

THE IMAGE OF GOD OR THE SLAVE OF THE GODS?

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Genesis 1-11 portrays God as the divine king of creation. But, there were competing worldviews at the time Genesis was written. Whereas God created *ex nihilo* (from nothing), other ancient cosmologies depict creation as, *creatio ex materia* (a Being of some sort creates with pre-existing or eternal material), *creatio ex deo* (one God creates out of other deities), divine combat (creation through primeval celestial conflict), *creatio continua* (ongoing creation or divine emanation over time), and eternal return (infinite regression to a primal state caused by cosmic destruction followed by recreation).

In addition, scholars have noted similar terms and concepts shared by Genesis 1-2 and the ideologies of the ancient Near East. For instance, in Egypt the pharaoh alone was believed to be God's image on earth. In Mesopotamia the monarch was considered the representative of the gods, who alone had power and authority to rule on behalf of the pantheon of heaven. The *Sumerian King List* chronicled the primeval origin of kingship as a gift from the gods, "when kingship was lowered from heaven."

Along with the idea of divine inspiration of monarchy, was the belief that the gods gifted mankind with the proper pattern for human society. Mesopotamia's urban culture with its vision of greatness and exercise of absolute domination was founded upon its myths. Mesopotamian civilization was thought to be a divine mandate, as thereby human beings were elevated from being primitive beasts and made fully human as slaves of the gods and their king.

For this reason, according to the *Antrahasis Epic*, humans were created. Specifically, civilization entailed the termination of the toil experienced by the inferior gods, who dug canals. So, mankind was created and put to work, replacing the lesser gods in food production and construction. This hoped-for solution proved to be a mixed blessing, as the numbers of humankind grew immensely and caused great commotion, upsetting the tranquility of heaven. Some gods attempted to reduce this disturbance through disease, infertility, and stillbirth, but the "final solution" was a great flood. Following the deluge, a new race of human beings was permitted to develop which was dedicated to labor for the gods and to provide offerings in their temples.

The contrasts with Genesis 1-2 are quite clear, however. Though these myths used similar terms and ideas, the biblical story is set within an antithetical cosmology and anthropology, an entirely different worldview. According to Genesis, God was not burdened by drudgery in creation or in the maintenance of his house. In fact, it was a great pleasure. Rather than the Mesopotamian worldview in service of a corrupt social system existing for the few and thriving on the subjugation of the many, God's reign fostered true human flourishing among all social and economic classes. Further, God's image and likeness was not confined to the monarchy with its trickle down benefits for the priestly and aristocratic elite, but was shared by all. God was not threatened by primeval chaos or conflict or undermined and disturbed by the advent of human beings. Neither was there a disjunction between God's work and mankind's labor. In fact, humans participated in God's mission (Gen 1:26). They were not pests or slave labor, a necessary evil to keep the body politic operating smoothly. They were, rather, the crown of creation, the apex of God's artistry and the stewards of God's house. They were royal ambassadors and vice-regents in God's kingdom.