The world is a place of conflict. There is no denying this, and as history moves along more evidence for this conflict exists, from wars that humans have continuously waged with each other since humans have organized themselves into groups to the individual struggles that people experience with starvation, disease and death. The basic problem with this conflict is that it disrupts what is necessary for the world to be life-sustaining. With this evidence for conflict come various ways that humans have sought to explain and to cope with it. In God’s design, not only can humans cope with this conflict, but empowered by him, can participate in his overcoming the evil behind it.

The ancient Near East, in which the ancient Israelites were situated both geographically and conceptually, had their own ways of explaining the conflict, as well as solutions to it in the divine and human spheres. This paper will examine the most prominent way that the ancient Near East conceptualized and expressed the conflict in the world, and how they imagined this conflict to be solved. This involved the king establishing order onto the chaos. The Old Testament viewed things similarly, but with striking differences, especially in the way this chaos and conflict was confronted in the human sphere. This conflict is articulated most clearly in the ancient Near Eastern combat myth. The value presented in the myth is that the sustenance of life must be maintained through effort and conflict against evil forces seeking to destroy it.

Humans, through various sociological mechanisms, have a large role to play in this. In most of the ancient Near East the mechanism was kingship, in Israel it was the community of the faithful. Through Christ’s victory in his death, resurrection and ascension, the fellowship of believers is the sociological mechanism. In the end of all things, in the New Heaven and New Earth, there is no more conflict, as the sea out of which creation comes, that primeval symbol of chaos, is no more. Jesus’ victory as the Lion of Judah who conquered as a lamb slain ended the cycle of conflict that allowed chaos to continually threaten the earth. In Christ’s death, conflict is ended by reconciling the world unto himself.
The basic way that the ancient Near East depicted the conflict is as a struggle of a new-comer deity with the primordial and pre-existent older gods, often seen as a watery chaos. The new-comer deity defeats the older gods and is raised to king of the gods and produces new order out of the older chaos. The role of the king in the human sphere is conceptualized along the same line, as the human king is the king of the gods’ representative on earth. Although the Old Testament reflects the chaos myth and sees the function of the king in similar ways, there are marked differences due to the fact that there are no gods that existed before the LORD, and humans in general are God’s representatives on earth, not just the king. The king confronts life-annulling forces and promotes life in most of the ancient Near East, whereas in the Old Testament, the faithful as a whole do it.

The ancient Near Eastern combat myth is significant in our understanding of the origins of evil, because certain scholars consider the language of the combat myth to be the natural way that the ancient Near East talked about spiritual warfare, thus it reflects conflicts with spiritual forces that oppose God. Other scholars explain evil in the world by saying that even in the Old Testament, the evil forces out of which God made the world were pre-existent. God fashions creation out of these forces. Whatever the case, it is a common way that the ancient Near East, and the Old Testament, speaks about life sustaining order being created out of life nullifying chaos.

The combat myth is significant for reflection on the nature of evil in the context of Christian development, because the view of the relationship of the god and primordial chaos on which he establishes order prefigures the relationship of humanity and their relation to the world around them on which they are to establish order. In the ancient Near East, the human that counted as far as ordering the world was the king. In the Old Testament text, it is the human in general. If these divine representatives did not operate in their divinely appointed roles, chaos would overcome life on the human sphere. This has significant relevance for Christian development, as it helps us understand how the Bible depicts forces that nullify-life’s entrance in the world, and how God has commissioned the faithful to be agents that allow life to thrive in imitation of God’s own efforts to create a life-affirming world.

In the ancient world, it seems that chaos and a nullification of life was the way of things, and the ancient societies exerted much energy and force to order their environment in a way that would sustain life. Chaos had to be held at bay or the precarious order that allowed ancient societies to exist would be destroyed as chaos reasserted itself. This ancient exertion to create order was enshrined in myth, ritual and art and has come down to us in the form of surviving texts, inherited worldviews and artifacts. The hero of the story on the human plane was the king who established righteousness and justice and ordered society. The antagonists are enemy peoples and destructive forces such as drought, disease, flood and so forth.

On the divine plane, the hero is the king of the gods who fights the watery chaos monster and establishes his rule. Generally, the king of the gods is a younger god that wrests sovereignty from eternal primordial powers from which the present gods had descended. In Mesopotamia, the king of the gods, Marduk in Babylon or Assur in Assyria, defeats Tiamat and from her corpse creates the universe. In Egypt, Ra the sun god, and a number of lesser deities defeat Apophis the chaos serpent as they sail through the underworld in the solar barge, thus daily re-establishing order in creation. At Ugarit, Ba’al defeats Yamm and establishes his eternal rule. Some myths that reflect this combat involve the creation of the universe, but not all of them. What they all have in common is an establishment of order out of disorder so that life may thrive. Levenson is quick to point out that in the ancient Near East, the fundamental act of creation was not creation out of nothing, but bringing life-affirming order out of life denying disorder. If such is the emphasis, Levenson submits that one cannot make too large of a division between portrayals of the combat myth that reflect creation,
such as Enuma Elish, and those that do not, such as the Ba’al Cycle. Psalm 74:12-14 depicts creation as a primordial act of God’s salvation, which provides a space for life in terms reminiscent of the combat myth. It also recalls the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea.

Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.

You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters [fn] on the waters.

You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

It is the salvific act of creation that the psalmist appeals to for deliverance from present enemies.

It is clear then, that the combat myth has left its imprint on the Old Testament as the activity of the LORD in establishing divine rule. An area of debate is whether or not this is reflected in Genesis 1. Many scholars see Genesis 1 as reflective of the combat myth. However, if it does, it has been sanitized of much of the violent language one would expect. God does a lot of separating and dividing in Gen 1, the waters above from the waters below, the dry land from the waters, day and night and darkness and light. The sea monsters with which gods such as Marduk and Ba’al fight in the combat myth are created by God (Gen 1:21). God does not do any fighting in Gen 1. This is priestly language of distinguishing things that are different, setting things apart and separating the clean from the unclean, not violent language. Although the materials God uses in creation are similar to those used in other ancient Near Eastern creation stories, God’s approach to his materials are different. In Genesis 1, God is Priest and Artisan, not Warrior.

All of that being said concerning Gen 1, other passages in the Hebrew Bible do depict God as a warrior against watery chaos and the sea serpent. It will be sufficient to only mention a few. Most clearly, see Isa 27:1,

In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.

In the psalms, as well, we see the LORD battling the chaos serpent. Ps 89:9-10 reads,

You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them.

You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.

In its larger context, Ps 89:9-10 may very well be referring to the foundation of the world by God. In Ps 74:12-17, it certainly does in similar language. To a certain degree, Ps 104:6-9 may reflect the subdual of waters in a creation text.

It is clear, then, that the idea of primordial, watery, chaotic monsters being slain by heroic gods has left its imprint on the ancient Near East and the Bible. Theologians such as Greg Boyd say that this language was how the theologians of the ancient Near East talked about the reality of spiritual warfare, and the restoration and preservation of creation. In relation to humanity, humans were created to be God’s regents on earth and participate in the re-conquest of the world from evil forces. This is a compelling reading of Genesis 1. However, as mentioned above, if there is a conflict in the background of creation in Genesis 1, then it has left little if any trace in its language. Jon Levenson considers Genesis 1 to pick up where the Enuma Elish and Marduk’s slaying of Tiamat leaves off. Others do not see conflict in the background of Genesis 1.

The congruence between divine rule and human rule is a crucial issue in understanding the human in relation to God and the human’s God-given role in the world. What the gods do in the heavenly realm in establishing order out of chaos is reflected in the earthly realm through the activity of humans, in most of the ancient Near East particularly through the activities of the king. When
we look at the foundational texts that describe the relationship between the divine and human spheres, in the ancient Near East, the king is the main human actor. In Egypt, the king was the mediator between the divine and human spheres, the sun god on earth. He made sure justice grew and evil and disorder was opposed. In Mesopotamia, the king was the one who ordered society and promulgated the divine will. He had a special relationship with the gods, and the nature of that relationship is conceptualized in various ways depending on what text you are looking at in different locales and time periods. Whatever the case, the king was the primary agent for promulgating the deity’s will and rule on earth, and the unwashed masses left leaderless are depicted as unable to fend for themselves.

Things are different in the Old Testament. Whereas human kingship is very closely connected with creation in the larger ancient Near East, in Israel, it is rooted squarely in history. Whereas in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the king is qualitatively different than the rest of humanity, in Israel, he was “one from amongst your brothers (Deut 17:15),” and the only positive command he is given in the rules concerning kingship in Deut 17 is to study Torah (vv. 18-20). He is first among equals and the consummate Torah scholar. Instead of promulgating a law, a chief function of ancient Near Eastern kings, the Israelite king studies Torah and is shaped, and shapes his rule, by it. The Israelite king leads the rest of the people in his promulgation of justice and conflict with injustice. Marduk and Ra empowered the king to promote justice and order and combat injustice and chaos; an earthly manifestation of their divine conflict to do the same, the LORD put this in the hands of humanity in general, through the sociological organization of the extended family. In the Old Testament, the whole community of God had a place in ordering society for life to thrive. The faithful one, in his or her Torah observance, had the prerogatives and responsibilities of the king.

In the Old Testament, humans in general were made in the image of God, and were called to rule over creation. The LORD has left a lot of work to do in human hands, with which to finish creation, as it were, and to make order out of chaos. Things did not quite turn out the way it was supposed to, and humans gave their rule of the world to Satan, so instead of God having a partner in creation, God has an adversary exercising dominion that humans are supposed to exercise.

It is possible that God did not create the world in a state of perfection. It was “very good,” but not “perfect.” The conditions for evil were in the world from the beginning, and it was the human exercising dominion and subduing (Gen 1:26-28), and keeping and guarding (Gen 2:15) within creation that was to maintain a God established order and the flourishing of life. In the fall, humans forfeited that authority, and another, Satan, obtained it, using it to accomplish purposes opposed to God’s original purpose. As God established order and imposed his will on unruly primordial forces in order for a life-giving space to exist, humans were called to complete that task as God’s regent(s) on earth. They failed to do so, and the human condition is wracked with disease, poverty and oppression. Much of what is manifest on the human sphere is the result of a warped exercise of the authority that humans still have.

How the primordial forces came to be on which God exercised control in creating a world that was life-nurturing is a debate among scholars, as is the nature of the evil is so clearly evident in that world. Did God create the world perfect, and place the humans in a world set up for their relative ease? Or do we take the language of subduing and exercising dominion, keeping and working that we find in Gen 1-2 to mean that God left quite a bit of work for humans to do in maintaining and establishing order in the world? Evil enters the world, because God’s regents did not exercise their authority under the empowerment of God, as was God’s original plan. Humans have given their authority to another who can say that he has dominion over all of the earth’s kingdoms, in his
What is the Ancient Near Eastern Combat Myth and What Difference Does it Make? • 9

temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Luke 4:5-7). The Devil has used that authority to foster hatred, disease, famine and instability, the opposite of the life sustaining creation that God and a humanity empowered by him were to create.

Jesus began to take dominion back from the Devil by force in his earthly ministry, and in his death and resurrection, a great victory over the cosmic powers over which he now reigns supreme. He has begun the work of realizing the victory that he won until he emerges in final victory over death and the establishment of a new heavens and new earth in which there is no sea and the nations are finally healed (Rev 21:1-22:2). Jesus ends the conflict in victory, not by merely exerting his will over the old serpent (Rev 12:9-15; Rev 20:2), but by reconciling the world to himself as the Lamb slain (Rev 5:5-7). Reconciliation between God and a rebellious world nullifies the need for coercion by force to gain life-sustaining order. It is clear that believers have a role in that reconciliation (Rev 5:9-10). As we are redeemed and regenerated we are restored to the authority that we have in the beginning. This began in the ministry of the first disciples, and continues as we are transformed into the image of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. We exercise authority as believers to restore creation that has been ravaged by a warped use of God given human authority and by the Devil, who was until Jesus’ death and resurrection, the god of this world.

What is unique concerning the Old Testament articulation of the ancient Near Eastern combat myth is its incorporation of the faithful into the work of God. The ancient Near Eastern combat myth depicts the king of the gods as defeating watery chaos and ordering reality to be life sustaining. It also served as a vehicle for communicating the legitimate role of the king in society in ordering the human sphere. Although Israel had a king, ideally, Israel was a holy nation comprised of a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6). It would be difficult to imagine Marduk or Ra making such a statement about the Babylonian or Egyptian people. The Apostle Peter makes alludes to Exod 19:6 and applies it to believers in Christ (1 Peter 2:9). The conflict that believers have with the world is modeled after the Lamb who conquered by being slain, and ultimately reconciles the world to himself.

Ancient Near Eastern Combat Myth, Joel Hamme ABD

Endnotes
1. Ideally, it was the extended family. It was the extended family as a whole in Genesis 1-2. God then begins anew with the family of Abram in Genesis 12, which became the families of Israel. Now it is the family of Christ believers.

2. Some scholars do think that the Bible depicts God as creating from pre-existent matter. See, for example, Israel Knohl, who views the unformed and void earth, darkness and deep waters of Genesis 1 to be pre-existent entities that belong to what he calls the “evil sphere.” See Israel Knohl, The Divine Symphony: The Bible’s Many Voices (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 12-13.

3. See, for example, Ps 72, and the facets of human life that the just rule of the king was supposed to influence. Compare this to Assurbanipal’s coronation hymn (Hallo, Context of Scripture, I:473-74).

4. Marduk is a third generation deity, who becomes king of the gods by destroying Tiamat, the embodiment of salt water. Ra forms himself out of the eternal ocean. An exception is Yamm from the Ugaritic Ba’al Cycle. Yamm is a son of El, the High God, and does not appear to be eternal. It is clear in the text that El favors Yamm over Ba’al, whom El declares king and is called “the Darling of El.”


6. Ancient Egypt never developed any large epic myths, like we see from ancient Mesopotamia and Ugarit. What we have are numerous ritual texts and magic spells that refer to Ra’s defeat of Apophis.

7. For Ba’al, the defeat of Mot, the demon of death, with the help of the goddess Anat is just as significant, if not more so, than Ba’al’s defeat of Yamm. For a good and very accessible translation of the Baal Cycle, see...


10. To a lesser extent the activity of the Davidic king is described in such mythic terms. See, for example, Ps 89:25-27, in which the king is spoken of in terms reminiscent of Ba’al’s defeat of Yamm in the Ba’al cycle.


12. Greg Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 93-113. One critique of Boyd’s position here is that the forces that are subdued in the ancient Near Eastern literature is the material out of which the cosmos is created. (This is not the language for demons, although from time to time these chaotic forces are seen to have spawned demons, making them not unlike the gods, which these chaotic forces also spawn.) This is reflected in the OT texts in a number of places, as well. Although chaotic and resistant to God’s rule (thus the need to exercise control over it), it is too much to draw a straight line from the language of watery chaos and sea serpents in the Old Testament to the Devil in the New Testament in every instance. We are dealing here with a multivalent image, which has an exact meaning that is contextually driven in each of its instances. In Isa 27:1, the sea serpent is depicted as an adversary, in Ps 104:26 and Job 41, the Sea Serpent is God’s creation in which the LORD takes joy and great pride. Another critique of Boyd’s position is that the ancient Near East definitely had a rich vocabulary with which to talk about demons and spiritual warfare apart from the language of the chaos myth as seen in a number of their ritual prayer texts and other bodies of literature. Boyd is drawing on one stream of a vast and varied religious tradition.

13. Boyd, *God at War*, 110-13. Another interpretation would be that God left a great deal of the subduing and exercising of dominion to humanity, which, as a result of the fall, never quite got subdued and put in order in the first place.


15. See, for example, this hymn from Pharaoh Hatshepsut’s funeral chapel,

Re has placed King N
On the earth of the living
Forever and ever

Judging humanity and propitiating the gods,
Realizing order (ma’at) and destroying disorder (izfet).

He gives offerings to the gods
And mortuary offerings to the spirits.

The name of King N
Is in the sky like Re.

He lives in joy
like Re-Harakhte.

The elite rejoice when they see him,
And the subjects perform a dance of celebration,
In his form as a youth.

16. A clear example is in a particular Mesopotamian creation myth in which the Queen of the Gods (belet-ili) creates lulu-amelu (uncivilized, primordial humanity), and then creates malik-amelu (the circumspect human; the king) to rule over uncivilized, primordial humanity. See Hallo W, Younger K. Context of Scripture [monograph on the Internet]. Leiden: Brill; 2003, I.477. [cited June 19, 2013]. Available from: eBook
Collection (EBSCOhost). However, because of a divine anointing upon the King of Israel, and his adoption as son, he receives a divine grace of kingship in the bible text, especially the royal psalms (See for ex. Pss 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144). This idea later is developed into messianism, which shapes our understanding of who Jesus is.

17. This is apparent in the pairing of royal psalms with Torah psalms in the case of Pss 1 & 2, 18 & 19, and 118-19. Also Old Testament faithful are depicted as ones who advance the cause of righteousness and justice. See, for example, Isaac in Gen 18:19 and Job in Job 29:14. The temple in both the ANE and Israel had a large role in this, but there is not enough room here to discuss it.


19. It is clear that humans are still creating, developing and ordering creatures, and reflect God’s original purpose for them. Presently, this purpose quite often has been tinged with the Satanic. One of the works of Christ is to restore humans to this original purpose. The position I am taking raises a lot of issues that I do not have time to explore here. Some of these include whether or not the world was created perfect.


21. In this understanding, the first humans could have as easily cast the evil out of the garden as succumbed to it.

22. One can only go so far with this, however. The authority that Satan has in the world is only because the first humans gave it to him. Satan’s authority is used in rebellion to God.

23. In this understanding, what we find in Rev 21:1-22:2 is not a return to the Garden of Eden. What we have in the New Creation is superior.

24. It is interesting to read Heb 2:6-9 in light of this idea. Although we do not see everything subjected to Jesus yet, they are nevertheless placed under his feet.

Reference List