

# **T**he primeval waters in israelite and jewish religious thought

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to discuss the most important aspects concerning the presence of the primeval waters in the Israelite and Jewish thought, with an emphasis on the first book of the Torah. The research took into account the similarities and differences between the creation narrative from Genesis and from the Mesopotamian poem "Enuma elish". The main conclusion is that although the concept of primeval waters from the Israelite and Jewish religious thought is essentially similar to its Mesopotamian counterpart, the Biblical authors managed to transform and integrate it into the general framework of their strict monotheism.

**Key words:**Cosmogony, Primeval Waters, Hebrew Bible, Genesis.

## **1. Introduction**

In the Jewish religious thought we find the idea of a deep, a primeval abyss waiting to be shaped, plasticized by the Creator. The Christian theology, though, which assumed the books of Jewish Torah, placed the emphasis more on *creatio ex nihilo*, avoiding more profound debates concerning the role and meaning of the primeval abyss found in the Book of Genesis. The first occurrence of the Hebrew term *tehom*, which designated the abyss or the deep, is in the very beginning of Genesis, the first book of the Jewish Torah and of the Christian Old Testament: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the

waters" (Gen. 1:1-2). The analysis of the meaning and role of this concept in the Jewish religious thought must take into account the history of this kind of literature, particularly the specific contributions brought by various redactions strata to the text of Torah that we read nowadays.

## 2. Genesis 1: 2 and *Enuma elish*

In the modern exegesis, especially since Herman Gunkel (1862-1932) (Gunkel, 1895), it has been asserted with a great deal of trust that the Hebrew term *tehom* has the same Semitic etymology as *Tiamat*, the name of the well-known Mesopotamian goddess of primeval salty waters. Consequently, based on this etymology and on the similarities between *Enuma elish* and Genesis, some exegetes speculated that the narrative of creation from Torah relies on the aforementioned Mesopotamian cosmogonic myth. Thus, the deep from the beginning of Genesis was considered to be the Hebrew equivalent of the primeval chaos found in other Semitic religious myths. Unlike their neighbors, the Israelites "cleansed" this myth of its polytheistic aspects, integrating it into the monotheistic framework, throughout successive redactions of the Biblical books (Vail, 2012: 124). Starting from Gunkel's arguments, the Biblical cosmogony was included in the category of *Chaoskampf* myths, along with the Babylonian cosmogonic myth found in *Enuma elish* and with other similar Oriental myths. Such an interpretation was shocking in its times, because it questioned fundamental themes such as the Jewish monotheism or the idea of the Creator God, themes that were essential not only to the Jewish, but also to the Christian religious thought. But Gunkel's arguments did not escape criticism from researchers working both in the field of the history of religions and of linguistics. Referring to *tehom*, the American Assyriologist Alexander Heidel (1907-1955) underlined that a direct borrowing into Hebrew from the language of *Enuma elish* is actually impossible. Firstly, Heidel asserted, based on analysis of the Mesopotamian cuneiform literature, that *Tiamat* already was a proper noun, being used as such in almost every source; only here and there we can find it as an equivalent of the common noun *tâmtu*, the generic name for stagnant waters (oceans, seas, lakes). Therefore, in order for the Hebrew term to indicate a direct link between the Biblical narrative and the creation poem in *Enuma elish* it should be based on *Tiamat* proper, and not on the generic noun *tâmtu*. But in this case the concept itself should be at least somewhat similar to what *Tiamat* signifies in

*Enuma elish*; this is impossible to maintain, on a careful analysis of the Hebrew text. In Genesis, the deep is not personified at all, as it is considered a geographically determined place – the surface of the waters. Heidel's arguments go on with detailed linguistic analyses, leading to the conclusion that all we can say in respect to *tehom* and *Tiamat* is that both terms might have the same distant Semitic root. The Hebrew term conserved the generic meanings of *tâmtu*, the stagnant waters, without acquiring a proper mythological meaning (Heidel, 1951: 99-101).

David Toshio Tsumura (Tsumura, 2005) continued Heidel's argumentation, asserting that the Israelites did not directly borrow neither the Babylonian *Tiamat*, nor *tâmtu*. For Tsumura, there is no common origin for the Hebrew *deep* and its Babylonian counterparts. He developed an elaborated linguistic analysis that aimed to demonstrate the fact that the structural modifications required for *Tiamat* to become *tehom* never occurred in the linguistic history of the Semitic world. Trying to remove any similarity between the *Chaoskampf* from *Enuma elish* and the Biblical narrative of creation, Tsumura explained that – in the framework of Genesis – *tehom* is closer to the concept personified by Apsu, the Babylonian god of subterranean waters, than to the concept of salt, violent waters personified by Tiamat. Therefore, in Tsumura's view, the deep of Genesis is the positive matter that awaits the creative energy of the Spirit (Tsumura, 2005: 37-43).

Recently, though, Paul Kang-Kul Cho, in his doctoral thesis from Harvard University, demonstrated the existence of some structural modifications during the transition from Proto-Semitic to Akkadian and Hebrew that would have allowed for *Tiamat* to become *tehom*. Going back to Heidel's arguments, Cho showed that although the hypothesis of a direct borrowing from Babylonian is hard to support, the common origin of the two terms is beyond any doubt. Moreover, he underlined the similarities and the logical differences between *Enuma elish* and the Biblical narrative of creation, showing that there is a conceptual link between the two cosmogonies, including the presence of the primeval waters. According to Cho, the redactors of the Priestly stratum of Genesis, the most recent of the redaction strata of the first book in Torah, had a very solid knowledge of the Babylonian cosmogony, where waters were personified in Tiamat. In editing the Israelite cosmogony they used the conceptual system of the Babylonians only to deconstruct it and to prove its weakness. The supernatural elements of the Babylonian myth were converted in

simple natural elements, obedient to the divine word and will. In the Biblical cosmogony, the Creator God does not fight against the violent ocean, like Marduk and Tiamat, in *Enuma elish*. In the Bible, the act of Creation is the first, fundamental step, the beginning of everything, and not the result of a theomachy. In the strictly monotheistic view of the Priestly redactors of Genesis, God does not have an adversary – He creates everything out of His own will and through His own will (Cho, 2014: 132-135).

The opinions expressed by researchers are influenced by their trust in linguistic analysis, on the one hand, and in the analysis of the cultural and religious connections between Israel and Babylon, on the other hand. If we accept that the Biblical creation narrative is directly or indirectly influenced by the Babylonian cosmogony, then the meaning of *tehom* appears evident and there is no need for further explanations. But if we do not admit this influence, we have to find an explanation for the presence of the primeval abyss in the strata of Genesis, specifically for the insertion of this concept in the Biblical text, operated by later redactors. In general, the exegetes agree that in the Ancient Near East the belief in the chaotic primeval waters that opposed creation and order was widespread, therefore it should be considered nothing unusual that it had a powerful echo in both Israelite and Jewish thought (Wenham, 2002: 16). The first verse of the Bible represents an abrupt cosmogonic introduction, which brings into foreground the creation *ex nihilo* of earth and sky; in the second verse the creative force diminishes, because earth is presented as “formless and empty”, an entity without shape and content. Therefore, the chaos that can be discerned in the Biblical thought does not precede creation, but the organization and ordering of the creation that was already brought into existence “in the beginning” by God Himself. The deep from Genesis is partial correspondent to the primeval aquatic chaos from the cosmogonies of the Ancient Near East and this is proven by the persistence of the motive in other Biblical writings, including here books of the New Testament, such as the *Apocalypse* of Saint John the Theologian (Dumbrell, 2002: 14).

### 3. The primeval waters in other Hebrew and Jewish texts

References to the primeval waters are not limited, in the Biblical cosmogonic narrative, to the second verse in the book of Genesis. Just a few verses later, the Biblical text asserts: “So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it

was so" (Gen. 1:7). Between the mentioning of the deep overseen by God's Spirit and the separation of waters we find the creation of light. The order of these essential moments is the same as in *Enuma Elish*. That is why Cho insisted on the fact that we have to accept the connections between the two cosmogonies, even if we only consider them as a sign of a common cultural heritage (Cho, 2014: 133). In respect to the proper meaning of the separation of waters we can explain it as an illustration of the general Near East view on meteorological phenomena. Thus, the Oriental thought was that earth is a middle world between the subterranean waters and the heavenly waters ("the firmament" from Genesis and *Enuma elish*). This firmament (called simply "heaven" in Gen. 1:8) was considered hard and resistant enough not to allow the waters from above to fall on earth in larger quantities than those needed to assure the persistence of life. The Jews, for example, although had observed the obvious link between clouds and rain, were still thinking that the clouds got their water from the heavenly ocean found above the firmament (Seely, 1992: 37). Sometimes, though, the firmament was thought to suffer serious ruptures, which allowed the waters from above to fall on earth as a flood. In these circumstances, the initial order established by the Creator God was profoundly disturbed (Brayford, 2007: 210-211). This understanding of the sky or heaven as a dam in the way of the primeval ocean from above was perpetuated in Christian era. The belief was initially assumed as such, but in the "Golden Age" of patristic Saint Basil the Great tried to demonstrate that, in fact, there are two firmaments: one firmament below the level of clouds, made of compressed air (the atmosphere), and the other firmament above the clouds, Sun and stars, made of water (the Biblical firmament). His explanation was accepted, in principle, by other Christian authors and it was only during the Renaissance era that most theologians accepted that the "waters above the firmament" mentioned in Gen. 1:7 could be, in fact, the very clouds that bring rain (Seely, 1992: 37-38).

The episode narrating the separation of waters in the book of Genesis was rewritten in the Book of Jubilees, in a slightly modified form. The book was written sometimes in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., most probably in an Essene milieu, and represents a *Midrash*, a creative commentary on the Books of Genesis and Exodus. Nowadays, the Book of Jubilees is considered a canonical writing in the Ethiopian Orthodox (Tewahedo) Church (Wood, 1996: 616). Thus, in the Ethiopic version of the Jubilees we read: "On the second day he made a firmament between the waters and the waters were divided on that

day. Half of them went up above and half of them went down below the firmament (which was) in the middle above the surface of the whole earth. This was the only work that he made on the second day” (Jub. 2:4) (Vanderkam, 1989: 9). As we can note, the text from the Book of Jubilees is somewhat similar to the text from Genesis, but there are two significant differences. Firstly, we should observe that the Hebrew Biblical text does not show the proportions of the separation, while the Ethiopic writing asserts that the firmament separated in halves the primeval ocean. Secondly, the text of the Jubilees talks about a movement of waters, which pass over and below the firmament, rising and descending. The waters, created in the first day, did not have their own place in cosmos, but they were at Creator’s disposal, who then placed them in specific places. The waters had to move in order to be established in their own designated places. This is a fundamental difference between the genesis described by the Jubilees and the Biblical cosmogonic narrative. In Torah, the waters have their own place, filling the initial creation (heavens and earth, according to Gen. 1:1). When God separates them He just divides the creation into the component pieces. God does not use the waters to fill empty spots in the universe, because there are no such spots after the initial creation of heaven and earth; all things created after Gen. 1:1 are created in an existing place. In the Jubilees, though, there is sufficient empty space for the waters to fill. We should also note that, unlike Gen. 1:8, in the Jubilees the firmament is equated with the sky. The authors of the apocryphal book talk about the existence of two distinct entities: the sky, created in the first day, and the firmament, created in the second day, to act as a frontier between the waters from above and the waters from below. The sky is somewhere “above” all things (Jub. 2:2), while the firmament is in the middle, above the surface of the earth (Jub. 2:4) (van Ruiten, 2000: 28).

#### **4. The brazen sea as a symbol for the primeval waters**

The remembrance of the primeval waters was also present in the Jewish worship, even though not in an explicit manner. A relevant element in this respect is the so called “brazen sea” found in the courtyard of Solomon’s Temple. In the description of the construction works carried on at the Temple site we read about Hiram, the mason from Tyre who worked for Solomon and “made the sea of cast metal ten cubits from brim to brim, circular in form, and its height was five cubits, and thirty cubits in circumference” (3 Kgs. 7:23). This huge

basin was used, in practice, as a laver for the priests of the Temple (2 Chr. 4:6), but its architecture and the fact that was designed and built by Hiram of Tyre lead to various symbolic interpretations in the Jewish thought. In principle, the brazen or molten sea was considered an element similar to the large scale basins found in Babylonian temples, particularly in the Temple of Marduk from Babylon. These basins symbolized the primeval waters that were organized and tamed by the Creator. Lundquist identified a series of characteristics of the Ancient Near East temples. Among the most important common features we find the association of the sacred building with the waters of life. As a place of communion between divine and human, the Ancient Near East temple was in an uninterrupted connection with the waters of creation (Lundquist, 1984: 57).

The same meaning and symbolism were ascribed to the brazen sea found in the courtyard of Solomon's Temple. Thus, in the project of the Temple the building was planned as a symbol for the center of the universe, this aspect being crucial in the sacred architecture of the Ancient Near East. But in the center of the universe, in the beginning, the primeval waters were also present; therefore, it was necessary to establish a symbol for these primeval waters in or near the Temple. The Israelites, though, helped by Hiram of Tyre, found a solution of their own, designing the brazen sea in a manner that would always remember Yahweh's victory over the chaotic forces of the deep, which strongly opposed the creation and organization of the universe. Moreover, the presence of the basin outside the Temple building was an indicator of the fact that the primeval ocean had no direct importance in the life of creation, occupying only a marginal place. It was at Yahweh's disposal and was used by His servants (Freedman, 1992: 1061-1062).

## 5. Conclusions

We can conclude that from the very beginning of the Torah to the daily worship at Solomon's Temple the concept of primeval waters was present in the Israelite and event in the later Jewish religious thought and practice. Even if the concept is closely related to the Mesopotamian poem of creation, *Enuma elish*, we cannot simply say that the Biblical narrative copied the Babylonian myth. In fact, the Israelite religious genius processed the Semitic aquatic cosmogony, integrating it in the monotheistic framework of the Mosaic religion. This transformation is easy to note in practice, when we refer to the

brazen sea from the courtyard of Solomon's Temple, a symbol of the fundamental inferiority of the chaotic powers of the deep compared to the almightiness of Yahweh.

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