

Parashat Breishit: Who were Tohu and Bohu?

Let us start at the beginning. The first word in the Torah is *b'reishit* (בראשית). The conventional English translation, "In the beginning," is not quite accurate. The prefix *b'* means "in" or "at." That's not controversial. However *reishit* means "beginning of." It is in the construct case. "In the beginning" would be *barosh* or *barishonah*, which is not what the Torah says. (This analysis is not new. Rashi pointed this out 900 years ago.)

"At the beginning of" what? The next word is *bara* (ברא). This usually means "he created," in the past tense, but verb tense usage was rather flexible in ancient Hebrew. Rashi says

b'reishit bara is like *breishit b'ro* ("creating of") בראשית ברא כמו בראשית ברוא

and he supports this interpretation with various other verses in Tanach in which the same grammatical structure is used. Thus we have the translation, "At the start of Elohim's creating of the sky and the land" or, in the JPS translation, "When God began to create the heaven and the earth." What we have here is not a description of the physical origin of the universe. It is simply the opening line of a story, "The Adventures of Elohim." Indeed, Onkelos, in his 2nd-century translation of the Torah into Aramaic, rendered *b'reishit* as *b'qadmin*, which means, "Once upon a time."

This is the beginning of an adventure story about the gods of Mesopotamia. The Hebrews were a far Western offshoot of Mesopotamian civilization. We are told later in Genesis that Abraham was born in Ur, a major city on the bank of the Euphrates that was the most important Mesopotamian religious center around 2000 BCE. The word *`ivri* ("Hebrew") seems to mean "those who crossed over" (the Jordan river), in other words, "those who came from the East."

Our text continues as follows:

At the start of Elohim's creating of the sky and the earth, the earth was *Tohu* and *Bohu*.

The words *Tohu* and *Bohu* are not Hebrew. The *-u* suffix marks them as foreign. In Hebrew, *-u* is a verb ending, but these are nouns. They are most likely Sumerian words. In the Sumerian language, nouns commonly end in *-u*, in particular proper nouns such as the names of people and the names of gods.

The Sumerians were a non-Semitic people that arrived, apparently by sea, in what is now southern Iraq around 5000 BCE. They established a civilization notable for large cities with impressive buildings, large-scale agriculture with elaborate irrigation and drainage systems, highly developed fine arts, a highly developed legal system, and a sophisticated and complex religious practice. They developed one of the world's first writing systems and left an extensive written literature.

Most of the peoples in the Middle East, then and now, were Semites. Their languages (Aramaic, Akkadian, etc.) are in the same language family as Hebrew. Sumerian, in contrast, seems to be unrelated to any other known language. The Semites were seminomadic tribes with economies

based on livestock. The situation between the Semites and Sumerians around 2500 BCE was somewhat similar to that of the Germanic tribes versus the Romans in the latter years of the Roman Empire. Sumeria was conquered by Semites in the year 2340 BCE. There was a resurgence of Sumerian independence, centered at Ur, around 2000. Finally, the Sumerians were reconquered around 1750 by a Semitic tribe called the Babylonians (also called the Akkadians) and absorbed into the Babylonian Empire. Sumerian gradually died out as a spoken language but continued as the language of business contracts, medicine, and religion, much as did Latin in Europe. Sumerian religion was adopted by the conquerors, much as the Northern Europeans adopted Christianity, the religion of the Romans.

The Sumerians too had a creation story, called *Emúnah Élish*. It is extant only in translations--one by Assyrians and the other by Babylonians. The Assyrian version is fragmentary but the Babylonian version is almost complete. The Babylonian version is in the Akkadian language except that most of the characters have Sumerian, or Sumerianized, names, for example, Anu, Shazu, Asharu, Kingu, Addu, Dumuduku, Enbilulu. The end of the creation process is strikingly similar to the creation as described in the Torah, with the creating of the sky and earth, astronomical bodies, and so on, ending with the creation of people, but *Emúnah Élish* also includes a detailed description of what happened *before* the sky and the land were made. Here is the opening of the text (I:1-12):

When up above the sky had not been named,
Down below, the land had not been called by name;
Apsú primeval, their begetter,
Mummu, [and] Ti'amat, she who gave birth to them all,
Mingled their waters together,
And no pasture land had been formed, not even a reed marsh was to be seen;
When the gods had not been brought into being,
They had not been called by name, their destinies had not yet been fixed,
[At that time] were the gods created within them.
Lachmu and Lachamu came into being; they were called by names.
Even before they had grown up [and] become tall,
Anshar and Kishar were created; they surpassed them [in stature].

There is a large cast of characters, all of them gods, many of them personifications of natural phenomena. Apsú is the freshwater, found today in rivers and underground aquifers. Ti'amat is the salt water. Mummu is the fog that forms above the waters. Southern Iraq is covered with brackish marshes, where ocean meets river water. The most striking seasonal variation in this environment is the annual flooding as freshwater from snow melt arrives from the Euphrates, which later in the year recedes and is replaced by salt water from the Persian Gulf.

At the beginning we have only Ti'amat and Apsú mingled together, with Apsú's servant and adviser Mummu hovering above. Ti'amat and Apsú have several offspring, who then have children and grandchildren of their own. Once Ti'amat and Apsú's great-grandchildren grow into adulthood they start to get together for loud raucous parties, which greatly disturb Ti'amat who just wants to rest in peace and quiet. Apsú tries to get them to keep the noise level down so that he and Ti'amat can get their sleep, but to no avail. Mummu advises Apsú to kill all of the great-grandchildren, and in desperation he decides to carry this out, despite Ti'amat's protest that such a course of action is too drastic. One of the grandsons, a god named Ea, known for his great wisdom, learns of Mummu and Apsú's plan. He uses a magic incantation to paralyze Apsú, and then, to save the younger generation of gods, Ea kills Apsú and declares himself king of the gods.

Ti'amat is devastated. She mourns Apsú for many years, and her profound grief (and continuing insomnia?) gradually drives her into a deep rage. She takes the form of a fearsome dragon and goes on the rampage in pursuit of Ea. Ea engages her in battle but soon flees in terror. All seems lost for the younger generations, but then one of Ea's sons, a strapping young god named Marduk, takes to the field and does battle with Ti'amat. After a fierce fight he manages to capture Ti'amat in a giant net. He then slays her by shooting an arrow into her open mouth that pierces her heart.

Marduk takes the substance of Ti'amat and of Apsú and creates from them the sky and the dry land. He splits the corpse of Ti'amat in two; one half becomes the ocean while the other half becomes the firmament. (Compare with Psalm 148: Praise Him, top of the sky and the water that is above the sky, let them praise the name ADONAI, because He commanded and they were created.) Marduk places a covering over the corpse of Apsú to make the dry land (which explains why if you dig deep enough you will find freshwater). He makes dwelling places in the sky for the other gods (whom we see to this day as the stars). He completes his creating by making humans, in order for them to build temples and then to perform rituals in the temples that provide comfort to the gods. Different cities take responsibility for different gods, who in turn provide for the welfare of the citizens of their corresponding cities. At the end of Marduk's creating, the gods threw a grand banquet, where they relaxed with music and beer, and they "praised the work that [Marduk] had done."

The Babylonian and Assyrian versions of this story are essentially identical, with one exception: While Marduk is the hero of the Babylonian version, the hero of the Assyrian version is a god named Enlil. It just so happens that Marduk was the god tended to by the city of Akkad, the capitol city of the Babylonian Empire, while Enlil was the god of Asshur, the capitol of the Assyrian Empire. In the end, it would seem that the main point of the story is to explain why it is that the particular city that happens to be politically dominant ought to be in charge of the empire.

In our version of the story, Ti'amat is called "Tohu" and Apsú is called "Bohu." Our text continues as follows:

At the start of Elohim's creating of the sky and the earth,

The earth consisted of Tohu and Bohu, and over the salt water was darkness and over the freshwater a divine breath hovered.

Already at the start of the creating, there exists salt water (*t'hom*) and freshwater (*mayim*). The salt water is named "Tohu" while the freshwater is named "Bohu," and above Bohu hovers the fog god, not referred to by name but presumably Bohu's trusted adviser Mummu--note that he only hovers above the freshwater, not the salt water. The Torah refers to the father and mother gods by their proper names, while *Emúnah Élish* refers to them using titles. In Sumerian the word *apsú* literally means "their father," that is, the father of the gods. *Ti'amat* is the Akkadian version of a Common Semitic root that was probably pronounced something like *tihamah* (in Hebrew, *t'hom*) meaning "ocean," which possibly derived originally from the Sumerian name *Tohu*.

In our version we put our particular tribal god, the protector of the Hebrews, in the role of the hero who creates the world as we know it out of the substance of the mother Tohu and the father Bohu. The creation story was probably so familiar to the peoples of the Middle East that the mere mention of Tohu and Bohu and the divine breath hovering above would have been sufficient to call to mind the full story--the divine genealogies and battle descriptions could be omitted.

The name the Torah uses for the hero of our story is *Elohim*. The Hebrew word *elohim* literally means "gods," in the plural. (The singular would be *eloah*.) The *-im* suffix clearly marks *elohim* as plural, but when it refers to our God it is used with verbs conjugated in the singular. When I first began reading Torah in Hebrew I was greatly perplexed by the fact that the first sentence of the sacred text of our "monotheistic" religion refers to God as "Gods." However, this usage can be understood by comparing with the final section of *Emúnah Élish*. At the banquet in honor of Marduk, the 50 gods of Marduk's generation one by one bestow their names on him, as declarations of subservience. With each name, Marduk takes on the abilities and responsibilities of the corresponding god. For example, Addu, the god of the thunder clouds, bestows his name so that Marduk will now be in charge of providing rain. Níbiru, who controls the courses of the stars, bestows his name and that now also becomes Marduk's responsibility. Thereafter the gods refer to Marduk as "Fifty":

With the name "Fifty"

The great gods of fifty names called him and thus made his way preeminent.

Finally, Ea, Marduk's father, bestows his name on his son, saying:

...His name shall be Ea!

The totality of all my ceremonial rites shall he control; and all my ordinances shall he direct.

It is in this spirit that the Torah uses "Gods" as an honorary title for the preeminent god who has taken on the responsibilities of all the gods.

Elohim is thus an honorary title for our God, whose proper name, incidentally, is *Yahu* (with the Sumerian *-u* suffix). In our scriptures, *Yahu* is encountered mainly in compound names of people; consider the following examples, among many:

<i>Eliyahu</i> (Elijah)	"My god is Yahu"
<i>Yirm'yahu</i> (Jeremiah)	"Yahu is exalted"
<i>Y'sha`yahu</i> (Isaiah)	"Yahu comes to the rescue"
King <i>Uziyahu</i>	"My strength is Yahu"
King <i>Y'chizqiyahu</i>	"Yahu is powerful"

and so on.

The conventional interpretation of the opening verses of the Torah as a theological proclamation of monotheism is clearly incorrect. *Yahu* is a descendent of the gods *Tohu* and *Bohu*, who of course existed long before He was born. *Yahu* kills His great-grandmother *Tohu* and thereby creates the physical world. However, the point of the story is not to explain the physics of creation, but rather to proclaim, "Our God is braver and stronger than your god." This sets the stage for the subsequent chapters of the Torah that tell in detail our national creation story. Isaiah, in the haftarah for this Torah

reading, concisely summarizes this entire story in just two verses (42:5-6):

Thus said the god *HaSheim*, creator of the sky, the one who stretched it out, and the one who made the earth and its peoples, giving souls to the earth's nations, spirit to those who walk upon it:

I, *HaSheim*, proclaimed you to be righteous and made you expand and gave you a national covenant to be a light for the nations.

(Isaiah, incidentally, uses God's proper name in its most sacred form--*Yahu* with an additional *h* at the end. It is disrespectful for anyone other than the High Priest to pronounce this name, so I have made the traditional substitution *HaSheim*, "The Name.") Isaiah begins by reminding us that *our* God is the god who created the sky and earth. He then states the central ideology of the Torah:

- (1) The nation of Israel has been chosen for a particular mission.
- (2) That mission consists of behaving according to a certain standard of behavior.
- (3) By doing so we do our part in the grand project of making the world a better place--by setting a good example for other nations to follow.

The kind of analysis I have presented here, based on archaeological evidence and linguistic studies, gives us a glimpse of our national folklore before it was redacted, filling in details omitted by the redactors. The act of putting in writing a sacred text that was previously transmitted only orally is an extremely significant event in the history of a nation. Until then, the stories are fluid, changing gradually from generation to generation. Writing a story down is like building a dam on a river: It gives special prominence to the part of the river just before the dam. This has happened twice in our history, first when the Torah was redacted and then around 200 CE when Rabbi Judah decided to have the Mishnah recorded in writing. These two large bulges in the river can make Judaism appear static and unchanging, but in fact a fundamental principle of hydrodynamics (the "equation of continuity") assures us that the water continues to flow at the same rate. It is tempting to focus just on the Torah and the Mishnah, because it is very convenient to have clear-cut texts in front of us, but Jewish civilization has continued its steady flow, both before and after those two written texts.

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