

**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST MYTHOLOGY:
CASE STUDY OF ENUMA ELISH AND GILGAMESH**

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To my beloved wife Nene Rita, and to all students and instructors in Beulah Heights University, I give my unalloyed wishes for your supports and kindness.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The term Ancient Near East is used to describe the ancient region that is the present day Middle East. Perhaps it is called nearest due to its proximity to Europe. Its long cultural influence stretched across all ancient kingdoms within the region. To be precise, ancient near east is synonymous with early civilization. This because, the region is made up of the areas hitherto referred to as the Fertile Crescent. The region has long been recognized for its vital contributions to world civilization of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Levant which included Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians, and Phoenicians. These ancient kingdoms contributed immensely to the development of civilization, and they virtually cut across all spheres of human endeavors whether science and technology, religion, agriculture, astronomy, literature, writing and many others.

One of the most fascinating creation stories of the ancient near east that trickled my fancy is the Enuma Elish otherwise known as the seven tablets of creation and the epic of Gilgamesh by extension. The two creation stories are compelling and to an extent are parallel to Biblical creation story in the Genesis chapter one and two. The stories can be better understood by delving deep into the primordial accounts associated with the time. The gods were seen to be at war with each other. The gods were also seen to be in the state of change which ascribes element of mortality to them. The creation of the world was seen as occurrence of a titanic battle between the deity of the primordial chaotic waters and storm god.¹ These aspects of the narrations make the stories much to be desired.

Similarly the epic of Gilgamesh gives accounts of an impious King who was described as brutish, rapist, capricious, arrogant and violent. When the people cry out about his brutality, the gods gave heed to their cry and created Enkidu, a man-beast that live wild in the bush to tame him. But before he could gather momentum, Gilgamesh had already gotten a tip up and sends a woman to seduce Enkidu. This and more other events give credence for a comparative analysis of these two ancient accounts on creation.¹

¹ Coogan, Michael D; The Old Testament, A very Short Introduction, vol.181. Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2008 1

CHAPTER TWO

Historical and Contextual Clarification

Historically speaking, the ancient near east is the cradle of human civilization. Every aspect of knowledge we can boast of today has its origin in primordial time of the ancient Mesopotamia. Human first settled in Mesopotamia in the Paleolithic era around 14,000 BC. Mesopotamia is a region of south west Asia in Tigris and Euphrates river system that benefitted from the area's climate and geography to host the beginning of human civilization. Its history is marked by many important inventions that changed the world, including the concept of time, math, the wheel, sailboats, maps and writing. Mesopotamia is also defined by a changing succession of ruling bodies from different areas and cities that seized control over a period of thousands of years.² Its historical accounts and writings established the existence of polytheism which is an act of worship of numerous gods and deities of all sorts within the region. Enuma Elish otherwise called the seven tablets of creation and the Epic of Gilgamesh were popular among various historical writings archeologists discovered over time.

Contextually speaking, myth is a narrative. The Greek word mythos originally meant story in either prose or poetry, in which gods and goddesses are the principal characters.³ The main characters in myths are usually the gods, demigods, or supernatural humans. Stories of everyday human beings, although often of leaders of some type, are usually contained in legends, as opposed to myths. Therefore, the term mythology may either refer to the study of myths in general or a body of myths regarding a particular subject.

The most elaborate description of a battle between cosmic forces that preceded creation is found in EnumaElish, also called Babylonian creation Epic. This an ancient Mesopotamian hymn in praise of Marduk, the storm god and chief deity of Babylon.⁴

Therefore, this paper is meant to discuss the parallels between these two creation stories of ancient near east with the view to examining other divergences that may exist within these mythologies.²

²"Mesopotamia"History.com Editors; A&E Television Network, Published November 30, 2017, retrieved from <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-middle-east/Mesopotamia>.(accessed June 04,2020).

³Coogan,Michael.D; The Old Testament, A very Short Introduction,vol.181.Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2008

⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

EnumaElish (the seven tablets of creation)

Creation stories and epics have contributed immensely to human development. They have helped to explain the universe and the interaction of cosmic forces from time immemorial. This of course helps to define the essence of human existence.

EnumaElish is the Mesopotamian creation myth whose title is derived from the opening lines of the piece “When on High.” All of the tables containing the myth, found at Ashur, Kish, Ashurbanipal’s library at Nineveh, Sultantape, and other excavated sites, date to C.1200 BCE but their colophons indicate that these are all copies of a much older version of the myth dating from long before the fall of Sumer in C. 1750 BCE.⁵

The story is concerns with the birth of the gods and creation of the universe and humans beings in those days when the gods are in the state of flux and at battle with each other. The gods wee described as polytheistic and moral beings that have power over each other. In the beginning, there was only undifferentiated chaotic water swirling. The water was divided into sweet, and fresh water, known as the god Apsu, and salty bitter water, the goddess Tiamat.

Once differentiated the union of these two entities gave birth to the younger gods. These young gods however were extremely loud, troubling the sleep of Apsu at night and distracting him from his work by day. Upon the advice of Vizier, Mummu, Apsu decides to kill the young gods. Tiamat, hearing of their plan, warns her eldest son, Enki (sometimes Ea) and he puts Apsu to sleep and kills him, from Apsu’s remains, Enki creates his home. ⁶

Tiamat was enraged by the action of the young gods who have killed her mate. She decided to consult te god Quingu who advised her to engage the younger gods in battle. Rewarding Quingu with the tablets of destiny which legitimize the rule of a god and controls he fates of the cosmic realm, she summon all forces of chaos and creates eleven horrible monsters to destroy her children.³

The battle was so fierce as the younger gods, Ea, Enki struggled in futility to contain Tiamat until Marduk emerged to defeat Tiamat.Marduk defeats Quingu and killed Tiamat by

³⁵ Mark, Joshua J. “EnumaElish; the Babylonian Epic of Creation-Full Text “Ancient History Encyclopedia, Last Modified May04, 2018. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/225/>.

⁶ Ibid.

shooting her with an arrow which splits her in two; from her eyes flows the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Out of Tiamat, Marduk creates the heavens and the earth, he appoints gods to various duties. After he consult Ea(the god of wisdom) he decided to create human beings from the remains of whatever of the gods that instigated Tiamat to war.⁷ From the blood of Quingu, Ea created the first man called Lullu to help the gods in maintaining order and keep chaos at bay.

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⁴ ⁷ Mark, Joshua J. "EnumaElish; the Babylonian Epic of Creation-Full Text "Ancient History Encyclopedia, Last Modified May04, 2018. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/225/>.

CHAPTER FOUR

Epic of Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh is the semi-mythic king of Uruk, in Mesopotamia best known as The Epic of Gilgamesh (written c. 2150-1400 BCE) The great Sumerian/Babylonian poetic work which pre-dates Homers's writing by 1500 years and therefore, stands as the oldest piece of epic in world literature.⁸ King Gilgamesh was described as impious, immoral, brutish, rapist, capricious and violent that his people could no longer condone his excesses, and they cried out to the god Aruru who heard their cry and send a man-beast called Enkidu to tame him. Enkidu was said to live in the bush among wild animals who were his close companions and associates. He was wild and had no contacts with humans. His mission is to checkmate Gilgamesh because he was as magnificent as himself. Before Enkidu could get Gilgamesh he had already gotten information about his coming. He then send a woman called Shamhat (perhaps a prostitute) who reached out to him in his state of nature, and he was tame after having sex with the woman.

Both Enkidu and Gilgamesh are heroic figures, forming a sort of intermediary class between humans and divine. Although they do not have the power and immortality of the gods, they are more powerful than ordinary humans. Gilgamesh is directly descended from the gods, and Enkidu was fashioned by the gods for the purpose of controlling the excesses of Gilgamesh. Enkidu and Gilgamesh are considered an even match by the people but after a fierce battle, Enkidu is bested.

He feely accepted his defeat and the two became friends and embark on adventure together. They kill Humbaba, demon of the Cedar forest, and this attracts the attention of Inanna (known by her Akkadian/Babylonian name Ishar in the story). Inanna is enraged and sends her brother-in-law, the Bull of heaven down to earth to destroy Gilgamesh. Enkidu comes to his friends aid and killed the bull but, in doing so, he has offended the gods and is condemned to death.⁹

The death of Enkidu brought so much pain and grief upon Gilgamesh who now reckons that one day he too will die likewise. The reality of his own mortality through death of his friend was lucid and stirs him in the face. For the first time in his life he felt the burden of death and the frailty of human nature he wore. All his ego and pride were jettisoned and a quest for immortality began. His quest for immortality is depicted in cries.⁵

⁵⁸Mark, Joshua J."Gilgamesh "Ancient History Encyclopedia, Last modified March 29,2018.<https://www.ancient.eu/Gilgamesh/>.

⁹. Ibid.

How can I rest, how can I be of peace? What my brother is now that shall I be when I am dead. I will go as best I can to find Utnapishtim who they call the faraway, for he has entered the assembly of the gods.¹⁰ After a long journey through the mountains and oceans to meet Utnapishtim who offered him two chances to become immortal, he failed all the tests given to him. He was ferried back home where he gives account of his ordeal.⁶

⁶¹⁰Mark, Joshua J."Gilgamesh "Ancient History Encyclopedia, Last modified March 9,2018.<https://www.ancient.eu/Gilgamesh/>.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Convergence and Divergence of the two creation stories

In trying to draw the parallels between these creation epics, we should also understand that every epic deserves our attention. This is because they offer insight into various religious and cultural belief systems and cosmologies of primordial era. They are related to adventures and achievements of heroic feats narrated by historians in more elaborate ways to explain social relationships, ethical behaviors, and class hierarchies among others.

The epic of Gilgamesh makes reference to the Enuma Elish, because both stories include gods and heroes. With expressing all details in a clear and obvious way, leaving no doubt as to the true intended meaning one can easily identify an explicit view in the epic of Gilgamesh, when the main character, Gilgamesh tries to defeat a giant, similar to how Marduk tried to defeat Tiamat in the Enuma Elish. Both wanted to show that they have power, but more so Gilgamesh wanted to show that he deserves to be immortal and that he should live with no limits.¹¹ Gilgamesh was created by several gods in their likeness with only one problem, he was not immortal, he continued to live his life to the fullest just like Marduk.

The Sumerians viewed some gods as unpredictable because of Tiamat's choices in the Enuma Elish, therefore when Humbaba created a mass of destruction by destroying nature he represented how Tiamat was unpredictable. In the historical background of introducing Gilgamesh, the document states that there were traces of an earlier matriarchal religion remains which is similar to the Enuma Elish because the word order continued to stay that way ever since the first creation myth.¹²

The epic of Gilgamesh described the king as impious, immoral rapist, brutish and capricious, which is why the people cried to the god Aruru who heeded their cries by sending Enkidu to confront him. Though he ended up in befriending Enkidu who became his close companion. This account explicitly reflects the actions of the young gods described in Enuma Elish as being troublesome, noisy, loud and could not be allowed to work either in the day or night. This calls for the decision of the gods to destroy the younger gods. The younger gods revolted by engaging the gods in a war which was decided in their favor.⁷

⁷Brandon. "The Epic of Gilgamesh in Comparison to the Enuma Elish; Free Book Summary, retrieved from <https://freebooksummary.com>, (accessed June, 30, 2020). 7

¹² Ibid.

The only difference was the deaths that happened, the death in the Enuma Elish is a death upon evil and in epic of Gilgamesh the death was between the giant and the destruction of nature.¹³

The young gods took control of the cosmic realm after destroying Apsu, Tiamat and the monsters that were created to fight them. From the eyes of Tiamat came the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The young gods were able to create the universe and made the first man called Lullu to help them maintain order and keep chaos at bay. By this implication the young gods acquired immortality and assumed positions by distributing and assigning duties to the gods. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the quest for power and immortality was suppressed by the gods who took upper hand in their creatures even though they were made by them. The death of Enkidu was an eye opener to Gilgamesh who now felt the heat and pain of death as one day he too will likewise die. Therefore, the inability of the of both Enkidu and Gilgamesh to conquer death and assume immortality creates a yawning gap between the Epic of Gilgamesh and The Seven Tablets of Creation otherwise called Enuma Elish.⁸

⁸¹³Brandon. "The Epic of Gilgamesh in Comparison to the Enuma Elish; Free Book Summary, retrieved from <https://freebooksummary.com>,(accessed June, 30,2020).

CONCLUSION

This paper explored two of the most popular creation stories in ancient near east; EnumaElish and Gilgamesh. The region has long been recognized for its contributions to world civilization whether religion, agriculture, science and technology, literature, astronomy, writing etc.

The EnumaElish creation story reflects the when the gods were in the state of change and there was a titanic battle between the deity of the primordial chaotic waters and a storm god. The union of the fresh water which is the god Apsu and the salty water the goddess Tiamat brought into existence the young gods, who later overthrew the gods and assume powers.

Likewise the Epic of Gilgamesh describes an impious king said to be riotous, brutish, rapist and arrogant, and his subjects cried out to the god Aruru, who send a man-beast called Enkidu to tame him. And they later became friends and joined hands to revolt against the gods. Discovering the mortality of the human nature after the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh succumbed to his fate that one he will likewise die.

Both stories are historical and provide evidence into religious and cultural belief systems and the cosmologies of ancient near east. They provide insights into ancient events and history that have existed from time immemorial.

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