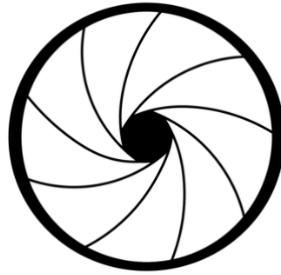


Opportunity (Proximity) and Purpose (Affinity)
The Hebrew Scriptures within the Broader Ancient Near East Literature



by

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Biological and Literary Relationships Through Proximity and Affinity

Since the discovery of genes in the late 19th century, geneticists have assumed that organisms pass genetic information to offspring in a straight line. This is described as a *vertical movement*, genes passing from progenitor to offspring in an unbroken genetic chain. The complexities of genetic traits notwithstanding, with sufficient training, you could predict the probability of dominant and recessive traits. In the last few decades, however, the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria presented a crux for geneticists. How could bacteria acquire genetic traits which did not exist in any of their progenitors? This question led to the discovery that some genetic material can pass laterally or horizontally *between* species. Traits can quite literally jump from one species' cells to another in a process called Lateral Gene Transfer (LGT).¹ LGT occurs in situations in which two factors exist. First, two organisms must be in very close proximity. Second, there must also be some bridging genetic need that prompts the movement. This common need or use may not be immediately apparent except in hindsight. For example, it is now generally believed that herbivorous animals acquired enzymes for digesting plant cell walls from bacterial and fungal genomes.² Acquisition requires both proximity and affinity.³ Put another way, there must be both opportunity (proximity) and purpose (affinity).

Just as genetic transfer was long considered to be vertical in nature, the relationships of Ancient Near East (ANE) literature has long been considered to be vertical. Early works were seen as directly influencing later works. Assuming this method of transmission, the discovery of similarities between the ancient Mesopotamian epic known as the *Enūma Eliš* and the Genesis creation record would require that one be the ancestor or source and the other be a borrower or child document. Modern scholarship has demonstrated that this is not even usually the case. John Oswalt has demonstrated more than sufficiently that biblical literature is distinctly non-mythical.⁴ The question must be whether the mythical, such as the non-biblical origin myths, can influence the non-mythical, and if so, how? The influence need not be direct or vertical. It can be lateral, just as bacteria can acquire resistance to antibiotics from the livestock who are given the antibiotics to defeat the bacteria.

We should consider when opportunity (proximity) and purpose (affinity) might exist for a sort of lateral transfer among cultural and literary worlds. Unlike bacteria, the authors of both the ANE and biblical texts were conscious, self-defining creative agents. They did not need to mindlessly replicate and adapt earlier works in a lateral relationship. The authors could be aware

¹ For an in-depth discussion of LGT, see Tomás G. Villa and Miguel Viñas, eds., *Horizontal Gene Transfer: Breaking Borders Between Living Kingdoms* (Cham, CH: Springer, 2019); Cheong Xin Chan, Robert G. Beiko, Aaron E. Darling, and Mark A. Ragan, "Lateral Transfer of Genes and Gene Fragments in Prokaryotes," *Genome Biology and Evolution* 1 (2009): 429–38.

² Guénola Ricard, et al., "Horizontal Gene Transfer from Bacteria to Rumen Ciliates Indicates Adaptation to Their Anaerobic, Carbohydrates-Rich Environment," *BMC Genomics* 7.22 (2006). doi-10.1186/1471-2164-7-22.

³ Here *affinity* is used in the biochemical way to denote the degree to which substances (or in this case organisms) combine.

⁴ John N. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 32–45.

of, but not dependent upon, earlier sources. In some situations, proximity bred similarity of expression but not necessarily an affinity of purpose. In others, there might be an affinity with no apparent proximity. Literary transfer is most often glimpsed only in hindsight, and evidence is always being added to the corpus of understanding. What appears at first to be a borrowing due to similarity might later be revealed to be an independent development or simply coincidental.

John Walton describes the possible comparative methods in his essay “Interactions in the Ancient Cognitive Environment.”⁵

- Texts could borrow directly (the linear or vertical model above)
- They could be direct responses as polemic or counter-text. These latter types would be sort of reverse vertical models, reactionary works.
- The influence could also be more diffuse, with texts simply echoing others intentionally or otherwise.
- Finally, it could be a matter of a single source being diffused throughout the entire culture, with traditions circulating and being altered as necessary.

Walton is quick to point out that these processes are not mutually exclusive. To Walton, literary creation is a “cultural river,” flowing in and out of culture freely. One need not see a direct cause and effect or lateral descent. The authors of texts could participate in a vibrant tradition of literary creation, and those inspired by God would be members of this tradition, even if they were creating polemics against the themes of the tradition.

*God communicated to them in the context of that cultural river, and they communicated to their audiences within that same framework. God’s message, God’s purposes, and God’s authority were all vested in those communicators and took shape in their language and in their culture. We cannot be assured of authoritative communication through any other source, and we therefore find the message of God through the intermediaries.*⁶

There are multiple influences and presences in the creation of any literature, including the biblical literature. The answer to the question of how one compares the biblical text to contemporary texts is not a matter of “which” but rather “when.” At different times, the text may have different affinities with the literature and thought of the world in which it originated. History is the vessel of revelation. Literature, like genes, has a way of working through both axes. This requires that we consider literature in terms of proximity and affinity.

Proximity is a matter of location. The Hebrews might be said to have a close geographical proximity with the Egyptians, but they share little affinity in their worldview. Affinity, on the

⁵ John H. Walton, “Interactions in the Ancient Cognitive Environment,” in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, eds. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 333–35.

⁶ John H. Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians: From Ancient Context to Enduring Belief* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 75.

other hand, is a matter of potential relationship and combination. The Elamite and Babylonian languages had a high proximity, being used as written languages in Mesopotamia at about the same time. Likewise, they share an ideological affinity, especially when appearing together, such as on the Behistun inscriptions. They had very little linguistic proximity, however, since Elamite was a language isolate.⁷ There was undoubtedly cultural crossover. It should not be surprising to find elements of Elamite culture expressed in the later Babylonian culture, and thus there is an affinity born of the geographical proximity and polylingualism, especially in the scribal elites, despite the linguistic distance. Still, there is a point of proximity that produced affinity.

No relationship is absolute, and every parallel must be weighed based on its own merits. The appearance of affinity does not necessarily mean there is any kind of common source, especially if the affinity is shared broadly across many cultures in the human experience.⁸ Affinity at one point does not mean there is affinity at all, or even most. Proximity may create affinity; but not always. There are many types of affinities to consider, but the most significant for our purposes here is the *necessary affinity*. This term may be applied to any case in which linear or lateral dependence is the only relationship the extant evidence allows for. A necessary affinity can be most easily recognized if a text utilizes a motif, phrase, expression or perspective that not only clearly similar but also can be said to rest uneasily in the new context.

Genesis 1-2 and Comparative Literature

There are obvious similarities between the Genesis 1 creation narrative and ancient creation myths. These can be attributed largely to proximity, rather than affinity. It can be demonstrated that there is no *necessary* affinity, meaning that there is nothing that requires direct descent. There is instead a lateral relationship, cognitive and cultural affinities but not causal relationships. For this study, three ancient origin myths will be considered. The first is that found in the *Enūma Eliš*, dealing specifically with the first act of creation. The second is Sultantepe Tablets, dealing with the organization and division of creation. Third is the relatively unknown bilingual myth dealing with the creation of man and the gods' purpose in this act. Finally, the cosmology of the poem known as "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World" is considered in relation to the overall view of creation.

The Uncaused Ordering of Creation in the *Enūma Eliš*

The tablets containing the *Enūma Eliš* creation myth are attested throughout Mesopotamia.⁹ There are eighty-six Assyrian tablets found so far and ninety-five in Babylonian script. The numerous extant copies indicate a wide distribution, and there are also a number of quotations

⁷ Jan Tavernier, "The Elamite Language," in *The Elamite World*, eds. Javier Álvarez-mon, Gian Pietro Basello, and Yasmina Wicks (London: Routledge, 2018), 416–17.

⁸ Shemaryahu Talmon, "The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation – Principles and Problems," in *Congress Volume Göttingen 1977*, eds. J.A. Emerton, W.L. Holladay, A. Lemaire, R.E. Murphy, E. Nielsen, R. Smend, and J.A. Soggin, VTSup 29 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 323–25.

⁹ Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 3rd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 21.

and allusions to the narrative as if it known well into the Seleucid period.¹⁰ There are certainly similarities between the *Enūma Eliš* and Genesis 1-2, and commentators have noted these, often with a sort of definitive phraseology that indicates one must be dependent on the other.¹¹

Enūma Eliš I.1-4	Genesis 1:1-2
e-nu-ma e-liš la na-bu-ú šá-ma-mu šap-liš am-ma-tum šu-ma la zak-rat apsû-ma reš-tu-ú za-ru-šu-un mu-um-mu ti-amat mu-al-li-da-at gim-ri-šú-un	bərešît bārā' ʾēlōhîm ʾēt hašāmāyîm wə'ēt hā'āreš. wəhā'āreš hāyitāh tōhū wəbōhū wəḥōšek ʾal-pənē təhôm wərûāḥ ʾēlōhîm mərəḥpet ʾal-pənē hamāyîm.
When the heavens above did not exist, And earth beneath had not come into being There was Apsû, the first in order, their begetter, And demiurge Tiāmat, who gave birth to them all. ¹²	In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, And darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. ¹³

The opening of *Enūma Eliš* is somewhat similar to the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1-2 but quickly diverges.¹⁴ There is the sense of primordial nothingness except the divine being (Apsû in *Enūma Eliš* and Elohim in Genesis). In the period after the discovery of the *Enūma Eliš*, the deity Tiamat was often assumed to be the root of the Hebrew word for *abyss* (*təhôm*, Job 38:8-11, Ps 104:7-9, Prov 8:29). Modern lexical resources tend to downplay this possible etymology, and the connection has been proven to be, at best, tenuous.¹⁵ Although the Hebrews undoubtedly were proximate to the *Enūma Eliš* in their historical context, the formulations of the myth are not followed. The creation itself is not personalized. It is the breath of God (*rûāḥ ʾēlōhîm*) that stirs the waters of the deep.

It could be argued, as Waltke has, that the common touch points of nothingness and the abyss were intended to demythologize a widely shared origin myth.¹⁶ This would assume a very close affinity between the Hebrews and the rest of the Mesopotamian world; and yet Currid argues that the absence of theogony in the biblical record indicates they were not nearly as close as this

¹⁰ W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, (Winona Lake, IL: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 4–9.

¹¹ One such case is in Helge Kvanvig, *Primeval History: Babylonian, Biblical, and Enochic - An Intertextual Reading* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 206. Kvanvig makes assumptions that because the two narratives begin at a beginning, they must have direct affinity.

¹² Critical text and English translation, Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 50–51.

¹³ Hebrew transliterations follow *The SBL Handbook of Style* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 5.1, 5.2). Unless otherwise noted, all English quotations are from the *English Standard Version*.

¹⁴ For tables showing the parallels and divergences, see John D. Currid, *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 37–39.

¹⁵ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M.E.J. Richardson (Boston: Brill, 1994-2000), 623.

¹⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 200.

would require.¹⁷ The similarity of imagery is not equivalent to an affinity of worldview but rather geographical proximity. These were societies that feared the sea, which was personified in both Mesopotamian and Canaanite mythologies.

Agency and Agenda in the Created Realm

The Genesis 1 account has a very specific diurnal structure, with creative events divided among a pair of three days cycles. This is absent in the *Enūma Eliš*. There are, however, indications of similar views of the composition of the heavens and the earth elsewhere in Mesopotamian literature. The Sultantepe Tablets (STT), for example, record a sense of division of the waters similar to Genesis 1:7; but the intent of the text is entirely different. In STT, there is both a sense of perpetual existence and continuity. All is the abyss.

STT 199 obv. 1-5	Genesis 1:7
[én an-na] níbi-ta tu-[ud-da-àm] [šamû] in ara-ma-ni-šú-un [ib]-ba-ni [ki-a] ní-bu-ta tu-ud-da-àm er-še-tum in ara-ma-ni-šá-ma [i]b-ba-ni [an idi]m-àm : šamû naq-bi eršetim naq-bi: Ki idim-àm	wayi'as 'elohim 'et-hārāqī'a waybādēl bēyn hamayim 'āšer mitaḥat lārāqī'a ūbēn hamayim 'āšer m'al lārāqī'a wayəhī-qēl.
Heaven was created by itself; Earth was created by itself. Heaven was the abyss. Earth was the abyss. ¹⁸	And God made the expanse And separated the waters that were under the expanse From the waters that were above the expanse And it was so.

The Sumerian word for heaven here (*šamê*) may be rendered as “of water.”¹⁹ The idea is that all water is either heavenly or earthly, and both are the abyss. In *Enūma Eliš*, there is a reference the division as well, although the waters are not divided by an “expanse” (Heb. *raqī'a*) as in Genesis but rather a “skin” like an egg’s shell separating the waters made by Tiamat’s death.²⁰

Genesis does not appear to simply reclaim or demythologize an existing narrative here. While the division of the waters is common, due to geographic and perhaps even cognitive proximity, there is little affinity in the purpose of the divisions. According to Table IV.142-146 of *Enūma Eliš*, the god Bēl is replicating the heavenly realm in the earthly one. In other words, there is a sense of continuity between the realm of the divine and the realm of the earthly. The experience of god and man is connected. In Genesis, the purpose of the division of the waters, and indeed of the entire creative process is the production of realm unlike the unknowable abode of God. This non-reflective division between the abode of God and man is not explicit in

¹⁷ Currid, *Against the Gods*, 39.

¹⁸ Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 171.

¹⁹ Ibid., 177, following A. Livingston, *Mystical and Mythological Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 33.

²⁰ Ibid., 94-95. Tablet IV.139 – iš-du-ud maška ma-aš-ša-ra ú-šá-aš-bit.

Genesis, but becomes more clearly stated later. There is therefore perhaps some lateral relationships in terms of the figure used, but no affinity in intent.

The Intent of Creation in the Bilingual Creation Myth

There is a bilingual creation myth that has attracted little attention because its four copies are difficult to reconstruct.²¹ Since the myth occurs in Sumerian, Akkadian and Assyrian, it is reasonable to assume it had a fairly long lifespan, but little is known about it. The tablets includes a dialogue among the Anunnaki after the division of the waters. The Akkadian text is cited here.

Obverse, lines 16-29	Genesis 1:26-27
a-na-àm ħé-en-bal-en-zé-en? a-na-àm ħé-en-dím-en-zé-en? a-nun-na dingir-gal-gal-e-ne, a-na-àm-ħé-en-bal-en-zé-en? a-na-àm ħé-en-dím-en-zé-en? dingir-gal-e-ne-mu-un-sur-re-eš-a, a-nun-na-dingir-nam-tar-re min-na-ne-ne en-líl-ra mu-un-na-ni-íb-gi-gi uzu-mú-a dur-an-ki-ke alla-alla im-ma-an-šum-en-zé-en múd-múd-e-ne nam-lú-u-lu mú-mú-e-dè á-giš-gar-ra dingir-e-ne éš-gàr-ne ħé-a	wayo'mer 'elohím na'áseh 'ādām bəsaləməñū kidəmətēñū. wəyirədū bidəgat hayām ūbə'ōp hašāmayim ūbabəhēmah ūbəkāl-hā'āreš ūbəkāl-hāremēs hāromēs 'al-hā'āreš wayibərā' 'elohím 'et-hā'ādām bəsaləməñū bəselem 'elohím bārā' 'otō zākār ūnəqēbāh bārā' 'otām.
“What shall we/you make? What shall we/you fashion? Ye Anunnaki, great gods, What do we/you propose? What do we/you say?” The great gods who were present, The Anunnaki and those who decree destinies, Both groups answer Enlil, “In Uzumua, the bond of heaven and earth, Let us slaughter the Alla deities And make mankind from their blood. The tasks of the gods shall be their tasks, That, forever, boundary ditches may be established.” ²²	Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

There are two immediately noticeable similarities. God takes a collective council to create man, speaking to himself/themselves in the plural. Then he creates man for a purpose. The similarities end there, however. The Anunnaki are self-indulgent. There is no intent in their creation other than to have someone to maintain things for them, to keep creation going. In Genesis, man is created for dominion, but in the Sumerian text, man is slave to keep the ditches

²¹ Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 350.

²² *Ibid.*, 354–55.

separating the world in good repair. On top of this, man is created through the slaying of the Alla, possibly the underworld god.

The plural form of self-address is a common device in these myths. That in itself is a linguistic feature, not an indication of borrowing. It is a matter of proximity. There is, however, some affinity in the function of man in creation, despite the differences. It is enough similarity that one could argue that the Genesis narrative is meant to contrast with, or even possibly correct the Sumerian myth.

The Cosmology of *Gilgameš*

The *Gilgameš* tradition is complex, with multiple versions of the myth in circulation for a substantial amount of time across many cultural and linguistic boundaries. Indeed the question may not be the relationship of *Gilgameš* to Genesis, but how different versions of *Gilgameš* may parallel or contribute to Genesis.²³

Nowhere near as widely attested as the *Enūma Eliš* is a poem that Samuel Noah Kramer dubbed “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World,” abbreviated as GEN.²⁴ It is attested in seventy-four manuscripts from throughout the Sumerian world.²⁵ Here Kramer’s reconstruction of GEN is compared to Genesis 1:1, 8 and 10.

GEN 1-5	Genesis 1:1
ud ri-a ud sud-rá ri-a ġi ri-a ġi bad-rá ri-a mu ri-a mu sud rá ri-a ud ul níġ du-e pa è-a-ba ud ul níġ du-e mí zid dug-ga-a-ba	bərešit bārā' 'ēlohīm 'ēt hašāmāyīm wə'ēt hā'āreš.
In those days, in those distant days, In those nights, in those far-off nights In those years, in those distant years, In primeval days, when that which is eminently suitable had become manifest In primeval days, when that which is eminently suitable had been well cared for	In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
GEN 8-9	Genesis 1:8, 10
an ki-ta ba-ta-bad-rá-a-ba ki an-ta ba-ta-sur-ra-a-ba	wayiqərā' 'ēlohīm lārāqî'a šāmāyīm wayəhî-'ereb wayəhî-moqer yôm šēnî

²³ For more on the Gilgamesh text, consider Daniel E. Fleming and Sara J. Milstein, *The Buried Foundation of the Gilgamesh Epic: The Akkadian Huwawa Narrative* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). Fleming and Milstein explore a possible pre-Gilgamesh narrative which may have resulted in multiple strands of the Gilgamesh text.

²⁴ Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium B.C.*, revised ed. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), 30-32.

²⁵ Alhena Gadotti, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld and the Sumerian Gilgamesh Cycle* (Boston: DeGruyter, 2014), 1.

	wayiqērā' 'ēlohîm layabāšah 'ereš wūlamiqērēh hamayim qārā' yamîm
When heaven had been separated from the earth, When the earth had been demarcated from heaven, ²⁶	And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and the morning, the second day. And God called the dry land Earth, And the waters that were gathered together he called seas.

The GEN myth leaves much of the divine intent implied, allowing for freedom of interpretation, one might suppose. Where GEN leaves the timing of the division of the universe between heaven and earth as an event which did occur without specifying how or why, Genesis is much more explicit. It is the direct agency of God that separates the two realms. (The division of the waters themselves in Genesis 1:9 was addressed earlier.) It appears as if GEN is looking back to an equivalent creative event, although none is extant and it may very well be that GEN assumes an unknowable origin. The idea of separation of creation is proximate. The sense of separating waters and the heavens and earth are ubiquitous through the Ancient Near East. There is no denying that there is a similarity in expression, but there is a clear, manifest distance in terms of divine intent. GEN assumes no agency, only allowing that the events must have occurred. Genesis embraces divine agency as crucial. Thus, there is no necessary affinity in the texts. The agency of God in Genesis is not simply a literary innovation. It is deeply interwoven into the narrative itself.

Conclusion

Some commentators like Bernard Batto might see the origins of Yahwism in the other Near East traditions, but such a position requires a presupposed and influential affinity.²⁷ Both the ancient Canaanite and Mesopotamian creation myths reflect a complex theological and literary style. The Hebrews were both aware of this and likewise capable. They do not simply respond to the creation myths but do so with sophistication that some commentaries do not believe they were capable of summoning. Consider Batto's proposal that all creation myths (including the biblical one) involve a clash of creator and anticreator.²⁸ Undoubtedly, Batto sees this clash in Genesis 1:2, with Elohim overcoming the Abyss, but this is not the case, as we have seen. Indeed, most of the primordial theogeny that Batto says exists in myths, and which occupies the vast majority of four tablets of *Enūma Eliš*, is completely absent from Genesis 1.

Time and time again, the reader must ask whether there is a *necessary* affinity among these texts. Are there lateral, proximate relationships between the biblical record and the creation myths of their neighbors? This is undoubtedly the case sometimes, but these are of varying types

²⁶ Text and translation, Gadotti, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*, 154, 162.

²⁷ Bernard F. Batto, *In the Beginning: Essays on Creation Motifs in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

and quality. They are not necessary affinities. As Walton has contended, there are eddies, tides, inflows and outflows in the river of cognitive environment. Contact does not equal cause.

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