

# The Hebrew Bible in Its Ancient Near Eastern Setting: Genesis 1-4 in Context

## Lecture 3 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rfst-145/lecture-3>

### Overview

In the first of a series of lectures on the book of Genesis, the basic elements of biblical monotheism are compared with Ancient Near Eastern texts to show a non-mythological, non-theogonic conception of the deity, a new conception of the purpose and meaning of human life, nature, magic and myth, sin and evil, ethics (including the universal moral law) and history. The two creation stories are explored and the work of Nahum Sarna is introduced.

#### 1. The Creation Story in *Enuma Elish*

[1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* Today what I'd like to do is begin our survey of Genesis 1 through 11, in order to illustrate the way that biblical writers--and precisely who we think they were and when they lived is something we'll talk about later--but the way biblical writers drew upon the cultural and religious legacy of the Ancient Near East that we've been talking about, its stories and its imagery, even as they transformed it in order to conform to a new vision of a non-mythological god. We're going to be looking at some of Kaufman's ideas as we read some of these texts.

[2] Now one of the scholars who's written quite extensively and eloquently on the adaptation of Ancient Near Eastern motifs in biblical literature is a scholar by the name of Nahum Sarna: I highly recommend his book. It appears on your optional reading list, and I'll be drawing very heavily on Sarna's work as well as the work of some other scholars who have spent a great deal of time comparing Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern stories, particularly these opening chapters, in order to see the features that they share and to wonder if perhaps there isn't after all a chasm that divides them quite deeply.

[3] In our consideration of Genesis 1 and 2, we first need to consider a Babylonian epic, an epic that is known by its opening words at the top of the column over there, *Enuma Elish*, which means 'when on high,' the opening words of this epic. And the epic opens before the formation of heaven and earth. Nothing existed except water,

and water existed in two forms. There's the primeval fresh water, fresh water ocean, which is identified with a male divine principle, a male god Apsu. You have a primeval salt water ocean which is identified with a female divine principle, Tiamat. Tiamat appears as this watery ocean but also as a very fierce dragon-like monster. I will be reading sections from Speiser's translation of *Enuma Elish*, part of the anthology put together by Pritchard [Pritchard 1950, 1955, 60-61]. It begins:

[4] When on high the heaven had not been named,  
Firm ground below had not been called by name,  
Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter,  
[And] Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,  
Their waters co-mingling as a single body;  
No reed hut had been matted, no marsh land had appeared,  
When no gods whatever had been brought into being,  
Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined--;  
Then it was that the gods were formed within them.

[5] So there's some sort of co-mingling or union of these male and female divine principals, a sexual union of Apsu and Tiamat that begins a process of generation and it produces first demons and monsters. Eventually gods will begin to emerge. Now, in time, Tiamat and Apsu are disturbed by the din and the tumult of these younger gods.

[6] The divine brothers banded together,  
They disturbed Tiamat as they surged back  
and forth,  
Yea, they troubled the mood of Tiamat  
By their hilarity in the Abode of Heaven.

...

Apsu, opening his mouth,  
Said unto resplendent Tiamat:  
'Their ways are verily loathsome unto me.  
By day I find no relief, nor repose by night.  
I will destroy, I will wreck their ways,  
That quiet may be restored. Let us have  
rest.'

...

Then answered Mummu, [Mummu Tiamat]  
giving counsel to Apsu;  
[Ill-wishing] and ungracious was Mummu's  
advice:

'Do destroy, my father, the mutinous ways.  
Then shalt thou have relief by day and rest  
by night.'

When Apsu heard this, his face grew  
radiant

Because of the evil he planned against the  
gods, his sons.

[7] So he decides to destroy the gods and he is  
thwarted by a water god named Ea, an earth-  
water god--sorry, he's a combination earth-  
water god--named Ea. And Apsu is killed.  
Tiamat now is enraged and she's bent on  
revenge. She makes plans to attack all of the  
gods with her assembled forces. The gods are  
terrified and they need a leader to lead them  
against her army and they turn to Marduk.

[8] Marduk agrees to lead them in battle against  
Tiamat and her assembled forces, her forces are  
under the generalship of Kingu, and he agrees to  
lead them against Tiamat and Kingu on  
condition that he be granted sovereignty, and he  
sets terms.

[9] His heart exulting, he said to his father:  
'Creator of the gods, destiny of the great  
gods,  
If I indeed, as your avenger,  
Am to vanquish Tiamat and save your  
lives,  
Set up the Assembly, proclaim supreme my  
destiny!  
...Let my word, instead of you, determine  
the fates.  
Unalterable shall be what I may bring into  
being,

Neither recalled nor changed shall be the  
command of my lips.'

[10] And the agreement is struck. And Marduk fells  
Tiamat in battle. It's a fierce battle and there is  
in fact a memorable passage that details her  
demise.

[11] In fury, Tiamat cried out aloud,  
To the roots her legs shook both together.  
...Then joined issue, Tiamat and Marduk...,  
They strove in single combat, locked in  
battle.

The lord [Marduk] spread out his net to  
enfold her,  
The Evil Wind, which followed behind, he  
let loose in her face.  
When Tiamat opened her mouth to consume  
him.

He drove in the Evil Wind that she close not  
her lips.  
As the fierce winds charged her belly,  
Her body was distended and her mouth was  
wide open.  
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.

[12] Well, what do you do with the carcass of a  
ferocious monster? You build a world, and  
that's what Marduk did. He takes the carcass, he  
slices it into two halves, rather like a clamshell,  
and out of the top half he creates the firmament,  
the Heaven. With the other half he creates the  
land, the Earth.

[13] He split her like a shellfish into two parts.  
Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky,  
Pulled down the bar and posted guards.  
He bade them to allow not her waters to escape.

[14] Alright, so he has used her body to press back  
her waters and that's what the ceiling is, the  
firmament, a firm sheet or structure that's  
holding back waters. When little holes come  
along, that's rain coming through. And the  
bottom part is the land, which is pressing down  
waters below. They come up every now and then  
in springs and rivers and seas and lakes and  
things.

[15] That is the created world, but he doesn't stop  
there and he creates various heavenly bodies at  
this point. 'He constructed stations for the great

gods'--the heavenly bodies were understood as stations for the great gods--

[16] Fixing their astral likenesses as constellations.  
He determined the year by designating the zones;  
He set up three constellations for each of the twelve months.  
...  
The moon he caused to shine, the night to him entrusting.

[17] And then the complaints begin to roll in. The gods are very unhappy because they have now been assigned specific duties in the maintenance of the cosmos. The moon god has to come up at night and hang around for a while and go back down. And the sun has to trundle across the sky, and they're pretty unhappy about this and they want relief from working and laboring at their assigned stations, and so Marduk accedes to this demand.

[18] He takes blood from the slain General Kingu, the leader of Tiamat's army, the rebels, and he fashions a human being with the express purpose of freeing the gods from menial labor.

[19] Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.  
I will establish a savage, 'man' shall be his name,  
Verily, savage man I will create.  
He shall be charged with the service of the gods  
That they might be at ease.  
...  
'It was Kingu who contrived the uprising,  
And made Tiamat rebel, and joined battle.'  
[So] They bound him, holding him before Ea.  
...[And] Out of [Kingu's] blood they fashioned mankind  
[And] Ea imposed the service and let free the gods.

[20] So the grateful gods now recognize the sovereignty of Marduk and they build him a magnificent shrine or temple in Babylon, pronounced 'Bab-el' which simply means gateway of the god, the gate of the god. Babylon means the city that is the gateway of the god. And a big banquet follows and Marduk is praised for all that he's accomplished, and his kingship is confirmed and *Enuma Elish* ends.

[21] It was the great national epic of the city of Babel or Babylon. It was recited during the New Year festival, which was the most important festival on the cultic calendar, and Nahum Sarna points out that it had four main functions which I've listed over here [on the blackboard]. The first of those functions is theogonic. It tells us the story of the birth of the gods, where they came from. Its second function is cosmological. It's explaining cosmic phenomena: the land, the sky, the heavenly bodies and so on, and their origins. It also serves a social and political function, because the portrait or picture of the universe or the world and its structure corresponds to and legitimates the structure of Babylonian society. The position and the function of the humans in the scheme of creation corresponds [to] or parallels precisely the position of slaves in Mesopotamian society. The position and function of Marduk at the top of the hierarchy of authority parallels and legitimates the Babylonian King, with others arranged within the pyramid that falls below.

[22] The epic also explains and mirrors the rise of Babel as one of the great cities in the Ancient Near East. It explains its rise to power, and Marduk's rise from being a city god to being at the head of the pantheon of a large empire. This also had a cultic function as well. According to Sarna and some other scholars, the conflict, that battle scene between Tiamat and Marduk which is described at some length, symbolizes the conflict or the battle between the forces of chaos and the forces of cosmos or cosmic order. And that's a perpetual conflict. Each year it's dramatized by the cycle of the seasons, and at a certain time of the year it seems that the forces of darkness and chaos are prevailing but each spring, once again, cosmic order and life return. So the epic served as a kind of script for the re-enactment of the primeval battle in a cultic or temple setting, and that re-enactment helped to ensure the victory of the forces of cosmos and life each year over the forces of chaos and death.

[23] So if we recall now, some of the things we were talking about last time and the theories of Kaufman, we might describe the worldview that's expressed by *Enuma Elish* in the following way, and this is certainly what Sarna does. We're going to consider first of all the view of the gods, the view of humans, and the view of the world: three distinct categories. First of all the gods. The gods are clearly limited. A god can make a plan and they're thwarted by

another god who then murders that god. They are amoral, some of them are nicer and better than others but they're not *necessarily* morally good or righteous. They emerge from this indifferent primal realm, this mixture of salt and sea waters, that is the source of all being and the source of ultimate power, but they age and they mature and they fight and they die. They're not wholly good, not wholly evil, and no one god's will is absolute.

[24] The portrait of humans that emerges is that humans are unimportant menials. They are the slaves of the gods, the gods have little reciprocal interest in or concern for them, and they create human beings to do the work of running the world. To some degree, they look upon them as slaves or pawns.

[25] The picture of the world that would seem to emerge from this story is that it is a morally neutral place. That means that for humans it can be a difficult and hostile place. The best bet perhaps is to serve the god of the day--whatever god might be ascendant--to earn his favor and perhaps his protection, but even that god will have limited powers and abilities and may in fact be defeated or may turn on his devotees.

## 2. *The Creation Stories in Genesis*

[26] Now if we turn to the creation story, the first of the two creation stories that are in the Bible, because in fact there are two creation stories with quite a few contradictions between them, but if we turn to the first creation story in Genesis 1 which concludes in Genesis 2:4...and, not for nothing, but everyone understands the function of the colon, right? So if you say Genesis 1:1, I mean chapter one, verse one. And then it goes to Genesis 2 chapter two, verse 4; left side of the colon is chapter, right side of the colon is verse, and every sentence has a verse number in the Bible; approximately [each] sentence.

[27] If we look now, we'll see a different picture emerging. The biblical god in this story, which I hope you have read, is presented as being supreme and unlimited. That's connected with the lack of mythology in Genesis 1 or rather the suppression of mythology. Okay, there's a distinction between the two and we'll have to talk about that, and I hope that you'll get into

some of that in section as well. I'm using the term mythology now the way we used it in the last lecture when we were talking about Kaufman's work. Mythology is used to describe stories that deal with the birth, the life events of gods and demi-gods, sometimes legendary heroes, but narrating a sequence of events. The biblical creation account is non-mythological because there is no biography of God in here. God simply is. There's no theogony, no account of his birth. There's no story by means of which he emerges from some other realm. In the Mesopotamian account, the gods themselves are created and they're not even created first, actually; the first generation of beings creates these odd demons and monsters, and gods only are created after several generations and the god of creation, Marduk, is actually kind of a latecomer in the picture.

[28] And this is also a good time for us to draw a distinction between mythology and myth. Kaufman and others have claimed that mythology is not in, certainly, this biblical story or if it's not there it's at least suppressed. But in contrast, myth is not mythology. Myth is a term we use to refer to a traditional story. It's often fanciful, it relates imaginatively events which it claims happened in historical time, not in a primordial realm before time, and a myth is designed to explain some kind of practice or ritual or custom or natural phenomenon. 'And that is why to this day,' you know, 'there...', I don't know, give me some myth that we all know of, you know, Paul Bunyan's axe handle is *something* in American nature which I now no longer remember! But myths are fanciful, imaginative tales that are trying to explain the existence of either a thing or a practice or even a belief...sometimes it's a story that's a veiled explanation of a truth, we think of parables, perhaps, or allegories. And so the claim that's often made is that the Bible doesn't have full-blown mythology. It doesn't focus on stories about the lives and deaths and interactions of gods, but it does certainly contain myths. It has traditional stories and legends, some quite fanciful, whose goal it is to explain how and why something is what it is.

[29] So returning to Genesis 1, we have an absence of theogony and mythology in the sense of a biography of God in this opening chapter and that means the absence of a metadivine realm. If you remember nothing else from this course and certainly for the mid-term exam, you should

remember the words ‘metadivine realm.’ There’s a little hint for you there. It’s an important concept. You don’t have to buy into it, you just have to know it, okay. But there is an absence of what Kaufman would call this metadivine realm, this primordial realm from which the gods emerge. We also, therefore, have no sense that God is imminent in nature or tied to natural substances or phenomena. So, the biblical god’s powers and knowledge do not appear to be limited by the prior existence of any other substance or power. Nature also is not divine. It’s demythologized, de-divinized, if that’s a word; the created world is not divine, it is not the physical manifestation of various deities, an earth god, a water god and so on. The line of demarcation therefore between the divine and the natural and human worlds would appear to be clear. So, to summarize, in Genesis 1, the view of god is that there is one supreme god, who is creator and sovereign of the world, who simply exists, who appears to be incorporeal, and for whom the realm of nature is separate and subservient. He has no life story, no mythology, and his will is absolute.

divine act: after this God can rest. And a sign of the humans’ importance is the fact that humans are said to be created in the image of God, and this occurs in Genesis 1:26, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ What might that mean? Looking at the continuation of the verse, of the passage, we have some idea because humans, we see, are going to be charged with specific duties towards, and rights over, the created world. And it seems, therefore, that the idea of being created in the image of God is connected with those special rights and duties. A creature is required who is distinguished in certain ways from other animals. How are humans distinguished from other animals? You could make a long list but it might include things like the capacity for language and higher thought or abstract thought, conscience, self-control, free-will. So, if those are the distinctive characteristics that earn the human being certain rights over creation but also give them duties towards creation, and the human is distinct from animals in being created in the image of God, there’s perhaps a connection: to be godlike is to perhaps possess some of these characteristics.

[30] Indeed, creation takes place through the simple expression of his will. ‘When God began to create heaven and earth,’ and there’s a parenthetical clause: ‘God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light.’ He expressed his will that there be light, and there was light and that’s very different from many Ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies in which there’s always a sexual principal at work in creation. Creation is always the result of procreation in some way, male and female principles combining. There’s a very similar Egyptian creation story actually in which the god Ptah just wills ‘let this be.’ It reads very much like Genesis 1 and yet even so there’s still a sexual act that follows the expression of those wills, so it is still different.

[31] Consider now the portrait of humans, humankind, that emerges from the biblical creation story in contrast to *Enuma Elish*. In Genesis, humans are important; in Genesis 1 humans are important. And in fact the biblical view of humans really emerges from both of the creation stories, when they’re read together--the story here in Genesis 1 and then the creation story that occupies much of 2 and 3. The two accounts are extremely different but they both signal the unique position and dignity of the human being. In the first account in Genesis 1, the creation of the human is clearly the climactic

[32] Now being created in the image of God carries a further implication. It implies that human life is somehow sacred and deserving of special care and protection. And that’s why in Genesis 9:6 we read, ‘Whoever sheds the blood of man, in exchange for that man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God was man created’ [Hayes’ translation]. [They] invoke that rationale from Genesis 1 in the absolute prohibition on murder. There is no way to compensate or punish someone for murder, it simply means forfeiture of one’s own life. That’s how sacred human life is. That’s the biblical view.

[33] So, the concept of the divine image in humans--that’s a powerful idea, that there is a divine image in humans, and that breaks with other ancient conceptions of the human. In Genesis 1, humans are not the menials of God, and in fact Genesis expresses the antithesis of this. Where in *Enuma Elish*, service was imposed upon humans so the gods were free--they didn’t have to worry about anything, the humans would take care of the gods--we have the reverse; it’s almost like a polemical inversion in Genesis 1. The very first communication of God to the human that’s created is concern for that creature’s physical needs and welfare. He says in Genesis 1:28-29, he blesses them, ‘God

blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky and all the living things that creep on earth.'" In Genesis 2:16 after the creation story there, 'And the Lord God commanded the man saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat.'" His first thought is what are you going to eat? I want you to be fruitful and multiply, and so on.

[34] So, humans in Genesis are not presented as the helpless victims of blind forces of nature. They're not the menials and servants of capricious gods. They are creatures of majesty and dignity and they are of importance to, objects of concern for, the god who has created them. At the same time, and I think very much in line with the assertion that humans are created in the image of God, humans are not, in fact, gods. They are still creatures in the sense of created things and they are dependent on a higher power. So in the second creation story beginning in Genesis 2:4, we read that the first human is formed when God fashions it from the dust of the earth or clay. There are lots of Ancient Near Eastern stories of gods fashioning humans from clay; we have depictions of gods as potters at a potter's wheel just turning out lots of little humans. But the biblical account as much as it borrows from that motif again takes pains to distinguish and elevate the human. First, the fashioning of the human from clay is--again--in that story, it's the climactic or, well not quite climactic, it's the penultimate, I suppose, moment in the story. The final climactic act of creation is the creation of the female from the male. That is actually the peak of creation, what can I say [laughter]? Second and significantly, not an afterthought, it's the peak of creation! Second and significantly, God himself blows the breath of life into Adam's nostrils. So while he fashions this clay figure, this carcass actually--and then breathes life, his own life into it. So, in the second creation story just as in the first, there's a sacred imprint of some kind that distinguishes the human creation from the other creatures. So this idea that the human being is a mixture of clay, he's molded from clay, but enlivened by the breath of God, captures that paradoxical mix of sort of earthly and divine elements, dependence and freedom that marks the human as unique.

[35] It should further be noted that in the first creation account, there's no implication that man and woman are in any kind of unequal

relationship before God. The Hebrew word that designates the creature created by God is the word *adam*. It's actually not a proper name, small a; it is *adam*, it's a generic term. It simply means human or more precisely earthling because it comes from the word *adamah*, which means ground or earth. So this is *adam*, an earthling, a thing that has been taken from the earth. Genesis 1 states that God created *the adam*, with the definite article: this is not a proper name. God created the *adam*, the earthling, 'male and female created he them.' That's a line that has vexed commentators for centuries and has spawned many very fascinating interpretations. And you will be reading some of those in the readings that are assigned for section discussion next week and I think having a great deal of fun with them. Moreover, this earthling that seems to include both male and female, is then said to be in the image of God. So that suggests that the ancient Israelites didn't conceive of God as gendered or necessarily gendered. The *adam*, the earthling, male and female was made in the image of God. Even in the second creation account, it's not clear that the woman is subordinate to the man. Many medieval Jewish commentators enjoy pointing out that she was not made from his head so that she not rule over him, but she wasn't made from his foot so that she would be subservient to him; she was made from his side so that she would be a companion to him. And the creation of woman, as I said, is in fact the climactic creative act in the second Genesis account. With her formation, creation is now complete. So, the biblical creation stories individually and jointly present a portrait of the human as the pinnacle and purpose of creation: godlike in some way, in possession of distinctive faculties and characteristics, that equip them for stewardship over the world that God has created.

[36] Finally, let's talk about the image of the world that emerges from the creation story in Genesis 1. In these stories, there's a very strong emphasis on the essential goodness of the world. Recall some of Kaufman's ideas or categories again. One of the things he claims is that in a polytheistic system, which is morally neutral, where you have some primordial realm that spawns demons, monsters, gods, evil is a permanent necessity. It's just built into the structure of the cosmos because of the fact that all kinds of divine beings, good and bad, are

generated and locked in conflict. So the world isn't essentially good in its nature or essentially bad. Note the difference in Genesis. After each act of creation what does God say? 'It is good,' right? Genesis 1 verse 4, verse 10, verse 12, verse 18, verse 21, verse 25... and after the creation of living things, the text states that God found all that he made to be very good. So there are seven occurrences of the word 'good' in Genesis. That's something you want to watch for. If you're reading a passage of the Bible and you're noticing a word coming up a lot, count them. There's probably going to be seven or ten, they love doing that. The sevenfold or the tenfold repetition of a word--such a word is called a *leitwort*, a recurring word that becomes thematic. That's a favorite literary technique of the biblical author. So we read Genesis 1 and we hear this recurring--'and it was good... and he looked and it was good... and he looked and it was good,' and we have this tremendous rush of optimism. The world is good; humans are important; they have purpose and dignity.

[37] The biblical writer is rejecting the concept of a primordial evil, a concept found in the literature of the Ancient Near East. So for the biblical writer of this story, it would seem that evil is not a metaphysical reality built into the structure of the universe. So all signs of a cosmic battle, or some primordial act of violence between the forces of chaos and evil and the forces of cosmos and good are eliminated. In *Enuma Elish*, cosmic order is achieved only after a violent struggle with very hostile forces. But in Genesis, creation is not the result of a struggle between divine antagonists. God imposes order on the demythologized elements that he finds: water, but it's just water. Let's look a little bit more closely at Genesis 1 to make this case.

### 3. Creation as God Imposing Order on the World

[38] The chapter begins with a temporal clause which is unfortunately often translated 'In the beginning,' which implies that what follows is going to give you an ultimate account of the origins of the universe. You sort of expect something like, 'In the beginning, God created heaven and earth,' like this was the first thing to happen in time. So, that translation causes people to believe that the story is giving me an account of the first event in time forward; but

it's actually a bad translation. The Hebrew phrase that starts the book of Genesis is pretty much exactly like the phrase that starts *Enuma Elish*: 'When on high,' there was a whole bunch of water and stuff, then suddenly this happened--very similar in the Hebrew. It's better translated this way: 'When God began creating the heavens and the earth... he said, 'Let there be light and there was light.' And that translation suggests that the story isn't concerned to depict the ultimate origins of the universe. It's interested in explaining how and why the world got the way it is. When God began this process of creating the heaven and the earth, and the earth was unformed and void, and his wind was on the surface of the deep and so on, he said, 'Let there be light and there was light.' So, we find that, in fact, something exists; it has no shape. So creation in Genesis 1 is not described as a process of making something out of nothing; that's a notion referred to as creation *ex nihilo*, creation of something out of utter nothing. It's instead a process of organizing pre-existing materials and imposing order on those chaotic materials.

[39] So we begin with this chaotic mass and then there's the *ruah* of God. Now sometimes this word 'ruah' is kind of anachronistically translated as 'spirit'; it really doesn't mean that in the Hebrew Bible. In later levels of Hebrew it will start to mean that, but it is really 'wind,' *ruah* is wind. So: 'when God began to create heaven and earth--the earth being unformed and void,' the wind of God sweeping over the deep. Remember the cosmic battle between Marduk and Tiamat: Marduk the storm god, who released his wind against Tiamat, the primeval deep, the primeval water, representing the forces of chaos. And you should immediately hear the great similarities. Our story opens with a temporal clause: 'When on high,' 'when God began creating'; we have a wind that sweeps over chaotic waters, just like the wind of Marduk released into the face of Tiamat, and the Hebrew term is particularly fascinating. In fact, the text says 'and there is darkness on the face of deep.' No definite article. The word 'deep' is a proper name, perhaps. The Hebrew word is Tehom. It means 'deep' and etymologically it's exactly the same word as Tiamat: the 'at' ending is just feminine. So Tiam, Tehom--it's the same word, it's a related word. So, the wind over the face of deep, now it's demythologized, so it's as if they're

invoking the story that would have been familiar and yet changing it. So the storyteller has actually set the stage for retelling the cosmic battle story that everyone knew. That was a story that surely was near and dear to the hearts of many ancient Israelites and Ancient Near Eastern listeners, so all the elements are there for the retelling of that story. We've got wind, we've got a primeval chaotic, watery mass or deep, and then surprise, there's no battle. There's just a word, 'let there be light.' And the Ancient Near Eastern listener would prick up their ears: where's the battle, where's the violence, where's the gore? I thought I knew this story. So something new, something different was being communicated in this story.

[40] And don't think the biblical writers didn't know this motif of creation following upon a huge cosmic battle, particularly a battle with a watery, dragon-like monster. There are many poetic passages and poetic sections of the Bible that contain very clear and explicit allusions to that myth. It was certainly known and told to Israelite children and part of the culture. We have it mentioned in Job; we have it mentioned in the following psalm, Psalm 74:12-17: 'O God, my king from of old, who brings deliverance throughout the land;/it was You who drove back the sea with Your might, who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters;/it was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan,' a sea monster. Other psalms also contain similar lines. Isaiah 51:9-10: 'It was you that hacked Rahab'--this is another name of a primeval water monster--'in pieces,/ [It was you] That pierced the Dragon./It was you that dried up the Sea,/The waters of the great deep.' These were familiar stories, they were known in Israel, they were recounted in Israel. They were stories of a god who violently slays the forces of chaos, represented as watery dragons, as a prelude to creation. And the rejection of this motif or this idea in Genesis 1 is pointed and purposeful. It's demythologization. It's removal of the creation account from the realm and the world of mythology. It's pointed and purposeful. It wants us to conceive of God as an uncontested god who through the power of his word or will creates the cosmos.

[41] And he follows that initial ordering by setting up celestial bodies, just as Marduk did. They're not in themselves, however, divinities: they are merely God's creations. In the biblical text, the firmament appears to be a beaten, the word in

Hebrew is something that's been beaten out, like a metal worker would hammer out a thin sheet of metal. And that's what the firmament [pointing at blackboard] this by the way is the portrait of the world; it looks a lot like my map of the Ancient Near East, but it's not. So you have this firmament, which is beaten back to hold back primeval waters that are pressing in; you have land which is holding down the waters here. We inhabit the bubble that's created in that way. That's the image in *Enuma Elish* and it's the image of Genesis 1. And later on when God gets mad he's going to open up some windows up here, right, and it's all going to flood. That's what's going to happen in the Flood. That's the image of the world that you're working with. So, the firmament is sort of like an inverted bowl, a beaten-out sheet of metal that's an inverted bowl, and again as I said: echoes of *Enuma Elish*, where you have Marduk dividing the carcass of Tiamat, like a shellfish. He separates the waters above and the waters below and creates this space that will become the inhabited world.

[42] Now the story of creation in Genesis 1 takes place over seven days, and there's a certain logic and parallelism to the six days of creating. And I've written those parallels here [on the blackboard]. There's a parallel between day one, day four; day two and five; day three and six. On day one, light and dark are separated. On day four, the heavenly bodies that give off light by day or night are created. On day two, the firmament is established. That water is separated, that bubble has opened up so we've got the sky created and we've got the waters collected in certain areas down here, and we've got sky. On day five, the inhabitants of the skies and the waters are created, birds and fish. On day three, land is formed to make dry spots from the waters below. So you have land being formed on day three, it's separated out from the sea and on day six you have the creation of land animals. But days three and six each have an extra element, and the fact that the first elements here pair up nicely with each other suggests that the extra element on day three and the extra element on day six might also be paired in some important way. On day three, vegetation is produced, is created, and on day six humans are created after the creation of the land animals. So the implication is that the vegetation is for the humans. And indeed, it's expressly stated by God that humans are to be given every fruit



bearing tree and seed bearing plant, fruits and grains for food. That's in Genesis 1:29. That's what you are going to eat. There's no mention of chicken or beef, there's no mention made of animals for food. In Genesis 1:30, God says that the animals are being given the green plants, the grass and herbs, for food. In other words, there should be no competition for food. Humans have fruit and grain-bearing vegetation, animals have the herbage and the grasses. There is no excuse to live in anything but a peaceful co-existence. Therefore, humans, according to Genesis 1, were created vegetarian, and in every respect, the original creation is imagined as free of bloodshed and violence of every kind. 'And God saw... [that it was] very good.'

[43] So on the seventh day, God rested from his labors and for this reason he blessed the seventh day and declared it 'holy.' This is a word we'll be coming back to in about five or six lectures, talking about what it is to be holy, but right now it essentially means it belongs to God. If something's holy, it doesn't belong to you, it belongs to God. And part of the purpose of this story is to explain the origin of the observance of the Sabbath, the seventh day, as a holy day. So this is a myth in the sense that it's explaining some custom or ritual among the people.

#### *4. Allusion to and Resonances of Ancient Near Eastern Themes*

[44] So Israelite accounts of creation contain clear allusions to and resonances of Ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies; but perhaps Genesis 1 can best be described as demythologizing what was a common cultural heritage. There's a clear tendency in this story towards monotheism in the abstract terms that Kaufman described. A transformation of widely known stories to express a monotheistic worldview is clearly important to these particular biblical writers, and we'll be talking later about who these writers were who wrote Genesis 1 as opposed to Genesis 2 and 3. But these stories rival, and implicitly polemicize against, the myths or mythologies of Israel's neighbors. They reject certain elements but they almost reject them by incorporating them. They incorporate and modify them.

[45] So, one of the things I've tried to claim in describing Genesis 1 is that in this story evil is

represented not as a physical reality. It's not built into the structure of the world. When God rests he's looking at the whole thing, [and] it's very good, it's set up very well. And yet we know that evil is a condition of human existence. It's a reality of life, so how do we account for it? And the Garden of Eden story, I think, seeks to answer that question. It actually does a whole bunch of things, but one thing it does, I think, is try to answer that question, and to assert that evil stems from human behavior. God created a good world, but humans in the exercise of their moral autonomy, they have the power to corrupt the good. So, the Garden of Eden story communicates what Kaufman would identify as a basic idea of the monotheistic worldview: that evil isn't a metaphysical reality, it's a moral reality. What that means ultimately is that evil lacks inevitability, depending on your theory of human nature, I suppose, and it also means that evil lies within the realm of human responsibility and control.

[46] Now Nahum Sarna, the scholar whose work I referred to earlier, he points out that there's a very important distinction between the Garden of Eden story and its Ancient Near Eastern parallels. He says the motif of a tree of life or a plant of life or a plant of eternal youth, that's a motif that we do find in other Ancient Near Eastern literatures, in Ancient Near Eastern myth and ritual and iconography, and the quest for such a plant, or the quest for immortality that the plant promises, that these were primary themes in the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh. We'll have occasion to talk in great depth about this story next time. But by contrast, Sarna says, we haven't as yet uncovered a parallel in Ancient Near Eastern literature to the biblical tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It's not the tree of knowledge, it's the tree of the knowledge of good and evil--it's a longer phrase. What is the significance of the fact that the Bible mentions both of these trees? It mentions a tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; and then goes on to just focus on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It virtually ignores the tree of life until we get to the end of the story, and that's important. But this tree of life which seems to be central to many other myths of this time and this part of the world... Sarna argues that the subordinate role of the tree of life signals the biblical writer's dissociation from a preoccupation with immortality. The biblical

writer insists that the central concern of life is not mortality but morality. And the drama of human life should revolve not around the search for eternal life but around the moral conflict and tension between a good god's design for creation and the free will of human beings that can corrupt that good design.

[47] The serpent tells Eve that if she eats the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, she will become like God. And he's really not telling a lie, in a certain respect. And God knows that, that human beings will become like God knowing good and evil. It's one of the things about God: he knows good and evil and has chosen the good. The biblical writer asserts of this god that he is absolutely good. The humans will become like gods, knowing good and evil, not because of some magical property in this fruit; and it's not an apple, by the way, that's based on an interesting mistranslation. Do we know what the fruit is? No, I don't think we really know but it's definitely not an apple. That comes from the Latin word which sounds like apple, the word *malum* for evil is close to the Latin word for apple which if anybody knows... whatever [see note 1]. And so iconography began to represent this tree as an apple tree and so on, but it's not an apple tree. I don't know if they had apple trees back then, there! But it's not because of some magical property in the fruit itself, but because of the action of disobedience itself. By choosing to eat of the fruit in defiance of God--this is the one thing God says, 'Don't do this! You can have everything else in this garden,' presumably, even, you can eat of the tree of life, right? It doesn't say you can't eat of that. Who's to say they couldn't eat of that and just live forever? Don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

[48] Student: Is there any sort of an explanation for why God says you can't eat of this tree when he's given all of the fruit bearing trees...

[49] Professor Christine Hayes: There have been about--how many thousands of years of speculation--on what's going on and you're going to be reading a wonderful and interesting gnostic interpretation. And so, yep, there's been lots of interesting... and this is all in the realm of literary interpretation: read the story closely, see if you can figure out what's going on here. Why does God do this? Isn't this, in a way, putting an obstacle in front of someone almost ensuring they're going to trip over it? That's

been an argument that some commentators have made. Others see it differently. So, keep that thought, take it to section and read Elaine Pagels' work and some of the other interpretations. That's something that people have struggled with for centuries. Where does this come from? Who's the serpent and what's he doing there? They're all very important.

[50] It is true--and maybe this will go a little bit of the distance towards answering it--it's by eating of the fruit in defiance of God, human beings learn that they were able to do that, that they are free moral agents. They find that out. They're able to choose their actions in conformity with God's will or in defiance of God's will. So paradoxically, they learn that they have moral autonomy. Remember, they were made in the image of God and they learn that they have moral autonomy by making the defiant choice, the choice for disobedience. The argument could be made that until they once disobeyed, how would they ever know that? And then you might raise all sorts of questions about, well, was this part of God's plan that they ought to know this and should know this, so that their choice for good actually becomes meaningful. Is it meaningful to choose to do the good when you have no choice to do otherwise or aren't aware that you have a choice to do otherwise? So, there's a wonderful thirteenth-century commentator that says that God needed creatures who could choose to obey him, and therefore it was important for Adam and Eve to do what they did and to learn that they had the choice not to obey God so that their choice for God would become endowed with meaning. That's one line of interpretation that's gone through many theological systems for hundreds of years.

[51] So the very action that brought them a godlike awareness of their moral autonomy was an action that was taken in opposition to God. So we see then that having knowledge of good and evil is no guarantee that one will choose or incline towards the good. That's what the serpent omitted in his speech. He said if you eat of that fruit, of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you'll become like God. It's true in one sense but it's false in another. He sort of omitted to point out... he implies that it's the power of moral choice alone that is godlike. But the biblical writer will claim in many places that true godliness isn't simply power, the power to do what one wishes. True godliness means

imitation of God, the exercise of one's power in a manner that is godlike, good, life-affirming and so on. So, it's the biblical writer's contention that the god of Israel is not only all-powerful but is essentially and necessarily good. Those two elements cannot become disjoined, they must always be conjoined in the biblical writer's view. And finally, humans will learn that the concomitant of their freedom is responsibility. Their first act of defiance is punished harshly. So they learn in this story that the moral choices and actions of humans have consequences that have to be borne by the perpetrator.

[52] So, just to sum up, Sarna sees in the Garden of Eden story, as I've just explained it, a message that's in line with Kaufman's thesis about the monotheistic world view. He says this story conveys the idea that, '...evil is a product of human behavior, not a principal inherent in the cosmos. Man's disobedience is the cause of the human predicament. Human freedom can be at one and the same time an omen of disaster and a challenge and opportunity' [Sarna 1966, 27-28]. We've looked at Genesis 2 and 3 a little bit as an attempt to account for the problematic and paradoxical existence of evil and suffering in a world created by a good god, and that's a problem monotheism really never completely conquers, but other perspectives on this story are possible. And when we come back on Monday, we're going to look at it from an entirely different point of view and compare it with the Epic of Gilgamesh.

[53] Again, I'm sorry about sections, we will continue to communicate with you. If you did not fill out a card last time, please come and give us your email address.

[54] [end of transcript]

## Notes

[55] 1. The identical word *malum* in Latin also means apple.

## References

[56] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from 'Tanakh: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text.' Copyright (c) 1985 by [The Jewish Publication Society](#). Single copies of the JPS biblical citations cited within the transcripts can be reproduced for personal and non-commercial uses only.

[57] Sarna, Nahum. 1966. *Understanding Genesis*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary.

[58] Speiser, E. A., trans. 1950, 1955. The Creation Epic. In *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 60-61. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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