Genesis 1—11 Resources

# Enuma elish (When on High): A Babylonian Creation Story

The Babylonian creation story may have been originally composed in about the time of Joshua. It comprises almost 900 lines on seven tablets, though there is a very large amount of repetition. When Judahites were transported to Babylon in 587 it was recited each year at the New Year Festival in Marduk's temple there. It is thus a celebration of Marduk and of Babylon, to which the story of creation was subservient. It explains how the obscure god of Babylon, Marduk, came to be king of the gods, and therefore how Babylon came to be the capital of its world. The following excerpts are based on the version in R. W. Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament.* See also J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts;* D. W. Thomas (ed.), *Documents from Old Testament Times;* W.Beyerlin (ed.), *Near Eastern Religious Texts.* You can readily find a complete version online.

[The creation of the gods by Apsu and Tiamat]

When on high the heaven was not yet named I/1  
and beneath the earth bore no name,  
and primeval Apsu who begot them  
and Mummu‑Tiamat, the mother of them all —  
their waters were mingled together  
and no field was formed, no marsh seen,  
when none of the gods had been called into being  
and none bore a name, and no destinies were fixed,  
then were created the gods in the midst of heaven....

[Trouble among the gods results in Apsu's death]

The brother gods banded together, 21

they disturbed Tiamat

by their revelry in the Abode of Heaven.

Apsu could not reduce their clamor

and Tiamat was speechless at their ways

Then Apsu, the begetter of the great gods, 29

summoned Mummu his messenger

They went and before Tiamat they lay down, 33

they consulted on a plan concerning the gods, their sons.

Apsu opened his mouth and said

"By day I cannot rest, I cannot lie down. 38

I will destroy their way

that the clamor be appeased, that we may lie down."

When Tiamat heard these words

she was furious….

"All that which we have made, shall we destroy? …” 45

Mummu answered and gave counsel to Apsu, 47

"Come, their way is strong, but you destroy it.

Then you will have rest by day, by night you will lie down."

Apsu hearkened to him and his face brightened

because of the evil he planned against the gods, his sons….

What they had decided between them 54

was told to the gods, their sons….

Ea, the all‑knowing, saw through their scheme…. 60

Having bound Apsu, he slew him. 69

Mummu he bound and left locked up….

[Marduk is brought in to defend the murderer gods]

In the heart of the Deep was Marduk created…. 81

The one who begot him was Ea, his father; 83

The one who bore him was Damkina, his mother….

He was the loftiest of the gods, surpassing was his stature…. 99

The gods said to Tiamat their mother,

"When they slew Apsu, your consort,

you did not help him but stayed still….

Apsu, your consort, must be in your mind…. 116

When Tiamat heard these words, she was pleased…. 124

Among the gods, her first‑born, who formed her army, 146

she exalted Kingu; among them she made him great….

She gave him the tablets of destiny, set them on his chest. 156

"Your command will not fail. It will be established"….

When Ea heard this word 11/5

he was afflicted and sat in sorrow….

Lord Anshar, father of the gods, rose up in grandeur…. 92

"He whose strength is powerful shall be our avenger, 94

he who is keen in battle, Marduk, the hero!"….

The lord rejoiced at his father's word…. 102

His heart exulted and he spoke to his father: 121

"O lord of the gods, Destiny of the great gods,

If I, your avenger,

do enchain Tiamat and give you life,

make an assembly, exalt my destiny….

When I speak even as you may I decree fate. 127

That which I shall do shall remain unchanged.

It shall not be changed nor fail, the word of my lips"….

[Marduk is put in authority and kills Tiamat]

They gave him scepter, throne, and symbol of authority, IV/28

bestowed on him an invincible weapon which destroys the enemy.

"Go and cut off the life of Tiamat.

Let the wind carry her blood into secret places"….

He made ready the bow, appointed it as his weapon…. 35

The bow and the quiver he hung at his side. 38

He put the lightning in front of him,

with flaming fire he filled his body.

He made a net to enclose Tiamat within it….

He created an evil wind, a tempest, a hurricane…. 45

He sent forth the winds he had created, the seven of them, 47

to disturb the inner parts of Tiamat, they followed him….

Toward Tiamat, the raging, he set his face…. 60

The lord drew nigh to scan the insides of Tiamat. 65

He perceived the design of Kingu, her spouse

Then advanced Tiamat and Marduk, counselor of the gods. 94

To the combat they marched; they drew nigh to battle.

The lord spread out his net and caught her.

The storm wind which was behind he let loose in her face.

When Tiamat opened her mouth to the widest

he drove in the evil wind so that she could not close her lips.  
The terrible wind filled her belly  
and her heart was taken from her and her mouth was opened wide.

He seized the spear and tore her belly.

He cut her inward parts; he pierced her heart.

He made her powerless; he destroyed her life.

[Marduk uses Tiamat's body to make the cosmos]

He cast down her body and stood on it….

Then the lord rested. He gazed on her dead body. 135

As he divided the form he made a cunning plan.

He split her like a shellfish into two halves.

One half of her he established as a covering for heaven.

He fixed a bolt and stationed a watchman.

He commanded them not to let her waters come forth….

He made the stations for the great gods; V/1

the stars, their images, as the stars of the Zodiac he fixed.

He ordained the year, he marked off its sections.

For the twelve months he fixed three stars for each….

In the midst he established the zenith. 11

Moon he caused to shine forth, to him entrusted the night….

[He uses her second‑in‑command's body to make human beings to serve the gods]

When Marduk heard the word of the gods, VI/1

his heart moved him and he devised a cunning plan.

He opened his mouth and unto Ea he spoke….

"Blood will I take and bone will I fashion. 5

I shall make "man", "man" shall be his name.

Yes, man will I create.

The gods' service will be established, their shrines be built.

But I shall transform the ways of the gods….”

The great gods replied to him…. 27

"It was Kingu who started the uprising 29

and made Tiamat revolt and join battle."

They bound him to bring him before Ea.

They imposed punishment on him and severed his blood vessels.

From his blood they formed mankind.

He imposed on him the service of the gods and freed them….

[Marduk's further reward]

The high gods said to Marduk their lord: 48

"Now O lord, you who have brought about our deliverance,

what shall be our homage to you?

We will build a shrine….”

When Marduk heard this, 55

his face glowed brightly like the day.

"Construct Babylon, whose building you have requested.

Let its bricks be fashioned. Name it 'The Sanctuary"'….

# A Possible Historical Context for Genesis 2—4

Here are some ways of seeing Genesis 2 – 4 against the background of the time of David and Solomon

* In Genesis 2 the man is portrayed as a king with his garden and his animals over which he exercises dominion. The story refuses to confine royalty to kings and implicitly offers a critique of David in particular (Brueggemann, *Genesis,* pp. 51-52*).* “The story derives from circles... who stand over against the king to admonish, instruct, and correct him, or finally to impeach him” (Coats, *Genesis,* p. 59*;* cf. Rogerson, *Genesis 1 – 11*, pp. 30-31). David knew how to rearrange the world for his own ends and he brings death. Solomon was the man who sought to know everything; kings and other mortals need to acknowledge that there are boundaries.
* How was Eve a “help” to Adam? The one thing Adam could not do was have children, and this is the way Eve helps him (Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help?*). This would fit with a situation when in the land of Canaan the problem was under-population and Israel needed women to bear children. Both men and women had to work hard to make things grow in the not-ideal conditions of the mountain country where Israel lived (cf. 3:16‑17) (Meyers, *Discovering Eve*).
* The serpent reflects the temptation and claims of Canaanite religion. There, the serpent is a symbol , for instance of fertility and of wisdom. In Genesis 3 it thus promises life and wisdom. Genesis puts the serpent in its place by noting that Yahweh created it. The understanding of the serpent’s significance as relating to the gift of life is supported by the stories in Numbers 21:9and 2 Kings 18:4.
* The Cain and Abel story reflects conflict between farmers and shepherds, and/or the question of the origin of the “Kenites,” whose Hebrew name could as easily be transliterated Cainites. “The Kenites were a difficult riddle to the Israelites. They, too, like the Israelites, were worshippers of Yahweh, perhaps even before Israel… In spite of this, the Kenites never really belonged to the covenant community chosen by Yahweh” (von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 104).
* Knowledge is power, so it is in the interests of people in power to deny knowledge to ordinary people; this is what is happening in Genesis 3 (J. M. Kennedy, “Peasants in revolt: Political allegory in Genesis *2-3*,” *Journal for the Study of the OT* 47 [1990], pp. 3-14)*.*
* The hostility to Cain in Genesis 4 provides justification in the period of David and Solomon for the dispossession of freehold peasant farmers by the state and/or by big landholders (I. J. Mosala, *Black Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa).*
* Genesis 3 – 4 reflects the way the liberating gospel of Genesis 2 has been abandoned in the time of David and Solomon, when patriarchy triumphs and brotherhood has collapsed. In keeping with this development, Christian tradition turned Cain into a black man. One might rather seek to invert that development by seeing Cain as in a sense a victim in the story, even though doing wrong in the violating of key relationships; he is “structurally locked into ‘not doing well’” (Stephen Breck Reid, *Experience and Tradition*, p. 40).

References for the above ideas:

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# Genesis and Science: Some Current Views

A subset of the question of Genesis and history and another question that is important to many Western people is the relationship between Genesis and scientific understandings of how the world as we know it came into being. Many understandings of how the world came into being are current among scientists.

1. “Creationism” denotes the world’s creation over six days a few thousand years ago. This view issues assumes that Genesis a straightforward historical account. One difficulty it raises is that there is evidence that the world has existed for much longer than a few thousand years. Perhaps in creating a mature world, God had to created it in a way that implied it had a history—Its trees would have rings that suggested they were much older than they were; something similar would be true about rocks. So such data need not imply that the world is billions of years old.
2. The theory that the original creation was followed at some stage by a great catastrophe and then by an act of re-creation provides an alternative approach to interpreting these data. This theory suggests that the account of creation in Genesis refers to the great act of re-creation, which happened over a brief period just a few years ago. The margin translation of Genesis 1:2 in the New International Version makes it possible to read Genesis in this way, as it refers to the earth “becoming” formless and empty.
3. The theory of Intelligent Design holds that the earth came into being over billions of years by a process involving God’s direct steering and intervention. The evolutionary “missing links” are missing because species did not develop directly from one another.
4. The theory of theistic evolution maintains that the world came into being over billions of years by a process of evolution that in principle science can trace as a “natural” one, but behind which believers see God’s activity.
5. The theory of naturalistic evolution holds that the world came into being over billions of years by a process of evolution that had its own dynamic and did not need God to guide or be involved in it. “On Main Street America, evolution is often interpreted as a creation story for atheists” (Giberson and Yerxa, *Species of Origins*, p. 58).

What is the nature of the difficulty in connection with Genesis? Why does this issue raise questions in connection with understanding Genesis?

1. One difficulty is that there seems to be a clash between two sources of information that should both be reliable. The world and the Bible are both sources of knowledge about the world. The Bible itself assumes that we learn from both – one is known theologically as “natural revelation,” the other as “special revelation.” In this case the sources of information have seemed to clash in what they tell us about world origins – about the age of the world, about the speed with which it came into being, and about the process where it did so (an immanent one or an interventionist one).
2. There can follow from that difficulty a danger of Christians being anti-science, as if science were anti-God. A bigger danger is of mis-focusing our attention on Genesis, so that we concentrate on its real or apparent scientific implications more than its inherent message.
3. The actual problem is a clash between the interpretation of two sets of evidence or information. Both sets come from God. The problem is a clash between our scientific understanding of the data from the world and our Christian understanding of the data from the Bible, and what we infer from both.

# Genesis and Science: Approaches to the Problem

Here are four approaches to the problem.

1. Science is right about the facts and Genesis is wrong about them, but it doesn’t matter, because Genesis can still be right on the theological significance of creation (so, for instance, von Rad, *Genesis*).
2. Genesis is right on the facts as well as the theology, and science is wrong. Thus creationism emphasizes that the theory of evolution is indeed just a theory, not proven fact, and urges the distinction between micro-evolution, which is uncontroversial, and macro-evolution, which is inferred from it. It declares that radiometric dating (by which the antiquity of the world is established) is wrong, or perhaps convulsions that came about through the worldwide flood in Noah’s day have misled people. As noted above, one could alternatively maintain that God (inevitably) created an old-looking world. In connection with opposition to evolution, whether evolution is inherently anti-God is important.
3. Genesis and (standard) science can be reconciled. One way of reconciling them is to take the “days” in Genesis 1 as very long periods. The order in which living things come into being broadly corresponds to the order hypothesized by the theory of evolution. Another way of reconciling them is by the “catastrophe” noted above, that Genesis 1.3-31 describes a series of acts of re-creation after something happened so that the original earth *became* a formless void. A third theory is that Genesis 1 is a six-day vision not a six-day creation (Wiseman, *Clues to Creation in Genesis*).
4. My view is that Genesis and science don’t need to be reconciled. On one hand, Genesis is parabolic or picture history, not literal history; we have noted that it portrays what happened by using symbols and stories that were available to the author and that might communicate with the audience. On the other, science is about the process whereby the world came into being, not the meaning of it. The two belong in different spheres. (D. F. Payne, *Genesis One Reconsidered*).

In connection with this question it’s worth noting that the OT offers several portrayals of the way God brought the world into being. Isaiah 51:9-11 describes it in terms of God having a fight with opposing forces. Psalm 90:2 says it was like God giving birth to a baby. Psalm 104:1-3 described it as God building a home. Alongside these descriptions are the two that come in Genesis: it was like God doing a week’s work and then having a day off (Gen 1) and like God turning a bit of desert into a garden (Gen 2). Discussion of whether Genesis 1 and 2 are compatible with science often presupposes that Genesis involves literal descriptions, but in fact there is no need to take them as any more literal than the other passages. All are using images to describe something that could not be literally described. Or rather, they are using images because it is a more helpful way to describe the process than a literal account would be. Most Western people living at the beginning of the third millennium after Christ would no more understand a literal account of this process than Middle Eastern people in the millennium before Christ. It issues from God’s mercy that God gave us a picture account rather than a literal one.

Of the five different scientific accounts of the process, the first four are compatible with Christian faith: creationism, creation then catastrophe, intelligent design, and theistic evolution. But (1) and (2) start from questionable assumptions about the genre or translation of Genesis 1. Both (3) and (4) are compatible with scripture. In understanding Genesis, we have no vested interest in which is right.

As well as books mentioned above, see the works by Miller, Pennock, Ruse, Turner, and Vinson, listed in the bibliography.

# Some Reflections on Genesis 1 – 11

1. Genesis 1—11 is not a piece of timeless doctrinal teaching or primitive science (or sophisticated science) but a preaching of the gospel. It tells a gospel story. We need to see how it brought good news and challenge to people (e.g., in the time of the monarchy, the exile, and the time after the exile). Then we may be able to see how it addresses good news and challenge to Christians today (e.g., concerning world food needs, global warming, the place of women, the search for meaning, and workaholism).
2. Christians have separated off Genesis 1 – 3 from Genesis 4 – 11, but Genesis 1 – 11 needs to be read as a whole. The chapters are the story of God’s original relationship with the world as a whole, and they provide the background to Israel’s story. They describe God’s relationship to the world (chapter 1), to individuals (chapters 2 – 3), to families (chapter 4), and to societies (chapter 5), and they show how the good creation got spoiled in each respect. Chapters 9 – 11 then subsequently go through such areas of life again the other side of God’s realizing that humanity is radically evil-inclined (8:21).
3. The story shows that it is not because God’s plan is being worked out that our lives and the world are what they are. God’s plan is not being worked out – or rather, God did not have a plan. God wanted to work out the plan with human beings. God did have some goals and God is committed to achieving them, but God is flexible about how to achieve them. Thus, God can have a change of mind from time to time.
4. The chapters show that the background to Israel’s story was always that God had a purpose for the whole world, even though that fact is not up front in most of the Old Testament. Israel was thus the same as the church, which also usually forgets that the world is God’s concern.
5. Genesis 1 does not say that God created the world “out of nothing”, but neither does it deny that point. No doubt if you asked the author of Genesis where the raw material for creation came from, the reply would be, “God made it, of course,” and Proverbs 8 is closer to articulating that affirmation. But the narrative is not so interested in where God’s raw material came from but in what God did with the raw material. The idea of creation out of nothing was formulated by second century Christian theologians Irenaeus and Tertullian in opposition to the views of Christians who said that God created the world out of (rather inferior) preexistent matter This is one of many points at which we must beware of imposing Christian doctrinal questions on Genesis if we want to hear its own message.
6. God created a good world, but this did not mean a world without pressures, problems, temptations, earthquakes, volcanoes, and death in nature. Romans 8 does not say that creation’s groaning issued from human sin, and the Bible does not say that creation is “fallen.” Rather, humanity’s disobedience means that it fails to be able to take creation to its goal, and that is why creation groans. A world with pressures and temptations was a good world because those are the stuff of what takes people towards maturity. You cannot get mature sitting on Malibu Beach.
7. Human beings were not created inherently immortal; in order to live forever, they needed to eat of the tree of life. Death would have been averted or succeeded by a transformed life if people had done so.
8. There have been many understandings of the idea of being “in God’s image”; for instance, it has been held to lie in rationality, or morality, or spirituality, or creativity, or physicality, or relationship. These different views reflect the convictions of their day. People read into the phrase what is important to them. The fact that an image is usually something visible and physical rather suggests that the image lies in humanity’s bodiliness, and that would make sense in light of the fact that God eventually became a bodily human being. This was not so difficult because humanity was already the kind of being God would be if God were human. And/or perhaps the significance of being in God’s image is spelled out in the fact that humanity is meant to rule the earth on God’s behalf. But perhaps these ideas are also read into the expression. Perhaps we should see the idea of being “in God’s image” as rather a stimulus to thought and take it as an invitation to read the rest of the story in the Torah (and the rest of the Old Testament story) to discover who God is and who human beings are and to reflect on the implications. It will then be by such a process that we discover a biblical theology of what it means to be human. Certainly we cannot get a theology of what it means to be human out of the phrase “in God’s image.” It is too vague.

On the image of God, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

1. It is odd that God tells Adam and Eve that they cannot have the knowledge of good and bad, the capacity to discern between these, because that discernment is a good thing that people are encouraged to have through the rest of the Old Testament (see especially 1 Kings 3:9). God’s prohibition is a test (like Genesis 22). If Adam and Eve obey God and do not take from the tree, they can have the knowledge of good and bad. God’s point is that submission to God is the first principle of wisdom. (Of course they get this capacity anyway: 3:22.)
2. “The essential purpose of [marriage] is to create stable families.” Marriage is not about romantic love. “Marriage…*can* follow, precede, or remain wholly independent of that condition.” Just because two people are in love does not mean they marry. If people are married but not in love, this doesn’t make the slightest difference to whether they are married. “The essence of marriage is to sanction and solemnize that connection of opposites which alone creates new life. (Whether or not a given married couple does in fact create new life is immaterial.) Men and women can marry only because they belong to different, opposite sexes.” (Sam Schulman on “Gay Marriage” in the Jewish monthly *Commentary*, November 2003.)
3. Our stress on God giving Adam and Eve freewill is something we import into the text. The story says that God told them where they had free will (most of the trees) and where they did not (one tree). God did not say “so you are free to decide whether to obey me.” Of course they did have freewill in our sense, but that is not the kind of freewill the text is interested in.
4. The serpent is a creature that talks. It is not Satan. Genesis 6:1-4 is closer to being a story about supernatural evil power getting involved in the world and bringing about terrible trouble. The earliest interpretations of Genesis (especially the Book of Enoch, chapters 6 – 7 and 15) thus see Genesis 6:1-4 as the origin of sin in the world. The stress on Genesis 3 as having that significance begins in Jewish writings just before New Testament times, with the stress being on Adam rather than Eve (2 Baruch 17; 54; 56; 2 Esdras 4:30; 117).
5. The Torah does not explain the origin of evil or suffering. It does not explain why there is a serpent that tempts, or why Abel’s sacrifice is accepted. These are questions we would like the answer to, but God did not see fit to provide them. What the Bible does instead is focus on what God and we do with/about evil and suffering (cf. Luke 13:4).
6. Headship of men over women comes as a result of sin in the world. It is not God’s ideal design. We don’t have to accept it just like that, any more than other results of the “fall.”
7. The Bible never describes the event in the Garden as a fall – the expression comes from the Apocrypha (2 Esdras 7:118). The usefulness of the image is that it expresses the awareness that humanity was not created sinful but that after creation human beings indulged in an act of disobedience that had devastating results for all other human beings. As Paul puts it in Romans 5, in Adam or through Adam all die. We are all affected by that original sin, which was a historical event. But the actual image of “fall” is misleading, for instance because it suggests that Adam and Eve were on high before their sin, whereas Genesis rather suggests that they were beginning a journey.
8. When God says to Noah, “for that man shall his blood be shed,” it is not clear that God is laying down a requirement of capital punishment for murder. God’s statement may be more like Jesus’ “those who live by the sword shall perish by the sword.”
9. In Genesis 9:20-27, we do not know what Noah’s son did. If it was a homosexual act, it was also an act of incest (like that involving Lot and his daughters). But the story wishes to draw a veil over what happened, as Shem and Japhet did.
10. It is Noah who curses Canaan, not God, and whereas the curse has been made the basis for regarding people of color as destined for enslavement, Noah’s curse has nothing to do with race in our sense (distinguishing people’s race on the basis of their skin color developed only in the eighteenth century).
11. “The theme of the Pentateuch is the partial fulfilment – which implies also the partial non-fulfilment – of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs. The promise or blessing is both the divine initiative in a world where human initiatives always lead to disaster, and… an affirmation of the primal divine intentions for humanity (David Clines, *The* *Theme* *of* *the* *Pentateuch*, 2nd ed., p. 30). Is Genesis 1 – 11 itself then bad news or good news? Only in the light of Genesis 12 can it be read positively (Clines, pp. 83-86).
12. To put it another way, Genesis 1 – 11 is the story of blessing and curse struggling for possession of the world. At the beginning God blessed the animals, blessed humanity, and blessed the Sabbath (1:22, 28; 2.3), but the result of human disobedience was a curse on the serpent, on the land, and on Cain (3:14, 17; 4:11). Genesis reminds us of God’s original intention to bless (5:2) but Noah’s father reminds us of God’s consequent curse (5:29). After the flood God blesses Noah (9:1) but Noah curses Canaan (9:25). Where will this story end? Will blessing or curse win out? Genesis 1 – 11 leaves this an open question. Only with God’s summons to Abraham (12:1-3) are we given an answer.

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There is a joke floating around the internet – we don’t know where it started, but we will gladly attribute it if someone claims it.

Adam was walking round the garden, looking very lonely. So God asked him, “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have anyone to talk to.”

“All right, I will give you a companion. She will wash your clothes. She will always agree with you. She will bear your children and never ask you to get up in the middle of the night to help with them. She will not nag you and she will always be the first to admit she was wrong when you have had a disagreement. She will never have a headache, and she will freely give you love and compassion whenever you need it.”

Adam asked God, “What would a woman like this cost me?”

“An arm and a leg.”

Adam asked, “What could I get for just a rib?”

(You know the rest of the story.)