



This essay will consider contributions of modern scholarship to the interpretation of the creation accounts in Scripture. Although modern exegesis differs significantly from a Thomistic approach, it should not be omitted from our inquiry into how to understand the creation narratives, for it can be used in harmony with Aquinas' approach to sketch out a more complete account.

One of the characteristics of modern biblical exegesis is a strong interest in ferreting out original sources. For instance, can we discern the hands of different authors in the Pentateuch? Or do creation accounts in the Bible borrow from older pagan creation myths?

One might be concerned that, by establishing that the biblical creation accounts are influenced by older pagan stories, one undermines biblical inspiration. That is, if the Bible has pagan sources, then it would seem that the text is not original and revealed by God, but cut and pasted from older manmade myths.

However, divine inspiration should not be equated with discontinuous originality. Before God chose his people Israel, making a covenant with Abraham, they were, naturally, like their neighbors. In revealing himself to his people, God not only gave them an entirely new revelation but also corrected and purified prevailing notions about himself and the universe that the people already had. Thus if Israel's inspired religious poetry retains vestiges of a polytheistic past, such as "God of gods" (*Deu 10:17, Ps 84:7, Ps 136:2, Dan 11:36*) we need not be unsettled.

Moreover we should not be startled that pagan peoples could make some right judgments about God and the world in their religious poetry. After all, as St. Thomas Aquinas teaches, one can know by reason alone that God exists and is the cause of all creatures.

In this essay, we will briefly review a number of themes present in biblical creation accounts that modern Scripture scholarship finds in older pagan sources, namely: a personal creator, the impersonal production of things, creation through the separation of elements, creating by speaking a word, the formation of man out of clay, man's being made in the image of the maker, and conflict with chaos and dragons or sea monsters. From the examples presented, the reader will be able to judge for himself how close the connec-

# Modern Biblical Exegesis of the Creation Accounts

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tions are between the Bible and the more ancient myths. In any case, the evidence should suffice to show that while there was an original and unique revelation made to Israel, the creation accounts do not articulate this revelation in isolation from Israel's neighbors.

Scholars have established that thousands of years before the nation of Israel was constituted, the peoples in that region already had a personal creator god in their mythology. What is unique about the Old Testament is that God is categorically outside of creation; he is uncreated. Other creation accounts include gods within creation, even if they are the highest or most powerful things in the universe.<sup>1</sup> This will be illustrated in the examples below. To situate the chronology, we should note here that the great Babylonian epics like the *Enuma Elish* (c. 1700 B.C.) and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 1200 B.C.) are drawn from older individual Sumerian myths that were later integrated.<sup>2</sup> The oldest material in the Pentateuch is believed to be from around 900 B.C.<sup>3</sup>

In ancient creation myths there is a transition from a description of the spontaneous produc-

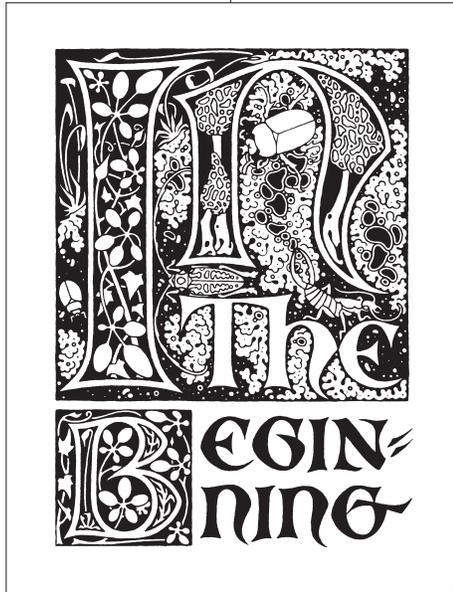
tion of things to the attribution of their production to a personal god. At an even later stage, praise is offered to the creator god. Modern biblical scholars observe vestiges of the more ancient origin stories in the Bible. For instance in Gen 1:24: “And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds;’” one sees the language of the spontaneous production of things, now set in the context of God’s commanding it.<sup>4</sup>

Many ancient pagan accounts of creation involve an act of dividing elements, *e.g.*, light from darkness or land from water. For instance: Marduk, the god of light, divides the dragon Tiamat’s corpse to produce the heavens and the earth in the Enuma Elish; the heavens are set at a distance from the earth in the Gilgamesh myth; and in the Egyptian narrative, Shu, the god of air, separates Geb, the god of earth, from Nut, the goddess of heaven.<sup>5</sup> This is not absent from the Bible, where we read that God separated “the light from the darkness,” “the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament,” and the water from the land (**Gen 1:4, 7, 9**).

The presence of the idea of creating through the utterance of a word has been documented in ancient pagan myths. In Egyptian literature we even encounter the accompanying approval of the result: “every utterance of the god truly came into being through that which was conceived by the heart and commanded by the tongue.... Thus was Ptah satisfied, after he had made all things and every divine utterance.” This theme is emphasized in Genesis 1, where we read eight times that God uttered a command like “let there be” as he created things during the six days; and six times, it is reported that God saw afterwards that “it was good.” However, dependence cannot be established since these accounts were composed at about the same time.<sup>6</sup>

The story of the formation of man out of clay seems to be the most common creation motif. As an illustration, in the Egyptian narrative, the pot-

ter god Chnum created humans out of clay using a potter’s wheel.<sup>7</sup> In Gen 2:7, we learn that “the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.”



The idea of man’s being created in a god’s image is not as old as the story of his being created out of clay, but the notion, though less explicit than in the Bible, does appear in the Epic of Gilgamesh, where Aruru creates Enkidu out of clay after conceiving a “double of Anu,” the sky god.

The struggle motif that appears in ancient creation literature, such as Marduk’s killing Tiamat, is reflected in the Bible in the prophets and wisdom literature. For example, we find the Lord doing battle with and

conquering dragons, serpents, sea monsters, and watery chaos in Job 26:12-13: “By his power he stilled the sea; by his understanding he smote Rahab. By his wind the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.”<sup>8</sup> In Babylonian myths, the struggle against chaos, already a theme in older Sumerian myths, became a central point in the creation story.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, in the Bible, God does whatever he wills effortlessly.

In conclusion, while Israel shares similar themes in its religious poetry with its pagan neighbors—a fact we need not fear—there is a definitive new revelation that works as a corrective in all these narratives. Through some of these same ancient images, the sacred Scriptures teach anew that there is only one God, uncreated and omnipotent, the only source of all things, who has bestowed on man the great dignity of being made in the image of the Almighty. **THE**

<sup>1</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction*, 25. This essay will take Westermann to be representative of modern Scripture scholarship. He documents other authors abundantly, signaling where he agrees and disagrees with them. »

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> See also Ps 74:13-15, Ps 89:10-11, Isa 27:1, and Isa 51:9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39.

“Pentateuch.”

<sup>4</sup> Westermann, 25-26.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., s.v.