

The Polemical Nature of the Creation Narrative

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Authorial intent has become a buzz-phrase in modern times. The crutch of understanding any piece of literature (or art, etc.) is first understanding what the author intended the original audience to understand.¹ In the case of Genesis 1, the original Mosaic intent was not to copy contemporary creation accounts in order to propagate a theology, but rather to systematically destroy the theologies behind the contemporary creation myths by presenting the standing deities in non-idealistic fashions; Moses' plan was to undermine any roadblocks that may cause the original audience to stumble back into paganism.

Of course, when I speak of the original audience I am presupposing both a Mosaic authorship and an early dating of the book of Genesis. Therefore, when speaking of the original audience, I am speaking of those who came out of Egypt (designated OOE's throughout).²

Polemics in Scripture

The idea of polemics within Scripture is not an abnormal concept. In fact, many scholars agree that the intent of the ten plagues on Egypt were polemic in nature,³ thus Yahweh deposes the pantheon of Egyptian gods so that the children of Israel would both know and acknowledge Yahweh as the true God.

¹ This is a highly controversial idea, especially in the secular world. It can be demonstrated rather conclusively that an author or artist can add something to his context accidentally that can add to the application of the art. This being said, the application is only secondary to and stems from the actual interpretation. In secular art, the author's intent is vital, but the author's mistakes may also be included in the understanding, although contrary to the author's intent. In biblical literature, even the author's grammatical mistakes (some argue for the poor grammar of certain texts, etc.) can be used for interpretation since "men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:21, NET).

² In order to help for easy reading purposes, we can refer to the original audience as OOE's (pronounced oo'-ē) for those who came "Out Of Egypt." This group would include both the first and second-generation exodus Israelites.

³ Exodus 7:5 also gives an apologetic concept to the plagues, stating that the Egyptians will then know who the true God is.

This concept, the impotence of the pagan deities, is a major polemic in many parts of Scripture. Speaking of the polemic nature of Genesis 31: 30-35, Daniel Block argues, “The narrator spoofs not only Laban’s powerlessness vis-à-vis Jacob, but also the gods’ powerlessness to defend themselves against theft in the first instance and ritual contamination in the second; Rachel is sitting on them while having her menstrual period.”⁴ Baker continues his argument by pointing out the polemical nature of Gideon’s destruction of the Baal altar,⁵ Elijah’s contest on Mount Carmel, the human fabrication of idols,⁶ and more. One major theme and purpose of the Scriptures is to teach that Yahweh alone is God – Creator, Sustainer, and Deliverer. In fact, Isaiah 45:6, 2 Samuel 7:22, and even 1 Timothy 2:5 all act as a polemic against the pagan deities.

One could argue that all of Scripture is in fact a polemic against human nature, in whatever form it is realized (whether religious or secular). Moses intended the OOEes to understand that the Deliverer is the only true God; the chronicler intended his audience to believe the same. Even the prophets contained polemics in that they wanted the children of Israel to know that even though the world is full of gloom (since they were at the time in exile), God was still in charge and was ready to bring them back into the land (which in fact He did). Beyond the Old Testament, the entire New Testament is a sort of polemic against pharisaical Judaism, which denied the Old Testament concepts of devotion and a relationship between Yahweh and His people and replaced that with a judicial and works based theology.

⁴ Block, Daniel. “Other Religions in Old Testament Theology,” in *Biblical Faith and Other Religions*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Pub., 2004) 70.

⁵ *ibid.* cf. Judges 6:25-32, specifically v. 31 where Joash states, “If he really is a god, let him fight his own battles! After all, it was his altar that was pulled down” (NET).

⁶ cf. Deut. 4:28

Ancient Creation Myths

This being said, we must be aware of the fact that Genesis is a literary and historical book, and that Moses was more than likely aware of competing views concerning creation (he was schooled and trained in the royal house of Egypt). As far as the original audience, the OOE's, are understood, living in a foreign land amongst the heathen must have both altered the peoples' individual religions as well as affected the worldview of the people as a whole. One point of evidence that can be seen is in the Sinai/golden calf incident, where it appears the Israelites had reverted to worship Yahweh in a ritualistic fashion used by the Canaanites.⁷ However we understand Genesis, it is evident that the OOE's were familiar with both Egyptian and Canaanite rituals and beliefs, which would include competing views of cosmology.

One such competing view is that of the infamous *Enuma Elish*, an ancient Babylonian myth centered on Marduk as creator of mankind for the service of the gods. "The story tells of a cosmic conflict between the leading deities. The monstrous Tiamat, mother goddess personifying the primeval ocean, was killed by the young and daring Marduk. The victorious Marduk then creates the universe (from Tiamat's carcass) and humankind (from the blood of her co-conspirator, Kingu) ..."⁸ The story itself dates to somewhere between the 18th century and the 12th century BC,⁹ thus possibly being well known throughout the Near East during the time of Moses.

⁷ The bull and calf were often used to represent El, the chief of the pantheon of Canaan; although at times Baal was depicted as riding upon a bull. For more information see Golden, Jonathan. *Ancient Canaan and Israel*. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004) 183.

⁸ Arnold, Bill and Beyer, Bryan. *Readings from the Ancient Near East*. (Grand Rapids: Baker. 2002) 31.

⁹ "Enuma Elish." Wikipedia. 2008. Accessed 11 Dec 2008 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enuma_elish

In Canaan, we find a similar story in the Baal Cycle, which was committed to writing in the first half of the fourteenth century BC,¹⁰ where Baal (the storm god) defeats Yam (the sea god) and Mot (the god of the underworld) in order to succeed El as the chief of the deities. By defeating Yam and Mot, Baal is able to establish his palace which some believe refers to the establishment of the cosmos (or at least the establishment of humanity's dwelling place).¹¹ With the finding of the Amarna Letters, we have substantial evidence that Canaanite correspondence was a norm during this period, thus allowing for Canaanite culture to enter into the database of ideas within Egypt (ideas in which the OOE's would have become quite familiar).

Besides these, there are numerous Egyptian and Mesopotamian myths concerning the creation of the world. One would stand to reason that if Moses was to make a claim so great that not only the gods of Egypt (which were already bested), but also the gods of Canaan and the rest of the world are no more than idols of stone and wood,¹² then he must begin his story from the beginning presenting to the Israelites what really happened.

Genesis 1 Polemics

The question we are faced with now isn't the question of whether Moses' intention was polemical, but what within his writing was meant to be specifically polemical against the alternative creation accounts. The first thing one would notice when comparing the alternative accounts with the biblical account of creation is the separating of the waters in order to create the heavens. Concerning this separation in the alternative texts, Gerhard Hasel writes,

¹⁰ If our dating is correct, this would place the writing of this epic after Moses' period of training in Egypt, but the story must have been widely circulated before it was committed to writing.

¹¹ For arguments for and against this view see Smith, Mark. *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*. (Danvers: Brill, 1994) 77-101.

¹² See Deut. 4:28

“The Sumerians present the process of separation as the sundering of heaven from earth by the air-god Enlil. The Babylonian epic *Enuma elish* reports that Marduk forms heaven out of the upper part of the slain *Tiamat* and the earth out of the lower part and the deep from her blood. The Hittite version of a Hurrian myth visualizes the process of separating heaven and earth as being performed with a cutting tool.”¹³ Hasel continues with the Phoenician and Egyptian cosmogonies, pointing out the intricacies of each.

The differences between these alternative cosmogonies and that of the biblical record all converge at one point, the lack of struggle. Moses did not give us the blood, sweat, and tears of Yahweh wrenching the waters above from the waters below, in fact there was no struggle at all. The creation by Yahweh is seen as a simple event with little to no effort on Yahweh’s part.

Biblical creation at all points contradicts the alternative texts in that according to Genesis, everything was created by the word of God. Whereas in each of the alternative accounts multiple deities argued or fought over the chiefdom over creation and position of creator, in the biblical record we find no struggle, no fighting and squabbling between lesser deities – all that is was created by the all supreme authority of the one true God, and this through nothing more than the spoken word. How would this affect the OOE’s idea of worship? Mixed with the biblical laws concerning the utter holiness of God, the OOE’s would instantly see that the one true God not only avoids the infected human nature of selfishness, but also rules effortlessly with no antagonist strong enough to resist His will. He alone is creator; He alone is God.

A third interesting contradistinction between the alternative texts and the biblical record is the creation of the luminaries. While the alternative texts list a myriad of starry deities

¹³ Hasel, G. F. “The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology” in *Evangelical Quarterly* 46: 87. 1974.

(including the major Sumerian moon-god Nanna and the lesser sun-god Utu, the Hittite chief of deities the sun-goddess Arinna, etc.), Moses merely mentions the creation of the major luminaries as a “greater light” and “lesser light” respectively. In fact, in order to avoid the idea that Yahweh was merely a chief God among other gods (a theme that the OOE’s would be familiar with), Moses “avoids the names ‘sun’ and ‘moon’ undoubtedly because these Common Semitic terms are at the same time names for deities.”¹⁴

What about the great pantheon of stars? Where “*Enuma elish* depicts Marduk as the one who fixes the astral likeness of the gods in their characteristics as constellations”¹⁵ after a major battle, Moses argues that Yahweh placed the constellations and adds that these constellations are for humanity to take advantage. Moses brings very little importance to the stars, but instead mentions them in a parenthetical statement as if to say, “And Yahweh created those too,” depicting the starry host not as worthy of worship but as tools intended for human use.

Conclusion

When we approach Scripture, we do so from the vantage point of one who can look back through history and see all major points at one time. Place yourself, instead of at your present position, in the lives of the original audience (the OOE’s), and you will see a different story. Instead of the God who was always there (as we can look back and see for the judges, for the good kings, for the prophets, etc.), you are approached by a new God. In a world in which petty deities are always fighting amongst themselves, is this God different than all the rest? He

¹⁴ Hasel, G. F. “The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology” in *Evangelical Quarterly* 46: 89. 1974

¹⁵ *ibid.*

frees you from a life of slavery, but will He always be there for you? Moses is in a very hard position; His task is to change the mindset of a people who as slaves never really had the opportunity of thinking for themselves. Not only must he teach them of the one true God, but he must also free his people from the radical ideas of wood and stone idols having any authority. “Not Baal of the Canaanites, not Marduk of the Babylonians, not Pharaoh of Egypt, but Yahweh, God of Israel, author of Torah, triumphs. As the Creator of the cosmos, He triumphed at the time of creation; as Creator of history, He triumphs in the historic present; and as Creator of the new heavens and the new earth, He will triumph in the future.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Waltke, Bruce. “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (Jan.-Mar. 1975) 31-36.

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