

Myth Making in the Bible and the Ancient Near East: The Yahwist Primeval Creation Myth

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The Yahwist Primeval Creation Myth¹, the story of the creation of humanity and the Garden of Eden, in Genesis 2-3, has traditionally been interpreted as a story of “*the Fall*” of humanity, a tale of crime and punishment. Some of the commonly held perceptions of Genesis 2-3 include the following: an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, loving, and gracious God; an ideal garden paradise without death, enmity, and labor; a demonic serpent; a foolish and naive woman; and a humanity corrupted by sin, who in the process, “*fall*” from God and paradise, for eating the forbidden fruit. Following the work of Bernard F. Batto, this paper will attempt to use ancient Near Eastern literature, mainly Atrahasis and the Epic of Gilgamesh, to provide a new interpretation of the Garden of Eden story.

The Yahwist Primeval Myth, like Atrahasis², begins with the desert chaos which precedes creation. In ancient Near Eastern mythopoeic speculation, there exist two primary symbols of primeval chaos: the first being the primeval waters of chaos, often symbolized by the dragonlike chaos monster; the second is represented by the barren chaotic desert³. The

¹ This paper will deal exclusively with the Yahwist Primeval Creation Myth (Gen. 2-3). As in most creation myths, including *Atrahasis*, the flood is a crucial component to the Yahwist Primeval Myth (Gen. 2-11). This paper, unfortunately, will not explore both creation and flood. Exploring Adam to Noah, and the Near Eastern counterparts, requires a scope greater than the space restrictions (word count) of this paper; therefore, I have decided to leave the flood out, in order to succeed in a thorough analysis of the primeval creation motif.

² , Bernard F. Batto. *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 27. *Atrahasis* is also known as the “Babylonian Genesis.”

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

Gen 1:1-2, Tiamat in *Enuma elish*, and Yam in the Baal-Yam myth use the symbol of the monster. David P. Silverman. “Divinity and Deities in Ancient Egypt”. *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths and Personal Practice*. (Ed. Byron E. Schafer. U.S.A.: Cornell University Press, 1991) 34, 38. The Egyptian deity Seth is an example of the desert chaos. Seth represents chaos, evil, and confusion and is sometimes identified with the desert.

Yahwist Eden represents the latter, and Bernard Batto believes this motif to be a typology of Atrahasis. The earth surrounding Eden is a dry, desolate landscape, comparable to the steppes that surround Mesopotamia. Batto suggests that the names of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, of course, support this idea, for the historical geographical locations of the rivers are associated with Mesopotamia and its surrounding areas.⁴ The name Eden likely derives from the Semitic root for “*abundance*” or “*luxury*”, and can be interpreted as an abundant, luxurious paradise.⁵ As will be illustrated, this is an abundant, luxurious paradise for a deity, and not for humanity.

Now that God has the Garden of Eden, an abundant and luxurious estate, he must create a labouring servant to tend to it. God needs a gardener, so humankind (*haadam*) must be created. Genesis 2:5 states “*no shrub of the field being yet on the earth and no plant of the field yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not caused rain to fall on the earth and there was no human to till the soil*”.⁶ It is evident, as it is in Atrahasis, that creation is synonymous with labor. Creation begins when the clay of the ground (*haadamah*) is fashioned into humankind (*haadam*),⁷ combined with the divine breath. Batto suggests that this is more than a play on words; he believes that the Yahwist author is implying that humankind is

⁴ I do not interpret this to be reference to Mesopotamia and its environs. I interpret Eden to be an *axis mundi*, somewhere in ancient Near East, which is not necessarily Babylon. Eden is at the centre of the earth, a zone of the sacred, with sacred iconography and symbols, such as the “tree of life” and the “fountain of youth”, located at the centre.

Mircea Eliade. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*. (Trans. Willard R. Trask. U.S.A.: Harper & Row Press, 1959) 17-18. The path to the centre being perilous and difficult, for it is a “rite of passage from the profane to the sacred...the ephemeral and illusory to reality and eternity...death to life...[human] to divinity”.

Francis Landy. Lecture. (University of Alberta, Edmonton, 24 September 2002) The rivers flow out of Eden, because it is the centre of the earth, and to assume this is a reference to Mesopotamia limits the significance of *axis mundi*. This is a universal motif, which is not limited to Mesopotamian mythology. In fact, the Pishon and the Gihon are both mythological rivers, and the latter being a spring in Jerusalem. Perhaps, if the Gihon is linked to Jerusalem (Babylon’s adversary), this is an antithetical statement toward Babylon. In addition, the Pishon flows to Havilah (a distant mythologized land), so, perhaps, the rivers flow from the centre of the world to vast lands throughout the world, as the author knew it.

⁵ Batto, *Slaying*, 47-50. Batto also links the root 𐤀𐤃, known in Hebrew (Neh. 9:25) and Syriac, to an Aramaic version of a ninth century B.C.E. bilingual inscription at Tell Fakhariyeh, in northeastern Syria, on a statue dedicated to the storm god Hadad. In the inscription, Hadad is referred to as “the irrigation master of heaven and earth, who rains down in abundance... who supplies drink and food for all of the gods... the irrigation master of all rivers, who makes *luxuriant* [𐤀𐤃] the whole land (Aramaic version, 11. 2-5). Batto believes the use of the rare root (𐤀𐤃) to illustrate a watery, luxuriant place to be significant and noteworthy. He further suggests that Eden may have a longer tradition behind it than what is known. Batto concludes that perhaps Gen. 2 implies Yahweh, similar to Hadad, is the “irrigation master” who controls the “cosmic” waters and transforms the barren desert of chaos “into a paradisiacal oasis”.

⁶ Robert Alter. *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996). This translation will be used throughout the paper.

⁷ Alter, *Genesis*, 8. The human (*haadam*) fashioned from the humus (*haadamah*) is, of course, the Hebrew etymological pun.

inseparably linked to the ground. Humankind has been created to cultivate the ground, and must, also, live off the ground. The ground and humanity are codependent, for even after the expulsion from the garden, humanity must still cultivate the ground (3:17-19, 23).⁸ This motif of the Yahwist myth parallels Atrahasis, in which humans were created to relieve the Igigi, the lesser gods, of agricultural labor. Also, in Atrahasis, humankind is fashioned out of clay, which is mixed with the blood of a slain rebel god. Enki (Ea), the Mesopotamian god of wisdom, together with the mother-goddess Nintu (Mami),⁹ fashion primeval humankind (lullu or lullu-awilu)¹⁰ out of clay and the blood of the slain leader of the rebel gods.¹¹ As in Atrahasis, the deity has a margin of error, and creation becomes a gradual process of trial and error.¹² The Yahwist portrays the creator deity fumbling with his¹³ creation, not knowing what to expect from his creation. The creator deity of Genesis 2 is not the same creator as Genesis 1.¹⁴ The Genesis 1 creator is omnipotent and controls all aspects of existence in the universe; all creation is, therefore, good and perfect. This is not the case in Genesis 2-11, where creation becomes a case of ambivalence, ambiguity, and a process of trial and error. The creator of Genesis 2 seems to be lacking the ability to distinguish between his human creation and other animals (2:18-20).¹⁵ Creation, from Eden to Babel, appears to be the case of

⁸ Batto, *Slaying*, 50.

⁹ Ibid. 28, 63. Since the Yahwist excludes the creator having a consort, like Nintu (Mami), Eve fills the role of the mother-goddess in Gen. 4:1. Eve is the “mother of all that lives” (3:20), and she, like Nintu (Mami), needs help to create humanity; Yahweh, like Enki (Ea), is the helper in the process of creation. In addition, Eve’s ecstasy over creation, “I have created man with Yahweh’s help” (4:1), parallels Nintu’s (Mami’s) joy.

¹⁰ The significance of a primeval human (*lullu*) and its relevance to Gen.2-3 will be explored below, in depth. The concept of the primeval human will be analyzed in accordance with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

¹¹ Batto, *Slaying*, 27-28. The Igigi, the rebel gods, sought divine status. They were servants to the Anunnaki, the divine sovereigns, forced to work the fields and provide subsistence to the Anunnaki. The Igigi revolted against the Anunnaki and disturbed the rest of the divine sovereigns. In the ancient Near East, the divine sovereign is associated with rest and leisure, and any act which disturbs the rest is a challenge to the status of the sovereign. The Igigi gods were challenging the status of the Anunnaki, so the rebel gods were essentially demanding full divine status. The demand of divine status is echoed in Gen. 3, 6:1-4, and 11:1-9.

¹² Ibid., 50.

¹³ I do not consider God to be exclusively male, but the pronoun “he” will be used throughout the paper, for the purposes of clarity and consistency.

¹⁴ Susan Niditch. *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible*. (U.S.A.: Fortress Press, 1993) 42. The author finds it quite surprising how often the deity of Genesis 1 is superimposed upon the interpretation of Genesis 2-3. She views modern scholars as trying to interpret the story as an omnipotent and omniscient deity fearing the possibility of human knowledge and immortality; a deity “who has to deal with humans on the loose, who has tricky snakes sneaking around his back, and who must adjust in a totally ad hoc way to events around him.” Niditch is correct when she suggests that the Yahwist deity as similar to other divine sovereigns such as Odin or Zeus, in that he is a powerful creator god, more powerful than all other forces; but he can still be tricked, “becoming subject to the wiles of those whom he has created, such as Loki, Prometheus, the snake, Adam, and Eve.”

¹⁵ I am not going to explore this theme in detail, at this time, because the second part of the paper will analyze the demarcation between the divine, humans, and animals.

a creator struggling to come to terms with his creation, and vice versa.¹⁶ The task at hand in both Atrahasis and Genesis 2-3 further defines the ambivalent relationship between humanity and the divine. Distinguishing the proper roles and the order of being is a trial and error process, which requires time to reach a general consensus.¹⁷ As is evident, Atrahasis probably influenced the Yahwist Primeval myth in many ways, including those mentioned above: the unsure deity fumbles about a creation fashioned from the ground in combination with divine elements, to work the ground as a servant. Although many similarities exist between Genesis 2-3 and Atrahasis, distinguishing points also exist. For example, Richard J. Clifford correctly surmises that Atrahasis places emphasis upon the gods, and their activities; humanity, on the other hand, including Atrahasis, is an abstraction. In contrast, in Genesis, humankind is portrayed in a vivid manner, and the divine, more of an abstraction.¹⁸ In addition, as Bernard Batto suggests, although Atrahasis influenced certain aspects of the Yahwist Primeval Myth, these motifs were never previously constructed in such a fashion. Batto argues that “*those who argue for two originally distinct traditions behind the Eden story miss the point that the Yahwist’s story was unique and original.*” To acknowledge possible literary influence does not deny the literary ingenuity of the Yahwist author.¹⁹

The Yahwist creation narrative also shares numerous literary motifs with the Epic of Gilgamesh. The two great narratives consider the demarcation between the animal, human, and divine realms. While trying to distinguish the boundaries of these realms, numerous significant motifs, themes, and characters emerge in both narratives, such as: nakedness, the primordial human/wild man, the divine, the role of women, the role of the serpent, and immortality.

¹⁶ Batto, *Slaying*, 51-52. The Yahwist creator, as in *Atrahasis*, struggles with a rebellious creation, a creation guilty of hubris in the eyes of the divine. In *Atrahasis*, Enlil responds to the rebellion by, originally, sending a plague, a drought, and then a famine. Once these means prove to be unsuccessful in ceasing the human rebellion of challenging the divine sovereign, Enlil sends “the Flood”. The devotee of Ea, Atrahasis (“Exceedingly Wise”), is preserved and survives “the Flood”. Atrahasis sacrifices to the gods, and humanity is given another chance, by Enlil. Humanity’s second chance is conditional; Enlil imposes a regulation on the limits of human life (they were not immortal before, but merely lacked a life span). The Yahwist Primeval Myth echoes the storyline of *Atrahasis*. Yahweh responds to the rebellious hubris of humanity, the challenge to his divine, sovereignty by expelling humanity from the Eden and the tree of life. The human condition ceases to improve (Cain, Lamech, and the Nephilim), in the eyes of the creator, so “the Flood” ensues. The pious Noah, like Atrahasis, gives humanity another chance. Noah sacrifices to the deity, and Yahweh reconciles with the imperfect creation, but at the same time limits human life to 120 years (6:3), *haadam* is still a mortal being.

Yahweh, like many divine sovereigns, plays the role of creator-preserver-destroyer.

¹⁷ Batto, *Slaying*, 57.

¹⁸ Richard J. Clifford. *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (U.S.A.:The Catholic Association of America, 1994) 149.

¹⁹ Batto, *Slaying*, 70.

In Genesis 2:18-20, Yahweh struggles to decipher the identity of the primeval human, and does not distinguish his creation from the animal realm. In verse 2:18, Yahweh states that “[i]t is not good for the human to be alone,” so Yahweh fashions additional creatures of clay, the same substance from which the human is fashioned. The logic of the creator may be that since the animals are made of the same substance as the human, then logically, the animals would make ideal consorts. Of course, these consorts are not adequate for the human, because there is a demarcation between human and animal. Yahweh discovers that the newly created animals are not sufficient companions for the human; so, the creator divides the androgynous human into man and woman.²⁰ In Genesis 2:25, the humans are described as being naked (*arummim*), and it is nakedness that links the humans with the animal realm. The naked Adam of Genesis 2 is comparable to Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Enkidu is created as a primordial man; Enkidu is naked and covered with “*shaggy hair*,” and he roams across the steppe with the other animals, eating grass and drinking from watering holes. The wild man,²¹ Enkidu, is the antithesis of human culture, for he is hostile to human culture and disturbs the pastoral order of the countryside.²² For the Mesopotamians, the wilderness was viewed negatively; it was associated with the nefarious aspects of existence, such as carnivorous lions and wolves, and thieving brigands.²³ This is not the

²⁰ Batto, *Slaying*, 54. I am employing Batto’s interpretation of Gen. 2:21-24, the androgynous being which is separated into male and female. The common translation of *tsela* is “rib”, but can also be translated as “side”. *Tsela* has a double connotation and an ambiguous meaning. Batto uses the translation of reworking “one of his sides”, meaning the whole is shaped into two complementary halves.

Bernard F. Batto, “The Institution of Marriage in Genesis 2 and in Atrahasis”. In addition, Batto once again looks to *Atrahasis* for comparative support. In *Atrahasis*, humanity is equally divided between male and female, seven and seven, from the beginning; in Genesis 2, the human is created androgynous, “a fact which necessitates a second creative procedure by the deity in order for the human species to be appropriately divided into complementary halves, male and female.” In both texts the human is divided into complementary genders, each selecting the other for marriage (*Atrahasis*), or abandoning parents in favour of the other (Genesis 2). Male and female, when separate are incomplete; each complements and fulfills the other.

This is common motif in mythology and mysticism.

²¹ Gregory Mobley. “The Wild Man in the Bible and in the Ancient Near East.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116.2 (1997) 218-222. Enkidu is the oldest literary representation of the wild man. Mobley uses Richard Bernheimer’s model to profile the medieval wild man, and Enkidu fits the profile well. The most distinguishing physical characteristic of the wild man is hairiness, and Enkidu is, of course, covered with hair. Other attributes of the medieval wild man, also possessed by Enkidu are: avoiding human contact; living in inaccessible areas, unsettled areas such as forests and mountains; sleeping in caves; and eating a primitive diet. Enkidu’s is raised in the wilderness by his mother, a gazelle, and his father, a wild donkey. It is even possible that Enkidu may be a quadruped, for the reason that he keeps pace with the other beasts of the steppe. Enkidu interferes with work of the hunters, a symbol of human culture, by foiling their traps. As we shall see, like the archetypal wild man, Enkidu is acculturated by a woman, Shamhat.

²² David Damrosch. *The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (U.S.A.: Cornell University Press, 1991) 94.

²³ Mobley, 223-224. Enkidu is, as mentioned above, associated with the iconographical figure the *lahmu*. The iconographical wild man, the *lahmu*, is depicted in Mesopotamian art as naked, bearded, and long haired. The *lahmu* figure is often depicted in contest scenes with animals and is often associated with a staff or

case for Enkidu, who sees the steppe as “*nothing less than the Garden of Eden.*” Enkidu had led a monotonous existence in the wild, where death was not a serious problem; but as soon as Enkidu encounters Shamhat, the prostitute, the wild utopia is no more, for the animals flee from him and there is no way back.²⁴ Nakedness in Genesis 2-3, as in the Epic of Gilgamesh, symbolizes the animal realm and the wild man; rather than innocence and purity, the traditional interpretation. In Genesis, Adam²⁵ is the naked wild man, and the Garden of Eden is the equivalent of Enkidu’s wild steppe. As quoted above, Enkidu sees the wilderness as “*nothing less than the Garden of Eden.*” It should be noted that there are distinguishing points between Enkidu on the wild steppe and Adam in the Garden of Eden. Although Enkidu and Adam are both naked wild men, Enkidu is no Adam. It seems likely that the pre-Shamhat Enkidu would run amok in Eden, just as he does when he terrorizes the shepherds of the steppe; Enkidu and Adam have divergent views of the ideal setting for the naked wild man’s sanctuary. In other words, Enkidu is not the type of wild man to be contained and restrained within the confines of a garden, for he would probably be more at home roaming outside of Eden. Batto credits the literary ingenuity of the Yahwist author for manipulating this motif for his own purposes in Genesis 2-3. As in the Mesopotamian tradition, the Yahwist likely intends the transition from nakedness to clothing to be a demarcation between humankind and animals. Nudity makes the primeval human, the wild man, synonymous with the animal world. The motif of the wild man is the reason Yahweh thinks that the “*human*” can have a suitable companion among the wild animals.²⁶

spade. The lahmu possesses an ambivalent status, but “textual referents indicate a demonic or monstrous classification.”

²⁴ Aage Westenholz and Koch-Westenholz. “Enkidu – The Noble Savage?” *Wisdom, Gods, and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honor of W.G. Lambert* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000) 443. Civilization, the human realm into which Enkidu is introduced is exhilarating, but it is also perilous. Enkidu’s monotonous life is no more, for he now experiences heroism, pride, and glory with his new found friend and lover, Gilgamesh. Enkidu also experiences the struggles of his new world, such as death and injustice.

²⁵ Mobley, 226-227. Some other examples of the biblical wild man are Ishmael, Esau, Samson, and Elijah (who represents the wild man as a shaman).

²⁶ Batto, *Slaying* 55-56. In Mesopotamian tradition, clothes were considered a gift of civilization bestowed upon humanity by the gods, along with the knowledge of irrigation and agriculture, and the knowledge of architecture to build cities. In Mesopotamia, as mentioned, animals went without clothes, and the gods, in contrast, wore clothing. Mesopotamian iconography portrays the gods wearing the horned cap and flounced garment. Batto interprets this to be a metaphor of human dignity, as beings closer in nature to gods than animals

John A. Bailey. “Initiation and the Primal Woman in Gilgamesh and Genesis 2-3”, *JBL* 62.4 (2000) 145. Bailey has a similar perspective to Batto. Bailey contends that nakedness in the Hebrew Bible is associated with “the loss of human and social dignity, as in Gen. 9:21 (Noah’s nakedness), Exod. 20-26 (the nakedness of priests at the altar), II Sam. 6:20 (David’s dancing), II Sam. 10: 4-5 (the humiliation of David’s ambassadors by the Ammonites), Isa. 3:17 and Hos. 2:10 (punishment of adulterous women), and Isa. 20:4 (treatment of the prisoners of war).

Enter the wily trickster, the serpent.²⁷ Of course, the well known pun of arum and arummim is very significant. Arum refers to the “*most subtle*” serpent (3:1), which plays against arummim, the “*nakedness*” of the humans (2:25).²⁸ The serpent, in Eliadian terms, is a source of knowledge, prophesy, and universal wisdom, and these are polemic traits of Adam and Eve, the human naked animal state.²⁹ Interestingly, the serpent, a symbol of universal wisdom, appears to be offering the humans universal wisdom. The “*knowledge of good and evil*” is probably not meant to be understood as a dualism. It appears to be a more ambivalent knowledge, an all encompassing knowledge, which includes everything between the two poles, good and evil. The type of knowledge, represented by the serpent, is what separates the humans from their creator.³⁰ The Yahwist author’s use of the “*tree of knowledge of good and evil*” then can be interpreted as an unsuccessful attempt by the deity to establish a demarcation between the creator and the creation.³¹

²⁷ The serpent, being a punished trickster character, is comparable to characters such as Prometheus and Loki.

Mircea Eliade. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. (Trans. Rosemary Sheed. U.S.A.: The World Publishing Company, 1966) 164-169. Eliade recognizes the rich symbolism of the serpent. The symbolism of the serpent “is somewhat confusing,” but the central ideas of it are: immortality, rebirth, knowledge (prophesy), lunar force, and fecundity. Eliade holds “regeneration” to be one of the most important meanings of the serpent. The serpent is, also, an animal that “changes,” a shape shifter, like Loki or a shaman. Does the serpent later become the flaming sword that guards the tree of life? Serpents are the subject of much occult speculation. The Hebrew and Arabic words for magic derive from words for “snakes.” Serpents can also be viewed as lunar, that is, eternal, and live underground embodying the souls of the dead (important for funerary goddesses/deities and cults); and, therefore, know all secrets, are the source of all wisdom, and can divine the future. The serpent, the woman, and the moon are all interconnecting themes (Mediterranean being Artemis, Hecate, and Persephone). A common Eastern motif was that a woman’s initial sexual contact was with a snake, at puberty or during menstruation.

Interestingly enough, in *Genesis Rabbah*, the *midrash* states that the death of “first man” and menstruation are the result of Eve’s contact with the serpent – ‘Because woman spilled first man’s blood, therefore to her was handed over the religious duty involving menstruation’ (GenR 17:8; Jacob Neusner. *Genesis Rabbah, The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis, A New American Translation (Volume I): Parashiyot through Thirty-Three on Genesis 1:1 to 8:14*. Atlanta Georgia: Scholars Press, 1985).

Gerald J. Blidstein. *In the Rabbis’ Garden: Adam and Eve in the Midrash*. (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997) 6. Further, later *midrash* traditions, as well as Second Commonwealth traditions, interpret Eve’s eating of the fruit as an act of sexual intercourse with the serpent.

Mircea Eliade. *A History of Religious Ideas (Volume I) From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*. (Trans. Willard R. Trask. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981) 166. Regardless, Eliade views the background, of Gen. 3, as a well-known “mythological emblem: the naked goddess, the miraculous tree, and its guardian, the serpent”.

²⁸ Alter, *Genesis*, 11.

²⁹ Eliade, *Patterns*, 168.

³⁰ Batto, *Slaying* 56. The serpent’s words of “you will become as gods” (3:5) motivates the humans to attain a higher level of dignity. Eating from the wisdom tree has exposed their nakedness, and hence, their animal state. They try to make clothes for themselves, as an initial step to divinity, but the garments of leaves symbolize the futility. The deity later clothes the humans, which appears to be compromise. For the deity now recognizes the humans are distinguished from the animal world, but nor are the humans divine. The humans are clothed, but not with cloth, they wear skin, symbolizing attributes of the divine and animals

³¹ *Ibid.*, 58-59. Batto considers wisdom to be a gift to be bestowed by the creator to protohumans, and he recognizes this as a standard motif. Batto uses the Mesopotamian examples of Ea (Enki), Adapa and

The “*subtle*” serpent is not the only character that plays a significant role in the transformation of the wild man, for whom, a woman must be the medium in his transition to humanization (acculturation). In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the prostitute³² Shamhat, is sent by Gilgamesh and the shepherds as an agent of culture and civilization. After coitus, six days and seven nights, Enkidu’s animal powers subside, for the other animals become afraid of him; he can no longer run with them. David Damrosch parallels this transformation to Eve’s humanizing of Adam and the loss of Eden, when Shamhat says to Enkidu: “*You have become [profound]*³³ *Enkidu, you have become like a god.*” (I, iv, 44).³⁴ With Enkidu’s sexual knowledge, he has attained godlike knowledge and has become separated from nature. There exist close parallels in the Eden story and Gilgamesh, but there is no direct reference to a sexual initiation in Genesis.³⁵ Although the Yahwist does not explicitly make a direct reference to a sexual initiation, nonetheless, Eve opens Adam’s eyes to a new realm of existence. Adam, like Enkidu, has become like a god, for he too, is now clothed, wise, and profound. Both Adam and Enkidu are now distinguishable from the other animals; the transformation of the wild man is complete, to the woman’s credit. Although Enkidu “*curses the harlot for robbing him of the Garden of Eden,*” there is not a pessimistic view of culture and a longing to return to nature, nor is there a great praise for life within civilization.³⁶ In both Gilgamesh and Genesis, the transition of the wild man is shrouded in ambivalence. The humanization has brought companionship, wisdom, and excitement, but has also brought misery, injustice, and mortality.

The tree of life³⁷ is central to the Eden story, and has Near Eastern parallels, especially the Epic of Gilgamesh. Traditionally, the garden has been interpreted as being created for humanity, and the presence of the “*tree of life*” symbolized the immortality humanity lost because of “*original sin.*” This paper has illustrated the concept that the garden was not created

Atrahasis. Ea is the god of wisdom, as well as the creator of humanity. Adapa and Atrahasis are archetypal humans, devotees of Ea, and are recognized for their wisdom.

³² Rikvah, Harris. “Images of Women in the Gilgamesh Epic.” *Lingering Over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran.* (Eds. Tzvi Abusch, et al. U.S.A.: Scholars Press, 1990) 222. (Referring to N.K. Gottwald’s *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C.*) the author indicates that the prostitute, in both Mesopotamia and Israel, was symbolic of urban life.

³³ Damrosch, *The Narrative*, 94. Damrosch’s translation is “[w]ise”.

³⁴ Stephanie Dalley, ed. *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 56.

³⁵ Damrosch, *The Narrative*, 94-95.

³⁶ Westenholz, “Enkidu”, 444.

³⁷ Eliade, *Patterns*, 286. Eliade notes the universal phenomenon of the “tree of life”, and the religious and metaphysical significance it carries. The “tree of life” is always located at the centre of the world (eg. Eden). The tree symbolizes the idea that the universe is in a cycle of endless regeneration.

for the benefit of humankind, but rather as a benefit to the deity; furthermore, humanity was never destined to have eternal life, because immortality has been set aside for the divine.³⁸ The Yahwist likely illustrates that the status of humanity had yet to be defined; the human condition was in an experimental stage, similar to the human condition in Atrahasis. Mircea Eliade interprets the “*tree of life*” to be hidden, and, therefore, only identified after universal wisdom is attained. Eating the forbidden fruit does not constitute “*original sin*,” but rather, the one shot at immortality. The “*tree of life*” can bestow immortality, which is not easy to attain; rather immortality is perilous journey.³⁹ The serpent of Genesis 2-3 may be interpreted as a Prometheus character, a martyred character, which is punished for illuminating humanity. Although the serpent illuminates humanity with a universal knowledge, it can also be interpreted as being the protector of “*the tree of life*.”⁴⁰ The serpent may be the obstacle in search for the “*tree of life*,” the source of immortality. Eliade sees a similar role for the serpent in Genesis 3 and the Epic of Gilgamesh. Both myths possess the archetypal pattern of the primeval human’s, or hero’s, search for immortality, the tree of life, and the guardian serpent⁴¹ or monster (preventing man by trickery from eating from it). As mentioned, the road to immortality is one of peril and challenge, for the tree of life is often in an

³⁸ Batto, *Slaying*, 22-26. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the barmaid tries to deter Gilgamesh from pursuing immortality, she says to him “The life you pursue you shall not find. When the gods created mankind,[d]eath for mankind they set aside.” Similarly, in the *Adapa* myth, Adapa, son of Ea, is another semidivine being (like Gilgamesh) who had immortality slip through his fingers. Adapa is tricked out of immortality by his own father, Ea. Adapa, like Adam, is a protohuman, and possesses special wisdom bestowed upon him by Ea. Adapa must appear before Anu, because he broke the wing of the South wind. Ea, the wise god, informs Adapa not to accept food or drink from Anu. Ea tells Adapa that the food is the “bread of death” and the water is the “water of death.” Anu receives Adapa as a guest, rather than a culprit, and offers him the “bread of life” and the “water of life.” Adapa, following Ea’s advice, does not accept Anu’s offerings, and, therefore passes up immortality for himself and all of humanity. Adapa remains a mere mortal and a servant of Ea.

³⁹ Eliade, *Patterns*, 287. Examples of this are Gilgamesh’s journey to the depths of the sea to find the herb of life, and the monsters guarding the golden apples in the Garden of Hesperides.

⁴⁰ Batto, *Slaying*, 60. Perhaps the serpent can be connected with the seraphim, of Isa. 6:1-7, “who stand in the presence of Yahweh.” In addition, the seraphim, and possibly the serpent, can be identified with the divine winged uraeus or cobra depicted in Egyptian art as protector of the deity.

The serpent, therefore, may be protecting Yahweh and his immortality. Also, the serpent, like Ea, may represent wisdom, illuminating the protohuman, Adam/Adapa, and at the same time tricking him out of immortality.

⁴¹ Because the serpent is often a “shape shifter,” one may wonder if the serpent becomes the flaming sword that guards the tree in Gen. 3:24. If we connect the serpent with the seraphim, we may associate the serpent and the flaming sword.

Francis Landy. “Seraphim and Poetic Process.” *The Labour of Reading: Desire, Alienation, and Biblical Interpretation*. (Eds. Fiona C. Black, et al. Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999) 17-18. The seraphim are “burning creatures” associated with fire, just as fire is often a metaphor for Yahweh and is one of his common attributes; in other words, these “fiery serpents” are closely connected with and protect and preserve the divine. As serpents, the seraphim are associated with death, metamorphosis, wisdom, and immortality.

In Eden, we have a combination of the serpent, the divine, fire, wisdom, and death and immortality.

inaccessible place.⁴² The tree is protected by a serpent or dragon, and the hero must vanquish it, and seize the fruits of immortality; but those who fail can never receive immortality. Adam is tricked by the serpent's wit, and Gilgamesh fares no better.⁴³ Gilgamesh fails to conquer "*little death*," that is sleep, so his last hope is the "*plant of life*." Gilgamesh carelessly allows his last hope for immortality, the "*plant of life*," to slip away, to whom else, but the serpent.⁴⁴

Jean Bottero suggests that we must carefully distinguish between what Israel may have already possessed from its traditional culture that it shared with Mesopotamia and other ancient Near Eastern cultures, and what the latter may have communicated to the Israelites from their own distinctly Mesopotamian traditions.⁴⁵ The authors of the Hebrew Bible were thus receptive to new images and myths from outside their land, including from Mesopotamia, "*provided they could pour them into their own religious mold, adapting them into their own religious mold, adapting them to their religiosity and to their particular view of God.*"⁴⁶ The adoption, use, and transformation of myths such as Atrahasis and the Epic of Gilgamesh to illustrate the origins of humankind are examples of the dependency and the independence of the Yahwist author in regards to Mesopotamian religious ideology.⁴⁷ The Yahwist author is undeniably a literary genius whose work still echoes loudly, thousands of years after composition. The Yahwist drew together elements from Atrahasis and the Epic of Gilgamesh, and other great literary works of his ancient Near Eastern neighbours, and then fused them in a unique manner. The resulting transformation of the ancient Near Eastern epics into a narrative that conformed to the Yahwist theology and worldview created an original Israelite primeval myth. These stories emerged as an original Hebrew composition with ancient Near Eastern roots. In employing these ancient Near Eastern motifs, the Yahwist conceptualized them and fashioned Israel's myths of origin. It is the uniqueness of this work that distinguishes the biblical tradition from other ancient Near Eastern traditions.⁴⁸

⁴² Eliade, *Patterns*, 288. For Adam the tree is probably hidden, perhaps in the "centre" of the garden, and Gilgamesh must journey to the bottom of the sea.

⁴³ Ibid., 288-89.

⁴⁴ Batto, *Slaying*, 23.

⁴⁵ Jean Bottero. *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*. (Trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 205.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 207

⁴⁸ Batto, *Slaying*, 70.

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The Genesis creation narrative is the creation myth of both Judaism and Christianity. The narrative is made up of two stories, roughly equivalent to the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis. In the first, Elohim (the Hebrew generic word for God) creates the heavens and the Earth in six days, then rests on, blesses and sanctifies the seventh (i.e. the Biblical Sabbath). In the second story, God, now referred to by the personal name Yahweh, creates Adam, the first man, from dust and places him in Myth - Free ebook download as PDF File (.pdf), Text File (.txt) or read book online for free. is true. We dont know better than God, and dispensing with the ancient environment doesnt make the Bible more understandableit in fact distorts or impairs its meaning. Situating the Bible in its ancient social, historical and, yes, religious context doesnt harm the Bibleit illumines the Bible for people like us who are culturally removed from its original context. A Disclaimer of Sorts I should telegraph one last thing about this book. By design I have tried to keep it uncluttered by lots of Hebrew and Greek words and technical jargon. Every civilisation needs a myth; but woe to the civilisation whose myth has been found wanting. That is the position of Christianity today. It came to ascendance at a time when the myths of Greece and Rome had lost their credibility. Much of the Hebrew Bible consists of history – the history of Israel from primeval times to around 500 BCE. It tells of patriarchs such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; of the bondage of the Israelites and their miraculous liberation by the hand of God; and of David and Solomon and their successors to the thrones of Israel and Judah. But as our knowledge of the first millennium BCE in the Near East has improved, it has become more and more obvious that the Bible cannot be entirely trusted even in these areas. I must digress here to make an important point.