

BIBLICAL LITERATURE AND CONTEMPORARY PARALLELS: ALIKE BUT DIFFERENT

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Many literary works were composed in the Middle East in the Second Millennium BCE, including the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Babylonian creation epic Enuma Elish, and the mythological texts of Ugarit. It has long been established that literary traces of these tales and myths are present in the Hebrew Bible.

There are basic differences which make the biblical literature unique. One is the consistent moral character of biblical writings that sets them apart. Another is monotheism. While the writings of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Ugarit recount wondrous and miraculous deeds by the various gods in their pantheons, in the Hebrew Bible all such acts are accomplished by the one God of Israel and the universe.

One case in point is the story of the great Flood. It appears in the Book of Genesis, and a similar story of a huge and destructive flood appears in both the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh and an even earlier Sumerian version. The god Enlil brings about this flood to destroy humans because the noise they make annoys the gods. Another god, Ea, decides to save one man, Utnapishtim, and tells him to build an ark. The flood ensues and Utnapishtim, after many vicissitudes, manages to save himself and his family. When the rains cease, a raven and a dove are sent forth to test whether the waters have receded. Finally, the humans leave the ark and their leader offers a sacrifice to the god whom he worships.

The narrative is clearly similar to the story of Noah, but the resemblance between the biblical Flood story and those from Babylonia and other countries is only on the surface. The similarities are obvious, but the differences are of far greater significance. The Babylonian story, for example, is polytheistic and devoid of any ethical-moral content. Essentially, it narrates the struggle between two gods, Enlil and Ea. The human man, Utnapishtim, is simply a tool or weapon for Ea to use against Enlil. The biblical story is not only monotheis-

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tic, but depicts the one God of the universe as being exceedingly concerned that the world be grounded on moral foundations. Noah and his family are chosen to be saved from the great Flood precisely because God perceives him as being a righteous man in a perverse generation.

There is another example of literary affinity between the Song at the Sea of Reeds (Ex. 15:1-19), and Babylonian and Ugaritic writings of the Second Millennium BCE. However, the Song is no celebration of a war of the gods, but the climax of Israel's deliverance from bondage. It represents another step in the fulfillment of God's promise in the Covenant He made with Abraham.

The latter pieces, in contrast, present a warrior god in conflict with a nature god, and his final victory. In the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish*, the warrior god Marduk fights against the monster Tiamat, and in the Ugaritic myth Baal fights against the sea god Yam.

If we follow the Song closely, we will note several literary parallels with the other two texts. In the Song, God is described as *ish milhamah*, [a man of war] who calls upon the wind to destroy the enemy (Ex. 15:3,8,10). *Enuma Elish* reads: "The four winds he [Marduk] stationed, that nothing of her [Tiamat] might escape."¹

In the Song, the fight against Pharaoh is graphically depicted:

*Pharaoh's chariots and army He has cast into the sea,
And his chosen captains are sunk in the sea.
The deeps cover them.
They went down into the depths like a stone
In Your great strength, You break Your opponents;
You send forth Your fury, it consumes them like stubble.
The floods stood upright like a wall,
the deeps froze in the heart of the sea (Ex. 15:4-5, 7-8).*

In this and other verses, God uses natural phenomena for His purposes: Wind (VV. 8,10), water (VV. 5,8), and earthquake (V. 12). In *Enuma Elish*, Marduk also calls on natural phenomena to help him defeat Tiamat.²

There is another example in Exodus 15:17: *Then you shall bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of Thine inheritance, the place, O Lord, which Thou has made for Thee to dwell in, the sanctuary, O Lord, which Thy hands have established.*

In comparison, in recognition of Marduk's victory the gods build a shrine for him, a "princely throne." Similarly, in the Ugaritic Baal Epic, we read: "Let a house be built for Baal like the gods', And a court like the children of Asherah's."³ The house is said to have been "on the mountain of thine inheritance."

In the Song, God's might is noted in a brief and simple phrase: *Who is like Thee, O Lord, among the mighty; who is like unto Thee, glorious in holiness.*

In contrast, the prowess of Marduk is noted by bestowing upon him 50 names, each of which describes an attribute, e.g., might and glory.⁴

For a final example, in the Song, after note of God's victory and His establishing of His residence, He is hailed by the words: *The Lord shall reign for ever and ever* (V. 18).

In Enuma Elish, Marduk is hailed with the cry: "*Marduk-ma Sharu* [Marduk is king].⁵ In the Ugaritic text the defeated monster Yam exclaims to Baal: "Who among the gods is like you? Glorified among the holies." Yam further calls out: "*B'lm ymlk* [Let Baal be king]."⁶

All of these give evidence that certain literary patterns present in Mesopotamian and Ugaritic epic poetry may have influenced the literary styles of the Hebrew Bible. These influences, it should be stressed, were at most only stylistic and neither moral nor theological. The Bible is thoroughly monotheistic and ethical whereas the other texts were just as thoroughly polytheistic and pagan.

NOTES

1. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (ANET), ed. James S. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) p. 66.

2. *Ibid.* p. 68.

3. *Ibid.* p. 133.

4. *Ibid.* p. 69.

5. *Ibid.* p. 66.

6. *Ibid.* p. 131.