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ENKIDU READS GENESIS

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For many people today, the stories of Genesis are little more than a part of their childhood heritage, along with the stories of Cinderella, Jack and the Beanstalk, and Winnie the Pooh. Some even think of Genesis much like the writings of Dr. Seuss: fanciful tales that, although they point to the truth, cannot be taken as the truth. What are we to make of the creation of the world in six days, or Eve being made from Adam's rib, or Methuselah living to the age of 969 years? Such stories hardly suggest to the modern reader that Genesis makes a serious claim to truth. Skeptics tend to treat Genesis with disdain and disbelief, while Christians are often embarrassed by Genesis and feel they must defend it.

Both reactions are unjustified. When it was written, Genesis was a revolutionary work that challenged the beliefs of its age. It is this unique and revolutionary character of Genesis that I wish to talk about today.

At the outset, I ask for your imagination, because I am going to imagine myself to be a nearly-three-thousand-year-old Babylonian. Ignoring, for a few moments, the separation of space and time, let us engage in an investigation of the Book of Genesis.

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Good afternoon. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Enkidu. My parents named me after the companion created for Gilgamesh by the divine assembly. I was a Babylonian merchant who earned his living in the international trade of spices. It was because of my business that I moved to Jerusalem in the

year 900 B.C. On the second day in my new residence, I met my Hebrew neighbor, Joshua. He was very friendly and, in time, was very helpful as well. It was perhaps a month after my arrival that Joshua gave me a propaganda pamphlet . . . oops . . . I mean an evangelistic tract to read. It was called *Bere'shit*, what nowadays is commonly called the Book of Genesis. I am here today to share with you my impressions of this book.

Before I proceed to my four main points, I must say that the beginning of this book is extremely odd. I make no claim to be an expert in Mesopotamian or Egyptian or Canaanite religion, but I do believe, due to my education and travels, that I'm fairly knowledgeable about the religious views of these cultures. Genesis simply starts: "In the beginning God," and then continues without offering any explanation as to the origin of this God. This is extremely odd. Unlike the so-called "pagan" cosmologies, Genesis exhibits no interest in the question of this God's origins. There is no ancestry and no genealogy. There are no divine births or divine deaths. There is no definition of this God and there is no description of his or her nature. I have been told that for the first time in the history of the Near East, God was thought of as being entirely free of temporal and spatial dimensions. This is remarkably unique.

So, from the outset I was a bit bewildered. And then, to add to my confusion, I did not know if this God was a her or a she. Even after having read the entire book, I was still somewhat baffled. Since this God apparently had no sexual consort or companion, I was in the dark as to its gender. Then I was told that the Hebrew God is nonsexual. I had never heard of such a thing.

These omissions are obvious, to someone like myself. Genesis claims to begin at the beginning, and yet it has nothing to say about the beginning of its God. This is extremely odd. Pardon my wordplay, but this God is odd. In fact, it is the oddness of this God that is the basis for my observations today.

First, according to the Book of Genesis, there is only one God. This was new to me. By the standards of the Ancient Near East, Genesis is quite a young document. I am vaguely familiar with some Egyptian materials that date back to around the mid-third millennium B.C. The Egyptian cosmogonies—and perhaps I should define a couple of terms before I proceed. A "cosmogony" is an account or theory concerning the origin of the universe; a "cosmology" is a philosophy or theory concerning the nature and principles of the universe as a whole and its various parts. Cosmogony—*origin* of the universe. Cosmology—*nature* of the universe. Now, where was I? Oh yes . . . the Egyptian cosmogonies are connected with local deities; for example, Re, Atum, and Ptah. Although different gods play the role of creator in the various cosmogonies, each cosmogony has only one creator-god. This is the primeval god, who is self-generated. In the Cosmogony of Heliopolis, the god Atum generates the divine couple Shu (the air-god) and Tefnut (goddess of moisture). Atum generates Shu and Tefnut either by a sexual activity that you would find disgusting or by spitting. Shu and Tefnut then give birth to Geb (the earth-god) and Nut (the sky-goddess), and these two—Geb and Nut—are separated by Shu (earth and sky are separated by air). In the Memphite Theology, the creator-god is Ptah. He creates nine gods, called the Ennead, and he begins with Shu and Tefnut. The truth is, most of the Egyptian cosmogonies are really theogonies; that is, they are more concerned with the origin of the gods than with the origin of the universe.

I don't have much to say about Canaanite beliefs. The main source of information here is from Ugarit, dating back to about the fourteenth century B.C. There is a Baal cycle of texts, but there is no certain cosmogony. The chief of the pantheon is El, who is called "creator of creation/creatures" and "father of humanity." His wife Asherah is given the title "creator/begetter of the gods." These descriptive designations suggest that for the Canaanites creation was thought

of in terms of procreation. There is one ritual text that tells of the birth of the gods Shahar and Shalim as a result of El's sexual activities.

Ok, let's get back to Mesopotamia, my homeland. It is helpful to make a distinction between the third and early-second millennium B.C. Sumerian cosmogonies and the mid-second and first millennium B.C. Akkadian cosmogonies. Again, notice how old some of these stories are in comparison to Genesis. I must admit, I was suspicious of Genesis because it is so modern.

There are at least two Sumerian traditions. One of these stems from Nippur. In it creation takes place through the union of heaven (the god An) and earth (the goddess Antum or Ki). This union fertilizes the earth to produce vegetable, animal, and human life. They all sprout from the ground like plants. The other tradition comes from Eridu. In this, Enki (the god of fertility and wisdom) produces the spring water that fertilizes the earth by means of rivers and canals. Life, including human life and cities, arise along the banks of the rivers and canals.

I have saved the best for last. From the perspective of the twenty-first century A.D., the best-known Akkadian cosmogonies are contained within two lengthy narratives: the Atrahasis Epic and *Enuma Elish*. The most complete copy of Atrahasis comes from the early seventeenth century B.C. The story begins at a time when only the gods exist. The lesser gods—called the Igigi— perform the menial labor for the senior gods—called the Anunnaki—but after many years of labor the Igigi rebel—they "go on strike." Enki and the mother goddess's creation of humans from clay and the blood and the "spirit" of an Igigi god resolves the ensuing crisis.

Enuma Elish is usually dated to between the fourteenth and eleventh centuries B.C. As a Babylonian, or what you folks might call an ancient Iraqi, I am most familiar with this marvelous story. After all, it tells how Marduk, the Babylonian god of cosmic order, is elevated to the supreme position in the

pantheon. Not surprising to me, it is a much-copied story; furthermore, it was recited on the fourth day of the New Year festival in Babylon. I have heard the story many times. At the beginning of this narrative, nothing exists but the primeval waters, Apsu (the divine patron of fresh water) and Tiamat (the divine patron of salt water)—Apsu and Tiamat give birth to the older gods. However, the activity of the gods disturbs Apsu, who plans to destroy them. Learning of this, Ea puts Apsu to sleep with a spell and kills him. He then builds a palace on Apsu's corpse, in which he and Damkina give birth to Marduk. Marduk turns out to be greater than any of his predecessors, but his play disturbs Tiamat. As a result, some gods, seemingly provoked by jealousy of Marduk, join Tiamat in a plan to destroy the other gods. When they hear of this, the other gods are filled with fear and are at a loss what to do, until Marduk appears and offers to do battle on their behalf. There is a condition of course: if Marduk is victorious, he is to be given the power of determining destinies and he is to be made king. This is agreed to, and Marduk goes out to do battle with Tiamat, the dissident gods, and a horde of monsters created by Tiamat. Marduk kills Tiamat in single one-on-one combat and splits her body in two. With one half he makes the sky, and with the other half he makes the earth. He puts the stars in their places and establishes the movements of the sun and moon. Seeing all of this, the gods acclaim him and make him their king. Marduk then orders Ea to make humans out of the blood of Kingu, the leader of the dissident gods, so that the humans might do the work of the gods. The gods themselves, however, build Babylon and its temple as Marduk's dwelling place, and they glorify Marduk with fifty names.

So, have you been able to keep up with the names of all these gods? How would you do if I gave you a test right now? I'm just kidding. But, can you begin to understand how stunned I was when I read the Genesis creation story? There is only *one* God. There is *no* multitude of deities vying for supremacy. Personally, I

think that many Americans would like my Mesopotamian stories. After all, there's plenty of sex and violence. But there is no sex, no violence, and no multitude of gods in the Genesis creation story. This is amazing. And to be honest, I found the idea of only one God to be very appealing.

This brings me to my second observation: I was struck by the power of this one creator God. No, I was not literally struck, but the power of the Genesis God is incredible. This God seems to know everything and to be able to do anything. He—I call this God a "he" because, although I'm still trying to comprehend that this God is beyond sexual distinction, "he" is portrayed in almost exclusively masculine imagery. I suppose this is fitting for one who has more power than any male in a patriarchal society. Now, where was I? Oh yes . . . speaking of this God, he is both omniscient and omnipotent. He speaks and the world appears perfectly ordered, so that after six days of divine activity the whole universe is completed and declared to be very good. As we have seen in the other creation stories from the ancient world, creation was often a long, drawn-out process involving battles with both a number of deities and chaos monsters. But in Genesis, creation by this God is depicted as effortless, orderly, and good. What a powerful creator!

However, it was not the creation story but the flood story that most impressed me with this God's power. Although it pains me to admit it, the Mesopotamian flood stories do not flatter the gods. In the Atrahasis Epic, the humans are growing in number and their noise keeps Enlil and the other gods from getting their sleep. "Getting up on the wrong side of the bed"—so to speak—the gods plot to destroy the human race by a series of plagues and finally by a flood. Only Atrahasis and his family survive the flood, thanks to a secret warning from Enki, who also advised Atrahasis to build a boat. So, almost all the humans are wiped out. Apparently not thinking of this result ahead of time, the gods now realize how much they relied on the humans. For seven days and seven nights the

flood covered the earth. Nintu and the divine assembly wept. Because the temples were flooded and the humans were dead, there were no sacrifices for them to eat or drink. Therefore, after the flood, the gods allow repopulation, although they introduce safeguards against over-population.

Another Akkadian document I would like to bring to your attention is the Gilgamesh Epic. Even though the epic as a piece did not come together until early in the first millennium B.C., some of the Gilgamesh sources that it incorporates date to the second half of the third millennium B.C. The flood segment is generally considered to have been adapted from Atrahasis. The Gilgamesh Epic describes how the gods collectively decided to destroy the human race with a flood. However one of the gods, Ea, disagreed with the decision and tipped off his devotee, Utnapishtim, to build a barge. Once the flood came, it was beyond the gods' control. They were so frightened they cowered in the corner like dogs. Furthermore, when the flood was over, one of the top three gods, Enlil, showed up at the sacrifice that Utnapishtim was offering and was astonished to find a human survivor.

To summarize, the Mesopotamian gods are first resolute when the flood decree is made, then terrified when the storm is raging, then bitter and full of regret at the result, and finally indignant at Enlil, who is blamed as the responsible party and made a scapegoat for the debacle. Enlil is portrayed as a shortsighted bully who is easily outwitted. Furthermore, the gods are dependent on humans, which is especially seen when, in desperation due to the loss of sacrifices that nourished them, the gods swarm like flies around the sacrifice that the flood survivor offers. The gods of Mesopotamia were neither in control of the flood nor did they know exactly what was happening. They were neither omniscient nor omnipotent. How different is the God of Genesis! The flood begins exactly when he determines. He knows everything about Noah; in fact, he even closed the door to the ark. Then,

when this God remembers Noah, the flood starts to subside. Finally, the Genesis God tells Noah when it is time to leave the ark. At every moment, the Genesis God knows what is happening and is in control of the flood. He is both omniscient and omnipotent. Once again, I found such a god to be not only amazing, but also very appealing.

My third observation is this: the Genesis God actually likes human beings. This God is genuinely and deeply concerned for humankind. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for my gods, the gods of Mesopotamia. In the Sumerian cosmogonies, although there are differing traditions as to the process by which humans were created, there is unanimity as to the purpose of humans: humans exist to serve the gods, to save the gods from having to work. Also, a thing or a person is assigned a "destiny" by the gods at the time of creation. According to the Atrahasis Epic, the creation of human beings was very much an afterthought. Originally the minor gods, the Igigi, were responsible for irrigating the ground and producing food for the great gods. However, when the Igigi went on strike, seven human couples were created to supply the great gods with their needs. So sending the flood turned out to be a major mistake, for the gods became very hungry when they nearly annihilated the human race. In the *Enuma Elish*, the victorious Marduk orders Ea to make humans out of the blood of the slain god Kingu, who was the leader of the rebellious gods. The humans are made so that they might do the work of the gods.

I must say that I was flabbergasted when I learned of the attitude of the Genesis God toward humans. The creation of human beings in two sexes in the image of God is the climax and goal of the creation story. So important is this event that the heavenly beings are summoned to watch when the Genesis God announces, "Let us make man in *our* image." I could not believe what I was reading. The whole narrative builds up to this point, with the most attention being

given to the creation of those things that matter the most for human existence—the sun, land, plants, and so forth. And then, it is striking that this God specifically supplies humanity with food. This God says, "I have given you every plant for food." I had never heard of such a thing. It is not the humans who feed the gods, but it is the God who feeds the humans. But this God is not done. He goes on to create the perfect human environment: rivers, trees, food, and companions. It seemed to me that this God was looking around to see if there was anything that people need and then stepping in to provide it. It is only after the creation of the human that the Genesis God declares his work complete, and that the work is described as "very good."

Then, most of this Genesis Book is filled up with what my Hebrew neighbor called "the Patriarchs"—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The relationship that the Genesis God had with these individuals is unlike anything I could have imagined. It seemed too good to be true. The care and concern that this God has for humans is extraordinary and practically endless. The God who created human beings in his own image refuses, absolutely refuses, to give up until his promises to humanity are fulfilled. Amazing. Utterly amazing. Whatever else the Book of Genesis is, it is a book of grace—a God of grace, a God unlike any other in the ancient world.

By the way, the part about Jacob and his family did seem a little familiar to me. Out of all of Genesis, this part read the most like the stories of the fusing and feuding gods of Mesopotamia.

Let's summarize what I have said. Upon reading the Book of Genesis, I was particularly struck by there being only one God, a God of incredible power, and a God who cares for humans. Only one God! A powerful God at that! And a God who cares for me! This was, and is, good news!

This brings me to my fourth and final observation: the God of Genesis is a stern moralist. Like the Genesis God, other ancient gods had their principles, but

like human beings they did not always live up to them. The gods lied and deceived; they bickered and battled; they were fickle and capricious; and it was always a risk to rely upon them. Indeed, the Babylonian flood was unleashed because of the number and noise of the human race, and the flood hero was saved simply because he happened to be a devotee of a god who disagreed with the decision to destroy humanity. Much sterner is the God of Genesis. He expels Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden for eating—eating, of all things. All they did was eat some pretty fruit! Then this God sentences Cain to perpetual nomadism for murdering his brother; he sends the flood because of the human addiction to sin. Noah escaped from death, not by luck, but because of his outstanding righteousness; he was blameless among his contemporaries. Following the flood, there is the Tower of Babel story. Here, this God disperses the humans because of their potential for collective wickedness. The Genesis God has moral standards and expectations, and there are consequences for immoral behavior.

There is a similar sequence of events in Gen 1-9 and the Sumerian Flood Story and the Atrahasis Epic; however, the interpretation of this sequence is very different. The Mesopotamian stories take an affirmative and optimistic view of existence; they believe in progress. Things were not nearly as good to begin with as they have become since. But in the Genesis account, it is the other way around. Things began as perfect from the hand of a single God and then grew steadily worse because of human sinfulness until this single God was forced to eradicate all humans except for the pious Noah who would father a new and better stock. The Mesopotamian outlook is optimistic; the Genesis viewpoint is pessimistic. Yes, taken as a whole, I understand that Genesis is optimistic, but such optimism has absolutely nothing to do with the humans. If this one God is so powerful, you would think he could have created better humans.

The Mesopotamian gods of my homeland may have their flaws, but as long as I appease them and do nothing to upset them, they, for the most part, let me live as I choose. This Genesis God, however, seems to be constantly meddling in the lives of humans because he actually expects them to live better than they do. I'm not so certain that I like a God who sits in moral judgment over my life.

So, that's what struck me in my reading of the Book of Genesis. I was astonished at its monotheism as opposed to my polytheism. I was awed by the sovereign power of the one God. I was amazed at this God's concern with human beings. But, I was dismayed by the moral strictness of this God, and disturbed by the ability of humans to destroy the good creation.

If I may be bold, and perhaps a bit naive, permit me to offer three observations that compare my ancient Mesopotamian setting with the contemporary American setting. *First,* we ancient peoples are often accused of creating our gods and then claiming that these gods created us. Furthermore, the gods we are said to have created are very human-like, rather than a god or gods who creates humans to be divine-like. In contemporary American culture, the ideology of individualism is pervasive. This ideology dispenses with creating a pantheon of gods and, instead, declares the individual to be their own god; interestingly creating a pantheon of individuals as gods. My point is this: ancient paganism and modern individualism have strikingly similar moral implications. Both grant us license to behave like the gods we have made, and free us from the obligation owed to a Holy Sovereign who is said to have made us.

Second, while ancient cultures were pre-modern, the current American culture calls itself post-modern. Both worldviews attribute little value to a rational, scientific mindset and both tend to be pluralistic. And this leads to the final observation.

Third, with the exception of the Hebrew people, the ancient world was polytheistic. Modern American society is pluralistic. Pragmatically, what's the difference? Both orientations refuse to reduce everything to a single ultimate principle, thereby accepting a wide variety of religious beliefs and religious expressions as legitimate.

In Jerusalem in 900 B.C., I was unable to become a monotheistic Hebrew; our worldviews were incompatible. In America in 2005, with a little time and effort, I think I will be able to become a religious American.

Thank you.

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NOTE: Although I have significantly supplemented his work, for the substance and structure of this paper I am heavily indebted to Gordon J. Wenham, "Reading Genesis Today," *Word & World* 14/2 (1994): 125-135.