GENESIS CHAPTER I AND THE CREATION MYTH

EVER since the discovery of the Babylonian myth of creation, called from its opening words *Enuma Elish*,[1] its similarity to the inspired account of Genesis has been recognized. Briefly, the story is this. In the beginning there is only chaos, with the deities Apsu and Tiamat, from whom other gods are then born. Conflict breaks out between parents and children; Apsu is killed and Tiamat threatens to destroy all the gods in revenge. They call on Marduk, the head of the Babylonian pantheon, to champion their cause, and Tiamat raises up a brood of monsters, 'the viper, serpent, hound', etc., figures from the Babylonian system of constellations. In the battle which follows Marduk is victorious; he kills Tiamat, uses her body to make the sky, and chains her allies there as constellations.

In Genesis, too, the state which precedes creation is described as a watery chaos; and some have even seen in the Hebrew word used for 'deep' (Tehom) the equivalent of the Babylonian Tiamat.[2] But far more striking are the passages which echo the idea that creation is the result of a conflict in which chaos is subdued. And first of all, Job xxvi. Although there is some confusion in the text in this section, v. 5 onwards certainly describes God's power in creation: how He 'hung the earth upon nothing . . . set bounds to the waters'. But vv. 12 and 13 read: 'By His strength He cleaved the sea, by His wisdom He struck Rahab; His breath made beautiful the sky, His hand pierced the fleeing serpent'.[3] Leaving aside Rahab for the moment, it is difficult to see what sense the reference to the striking of the serpent could have in such a context, if we do not bear in mind the Babylonian story, where the serpent is one of the allies of Tiamat. (It is interesting to find that the defeat of the sea-serpent is an idea which occurs in Egyptian literature also, in connexion with creation. Canaanite literature also knows a similar legend: 'Thou didst smite Lotan—Leviathan—the crooked serpent'; but the context is not known).[4] Similarly in Job vii, 12, Job complains to God: 'Am I the Sea, or the Dragon, that you have imprisoned me'; and the same figure of imprisonment is used in Job xxxviii, 8, again

[1] A translation of the text is to be found in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (ANET), ed. J. B. Pritchard, Princeton, 1950: pp. 60–72. A translation and study of it is given by S. Langdon, *The Babylonian Epic of Creation*, Oxford, 1923.

[2] It is interesting to see that A. Heidel in the second edition of his *Babylonian Genesis*, Chicago, 1951, now denies the equation Tehom–Tiamat.

[3] I have translated from the Hebrew in this passage and in others where the Vulgate does not bring out the meaning sufficiently clearly.

[4] For the Egyptian texts, see ANET, pp. 6–7, 11–12. For the Canaanite reference, see C. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature*, Rome, 1949: p. 38, Text 67, 1, 1,

with reference to God's creation: 'Who shut up the sea in gates . . .' In these last two, the mythological reference is not necessary for the understanding of the passage, but seems probable.

In Job xxvi, 12, we have seen a reference to a sea monster named Rahab. The same beast, along with the dragon of Job vii, 12, appears in Isaias li, 9. The author calls on God to show His strength, as He did in olden days, when He 'struck Rahab, and defeated the dragon'. The same is mentioned in Job ix, 13, in a way which recalls even more clearly the Babylonian story: 'God does not withhold His wrath; beneath Him are prostrate the helpers of Rahab'. But a complication enters in here. In Hebrew the word 'rahab' means turbulent, proud; and therefore besides meaning the turbulent sea or sea-monster, it can be used as an epithet, 'the proud one'. Now by a mixture of both ideas, the word is used as an epithet, almost a proper name, for Egypt, the turbulent nation lying like a sea-serpent beside her river. Psalm 86, 4 clearly uses it, in this sense, of Egypt: 'I will number Rahab and Babylon among my worshippers, Philistia, Tyre' and other nations. Now in Isaias xxvii, 1 we get a similar admixture of ideas. 'In that day, God will punish . . . Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the writhing serpent, will kill the dragon that is in the depths of the sea.' Clearly there is a suggestion of our theme here; but the context makes it clear that the immediate reference is to God defeating the enemies of Israel. This suggests two comments to us. First, we note that a borrowing of terminology does not necessarily mean borrowing of concepts; not that there could, in any case, be any question of acceptance of mythology by the Bible; but that whereas phrases and ideas from mythology are sometimes taken out of their false context and applied to God in a true context (it is God who is Creator, not Marduk or Baal, and one might describe His creation as victory over the joint forces of chaos), sometimes on the other hand, the phrases are borrowed but applied to quite a different context—they become detached more and more from their parent story in the process of transmission. The second point we note is that Egypt finds itself caught in a semantic tangle between God's power to create and God's power to deliver. We see it in Isaias li, 9; after the verse quoted above, where God is called to show His strength, as He did when He destroyed Rahab and the dragon, v. 10 goes on with a clear reference to the liberation from Egypt: '. . . made the sea a road so that the delivered people may cross over'. In Psalm lxxiii, 13, 14 we meet another example of the same duality of thought: 'By thy strength thou didst split the sea, broke the heads of the dragon of the ocean; thou hast broken the heads of leviathan . . .' The reference to deliverance from Egypt would fit; but so would the idea of victory over primal ocean in creation—v. 16 says: 'Thine is the day, thine is the night, Thou has made the morning light and the sun'. This connexion between

creation and salvation seems to be more than merely coincidental; but since it would lead us too far, we must leave it as a suggestion.

In *Enuma Elish*, Marduk follows up his victory by using Tiamat in creation. He 'split her into two parts, like an oyster', and with one half made the heavens, with the other (presumably, though the text does not say so explicitly) he made the earth; and then set watchmen with orders not to let her waters flow forth. Genesis contains a similar conception: God divides the waters and sets a firmament above to keep the upper waters in place, and sets earth on the lower waters. This is also an idea which is often found in the Bible: 'I have set a limit to the sea, that it should not pass over' (cf. Jer. v, 22; Ps. ciii, 6ff, etc.). As long as God's protecting hand is on the subdued ocean, its waters are beneficent, as in the case of the waters which flow from the right side of the temple in Ez. xlvii, 1ff; if He lets them loose, as in the flood when He opened the sluice gates of heaven above and the springs of the ocean beneath, it is a return to the primitive chaos, an undoing of the work of creation.

In the body of Tiamat which now forms the heavens, Marduk sets sun and moon and stars to act as signs of the seasons. The same idea of the function of the heavenly bodies is expressed in the Bible (Gen. i, 14–18; cf. Ps. ciii, 19ff; Ps. cxxxv, 7–9). But, further, it appears that for the Babylonians these stars are gods: 'He constructed stations for the great gods, the stars their likeness he fixed'.[5] Now it seems that something of the same idea—heavenly beings who rule and direct men—is present to the Hebrew mind also; or at least that they use terminology affected by such a concept. Psalms lviii and lxxxi suggest this idea—they complain about 'judges', rulers, who have been lacking in their duty; and these rulers are 'sons of God', have their place in the heavenly court. And the connexion of such beings with the heavenly bodies can be seen from Deuteronomy. Moses warns the people of the punishment which will come upon them if 'they served strange gods and adored them whom they knew not, and for whom they had not been assigned' (Deut. xxix, 26); as if God allows other nations to adore other gods, but gives Israel the privilege of knowing and adoring Him. Compare Deut. iv, 19: Beware of images, says Moses, 'lest you should lift up your eyes and see the sun and moon and stars, and should fall into the error of adoring and serving them; whereas God made them

[5] Tablet V, 1, 2. This tablet is extremely defective. One may note in passing, however, that even where the text is complete, the thought is certainly incoherent. In the Babylonian original story, no doubt this is to be explained partly by the fact that the poem is primarily a ritual, and only secondarily a cosmogony. The inconsistencies in the Bible references are more easily understandable, since the inspired authors are not at all concerned with relating the myth in its original form, but are merely using language which is coloured by it.

to be served by other nations', but has kept Israel for Himself. The idea is not impossible; until God was ready to reveal Himself to the whole world, He may well have allowed the mistaken form of natural religion which refers worship to the most wonderful of God's manifestation of Himself, in the heavenly bodies. This is the view taken by Clement of Alexandria: this was permitted lest they should become entirely godless and corrupt, and as a means by which they could rise to God.[6] This idea, then, may cast light on such passages as Is. xxiv, which describes God's judgement on the earth, ending up (vv. 21–23): 'The Lord will punish the host of heaven on high and the kings of the earth below . . . the moon shall blush, the sun shall be ashamed, when the Lord of hosts shall reign in Sion'. In God's good time, He will put an end to the dominion of the false gods which are the sun and moon, and to the rule of the kings of earth who have served them, and will reveal Himself as the one true God of all the world. And again in Is. xxiv, 2–4, God's power over the earth is paralleled by His sway over heaven: 'The indignation of the Lord is upon all the nations . . . and all the host of heaven shall pine away'. No doubt it was this idea which led up to the concept of Daniel, that each nation has an angel which looks after its interests (cf. Dan. x, 13, 20, 21; and xii, 1); and ultimately to the idea of guardian angels.

There will be no need to repeat that there is not in this any implication of the existence of mythological teaching in the Bible. An inspired author cannot possibly teach what is false. But he can—must, even—express the truth in a way which is familiar to himself and his hearers, using the expressions and literary forms of his day. 'It is absolutely necessary for the interpreter to go back in spirit to those remote centuries of the East . . . in order to discover what literary forms the writers of that early age intended to use . . . The Sacred Books need not exclude any of the forms of expression which were commonly used by the ancient peoples . . . For just as the substantial Word of God became like man in all things "without sin", so the words of God expressed in human language became in all things like to human speech, except error'.[7] And one who wants to understand God's word as fully as possible will want his ear to be attuned as carefully as possible to every modulation of the instrument which expresses it.

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[6] Clem. Al., quoted by Driver, *Deuteronomy*, International Crit. Comm. 1902.
[7] Divino Afflante: C.T.S., translation, paras: 39–41.