

# As It Was

*By Tim Dunston*

Imagine that last week in your Sabbath School class the leader started with these words: “In the beginning, Marduk created the heavens and the earth.” How would you respond? Would you open your Bible to Genesis just to make sure it said what you thought it said? Would you raise your hand? Each of us I’m sure would react in a different way, but what I can’t imagine is that everyone would decide to remain silent and not say anything at all.

Yet this is exactly how Genesis deals with that same situation. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. That is all that the creation story has to say about pre-creation history: In the beginning, God. Period. Creative license was not something that the God of Genesis earned; it was something he had, by definition.

The editors of the Pentateuch left us two great stories of the beginning of the world. In chapter one, the story of Elohim is told: he creates the world, all its life, all its boundaries, just by the power and command of his voice. This command is not so much a command as it is an invitation: Let there be...and there was.

In chapter two, we read about YHWH and his more hands-on approach to creation; if chapter one pictures the glory of God as transcendence, chapter two focuses on the glory of God’s immanence. So close is YHWH to human beings, so connected; not only are we created in his image, we are formed physically by his hands, we are given his breath to breathe as he creates a living soul in the likeness of the divine.

The book of Genesis, particularly the creation story, bears a message of great importance. This message was soon forgotten, or at least overlooked by early Israel. Even today, we often turn a blind eye to the most significant message of the book: its silence.



## Creation Stories from the Fertile Crescent

Creation stories of the Mediterranean world carried great significance because they were often used to establish the supremacy of one God among many others. Marduk, the patron god of Babylon, was once just one god among many others. But not after the *Enuma Elish* was written.

The long Babylonian creation epic *Enuma elish*...narrates a chain of events beginning with the very first separation of order out of chaos and culminating in the creation of the specific cosmos known to the ancient Babylonians. As the gods are born within the commingled waters of their primeval parents, Apsu [father of the gods] and Tiamat [mother of the gods],...[the restlessness of the new children] disturbs Apsu. Over Tiamat's protests, he plans to kill them; but the clever Ea [one of Tiamat and Apsu's children] learns of his plan and kills Apsu instead. Now Tiamat is furious, she produces an army of monsters to avenge her husband and to wrest lordship from the younger generation. The terrified gods turn to Ea's son Marduk for help. Marduk agrees to face Tiamat, but demands supremacy over them as compensation.<sup>1</sup>

The council of the gods tests Marduk's powers by having him make a garment disappear and then reappear. After Marduk passes the test, the council enthrones him as high king and commissions him to fight Tiamat. With the authority and power of the council, Marduk assembles his weapons, the four winds as well as the seven winds of destruction. He rides in his chariot of clouds with the weapons of the storm to confront Tiamat. After entangling Tiamat in a net, Marduk unleashes the Evil Wind to inflate Tiamat. When she is incapacitated by the wind, Marduk kills her with an arrow through her heart and takes captive the other gods and monsters who were her allies. After smashing Tiamat's head with a club, Marduk divides her corpse, using half to create the earth and the other half to create the sky, which is complete with bars to keep the chaotic waters from escaping. The tablet ends with Marduk establishing dwelling places for his allies.<sup>2</sup>

At this point, I would like to turn to the text of the *Enuma Elish*. We join the scene in the middle of the fourth tablet.



He released the arrow, it tore her belly,  
It cut through her insides, splitting the heart.  
Having thus subdued her, he extinguished her life.  
He cast down her carcass to stand upon it...

And turned back to Tiamat whom he had bound.  
The lord trod on the legs of Tiamat,  
With his unsparing mace he crushed her skull.  
When the arteries of her blood he had severed,  
The North Wind bore it to places undisclosed.  
On seeing this, his fathers were joyful and jubilant,  
They brought gifts of homage to him.  
Then the lord paused to view her dead body,  
That he might divide the form and do artful works.  
He split her like a shellfish into two parts:  
Half of her he set up as a covering for heaven,  
Pulled down the bar and posted guards.  
He bade them to allow not her waters to escape.<sup>3</sup>

This is the heroic epic of Marduk and how he brought the earth into being. The story goes on to tell how he creates humans. Needing flesh and bone to make them, he kills one of his fellow gods and uses the god's body as flesh and bone and blood for the human race.

Marduk creates only in the wake of great violence. I would like to suggest two reasons for this. First, he had to convince the other gods that he was worthy for the task, and secondly, he needed the raw material for his "artful works." Marduk is the Dr. Frankenstein of

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Mesopotamia, building his creation from the corpses of the dead. He destroys the old in order to establish the new, because he cannot create any other way.

The Greek creation epic is very different, but worth looking at as well. In the Greek creation myth, Zeus must overthrow his father Cronos in order to establish his own rule: We join the scene in the middle of the story.

Cronos married his sister and became King of the Titans. They had five children but Cronos had been warned that one of them would kill him; so, he swallowed each one as it was born. To save her sixth child, Rhea tricked Cronos into swallowing a stone wrapped in baby's clothing and hid the child among some lesser nature goddesses called nymphs who brought him up safely. This child was Zeus. When he grew up, Zeus returned home in disguise and slipped a potion into Cronos' drink, making him choke. The children he had swallowed were coughed out, whole and safe. A fierce battle then took place. Zeus freed the Cyclops who made thunderbolts for him to hurl. They also made a forked trident for Poseidon, and a helmet that made its wearer invisible for Pluto. But, most of the Titans and giants sided with Cronos. After a terrible struggle the younger gods were victorious. The Titans were banished: one of them, Atlas, was made to hold up the heavens as punishment. [And] Zeus became ruler of the sky and king of all the gods.”<sup>4</sup>



deeds, telling how they were powerful enough to overthrow the primeval rule, and by demonstrating their power to deceive and to destroy. It is through their destructive prowess that they create. And it is because of their destructive power that they are worshipped.

The difference between these creation stories and the Genesis account is astronomical. Normally, when Genesis is compared with other creation narratives it is to show the similarities. Here are excerpts of the first two chapters, and in light of what you have just read, look for the differences, in particular the glaring absence of a primeval victory for God.

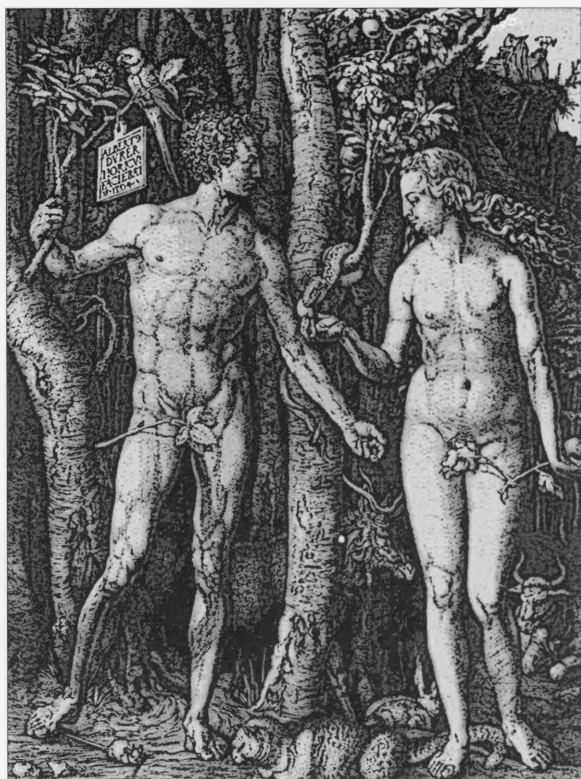
**1:1** In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. **2** Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

We are all familiar with what comes next. God creates the world and its creatures in five days, human beings come on the sixth day, and he deems the creation good. That is the first chapter of Genesis. The story is told again in the second chapter.

These two creation narratives establish the power and glory of Marduk and Zeus by telling of their heroic



## Our God is not a God who destroys in order to create.



**2:1** Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. **2** By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. **3** And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. **4** This is the account of

ing, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. **22** Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. **25** The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Where is the violence? Where is the heroic overcoming? Where is the struggle of the new God against a primeval order? On all these topics, Genesis is deliberately silent. The only place in the Genesis account where God uses pre-existing matter for creation is with the creation of Eve. Even in this, God closes Adam's wound with flesh. He does not destroy Adam, he simply puts him to sleep. What results is more like surgery than rampant destruction.

Our God is not a God who destroys in order to create. The composite story we get from the first two chapters of Genesis is diametrically opposed to the other creation myths of Mesopotamia. Zeus sets up his kingdom, metaphorically on the dead bodies of the previous rulers. Marduk, in comparison, sets up his kingdom, very literally on the carcass of his foe. He splits her up the middle and makes the sky and the earth. Violence is the very foundation for life in the *Enuma Elish*.

Our God is so different. At the outset of each testament of Scripture, we are given a beautiful vision of God's character and of his plan for a chosen people, a people who will be like him, creators, creating from the

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the heavens and the earth when they were created. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens **7** the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. **18** The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." But for Adam no suitable helper was found. **21** So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleep-

vast storehouses of love, not violence. And, yes, we stray from this example. It is only a few books after Genesis that we see the rampant violence of Canaan's conquest, and the bloody aftermath of judges and kings.

It is not that long after Jesus' message of submission and love that Christianity loses itself in indulgences and inquisitions and crusades. Somehow in the centuries after Jesus' death his message of love and self sacrifice was forgotten.

In the "Efficacy of Prayer," an essay in *The World's*

*Last Night*, C. S. Lewis wrestles with this very problem. Speaking of God, he says this:

For he seems to do nothing of himself which he can possibly delegate to his creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what he could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye. He allows us to neglect what he would have us do, or even to fail....We are not mere recipients or spectators. We are either privileged to share in the game, or compelled to collaborate in the work, "to wield our little tridents." Is this amazing process simply creation going on before our eyes? This is how (no light matter) God makes something—, indeed makes gods—out of nothing.

For some reason, it is important to God to let us do things, to let us have free will, to let us create things imperfectly over long periods that he could do perfectly in an instant. It is important to God that we emulate him, even if we never achieve a shadow of what he is, it is important to him that we try.

I have often heard it said that God created the world *ex nihilo*. And at this point in the article you may be running in to the same difficulty I did when I was writing it. If God created something out of nothing, how are we supposed to create like he did?

It's a simple answer really. God didn't create the world from nothing. God created the world from the vast storehouses of his being. In a word: love. He spoke love, and the laws of physics came into order. He spoke love, and matter filled the void. He spoke love and the chemistry of matter sorted itself into life. He spoke, and the first humans appeared before him in his image. And as it was, so it is.

As our creator created, so should we create. Create with love. Create love in the darkness of the void. Light a spark in the midst of the darkness. Create not through domination, not through deception, but through the strength of submission and through the power of hope. We do not conquer the darkness of the deep, we do not overcome it by power, we outlast it—we outshine it—with the everlasting creation of love. It is the unbreakable, unfathomable power of the God we serve.

As Paul says, there is no distance, no power on heaven or earth that is stronger than love. It must be the initiator of our creating; if it is not, we use our energy to destroy. By definition, destructive power can only substitute one evil for another. When we create for

the purpose of blessing our creation, when our creative ability flows naturally from the small warehouse of our love, creating by nature objects of love, free and unpossessed—when we can say as an invitation: Let there be love....then we begin to create as we were created: in the image of our God.

When we do that, we wield our little tridents in a seemingly infinite void, and, believe it or not, that is good.

## Notes and References

1. "Mesopotamian Cosmology," in the Web site Myths of the Creation of the World, <<http://alexm.here.ur/mirrors/www.entract.com/jwalz/Eliade/055.html>>, accessed February 3, 2006.
2. Dennis Bratcher, "The Enuma Elish: 'When On High...': The Mesopotamian/Babylonian Creation Myth," Web site of the CRI/Voice Institute, <<http://www.cresourcei.org/enumaelish.html>>, accessed February 3, 2006.
3. Ibid.
4. "The Creation of the World," see URL <[http://www.hellenism.net/cgi-bin/display\\_article.html?a=52&s=28](http://www.hellenism.net/cgi-bin/display_article.html?a=52&s=28)>.

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