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## Introduction

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when I was a graduate student in the Bible Department of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel, I became very excited about certain academic studies on biblical ethics that I was reading, as well as by certain courses I was attending which dealt with biblical teachings on morality. At the same time, I was disappointed that these studies were not being made available to the general public but were mostly hidden away in academic journals or dense books virtually inaccessible to all but university scholars. One day I approached a visiting professor from the University of California, Berkeley, Jacob Milgrom, who was writing some of these fascinating ethical studies, and confronted him on why he wasn't translating them into reader-friendly language geared to the interested layperson. He responded, "You do it!"<sup>1</sup>

Well, I was a bit taken aback. After all, I was a mere graduate student, and I didn't feel worthy of that task. However, I kept the project in mind, maintained my enthusiasm for it, and never forgot about it. This book is my attempt to fulfill both my original wish and my teacher's directive.

Why I felt that it was necessary to write this book, however, goes back to an earlier historical period. Once upon a time, indeed, until the nine-

teenth century, the Hebrew Bible, as the Old Testament, had an honored place within western civilization. Even after Christianity lost its political power, the stories of Genesis, the Exodus from Egypt, the revelation of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, and other biblical texts too numerous to mention still held powerful sway over American and European imagination. It made little difference whether one believed in the Hebrew Bible as God's word or Divinely inspired, or even if one was an atheist. The Hebrew Bible was viewed as a fount of unparalleled wisdom, values, history, and spirituality that was not duplicated in the only other ancient foundational literatures of the West, that of Greece and Rome. It is not for nothing that the crest of Yale University contains the Hebrew words *Urim* and *Thummim*, the oracle of the breastplate of the Israelite High Priest, or that the crest of Princeton University states in Latin, "Old and New Testament," or that the seal of Dartmouth College has the Hebrew words *El Shaddai* (a biblical name of God).<sup>2</sup>

However, during the nineteenth century, archaeological discoveries of ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian artifacts and inscriptions began to capture the imagination of Europe and America. Quickly the traditionalists, predisposed as they were to the superiority of the Bible, scanned some of the newly discovered ancient Near Eastern writings, such as creation and flood stories, and claimed that these polytheistic writings were religiously and ethically inferior to biblical monotheism. On the other hand, other ancient material was also being published, such as prayers and hymns that exhibited a highly developed ethical and spiritual awareness. A watershed moment occurred at the dawn of the twentieth century, on the evening of January 13, 1902, when the foremost German Assyriologist at that time, Professor Friedrich Delitzsch, lectured in Berlin before an august audience of representatives of the Royal Academy of Sciences as well as Germany's ruling elite, including Kaiser Wilhelm II.<sup>3</sup> Delitzsch's topic that evening was "Babel und Bibel," that is, "Babylon and the Bible." During the lecture Delitzsch purported to prove that the greatly superior Babylonian civilization had a profound influence on the development of ideas and customs of the Old Testament. Part of what drove Delitzsch to his conclusions was his antisemitism, which prevented him from seeing anything of value in the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>4</sup> The lecture, and his two subsequent ones in this series,

received wide publicity and generated a controversy that swept the country, with reverberations throughout western culture.

It matters little that some of the sensational influences that Delitzsch claimed were eventually disproved; more and more academic scholars adopted Delitzsch's general convictions. The pendulum had begun to swing in the other direction, and there it has stayed. Today a million inscriptions have been discovered in the ancient Near East. Even if most of those on clay tablets have still not been studied, a great many have, as well as inscriptions on tombs, palaces, monuments, papyri, parchment, and stelae. The prevailing sentiment today is that the Jewish Bible's ideas, perspectives, and ethics must not only be viewed as part and parcel of the ancient Near East, but are derived from and are subservient to, or at least no better than, the surrounding civilizations.

Indeed, one scholarly perception is that the ancient Israelites were a small, insignificant, semi-pagan society, and their biblical writings had little, if anything, new to add on either spiritual or moral grounds to our knowledge of other ancient Near Eastern cultures. To the contrary, the old Christian triumphal degradation of the God of the Old Testament as being stern and punishing—as opposed to the moral heights attained by the God of Love of the New Testament—has often been adapted to modern scholarship (never mind the frequent expressions of God's love and kindness in the Jewish Bible). The view of God in the Jewish Bible was now seen as “jealous” and “cruel,” commanding the deaths of all who oppose Him (men, women, and children). Think of the flood story, Sodom and Gomorrah, or the command to wipe out the seven Canaanite nations. Thus whatever one finds ethical in the Old Testament is obviated by the immoral behavior of God.

Even when scholars adjudge that some of the Bible's values might actually be ethically superior to those found in polytheistic societies, this evaluation is considered “unfair” to those cultures. After all, the argument goes, once you have only one powerful God, of course that deity will be more moral than the gods who were constantly competing with each other for power and authority. So, in a famous article by Assyriologist Jacob J. Finkelstein published in *Commentary* in 1958 (quite intentionally titled, “Bible and Babel: A Comparative Study of the Hebrew and Babylonian Religious Spirit”), Finkelstein states,

polytheism . . . implies the existence of a plurality of superhuman wills. This very condition precludes the absolute omnipotence of any one of these wills. Even if . . . one of these . . . deities . . . is . . . the head of a pantheon, he must at all times be mindful of the purposes of the other deities which are potentially vitiating to his own designs. . . .

If the first thought of the gods, as that of man, must be “to look out for himself” . . . moral and ethical considerations necessarily become secondary.<sup>5</sup>

He then goes on to posit that monotheism inherently tends “to become an ethical religion.” Since the god has no real rivals, his will cannot be contested. So the god can be viewed as motivated “by the highest ideals.” Furthermore,

he is in a position to lay down a mandate for man’s behavior . . . in accordance with these ideals, and to guarantee man’s well-being if his will is complied with, an advantage which . . . no polytheistic god could possibly enjoy . . . the gods were not absolutely free; the concept of a “covenant” in a polytheistic society is inherently impossible. . . .

The god of Israel is “ethical” precisely because he is the sole deity.

So, Finkelstein is saying, ancient Near East polytheism should not be condemned or denigrated for failing to achieve certain ethical advancements that appear in the Hebrew Bible, for to compare this polytheism with biblical monotheism is like “despising the elephant because he cannot outrace the horse.”<sup>6</sup> It is in the very nature of the polytheistic system that the gods cannot adhere to ethical standards, just as it is in the nature of monotheism that the one god will be ethical.

Yet why couldn’t *all* the gods be conceived as ethical? Why must their wills be in conflict? Why couldn’t the ancient Near East pantheon have been conceived as a collection of harmonious, complementary wills, where each deity had his or her own role and responsibility and they act in concert to do good for humanity? Why is it impossible for humans to imagine an ethical polytheistic system? After all, conceptions of goodness, justice, peace, and well-being are found throughout the ancient Near East. And if one were to ask how the conquest of one country over

another could not be seen as that victorious country's gods overwhelming the gods of the defeated country, one could respond that the gods of the losers were punishing their people for their sins.

Conversely, why must monotheism be ethical and the only God be caringly concerned with humanity? In the fourteenth century BCE, the pharaoh Akhenaten rejected traditional Egyptian polytheism and centered all worship on the Aten (the sun-disk). Akhenaten's short-lived "monotheistic" religion (eradicated some twenty years later) had no morality; evil simply did not exist. His Atenism ignored suffering and was highly elitist.<sup>7</sup> Later Aristotle's impersonal god, the supreme unmoving mover, did not care about humanity. Further, the history of monotheistic religions has provided us with irrefutable evidence that at different times people believed in the one God who was seemingly pleased to have His earthly minions oppress, enslave, torture, and slaughter millions of humans—mind you, also His creations—because the victims either did not believe in Him in the "right" way or did not follow His will "correctly." One need only remember centuries of Christian persecutions of the Jews and Muslim subjugations and wars against anybody who wasn't Muslim, to say nothing of the extreme, joyful brutality of radical Islamists today. Indeed, one can make the case that these perversions supported a satanic view of God, for only a demon would want his followers to cause so much suffering and death.

### *The Purpose of the Book*

This book's premise, then, is that ethical principles did exist in significant idealized understandings of ancient Near Eastern human, if not divine, authority. At the same time, this work challenges the scholarly perception that the Jewish Bible has made, at best, only an inconsequential contribution to the ethical development of ancient Near Eastern values. It is the goal of this book to demonstrate by substantial evidence, derived from various sources (Sumerian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Hittite, Ugaritic, Assyrian, and, of course, biblical), that the Jewish Bible not only changed the course of ethical thought but advanced it far beyond ancient Near Eastern society and religion in key ethical areas. The pendulum has swung too far. It is past time to make a more realistic investigation of the data.

The book will seek to explicate some of the most important ethical innovations of Judaism as first presented in the Tanakh.<sup>8</sup> The goal of the book is neither chauvinistic nor triumphal. It is not an attempt to claim that the Jews are innately morally superior or that the Bible or Judaism is perfect. Indeed, it is an accepted assumption here that the Bible contains some statements that are ethically abhorrent to those who live in the twenty-first century in democracies (although not in terms of the social-cultural norms of biblical times and environment). Rather, what is argued here is that significant portions of the Bible speak in terms of absolute monotheism and that these same portions contain certain specific important ethical advances in contrast to what we know about the ancient Near East. This work is an attempt “to return the crown to its place,” to point out that important ethical values and concepts which were the basis of many of the ideals of western civilization are first found in the Jewish Bible. It is hoped that the book will reinvigorate interest in and appreciation for the ethics of the Tanakh among laypeople (whether secular or religious), students, scholars, and clergy.

### *The Plan of the Book*

No one in the world knows when any book of the Torah or the Torah as a whole was written. Instead, many theories abound. Religious traditionalists believe that the Five Books of Moses were written by Moses at the dictation of God on Mount Sinai alone or on Mount Sinai and throughout the desert wanderings. Many modern academic scholars hold that most of the Torah was written during the First Temple period, 1000–586 BCE, to say nothing of oral traditions that may well have preceded the writing down of the material. In recent decades there has been a minimalist tendency among some academic practitioners (located mostly in central Europe) to portray biblical monotheism as totally an outgrowth of the Persian period (late sixth century BCE and on). In other words, they see most of the literature of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Psalms as entirely the product of the first part of the Second Temple period (and some even wish to see Maccabean influence, that is, second century BCE). In the view of many other scholars in North America, Israel (including the present author), and other locales, such



late dating is based on poor presumptions, inadequate methodology, inattention to contradictory archaeological and inscriptional evidence, and a blatant disregard for any cogent arguments to the contrary. It is beyond the scope of this book to present a detailed refutation of that position, but for those who might be interested, some relevant bibliography has been provided in the endnotes.

In this work, the general approach will not be to arrive at a particular date when a text was written. What a text says is more important than its date of composition. Again, the endnotes will occasionally refer to different scholarly views on dating the material. The approach that will be taken, based on solid scholarly research together with logical understandings, is that the prophets knew the laws of the Torah and either followed them verbatim or expanded and developed them further (see chapters 3–6).

The book progresses in a purposeful sequence. Each chapter will contain a discussion of relevant ancient Near East literature on a specific topic, followed by an examination of pertinent biblical texts.<sup>9</sup> The first three chapters focus primarily on ideas and laws in the Torah, while the last three delineate prophetic contributions. While that sequence follows the literary order of the Jewish Bible, it also indicates a historical development. Thus chapter 1 compares the creation and flood stories in Mesopotamia and the Torah with a focus on the ethical relationship between divinity and humanity. Chapter 2 delineates four primary understandings in the Torah of God's revelation on Sinai to the Israelites: treaty, law, "kingdom of priests and a holy people," teaching—each in terms of its ancient Near East background and its implications for the ethical relationship between God and the people. Chapter 3 concentrates on how the Torah's treatment of two significant underprivileged societal elements—the resident alien and the poor—is derived from the ethics of the relationship between God and Israel and how it differs from the rest of the ancient Near East. The prophetic innovation of the primacy of morality over ritual is the subject of chapter 4. Chapter 5 illustrates how the prophetic message of repentance exceeds the laws of the Torah and goes far beyond anything imagined in the rest of the ancient Near East. Finally, in chapter 6, the prophetic teaching of redemption enables the people to live with hope for the future despite the tragedies

of destruction and exile, a remedy absent in the rest of the ancient Near East. A conclusion sums up the relationship of the specific ethical findings mentioned in this book to the Jewish Bible's unique concept of God.

The word "Bible" in Israel (and for Jews everywhere) refers to the Hebrew Bible, or what Christians refer to as the Old Testament. "Ethics" is used throughout this book as simply referring to principles of behavior that are altruistic, that is, beneficial to others. Morals are beneficial actions on behalf of others. Sometimes, as in common speech, "ethics" and "morals" will be used interchangeably. All dates are given as BCE (Before the Christian, or Common, Era), or CE (the Christian, or Common Era), as is now accepted academic style.

A note on the English translation used here and the translations of "God" and "the Lord": the primary English translation herein was done by a committee of academic experts in the Hebrew Bible over several decades and is known as the NJPS, New Jewish Publication Society translation (*JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*), which relies predominantly on medieval Hebrew manuscripts. Occasionally I have tweaked the translation on the basis of the work of different scholars and sometimes on my own understanding.

For the sake of variety, I use the terms "Hebrew Bible," "Tanakh," or "Bible" (or the adjective "biblical") when referring to the Jewish Bible. When referring to a Christian scripture, I use "New Testament" or the name of one of its books.

Following long-standing English custom, the NJPS uses the word "God" to translate the Hebrew *Elohim* (an extremely frequent appellation of the God of Israel) and "the Lord" to translate the proper four-letter name of God, Hebrew *YHWH*, known as the tetragrammaton. The Hebrew root at the basis of the name refers to "being" or "existence." In Hebrew, vowels are not letters but marks or signs that appear beneath, above, or next to a letter. All medieval manuscripts (the first ones that have these signs) use similar marks for the tetragrammaton that appear with the word *Adonai*, meaning "my Lord," indicating that no attempt was made to pronounce *YHWH*. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that the name was considered too holy to pronounce in the pre-Christian period. Here, too, then, it will be translated as "the Lord." Concerning references to God, it is also important to understand that Hebrew gram-

matical form does not necessarily indicate meaning. So Hebrew *nashim* means “women” even though the word is in the masculine plural, and *avot* means “fathers” even though it has a feminine plural ending. Therefore, even though the Hebrew *hu* means “he” and is commonly used to indicate God, God is not a sexual being. True, most metaphors in reference to God use masculine images, but feminine images (particularly that of mother) also occur. Thus here, “He” will be used when designating God, capitalized to indicate that God is wholly other and not like any other “he.”

### *On Comparing the Jewish Bible to Ancient Near East Literature*

Given the biases and excesses mentioned at the beginning of this introduction (sometimes referred to as “parallelomania”), is comparing or contrasting biblical ideology and ethics to those of the ancient Near East a legitimate enterprise? Is there an acceptable method of comparing literatures?<sup>10</sup> In recent decades, serious scholars have responded to this question. Certain reasonable principles have been enunciated, such as the following:<sup>11</sup>

In comparative studies, differences may be more illuminating than similarities. For example, differing cultural principles are exemplified more in the dissimilarities in the two flood stories compared in chapter 1 than in the commonalities. At the same time, the biblical flood story appears to have modified the Babylonian one.<sup>12</sup>

The interpretation of a feature in a specific culture—whether of a social, political, religious, or literary nature—should always be done with the help of parallels within that culture, before any comparison is made with material from a different culture. For example, law in ancient Near Eastern law collections as opposed to biblical law (see chapter 2).

One should always attempt to understand the historical, social, or literary *development* of a feature within a specific culture before comparing it with the development of the same feature within a different culture. For example, the development of the relationship between ethics and ritual in biblical texts, as opposed to that relationship in other Ancient Near East texts (see chapter 4).

In any comparative study, all the available evidence must be examined. In other words, a phenomenon should be studied within its holistic context—social, religious, political, literary, historical, geographic—if possible. On the other hand, a specific feature or word should not be studied in isolation, that is, out of context. For example, both Babylonian and biblical legal texts mention concern for the poor, but if one does not take note of the elements in the broader literary contexts in which such concern is found, one will fail to understand the significance of that concern in the Jewish Bible as opposed to Hammurabi's collection (see chapter 3).

This study will make use of the above methodological principles in order to arrive at a fair comparison or contrast between biblical material and the rest of the ancient Near East.

### *Reading Ancient Materials Carefully, Including the Bible*

Further, one needs to be aware of using anachronistic terminology or concepts in relationship to the Jewish Bible and the rest of the ancient Near East. In other words, terms that are in use today can rarely be easily translated into the ancient world. What is meant today by “religion” or the ideal of an “egalitarian” society are hardly applicable to the ancient world. That is why, for example, the word “ethics” in this book refers specifically to principles of benevolent behavior, as opposed to general societal values. Biblical Hebrew has no term for “values-principles,” but it does have terms for behaving well to others, such as “to be good to,” “to show mercy to,” and “to have love for.” In the course of this book, an effort will be made to explain key terminology and concepts within the ancient contexts.

Additionally, it should be noted that a major difference between ancient Near Eastern texts and the Jewish Bible was the purpose of the literature. The texts of the Jewish Bible were designed to be promulgated to the populace, even if they were originally developed primarily by pious minorities. Those in the ancient Near East were never intended to be propagated to the public at large. Rather, they were always written for a select few, an elite. Only a tiny segment of the ancient world was literate, which is why the Jewish Bible depicts texts read aloud to the public.

It is worthwhile for the careful reader to be aware of the above considerations, and how difficult it may be for him or her to fully comprehend ancient literature, including that of the Jewish Bible. The bottom line is that even accomplished scholars can rarely be completely certain that they have fully understood an ancient text.

Additionally, it should be noted that this work consciously uses the English term “Jewish Bible” to refer to the Tanakh. Using “Jewish Bible” counteracts an academic approach that claims that the Babylonian exile (586–539 BCE) was a watershed in biblical history—that the Israelite religion of the First Temple period (approximately 1000–586 BCE) ended with the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the Davidic monarchy, and that what we know as ancient Judaism began only with the beginning of the Second Temple period under Persia in 539 BCE. The assumption is that, during the exile, groups of Jews redefined monotheism, covenant, and law and created a new theology. The assumption further states that the Torah is the product of this new theology. In other words, the Torah was not written down until the Second Temple period, and that pertains also to most of the prophetic works.

This book bases itself on a different supposition: that the Hebrew Bible is the product of ancient Jewish civilization from the second millennium BCE until the latter part of the first millennium BCE. The contention here is that Judaism, that is, monotheism, the Sinaitic Covenant, the law, the tie of the people to the land (including the establishment of all the rituals connected with the land, such as the holidays, tithes, and providing for the poor from the agricultural produce), the Temple (with its priesthood, sacrifices and their intrinsically Jewish significance), the prophetic messages of repentance and redemption, all originated significantly before the end of the First Temple period. Further, these Jewish memories and texts, ideas and practices, were carried on throughout the exile and the restoration to the land at the beginning of the Second Temple period. It is not a coincidence that the first momentous act of the redeemed community was to rebuild the Temple on the exact site of the previous one in Jerusalem. The returnees from exile sought to reconstitute the ideas, practices, and institutions of the First Temple period. Monotheistic Judaism had not changed; only historical circumstances had. Since the Judaism of First Temple times was the model for

Judaism of the Second Temple period, the Bible that encompassed the times of both Temples should be called the *Jewish* Bible.

The ethics of the Jewish Bible have had, unsurprisingly, an enormous influence on later Jewish thought and law, as well as on Christian thought and the development of modern western civilization, and they still influence Judeo-Christian culture today (but that is a topic for a different book). This book is written with the hope that it will encourage Jews, and non-Jews if they wish, to mine the Hebrew Bible for their ethical thinking. Further, may Christians, Muslims, and members of other civilizations be likewise encouraged to investigate their formative texts, too, for ethics that may benefit all of humanity. If that is our goal, then is there a task more worthy?

# 1

## The Jewish Bible's Unique Understanding of God

### *The Ethical Relationship of God to the World and Humanity*

In modern times, the abundance of unearthed Ancient Near Eastern writings—myths, laws, treaties, temple inscriptions, prayers, wisdom instructions—has provided us with a wealth of information about the gods and their interrelationships with the world and its inhabitants. To be familiar with all of these writings is an impossible task, as much material remains still unread! Nonetheless, certain key universal characteristics about these gods can be confirmed from published discoveries:

- The gods are *natural* beings. In that sense, they are no different than humans. They eat, drink, sleep, fornicate, make war, are born, and even die (or can be killed). They are part and parcel of nature. However, while they are not supernatural, they *are* superhuman in such characteristics as strength, longevity (some can even be resurrected), and other powers.
- While possessed of superhuman powers, the gods are not omnipotent. As natural beings, they are affected by nature. They also are subject to time, magic, divination (trying to ascertain the gods' plans that will affect humans, often in order to circumvent them), and destiny.

## 2 The Jewish Bible's Unique Understanding of God

- Ethically the gods are capricious. Sometimes they behave justly, and sometimes they don't. Nor do these texts view the gods as ethical paragons. Their attitudes toward humans are notably problematic. On the one hand, Mesopotamian kings see their divine charge as ensuring justice in society. On the other, humans are created to be slaves to the gods and to enable them to rest, as befits their divine royalty.<sup>1</sup>

What emerges is that the least significant difference between polytheism and monotheism is the numerical one.<sup>2</sup> Two of the more pervasive epics—the Babylonian creation saga (*Enuma Elish*), and the flood story in the Gilgamesh epic—will illustrate these characteristics. They will each be compared and contrasted with the relevant Hebrew Bible stories to point out key differences in the latter's perception of God.

It is important to note that while the Babylonian creation epic is a self-contained literary unit (as is the Gilgamesh epic), the biblical creation and flood stories are subunits of a much larger literary creation.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the observations here will sometimes refer to relevant passages in other portions of the Torah, the larger literary provenance of the biblical creation and flood stories.

### *The Babylonian Creation Epic*

The most famous and prevalent ancient Near Eastern creation epic is known as *Enuma Elish* (Akkadian for “When above”).<sup>4</sup> Most scholars date the epic's origins to the First Babylonian Dynasty (1894–1595 BCE), which is considerably earlier than the traditional thirteenth-century BCE date for the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.<sup>5</sup> The storyline is as follows:

Before heaven and earth had been created, only the two original divine parents, the male Apsu (the primeval sweetwater ocean) and the female Tiamat (the saltwater ocean) existed. The commingling of their waters brought forth several divine offspring who, in turn, gave birth to others. As typical of teenagers in their exuberance, the clamor of the younger generation of gods disturbs the “great-grandparents,” who can't get any sleep. In his rage, Great-grandpa Apsu decides to kill off his younger descendants, who, hearing of his intentions, devise a preemptive strike. Their wisest, Ea,



ironically concocts a magical incantation to cause Apsu to sink into a deep sleep, at which point Ea takes his crown and kills him. Ea establishes a palace on top of the slain Apsu and, through the goddess Damkina, gives birth to the future savior (and real hero of the epic), Marduk.

In the meantime, Great-grandma Tiamat, very upset by what has transpired, is incited by the god Kingu to avenge Apsu. She decides to go to war against those responsible for Apsu's death. She gathers her divine and monstrous allies and appoints Kingu as commander. Word comes to Ea of the impending attack, and eventually Marduk is persuaded to lead the younger gods, but he does so only on the condition that he will become the supreme divine authority. His condition is accepted by the assembly of the younger gods, who give him "kingship over the sum of the whole universe."<sup>6</sup> They then give him a test and place a garment before him. At his command, the garment is destroyed. He commands again, and the garment is entirely restored.

Marduk, fully armed, goes out to meet the ostensibly invincible Tiamat. "He let loose the Evil Wind, the rear guard, in her face. Tia-mat opened her mouth to swallow it. She let the Evil Wind in so that she could not close her lips. . . . Her inwards were distended and she opened her mouth wide. He let fly an arrow and pierced her belly. He tore open her entrails and slit her inwards."<sup>7</sup> Having killed her, "He split her into two like a dried fish: One half of her he set up and stretched out as the heavens. He stretched the skin and appointed a watch with the instruction not to let her waters escape."<sup>8</sup> With the other half of Tiamat, Marduk establishes the earth. He takes possession of the tablet of destinies, sets up the stars in constellations to define the twelve-month calendar, fixes the path of the sun, creates the moon, delineates the month into days, and arranges abodes for the gods. Marduk then kills Kingu and out of his blood creates mankind to serve the gods. Finally, he is lavishly praised by the gods. Humans are urged to remember Marduk's fifty names and rejoice in them, so that humanity's land shall be fruitful and it shall go well with them.

Significant commonalities exist between the *Enuma Elish* story and that of the biblical creation story from Gen. 1:1–2:3, both in content and sequence:

- At the beginning, nothing identifiable exists (no heavens and earth in *Enuma Elish*, only chaos in Genesis).

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- The first words mention both heaven and earth.
- Water is present as part of the stuff of creation. Apsu and Tiamat are watery beings. Water is mentioned in Gen. 1:2.
- Tiamat and the Hebrew word *tehom* (“deep water” in Gen. 1:2) are probably from the same linguistic root.
- Creation occurs through divine speech (the garment in the Babylonian story; all of creation in the biblical one).
- The creation of the heavens, the firmament to keep the upper waters in place, dry land, the luminaries, and humans all occurs in the same sequence.
- Divine rest follows.

However, the contrasts between the two stories are remarkably revealing:

- While creation occurs through violent, unjustified conflict in *Enuma Elish* (are the noisy activities of youngsters really a good reason to kill them?), the Bible depicts a universe in which creation takes place in complete harmony as God's commands bring cosmic order into being.<sup>9</sup> Not only is there no violence but the biblical ideal (Gen. 1:29–30) is that both animals and humans should be vegetarians.
- The gods are part of nature: they are born, have sex, give birth, and die. They are subject to nature. (Remember how the wind prevents Tiamat from closing her mouth?) The Bible's God is not only supernatural but He alone rules nature.
- The gods are subject to magic. In the Bible, magic can never affect God.
- Humans are created to serve the gods. In the Bible, God creates humans to rule the earth: “*fill the earth and subdue it; rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens, and all the animals that teem upon the earth*” (Gen 1:28).<sup>10</sup>
- In *Enuma Elish*, humans are made out of the blood of the evil god. In the Bible, the human is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27).
- The constant delineation in Genesis is that creation is “good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21) and that the totality is “very good” (1:31). That the word “good” here refers to ethics and not aesthetics (“a good painting,” “good-looking,” etc.) may be inferred from the

second verse of Genesis. The “wind” (Hebrew, *ruach*) of God “flutters” over the face of the waters.<sup>11</sup> The word “flutters” is used elsewhere in the Torah only of an eagle “fluttering” over its young (Deut. 32:11). Why does the Bible use this rare word to express what the “wind” of God is doing, when other words are commonly used about the movement of the wind (“moves,” “blows,” “carries”)? Apparently the intention in Genesis is to bring to mind a mother bird (the Hebrew verb here is in the feminine), that is, God’s spirit is hovering over the stuff of creation like a mother bird over her young.<sup>12</sup> Creation, as it were, is being born, and the goodness of that birth is best understood as ethical. (Ask any mother!)

- God’s day of rest at the end of creation is sanctified: *“And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work of creation that He had done”* (Gen. 2:3). God’s rest explicitly serves as a model in the Ten Commandments for requiring complete rest from work not only of the Israelites but even of their slaves and animals (Exod. 20:8–11).
  - *Remember the Sabbath day to make it holy. You shall work for six days and do all your labor, and the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. You shall not do any labor, you, and your son or your daughter, your male servant and your maid servant, and the alien who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*
- In other words, Divine rest in the Bible is in stark contrast to the gods’ rest in *Enuma Elish* where the result is the enslavement of humanity to the gods. That enslavement, in turn, is a consequence of the need of the gods for sustenance. As one who is supernatural, the biblical God has no such need. In the words of Psalm 50:10–13, *“For Mine is every animal of the forest, the beasts of a thousand mountains. . . . Were I hungry, I would not tell you, for Mine is the world and all it holds. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of he-goats?”*

The ethical emphasis in the biblical story, in contrast to the Babylonian, cannot be denied. Three major biblical ethical innovations appear:

- a. Humans are blessed by God to be good rulers, not slaves. The implication of the creation of the human in the image of God is to be rulers over the earth! Gen. 1:26 reads, *“And God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the heavens, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and all the teeming things that teem upon the earth.’”* Much ink has been spilled on the question of the specific image of God in which humans are made. Not enough attention, however, has been paid as to how the two halves of the verse fit.<sup>13</sup> It seems logical that the second half of the verse is intrinsically related to the first. That is, the “image of God” here is specifically one of ruler. As God rules over the universe, He gives humanity a fiefdom, the earth. And if humanity is to rule over the earth, then humans must do so in the fashion that God rules over the universe. Since the Bible understands God as a good ruler—indeed, the best possible ruler—then humans also must be good rulers. This viewpoint clarifies the succeeding commandment in verse 29: *“God said, ‘Behold, I have given you every seed-bearing plant that is upon the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit, for food.’”* Why are humans commanded to be vegetarians? Because the ethical purpose of God’s nonviolent creation is to lead to a world without bloodshed! Furthermore, humans are supposed to be good rulers over the animals, and a good ruler does not eat his subjects!
- b. The “image of God” refers to all men and women equally. Due to the basic biblical understanding of the patriarchal nature of human society, the biblical text does not depict a society in which men and women have equal rights in the legal and socio-economic systems.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the equality of the genders in Genesis 1:26–28, in the dialogues between the patriarchs and matriarchs in the Genesis narratives,<sup>15</sup> in the obligation of children to treat their parents equally in the Ten Commandments—*“Honor your father and your mother”* (Exodus

20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16)<sup>16</sup>—and in Leviticus 19:3—“*Each person shall revere his mother and his father,*” and in the view of Proverbs that both parents are seen as equal teachers of the child,<sup>17</sup> all indicate that the Bible did not justify the reality of social imbalance as due to men being innately superior to women. Further, no negative stereotypes are ever attached to women as a whole.<sup>18</sup> The fact that individual women, such as Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah, could be characterized and accepted as “prophetesses” is also evidence that women were not perceived in the Bible as inferior to men. So even if the Jewish Bible itself did not advocate a socioeconomic revolution in women’s rights, it created the foundation for such a revolution in the future. In similar fashion, Jefferson’s “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence eventually would be understood to encompass all humans.

- c. The Divinely established beginning of human rights—the Sabbath rest as the first law of equality in society. The third great ethical implication of this Genesis creation story is God’s rest at the end of creation that in the Ten Commandments serves as a model for human behavior. No scholar has succeeded in providing evidence for any weekly or regular day of rest in any other ancient society.<sup>19</sup> The Jewish Bible invented the weekend (which has been adopted, in one form or another, by the vast majority of the world). This concept of the Sabbath rest had a democratizing influence upon society. All were equal for one full day a week (and on certain holidays), and no one could require anybody else to work on that day. Even the king could not ask his lowliest servant to work on that day! The effect of such a desideratum on society cannot be minimized. Here the Bible establishes a weekly rest period as the first labor law: human rights for all members of society, along with the limitation of government.

Truly, as an old observation states, “in the Bible, man was created in the image of God; in Babylon, gods were created in the image of man.”<sup>20</sup> More than that, in Babylon humans were perceived as slaves. In the Bible, they are royalty.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Gilgamesh Epic's Flood Story*

The best known and most pervasive Mesopotamian flood story appears in Tablet XI of the Gilgamesh epic.<sup>22</sup> The epic's origins are generally dated to as early as 2000 BCE, and Sumerian versions probably predate that. The main theme of the epic is the hero Gilgamesh's search for immortality. Along his journeys, he hears of a couple, Utnapishtim and his wife, who have been granted immortality by the gods. Most of Tablet XI consists of Utnapishtim's report of how he survived the flood and attained immortality. The main lines of the story follow:

The great gods decide to flood the world (later in the story, blame for the flood is laid on both the goddess Ishtar and the god Enlil). In the Utnapishtim story, no reason is given for the deluge, although near the end of the story there is an allusion to some unstated human sin. However, in another well-known ancient Babylonian flood story, Atrahasis (another name for Utnapishtim), the deluge occurs for almost the same reason that we saw in *Enuma Elish*—the chief god, Enlil, is disturbed by the noise emanating from the increased human population and can't get any sleep (note again the capriciousness of the gods).<sup>23</sup>

The great gods make their decision (to be kept secret from man) in a council attended by the god Ea. Ea repeats this secret to a man who is apparently his favorite, Utnapishtim. That Utnapishtim is a favorite of Ea is a surmise; no reason for Ea's revelation is given in the text. Ea urges Utnapishtim to save himself by building a ship of equal length and width, and upon questioning Ea tells him to hide from the townsfolk what he is doing. Utnapishtim builds the ship as a cube using workmen and pitch, asphalt, and oil. When the ship is completed, Utnapishtim loads it with his silver and gold, his relatives, and whatever he had of "the seed of all living creatures"—the game and beasts of the field.

As it begins to rain, Utnapishtim enters the ship and closes the door. The storm is so strong that "even the gods were terror-stricken at the deluge. They fled and ascended to the heaven of Anu (the sky-god). The gods cowered like dogs." The goddess "Ishtar cried out like a woman in labor . . . [and] lamented . . . 'Because I commanded evil in the assembly of gods . . . how could I command war to destroy my people, for it

is I who give birth to these my people!' The . . . gods wept with her." The gods regret their hasty decision.

It rains for six days and nights and then abates on the seventh day. The ship lands on Mount Nisir. On the seventh day after landing, Utnapishtim sends out a dove, which finds no resting place and returns. He then sends out a swallow, and the same thing happens. At last he sends out a raven, which eats and does not return. Utnapishtim then leaves the boat and offers a sacrifice. "The gods smelled the sweet savor. The gods gathered like flies over the sacrificer." Ishtar lifts up the jewels around her neck as a reminder of the flood.

The instigator of the flood, Enlil, joins the gods late. Ishtar says accusingly, "Without reflection, he brought on the deluge and consigned my people to destruction." Enlil becomes angry when he sees that some mortals have escaped. One of the gods tattles on Ea. Ea defends himself by attacking Enlil: "How could you without reflection bring on this deluge? On the sinner lay his sin, on the transgressor lay his transgression." However, the story identifies no particular sinner or sinners, so Ea's after-the-fact ethical principle is only hypothetical. Ea then suggests that Enlil would have done better by bringing a lesser punishment on mankind, such as wild animals or pestilence. Ea further defends himself by prevaricating. He states that he did not reveal the gods' secret to Utnapishtim, but simply showed him a dream. Finally Enlil, having calmed down, makes Utnapishtim and his wife immortal.

### *The Noah Story*

The Noah story (Gen. 6:5–9:17) has both remarkable similarities to and key differences from the Utnapishtim story:

God sees that human selfishness has led to evil and violence, which have saturated and corrupted the earth and its creatures. God therefore regrets his decision to make humanity and decides to destroy it. However, He favors Noah due to the latter's righteousness. God explains His judgment to Noah and tells him to build an ark in the shape of a cube, to use pitch, and to put in a window. He also guarantees His covenant with Noah and instructs him to bring his family into the ark along with

pairs of all the animals and birds. Noah faithfully does all that God asks him, and God closes the door of the ark behind him.

It rains for forty days and nights, flooding the entire earth. God remembers Noah, and after the rain stops and the waters recede, the ark lands on Mount Ararat. Noah sends out first a raven and then a dove—twice. The second time it does not return. God commands Noah to leave the ark with his family and all the animals. Noah makes a sacrifice. God “*smells the sweet savor*” and determines never again to “*curse the earth because of man*.” He then blesses Noah and his children, telling them to “*be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth*” (like Gen. 1:28), but cautions them that anybody who kills a man must in turn be killed, “*because He made man in the image of God.*”<sup>24</sup>

Finally God makes an unconditional covenant with all humans and living beings that never again will a flood destroy all life upon the earth. The eternal sign of remembrance of this covenant is the rainbow, which symbolizes the Divine bow at rest (that is, no longer pointed at the earth).

The many parallels between the two stories, along with the similar sequence of events, leaves little doubt that one story has influenced the other. Again the Babylonian story originates long before the biblical one. However, what are notable here are not the similarities between the stories but the ideological and ethical differences (the Babylonian precedes the biblical):

- The gods wish to destroy all of humankind for a capricious reason (humans are disturbing their rest). God only acts to destroy humanity for a clear ethical reason—when its evil has become so great that violence has polluted the entire earth (Gen. 6:5, 11–13).<sup>25</sup>
- One god disobeys the divine council and saves his favorite. God saves Noah because of his righteousness (Gen. 6:9; 7:1).
- Some of the species of animals are saved by Utnapishtim. All animal species are saved by Noah.
- Utnapishtim closes the door to the ship. God closes the door to the ark.
- The gods, as natural beings, are terrified by the outpouring of nature. One is almost moved to pity the poor little goddies who, like frightened children, run up to the “attic” to escape the rising flood waters. On the other hand, the biblical supernatural Deity



controls all in serenity and is constantly solicitous of the ark's inhabitants (Gen. 6:18; 8:1, 17).

- The gods, not having eaten since the flood began, are starving (they “hover like flies around the sacrificer”). God, anthropomorphically, also “smells the sweet savor,” but that only prompts Him to ethical reflection (8:21–22). Unlike Enlil or Ishtar, His behavior is based upon justice. He does not regret His decision to flood the earth.<sup>26</sup> Now that He is starting humanity anew with a righteous man and his family and with the understanding of natural human selfishness, God guarantees that He will never again mete out such an all-encompassing catastrophe. To the contrary, He both establishes a permanent covenant with mankind and blesses humanity's future procreation in the same manner as Genesis 1, with the acquiescence that humanity's selfish nature demands carnivorous behavior and with laws to control that selfishness.<sup>27</sup> Thus God reminds Noah and his family that they are made in the image of God and that the taking of human life must be punished (9:5).

Here, too, as in the creation story, we see key biblical ethical innovations:

- God rules the world with justice: The immorality of the Babylonian gods is sharply contrasted with God's ethical behavior. The Noah story presents us with the ethical innovation of the sole Deity who rules the world in justice and who is a fitting recipient of Abraham's famous challenge and expectation, “*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?*” (Gen. 18:25).
- Evil is the result of human behavior, which in turn is the consequence of permitting free rein to human selfishness. Humans, however, have the free will to behave ethically. While ancient Near Eastern civilizations recognized that human behavior could be evil, their deities also could behave amorally and often did so. Further, the idea of demonic evil was common. In the Hebrew Bible, by contrast, the normative view was that human behavior alone was the source of evil, while God's moral essence was only good.<sup>28</sup> Thus for the first time humans were conceived as responsible for their own destiny, despite their innate, selfish character.

This selfishness is prominently displayed in two of the verses in the Noah story, Gen. 6:5,

*“And God saw that human evil was great upon the earth, and that every formation of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all day long,”*

and 8:21,

*“for the formation of the heart of man is evil from his youth.”*

In the Hebrew Bible, the heart is the seat of both thoughts and emotions. It is important to note that biblical Hebrew contains no purely abstract terms. Every idea, thought, or emotion has practical consequences. Any expression of thought, knowledge, and emotion is related to some sort of action. So “plan” may be a more accurate translation than “thought.”<sup>29</sup> If the text had wanted to say that humans are evil, it could have easily done so. However, the text goes out of its way to craft a complex formulation. It is not man who is evil but the “formation of the thoughts of his heart.” In other words, people are innately selfish.

This insight into human personality dovetails well with modern understandings of the mind-body dichotomy. A baby is a being totally in need and unable to fend for itself. It cries when it is hungry, tired, hurting, or wet. It cares not nor knows the strains it puts upon those two hulking servants known as parents. The baby, certainly innocently, is completely selfish. As the child grows older and becomes a toddler, for the first time he or she hears the word “no,” as the parents try to distinguish for the child the difference between “want” and “need.” It may be said that the entire transition of a child into a civilized being is based upon his or her ability to assimilate that differentiation. (Unfortunately, we all know people who think that every want they have must be fulfilled, and they don't care by whom, as long as they are provided with immediate gratification.)

So if humans are basically selfish, then how can they be expected to act with ethical responsibility? The biblical response is that their destiny is dependent solely upon their free will to decide between right and wrong. Free will is a basic assumption of the Bible, for every commandment, every instruction implies that people are free to obey or disobey. The example of Deut. 30:11–19 is instructive:<sup>30</sup>

*For this commandment which I enjoin upon you today is not too wondrous for you, nor beyond reach. It is not in the heavens that you should say, "Who can go up to the heavens and get it for us, and impart it to us that we may observe it?" Nor is it beyond the sea that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side. . . ." Rather, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. See I have set before you this day life and good and death and evil. . . . choose life in order that you and your offspring shall live.*

The Hebrew Bible posits that people have the capability to understand that obedience to the ethical God is both in their power and in their own best interest.<sup>31</sup>

- God's permanent, unconditional promise to never again bring such worldwide destruction gives humanity hope for the future.<sup>32</sup> The Divine covenant with Noah and his descendants (Genesis 9:8–17), confirmed for all time by the beautiful appearance of the rainbow, relieves humanity of the uncertainty of the preservation of the species. Unlike ancient Near Eastern polytheists, the ancient Israelite now knows that whatever catastrophes occur in the future are temporary and limited, but life will go on. It is not surprising, then, that the innate optimism of this passage will find prophetic usage as a model for God's redemption of Israel during the Babylonian exile (Isaiah 54:9–10),

*For this is to Me like the waters of Noah: As I swore that the waters of Noah would nevermore flood the earth, so I swear that I will not be angry with you or rebuke you. For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken, but My faithfulness shall never move from you, nor My covenant of peace be shaken—said the One who has mercy upon you, the Lord.*

### *What Are These Stories Doing in the Bible?*

Given the close relationships of the biblical creation and flood stories to those of Mesopotamia, one must ask, "What is the Bible's purpose in

retelling these stories?” The conclusion seems inescapable that the Bible is trying to “correct” the Mesopotamian accounts of creation and the flood that were circulating (in one version or another) throughout the ancient Near East. Indeed, a fragment of the Gilgamesh epic from the fourteenth century BCE was found near Megiddo in northern Israel.<sup>33</sup> So Genesis is claiming that it was not the amoral gods of nature who were responsible for creation and the flood. Rather, all was the work of the ethical God, creator of the cosmos. Indeed, the unprecedented biblical idea of the one and sole ethical Deity counteracts the possibility of conflicting divine interests, as seen in the Mesopotamian stories.<sup>34</sup> So, for example, the *tehom*, “deep water,” of creation is in pointed contrast to a brutally destructive goddess such as Tiamat.<sup>35</sup> The biblical stories are thus designed to refute and replace the polytheistic ones and to shape the moral consciousness of the ancient Israelites.<sup>36</sup>