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Creation and Chaos

*A Reconsideration of Hermann Gunkel's
Chaoskampf Hypothesis*

edited by

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and

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Babel-Bible-Baal

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I. “Babel-Baal Streit”

On January 13, 1902, Friedrich Delitzsch delivered his first *Babel und Bibel* lecture before the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft and the Kaiser of the German Reich. As part of Delitzsch’s general argument that much in the Hebrew Bible depended on Babylonian culture, the Assyriologist provided his audience with a lengthy paraphrase of *Enūma eliš*. “At the very beginning of all things,” Delitzsch informed the Kaiser, “a dark, chaotic, primeval water, called *Tiāmat*, existed in a state of agitation and tumult,” but the god Marduk later cleaved it “clean asunder like a fish.”¹ Delitzsch proceeded to explain the relevance of the ancient Babylonian poem to his theme: “As Marduk was the tutelary deity of the city of Babylon, we can readily believe that this narrative in particular became very widely diffused in Canaan. Indeed, the Old Testament poets and prophets even went so far as to transfer Marduk’s heroic act directly to *Yahwè*.”² Delitzsch was only popularizing an opinion that many scholars of his day were already taking for granted—that the origin of Israelite ideas about creation was to be found in Babylonia.³ This groundbreaking thesis had been presented seven years earlier, when, in *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit*, Hermann Gunkel argued that the Babylonian narrative of Marduk’s defeat of *Tiāmat* had influenced the Bible’s conception of creation, as well as its depiction of the eschatological end of days.⁴

1. Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible: Two Lectures* (trans. C. H. W. Johns; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007; original: New York: Putnam, 1903) 47, 49. On Delitzsch’s ideological commitments, including his nationalism and anti-Semitism, see Bill T. Arnold and David B. Weisberg, “A Centennial Review of Friedrich Delitzsch’s ‘Babel und Bibel’ Lectures,” *JBL* 121 (2002) 441–57, with bibliographical references. For a discussion of Delitzsch’s lecture in its larger cultural context, see Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 212–51.

2. Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible*, 49.

3. The principal biblical passages that have come under discussion in this regard are Genesis 1; Isa 17:12–14; 27:1; 51:9–10; Pss 104:5ff.; 46:3–4; 74:12ff.; 89:10ff.; Job 26:12; 9:13; Daniel 7; Revelation 12, 13, 17.

4. H. Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12* (trans. K. William Whitney, Jr.; Grand Rapids,

Uncertainty emerged about Babylon as the source of the divine combat imagery in the Bible when the Ugaritic mythological texts were discovered in 1931. As early as 1936, just one year after the initial publication of the *Ba'al Cycle* passage presenting the storm god's combat with Yamm, W. F. Albright raised the issue of influence between Mesopotamian and Ugaritic mythology.⁵ Albright observed that "Yammu plays essentially the same role in Canaanite cosmogony that Tiāmat and Labbu, etc., do in Mesopotamian"⁶ but remained agnostic regarding the direction of influence. In a note, he remarked: "It is too early to reach any definite conclusion with regard to the original provenience of these monsters, whether from the East or the West."⁷

Thirty years later, Thorkild Jacobsen believed he could resolve the question of the combat motif's geographical origin. In a short article devoted to the combat between Marduk and Ti'āmat, Jacobsen reflected on the relationship between the Babylonian creation epic and the myth of Ba'al from Ugarit:

To find the same mythological motif: a battle between the god of thunderstorms and the sea from which the god of the thunderstorm emerges victorious, both in *Enuma elish*—composed in Babylonia around the middle of the Second Millennium B.C.—and in an Ugaritic poem written down on the coast of the Mediterranean at roughly the same date naturally raises the question whether we are dealing with a case of independent invention, or with a motif that has wandered from East to West or from West to East.⁸

Earlier in his essay, Jacobsen had concluded that "the battle between Marduk and Ti'āmat described in *Enūma eliš* is a battle of the elements, of forces in nature, a battle between the thunderstorm and the sea."⁹ This meteorological interpretation constitutes the basis for Jacobsen's answer to the question of origins. Considering which geographical location—coastal Syria or southern Mesopotamia—is the more likely original environment to have produced this myth, he concludes that the meteorology of coastal Ugarit makes for the more likely candidate. The environment surrounding Babylon, Jacobsen argued,

MI: Eerdmans, 2006); cf. idem, *Israel and Babylon: The Babylonian Influence on Israelite Religion* (trans. E. S. B. and K. C. Hanson; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009 = Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1903) 42–43.

5. Willam Foxwell Albright, "Zabūl Yam and Thāpiṭ Nahar in the Combat between Baal and the Sea," *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 16 (1936) 17–20. See Dennis Pardee, "La mythologie ougaritique dans son cadre historique," *Res Antiquae* 7 (2010) 168–69.

6. Albright, "Zabūl Yam," 18.

7. Ibid., 18 n. 1.

8. Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Battle between Marduk and Tiamat," *JAOS* 88 (1968) 104–8; quotation from p. 107.

9. Ibid., 106.

would have supplied no incentive for such a mythopoeic rendering of the storm and sea, and so the idea that the Babylonians “should independently have thought up a myth about a battle between the thunderstorm and the sea and should then have made the myth central in [their] cosmogony is exceedingly difficult to imagine, and common sense must exclude it as a probable possibility.”¹⁰ Jacobsen ends his article by considering when this migration may have taken place. Basing his opinion on the time when the uncontracted form *tī'amtum* would most likely have arrived in the east, he states that his “personal preference is for assuming that the motif was brought to Babylon late, with the Amorites.”¹¹

Jacobsen’s “common sense” seemed to be proved right when, in 1993, Jean-Marie Durand published a letter from Mari containing a prophecy of the storm god of Aleppo.¹² The prophecy contains a reference to the combat between the storm god and the sea and thus provides an attestation of the motif several hundred years older than both the Ugaritic and the Babylonian poems. This early appearance of the combat motif in the west lent support to the contention that the Mesopotamian use was derivative of an earlier Amorite tradition. Exorcism rituals from Ebla, published four years later by Pelio Fronzaroli, further localized the tradition in Syria at an early date.¹³ Scholarly opinion has accordingly shifted toward identifying an Amorite origin for the mythic motif of divine combat against the sea.

The discovery of these western sources has necessitated a reconsideration of the question of influence on the Bible that produced the *Babel-Bibel-Streit*. With numerous attestations of the mythic motif now available from locations more proximate to ancient Israel, one must wonder whether the biblical authors took from Babylon at all or instead acquired their mythical material closer to home. Though proponents of Babylonian influence on the Bible have not disappeared—especially with respect to biblical texts considered to be later productions—the discovery of the Ugaritic mythological texts have dramatically shifted scholarly attention to Israel’s “Canaanite” background. According to Mark S. Smith, for example, “the Baal Cycle expresses the heart of the West Semitic religion from which Israelite religion largely developed.”¹⁴

10. *Ibid.*, 107.

11. *Ibid.*, 108.

12. A. 1968. Published in Jean-Marie Durand, “Le mythologème du combat entre le dieu de l’orage et la mer en Mésopotamie,” *MARI* 7 (1993) 41–61.

13. Pelio Fronzaroli, “Les combats de Hadda dans les textes d’Ébla,” *MARI* 8 (1997) 283–90.

14. Mark S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, vol. 1: *Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU 1.1–1.2* (VTSup 55; Leiden: Brill, 1994) xxvi.

Israel's use of the combat motif has come to be seen mainly as an inheritance of local Syro-Palestinian traditions, not an importation from Mesopotamia. This revision of Gunkel and Delitzsch's position has resulted, above all, from the displacement of Mesopotamian by Ugaritic mythology as the principal source for reconstructing the background to Israelite religion.

In contrast to the furor that broke out in the wake of Delitzsch's famous lecture, the replacement of *Enūma eliš* with the *Ba'al Cycle* as the key text for understanding the Bible's mythological background has been a tame academic affair. There has been no "Babel-Baal Streit" akin to the *Babel-Bibel Streit* of a century ago. This is understandable. The idea that the biblical texts reflect prebiblical traditions has, of course, become more palatable over the years. Besides, compared with the problem of whether to admit the existence of outside influences on the Bible at all, the question whether these influences come from near or far can hardly cause blood to boil; particularly so because—as Albright's early comment about Yamm's resembling Tī'āmat attests—little effort has been placed on distinguishing the meaning of mythological material in Mesopotamia and Ugarit. Instead, Jean-Marie Durand has referred to the *Ba'al Cycle* and *Enūma eliš* as attesting "la même histoire,"¹⁵ while Albright's student Frank Moore Cross has contended that both poems are cosmogonies that share the same basic structure.¹⁶ If there is little fundamental difference between the mythical attestations of the combat motif in Ugarit and Babylon, then the question of which provides the more direct source for the Bible is at best a secondary concern.

Consensus has begun to break down, however, regarding the similarity of the Ugaritic and Babylonian poems.¹⁷ Already in the first volume of his *Ba'al Cycle* commentary, Smith provided an extensive list of points at which the characterization of Ba'al differs from that of Marduk.¹⁸ In his contribution to this volume, Wayne Pitard continues to distinguish the two poems by arguing against claims that the *Ba'al Cycle* is a cosmogony. It is an opportune time, therefore, to reconsider the relevance of the discovery of the Ugaritic myth to our understanding of the motif of divine combat against the sea as it occurs in the literature of the ancient Near East.

15. Durand, "Le mythologème du combat," 42.

16. Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 73–83.

17. To be sure, there have always been those who objected to the tendency of reading the *Ba'al Cycle* in light of *Enūma eliš*; see, for example, Jonas C. Greenfield, "The Hebrew Bible and Canaanite Literature," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) 557.

18. Smith, *Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, xxv–xxvi.

II. Motifs and Meanings

The corpus of texts that attest the mythic motif of a storm god who fights the sea has grown since the days of Gunkel and Delitzsch. Nevertheless, the predilection has been to approach these new finds with the same basic questions that motivated those German scholars a century ago. Focus has remained on tracking influence and transmission. This has often had the effect of diverting attention away from the particularities of each specific occurrence. This procedure makes sense if the goal is to plot a motif's historical trajectory but often stands in the way of understanding the meaning of the material in our possession. Because meaning is not present intrinsically in a mythological motif but, rather, results from the way that a motif is employed within a specific context, concern with origins can prove to be an obstacle to understanding. Knowing where something comes from is not the same as understanding what it is doing once it is there.¹⁹ The tendency to focus on influence and transmission and thus to abstract from what particularizes each attestation must be balanced by investigation into the ways that a common motif can produce a variety of meanings, sometimes quite at odds with one another.

Jacobsen, for instance, failed to consider this latter issue when he wrote about the relationship between *Enūma eliš* and the *Ba'al Cycle*. For him, the meaning of the myth derived from "which realities may be thought to underlie it."²⁰ He determined that the two combatants stood for meteorological phenomena and that these phenomena corresponded to the climate of Ugarit, not Babylonia. As a result, the Ugaritic poem was designated original, and the Babylonian poem was treated as derivative. Jacobsen never explained what good a meteorological myth that did not correspond to the Babylonian climate would have done for the people of Babylon. Employed as a means to convey ideas about political order and authority, however, the motif achieves a function at Babylon despite its meteorologically foreign origins. The combat motif, even if foreign in origin, was integrated into an elaborate Babylonian account of Marduk's reign, how that reign overturned an earlier chaotic era, and how it manifested itself on earth in the institution of Babylonian kingship. The motif's meaning in *Enūma eliš* derives from the way this poem uses it to imagine the conquest of chaos by the current lord of the universe.²¹

19. See Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (trans. Peter Putnam; New York: Knopf, 1953) 29–35.

20. Jacobsen, "Battle between Marduk and Tiamat," 105.

21. Elsewhere, Jacobsen does address the political meaning of Marduk's combat with Tīpāmat; see Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976) 183–91.

By contrast, the *Ba'al Cycle* does not employ the combat with Yamm to depict the overcoming of a primordial past. That is—to employ a generic definition proposed by Cross—the *Ba'al Cycle* is not a cosmogony. According to that definition, a cosmogony tells the story of how the “olden gods” were overcome by the “younger gods.”²² Though Cross offered this definition as part of an argument aimed at identifying both *Enūma eliš* and the *Ba'al Cycle* as cosmogonies, his criteria only hold good for the Babylonian poem. The two criteria he offered for identifying a god as “olden” are that such a god would not have received cultic sacrifices and would not have been taken as a theophoric element in personal names.²³ This test works for Marduk's antagonist in *Enūma eliš*, since Ti'āmat did not receive offerings in Mesopotamia, nor was she taken as a namesake. At Ugarit, however, the picture for Yamm is rather different. The sea god is found listed as a recipient of cult—along with El, Ba'al, and Athirat—in local ritual texts.²⁴ Likewise, the Ugaritic onomasticon attests Yamm as a theophoric element in such personal names as *yammu'ilu* (“Yamm is god”), *ilyammu* (“A god is Yamm”), *mlkuyammu* (“A king is Yamm”), and *'abduyammī* (“Servant of Yamm”).²⁵ Unlike Ti'āmat, therefore, Yamm fails both tests for being an “olden god.” Not a deity of the distant past, Yamm belongs to the coterie of gods that make up the present world. Battle with him, therefore, is not about transitioning from a chaotic past to an ordered present; rather, in the *Ba'al Cycle* the combat motif belongs to a depiction of struggle as present within the current world order.

Though both the poets of Ugarit and of Babylon employed the motif of combat between the storm god and the sea, they characterized the sea in different ways—with the result that the combat takes on a different meaning in each case. At Babylon, the motif was used to mark a transition from one eon to another, with the concomitant political implication that the current order has replaced a previous disorder; at Ugarit, one finds no reference to a displaced primordial chaos but, rather, a suggestion that the current world itself is constituted by ongoing struggle. The ramifications of this distinction for the respective myths' messages regarding earthly political life are profound. Any attempt to elucidate the meaning of the *Ba'al Cycle* in relation to *Enūma eliš* must take into account how each applies the combat motif differently.

22. Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, 78.

23. *Ibid.*

24. See *KTU* 1.39 13; 1.46 6; 1.148 9, 41; and 1.162 11.

25. *Ym'il: KTU* 4.75 V 14; *'ilym: KTU* 4.116 13; *mlkym: KTU* 4.126 19; *'bdym: KTU* 4.7 7; 4.103 18 and 47; 3.3 10; 4.341 3 (restored).

III. *Myth and Politics*

Nicolas Wyatt has asserted that, following Durand's publication of the Adad letter, "it became clear that the whole narrative tradition of the *Chaoskampf* had an intimate relationship with rituals of kingship, new kings receiving from the gods a charter guaranteeing divine sanction in their military campaigns." According to Wyatt, "[E]very petty local king present[ed] himself to his people in the same guise. It really had become a cliché for legitimacy."²⁶ Wyatt's conclusion flattens out the differences between the various attestations of the combat motif. His use of the term *Chaoskampf* obfuscates how the *Ba'al Cycle* is able to make use of a narrative tradition without telling a story about the conquest of chaos. Wyatt may well be right that there was an affinity between the combat motif and political thinking in the ancient world, but this affinity should not be mistaken for a fixed political message. Rather, the politics of myth are malleable in conformity with the ways a motif can be variously applied.

A typological approach furnishes a powerful corrective to the emphasis on origin and influence that has dominated discussion of the combat motif since Gunkel's pioneering work. Attention to typological distinctions provides for a richer account of the political implications of myth because it puts focus on variation and adaptation and therefore necessitates political explication consonant with that variety. I will therefore conclude by proposing two typological distinctions that are helpful for understanding the combat motif in its various manifestations. The following comments should be taken as a preliminary sketch, the purpose of which is to orient inquiry, not supply a definitive account.

The first typological distinction is between narratives that use divine combat to depict a transgenerational conflict and narratives in which combat occurs within a single generation. Call this the distinction between "diachronic" and "synchronic" applications of the combat motif. Only the former would be an appropriate mythopoeic means for describing the transition from one temporal epoch to another. Other purposes should be sought when explicating a synchronic application. The contrasting temporal horizons of *Enūma eliš* and the *Ba'al Cycle* put the Babylonian poem in the diachronic category and the Ugaritic myth in the synchronic.

Notably, the Bible's attestations of the combat motif tend to resemble the usage at Babylon more closely than at Ugarit—a point that holds true regardless of how one maps out the trajectories of influence and transmission. When, in Psalm 89, David's kingship is associated with Yahweh's primordial subduing

26. Nicolas Wyatt, "The Religious Role of the King in Ugarit," *UF* 37 (2005) 698–99.

of the sea, explicit reference is being made to an earlier time. Politically, Psalm 89 is also closer to *Enūma eliš* than to the *Baʿal Cycle*. Yahweh's relationship to the House of David resembles Marduk's position vis-à-vis Babylon. Despite Ugarit's greater proximity to Israel, the *Baʿal Cycle*—which neither associates the combat motif with the overcoming of a primordial past nor identifies divine rule with kingship on earth—provides less of a parallel to Israel's use of the motif than does the Babylonian poem.

However, the Bible also attests its own complex renderings of the mythic trope. As Gunkel recognized, the combat motif was not only used in the Bible to express ideas about creation (as in *Enūma eliš*) but also to describe the future end of days (an idea that is absent from the Babylonian poem). For instance, Isaiah predicts that “on that day” Yahweh will visit his sword on Leviathan; “He will slay the dragon of the sea” (Isa 27:1). As in the beginning, so too in the end. This prophetic eschatology is intertwined politically with the messianic hope that the future will bring an end to Israel's suffering. The eschatological adaptation of the combat motif belongs to Israel's particular rethinking of politics' relationship to the divine—one that emerged in part as a reaction to imperial subjugation.

This leads to my second typological distinction: between victory at work in the present and victory projected into the future. According to *Enūma eliš*, Marduk achieved his victory in the past and thus is ruling now, in the present. Biblical eschatology, on the other hand, recalls Yahweh's past triumph as a way to anticipate his reign in the future. Isaiah announces that Yahweh's combat at the end of days will reproduce his victory at the dawn of creation. The period between these two endpoints of history, however, the time in which we ourselves live, does not manifest the reign of a victorious god—the prophet implies—as does the world according to *Enūma eliš*. By applying the combat motif to the future as well as the past, biblical authors produced a distinct picture of the present. This picture of the present was unlike either Babylon's optimistic portrayal of Marduk's current reign or Ugarit's representation of a present characterized by continuous conflict.

There is something appropriately imperial about the Babylonian account that coordinates present Babylonian domination with Marduk's rule over the entire universe. It similarly stands to reason that Israel developed its own eschatological use of the combat motif in response to its political circumstances as a small state oppressed by imperial power. Like Israel, Ugarit also developed its political understanding in the shadow of imperial power. However, unlike the Israelite prophets who saw hope in the future, whoever composed the *Baʿal Cycle* did not apply the combat motif eschatologically. Rather, the Ugaritic poem embraces a picture in which there is neither beginning nor end

but only the ongoing struggles of today. These three cases attest three entirely different approaches to understanding the relationship among politics, history, and the divine—all three making use of the combat motif. A typological approach makes these distinctions apparent in a way that concern with transmission and influence cannot.

The *Babel-Bibel Streit* was explicitly theological. At stake were the authority of the Old Testament, the nature of revelation, and the character of God's working through history. Of the many permutations of theological thinking that came to expression in those early years of the twentieth century, I will conclude with a comment that C. H. W. Johns makes in the introduction to his 1903 English translation of Delitzsch's two lectures. The Cambridge Assyriologist and Church of England clergyman defended his German colleague by situating Babylonian culture within the history of salvation. The discoveries announced by Delitzsch are not a challenge to faith, Johns argued, but rather, an occasion for celebrating God's grace:

The men of deep religious faith, who alone count for the progress of the race, will rejoice and take courage at a fresh proof that the Father has never left Himself without witness among men, and that even the most unlikely elements have gone to prepare the world for Him who was, and still is, to come.²⁷

From Johns's perspective, the discovery of religious expression that anticipates the writings of ancient Israel only goes to prove that recognition of God has been richer and more extensive than previously appreciated. The tracking of transmission takes on a particular value when one is tracking the manifestations of grace.

We inherit the research questions of our predecessors. If the motivations that defined those questions have faded from view, it is incumbent on us to reacquaint ourselves with the concerns of former scholars. Do we share the concerns that motivated their research? If not, why continue to pursue the same questions? By turning away from questions of transmission and continuity, I have tried to refocus inquiry on the different ways that the same inherited materials could be used to fashion three vastly different visions of the world. This may not speak to the unity of divine care, but it does attest the range and significance of human creativity.

27. C. H. W. Johns, "Introduction," in Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible: Two Lectures*, xxix. There is reason to believe that Delitzsch would not have shared his apologist's position, but that is another matter.