

The Generations of the Heavens and of the Earth: Egyptian Deities in the Garden of Eden

Paper presented by Gary Greenberg at the annual meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt, St. Louis 1996

Abstract

“These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens . . .” Gen. 2:4

The above quote from Gen. 2:4 introduces us to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Many biblical scholars believe that the next few verses contain a slightly different version of Creation than that contained earlier in Gen. 1. What is especially unusual is the reference to the “generations of the heavens and the earth.” In the several other instances when Genesis says, “These are the generations of . . .”, it refers to information about a parent and their children. This would imply that Genesis 2 is about the Children of the Heavens and Earth, a polytheistic throwback to an earlier cosmogony. But whose cosmogony?

This paper examines some of the verses and images associated with the story of Adam and Eve and compares them with elements in the Heliopolitan Creation myths. It will be suggested that Adam and Eve correspond in part to Geb and Nut and in part to Osiris and Isis. Additionally, it will be suggested that the three male sons of Adam and Eve—Cain, Abel and Seth—correspond to the three male sons of Geb and Nut—Osiris, Seth, and Horus.

Although the main thrust of the paper will be on the Adam and Eve story, the paper will also look at the first Genesis Creation account as well as the story of Noah’s Flood, originally, perhaps, a third Creation story, and suggest that the series of Creation stories in Genesis draws upon the Theban doctrine of Creation in which Amen appears in a series of forms representing the Memphite, Heliopolitan and Hermopolitan cosmogonies.

The paper will examine such common themes as the stirring of the primeval waters, creation by word, the separation of heaven and earth, the rising of a firmament between the heaven and earth, problems of childbirth as a punishment for disobeying God, the bruising of the serpent from the tree, the enmity between the child and the serpent, the killing of a brother as an agricultural myth, the introduction of civilization, the building of the first city, and the relationship between the husband/brother and wife/sister with the serpent.

This paper attempts to introduce the idea that the biblical Creation stories, from the dawn of Creation through Noah’s Flood, derive from Egyptian cosmogony, more specifically, the Theban doctrine of Creation. Thebes came late to the political scene in Egypt and its view of Creation attempted to incorporate the ideas of Memphis, Heliopolis and Hermopolis into a new cosmology that subordinated the chief deities of those cults to Amen, chief deity of Thebes.

The Theban doctrine holds that in the beginning there was the great primeval flood known as Nu or the Nun. The god Amen then appeared in a series of forms, first as an Ogdoad, then as Tatenen (a Memphite name for Ptah identified with the primeval hill), then as Atum, who created the first gods, then as Re. After this he created humanity, organized the Ennead, appointed the four male members of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad as his divine fathers and priests, and appointed Shu as their leader. Another Theban tradition holds that Osiris built the first city at Thebes.

To equate all these ideas with the biblical Creation stories would be a massive undertaking, far beyond the scope of this short paper. Therefore I will deal only with a small piece of this very large subject. In this paper I will just compare some elements of the Heliopolitan cycle with the biblical account of Adam and Eve and the second day of Creation.

My point of departure is Genesis 2:4-5, which serves as a preamble to the story of Adam and Eve. Coming immediately after the account of the seven days of Creation, the text reads as follows.

These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew: for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground.

The phrase “generations of” appears eleven times in the Book of Genesis, but in the other ten instances it refers to stories about members of a family, such as in “the generations of Noah” or “the generations of Jacob.” This indicates that the noun or nouns following after the words “generations of” refer to a parent or parents. Genesis 2:4, therefore, implies that “the heavens and the earth” are anthropomorphic beings with children, and that what follows is about the family of these two entities.

This formulation clearly implies a pagan throwback to the idea of Heaven and Earth as deities, but biblical scholars, determined to preserve the monotheistic view of biblical history, are reluctant to accept such an interpretation. Instead, they wrench the phrase out of context and assert that it simply means “things that are to follow” or “the history of.”

A second major difficulty with Gen. 2:4-5 is the time frame in question. The passage indicates that the stories we are about to read take place “in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens,” and before the appearance of plant life. When is that day?

Biblical scholars tell us that the preamble refers to stories that take place after the seven days of Creation. But reading the passage literally and in context, it quite explicitly states that the stories we are about to read occurred on the day that God made the earth and the heavens and before the appearance of plant life. That time frame is clearly defined in the account of the seven days of Creation.

On the second day of Creation, a firmament arises out of the primeval waters and separates the waters above from the waters below. The biblical text says that the firmament came to be called “heaven.” On the third day of Creation, the waters below gathered in one place to create the dry land, which was then called “earth,” after which, plant life appeared. So the preamble to the story of Adam and Eve places the upcoming stories in the period between the division of the waters and the appearance of plant life, in the middle of the third day of creation.

Biblical scholars, however, note an interesting problem with this division between the second and third day. The second day is the only day in the sequence that isn’t blessed by God. Instead, the third day receives two blessings, one after dry land or Earth appears, and one after the arrival of plant life. As many of these scholars have recognized, the gathering of the waters to create dry land continues the second day’s process of rearranging and dividing the primeval waters. For this reason, they argue that the second day’s blessing is held off to the middle of the third day because that is when the task of rearranging the primeval waters is finished. I would propose instead that the biblical redactor simply made an editing error, and the first half of Day Three actually belongs with Day Two and the associated blessing belongs at the end of Day Two. This would be consistent with the text of Genesis 2:4, which says that heaven and earth were created on the same day.

To summarize briefly, so far: On the second day of Creation, god placed a firmament in the primeval waters, separating the waters above from the waters below. The firmament was called Heaven. Then he gathered the waters below into a single place and created dry land. The dry land was called Earth. The preamble to the story of Adam and Eve places the starting point for the biblical stories on the second day of Creation, before the appearance of plant life on Day Three.

The arrangement of events on Day Two seems to closely parallel the Heliopolitan Creation myth. A great hill arose out of the primeval flood. This hill would obviously constitute a form of firmament. In some traditions that hill was Atum, the Heliopolitan Creator deity. In other traditions, Atum appeared at the top of the hill.

Atum, through act of masturbatory sex, brought forth two deities, Shu and Tefnut, representing “air” and “moisture”. These two deities gave birth to the male deity Geb, who represented the earth, and the female deity Nut, who represented the heavens.

Several Egyptian pictures portray Shu as lifting Nut into the air and separating her from Geb. Sequentially, then, Atum appears as a firmament in the middle of the Nun and creates Shu who ultimately separates heaven and earth and symbolizes the space in between. Shu, therefore, becomes the firmament between Heaven and Earth.

Consider now how Genesis says the waters were divided. First, the waters above were divided from the waters below. Next, the waters below were gathered into a single place. “The waters above” is an Egyptian concept signifying the sky. We see it most clearly in images of the solar bark sailing through the heavens. Although Genesis says the firmament was called Heaven, I believe this was a late gloss by the biblical redactors. The firmament stands below the waters above. It is the waters above that would correspond to heaven. The firmament would be the space in between heaven and earth, corresponding first to the primeval mountain and then to Shu.

This brings us to the question of where in all the middle east would any people have such a concept as all the waters gathering in a single place, leaving fertile land behind in its retreat. The most logical location is the Nile River in Egypt. The gathering of the waters in one place is the primary Egyptian agricultural phenomenon. It derives from the annual overflowing of the Nile, which fertilizes the land and then withdraws, leaving the dry land in its place. For Egyptians, the Nile was the one and only great water way. Even the Mediterranean Sea attaches to the Nile.

Elsewhere, throughout Canaan and Mesopotamia, there were numerous large unconnected bodies of waters that were well known to the inhabitants of those lands. They include the Mediterranean Sea, Persian Gulf, Reed Sea, Dead Sea, The Jordan River, the Tigris and The Euphrates. It is unlikely that the people of those lands would think of all these waters as gathering in a single place.

Returning to Genesis 2:4-5, we are told that when dry land was formed, no plant life existed because no man existed to till the ground. The next Genesis verses in sequence tell us: a mist rose up to water the dry land, God created “the Adam” out of the dust, (note that the bible says “the Adam”, not “Adam”), then he planted a Garden and put “the Adam” in it. Observe here 1) Adam appears before the plant life on Day Three and 2) that woman has not yet appeared. This is contrary to the sequence in the seven days of Creation, which places man and woman on the sixth day. Eve, or “the woman”, which is how she is described until after the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, appears later in the sequence, after plants and after other animal life.

This arrangement strongly suggests that the man and woman created on Day Six were other than Adam and Eve, who appear earlier. The confusion arises from the fact that Adam and Eve originally represented Heliopolitan deities, the most important of whom was named Atum, a name virtually identical in pronunciation to the Semitic word “Adam”, which was used to describe the human male. The later biblical redactors, unable to conceive of Adam and Eve as deities, thought of them instead as the first humans, and equated them with the man and woman created on Day Six, who actually are the first humans in the Genesis Creation story.

Chronologically and contextually, we see that Genesis introduces Adam and Eve as the anthropomorphic beings referred to in Genesis 2:4 as heaven and earth, and since Adam is created out of the dust of the earth, we can equate him with the Egyptian deity Geb or Earth and we can equate Eve with the Egyptian deity Nut or heaven.

Eve enters the story, however, only after she is physically ripped from the body of Adam. This separation of Adam (the earth) from Eve (the Heaven) closely parallels the Egyptian account in which Shu physically pulls Heaven from

the Earth. It also incorporates the Heliopolitan idea that a male and female deity were created from a single male deity.

There are some other interesting parallels between Geb and Nut and Adam and Eve. According to Plutarch's account of the Osiris myth, Re, the chief deity, ordered Geb and Nut not to couple. They disobeyed his injunction and were punished. Re ordered Shu to separate the two bodies and declared that Nut would not be able to give birth on any day of the year. Thoth, sympathetic to Nut's plight, won some light from the Moon and created five new days. Since these days were not yet part of the year, Nut could give birth on these five days. She had five children, one on each day, born in the following order: Osiris, Horus, Set, Isis and Nephthys, the three males first and then two females. The Egyptians memorialized this sequence in their calendar, which names the last five days of the year after these five deities in the order of their births. Because of the role of Geb and Nut in birthing these deities, they were often known as the father and mother of the gods.

Observe the sequence of events: The chief deity gives a direct command to Heaven and Earth. They violate the order and as a penalty the chief deity makes childbirth a difficult act for the female. Subsequently she gives birth to three sons. As we know from other Egyptian myths, one of those three sons, Set, kills one of the other sons, Osiris.

Genesis has a similar plot. God gives Adam and Eve (or Earth and Heaven) a direct order. They disobey that order and one of the punishments inflicted includes difficulties with childbirth. Subsequently, Eve gives birth to three named sons, Cain, Abel, and Seth, one of whom kills one of the other brothers. Also, Eve is identified in the bible as the "mother of all living", an identification similar to Nut's designation as mother of the gods. So, as with Nut, Eve disobeys God, is punished with difficulty in childbirth, has three male sons, one of whom kills one of the others, and she is thought of as the first mother.

Interestingly, the Hebrew name Seth and the Egyptian name Set are philologically identical and both children are born third in sequence. However, as some will note, in the biblical sequence it is not Seth who kills his brother. Instead, Cain does the killing. Cain, as the oldest brother, should correspond to Osiris and his killing of another brother is inconsistent with the Egyptian story. Why that occurs is too complex an issue to be resolved in this paper and we will let it pass. However, a little further below, we will see that Cain and Osiris share some other characteristics.

Although Adam and Eve start out as Geb and Nut they also share some aspects of Osiris and Isis. In this regard, we should observe that the Egyptians recognized a deity known as Geb-Osiris who was thought to have created the cosmic egg in Hermopolitan creation myths. Therefore, a merging of Geb and Osiris into a single character involved with Creation does not undermine the theme of this paper. However, I should observe that I believe the biblical character of Adam initially corresponds to the Egyptian god Atum and that Genesis incorporates within Adam all the members of the Ennead. This is consistent with the Egyptian view of Atum, who was also thought of as including within himself all the members of the Ennead.

The connection between Adam and Eve and Osiris and Isis is most apparent in the story of the serpent and the forbidden fruit. Osiris, as ruler of the afterlife, had to make two decisions with regards to the people who appeared before him. First he had to decide if the person lived a moral life; then he had to determine whether to grant that individual eternal life.

In Genesis, we learn that the Garden of Eden had two special trees. The fruit of one gave knowledge of good and evil; the fruit of the other gave eternal life. Thus, the ability of Adam to have control over the fruit of these trees would give him the same status as Osiris, but the biblical theology cannot allow an Osiris to exist, so access to those fruits was forbidden by the one true deity. The nature of this conflict is even noted in the bible when God says to one of his angels,

"Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever:"

I suppose almost everyone who reads the story of Adam and Eve has at one time or another questioned why it was such a terrible thing for these two people to learn about the difference between good and evil. I suggest that to ask this question is to misunderstand what the story was really about. The story was not about good and evil. It was about the need to diminish the role of Osiris as a cult figure.

As a consequence of Adam and Eve eating the fruit, God administered some punishments. We have already mentioned the problem of childbirth. In addition, Adam lost his kingdom and was banished from the Garden. He journeyed to a new land where he became a farmer who had to suffer hard labor in order to produce food. As to the serpent who tricked Adam into losing his kingdom, God declared that there should be enmity between the woman and the serpent and between her seed and his seed. Furthermore, the seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent and the serpent shall bruise the heel of the woman's seed.

Again, these themes seem to be drawn from the Osiris cycle. In the Osiris myth, especially as related by Plutarch, Osiris and Isis ruled in a golden age. Osiris traveled far and wide teaching the people what he knew and Isis ruled in his absence. But the god Set, whom the Egyptians frequently identified with the serpent Apep, enemy of Re, conspired to take the throne for himself. Through trickery, he trapped Osiris in a chest, killed him, and hid the box away. Subsequently, Set hacked the body into pieces and buried them around the land of Egypt. Isis, fearing for the safety of Horus, her child, hid him away from Set. Still, Set managed to sneak up on Horus, and in the form of a serpent bit at his heel. But for the intervention of the gods, Horus would have died. When Horus grew up he avenged his father's murder and defeated Set in battle.

In Genesis, the Osiris role is shared between Adam and Cain. For comparisons, we begin with the observation that the key scene in the Garden of Eden involves a serpent in a tree trying to kill Adam by tricking him into eating the forbidden fruit. The trick worked. Where Adam was essentially a fertile agricultural deity in the Garden of Eden, he has now been figuratively killed in that he now lives as a mortal and he must sweat out agricultural growth. He no longer rules as king in a golden age.

Indeed, the bible implicitly recognizes that the serpent killed Adam. The text explicitly says that if Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil he would surely die. Since the serpent tricked Adam into committing this life extinguishing act, he has, like Set, killed the king. That Adam didn't actually die in accord with the warning is no doubt due to the confusion of identities in later times between Adam and Eve and the first man and woman created on Day Six.

As to the serpent who tricked Adam, just as Set tricked Osiris, he and Eve became enemies, just as Set and Isis became enemies. Also, just as Set bit the heel of Horus, Genesis said that the serpent would bruise the heel of Eve's children. And just as Horus avenged Set by beating him in battle, Genesis says that the seed of Eve will bruise the head of the serpent.

With regard to this last matter, let me call your attention to a well-known Egyptian scene generally identified as "The Great Cat of Heliopolis". It shows a cat with a stick bruising the head of a serpent who is sitting in a tree. Egyptologists usually identify the Cat as Re and the serpent as Apep his enemy. Ichnographically, while the Great Cat scene no doubt derives from the conflict between Re and Apep, the image portrayed seems remarkably consistent with the biblical story of Adam and Eve. I suspect that if we replaced the Cat with a more human image of one of the sun Gods, Re, Atum, or Horus, and left out the identifying words, many persons unfamiliar with the origin of the picture might consider it an illustration for the story of Adam and Eve.

As noted above Cain as the oldest of Eve's three children should correspond to Osiris, and many such correspondences exist. To begin with, like Osiris, Cain is an agricultural figure associated with fruit farming. Osiris wandered far and wide spreading his knowledge and teachings. Cain also wandered far and wide spreading his knowledge and teachings. In fact, Cain's name is Semitic for "smith", a craft figure, and Cain's descendants, according to Genesis, are the founders of all the creative arts and sciences.

In Theban tradition, Osiris built Thebes, which was the first city. According to Genesis, Cain also built the first city. He built it in a land called Nod. Curiously, the bible refers to the city of Thebes by the name "No", a rather close philological fit with "Nod".

Finally, although we noted the anomaly of having Cain, the Osiris character, kill his brother instead of having the brother corresponding to Set do the killing, we do note that in both the Egyptian and biblical stories, we appear to have the story of the first murder and in each instance the killer buries the body and hides it from view, in the hope that no one will discover it.

Summary

In conclusion, I note that the bible places Israel's formative years as a cultural entity in Egypt, and its leading figures, Joseph and Moses, were educated in Egypt's traditions. What they knew about the origins of the world they learned in Egypt, and what they wrote about those origins should surely have had an Egyptian influence.

Yet, while scholars are willing to admit all sorts of Semitic pagan influences on early Hebrew historical beliefs, they treat the idea of Egyptian influence as far too profane for intense examination. I hope in this paper I have been able to at least raise some interest in more closely examining the idea that Egyptian ideas greatly influenced the writing of early biblical history.