

GENESIS 1 AND ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CREATION MYTHS

Gordon H. Johnston

FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY biblical scholars have generally read the Hebrew creation account in Genesis 1 in the light of parallels from Mesopotamia (particularly *Enuma Elish*),¹ and more recently Ugaritic literature.² Both describe divine conflict with the mythical waters of chaos. Despite its popularity there are two fundamental problems with suggesting that *Enuma Elish* pro-

Gordon H. Johnston is Associate Professor, Department of Old Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas. This article represents section 1 of a more extensive treatment of this subject in Gordon Johnston, "Genesis 1:1-2:3 in the Light of Ancient Egyptian Creation Myths: Context and Contextualization of Ancient Egyptian Cosmogony," presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (Washington, DC: November 2006).

¹ For example see Hermann Gunkel, "The Influence of Babylonian Mythology upon the Biblical Creation Story," in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. Bernard Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 25–52. W.G. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis," *Journal of Theological Studies* 16 (1965) 285–300; A. R. Millard, "A New Babylonian 'Genesis Story,'" *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967) 3–18; Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Polemical Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974) 81–102; idem, "The Significance of the Cosmology of Genesis 1 in Relation to Ancient Near Eastern Parallels," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 10 (1972) 1–14; John H. Walton, "Cosmology," in *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels Between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 19–42. Also Joan Heuer DeLano, "The 'Exegesis' of 'Enuma Elish' and Genesis 1–1875 to 1975: A Study in Interpretation," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, 1985.

² Many studies note the similarities between Ugaritic myths and the Bible (e.g., L. Fisher, "Creation at Ugarit and in the Old Testament," *Vetus Testamentum* 15 [1965]: 313–24; Richard J. Clifford, "Cosmogonies in the Ugaritic Texts and in the Bible," *Orientalia* 53 [1984]: 202–19; J. C. L. Gibson, "The Theology of the Ugaritic Baal Cycle," *Orientalia* 53 [1984]: 203–19; and J. H. Groenbaek, "Baal's Battle with Yam: A Canaanite Creation Fight," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33 [1985]: 27–44). While some Ugaritic texts were cosmological in nature (i.e., describing the operation or structure of the universe in a mythic manner), it is debatable if any were cosmogonic (i.e., explaining the origin of the universe). See especially B. Margalit, "The Ugaritic Creation Myth: Fact or Fiction?" *Ugarit-Forschungen* 13 (1981): 137–45; and Marvin H. Pope, *El in the Ugaritic Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1955).

vides the conceptual background of the Genesis 1 creation account.

First, although *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1 each begin by mentioning the original primordial waters from which creation would eventually emerge, the etymological connection between the name *tiāmat*, "Tiamat," and the Hebrew noun *tēhôm*, "watery deep," remains a matter of debate.³

Second, more significantly there is no hint of divine conflict between God and the primordial waters in Genesis 1.⁴

Nearly a century ago two biblical scholars—A. H. Sayce and A. S. Yahuda—drew attention to parallels between Genesis 1 and Egyptian creation myths, which they claimed were tighter than the putative Mesopotamian parallels.⁵ However, their work fell on deaf ears for several reasons: (1) scholars' fixation on the Mesopotamian materials, which were more widely known and accessible; (2) critical assumptions that Genesis 1 should be classified as P, dated to the exilic or postexilic period, and assigned to a Babylonian provenance; (3) failure to take seriously the biblical tradition of Hebrew origins in the land of Egypt; and (4) general lack of familiarity with the Egyptian language and literature dealing with creation.⁶ Nevertheless a growing number of contemporary biblical scholars have begun a groundswell of support for an Egyptian background.⁷

³ For example Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Polemical Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974): 81–102.

⁴ Jon Levenson argues that when Genesis 1 opens, the cosmic battle has already been won, or that God is simply presented as superior to Marduk in that He does not have to fight against the waters that are impotent before Him (*Creation and the Persistence of Evil* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988], 66). However, this assumes the conclusion before arguing the point.

⁵ A. H. Sayce, "The Egyptian Background of Genesis 1," in *Studies Presented to F. Ll. Griffith* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1932), 419–23. This contrasts with his earlier essay in which he advocated a Babylonian background for Genesis 1 in "Cosmogonies," in *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religion of the Ancient Babylonians*, Hibbert Lectures (London: Williams and Norgate, 1887), 367–412. Abraham Shalom Yahuda, *The Language of the Pentateuch in Its Relation to Egyptian* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 101–294; and idem, *The Accuracy of the Bible* (London: W. Heinemann, 1934). Yahuda's view was largely ignored because he overstated his case for the Egyptian influence in the Pentateuch and tended to pan-Egyptianize the Hebrew text. Nevertheless a number of his suggestions have proven legitimate.

⁶ James K. Hoffmeier, "Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 and 2 in Light of Egyptian Cosmology," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 15 (1983): 40–42.

⁷ R. Kilian, "Gen 1:2 und die Urgötter von Hermopolis," *Vetus Testamentum* 16 (1965): 420–38; W. H. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift* (Neukirchen: Neukirchen Verlag, 1967); Viktor Nötter, *Biblischer Schöpfungsbericht und Ägyptische Schöpfungsmythen* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1974); Cyrus H. Gordon, "Khnum and El," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 28 (1982): 203–14; Hoffmeier,

Ironically a significant number of Egyptologists have been suggesting this very relationship for years,⁸ but their observations largely went unnoticed by those who rarely venture into Egyptology or the influence of Egypt on ancient Israel. What follows is a survey of some of the more important connections between Genesis 1 and Egyptian cosmogonies, noting both striking similarities and stark differences.⁹ This article makes no claim to original research in the Egyptian literature itself. Rather, it simply summarizes some of the more important conclusions of recent scholarship in primary Egyptian sources and attempts to make these more accessible to a broader audience.¹⁰

“Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 and 2 in Light of Egyptian Cosmology,” 39–49; John D. Currid, “An Examination of the Egyptian Background of the Genesis Cosmogony,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 35 (1991): 18–40; Donald B. Redford, “Four Great Origin Traditions,” in *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 396–400; Richard J. Clifford, “Egyptian Creation Accounts,” in *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1994), 101–7; James E. Atwell, “An Egyptian Source for Genesis 1,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 51 (2000): 441–77; Hans-Peter Hasenfratz, “Patterns of Creation in Ancient Egypt,” in *Creation in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 174–78; John Strange, “Some Notes on Biblical and Egyptian Theology,” in *Egypt, Israel, and the Ancient Mediterranean World: Studies in Honor of Donald B. Redford*, ed. Gary N. Knoppers and Antoine Hirsch (Boston: Brill, 2004), 345–58.

Mention should also be made of the brief reference to possible Egyptian background to Genesis 1 in Richard J. Williams, “Egypt and Israel,” in *The Legacy of Egypt*, ed. J. R. Harris (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 288; Robert Luyster, “Wind and Water: Cosmogonic Symbolism in the Old Testament,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93 (1982): 1–10; John H. Walton, “Cosmology,” in *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 23–24, 32–34.

See also Tony L. Shetter, “Genesis 1-2 in Light of Ancient Egyptian Creation Myths,” unpublished paper presented at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (Washington, DC: November 2006).

⁸ For example Vincent Arieh Tobin, “Myths,” “Creation Myths,” and “Mythological Texts,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Donald J. Redford et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:459–69.

⁹ For discussions of the comparative method, see Helmer Ringgren, “Remarks on the Method of Comparative Mythology,” in Hans Goedicke, ed., *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971) 407–11; Tigay, Jeffrey H. “On Evaluating Claims of Literary Borrowing” in M. Cohen, D. Snell, and D. Weisberg, eds., *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William H. Hallo* (Bethesda, MA: CDL Press, 1993): 250–255; William W. Hallo, “Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Their Relevance for Biblical Exegesis,” in William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture, Volume 1: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000) xxiii–xxviii.

¹⁰ I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to James K. Hoffmeier, professor of Egyptology and Biblical Studies, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, for his valu-

BASIC FEATURES IN EGYPTIAN CREATION TRADITION

Egyptian religion featured four major versions of the same basic mythic cycle of creation, each represented by rival sanctuaries: Heliopolis, Hermopolis, Memphis, and Thebes.¹¹ These creation mythologies are reflected in four major Egyptian cosmological texts: the *Pyramid Texts*, from the Old Kingdom period (Dynasties 4–5: ca. 2613–2345 B.C.);¹² the *Coffin Texts* from the Middle Kingdom Period (Dynasty 12: ca. 1991–1786 B.C.);¹³ the *Book of the Dead* from the New Kingdom period (Dynasties 18–19: ca. 1570–1220 B.C.);¹⁴ and the so-called *Shabaka Stone*, preserved in a text from

able personal interaction in helping to clarify several aspects of the Egyptian creation myths; and Tony L. Shetter, Ph.D. student, Dallas Theological Seminary, for our many helpful conversations when we both embarked on our initial journey into the Egyptian creation mythologies.

¹¹ For discussions of ancient Egyptian mythology and cosmogony, see Donald Redford, *The Ancient Gods Speak: A Guide to Egyptian Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); George Hart, *Egyptian Myths* (London: British Museum Publications, 1990); Vincent Arieh Tobin, *Theological Principles of Egyptian Religion* (New York: Lang, 1989); James P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts*, Yale Egyptological Studies 2 (New Haven: Yale University, 1988); Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); Sir E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Studies in Egyptian Mythology (New York: Dover Publications, 1969); For convenient essays, see Vincent Arieh Tobin, "Creation Myths," in Donald J. Redford, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 2:464–72; idem, "Mythological Texts," in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, 2:459–72; idem, "Mytho-Theology in Ancient Egypt," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 25 (1988) 169–83; Jacobus van Dijk, "Myth and Mythmaking in Ancient Egypt," in Jack M. Sasson, ed. et al, *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1995) 3:1697–1709; Leonard Lesko, "Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology," in Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Religion in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) 88–122.

¹² Raymond Oliver Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts, Translated into English by R. O. Faulkner: Supplement of Hieroglyphic Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); Samuel A.B. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952); James P. Allen, *The Cosmology of the Pyramid Texts*, Yale Egyptological Seminar (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). For a convenient translation of selected sections, see Robert K. Ritmer, "Pyramid Texts," 55–57 in William H. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture, Volume 2: Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000).

¹³ Raymond Oliver Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I–III* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1973–78). For a convenient translation of selected sections, see Robert K. Ritmer, "Coffin Texts," 57–58 in William H. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture, Volume 2: Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000).

¹⁴ Raymond Oliver Faulkner, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, Revised edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani* (London: British Museum, 1895; reprint edition, New York:

king Shabaka (716–702 B.C.), but dating to the Old Kingdom (Dynasty 5: ca. 2494–2345 B.C.).¹⁵ Each version followed the basic storyline: (1) the original undifferentiated monad evolved into Primeval Waters (Nun); (2) out of these Waters (Nun) emerged Atum, the demiurge creator-god, who was generated/self-generated in the waters; (3) his generation in the waters was manifested by a sudden appearance of supernatural light; (4) at the dawn of time Atum the creator-god appeared on the primordial hill when the waters receded; (5) Atum generated the Ennead, manifest in the creation of the material world; (6) the apex of this theogony/cosmogony was the generation of Rê/Rê-Amun and corresponding creation of the sun as his divine image, whose birth was represented by the first sunrise; (7) the daily recurrence of the sunrise and sunset represents a continual process of a one-day creation mythology; (8) the creation of humanity was an accidental event—humanity sprang from the ground from the weeping (alternately tears of sorrow or joy) of the creator-god; (9) at the end of the one-day creative activity, the creator-god rested in satisfaction, not weariness; and (10) the creation cycle is completed by the mythical physical birth of pharaoh as the firstborn of Rê/Rê-Amun as the ruler of the terrestrial realm corresponding to the sun god's role as ruler of the celestial realm.

PARALLELS BETWEEN GENESIS 1 AND THE EGYPTIAN CREATION TRADITIONS

The detailed studies noted above have identified three kinds of parallels between Genesis 1 and the Egyptian creation traditions: lexical, structural, and thematic/conceptual. The following paragraphs survey selected examples.

LEXICAL PARALLELS

Dover Publications, 1967). For a convenient translation of selected sections, see James P. Allen, "Egyptian Cosmologies," 5–31 in William H. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture, Volume 1: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997).

¹⁵ Erik Iversen, "The Cosmogony of the Shabaka Text," in Sarah Israelit-Groll, ed., *Studies in Egyptology Presented to Miriam Lichtheim*, Volume 1 (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press/The Hebrew University, 1990) 489–90 [485–93]. For a convenient translation, see James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd edition with supplement (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 1969) 4–5; James P. Allen, "Cosmologies," 5–31 in William H. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture, Volume 1: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997).

Several biblical scholars who are trained Egyptologists point to striking lexical parallels between Genesis 1 and Egyptian creation myths. One of the most dramatic is the use of the equivalent expression “in the beginning.”¹⁶ In both cases the phrase refers, not to the infinite indefinable time of all precreation eternity past, but to the specific moment when the creative activity of the cosmos formally began. In the Egyptian material this moment occurred when the Primordial Waters stirred up self-recognition within Nun, which was followed almost immediately by the generation of Atum, the creator-god, in the form of a sudden appearance of supernatural light. In Genesis 1 this starting point in marked time occurred when the eternally preexistent transcendent God spoke supernatural light into existence, driving off darkness from over the primordial waters.

STRUCTURAL PARALLELS

Although Genesis 1 shares several thematic/conceptual parallels and perhaps a few lexical parallels with *Enuma Elish*, it does not share structural parallels in its overall storyline. On the other hand Sayce observed that the sequence of events in Genesis 1 essentially mirrors that of the tradition of Hermopolis, reflected in the *Pyramid Texts* and *Coffin Texts*, dating from the Old Kingdom period but still current during the Middle and New Kingdom periods.¹⁷ Hoffmeier agrees with Sayce’s analysis.¹⁸

Hermopolis: <i>Pyramid Texts</i> and <i>Coffin Texts</i>	Genesis 1:1–2:3
1. Pre-creation condition: lifeless chaotic watery deep	1. Pre-creation condition: lifeless chaotic watery deep
2. Breath/wind (Amun) moves on the waters	2. Breath/wind of Elohim moves on the waters

¹⁶ “In Genesis 1:1, the word *bērešit* is used to describe the ‘beginning’ of God’s creative activity. The root of the word is *rōš*, which literally means ‘head.’ The Egyptian expression used to refer to primeval time or the beginning of the creation process is *sp tpy*, ‘first occasion’ or time of creation. The root of *tpy* comes from *tp*, which literally means ‘head.’ The terminology, while not etymologically related, is related conceptually. In both traditions, creation marked the beginning of time” (Hoffmeier, “Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 and 2 in Light of Egyptian Cosmology,” 42).

¹⁷ Sayce, “The Egyptian Background of Genesis 1,” 421.

¹⁸ Hoffmeier, “Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 and 2 in Light of Egyptian Cosmology,” 42.

3. Creation of supernatural light (generation of Atum)	3. Creation of supernatural light (creation by God)
4. Emergence of primordial hill “in midst of Nun”	4. Creation of firmament “in midst of the waters”
5. Procreation of sky (Shu) when Nun was raised over the earth	5. Creation of sky when waters were raised above the firmament
6. Formation of heavenly ocean (Nut) by separation	6. Formation of heavenly ocean when waters were separated
7. Formation of dry ground (Geb) by separation	7. Formation of dry ground when waters were gathered
8. Humanity accidentally created by tears of Atum	8. Sun and moon created to rule day and night
9. Sun created to rule the world as the image of Rê	9. Creation of humans to rule the world as the image of God

Atwell and Strange also note parallels between the sequence of events in Genesis 1:1–2:3 and those in the *Shabaka Stone*,¹⁹ representing the “Memphite theology,” published during the New Kingdom period, but most likely going back to an original document from the Old Kingdom period. The additions/modifications to the traditional Egyptian myth are italicized below.

Memphis: <i>Shabaka Stone</i>	Genesis 1:1–2:3
1. Pre-creation condition: lifeless chaotic watery deep	1. Pre-creation condition: lifeless chaotic watery deep
2. Breath/wind (Amun) moves on the waters	2. Breath/wind of Elohim moves on the waters
3. <i>Thought and word of Ptah creates Atum (light)</i>	3. Word of God creates light
4. Emergence of primordial hill “in midst of Nun”	4. Creation of firmament “in midst of the waters”
5. Procreation of sky (Shu)	5. Creation of sky when waters

¹⁹ Atwell, “An Egyptian Source for Genesis 1,” 449–67; and Strange, “Some Notes on Biblical and Egyptian Theology,” 350–55.

when Nun was raised over earth	were raised above the firmament
6. Formation of heavenly ocean (Nut) by separation	6. Formation of heavenly ocean when waters were separated
7. Formation of dry ground (Geb) by separation	7. Formation of dry ground when waters were gathered
8. <i>Sun created to rule the world as the image of Ré</i>	8. Creation of plants . . . later fish, birds, reptiles, animals
9. <i>Earth sprouts plants, fish, birds, reptiles, animals</i>	9. Sun and moon created to rule day and night
10. <i>Creation of gods' statues, cult sites, food offerings</i>	10. Creation of man as divine image, food to eat, dominion
11. <i>Ptah completes activity and "rests" in satisfaction</i>	11. God completes activity and "rests" (in satisfaction)

A few subtle but significant differences occur in the order and framing of events in the Genesis 1 account in comparison with the Egyptian version, probably reflecting an ideological redaction or theological polemic against the Egyptian prototype. In the light of the tight parallels, Strange concludes, "The similarities in detail and structure are too close to be accidental."²⁰

THEMATIC/CONCEPTUAL PARALLELS

The four elements of the pre-creation cosmos. The Hebrew depiction of the pre-creation state of the cosmos seems to echo the Egyptian idea of original infinite nothingness, an undifferentiated Monad—the infinite, static, lifeless, dark primordial sea.²¹ The four cosmic phenomena of Genesis 1:2 may be polemically demythologized counterparts to the four members of the Ogdoad of Hermopolis, the so-called "chaos gods." The Ogdoad represented the four primal elements of the pre-creation condition, two primordial features (boundless indifferenciation, infinite obscurity) and two primordial

²⁰ Strange, "Some Notes on Biblical and Egyptian Theology," 345.

²¹ For example Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 173–74. A growing number of scholars hold this view, including Sayce, "The Egyptian Background of Genesis 1," 421; idem, "Cosmogonies," 267–68; John Albert Wilson, "The Nature of the Universe," in *Before Philosophy*, ed. Henri Frankfort (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1946), 61; and Hoffmeier, "Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 and 2," 42–44.

entities (primordial water, primal wind).²² Genesis 1:2 also depicts four primal elements at the beginning of creation: two primordial features (empty formlessness, obscure darkness) and two primordial entities (watery deep, divine wind= Spirit of God).

1. “empty formlessness” (*tōhū wāvōhū*) echoes Egyptian “boundless indifferenciation” (Hehu)
2. “darkness” (*hōšek*) recalls Egyptian “infinite obscurity” (Keku)
3. “watery deep,” “primeval abyss” (*tēhôm*) is reminiscent of “primordial water” (Nun)
4. “Spirit/Wind of God” (*rūāḥ ’ēlōhîm*) parallels “divine wind/soul” of the creator-god (Amun).²³

Now, the world [*hā’āreṣ* = cosmos/monad?] was undifferentiated formlessness [*tōhū wāvōhū* = Hehu], and darkness [*hōšek* = Keku] was over the surface of the primordial watery deep [*tēhôm* = Nun]; but the divine wind [*rūāḥ ’ēlōhîm* = Amun] was hovering over the primeval waters [*hammāyim* = Nun].

The Ogdoad (the Eight) consisted of four pairs of Egyptian gods: the four male primeval cosmic forces and their four female consorts, each pair consisting of one negative (disorder) and one positive (order) force. According to the Hermopolis tradition the cause of creation originated in the Ogdoad, proclaimed as “the fathers and mothers” of Nun and Atum, the creator-gods of Heliopolis. These four divine couples preexisted in the primordial water before it became the god Nun. Tension between the four sets of males and females created energy that stirred up the lifeless water, transforming it into the living god Nun (*Coffin Texts*, Spells 75–80).

Creation of supernatural light within/upon the primordial cosmic waters before the creation of the terrestrial sun. According to the tradition of Hermopolis the first creative act was the emergence of light from the primeval gloom and darkness. After millions of years of the darkness of the primeval waters, the god Atum

²² In 1933 Sayce noted, “The Ooctead [*sic*] was composed of a formless deep, an illimitable chaos, darkness, and a breath; the Hebrew cosmogony begins also with a formless (*tōhū*) deep, illimitable chaos (*wā-bōhū*), darkness, and breath” (“The Egyptian Background of Genesis 1,” 421).

²³ Wilson, “The Nature of the Universe,” 61; Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 154–55; and Hoffmeier, “Some Thoughts on Gen 1 and 2 in Light of Egyptian Cosmology,” 42.

(later Rê-Atum) evolved/emerged out of Nun. As the sun-god his first act was to manifest himself as light—before he formally created the sun.²⁴ In the *Pyramid Texts* Rê was born in Nun prior to the existence of the sky and the earth (PT §1040). In the *Coffin Texts* the creation of Rê takes place in the midst of Ogdoad, that is, the four elements of the precreation state of the cosmos: “in the darkness (*kkw*), the primeval sea (*nw*), the chaos (*tnmw*), and the gloom (*hḥw*)” (CT II.4). As his first creative act in the dark primordial chaos Rê states, “I lighten darkness” (CT II.5). However, it was not until after that event that the gods “gave birth to the sun-god,” that is, the sun was created after the original supernatural light. The Egyptians believed that the primordial gods created supernatural light to dispel the primeval darkness as the first act of creation when they stood for the first time on the primordial hill-ock. This is also reflected in the name, “Isle of Flames,” given to the primordial hill of Hermopolis.

This mythic background may explain an otherwise seeming anomaly in Genesis 1. On Day 1 God is depicted breaking into the darkness and formlessness of creation by calling forth a supernatural light that dispelled the darkness of the primordial gloom and chaos (v. 3). Since the sun was not created until Day 4 (v. 16), the light created on Day 1 was not meant to be considered the light from the sun, but light from deity (v. 3). Whereas the divine light as the first act in Egypt was the manifestation of the self-generation of the creator-god from the darkness of the primeval waters, the appearance of supernatural light in verse 3 resulted from divine command, not divine self-generation. While the Egyptian creator god Rê/Rê-Atum came into existence at this point, the God of Israel is preexistent and the supernatural light was not a manifestation of His self-creation, but of the power of His command, “Let there be light!” The appearance of this motif in Genesis, far from marking the moment of the self-generation of God, is a case of the Hebrew author indulging in a bit of one-upmanship. Yahweh is superior to Rê/Rê-Atum, Egypt’s god of light.

The means of creation: spoken word/divine fiat. Several writers suggest that creation by divine word in Genesis 1 is analogous to Mesopotamian cosmogony.²⁵ Babylonian *Enuma Elish* opens by describing the precreation state as a time when things had not yet

²⁴ Sayce, “The Egyptian Background of Genesis 1,” 421.

²⁵ For example E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1956), 8–13; and W. G. Lambert, “A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis 1,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 16 (1965): 287–300.

been “named.” Marduk later displays his power in what is more a stunt than an act of creation when he proves his word can “wreck or create” by making images appear and disappear on command (Tablet IV, lines 25–26). Nevertheless Marduk does not actually create the cosmos by utterance, but by gruesomely splitting Tiamat. Marduk does call objects into existence, however, by naming them. Genesis 1 does indeed reflect this ubiquitous motif of creation by naming an object. However, God is pictured as creating first by issuing a divine fiat, but then only after the item had come into existence did He name it. Only in ancient Egypt was creation by divine word viewed as official dogma. Hoffmeier observes, “While the doctrine of creation in response to divine command is widespread in Egyptian literature, it is not to be found in Babylonian cosmologies.”²⁶ Egyptian scholar Redford notes, “Genesis 1:1–2:4 and 2:4–24 have long been claimed to display clear dependence on Mesopotamian creation stories. However, . . . the divine fiat, ‘God said, ‘Let there be . . . ,’’ reminds us not of Mesopotamian myth, but of Egyptian.”²⁷

Creation by divine word/fiat appears in rudimentary form in the *Coffin Texts*, dating to the Old Kingdom (ca. 2686–2188 B.C.). Nun, personification of the Primeval Waters, brings the first life into existence by speaking in the midst of the four elements of the Ogdoad (cf. Gen 1:2–3): life is created “according to the word of Nun in Nu, in Hehu, in *nmw* in Keku” (CT II. 23). Shortly thereafter the command of Atum brings about the creation of vegetation and animal life (CT II. 42–43).

Creation by divine fiat appears in pristine form in the so-called “Memphite theology” of the *Shabaka Stone* from the New Kingdom (ca. 1740–1100 B.C.). Ptah, the creator-god, brings about creation by combination of conception in his heart (=thought) and command of his tongue (=speech). This concept of the *logos* creation is also seen in Hymn to Ptah, dating to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth dynasty (ca. fifteenth century B.C.): “The One says in his heart, ‘Look, may they come into being!’ ”²⁸ Many Egyptologists see in the Memphite cosmogony of Ptah’s creation by the combination of thought and word the root of the later Greek notions of *nous* (“mind”) and *logos* (“word”) that would eventually develop into the

²⁶ Hoffmeier, “Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 and 2,” 45.

²⁷ Redford, “Four Great Origin Traditions,” 396–400.

²⁸ M. Mogenson, “A Stele of the XVIIIth or XIXth Dynasty, With a Hymn to Ptah and Sekhmet,” *Proceedings of the Society for Biblical Archaeology* 35 (1913): Plate II.

so-called *logos* doctrine of creation in Alexandria, the center of Jewish Hellenistic *logos* speculation of creation.²⁹

The concept of creation by divine fiat so predominates Genesis 1:1–2:3 that it provides the framework for the six days of creation. Divine fiat is expressed by the series of jussives (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14–15, 20, 24) and a set of imperatives addressed to sentient beings (vv. 22, 28). The climactic cohortative, “Let us make man” (v. 26), often the center of Trinitarian discussion, might express the motif of *thought* (resolution) in the heart, followed by *command* of the tongue. The cohortative also connotes divine thought (resolution) in the heart in Genesis 11:6–7, where God first considered what to do and then acted.

Emergence of primordial hillock from receding waters. To visualize the beginning of creation the Egyptians used the mythical image of a Primordial Mound emerging from the Primeval Waters.³⁰ This image was familiar to them from the annual recession of the waters of the Nile at the end of the inundation season.³¹ According to Egypt, Atum was floating in the midst of the infinite waters in an inchoate state as the seed of potential life (as “he who is in his egg”). At the dawn of creation the waters receded and the primordial hillock emerged on which Atum, as the first living being, came into existence (PT §§587, 1652).³² The beginning of creation of the material world was the sudden appearance of a primordial hillock rising from the watery void.³³

The Primordial Mound was both the place where Atum began

²⁹ J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt III* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906), 54; and Erik Iversen, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 1984).

³⁰ A.-A. Saleh, “The ‘Primaeval Hill’ and Other Related Elevations in Ancient Egyptian Mythology,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 25 (1969): 110–20.

³¹ Jacobus van Dijk, “Myth and Mythmaking in Ancient Egypt,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Donald R. Redford et al. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 3:1699–1701.

³² The earliest extant witness to the motif of creation through the emergence of the Primordial Hillock appears already in the *Pyramid Texts* that were inscribed for the reigns of Unis (Dynasty 5), Teti, Pepi I, Merenre, Pepi II (Dynasty 6), and Ibi (Dynasty 7). Each inscription was discovered on a tomb monument at Saqqara. See also R. Antihes, “Remarks on the Pyramid Texts and Early Egyptian Dogma,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 74 (1954): 35–39. Of 759 utterances, 13 refer directly to an act of creation (PT §§ 222, 301, 484, 486, 506, 527, 558, 571, 587, 600, 609, 660, and 684).

³³ Saleh, “The ‘Primaeval Hill’ and Other Elevations in Ancient Egyptian Mythology,” 110–20.

to “create/develop” himself and a manifestation of Atum. In fact the Mound is actually called Atum. In one version the Waters gave birth to the Mound as the manifestation of Atum. When the Waters receded at the beginning of time, on the dry ground sat Atum the creator god, represented in reptilian, insect, or avian form, or as Rê-Atum the creator sun-god rising on the hill as the sun rose on the eastern horizon. Taking his stand on the mound, Atum performed the creative acts that brought the created world into being. As the original locus of creation, the primordial hill was sacred space.³⁴ In the Heliopolitan version of the creation myth the hill was identified as the site of the sacred precinct of the temple of Heliopolis. In the Hermopolitan version, the hill was identified as the site of the temple of Hermopolis, as in the version of Thebes, which identified the first hill with its temple.

Numerous studies note the dramatic parallel between the emergence of the Primordial Hillock from the Waters—a theme common to all major Egyptian creation myths—and the appearance of the dry ground from the waters in Genesis 1:9–13. Whereas the Waters are deified in Egypt, receding of their own volition and giving birth to the Mound, by the manifestation of the creator Atum, the Genesis waters are inanimate and recede at the command of God, exposing the dry ground, also a created object. While highlighting the distinct monotheistic emphasis of Genesis 1, Atwell says of the motif of the mythical Primordial Hillock, “The picture is in complete accord with Egyptian concepts where the emergence of the first piece of dry land as the waters recede is a universal feature which has been absorbed into all cosmologies.”³⁵ While the original location of the Primordial Hill was limited to the individual rival cultic centers of Heliopolis, Hermopolis, or Thebes, Genesis 1 presents the original primordial dry ground as the whole earth. The sacred precinct of the Creator was not limited to a small hillock marked by a single cultic shrine; rather the whole earth was the sacred precinct of the God of Israel.

Generation of dry air and humidity, subsequent separation of dry ground and heavenly ocean. In Egyptian cosmic geography the three elements—earth, air, sky—are alive. The sky is the goddess Nut, the ground is her husband Geb, the dry air between is Shu. Originally Geb (ground) and Nut (sky) were enjoying an eternal

³⁴ For discussion see J. K. Hoffmeier, “Sacred,” in *The Vocabulary of Ancient Egypt: The Term DSR, with Special Reference to Dynasties I–XXI*, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), 171–77.

³⁵ Atwell, “An Egyptian Source for Genesis 1,” 456.

embrace as husband and wife. However, creation of the material world began when Shu (dry air) separated the two lovers to create inhabitable space for Atum to reside. Egyptian iconography shows Shu standing with feet planted on Geb below and arms outstretched lifting Nut above. However, the two lovers continually struggle against Shu; they want to resume their embrace. Therefore Shu must continually hold back the heavenly ocean (sky). In one version Shu is assisted by helpers.

Genesis 1 clearly rejects the Egyptian polytheistic deification of the sky, ground, and air. It does not, however, dramatically distance itself from Egyptian cosmic geography. According to Genesis 1:6–7, the sky separates the waters below it and above it. The waters below were confined to one place and called “seas” (v. 10). On the other hand the “waters above” are depicted as a heavenly ocean located above the sky and therefore above the sun, moon, and stars, which are placed in the sky and therefore below the heavenly ocean (vv. 14–19). Day 2 pictures God constructing a cosmic water dam (*rāqîā'*), which He places in the middle of the primordial ocean (v. 6). Longman and Ryken note, “*Firmamentum* is the Latin translation for Hebrew *rāqîā'*, a pounded brass dome over the earth, ‘hard as a molten mirror’ (Job 37:18), which separates the waters from above from the waters below and keeps them from flooding the world (Gen 1:7).”³⁶ God constructed this cosmic dam to separate the primordial sea into two bodies: the waters above the *rāqîā'* and the waters below the *rāqîā'* (vv. 6–8). God placed this cosmic dam in the sky to hold up the heavenly ocean and keep back its waters from inundating the world below (cf. 7:11; 8:1). Just as Shu's strength was required to hold up Nut (sky), the *rāqîā'* testifies to Yahweh's strength in the sky (Ps. 150:1).

STRIKING SIMILARITIES AND DRAMATIC DIFFERENCES

The number of parallels and degree of correspondence between Genesis 1 and major Egyptian creation myths is remarkable.³⁷ It is difficult to dismiss them as mere coincidence.³⁸ In his cautious dis-

³⁶ “Cosmology,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 170.

³⁷ Atwell observes, “When the template of ancient Egyptian creation traditions is held up against the Genesis 1 creation account there is a quite remarkable correspondence” (“An Egyptian Source for Genesis 1,” 465).

³⁸ Currid writes, “There exists such a magnitude of parallels that it could not be by mere chance. Dare we say that it was a freak of antiquity? I think not” (“An Examination of the Egyptian Background of the Genesis Cosmogony,” 39). Likewise

cussion of the comparative method Ringgren notes that tight literary and ideological parallels between neighboring Semitic cultures often reflect some kind of “real historical connection.”³⁹ What kind of “real historical connection” is reasonable to posit? Redford suggests, “It may in fact prove to be a simple case of linear borrowing, albeit accompanied by a purposeful intent to ‘demythologize,’ or it may turn out to be a mere sideshow in a far more widespread and complex pattern of cultural exchange.”⁴⁰ Atwell remarks, “The conclusion is stark and compelling: ancient Egypt provided the foundation tradition which was shaped and handed on by successive priestly [*sic*] generations.”⁴¹ Hoffmeier and Currid, two evangelical Egyptologists, also suggest that these Egyptian creation myths influenced the way the Israelite author thought and talked about creation; however, they suggest he recast this inherited tradition to make it acceptable within orthodox Yahwism.⁴² The stark differences in Genesis that seem intentionally polemical were ideologically driven and reflect a Yahwistic redaction of the culturally shared Egyptian prototype.

As impressive as are the thematic continuities, the ideological discontinuities are more significant. First, the Hebrew cosmogony rejects all notion of theogony. Second, the Israelite cosmology rejects any hint of pantheism. Third, the Yahwistic version of creation is clearly monotheistic. Fourth, the apex of creation in the Hebrew version is not the generation of the sun as the image/manifestation of the sun god, but the fashioning of humanity as the image of Yahweh. Fifth, the distinctive seven-day framework of Genesis 1 is an ideologically loaded paradigm shift away from the one-day pattern of recurrent creation brought about each morning with the sunrise symbolizing the daily rebirth of Rê-Amun, the sun god creator as embodiment of Atum the primordial

Strange says, “The similarities in detail and structure are too close to be accidental” (“Some Notes on Biblical and Egyptian Theology,” 358).

³⁹ “It is obvious that certain mythical elements can be present in various mythologies without the myths themselves being identical. . . . In the case of the ancient Near East it is difficult to avoid the assumption that there is also some real historical connection when one element occurs in two or more places” (Helmer Ringgren, “Remarks on the Method of Comparative Mythology,” in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, ed. Hans Goedicke (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 411).

⁴⁰ Redford, “Four Great Origin Traditions,” 400.

⁴¹ Atwell, “An Egyptian Source for Genesis 1,” 467.

⁴² Hoffmeier, “Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 and 2,” 45; and Currid, “An Examination of the Egyptian Background of the Genesis Cosmogony,” 39–40.

demiurge creator. Sixth, Yahweh is self-existent, unlike the self-generated Atum.

The Egyptians conceived of the various elements of the material world as the embodiment, physical manifestation, or terrestrial incarnation of the individual gods. The sun was the terrestrial manifestation of the sun god Rê (later Rê-Amun). The sky was the incarnation of Nut, the ground the embodiment of Geb, the dry air between was the male deity Shu and moist humidity was the goddess Tefnut. The primordial sea was Nun, the original womb of Atum, the original creator-god. Atum was called the All or One because all that he created (immaterial gods and material world) was simply an extension of himself.

The Egyptian creator was immanent in his creation. Creation in Egyptian cosmogony was not *ex nihilo*, but was a transformation of the immaterial deity into his material manifestation. The procreation of the gods was the means of the creation of the material world (e.g., the birth of Shu is the creation of the sky [dry air], and the birth of Geb is the creation of the ground). Even Atum himself was procreated; the Primeval Waters (Nun) were his father and mother (although some versions depict Atum generating himself in the womb of the Primeval Waters). Likewise the Primeval Waters, once the lifeless infinite Monad, transformed itself in the Waters of life from which all living beings and things in the cosmos would ultimately spring. Egyptian cosmogony was in effect theogony.⁴³ In *Coffin Text* 714, for example, Nun describes his own creation of himself.

I am Nun, the one with no equal.
 I came into being there [i.e., primordial hill]
 I came into being on the Great Occasion of the inundation.
 I am he who flew, who became *Dbnn* who is in his egg.
 I am he who began there in Nun.

⁴³ For example in the Sun-Hymn of Harehab it is said of the creator-god, "You are a divine youth, the heir of eternity, who begot yourself and bore yourself" (Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt III*, 9). In the Leiden Papyrus, the creator Amun generated himself: "joining his seed with his body, to create his egg within his secret self" (A. Gardiner, "Hymns to Amon from a Leiden Papyrus," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 42 [1905]: 25). The creator-god Amun was he "who came into being by himself" (E. Chassinat, *La temple d'Edfou II* [Paris: Memoires de la Mission archeologique française au Caire, 1892], 37). Atum said, "I came into being of myself in the midst of the primeval waters in this my name of Khopri" (Book of the Dead §85). Likewise, "I am Re-Atum who himself molded [*khnumed*] himself" (*Coffin Texts*, Spell 601).

See, the chaos-god came forth from me.
 See, I am prosperous.
 I created my body in my glory;
 I am he who made himself;
 I formed myself according to my will and according to my
 heart.

Nun then became father/mother of Atum; however, Atum is said to have generated himself (one version explains that Atum was one with Nun). This initial moment of the creator-god's self-generation was said to have occurred, "in the beginning" (lit., "at the head" of time). Through a process of self-impregnation, Atum's mouth functioned as maternal womb of his paternal seed, which he spat out and sneezed out giving birth to his son Shu (dry air) and his daughter Tefnut (moist humidity), respectively. As first divine husband and wife, Shu and Tefnut begat the male Geb (dry ground) and female Nut (sky=heavenly ocean). They in turn generated two sets of sons and daughters: Isis and Osiris, Seth and Nephthys. Thus the Heliopolitan cosmogony is the story of the theogony of the nine primal gods, the generation of the Ennead. This family genealogy was completed by its tenth descendant, with the birth of the sun god Rê, represented by the first sunrise as the apex of creation. The later developments of Hermopolis, Memphis, and Thebes all reprise this common theogony, but they attempt to give better account of the generation of Nun the primordial waters and Atum the demiurge creator.⁴⁴ Egyptian cosmogony was thoroughly devoted to theogony—birth of the gods as they took their forms in the creation of nature.

In conclusion, Genesis 1 appears to be a literary polemic designed to refute ancient Near Eastern creation mythology in general, but ancient Egyptian creation mythology in particular. Although there are several elements in this passage which surely reflect a general Semitic background, the majority of parallel elements are cast against the Egyptian mythologies. This suggests that Genesis 1 was originally composed, not as a scientific treatise, but as a theological polemic against the ancient Egyptian models of creation which competed against Yahwism for the loyalty of the ancient Israelites.

⁴⁴ In the *Shabaka Stone*, expressing the so-called "Memphite Theology," the Memphite priests assert that Ptah-Nun gives birth to Atum the creator-god (1.50a). The *Pyramid Texts* state that Re was born in Nun before the existence of sky, earth, and the conflict of Horus and Seth (PT §1040).