



HAL
open science

The Creation of Humans and their Multiplication: A Comparative Reading of Athra-Hasis, Gilgamesh XI and Genesis 1; 6-9

T. Römer

► **To cite this version:**

T. Römer. The Creation of Humans and their Multiplication: A Comparative Reading of Athra-Hasis, Gilgamesh XI and Genesis 1; 6-9. *Indian Theological Studies (ITS)*, 2013, 50, pp.123-131. hal-03821354

HAL Id: hal-03821354

<https://hal.science/hal-03821354>

Submitted on 19 Oct 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**THE CREATION OF HUMANS AND THEIR
MULTIPLICATION:¹
A COMPARATIVE READING OF
ATHRA-HASIS, GILGAMESH XI AND
GENESIS 1: 6-9²**

The chapter which opens the Bible belongs according to a rare consensus to the Priestly milieu. Style, language, worldview and concerns expressed by the text of Genesis 1 indicate that it comes from Judean priests exiled to Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, or returned from Babylon, probably in the late VIth or early Vth century BCE. These priests are probably aware, during their stay in Babylon, of Babylonian cosmogonies and their mathematical and astrological reflections. They therefore used the knowledge and concepts of the Babylonian civilization while adapting them to their own theological ideas.³ One may ask whether they wanted to incorporate into their story an anti-Babylonian polemic, as claimed by a good number of commentators.⁴

The creation as told in Genesis 1 emphasizes the order and rhythm of the divine creative act which falls within one week

¹ This article is a translation (by P. Joseph Titus) of the author's article, which was originally written in French and was first published in Thomas Romer, "La création des hommes et leur multiplication. Lecture comparée d' Athra-Hasis, de Gilgamesh XI et de Genèse 1:6-9," *Semitica* 55 (2013) pp.147-156.

² I thank my colleagues Jean-Marie Durand and Michael Guichard for their availability to advise me on issues related to Mesopotamian sources.

³ It is possible that Gen 1 is the result of a Priestly revision of a more ancient text, see already H. Gunkel, *Genesis übersetzt und erklärt* (Nowacks Handkommentar zum Alten Testament, Abtl. 1), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901, 6th ed. 1964, and recently J. Hutzli, "Tradition and Interpretation in Gen 1:1-2:4a", *JHS* 10/12, 2010, pp. 1-22.

⁴ For a good presentation of the file, see J. C. Gertz, "Antibabylonische Polemik im priesterlichen Schöpfungsbericht," *ZThK* 106, 2009, pp. 137-155.

frame, six days of work and one day of rest. It is not a creation out of nothing (“ex nihilo”), but an organization of primordial chaos by God the Creator. There are, in this text, a number of elements which preexist before the first divine word: the *tohou-wa-bohou* (“a¹ chaotic state”), the darkness and the primordial ocean, called in Hebrew *tehom*, derived perhaps from the same root as the name of Tiamat or making here at least allusion.⁵ These primordial “materials” are transformed above all by acts of separation:⁶

On the first day the separation takes place between light and darkness. Then comes the separation between the upper waters and the lower waters and the upper waters form then the sky. These acts of separation are acts of creation by the divine word; they gradually define a domain of life for plants, animals and humans, which are created one after the others in the sea, in the air (5th day) and on the solid land (6th day). The story of Genesis 1 presents so the creative work in a very orderly and harmonious way.

Unlike Babylonian myths, the biblical story seems, at first sight, written from a monotheistic perspective, but let us not forget that at the end of the *Enuma Elish*, we find in the tablet VII, an almost “monotheistic” interpretation of the Babylonian pantheon, as the hymn attributes almost all the functions and powers of the gods to Marduk.

In Gen 1, the author uses ‘*elohim*, a term which can obviously be understood as “God,” but whose form allows also a reading in the plural (the god who includes in him all the other gods, like Marduk receives his 50 or 51 names at the end of the *Enuma Elish*).

⁵ M. Bauks, *Die Welt am Anfang : zum Verhältnis von Vorwelt und Weltentstehung in Gen 1 und in der altorientalischen Literatur* (WMANT 74), Neukirchen-Vluyn : Neukirchener Verlag, 1997, pp. 122-126.

⁶ P. Beauchamp, *Création et séparation: Etude exégétique du chapitre premier de la Genèse*, Paris-Neuchâtel, Aubier-Montaigne - Delachaux et Niestlé (Bibliothèque de sciences religieuses), 1969, Paris: Cerf (Lectio divina 201), 2005.

That Gen 1 borrows from the Near Eastern cosmogonies is indisputable and widely accepted. Gen 1 tells, like the *Enuma Elish*, the creation as a “victory” of the creator god on the watery chaos. But unlike the Babylonian poem, in Gen 1, there are no more traces of fight (Ps 74 and 89, however, keep the idea of a victory of Yahweh against sea monsters). Everything seems subjected to the creator god. Almost everything...

When Elohim creates the heavenly bodies, the author of Gen 1 avoids calling them “sun” and “moon,” because these names evoke Babylonian deities. One could speak of a certain “demythologizing” of the two heavenly bodies,⁷ or even a mockery about their power,⁸ but at the same time the text keeps the idea of a power of the sun and of the moon because they are established to “govern” the day and the night.

The creation of man introduces a specificity into the Priestly story. When God decides to create man, we find a speech in the plural (Genesis 1:26-27):

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף
 הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ:
 וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר
 וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

God said: “Let us make humankind in our image,⁹ according to our model (our likeness); He will subjugate¹⁰ the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and animals all (living on) the earth, all the creatures that creep upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.

⁷ L. Ruppert, *Genesis. Ein kritischer und theologischer Kommentar. 1. Teilband: Gen 1,1-11,26* (Fzb 70), Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1992, pp. 75-77.

⁸ H. D. Preuss, *Verspottung fremder Religionen im Alten Testament* (BWANT 92), Stuttgart et al.: Kohlhammer, 1971, pp. 178-192.

⁹ Cf. *šalmu* (acc.): “statue, figurine, image.”

¹⁰ Literally: “will trample.”

Why this plural? It has been sometimes assumed that it is a plural of majesty, but this figure of speech is not plausible in Biblical Hebrew.¹¹ Consequently it was thought that this was residue of the idea of a heavenly court in the midst of which God enthrones surrounded by his advisors.¹²

It is also interesting to note that when Marduk, while being surrounded by other gods, sets out the decision to create man, he speaks in the singular: "I'm going to condense the blood and to make bones exist, I will bring forth a being, his name will be Man, I am going to create the being, the Man, that on him be imposed the drudgery of the gods and that themselves be at rest" (VI, 5-8).¹³

Therefore the plural may have a more precise meaning than the memory of a heavenly court; let us recall that Elohim creates human being "in his image" as male and female. So it can be the remaining of the divine couple (the creator god with his consort) who creates the human couple in his image. God, for the Priestly writers, had probably already "lost" his wife. But consciously or unconsciously, they had seen in the human couple a reflection or perhaps better: a sublimation of the divine couple.¹⁴

In what is man the image of God? This question, which has occupied for centuries theologians and philosophers, does not seem so complicated in the context of the ancient Near East. In

¹¹ Gunkel, *Genesis*, p. 111. Let us note however that the Persian kings, according to Ez 4:18 used such a plural: H. Seebass, *Genesis I. Urgeschichte (1,1-11,26)*, Neukirchen-Vluyn : Neukirchener Verlag, 1996, p. 79.

¹² P. ex. Gertz, "Polemik," pp. 142-143. This idea appears not as problematic at the beginning of the Persian period, as shown also by the prologue of the Book of Job.

¹³ Translation according to P. Talon, *The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth. Enuma Eliš (SAACT 4)*, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2005, p. 99.

¹⁴ Another strategy of compensation for the disappearance of the goddess is found in the personification of wisdom, present at the creation, in Prov 8. For other traces of the disappearance of the goddess at the beginning of the Persian period, see T. Römer, "L'éviction du féminin dans la construction du monothéisme," *ETR* 78, 2003, pp. 167-180; C. Uehlinger, "Die Frau im Efa (Sach 5,5-11). Eine Programmvision von der Abschiebung der Göttin," *Bibel und Kirche* 49, 1994, pp. 93-103.

Egypt, it is mainly the Pharaoh who bears the title of “image of God.”¹⁵ In Mesopotamia, there are some texts, especially from the Neo-Assyrian period, where the king is also called the image of a god. In a text of the thirteenth century BCE, Tukulti-Ninurta is called “the image of Enlil” (*salam dEnlil*) (line 18).¹⁶ The hymn explains how Tukulti-Ninurta is Enlil’s image, he represents him before the people and he is the head of the army. Among the Neo-Assyrian texts, we can cite a letter from a priest-physician to Asarhaddon who is apparently sick, in which he calls him “the image of Shamash” (*šalmu ša dšamaš*), in order to encourage him to resume his business. The same priest Adad-shumu-uzur writes in another letter that the king (LUGAL) is “the perfect reflection of god” (*kal muššuli ša ili*) and, in a text of interpretation of an omen (RMA 170), the king is described as “image of Marduk” (*šalam dMarduk*).

Although in Mesopotamia the king is not deified as in Egypt, he is nevertheless the representative of the gods and this is also confirmed in iconography where the king and the god are represented in an identical manner. The title of “image of god” thus indicates that the king reflects the divinity before the people, he is his representative on earth, the mediator between the god and the people.

In the context of the Priestly document, the idea of man as the image of God can also be understood as a substitution strategy. The Hebrew word translated by “image” means firstly the (divine) statue. Man somehow replaces the divine statue which the early Judaism will reject.

Since the text of Gen 1 had been written at a time when there was no king in Israel, one can understand the application of this title to all humanity as a kind of “democratization” of royal ideology. By the order to “submit,” this royal function is

¹⁵ See also: A. Schellenberg, *Der Mensch, das Bild Gottes? Zum Gedanken einer Sonderstellung des Menschen im Alten Testament und in weiteren altorientalischen Quellen* (AThANT 101), Zürich : TVZ, 2011, pp. 98-106.

¹⁶ Schellenberg, *Der Mensch, das Bild Gottes?* p. 107, who also cites the following texts.

again underlined. He is superior to other creatures, but not to other humans:

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹּשׁוּהָ
וַרְדּוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל-חַיָּה הַרְמִשָּׁת עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gen 1:28)

The human being as the image of Elohim has two functions: reproduction (multiplication) and the government.

The first aspect - the multiplication – can also be understood as dialoguing with the Mesopotamian tradition, particularly with the epic of Athra-Hasis and the version of the flood story preserved in the epic of Gilgamesh. Curiously, this aspect has not attracted the attention of commentators. However, this may be the most important point of distinction between the different visions of the human condition expressed in the Babylonian and Judean-Priestly anthropogony.

According to the epic “Inuma ilu awilum” (Athra-Hasis), the humans, after their creation, encounter very quickly a mortal danger. The goddess Belet-ili says to the other gods: “You have given to humans a language / a clamor (*rigmu*)”¹⁷ (AH I, I, 242) - and it is this noise that will cause distress to humans. The *rigmu* of the humans will then upset the gods. This clamor is the consequence of the fact that humans are rapidly increasing:

Twelve hundred years had not passed, that the inhabited country spread (*ir-ta-pí-iš*, of *rapāšu[m]*) and the people multiplied (*im-ti-da mâdu [m]*).¹⁸ The earth of humans roared like a bull, and with the noise they made, the god

¹⁷ According to M. Guichard, Paris I, UMR 7192, this translation (oral communication) has to be adapted. The meaning of this passage is, actually, discussed.

¹⁸ For questions about grammar and translation, see D. Shehata, *Annotierte Bibliographie zum altbabylonischen Atramhasis-Mythos. Inūma ilū awilum* (GAAL 3), Göttingen : Seminar für Keilschriftforschung der Universität Göttingen, 2011, p. 89-90.

was troubled. Enlil heard their cry and said to the great gods: Too heavy for me is the cry of humanity, the noise they make, I am deprived of sleep. Cut to humans all subsistence. That for their hunger the plants be scarce, that Adad retain his rains, that below the flood no longer rise groundwater, that the wind blows, that it dries up the earth...(AH II II, 1-15).

Given the increasing number of humans, Enlil sends first "ice,"¹⁹ then drought (see the above passage), apparently twice. And even after the flood, the gods decide the means to prevent the excessive proliferation of humans: so the goddess of births must intervene to prevent too abundant births in striking some women with infertility or in provoking stillbirth or, again, in creating castes of "taboo" women who cannot have sexual relations.²⁰

In the version of the flood according to the epic of Gilgamesh, we find the same idea less explicitly: the flood is considered as a medium (disproportionate) of gods to limit the growth of humans. Thus at the end of the flood, Ea is angry against Enlil telling him:

Instead of sending the flood, the lion should have risen to decimate the human mass²¹... instead of sending the flood, there could be a famine to afflict the country, instead of sending the flood, Erra should have risen to bruise the country (XI, 188-195).²²

The Mesopotamian accounts of the flood set up in this way the concern of the gods to limit the multiplication of humans.

Both versions of the biblical flood story (P and not-P) in Genesis 6-9 do not share this concern. The new order after the flood introduces, according to the priestly version the death

¹⁹ The precise meaning of *šurupp(um)* is not clear: "Beach," "Kältefieber" (von Soden), cf. Shehata, p. 90. According to Jean-Marie Durand, Collège de France, UMR 7192, it would be hoar frost that the god makes fall on men (oral communication).

²⁰ For this difficult passage (III VI 34-VII 8), see W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-Hasis: the Babylonian Story of the Flood*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, p. 102-103.

²¹ After there is an identical wish with the wolf.

²² Translation according to S. Maul, *Gilgamesh*, 147.

penalty (v. 6), but is framed in 9:1 and 7, by the call to humans (Noah and his family) to become numerous and to multiply:

9:1	וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ:
9:7	וְאַתֶּם פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ שִׂרְצוּ בָאָרֶץ וּרְבוּ־בָתָּה:

The idea of the domination of humans on earth is not resumed; however the need for mankind to multiply is asserted again. As for the non-P version which is perhaps not much older than the P version,²³ it contains the idea of multiplication as prompting the flood, however not directly related to humans, but to the violence that causes the breaking of the flood:

Genesis 6:5-7a *.8: "Yhwh saw that the wickedness of humankind was multiplied (רַבָּה רָעָה) in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And Yhwh was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created. But Noah found favor in the sight of Yhwh.'"

Can we understand the multiplication of human violence as an "ethical" rereading of the biological multiplication of humans in Athra-Hasis? In the case of the non-P version, this remains a possibility, although speculative. Regarding the Priestly version, the repeated insistence on the importance of the proliferation of humans in Gen 1 and Gen 9 can hardly be understood otherwise than as a response to the Babylonian myths.

The divine command, given to humankind at the time of creation and repeated after the flood in Gen 1 and 9, is therefore a redefinition of the Babylonian myths. Humanity is called to

²³ Traditionally, non-priestly passages in Genesis 6-9 were assigned to the document "J" (Yahwist) at the time of the monarchy. These passages, however, are more fragmentary than P narrative, which has led some to consider them as recent additions to the Priestly text: J. L. Ska, "El Relato del Diluvio. Un relato sacerdotal y algunos fragmentos redaccionales posteriores," *Estudios Biblicos* 52, 1994, pp. 37-62; M. Arneht, *Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt...: Studien zur Entstehung der alttestamentlichen Urgeschichte* (FRLANT 217), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007. Scholars who consider an independent non-P narrative tend to date it around the VIth century BCE: M. Witte, *Die biblische Urgeschichte. Redaktions- und theologiegeschichtliche Beobachtungen zu Genesis 1,1-11,26* (BZAW 265), Berlin - New York: de Gruyter, 1998, pp. 204-205.

multiply and fill the earth, and thus this fact no longer causes the wrath of the gods. Differences between Athra-Hasis and the Priestly account probably reflect significant economic, political and ideological changes. Scholars often emphasize the optimistic world view which is reflected in the P document,²⁴ and this opinion is confirmed by our survey. If the Priestly author has welcomed favorably the integration of Judea into the Persian Empire, he should endeavor to show that a large humanity living under the eyes of a god (*'elohim*) corresponds to the set of peoples united in the Persian Empire under the Achaemenid Great King.

Thomas Römer²⁵

Professor of Hebrew Bible

Chair of "The Bible and Its World"

Collège de France

75005 Paris

²⁴ N. Lohfink, "Die Priesterschrift und die Geschichte," in J. A. Emerton (éd.), *Congress Volume. Göttingen 1977* (VT.S 29), Leiden: Brill, 1978, pp. 189-225; A. de Pury, "P^s as the Absolute Beginning", in T. Römer and K. Schmid (eds.), *Les dernières rédactions du Pentateuque, de l'Hexateuque et de l'Ennéateuque* (BETHL 203), Leuven: Peeters - University Press, 2007, pp. 99-128.

²⁵ He is also Professor of Hebrew Bible in the *Faculty of Theology at Lausanne* (Switzerland).

S
S
a
l,
f
e

of
e
o
re
nt
al
P.
ng
&
ite
is-
5),