

Pagan Mythologies

In order to understand the mindset of the Hebrews that the Torah was being written to you must understand the cultures that they came from and thus the worldview that they had. We will first look at the Babylonian and Canaanite creation stories and how they portray the gods and the origin of creation. Then we will discuss the uniqueness of the Yahweh and His creation account.

The Sea in Babylonian Mythology

The Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish*, tells of the demise of the primordial gods Apsu and Tiamat at the hands of Marduk who creates the world. In the beginning all that existed were the divine parents Apsu and Tiamat and their son Mummu. Apsu was the primeval sweet-water ocean, his wife Tiamat was the salt-water ocean, and their son was the mist. These waters were mingled in one immense and undefined mass that contained all the elements from which Marduk later created the world. There was neither heaven nor earth at this time.

Apsu and Tiamat began to give birth to a whole host of gods, and after many years they gave birth to Anu, the sky god, who then gave birth to Ea, the god of wisdom. Ea was so superior to all the other gods that he became ruler over them all, even over his parents.

One day Apsu decided to kill all the other gods (with the exception of Tiamat and Mummu) because they made so much noise he could not sleep. When Ea found out about this, he magically put Apsu to sleep, stole his might and splendor, and then slew him. Ea established himself as supreme ruler over the other gods.

Tiamat, enraged, swore vengeance on all the other gods and began to amass her army. She gave birth to eleven kinds of monster serpents and fierce dragons, and she made Kingu her new spouse and general over her forces. Thus, there was the emergence of a formidable demonic host.

When Ea and the other gods heard of this, they were crippled with fear. The gods tried to attack Tiamat but discovered that they could not conquer her through magic; their attack had to be through physical force, which only added to their fear. From out of the hopelessness, Marduk, Ea's son, rose up to conquer Tiamat. However, he demanded that after his victory, he be made supreme and undisputed ruler over all gods. They agreed unanimously.

Marduk was given wisdom by Ea and as the storm god, he filled his body with a blazing flame, caused lightning to come out from his body, and with seven winds and a rain-flood that he created, he mounted his storm chariot, drawn by four frightful mythological creatures, and set out to face Tiamat.

Marduk's coming in might and splendor threw Kingu and his helpers into confusion, leaving only the frenzied Tiamat. When Tiamat opened her mouth to devour Marduk, he sent a wind into it to prevent it from shutting, then shot an arrow into her mouth, which pierced her heart and killed her. Marduk then chased down the sea monsters and dragons and imprisoned them in the deep.

Marduk then cut the body of Tiamat in half, and with one half of her watery body he formed the sky, and with the other half he formed the earth. He then established the years, months, and days. He built gates in the east and west for the sun to enter and depart and established the sun and the moon to govern the day and night. *(Here the text breaks off.)*

The imprisoned gods then complained that their tasks were too menial, so Marduk slew Kingu, and out of his blood he created mankind to serve and feed the Babylonian gods.

Marduk assigned each of the gods to govern the various parts of creation and took his place as supreme and undisputed ruler. The *Enuma Elish* closes with the gods' recitation of the glorious fifty names of Marduk and the exhortation for people to memorize them and recite them.

The primary purpose of the *Enuma Elish* is to offer cosmological reasons for Marduk's rise to supreme and undisputed ruler and thus his right to be creator. The recitation of the *Enuma Elish* during the Babylonian New Year's Festival suggests that Marduk's celebrated mastery was not a given, but that through the community's recitation, Marduk's sovereignty over the world was renewed.¹

The Sea in Canaanite Mythology

The Ugaritic Ba`al myth tells of how Ba`al (god of the sun, rain, thunder, fertility, and agriculture, and the lord of Heaven) conquers Yamm (god of the sea and rivers) and then Mot (god of death, underworld, and sterility).

Though the text is badly damaged, the story opens in the middle of a conflict between Ba`al and Yamm. Yamm is seeking the aid of El, his heavily drinking father and the creator of the Canaanite gods, goddesses, and mankind, who is also known as the Bull. He grants his aid to his son Yamm and encourages him to drive Ba`al from the throne of his kingdom, from the seat of his dominion. "If you do not drive him from his throne, he will beat you."

After a break in the text, the story continues with the gods feasting at a banquet held in El's palace, when Yamm's messengers show up. Upon seeing the messengers of Yamm, all the gods drop their heads to their knees, and Ba`al rebukes them for their cowardice. The messengers of Yamm demands that Ba`al be delivered up to Yamm-Nahar [River], and El promises that Ba`al will be handed over. Ba`al tells the messengers that he will not bow to Yamm and that Yamm must beware of him.

After a break in the tablets, Ba`al and Yamm taunt each other. Then Kothar-and-Khasis (meaning "Skillful-and-Wise," he is a smith, craftsman, engineer, inventor, and magician) tells Ba`al it is time to strike. Kothar arms Ba`al with two magic weapons, Yagarish (Chaser) and Ayamari (Driver). Ba`al attacks Yamm-Nahar with Yagarish, striking him between the shoulders, but he is not subdued. Then Ba`al strikes Yamm between the eyes with Ayamari, and Yamm sinks to the earth. Ba`al would have given the final blow, but he is restrained by `Athtartu who reminds him that Yamm is now their captive and Ba`al will surely reign. Ba`al is ashamed and spares his vanquished enemy, while Yamm keeps repeating: "I am as good as dead! Surely Ba`al is king! Indeed, Ba`al rules!" Yamm is then confined to the sea and Ba`al serves a huge feast in celebration of his triumph on his sacred Mount Zaphon, the Heights of the North.

Anat (Ba`al's sister, the violent war-goddess and goddess of love and desire) proceeds to slay the enemies of Ba`al. Their heads roll beneath her, and their hands fly above her like locusts. She hangs heads on her back, binds hands to her belt, and wades up to her knees in blood. Later Anat will declare, "Did I not snare the Dragon, vanquish/envelop him? I did demolish the Wriggling/Twisting/Tortuous Serpent, the Tyrant with Seven Heads. I did demolish the Darling

¹ see Jon D. Levenson. *Creation and Chaos and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 7.

of the gods, Arsh, Desire, I did silence/annihilate the Calf divine/of El, Atik, the Quarrelsome, the Rebellious One” (KTU 1.3.III.38-40). However, later Ba`al is also given credit for this as well; “...for all that/When/If now thou smotest/killed/goest fighting Lotan (=Leviathan), the Slippery/Evasive/Fleeing Serpent, made an end of/finished off/to destroy the Wriggling/Twisting/Tortuous/Slant Serpent, Shalyat the Tyrant of seven heads/ The seven-headed monster (of might)” (KTU 1.5.I.28).

Ba`al sends a message to Anat, asking her to be at peace now and to fill the land with love. Anat answers that she will do these things when Ba`al sets in the heavens his thunder-bolt, and causes his lightning-flash! Upon her arrival at Zaphon, Ba`al complains that he has no house like the other gods. Anat says that El will attend to her, or she will drag him to the ground like a lamb and make his grey hairs run with blood, if he doesn't give Ba`al a court.

Anat and Athirat (consort of El) obtain El's permission for Ba`al to have a house of gold and silver built. Athirat adds that now at last Ba`al will observe the season for his rain. Ba`al tells Kothar that he should furnish the house with a window through which Ba`al can send his lightning, thunder, and rain. All Ba`al's foes tremble at the sound. Then Ba`al withdraws within his house and declares his supremacy, announcing that he will not send tribute to El's new favorite, Mot (god of death and the underworld). Ba`al sends his messengers to Mot in the pit under the earth, refusing to give him tribute.

Mot declares that his enormous appetite is insatiable and threatens to devour Ba`al. Ba`al is filled with dread and sends back a humble reply, “Be gracious, O divine Mot; I am thy slave, thy bondman for ever.” Mot rejoices and commands Ba`al to bring his clouds, winds, thunder, and rains and descend into the depths of the netherworld where he will kill him Ba`al. Ba`al obeys.

Anat then goes in search of Ba'al, finding his body on the shores of the lake of Death and mourns, cutting her flesh and weeping. The soil and the fields are parched because of Ba`al's absence. After the passage of an unspecified amount of time, Anat seizes Mot, splits him with her sword, winnows him with her fan, burns him with fire, grinds him in her hand-mill and sows him in the ground where his body is devoured by birds.

After a break in the text, Ba`al returns and reassumes his throne on Mount Zaphon. After seven years Mot appears again, demanding that Ba`al give him one of his brothers to eat; if he does not, then Mot shall consume all humankind. Then the two gods butt each other like antelopes, fighting for a long time, and then both fall to the ground. Mot concedes to Ba`al, Ba`al resumes his throne, and there is a great feast.

The Ba`al epic portrays Ba`al as having to defeat Yamm in order to earn his right to rule over creation. The Ba`al epic also explains the cycle of winter, summer, famine, and good times through the yearly battle between Ba`al and Mot. Ba`al's victory is an act of salvation, which enables the created order to endure. Thus, Ba`al is not seen as the supreme and undisputed ruler as was with Marduk.

Common Themes Among the Myths

Though at first glance Marduk and Ba`al may seem to be great and powerful gods who conquer a formidable enemy, we can see that this is not true as we look closer at the details. The first question is what is the origin and nature of the gods? In these myths we see that the first gods Apsu and Tiamat (Babylonian) and El (Canaanite) are not eternal and they are impersonal gods

that not only are disconnected from creation but sometimes the other gods as well. Likewise the later gods Marduk (Babylonian) and Ba'al (Canaanite) that become the high gods are not eternal in their origin rather they were created by the other gods. It is also important to notice that these gods are flawed and are seen as just an immoral at times as the humans that they rule over.

The next question is how did the high gods (Marduk and Ba'al) conquer the sea? In both accounts the high god needed the help of another god in some way or form. With Marduk he needed wisdom from Ea in order to defeat Tiamat (the sea). Ba'al likewise not only obtained weapons from Kothar that become crucial in the defeat of Yam (the sea) but he also needed the help of his sister Anat who defeated the last of his enemies. He also needed her help to free him from Mot in his second epic battle.

Another important factor is that neither Marduk nor Ba'al are able to totally eliminate or gain mastery over the sea. It is still present throughout time and is a constant threat to their sovereignty. Once again with Ba'al this is seen clearly with his annual conflict with Mot.

A final question is how are the high gods kingship established and how secure are they? With both Marduk and Ba'al their rule is granted only through the agreed consent of the other gods. The implication of Marduk making a deal with Ea and Ba'al requesting a house from El is that if they were rejected they would not be able to be the high god. With Marduk, he not only needs permission from the other gods but his reign is also dependent upon the annual New Year recitation of the *Enuma Elish*. With Ba'al he is constantly threatened by Mot who not only challenges his rule but also continually defeats him.

Though there is a high god that rules over the other gods and creation it is important to know that their sovereignty is still limited. All the gods are seen as a god of a particular element or territory, thus their power is limited to that element or territory. This is why Marduk and Ba'al needed the help of others because even though they are the only ones who were able to defeat the sea they are also limited to their specific elements (thunder and rain).

Yahweh Unique Among the Pagan Myths

Though there are similarities with the creation account of the Bible and the pagan creation accounts there are also major differences that make Yahweh unique from all the other gods. There are six major differences between the pagan gods and their creation accounts and Yahweh and His creation account.

1. The pagan gods are portrayed as having a beginning, therefore they can have an end. In contrast, Yahweh is portrayed as an eternal God who existed before time began and will continue on for all eternity.
2. The pagan gods are portrayed as immoral, selfish beings who are just as sinful as humanity and so are not trusted nor respected by humanity but rather feared. In contrast, Yahweh is not only seen as a morally righteous being who is unlike any other in creation but also is the standard of all righteousness.
3. The pagan gods are portrayed as creating the world out of already existent, chaotic, and evil matter. They often create in the midst of some violent cosmic battle among the gods, sometimes using the corpse of a god for the foundation of creation. In contrast, Yahweh is seen as creating, out of nothing, something that is fresh and new. There is no chaos or violence, and each day is pronounced as "good."

4. The pagan gods are responsible for the creation of one or two elements but sometimes none at all. In contrast, Yahweh is seen as creating all things in creation on every day of the creation week.
5. The pagan gods are thus limited in power and control over one or two elements and are also portrayed as being limited in power over only certain regions/nations. In contrast, Yahweh is sovereign over all things in creation because He created all things.
6. The pagan gods created humanity to serve them as slaves and to be pawns for the gods. In contrast, Yahweh not only created humanity in order to have a loving relationship with them but also to represent Him and to share responsibility over His creation.

For someone living in the ancient Near East, reading the Bible's creation account would have been revolutionary and refreshing. Consider the fact that Abraham was worshiping the gods of Babylon when Yahweh came and spoke to him, offering a mutual relationship. Yahweh's unique nature and character are why Abraham immediately abandoned his gods and followed Yahweh.