



Teaching Comparative Creation Stories

By April Favara

Most students are familiar with the creation account in Genesis. But few may know that multiple creation accounts circulated in the rich oral culture of the ancient Near East. These creation accounts come from a variety of locales and are rich in their theology, imagery, and beautiful prose. All of them contain distinct beliefs and concepts about the origins of the world and the purpose of life and humankind. But, many of these stories also contain very precise parallels with the creation account in the biblical text.

Comparison is essential for cognition. Our minds process information within a comparative framework, whether we do so consciously or unconsciously. Putting the biblical text in conversation with other texts can help us to formulate new ways of thinking about the Bible and imagining the ancient world. Reading two different, ancient texts that contain parallel features or ideas can help teach students to read texts closely as they look for commonalities and differences. Exploring these points of symmetry and departure can help students see how Israel interacted with her cultural neighbors—accepting some of their religious ideas, and rejecting or transforming others.

Educators may at first be wary of the anxiety it may cause students to examine ancient creation accounts that are similar to the creation accounts presented in the biblical text. These similarities are a challenge to the ideas that the biblical text is either the result of divine inspiration or simply the product of interaction with the cultures and ideas surrounding ancient Israel. In order to begin to address some of these anxieties, open up a dialogue with students prior to any examination of the ancient texts.

Within this dialogue, one of the things that might be emphasized is that the formation of Israelite religion was complex, and that the Israelites were in conversation with their environment, which in turn influenced their faith formation and the composition of the biblical text. Israelites were real people, in a real setting, interacting with other peoples and their ideas, and who expressed a relationship with a real and dynamic deity. Looking at comparative texts can provide a window into the various ideas that were circulating in Israel's environment.

The creation accounts from the ancient Near East often significantly pre-date the accounts given to us in the biblical text, and come from several different locales outside of Israel. One of the things that may be exciting for students is to know that they are reading texts that are thousands of years old. For instance, though the copies of *Enuma Elish*, discussed below, date prior to the 1st Millennium BCE, most scholars date the epic itself to the around the 18th-16th Century BCE. Though these creation stories were composed much earlier than the creation story in the biblical text, they were popular in both the oral and written culture of ancient Israel. Trade routes, military interactions, governance or protection by other states, and Israel's exilic experience in Babylon, all meant that Israel was aware of and interacted with these creation texts in the formulation of its own history and texts.

There are a number of creation stories from the ancient Near East that share common elements with the creation stories available to us in the biblical text. Rather than highlighting every one, I provide three examples of ancient Near Eastern texts that are easily accessible to the educator to incorporate into the classroom. The first text is the Babylonian creation account, *Enuma Elish* (meaning, “when on high”). This account is written on seven tablets, and is primarily concerned with elevating Marduk as the chief god of Babylon. The epic also elevates the city of Babylon, not only because of Marduk’s supremacy, but because Babylon’s roots are traced back to the beginning of time where the Annunaki themselves built Babylon as a dwelling place for Marduk and the gods. So, while this source is theological and discusses the creation of humankind for the service of the gods, it also served a political purpose in Babylon.

In comparing this text with the biblical creation account, students can explore things like the mutual references to the deep (cf. Gen 1:2), the import of the number 7, and the significance of the resting of the deities after creation. Students can also explore the differences in these accounts and their importance. For instance, students might examine the power of Shamash (the sun-god) and Sin (the moon-god) in *Enuma Elish* in comparison with the powers of the sun and moon in the biblical account. Educators might ask students whether they think the biblical writers were commenting specifically on *Enuma Elish* in order to get them thinking critically about these texts and how Israel might be interacting with other popular traditions of its time.

A second text that educators can have their students read is the Babylonian epic, *Atrahasis* (dated around 1700 BCE). This account is an epic cycle that addresses the sins of humanity and their consequent punishment by a great flood. This text also contains an account of the gods’ creation of humankind. Reading this text, students will be able to explore together the reasons behind the divine creation of humankind in the two different accounts, Genesis and *Atrahasis*. Educators might also ask students to consider whether there is an introduction of evil or trouble in this text, and how the biblical text might be in conversation with this account of creation.

Last, the Shabaka Stone (also called, the *Theology of Memphis*) from Egypt, which is dated as early as the 2600 BCE, provides an interesting opportunity for students to explore a unique account of the god Ptah in the act of creation by divine word. The 1st dynasty in ancient Egypt established Memphis as the capital, making the Memphite god Ptah higher than other gods, and recognized over other creator-gods. With this text, students can compare this story with the biblical creation story where creation is also the result of the divine word of the deity (Genesis 1:3-27). References to translations of all three of these texts are provided below, and are freely available on the Internet.

In addition to fostering critical thinking and reflection on the biblical text, comparison is a fun exercise to introduce into the classroom. Students can benefit from the exploration of these texts and the possibilities set before them without feeling constrained by finding a “right” answer. Incorporating comparison in the classroom is also a great opportunity for educators to model tolerance for different religions or beliefs. Doing comparative work not only helps us formulate our concepts of our own particular religious communities and their history and text, but it also can encourage dialogue between communities, bringing out their commonalities and their differences.

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Resources:

“The Babylonian Creation Epic.” eTACT, 2011. Online: <http://www.etana.org/abzu/fulldisplay.pl?SID=20080903288482666&code=etact&RC=54&Row=4&code=etact>.

“The Epic of Atrahasis.” Livius, 2007. Online: [http://www.livius.org/as-at/atrahasis/atrahasis.html#Proposals by Ea Belet-ili and Enki](http://www.livius.org/as-at/atrahasis/atrahasis.html#Proposals%20by%20Ea%20Belet-ili%20and%20Enki).

“The Text of the Memphis Theology.” Antwerp, 2010. Online: <http://www.maat.sofiatopia.org/memphis.htm#b>