The Garden Story Never Happened. The Garden Story Always Happens.

Section 4: The Presence and Absence of Conflict Mythology in the Bible

Aside from there being two different creation narratives in early Genesis by different authors, ancient Israelites had other mythological views about creation that found their way into the Bible. Before jumping into that it might be instructive to summarize some of the conflict myths in the ancient near east and to see how their absence from Genesis 1-2, meaning what the Bible is not telling us, might be one the most important things it actually teaches us.

The *Enuma Elish* is an ancient creation epic that attempted to establish Marduk as the chief Babylonian god. Before any other gods were formed, the primordial waters Apsu (sweet sea) and Tiamat (salt sea) comingled together. They create the younger gods but war develops with them and Apsu is slain. The younger gods fear the older goddess Tiamat and they choose eventually Marduk to battle her. He defeats and kills Tiamat who is personified with the sea. After the battle she is split into two and he makes the sky with her and other parts of creation with different body parts. Subsequently, the creation of humans occurs from the blood of Tiamat's champion and consort Qingu. This Babylonian work was popular enough to be poached by an Assyrian editor that changed the details to honor the God Ashur in place of Marduk.

We also have **Anzu**, which Ballentine writes, *"relates Ninurta's victory over Anzu, a bird-like composite figure who stole the Tablet of Destinies (šīmātu) from Enlil. After several other deities refuse to challenge Anzu, Ninurta is chosen to fight him. As a reward for his victory the gods grant him kingship. This story survives in two versions, an Old Babylonian version (ca.

1850–1500 BCe) and a Standard Babylonian ver- sion (ca. 1500–600 BCe)."[1] A listing of mythical foes Ninurtia has defeated appear in his exploits (dragon, mermaid, Gypsum et al).

The Ugaritic **Ba'lu Cycle** 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, and his grand plan to become the most powerful of all. Eventually he gains dominion but after he dies a successor must be chosen and something interesting happens. Ballentine writes:

> "'Ilu tells ʾAṯiratu to choose one of her sons for ʾIlu to make king (*KTU* 1.6 I 43–46). She chooses *Ydʿ-ylḥn*, but ʾIlu objects that he is too weak to match Baʿlu's physical capabilities (*KTU* 1.6 I 50–52). ʾAṯiratu then chooses ʿAṯtaru, who ascends to Baʿlu's throne, but, "His feet do not reach the footstool, his head does not reach its top." ʿAṯtaru admits that he can- not be king on Mount Ṣapanu, so he descends from Baʿlu's throne, but still reigns over the earth (*KTU* 1.6 I 53–65). These alternative kings pale in comparison to Baʿlu and are unable to serve as adequate substitutes. This emphasizes Baʿlu's "rightful" position as king. Thematically, the feature of characterizing a series of alternative kings as inadequate when compared to Baʿlu is parallel to the series of divine warriors who are inadequate in comparison to Ninurta or Marduk (*Anzu* SB I 89–157; *EE* III, 111–112). By emphasizing the relative lack among even the best of potential alterna- tives, the narrative asserts that Baʿlu's kingship is legitimate."[2]

Clearly none of this is historical or actually happened as written and I doubt it ever was originally intended to be taken as such. The narrative is clearly giving primacy to Baal as the greatest king and elevating him over other gods. That is the point here. One should not be judging the merit of this story based on the fact-literal accuracy of its statements anymore, to use the analogy of the last section, than we should use van Gogh's Starry Night painting to do astronomy. Creation mythology had specific goals and purposes in the Ancient Near East and this generally preclude modern questions of historicity. This was about the primacy of Baal amidst a heavenly pantheon that consisted of companions and competitors. Genesis has similar concerns but dumps everything on its head. This context is what makes the two creation stories in Genesis so remarkable. They aren't just another elaborate case of "my god is better than your god." While there could be a hint or nod to it in Gen 1:2, the *conflict topos* is entirely missing from Genesis 1-2. Within this context the striking monotheism in Genesis 1-2 stands out. In Karen Armstrong's words, Genesis offers us:

" . . . the omnipotent, transcendent, and benevolent God of classical theism. The world that he created has pattern and meaning. It is also hierarchically arranged, with God at the apex of the pyramid and human beings as his deputies on earth . . . Yet many of P's first readers would have found the first chapter of Genesis rather a shock. In the ancient Near East, this vision of the creation was radically new. God appears in the very first sentence without any introduction. P

---

[1] Debra Scoggins Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth and the Biblical Tradition*, pg 23.
[2] Debra Scoggins Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth and the Biblical Tradition*, pg 55.

Section 4: The Presence and Absence of Conflict Mythology in the Bible

uses the formal divine title "Elohim," a term that sums up everything that the divine can mean for humanity. In a world where there were many deities, a reader would be likely to ask, "Which god are we talking about?" or "What is Elohim?" Most of the Near Eastern deities had parents and complex biographies that distinguished them from one another, but P introduces his Elohim without telling us anything about his origins or past history in primordial time. The pagan world found the timeless world of the gods a source of inspiration and spirituality. Not so P, who ignores God's prior existence. As far as he is concerned, his God's first significant act is to create the universe. Again, the very notion of a wholly omnipotent deity was a new departure. All gods in the Near East had to contend with other divine rivals. None had a monopoly of power."

It seems that Genesis 1 (and to a good extent 2) is about establishing God's primacy and promoting blossoming monotheistic beliefs. There are no rivals, no prior lineage, there is a monopoly on power and only one true God. Unlike in the Atrahasis Epic, God doesn't need a discussion amongst peers or the approval of anyone to create human beings. We weren't created after he proved himself against Tiamat in some cosmic struggle and gained the renown of other gods. There is no conflict here because the author is plainly telling us God cannot gain what he never lacked. For Genesis 1 He is the **C**reator who merely speaks his word and his will comes to pass. The absence of conflict mythology, what is not written on thepage, screams at us and its worth requoting a snippet from Bill Arnold's commentary on Genesis now that we have perused some of the conflict mythologies in antiquity:

"It contains no theomachy, or cosmic conflict among the gods, or victory enthronement motif. Both are excluded by "in the beginning when God created . . . "! Israel's God has no rivals. There can be no struggle with forces opposed to his actions or corresponding to his power. There can be no victory enthronement motif because God's victory was never in doubt; rather, God has never *not* been enthroned. There can be no enthronement portrait here because God has not *become* sovereign; he has simply never been *less than* sovereign."[3]

McKnight and Venema describe Genesis similarly , "Most notable perhaps about the Bible's presentation is that the God of Genesis is not like the gods of the Mesopotamian accounts. In fact, the God of the Bible is the one and only God, as stated in Deuteronomy 6:4–9, which will become the Jewish creed, the Shema. There are many gods in the Mesopotamian stories: Marduk, Tiamat, Enlil, and others. The Bible's own most important parallel to Genesis 1 is Isaiah 40–48, because what is implicit in Genesis is explicit in Isaiah: the God of Israel is all-powerful, while the gods of the pagans, especially the Babylonians, are powerless and, not to put too fine a point on it, nonexistent. Genesis 1, then, is a claim that "our God is the one and only true God." . . . There is a notable difference not only regarding God but also regarding creation itself. The gods go back and forth and get in tangles with one another while working the earth. Those deities are irritable, worn down by working, in need of help—and not entirely able to resolve their own problem without permission from the higher-up gods, who seem at the same time to be at odds with themselves. No one seems to be totally in control. The God of Genesis 1–2 is

---

[3] Bill Arnal, *Genesis New Cambridge Commentary*, pg 32

Section 4: The Presence and Absence of Conflict Mythology in the Bible

different: this God, like Michelangelo's creator God with the all-powerful, creative finger, controls the whole lot. God creates by a word deriving from God's own sovereign choice. The fundamental event of Genesis 1 is God saying, "Let there be," and there is. The waters may be primal chaos, but the waters are easily and simply subdued by God's own command. The swirl of the *tohu va-bohu*, translated "formless and empty," is untangled into orchestrated order, function, and purpose. This God is transcendent and exceedingly powerful, exalted above creation and responsible for all of creation; this God, then, is not part of the created order but outside and over the created order. All of the gods of the ancient Near East are eliminated in the theology of Genesis 1, and one supreme God, YHWH, is left standing."[4]

Conflict Mythology in the Bible
While largely absent in the creation stories, there is conflict mythology scattered throughout the Bible. Or at least elements of it used to exalt God. Psalm 74 reflects genuine despair and suffering, praise for God through listing many of his mighty primordial deeds such as establishing the sun and moon and concludes with a very real and coaxing request for help. It assumes ancient near-eastern mythology as background knowledge and it utilizes this material ultimately to elevate and flatter God. Several of the mighty deeds are listed in Ps. 74:12-14 which reads: "You divided the sea by your might; you **broke the heads of the dragons in the waters**. **You crushed the heads of Leviathan;** you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness." This passage along with Isaiah 27:1, 51:9-10, Job 9:8, 26:12 and a host of other passages, refers to struggle or conflict models of creation where God demonstrates his sovereignty and superiority over the sea monsters and all creation. Unlike in other ancient mytholohy, the struggled aspect is missing in the Biblical versions.

Job 9:8 tells us God alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea (or trampled the back of the sea dragon). In a footnote Fishbane says, ""In iv. 129, it is stated that Marduk strode over the back of Ti'amat *(ikbusma... isidsa).* This phrase recalls the image in Job 9: 8, in which YHWH, the creator, is described as *dorekh fal bamatei yam,* as having 'trod upon the back of Yam' (understanding *bamatei* in the light of Ugaritic *bmt,* 'back'). The mythic background of the image is further assured from v. 13, which states that 'God does not restrain His fury, the warriors *('ozrel)* of Rahab sink beneath Him' (understanding *'ozrei* in the light of Ugaritic *gzr,* 'warrior'."[5]

Job 26:10-13 reads, "He has described a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness. **11** The pillars of heaven tremble, and are astounded at his rebuke. **12** By his power he stilled the Sea; by his understanding he struck down Rahab.**13** By his wind the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent." Regarding verses 12-13 the New Jerome Biblical Commentary says, "The divine creativity is portrayed in images derived from Ugaritic mythology: the battle with Yam("Sea"), paralleled here with Rahab, the mythological

---

[4] Scott Mcknignt and Venema, Adam and the Human Genome
[5] Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking,* pg 40;

Section 4: The Presence and Absence of Conflict Mythology in the Bible

monster. The serpent (Isa 27:1) is described *bariah* (fleeing, or primeval, or perhaps evil) and is another symbol of chaos."

In Job 40:15-24, God admonishes Job to look at the behemoth, whom only its maker can approach with a sword. The NJBC thinks this creature is a hippopotamus as the description fits but of note is that it is identified as the first of the great acts of God (see also Prov 8:22). In Job 41 God turns to the splendor of the leviathan. Here the NJBC thinks a sea monster and mystical dragon is probably meant. God asks Job if he can make a pet of him? The answer is obviously no. Batto has a slightly different take on the Behemoth and Leviathan:

> "In the ancient Near East there were two primary, equally powerful symbols of chaos. One was the primeval flood or ocean, frequently portrayed as a dragonlike monster; the other was the barren desert, sometimes portrayed as a dreadful land beast. Life—at least human life—was impossible under either of these conditions; hence the utility of the sea and the desert as symbols of nonexistence, or chaos.
>
> The author of Job understood and utilized these symbols well. As part of his literary ploy to emphasize the Creator's awesome transcendence vis-a-vis a mere human, the author of Job 40:15-41:34 has Yahweh challenge Job to play the role of creator, if he can, by subduing Behemoth and Leviathan, the traditional twin chaos monsters representing the dry wasteland and the unformed ocean, respectively. Since Job obviously cannot subdue the chaos monsters, Job has no right to challenge the Creator about the way he runs this world."[6]

If this interpretation is correct, or at least the second half referring to the leviathan, it is important to note that in Job these are just creatures God has created. In the surrounding literature, these are rival gods and competitors. Marduk had to battle Tiamat but to Yahweh the leviathan (sea monster) is but a pet or a plaything. Another aspect of His good creation.

Micheal Fishbane writes, "The many-headed creatures of the deep (the *tanninim* and Leviathan) suggest some beastly aspect—comparable to the seven-headed sea dragon pictured on a third-millennium seal impression from Akkad. A similar image occurs in a Canaanite myth depicting BacaPs victory over the sea god Yam, which refers to the smashing of Lotan (a dialectal variant of the Hebrew name *livyatan,* Leviathan) and the defeat of a monster with seven heads. What is more, in this same text the serpent Lotan is described as both 'slant' and 'twisted' *(brh* and *'qltri)*—apostrophes exactly like those used of Leviathan in Isa. 27:1 (who is called both *bariah* and *'aqalaton);* and the verb that is used to describe the smashing *(tmhs)* of Lotan is identical to that used in Job 26: 12 *(mahatz)* when it depicts the defeat of the sea monster Rahab. Such battle scenes also recall the account of the lord Marduk's battle against Ti'amat in Babylonian mythology, where we learn that 'He smashed (her) skull with his merciless staff (*ina mittisu la padi ulatti muhha*; *Enuma elish* iv. I3o)."[7]

---

[6] Bernard Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition*, pg 47-48
[7] Michael Fishbane, Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking, p. 39-40."

Section 4: The Presence and Absence of Conflict Mythology in the Bible

Debra Scoggins Ballentine writes, "Passages from the Ugaritic *Baʿlu Cycle*, the fragmentary Ugaritic text *KTU* 1.83, and many books of the Hebrew Bible include epitomes of a battle between a warrior deity and a series of defeated enemies. Baʿlu, ʿAnatu, and Yahweh are each attributed victory over the sea, a multi-headed serpentine figure, and/or draconic figures. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ninurta defeats a similar list of foes, and the gods Marduk and Aššur each defeat the sea deity Tiamat, along with her army of serpentine, draconic, and composite figures."[8]

Fishbane notes, "All these cross-references and shared depictions suggest that ancient Israel drew upon a bundle of mythic traditions that circulated throughout the Syro-Palestinian region, and used them in order to depict battles against sea dragons—albeit for its own purposes and in its own ways."

It does not seem to me that the Biblical narratives are trying to teach us God actually and literally slew a sea dragon. This type of material is clearly being used as an accolade or praise for God in the Bible. Unlike the others who are said to have battled ferocious sea gods, they are, to use a modern analogy, but a goldfish in a bowl to Yahweh. Ballentine writes, "The rhetorical force of boasting about Leviathan's greatness, however, is to draw out the implications of Yahweh taming and binding this tremendous creature. Leviathan frightens the gods, disturbs Sea/Deep, and has no equal on earth, yet Yahweh can make him his plaything and servant."[9]

Kidner, in his commentary on Genesis writes of 1:21-22 where God is said to have created the sea monsters:

> "The *sea monsters* (*tannînîm*) (RV, RSV; *whales*, AV) are specially noteworthy, since to the Canaanites this was an ominous word, standing for the powers of chaos confronting Baal in the beginning. Here they are just magnificent creatures (like Leviathan in Ps. 104:26; Job 41), enjoying God's blessing with the rest (22). Although in some scriptures these names will symbolize God's enemies (e.g. Isa. 27:1), taunted in the very terms in which Baal exults over them, no doubt is left by this chapter that the most fearsome of creatures were from God's good hand. There may be rebels in his kingdom, but no rivals. To the Canaanites, however, Baal's adversaries were gods like himself, or demons to be propitiated; and to the Babylonians the chaos-monster Tiamat pre-existed the gods."[10]

Kidner also had an interesting take on the Bible and history as a whole:

> We have in the Bible some of the most beautiful poetry: pious, lyrical and erotic, and also some of the angriest. We have narratives of epic proportions, aetiologies and

---

[8] Debra Scoggins Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth and The Biblical Tradition*, p 75.
[9] Ballentine, ibid.
[10] Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, vv 1:21-22.

Section 4: The Presence and Absence of Conflict Mythology in the Bible

folktales that are at times stunningly profound and evocative, romances and adventure stories, some of them are ideologically tendentious or moralistic. There is patent racism and sexism, and some of the world's earliest condemnations of each. One of the things the Bible almost never is, however, is intentionally historical: that is an interest of ours that it rarely shares. Here and there, the Bible uses data gleaned from ancient texts or records. It often refers to great figures and events of the past . . . at least as they are known to popular tradition. But it cites such 'historical facts' only where they may serve as grist for one of its various literary mills. The Bible knows nothing or nearly nothing of most of the great, transforming events of Palestine's history. Of historical causes, it knows only one: Palestine's ancient deity Yahweh. It knows nearly nothing of the great droughts that changed the course of Palestine's world for centuries, and it is equally ignorant of the region's great historical battles at Megiddo, Kadesh and Lachish. The Bible tells us nothing directly of four hundred years of Egyptian presence. Nor can it take on the role of teaching us anything about the wasteful competition for the Jezreel in the early Iron Age, or about the forced sedentarization of nomads along Palestine's southern flank. . . . The reason for this is simple. The Bible's language is not an historical language. It is a language of high literature, of story, of sermon and of song. It is a tool of philosophy and moral instruction. To argue that the Bible has it wrong is like alleging that Herman Melville has got his whale wrong! Literarily, one might quibble about whether Jonah has it right with his big fish, but not because the story could or could not have happened. On the story's own terms, the rescue of Jonah is but a journeyman's device as far as plot resolutions go. But no false note is sounded in Jonah's fig tree, in Yahweh's speech from the whirlwind in the Book of Job, or in Isaiah 40's song of comfort."

Genesis 1-2 and clearly, many other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures are, as we would expect, steeped in the mythology and background knowledge of their day. They are not interested in the same modern questions that we are and most of what we see is not meant to be fact-literal history. As a further example, in Job 41, God asks Job about the Leviathan, "were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it?" Are we to take this as an indication that not only the Leviathan but also these other ancient-near eastern gods are real? This is, after all, a question straight from God's mouth per the narrative. Or is the essential point of the story to show God's superiority over everything around Him using the background mythology of the day? In lieu of this we should exercise tremendous caution in how literal we demand Genesis and parts of the Bible to be. If we want to get God's word right, we have to understand it in context and know what genre of literature we are reading.

Conservative Objections:
It is true that many conservatives generally don't like the idea of the authors of Biblical works borrowing from neighboring mythologies. As an example here quote from an article over at gospelcoalition.org, by James Hamilton (PhD from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) who, to be honest, confines God's sovereignty to a box and limits how he chooses to communicate with us (emphasis mine):

December 1, 2021

Section 4: The Presence and Absence of Conflict Mythology in the Bible

"The idea of creation involving conflict among the gods appears in Ancient Near Eastern mythology, but it is highly unlikely—**indeed impossible**—that such a concept would've been embraced and articulated by a biblical author."[11]

Theologians like Hamilton favor eisegesis and try to explain all such passages as referring to Egypt. The context of the passage above is far more universal as is its relation to Near Eastern mythology. I leve it to readers to decide what to make of this. Interpret Genesis in its proper historical context with many other similar pieces of literature, or impose modern standards on it and take it out of context. For me it is clear that God chose to speak to us through ancient mythology and when we modernize the Bible and offer these sorts of forced explanations, it instead reflects our own voice instead of that of its divine Author.

Extension to Jesus
With all of this mythology involving primordial waters and the conflict with sea gods and dragons, one might think Jesus' stilling of the storm and walking on water (taming the sea?) would have conjured up a lot more imagery to some ancient audiences than it does to modern ones largely oblivious to these potential cultural references.

---

[11]Crushing Rahab: Does the Old Testament Borrow from Myth? By James Hamilton, Accessed 8/12/21.

Section 4: The Presence and Absence of Conflict Mythology in the Bible