set up primeval man. Man shall me his name.
Let me create a primeval man.
The work of gods shall be imposed (on him), and so they shall be at leisure.
Let me change the ways of the gods miraculously,
So they are gathered as one yet divided in two." (Enuma Elish, 18)

When the Babylonian gods decided to create man, he was created solely to be a servant to the gods. This was an important concept to the Babylonian society because one class of society worked as servants to a royal class. A people who believed that men were originally created to be subordinate would be less likely to question the authority of kings.

In contrast the book of Genesis focuses much more the human side of the story where man is given dominion over the earth. In the book of Genesis, God gives his people dominion over Earth:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. (Genesis 1:27-30)

In the Enuma Elish the gods create humans to be their servants; however, in Genesis God makes the Earth and gives man control of his creation. God giving away his creation gives the reader an impression of a trusting God. After the beginning, the entire book of Genesis focuses on human actions. Instead of God causing humans to act, humans cause God to act. Cain's action causes God to respond. The Jewish people had just escaped from oppression. For years they had been subject to the wrath of the Egyptians. Now that the Hebrew people were no longer secondary in society, they produced writing in which they were the focus of attention instead of some other being or beings.

The Enuma Elish mirrors the subordinate disordered lives of the Babylonians that created it. Genesis mirrors the newfound freedom and idealism of the Jewish people who created it after years of oppression. These two writings contrast the differences between the ancient Babylonians and the ancient Hebrews. Creation stories give great insight into the lives of the people who created them.