YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)
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Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
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Shiur #08c: *Tanakh* and Literature of the Ancient Near East

c. The Narratives in *Sefer Bereishit* and their Parallels in Ancient Near Eastern Literature

So far we have dealt with the parallels between laws of the Ancient Near East and some of the laws of the Torah, and demonstrated that the similarities serve to highlight fundamental difference between them. A similar situation pertains to the relationship between the narratives in *Sefer Bereishit* and parallel narratives in Ancient Near Eastern literature.[1] We will introduce our discussion here with an especially striking example – the story of the Flood, as recounted in *Bereishit* 6-8. The most extensive parallel is to be found in the *Epic of Atrahasis*, composed in Babylonia in the 18th-17th centuries B.C.E., but the narrative most similar to the biblical story appears in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.[2]

The narrative describes how Gilgamesh asks the immortal man Utnapishtim (paralleling the biblical Noach) to reveal how the gods came to grant him eternal life. In response, Utnapishtim recounts at length the story of how he was saved from a flood. According to his account, the gods decided to bring a flood upon the world, and vowed not to tell of this imminent catastrophe. However, Ea, the god of wisdom and magic, wanted to save his beloved Utnapishtim, and therefore decided to reveal this secret decision. Ea instructs Utnapishtim to build a ship, and then:

> "Make all living beings go up into the boat.
> The boat which you are to build,
> its dimensions must measure equal to each other." (lines 27-29)[3]

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[1] A classic study of the book of *Bereishit* in its Ancient Near Eastern context is Nahum Sarna's *Understanding Genesis*, New York 1966.

[2] The *Epic of Giglamesh* (or *Gilgameš*) is an enormous work and one of the earliest known to mankind. The original text was composed in the 18th or 17th century B.C.E., based on epics from the Sumerian culture. The Assyrian version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was discovered in the library of Ashurbanipal, in Nineveh, and dated to around 1250 B.C.E. The epic centers around Gilgamesh, king of the Sumerian city of Uruk (in modern-day Iraq; mentioned as one of the cities of Babylonia in *Bereishit* 10:10). It discusses the attitude towards death and the conflict between the human world and the natural world.

[3] Translation (here and in the excerpts below) by Maureen Gallery Kovacs, Electronic Edition by Wolf Carnahan, 1998: http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab11.htm

Utnapishtim builds the ship:

> "I provided it with six decks,
> thus dividing it into seven (levels)… Three times 3,600 (units) of raw bitumen I poured into the
> bitumen kiln." (lines 60-65)

And ultimately:

> "All the living beings that I had I loaded on it,
> I had all my kith and kin go up into the boat." (lines 84-85)

After everyone is inside, there is a flood that lasts six days and seven nights. When it ends, the ship comes to rest on Mount Nisir for seven days. Then,

> "When a seventh day arrived
> I sent forth a dove and released it.
> The dove went off, but came back to me;
> no perch was visible so it circled back to me.
> I sent forth a swallow and released it.
> The swallow went off, but came back to me;
> no perch was visible so it circled back to me.
> I sent forth a raven and released it.
> The raven went off, and saw the waters slither back.
> It eats, it scratches, it bobs, but does not circle back to me." (lines 145-154)

After leaving the ship, Utnapishtim offers sacrifices and "the gods smelled the sweet savor" (line 160). The story concludes with Enlil, the chief god of the pantheon, becoming very angry at Ea for revealing the secret to Utnapishtim, but Ea defends himself, arguing:

> "How, how could you bring about a Flood without consideration?
> Charge the violation to the violator,
> charge the offense to the offender." (lines 182-184)

Sinners should be punished, but there is no need to destroy all of humanity. Ultimately, Enlil accepts Ea's advice not to destroy the human race, and he blesses Utnapishtim and his wife with eternal life.

There are many points of similarity between the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the story of the Flood as recounted in *Sefer Bereishit*.[4] Here, too, there are two

[4] For additional similarities, including those in other Mesopotamian sources, see M.D. Cassuto, *Mi-Noach ad Avraham: Perush al Seder Noach ve-al Seder Lekh Lekha*, Jerusalem 5719, pp. 10-12.

approaches to this phenomenon. On the one hand, the great similarity to a source that is unquestionably more ancient, may serve to substantiate the authenticity of the story of the Flood.[5] If there were no other known traditions of this event, with its impact on the entire world, at the very dawn of human existence, the reliability of the biblical account might be undermined. On the other hand, Delitzsch and others argued that the biblical story was simply a duplication of the earlier Mesopotamian tradition.[6]

However, as we saw in the comparison of the legal systems, the similarities serve to highlight the substantial differences between the two accounts. These differences find expression both in a comparison between the description of God and the description of the pagan gods, and in a comparison between the description of Noach and that of Utnapishtim. We shall examine some of the central differences between the accounts and their significance.[7]

a. First and foremost, the biblical story centers around the monotheistic Noach, as opposed to the pagan Gilgamesh. In the former, God operates as a single Divine power, while in the story of Gilgamesh several gods produce the flood collectively with disagreement recorded amongst them.
b. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* gives no reason for the decision of the gods to bring a flood upon the world. In the story of Atrahasis, mentioned above, the noise produced by human beings disturbs the rest of Enlil, who declares,

> "The noise of mankind has become too much,
> I am losing sleep over their racket.
> Give the order that *surrupu*-disease shall break out."[8]

In the story of Noach, the decision is made on the basis of God's view that humans have become irredeemably corrupt.
c. This difference is also reflected in the salvation of the survivor of the flood: the different versions of the Gilgamesh story offer no explanation as to why it was specifically Utnapishtim who was saved,[9] while in the Torah Noah's personal ethical conduct is distinguished from that of his generation: "For I have seen you righteous before Me in this generation" (*Bereishit* 7:1).
d. In the Epic of Gilgamesh the gods themselves are fearful of the flood that they have brought upon the world:

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[5] Indeed, in the Christian world the parallel was perceived by Protestant orthodoxy as absolute proof of the biblical tradition (see Shavit and Eran, p. 83).
[6] Shavit and Eran, p. 171.
[7] These differences have been discussed in many different works; see especially Cassuto, pp. 12-20 and Sarna pp. 37-63
[8] For different approaches to the question of the reason for the flood in Mesopotamian literature, see Y. Klein, "Ha-Mikra ve-ha-Sifrut ha-Mesopotamit," in *Sifrut ha-Mikra – Mevo'ot u-Mechkarim*, pp. 547-548.
[9] The story of Atrahasis even states that man is actually saved from the flood for the sake of the gods – "Behold, I have done this for your sakes" – apparently, because the gods need man to work for them.

"The gods were frightened by the Flood,
and retreated, ascending to the heaven…
The gods were cowering like dogs… the gods humbly sat weeping, sobbing with grief,
their lips burning, parched with thirst" (lines 113-126)

The gods are unable to control the mighty forces of nature that they have unleashed. They themselves dwell within nature, and may themselves be harmed by the flood. It also appears that the gods do not anticipate the results of their decision. In the story of Noach, God controls nature and is completely independent of it.

e. In the Gilgamesh story there are disagreements and arguments between the gods. No such reality can exist in the story of Noach, where God's will is the only will that has any influence on the world.

f. In the story of Gilgamesh, following the offering of sacrifices by Utnapishtim, the gods smell the sweet aroma and then they "collected like flies over the sacrifice" (line 161). According to the pagan view, the gods need to eat and drink the sacrifices that humans offer to them. During the week-long flood, during which no sacrifices were offered, the gods became hungry and thirsty. In sharp contrast, the Torah says of God only that "God smelled the sweet aroma" (*Bereishit* 8:21). God has no "need" for the sacrifice, and there is certainly no physical aspect involved. The biblical expression denotes Divine acceptance of man's actions, the sole result of which is the decision, "I shall not again curse the earth anymore because of man, for the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (ibid.)

g. The Mesopotamian story ends with the survivor being "promoted" to the rank of a god. Noach remains a mortal man after the Flood.

We may therefore summarize as follows: the basic facts of the story – a man saved from annihilation by a flood, through advice given from on High that he build an ark into which he should take all types of living things; the conclusion of the flood, and the way in which the man leaves the ark parallel one another, offering support for the authenticity and the ancient origins of the narratives themselves. The contrasts between the stories point to the fundamental differences between the pagan and the monotheistic worldviews, and to our mind demonstrate the superior moral message of the story of Noach over that of the pagan story. The fact that the tradition of the great flood was familiar to the nations of the Ancient Near East presents no difficulty, and there is no reason that the Torah should refrain from recording it just because it was already well-known. It is specifically the comparison of the messages arising from the respective descriptions that strengthens the distinction between them. In any event, chronological precedence has nothing to do with the authenticity of the story, one way or the other.

We may adopt a similar attitude to the parallels to the Creation narrative appearing in Mesopotamian literature. Among the various works that have been discovered, of special note is the Babylonian *Enûma Eliš (Enuma Elish*), which

appears to have been written towards the end of the second millennium B.C.E., but which may be assumed to preserve more ancient Mesopotamian traditions. The similarities between this text and the description of the Creation of the world (*Bereishit* 1) include the following:[10]

1. *Enuma Elish* is introduced with the following words:

   "When the heavens above were yet unnamed,
   And the name of the earth beneath had not been recorded,
   Apsu, the oldest of beings, their progenitor,
   "Mummu" Tiâmat, who bare each and all of them --
   Their waters were merged into a single mass.
   A field had not been measured, a marsh had not been searched out,
   When of the gods none was shining" (First Tablet, lines 1-7)[11]

   The two gods mentioned here represent the two entities that existed prior to the creation of the world: "Apsu," representing the waters of the deep, and "Tiamat," the primordial sea goddess. There is a clear similarity here to the description at the beginning of *Bereishit*: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And a wind from God moved over the surface of the waters" (*Bereishit* 1:1-2). Both descriptions make mention of water as the primordial material preceding the rest of creation, and this substance is given a similar name in both traditions (*tehom* – *tiamat*).

2. Further on, the Babylonian myth describes the splitting of Tiamat into two, with a separation between the primordial sea and the sky, by means of a firmament:

   "He slit Tiâmat open like a flat fish [cut into] two pieces,
   The one half he raised up and shaded the heavens therewith,
   He pulled the bolt, he posted a guard,
   He ordered them not to let her water escape." (Fourth tablet, lines 137-140)[12]

   Here, too, there is a similarity to the description in *Bereishit*:
   "And God said: Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide water from water. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were

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[10] For more on parallels between the Mesopotamian creation stories and the account in Bereishit, as well as the differences between them, see Klein, pp. 529-534.

[11] *The Babylonian Legends of Creation*, translated by E. A. Wallis Budge, [1921], http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/blc/blc08.htm

[12] http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/blc/blc11.htm

above the firmament, and it was so. And God called the firmament '*shamayim.*'" (*Bereishit* 1:6-8)

3. In the Fifth Tablet of *Enuma Elish* there appears a description of the creation of the sun and the moon, which serve *inter alia* to establish the calendar (lines 1-46), and in the Sixth Tablet, at the end of the process of creation, there is a description of the creation of man (lines 35-38). Further similarities exist between these descriptions and their parallels in *Bereishit* (1-14-18; 26-27), both in terms of the order of creation and in certain other details.

Once again, the similarities on the one hand support the credibility of the Creation account, which was known to different cultures in the ancient world. On the other hand, there are some fundamental differences. First and foremost, in the Babylonian version, all the gods (including the creator god), representing the forces of nature, are themselves created out of nature, out of a mixture of the sweet water of "Apsu, the oldest of beings, their progenitor" with the salty water of "Mummu" Tiâmat, who bore each and all of them. The Torah presents a single, transcendent God, having no progeny and not influenced by nature, devoid of any physical aspects or influences. Here again, the similarities between the descriptions in the respective cultures sharpens the difference between the Torah and the pagan perceptions that preceded it.

In conclusion, it should be noted that while the universal narratives recorded in *Sefer Bereishit* up to chapter 11 may have parallels to a greater or lesser extent in Ancient Near Eastern literature, when the text shifts to stories of the forefathers, starting from *Bereishit* 12, there are almost no parallels. This is especially evident with regard to the two central narratives of the Torah – the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah, which have no parallels in Ancient Near Eastern literature – and for good reason. These narratives indicate the unique national story of Am Yisrael, and their special relationship with God. There is no reason why they would appear in the stories of other nations. Moreover, these narratives deviate to a considerable extent from the pagan world-view: a spiritual Divine revelation to an entire nation as part of the forging of a covenant between God and the people stands in opposition to the scornful pagan attitude towards mankind.[13]

d. Shabbat

Let us briefly address the question of Shabbat in the Mesopotamian sources. The Torah testifies to the uniqueness of Shabbat in relation to Am Yisrael:

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[13] Concerning the uniqueness of the story of the Revelation at Mount Sinai in this context, specifically against the backdrop of Hittite Vassal-Treaties of the same period, see J. Berman, "God's Alliance With Man," *Azure* 25, 5766/2006; "The Biblical Origins of Equality," *Azure* 37, 5769/2009.

> "Bnei Yisrael shall observe the Shabbat, to perform the Shabbat for their generations; an eternal covenant. Between Me and Bnei Yisrael it is a sign forever, for [in] six days God made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He ceased, and rested." (*Shemot* 31:16-17)

For this reason, if the Shabbat is not an original innovation of the Torah, we have a more difficult question than that posed by the laws or narratives discussed thus far, which display a degree of similarity to parallels in the Torah. Delitzsch's[14] argument was that the institution of Shabbat in the Torah was borrowed from Mesopotamian culture, where we find concepts of *'sabbatu'* or *'sappati'* and the like, in the context of rest on the seventh day.

However, here Delitzsche's claims were misleading, and his argument in this regard is not accepted by Biblical scholars. The concepts that he names do indeed appear in the ancient sources, but in contexts quite different from those of the Torah.[15] In fact, two separate sources are involved. The first is the day referred to as "*sappatu*" in the Assyrian Babylonian calendar, defined as the "day of rest for the heart." According to the accepted interpretation, this is the day when the hearts of the gods are set at rest through the performance of ritual ceremonies. This day falls on the 15th of the month – the day of the full moon. The second source is related to the phenomenon of the division of the lunar month into quarters, each consisting of approximately seven days. In ancient Assyrian calendars the 7th, 14th, 21st, and 28th days are "evil days," when kings and officials were forbidden from certain activities: they were prohibited from eating cooked meat or baked bread, nor were they permitted to travel in a chariot, etc. However, these days are related mainly to the new moon, and pertain to kings or rulers, rather than to the nation as a whole.

We may therefore conclude that only weak similarities exist between Shabbat, as it appears in the Torah, and the ancient elements appearing in Mesopotamian culture. Here again we might propose[16] that the Torah presents a "Shabbat" that is diametrically opposed to its seeming parallels: Shabbat is not related to the lunar calendar and the appearances of the moon, but rather to the "seventh day" – it is independent of the heavenly spheres. It is not a day of bad luck, but rather one of blessing. It is not a day for appeasing the gods, but rather a day for desisting from creative labor, as an expression of faith in the Creator of the world, etc. Critically, it is not a day solely for the societal elite but a radically egalitarian institution applying to servants, strangers and even animals as much as to rulers. Thus, while the concept of a "Shabbat" may not be unique to the Torah, the very significant differences between Shabbat in the Torah and the

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[14] See Shavit and Eran, pp. 116, 172-175.

[15] On this subject see, *inter alia*, Cassuto, pp. 40-42; J. H. Tigay, entry "Shabbat," *Encyclopedia Mikrait* 7, Jerusalem 5736, columns 511-513; B. Oppenheimer, "Shabbat – Shemitta – Yovel: Semikhut ha-Parshiot bein Shabbat, Shemitta ve-Yovel," *Beit Mikra* 100 1, 5745, pp. 33-35.

[16] As do, for example, Cassuto and Oppenheimer.

institution in Mesopotamian culture does indeed emphasize the unique nature of the former. The partial parallels may indicate historical roots at the foundation of Shabbat, but whatever the nature of these roots may have been, they were molded amongst the Jewish people into a new and unique institution.[17]

e. Summary

The Torah was given to Am Yisrael – a nation that lived and interacted in its Mesopotamian environment. As such, they were aware of ancient systems of law and world-views, and the generations preceding the giving of the Torah followed these to a considerable extent. The Torah given to Am Yisrael was likewise written with an awareness of the legal systems in practice at the time, and for this reason its own unique system of laws does not proceed from a *tabula rasa* assumption. Various aspects of the ancient laws are left intact in the Torah, others are amended, while others still are erased entirely. The Torah represents a religious view of the laws which is morally superior, and this may be discerned specifically through comparison with the ancient legal systems. A familiarity with the laws of the Ancient Near East, along with its culture and concepts, can shed light on and help to clarify the intention of the Torah in various instances. In any event, the fact that certain concepts existed long before the giving of the Torah in no way supports the claim of duplication. At most, it offers an interesting basis for an important comparison between systems which are fundamentally different from one another religiously and morally.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[17] Tigay, p. 513.