

## CHAPTER VII

### HEBREW AND BABYLONIAN COSMOLOGY

IT has long been recognized that the earlier chapters of Genesis have a Babylonian colouring and background. Two of the rivers of Paradise are the Tigris and Euphrates, and it was at the Tower of Babel that the confusion of tongues took place. The discovery of the Babylonian story of the Deluge proved that the Biblical account of the Flood also had a Babylonian parallel and prototype, and the discovery of the Babylonian story of the Deluge was followed by that of the Babylonian story of creation, which showed that here too the cuneiform tablets and the Book of Genesis were in close accord. The cosmology of Genesis looks back to that of Babylonia.

The fragments of an epic poem which contained one of the versions of the Babylonian story of the creation were discovered by Mr. George Smith. Other fragments have since been found, more especially by Mr. L. W. King,

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and we now possess the poem in a fairly complete form. It is really a poem in honour of Merodach, the patron god of Babylon, and must have originally been composed by a Babylonian writer. As the inhabitants of Babylon regarded their patron god as the creator, the epic naturally includes an account of the way in which the heavens and the earth were made. Babylon, however, was a comparatively modern city in Babylonia, and its god did not become the supreme deity of the country until his city had been made a capital by Khammu-rabi. Before that date he was but one among a host of minor divinities, over whom the 'great gods' of the older sanctuaries presided. Chief among these were Anu, the god of heaven, whose seat of worship was Erech, in the centre of Babylonia, Bel, the god of the earth and air, who was adored at Nippur in the north, and Ea of Eridu, on the coast of the Persian Gulf, the culture-god of Chaldea, whose domain was in the flood.

When Merodach and his city usurped the place of the older divinities and the earlier centres of Babylonian religion, the attributes of the older gods passed to him. He became the

son of Ea and took upon him the name and prerogatives of Bel. Both Ea and Bel had been creators in the cosmologies of their respective worshippers, and when their powers were transferred to the younger deity he necessarily was made the creator of the world.

But in the epic the creation of the world is but an episode in the story of the war between Tiamât, the dragon of chaos and darkness, and Merodach, the champion of the gods of light. It was his victory over the dragon which gave Merodach the right to be supreme among his divine peers and to create the present world of law and order. The heavens and earth were fashioned out of the two halves of his defeated foe, while 'bolts' were driven in and 'watchmen' set, that the anarchic 'fountains' of Tiamât might not again break forth from above the firmament and destroy the world of gods and men.

In its present shape the epic consists of seven tablets or books. The first is an introduction embodying the atheistic philosophy of a late age, when the divine personages of mythology had been resolved into the material forces and elements of Nature, and creation was

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regarded as a process of self-evolution. The second and third books recount the war of the gods, and the fourth ends with the victory of Merodach and the creation of the heavenly firmament. The fifth tablet describes the appointment of the heavenly bodies for signs and seasons and days and years. They were not created like the firmament, since in the eyes of the Babylonians the sun and moon and stars were deities, and consequently had come into existence at the same time as Merodach himself. What the creator did, therefore, was to fix their places and duty, to 'ordain the year' with its twelve months, and to bind the whole together by inviolable laws, 'so that none might err or ever go astray.'

In the sixth book the creation of man is narrated. Man was made of bone which the god had fashioned, and of the blood of life which he had drawn from his own veins. For Babylonian religion held that the gods were in the likeness of men, and hence that, conversely, men were made in the image of the gods. It was in order 'that the service of the gods might be performed and their shrines (built)' that man was created and bidden to 'inhabit' the earth.

The seventh and last book of the epic is a hymn of praise sung by the gods in honour of Merodach, in which the attributes and powers of the other 'great gods' are transferred to him. It formed originally no part of the story of the creation or even of the legend of Merodach; it was an independent poem, going back to pre-Semitic times, and incorporated by the author of the epic in his work. Fragments have come down to us of some of the commentaries that were written upon the original text. All that the author of the epic has done has been to tell us that it was sung in the council-chamber of the gods, and to add a few lines of epilogue at its end.

Tiamât, the dragon of chaos, is the impersonation of the primaeval deep, of that formless abyss of waters in which the Babylonians saw the beginning of all things. Babylonian theories of creation first grew up in the city of Eridu, the primitive sea-port of the country, where new land was continually being formed by the accumulation of silt. We possess a pre-Semitic, Sumerian account of the creation, which differs entirely from that of the epic, and constituted one of the hymns that were sung in

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the temple of Ea at Eridu. In it Ea was still the creator of the world; he is the lord of the deep, out of which the dry land arose through the settlement of mud around a bundle of reeds that the creator had planted in the shoreless sea. Once the land was formed, Ea stocked it with 'the beast of the field' and 'the green herb'; of the creation of the heavens no word is said.

The cosmological legends of Babylonia must have been known to Abraham before he left Ur of the Chaldees. They were pictured on the walls of the Babylonian temples and taught in the Babylonian schools. With the rest of Babylonian culture they passed to the West. Even in Upper Egypt fragments of Babylonian legends have been found among the cuneiform tablets of Tel el-Amarna, and the points which separate the words in them one from another indicate that they must have been used as exercises at school. Long before the age of Moses the Babylonian theory of creation and the myths and poems which embodied it would have been familiar to the educated native of Canaan.

A German scholar, Gunkel, has demonstrated

that there are references to the Babylonian story of the creation and the dragon Tiamât in passages of the Old Testament, which the most sceptical criticism allows to be of early date. There is no longer any need to prove that Jewish writers could have become acquainted with the cosmology of Babylonia only during the Exile. That it was known in Palestine long before that period is now admitted on all hands. Those who, like the contemporaries of Moses, could read the cuneiform tablets of Babylonia would have been familiar not only with the general belief of the Babylonians concerning the creation of the world, but also with the literary form or forms which that belief had assumed.

The resemblance between the Babylonian Epic of the Creation and the first chapter of the Book of Genesis is too striking not to have attracted attention from the outset. In both alike there is 'in the beginning' a watery chaos, above which the darkness brooded, while 'the earth was without form and void.' In both alike the creation of the present world commences with the creation of light; it was the destruction of the powers of darkness by the

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gods of light that made it possible for the Babylonian creator to begin his work. In both there is a firmament dividing the imprisoned waters above it from the waters beneath, and in both, too, the creation of the heavens and earth precede the appointment of the heavenly bodies to mark and measure time. In both the creation of man is the final consummation of the creator's acts, and the artificial division of the Babylonian epic into seven books corresponds with the seven days of the Hebrew account.

This, however, is not all. With all the resemblance that exists between the Babylonian and the Biblical narratives, there is yet a profound difference. Yet the difference is one which indicates not only the priority of the Babylonian version, but also the deliberate purpose of the Hebrew writer to contravene and correct it. We have seen, for instance, that in both accounts the heavenly bodies are appointed to measure time, and that the appointment follows not only the creation of the heavens and earth, but also of light itself. Indeed, in the Hebrew cosmology it even follows the creation of vegetation. The fact has often been a cause of difficulty, since according to the Book of Genesis the celestial



bodies were created on the fourth day as well as set to measure time.

But the difficulty is solved when we compare the Biblical account with the Babylonian epic. Here the sun and the moon and stars could not be created; they were gods, and consequently had existed before the creation of the world was begun. But for the writer of Genesis there was but one God, and the heavenly bodies were as much His creation as the green herb or the beast of the field. It is probably for this reason that he avoids calling the sun and moon by names which in Babylonian belief were the names of deities; for him the 'sun' and the 'moon' are the 'two great lights,' while 'the stars' take the place of the goddess Istar, who in the Babylonian story stood at the side of the 'sun' and 'moon.' But in thus ascribing the creation of the celestial bodies to the one and only God the Biblical writer has been unable to avoid the difficulty of making the morning and evening to have followed one another, and vegetation to have come into being before the sun or the moon. In the Babylonian version evening and morning naturally succeeded each other as soon as the gods of light appeared upon the scene,

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and the heavenly bodies were merely appointed afterwards to mark out the seasons of the year ; the fact that the writer in Genesis, while declaring that their appointment was accompanied by their creation, nevertheless adheres to the order of creation as described in the Babylonian epic, is a plain proof that that order of creation was already known to him, and was too firmly established to be altered.

But it is also a proof that he has changed and corrected the Babylonian version with deliberate intention. The heavenly bodies, he implicitly teaches, are creatures, and not gods. Even at the risk of throwing the story of creation into confusion and introducing into it elements of difficulty, he has formally contradicted and denied the polytheism of his Babylonian prototype. The polytheistic elements it contained are not merely rejected, they are contradicted and denied.

The same fact is apparent in other parts of the Biblical cosmology. The polytheism and mythology of the Babylonian theory are met with a stern negative, along with the materialism of the preface to the epic. The legend of the war in heaven between Merodach and Tiamât finds

no place in the narrative of Genesis, whatever references to it may be discoverable elsewhere in the Old Testament, and the declaration that man was created to worship the gods and build their sanctuaries is similarly excluded from it. There is no dragon Tiamât out of whom, as in the Babylonian legend, the firmament of heaven may be made, even though the Babylonian conception of a firmament is retained, and equally there is no impersonation of the deep whose waters should be gathered into seas. By the side of the Creator of Genesis no other god can exist.

The materialistic philosophy of the introduction to the epic is banished from the pages of Genesis like the polytheistic mythology which accompanies it. It expressed beliefs that had long been current in the philosophic schools of Babylonia, and endeavoured to harmonize the religious legends of the people with the more scientific knowledge of the few. The epic commences with the description of a formless matter, independent of the Creator, generating itself and developing into the divine. 'In the beginning was the deep, which begat the heavens and the earth, the chaos of Tiamât, who was the

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mother of them all.' Against this, on the forefront of Genesis stands the declaration that 'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' The earth was indeed a formless chaos resting on the dark waters of the *primaeval deep*—thus far the conceptions of the Babylonian cosmology are adopted, but the chaos and the deep were not the first of things; God was already there, and His breath or spirit brooded over the abyss. While the letter of the Babylonian story has been followed, the spirit of it has been changed. The Hebrew writer must have had the Babylonian version before him, and intentionally given an uncompromising denial to all in it that impugned the omnipotence and unity of God.

It is true that one or two expressions have been left in the Biblical narrative which are derived from the polytheism of its Babylonian prototype. The name of *Tehom*, 'the deep,' the Babylonian *Tiamât*, is used without the article, and we read that God said: 'Let *us* make man in *our* image.' But such expressions merely show how closely the letter of the Babylonian system of cosmology has been adhered to; they impair in no way the stern monotheism

of the Biblical narrative, and only serve to bring into greater relief the twofold fact that the cosmology of Genesis is the cosmology of Babylonia in a fundamentally changed form.

Perhaps nowhere is the change of form more striking than in the different conception of the mode of creating which distinguishes the Book of Genesis and the Babylonian epic. In the epic creation is either the result of evolution on the part of godless matter, or else the creator works like a craftsman, fashioning the universe out of pre-existing materials and putting it under bolt and key. In the Book of Genesis, on the other hand, God speaks, and it is done. Creation by the word is indeed known to the author of the epic; in the assembly of the gods Merodach is described as destroying and re-creating by the simple power of his word, and thereby proving himself a fitting champion of them in the struggle with the dragon; but in the actual creation of the world the word is never employed. In the mind of the Babylonian polytheist the gods were in the image of men, and as men therefore they were compelled to work.

The conclusion to which a comparison of the

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Hebrew and Babylonian accounts of the creation has thus brought us is unmistakeable. On the one hand the cosmology of Genesis presupposes the cosmology of Babylonia; the same conceptions underlie both, and the watery abyss of Genesis has its first home among the seafaring natives of Eridu. But on the other hand between the two, as they lie before us in the Bible and in the cuneiform literature of Babylonia, there is an impassable gulf. The cosmology of Babylonia is thickly overgrown and intertwined with polytheistic, mythological, and even materialistic elements; in the cosmology of Genesis these are all swept away, and in place of them the doctrine is proclaimed that there is but one God, the Creator of the whole universe.

The same contrast meets us elsewhere, when we examine the religious literature of Babylonia and the contents of the Old Testament side by side. Babylonian literature is full of hymns and penitential psalms, of prayers and addresses to the deity which breathe a deep spiritual earnestness, and often rise in accents of passionate devotion. From time to time we find language in them which reminds us of the psalms of

David or even the evangelical utterances of an Isaiah, and we are tempted to ask whether after all there was so profound a religious difference as we have been taught to believe between the inspiration of the 'chosen people' and that of their Semitic kindred, whether after all the spirit of the Hebrew scriptures may not have been the common heritage of the Semitic race.

But hardly is the question asked before we are suddenly brought, as it were, to a stand by passages and words that express the grossest polytheism or the puerilities of a grotesque and stupid superstition. Passionate outpourings of deep spiritual contrition for sin or the most exalted descriptions of the divine attributes are mingled with expressions of belief that are at once degrading and grotesque. To us the mixture seems incomprehensible, to the Babylonian it was natural and right. His mind was so steeped in polytheistic beliefs and practices, in the superstitions of magic and the dark rites of sorcery, that he could see no incompatibility between them and the purer and more spiritual thoughts that came from time to time to his soul from the light 'that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.' The Israelite stood

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alone among the Semitic peoples of the ancient East in maintaining that besides Yahveh there was no other god, and that the law of Yahveh was a law of righteousness.

And yet the Israelite was not better educated or more advanced in philosophic thought than his kinsfolk in Babylonia and Canaan. On the contrary, he stood on a lower level of culture and civilization, and his legal code, as we have seen, implies a less developed social organization than that which Babylonia possessed several centuries earlier. How, then, can we explain the gulf, fathomless and impassable, which lies between the cosmology of Genesis and the cosmology of Babylonia, or between the Old Testament literature as a whole and the religious literature of the Euphrates, without calling in the aid of an agency other than human? Whence came the revelation of the true nature of God, and His relation to man, which is announced in the first verse of the Pentateuch, and which stamps the literature of the Old Testament to the end?

It was certainly not from Babylonia or Canaan that it was derived, still less from Egypt; like the gift of reason and speech which distinguishes man from the lower animals, it remains solitary



and unique, a fact which we must accept, but which purely human science has failed to explain. We can analyse and trace the origin of the material elements that underlie the fact; but between the material elements and the fact itself there is a break of connexion which the forces at present known to us are unable to unite.

The revelation of monotheism is not confined to the cosmology of Genesis or the writings of the later prophets. We find it also in the Ten Words or Commandments, which even the 'critic' allows us to believe were Mosaic in origin. It goes back to the Mosaic age, to the time when Israel fled from Egypt and was still under the tutelage of the wilderness. On the other hand, the cosmology and legends, the myths and gods of Babylonia were known to the Canaan of the Mosaic age. Long before the Exile the Hebrew literature which has survived to us shows that the Israelitish people also were well acquainted with the cosmological theories and mythological monsters of Babylonia. The Babylonian story of the creation could have been known to the great Hebrew legislator, and it is quite as easy to believe that it was he who

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found in it the material for his work, as that this was done by some later and unknown author.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the writer of the first chapter of Genesis had a cuneiform document before him which he was able to read; and we know of no periods when this could have been the case except the Mosaic and the epoch of the Exile. But the epoch of the Exile is excluded, if for no other reason, at all events for the very sufficient one that no Jew would then have borrowed from his enslavers a story of the creation which was saturated with their superstitions and idolatry. The simplest hypothesis is, after all, that which agrees with tradition.