

PAGANISM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

It is perhaps under appreciated that portions of the OT are intended to be polemics against pagan mythology. Allusions to Caananite creation myths are incorporated into many passages arguing for God's supremacy. *Rahab, The Proud One, Leviathan, The Twisting One, Yam and The Sea* are all titles of someone or something with which Yaweh does battle.¹ 5 of these 12 or so passages connect this battle with creation itself.

He quieted the sea (Yam) with his power and by his understanding he shattered Rahab. By his breath the heavens are cleared; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.
Job 26:12-13

You divided the sea (Yam) by your strength; you broke the heads of the sea-monsters in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. You broke open springs and torrents; you dried up ever-flowing streams. Yours is the day, yours is the night; you have prepared the light and the sun. You have established all the boundaries of the earth; you have made summer and winter. Ps.74:13ff

Comparisons between battle myths from the ancient Near East² and biblical narratives suggest to some scholars³ that Hebrew accounts of Yaweh-monster battles are anti-pagan polemics rather than evidence that Hebrew theology is borrowed from surrounding nations. Three features are typical of Near Eastern battle myths according to Wakeman: 1. A repressive monster⁴ prevents creation; 2. The monster is defeated by a god⁵ who thereby looses certain life forces⁶ and 3. The victorious god masters the life forces to create⁷ and is elevated to king of the gods status.

Source	Repressive monster	Monster's Defeat	Creation
Sumerian - the feats and exploits of Ninurta	Asag (lit. to restrain) restrains Kur (waters)	Ninurta (son of Enlil the separator of heaven & earth) destroys Asag causing a great flood.	Ninurta restrains the flood to form the Tigris river. Ninurat appoints his mother Ki as a sort of mother earth. Ninurat is elevated to the high god position.
Indian - in the Vedic texts	Vritra (lit. covering) a serpent that binds and restrains the cosmic waters pregnant with the sun. Vritra is one of a group of beings called the Danava.	Indra the separator of heaven & earth is one of a group of beings called Adityas. Indra breaks Vritra's back, belly or mountains thus releasing the pregnant	Indra separates Sat (extant) from Asat (non-existent). Sat is ordered by Indra.

¹ Waltke argues from Wakeman & Allen that Rahab (a.k.a. Leviathan) is an anti-creation dragon monster because the biblical text descriptions of this entity correlates with the monsters of neighboring pagan mythology (c.f. Job 3:8; Ps.89:9f)

² Sumer, India, Anatolia, Meopotamia, Greece and Canaan.

³ Mary Wakeman (1973) *God's Battle with Monster: A study in biblical imagery*; Ronald B. Allen (1968) *The Leviathan-Rahab-Dragon Motif in the Old Testament*; Cyrus Gordon (1966) *Leviathan: Symbol of Evil*, In: *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations* ed. A. Altmann

⁴ A serpent or other indescribable creature that encompasses the potential existence of all things; In other accounts it is a demonic agent that perpetuates a state of inertia.

⁵ Typically this god is born of the restraining monster

⁶ This is often, though not always accomplished through violent confrontation and the life forces are conceived as fluids that flow from the wounded monster.

⁷ Either body parts, body fluids or body energies are used to fashion a cosmos.

		waters.	
Akkadian - the Enuma Elish is an account of the Chaldean cosmogony.	The primordial father Apsu (lakes, marshes & groundwater) and the primordial mother Tiamat (salt marsh, unspeakably hideous, gigantic and powerful) and Mummu (a sort of grand vizier). Apsu & Tiamat gave rise to the other gods but found them irritating.	Ea (son of Anu, son of Anshar & Kishar) puts Apsu to sleep and then kills him; he trapped Mummu. Later Ea & wife conceive Marduk. Tiamat attempts to exact revenge but is defeated by Marduk who kills her.	Marduk cuts her in half forming the sky and earth with the respective body parts.
Semitic - various Torah passages.	Rahab & Leviathan are the same critter (dragon, proud, twisting) associated with the sea. ⁸	Yaweh cut Rahab into pieces, pierced the dragon (Isa.51:9 & Job.26:13); Yaweh crushed Rahab (Ps.89:10)	Yaweh rules & quells the turbulent sea that's associated with the dragon (Ps.89:10; Job 26:12)

Waltke argues that the Torah use of Canaanite mythology did not affirm that the Semites believed such a creature existed. He says they used the myths to argue the superiority of Yaweh:

- These were strict monotheists (Job 31:26-28; Isa. 51:9; 44:6; 45:6-7) and as such would not have affirmed the existence of other gods.
- Pagan references do appear in the Torah but in poetic passages where imagery is important for vivid illustration; it's not pagan theology that's borrowed, it's pagan imagery.
- Strict monotheists would not have attempted to support their monotheistic view from pagan mythology, rather they used the mythological imagery to argue that Yahweh is the creator; that Yahweh defeated Pharaoh (Rahab was a nickname for Pharaoh at the time of the exodus and remember, God dried up the restraining sea Isa.51:9f; Ps.87:4) and the prophets used the imagery to convey Yahweh's contemporary and future defeat of his enemies culminating with the defeat of Satan Isa.27:1; Rev. 12:7-9

Thus, in every case where these references are used it is to affirm the triumph of Yahweh over his foes, the establishment of his rule on earth and his superiority over the pagan gods.

⁸ Op. Cit. Gordon; compare Ps.74:13f with Ugaritic text 67:1:1-3; Lotan = Leviathan; the myth is even older, having been dated to the 24th century BC during the Akkad Dynasty.