

A NOTE ON THE ENUMA ELISH CREATION STORY

The Genesis creation stories are best read as ancient Israel's response to other creation stories circulating in the Ancient Near East. For example, the Babylonian creation myth, known as the Enuma Elish (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/enuma.htm>), was filled with violence. The god Apsu (= fresh water) and the goddess Tiamat (= salt water) commingled resulting in the birth of gods Lahmu and Lahamu, followed by the the gods Anshar, Kishar, Ea/Nidimmud (the earth/ water god), and others. The children proved to be too noisy for Apsu, so he planned to kill them (Tablet I, lines 38-52) to restore quiet in the heavens. But before the father could destroy the kids, Ea killed Apsu his father. The victorious Ea then fathered Marduk, and Marduk in time killed Grandmother Tiamat (Tablet IV, lines 31-145) who had been inspired by a new husband to turn against her murderous children. Marduk cut up her corpse to become the sky and the firmament with their constellations. This creation story asserts that creation was born out of violence. Violence *was* normative, therefore violence *is* normative—it is the way of the gods/God and it the way of heaven and earth. This “theology of violence” perpetuates itself down to modern times in a number of religions and, in my opinion, contributed to the violence of September 11.

The Biblical creation stories in Genesis 1-2 offered an alternative to the Babylonian perception of ultimate reality. For the Israelite theologians who crafted the Genesis story, God's creation transformed chaos into cosmos, simply by the power of the word: “and God said, ‘Let there be’” It was radically non-violent. The pre-existent Power (in Hebrew the noun for “God” means “power”), through a

word created Wisdom (Proverbs 8:22). And then, with Wisdom, “the Power” made it all. It was all good! Non-violence was normative in the act of creation and within the creation, itself.

To read the biblical stories of creation without consideration of their original purpose can only result in a misreading of the texts and a misunderstanding of their intent. The “Big Bang” which concerned the theologians who crafted the Genesis creation stories was not the theory of contemporary astronomers but the the “big bangs” when Ea slew Apsu and Marduk “with his unsparing mace crushed her [Tiamat’s] skull” (Tablet IV, line 130).

Neither the Babylonian creation myths or the biblical creation stories were concerned about factual scientific accuracy for specialists in cosmogony. They were making faith statements about the nature of ultimate reality. For Babylon creation was characterized by violence in heaven and on earth; for Jerusalem creation came about by words and wisdom without any hint of violence in heaven or in Eden.