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Life 1st & the Mysteries of the Beginnings

By Jim Myers

Even though the Torah begins with the creation account, the history of the Torah itself began in the 6th century BCE Babylon. Judea had been conquered by the Babylonians and the First Temple destroyed in 586 BCE. Thousands of Judeans were forced to walk from Judea to Babylon and live there as captives. It wouldn't take them long to discover that their new home was the "**Gateway of the Gods**" – *which is what the word "Babylon" means.*

As Babylon came into to their view, they saw a man-made mountain towering above Babylon's high city walls. When they walked across the bridge over the Euphrates and through the massive gates they found themselves surrounded by many temples and monuments dedicated to gods and goddesses – *Ishtar, Ea, Enlil, Adad, Ishara, Ninurta, Eridu, Nabu and Ninmah* -- to name a few. But, towering above all the Babylonian gods and goddesses – and their temples – was that man-made mountain – ***The Temple of Marduk, the Creator of the Heaven and the Earth.***¹

For the next fifty years, the Jewish survivors lived in the shadow of Marduk and the others gods and goddesses of Babylon. Each new year began with a huge public celebration at which Babylon's most famous actors performed ***Enuma Elish***, the Babylonian creation myth. *Enuma Elish* had dominated the Babylonian culture and calendar for over 600 years by the time the Judean captives arrived. Babylonians were celebrating this creation myth before Saul became the first king of Israel.

Year after year the original captives Jews and their children, many of whom were born in Babylon and had never had seen Judea. They were thoroughly exposed to the Babylonian culture and its traditions, rites, rituals and beliefs. Those Jews who had come from Judea remembered their homeland and that the temple of their God was a pile of rubble. This was the setting in which a Jewish priest-scribe named Ezra began his work of gathering and assembling the laws and traditions of the Jewish captives. The work he and his fellow scribes produced is called the **Torah** (*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy*). Ezra not only had

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<http://biblicalheritage.org> • jim@biblicalheritage.org

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collecting information on his mind. All of the Jews were probably wrestling with the same questions. *Why had their nation been defeated? Why had their temple been destroyed? Why did their God not protect them? Why did their God allow them to be taken captive and exiled to Marduk's nation?*

The Torah and the Prophets not only contain answers to those questions, they also have the principles that could prevent future generations from finding themselves in the same situation. Ezra's work would create the cultural foundation of Second Temple Judaism. However, as the centuries passed, knowledge about the environment that Ezra and his fellow captives lived was forgotten and the role it played in creating the Jewish Scriptures, including *Enuma Elish*, which was lost and unknown until very recently, in historical terms. It was recovered by Austen Henry Layard in 1849 (in fragmentary form) in the ruined **Library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh** (Mosul, Iraq), and published by George Smith in 1876.² Today, even though *Enuma Elish* can be read on the internet,³ very few people have read or know anything about it. Obviously, the link between Ezra's work and *Enuma Elish* was – *and continues to be* -- unknown to many Bible readers. But, in the next a few minutes you will understand exactly how important *Enuma Elish* was to Ezra and his fellow Jewish scribes. It may have been a key factor in one of the most powerful revelations in the history of mankind.

Enuma Elish means either "When on High" or "When the Skies Above," and are found in the beginning of the ancient text:

*When on high the heaven had not been named,
Firm ground below had not been called by name,
Nothing but primordial Apsu, their begetter,
[and] Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all.*⁴

Two things – "**the heaven & firm ground**" – are named, but have not been created. Two things existed and had names -- **Apsu** (a primeval fresh water ocean) and **Tiamat** (a primeval salt water ocean). Apsu is a male called "*the begetter*" and Tiamat is a female called "*she who bore.*" Nothing else is revealed about the two bodies of water -- *they simply existed at the beginning.*

*When sweet and bitter (waters) mingled together, no reed was woven
no rushes muddied the water, the gods were nameless, natureless,
futureless, then **from Apsu and Tiamat, in the waters, gods were
created.***⁵

The first creative act began when Apsu and Tiamat mingled their waters together. The sexual imagery is obvious in the phrase "mingled their waters together." It is clear that the Babylonian idea of creation was understood in terms of sexual

reproduction. It was an integral part of the ancient Mesopotamian cosmic reality and even the creation of the gods and goddesses were subject to it. The first act of creation recorded in this ancient text revealed the highest value and first priority of the Babylonians – *the gods*. But make sure you note this -- **there was a period in which the Babylonian gods did not exist.**

Now pay close attention to the Babylonian account of how the heavens and earth were created. Tiamat, the salt-water ocean, was transformed into a dragon-like entity. **Marduk**, a descendant of the gods that she bore, used powerful winds as weapons to inflate Tiamat's body like a balloon and then stab her to death. *Marduk cut her body in half and opened it up like a giant clam shell. **The upper half of her dead body became "the heavens" and the lower half "the earth."***⁶ **Humans were made by mixing clay with the flesh and blood of the murdered god, Kingu.** They were taught to remember their origin with every heartbeat – it was that of the dead god.

Think about how this creation account influenced the way Babylonians viewed the heaven, earth and themselves. When they looked up, they were looking at one half of the dead body of Tiamat. When they looked down, they saw the other half of her dead body. With every heart beat they remembered they were created from the flesh, blood and clay of the murdered Kingu and Tiamat. ***In their world, sex, violence and death were the foundational values and fabric of reality.*** This can still be seen in certain cultures of the Middle East today. But now, let's turn to the Torah's account of creation.

*In the beginning **ELOHIYM** created the Heaven and the Earth.*⁷

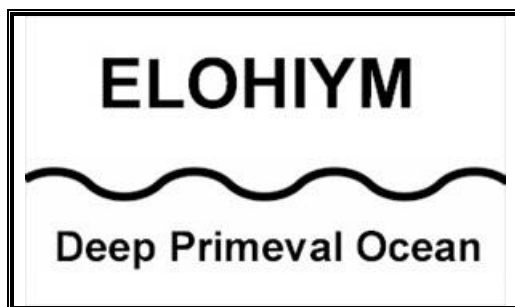
ELOHIYM (pronounced **EL-O-HEEM**) is the transliteration of a Hebrew word that appears many times in the Hebrew Bible. It is usually translated "God," but its root meanings are -- *god, gods, goddess, and goddesses. It has also been translated angels, rulers, and judges.*⁸ There are no capital letters in Hebrew, so the decision to capitalize "God" was simply the choice of the translator. In other words, this god's name wasn't "God." This introduces the first mystery of the Torah – ***the mystery of the unnamed ELOHIYM.*** He just exists at the beginning – *just like Apsu & Tiamat existed at the beginning.* No information is given about His origins, history, victories, descendants, physical appearance, etc. **The only thing the Torah reveals about Him is that He is "a creator."**

It is very important to understand what the Hebrew word translated "create" meant to the ancient Jewish audience. It means "***to change the form or shape of something that exist.***" Anytime something is created, look for what the Creator changed. So, let's find out what existed at the beginning:

The Earth was without form and void, darkness was over the surface of the primeval ocean, and the Spirit of ELOHIYM hovered above the surface of the waters.⁹

In *Enuma Elish*, the names "Heaven" and "Earth" were introduced at the beginning, even though they did not exist yet. In the Bible, the "Heaven and the Earth" are also recorded in the opening verse and the verse above reveals that the Earth did not exist yet (neither did the Heavens). The verse reveals what did exist: **darkness, a primeval ocean and the Spirit of ELOHIYM** (meaning the "**presence of ELOHIYM**," not a separate entity).

The first mystery we encountered in the text was the "mystery of ELOHIYM," now the second mystery is revealed – *the "mystery of the primeval ocean."* Nothing is revealed about its origin. It is there at the beginning with ELOHIYM. But, there is only one body of water, not two.



The location of ELOHIYM sent a very clear message to the Jewish captives. He is superior to the primeval ocean and above the Babylonian creators of the gods. **In the Torah, the creation is the expression of His will alone.** The idea expressed here is that the presence of ELOHIYM, poised like an eagle hovering above its nest, is ready to provide its life-giving energy and protect to its offspring.¹⁰ The nest is the primordial ocean.

However, before we move on, take a moment to picture what it would have been like to have been there at the beginning enveloped in absolute darkness with a deep ocean. Wouldn't that have been one of the most dangerous environments imaginable for human life? Your odds for survival would have been zero.

As we saw above, to create means to change something exists. So which will the Creator change first – *the darkness or the primeval ocean?* The answer is recorded in the ancient Hebrew manuscript, when ELOHIYM spoke this word:

אור

This is a very interesting word. Ancient Hebrew did not have the vowel signs you find in most Hebrew versions of the Bible today. The **Masoretes**, groups of Jewish scribe-scholars based primarily in Tiberias, Jerusalem and Babylon, worked between the 5th and 10th centuries CE to standardize pronunciation, paragraph and verse divisions and cantillation of the Jewish Bible for the worldwide Jewish community.¹¹ Their system added vowel signs to the Hebrew words, but required them to be placed under, above or within the Hebrew

consonants. They could not change the consonants however. In the Hebrew above, **the choice of where they placed one dot was placed makes a big difference** in how we understand what the Creator created. The original word is #1 below, and the two options the Masoretes had are #2 and #3 (find the dot).

1	2	3
אור	אור	אור
	light	fire

Did the Creator create #2 "light" or #3 "fire"? **In the Jewish culture light and life are used synonymously**, as can be seen in the example below:

"Better to extinguish the light on Sabbath than to extinguish life, which is ELOHIYM's light."¹²

The creation of light was the creation of life. This reveals life the highest value and first priority of ELOHIYM. However, for the Jews living in captivity, they may also have considered the possibility of the other – fire. By the time Ezra began his work on the Torah, **Zoroastrianism** was a powerful religion in Babylon because it was the religion of **Cyrus the Great**, the Persian conqueror of the Babylonians. **Sacred fire played an important role in Zoroastrianism.**

The Adar is the sacred fire of the Zoroastrians (Parsis). **The fire symbolizes purity, the essence of life, and the presence of God.** In the Zoroastrian creation story, fire is the last creation, but **brings life** to all that came before it.¹³

If the captive Jews understood the word to mean "light," it also meant "life." If they understood it to mean "fire," that could also mean "life." The point is, ELOHIYM is the Creator of Life and every act of creation He did created life or made life better – *unlike Marduk who created everything by death and violence.* In an interview several years, the head of the terrorist organization said:

*"**The Jews love life**, so that is what we shall take away from them. We are going to win, because they love life and **we love death**."¹⁴*

Interestingly, the Jews have survived all of the empires and fanatics that have tried to destroy them. There can be little doubt that a culture that values life as its highest value has a better chance of survival than those who value death or anything else – *for example wealth.* The message of the first creation account of the Bible is this -- ***The Creator chose Life 1st – You do the same!*** **BHC**

January Memorials

In Loving Memory

**HOMER
MELTON
(DOC) PITNER**

October 7, 1914
January 10, 1971

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**GLADYS
GERALDINE
MYERS**

October 1, 1916
January 29, 2009

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to
seek those qualities of mind and
heart which they shared when we
walked life's journey together.*

*May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and
noblest strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our
loyalty to those things which we
valued and shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion
and our biblical heritage.*

*As long as we live, they too will
live; for they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The Prayer
Book Press)

In Loving Memory

**JULIE
FALLIN
KELSOE**

January 12, 1960
January 19, 1990

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*



שְׁלוֹם

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¹ http://www.biblesearchers.com/temples/jeremiah5_files/image001.jpg

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/En%C3%BBma_Eli%C5%A1

³ <http://www.cresourcei.org/enumaelish.html>

⁴ *Enuma Elish* Tablet I lines 1-4; <http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/stc/stc04.htm>

⁵ *Enuma Elish* Tablet I lines 5-9

⁶ <http://www.jcu.edu/Bible/200/Readings/EnumaElish.htm>

⁷ Genesis 1:1

⁸ A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament by William L. Holladay (William E. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Grand Rapids, Michigan; © 1971 E. J. Brill, Leiden, Netherlands; page 16b).

⁹ Genesis 1:2

¹⁰ See Deuteronomy 32:11

¹¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masoretes>

¹² Shab. 30b (Babylonian Talmud)

¹³ <http://symboldictionary.net/?p=1797>

¹⁴ <http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/858/features/we-love-death/>