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Creation Myths: Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament

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The article is devoted to the comparison of the world creation in the Old Testament and Egyptian mythology. The Genesis contains two basic narrative blocks, telling about the creation of the world (1:1 – 2:3; 2:4 – 24). The first story about creation is connected with image of flood and drainage of the great river: the influence of Egypt and crucial role of the Nile in life of the community are not excluded. As a whole god “upon the face of the waters” has an equivalent in Heliopolis version of the Egyptian cosmogony where the first deity (Atum, Ra) arises over Primordial Ocean (Nun). The major typological motives uniting Heliopolis myth and the Bible images of creation are: the indication to pre-binary order of things before creation; time inversions are used: the time before and after the creation is mentioned; the fact of creation actually from nothing, creation by the word (leaving the lips of the speaker); the man is the last and highest of demiurgic creations. There are also equivalents of purely stylistic character. In the Memphis creation myth the importance of creation by the word can be specified. The motives of primary chaos with its infinity, non-existence and darkness, with its protogenic ocean and the creation through it are also repeated in Hermopolis cosmogony. The obvious affinity of the Bible motives and the Egyptian variants of creation of the world, apparently, can be explained not only by the unity of laws of mythological thinking of the antiquity, but also by direct borrowings that are also proved to be true in history of cross-cultural interactions.

Keywords: The Old Testament, Ancient Egypt, myths about creation, cosmogony, chaos and space, creation by the word.

Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament mythology: issues of cross-cultural interactions

Till now the issues of cultural influence during the ancient times remain up-to-date as far as research of intercultural communication processes faces the insufficiency and complexity of the archaeological data interpretation – in

particular the data concerning long-term stay of Israel in the Nile valley.

Nevertheless some researchers have mentioned the issue of cultural interactions between Egyptians and Hebraic people, and different scientists have studied this aspect. Till now, however, no analytical papers on this subject have been written, as far as we know.

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The story of the Moses' law "Egyptian roots" has profound influence on the history of the world. Apostle Paul wrote: «And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds» (Acts 7:22; the Webster Bible is quoted hereinafter). Thus, up to the present days the concept of the Egyptian culture in comparison to the Old Testament culture has been considered from two polar points of view: some scholars (I. Rak) think that Ancient Egypt had polytheism (in this case the Jewish monotheism could start only from negative experience of Egypt), the other (W. Budge) consider the idea of pure monotheism which could become the sample for Moses' Jahwism improvement. As priest Lev Shikhlyarov writes in his "Introduction to the Old Testament", "in its pure form the religion of Egypt consisted of the following:

1. belief in the One God Creator, worthy of thanksgiving;
2. concept about Divine requital to each soul depending on execution of the moral law;
3. belief in divine Osiris who has overthrown the death.
4. belief in afterlife and in own corporal revival.

Thereby, the increase of Moses in Egypt, which in the spiritual relation was the successor of "paradise" Revelation, has appeared procogitative" (Shikhlyarov).

The interpenetration of Hebrew and Egyptian cultures has a long history. The mixture of Egyptian and Canaan elements in the various images which have been found on territory of pre-Israeli Canaan, testifies to deep interpenetration of two cultures: in the Middle and Late Bronze Age on the territory of Palestine the scarabs and the press with the images of snake, goddesses Tauret, a winged solar disk, a falcon or falcon-headed figures, a lotus flower, an ankh, and scenes of the Egyptian mythology are found

(Astapova, 2009). During the Late Bronze Age the Egyptian gods were glorified in Palestine: in Timna the ruins of the temple of goddess Hathor have remained, in the papyrus Harris I the temple of Ramses in Canaan is mentioned (there is also a suggestion about him, mentioned on a plate made of ivory from Tell Qarqur, found in Megiddo) (Giveon, 1978). In the Late Bronze Age in Palestine Sehmet and Bastet were also worshiped; the names of the Palestinian kings including an element *maat*, and the symbolic image of *maat*, an ostrich feather, have remained on the scarabs (Keel, 1998). Thus, the question about possibility of cultural influence of Egypt to Palestine, including the people of Israel, gets the answer proved by the archaeological data. There are also some other possible influences, e.g. *rather* distinguishable *Zoroastrianism's influence*, or widely investigated contacts with Babylonian and Sumerian cultures.

M. Korostovtsev has noticed an important fact, that between Egyptians and Jews, owing to the spread of the Egyptian language and the influence on the Palestine throughout many centuries, "there was no language barrier to cultural exchange", while "the ancient and great power of the East, Egypt, was basically the giving party, and the weak, hardly developed Israel, – the accepting one" (Korostovtsev). Further there are a lot of undoubtedly Egyptian words in the text of the Tanakh, including proper names and calques. Thus, the basis for cultural influence is doubtless.

The Egyptian mythology (as a complete phenomenon in its chronological and geographical variants) in comparison to Israel amazes a modern scientist with its variability, variety and functionality, culturological otherness. The mythology of Ancient Jews, much better mastered by modern culture, was included into the Tanakh extremely selectively. E. Torchinov writes convincingly enough about the reasons

of such selective attitude to mythology in the comparative aspect. He notices that connections of mythology as a whole are closer to religions where the base psychological experience was formulated, described or comprehended by mythological categories and ways of mythological and poetical thinking: first of all the most ancient religions (including Ancient Egypt) (Torchinov, 2007).

In Judaism, which has endured an epoch of domination of mythological thinking, the functions of the included myths were transformed, and the myths lost their spontaneity under the influence of new reflection and were edited and modified in many aspects.

Two variants of cosmogony of the Book of Genesis

The minimum connections with religion were kept through interpreting and historicised myths: cosmological, sociogenic, cultural heroic myths. At the same time these types of myths are among the most ancient forms of generalisation and transfer of collective knowledge in society; mythologemes used there have the archetypal nature. Therefore comparison of mythological views of Ancient Egypt (with their variability) and the Tanakh (the variant of the “edited” mythology) may lead to interesting conclusions.

The Genesis (תּוֹשָׁאָרָב, “Bereshit” – “In the beginning”) contains two basic narrative blocks, describing the creation of the world. These are stories of Elohist (1:1 – 2:3) and Jahvist (2:4 – 24). We will outline the plot of creation in these two versions.

According to the first version, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”, the latter was empty, “and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters”. Then at the words of command (“And God said, Let there be ...”) the light which had received an imperative of clemency (“And God saw the light, that it was

good”) was created and separated from darkness: that was creation of the first day. Then, also at his words of command, The God created: on the second day – firmament, named the sky (and water which is under the firmament, has been separated from water, which is over the firmament); on the third day – the land and the seas, and the plants; on the fourth day – heavenly bodies and the stars placed “in the firmament of the heaven, to give light upon the earth. And to rule over the day, and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness”; on the fifth day – birds and fishes, on the sixth – animals (beasts, cattle and “the creeping animal”), and also the man: “male and female created he them”, in his own image, in the image of God. The man is represented as the top of creation, blessed for sovereignty over the animals and flora. Then, on the seventh day, God finished the rest, again confirming the good of what he has done: “And God saw every thing that he had made, and behold, it was very good”.

After that fragment goes the second version of creation, starting with an apophatic introduction “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 on the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground”. Here the natural background is not “the face of the waters”, but a mist which “went up ... from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground”. Here the sequence of creation is different: first a man was created and placed in “a garden eastward in Eden”, then the trees, including a tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil were created and placed in. Then goes the description of four rivers of paradise and an interdiction for the tree of knowledge of the good and the evil. Then narration continues on creation of animals and birds, named by the man, and only after that the woman was created from his rib.

As a rule, the critics of the Bible (Z. Kosidovsky, R. Graves etc.) consider these two narrations in the context of Mesopotamic mythology. So, the first narrative is correlated to the Babylonian cosmogonies (sequence of creation, creation of the man on the sixth day and rest on the seventh) and the Ugaritic myths (god on waters), and the second – with Sumerian sacral geography (a garden in the myth about god Enki; goddess Ninti – “the woman from a rib”).

The creation of the world: the Bible and Heliopolis myth

At the same time, taking into account the role of the Egyptian culture in life of the Ancient East, the issue of Egyptian influences on cosmogonic Old Testament myths may be considered as well.

The first story about creation may be connected with the image of flood and drainage of the great river: R. Graves and R. Pataj suggest that these rivers are the Tiger and the Euphrates, and, thus, the given text is created under the influence of the Babylonian cosmogonies (Mushich-Gromyko, 2010); at the same time earlier influence of Egypt with its major role of the Nile in life of the human community reflected in the image of god Hapi is also not excluded.

As a whole the god “upon the face of the waters” has an analogue in Heliopolis version of the Egyptian cosmogony where the first deity (Atum, Ra) arises over Primordial Ocean (Nun, *Nwnw*). “The lord of the Universe after he came into being speaks: <...> I am now, and all beings came into being. They all entered the existence after I did, and many creatures left my lips. There was no still a sky, and there was no earth. There was not still neither soils, nor a snake in this place. I have created them there from Nun, from a non-existence. I have not found a place for myself on which I could stand up there. I thought

in the heart, have conceived in front of my face. And I have created all the images, being uniform ...” (Matje, 1996). The Heliopolis cosmogony – one of the most ancient, if not the most ancient Egyptian theological concept – has had a great influence on the latest texts, both religious and “secular” ones (Zhdanov, 2006).

Let us note some major typological motives uniting Heliopolis myth and the Bible images of creation. They are the following: the indication of pre-binary order of things before creation: space has not been parted into pairs of contrasts, such as the sky and the earth, light and darkness (and also life and death); the indication that prehistoric substances were water, the darkness without forms or entities. This substance has a name (and a mythological embodiment) in the Egyptian myth – Nun – and in the Bible it is nameless. *Nun*, as well as many concepts of the Egyptian world view, is an original category of the culture demanding separate research; the biblical “waters” also have the additional meanings actualised in books of the Bible (a habitat of the chthonic Leviathan etc.).

Let us specify more particular equivalences. So, in the beginning both Egyptian, and the Bible versions of creation time inversions are used: the time before and after creation are mentioned (the sky and the earth in The Gen.1:1, 2:4, etc.). In the Egyptian text we read: “there was no still a sky, and there was no earth. Was not still neither soils, nor a snake in this place”; in the Genesis we see: “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 on the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground...”. The uniformity of poetic reception of the message about prehistoric times is obvious in contrast with present time.

As for an ancient water surface the Egyptian text offers more space for interpretations: “I have created them there from Nun, from a non-existence. I to myself have not found a place on which I could stand up there”; while in the Genesis “the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters”. Here the word *merahephet*, literally “trembled”, is used; the latter is what we meet once again only in the Pentateuch text: in the Deuteronomy book (32:11); it is used for the description of an eagle, which flying up to a nest, slows down its flight not to frighten baby birds, having settled itself on a nest unexpectedly (Law of Moses, 2003). Thereupon it is worth mentioning that in other version of Heliopolis cosmogonies the non-created divine bird called Benu, which at the beginning of the universe was flying over the waters of Nun (Rak, 1993), is mentioned. Despite figurative distinctions, unity of an overall picture of pre-created world leaves no doubt.

Further, important equivalence is creation out nothing, creation by the word (leaving the lips of speaker). In the Egyptian text: “All beings came into existence after I did, and many beings left my lips”. In the Bible – the repeating formula “And God said, Let there be... and it was so”. In the Egyptian text, to tell the truth, further we see the physiological explanation of the poetic formula peculiar to corporal poetics in mythology: “I have connected to my fist, have copulated with my hand, the seed has fallen in my own mouth. And I have spat out Shu, I have vomited Tefnut”. In the Bible, with its postulation of impersonal God as much as possible got rid of anthropomorphous features (despite creation “in his own image”). Such explanation, of course, is impossible. Here is a vivid example of various usage of the same mythological motives in various types of religions: in the archaic religion created

during the period of mythological and poetic type of thinking (Egypt), and in later religions where the abstract-logic type of thinking (Judaism) prevailed.

Let us note that both in the Egyptian myth and in the text of the Genesis the man is the last and highest of demiurge creation.

There are also equivalents of purely stylistic character: it is a poetic parallelism, the circular composition and antitheses. Besides both in the Egyptian text and in the phonologic picture of the Tanakh investigated by cabbalists the letters playing the role in creation of a mythological world view are used, these are important alliterations. So, M. Matje specifies in her comments that “In the text the combinations of letters are repeated creating a word-play: ‘Hepra’ – god of the sun, ‘heper’ – ‘to exist’, ‘hepru’ – ‘existence’” (besides all three words are written by means of a trigram phonogram of a scarab *hpr*) (Zhdanov, 2006), “‘isheshni’ – ‘I have spat out’ and Shu”, “‘tefni’ – ‘I have vomited’ and Tefnut”, “a word-play: ‘remit’ – ‘tears’ and ‘remet’ – ‘people’». Interpreted through the centuries the first line of the Genesis looks like following: תא מיהלא ארב תישארב “Be-reshit bara’ Elogim et ga-sha – májím ve-et ga-arets” (Shchedrovitsky); the consideration of the original text also leads the reader to the conclusion about depth of the senses put by the story-teller, not always transferred in translation, owing to peculiarities of a language system and even the metaphysics of language. We will give an example from D. Shchedrovitskyi’s work: “Heaven (“heavens” is more exact as the word is in the plural) is called here the higher spiritual, invisible world, and also infinite extraterrestrial space of the visible world. The word שִׁמְשִׁים “shamajim” derives from a demonstrative pronoun “sham” – “there”, i.e. “local”, “remote” worlds” <...> The ancient Hebrew word combination והבו והת ‘togu

va-vogu', translated by words "without form, and void", means "disorderliness", "chaotic condition", "absence of an intelligent structure". The earth was sightless and empty: Moses in this description does not consider the space and "sky" (Shchedrovitsky). Also the letters significant for both linguistics and mythology *adam* (man) – *adama* (red clay) generate the variety of traditional assimilations of the turn of a man to ashes and the earth.

Thus, even on the basis of the short analysis we see the most various levels: subject, figurative, chronotopic, stylistic – they are rather similar and show surprising uniformity; the distinctions, caused by the difference of a religious world view of Ancient Egypt and Israel, are quite obvious. Nevertheless, it appears that the issue of influence of Heliopolis cosmogony (which is obviously more ancient) on the Genesis cosmogony can be solved positively.

Bible creation and Egyptian versions of cosmogony

Let us address the other version of creation in Ancient Egypt – the Memphis legend (on the basis of "Shabaka Stela"). We will quote this record about creator-Ptah selectively: "It has happened that the heart and the tongue have got the power over (all) members for they have learnt that he (Ptah) is in each body, in each mouth of all gods, all people, all animals, all worms and all living for he thinks and rules over all things that he wishes. ... And Ptah was pleased after he has created all things and all divine words" (Hereinafter M.Matje's translation of the text from "Shabaka Stela" quot. on 19). Here we will specify only the importance of creation by means of the word, relevant for creation described in the Bible, and on motive of satisfaction of the demiurge, the goodness of created which is extremely important for the Genesis.

The motives of primary chaos with its infinity, non-existence and darkness, with its protogenic ocean and happening *over* it creation (connected again with motives of a primary bird, and also an egg and a lotus) are repeated also in Hermopolis cosmogony – the descriptions can be found in separate fragments of "Book of the Dead" and "Texts of Sarcophagi" (Rak, 1993). The later variations of the Egyptian cosmogonies also, as a rule, use the mentioned motives in combinations.

The uniformity of creation according to Egyptian and the Bible sources has been noticed in 1932 by English assiriologist A.H. Sayce who allocated the following parallel places between Hermopolis cosmogony and the Bible:

- 1) a water chasm, water chaos;
- 2) a spirit soaring over it;
- 3) the creation of light;
- 4) the emergence of land from chasm.

It is necessary also to mention the other moments of influence in the aspect of myth about creation. So, the image of God-potter who has molded the man from clay passes through all the Bible: it is mentioned in the books of Isaiah (29:15-16; 45: 9; 64: 8), Jeremiah (18: 2-4), Job (10: 8-9), and also books of The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach (33: 13), The Wisdom of Solomon (15: 7) and Paul's message to Romans (9: 21). In the famous Egyptian "Instruction of Amenemope" the similar representation of a deity is displayed: "After all the person is a clay and straw, and god is his founder. He (i.e. god) destroys and creates daily, he creates thousand poor men daily voluntarily, he creates one thousand supervisors at the right hour (i.e. at the moment of creation)" (Quot. on: 16). As a result, as M. Korostovtsev considers, "the Egyptian and the Bible literary images of god-potter and god-creator ascend finally to the Egyptian mythological image of god Hnum who has created people on a potter's wheel». Hnum, the sheep-headed god-demiurge in Elephantine

cosmogony (Rak, 1993), has also been involved in the bible God image enrichment.

Further, M. Korostovev marks the uniformity of the Universe image in Egyptian and Bible cosmology, in particular, the sky as a reservoir: “And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters” (Gen. 1:6). “Here we face purely Egyptian representation about the world structure: the sky is water on which heaven bodies swim in boats, and the earth separates it from primitive ocean Nun” (Korostovtsev).

The poetic pictures supplementing Bible images of creation (for example, in Psalter. 32:6, Isaiah 40:22, Jeremiah 31:35 and others) also reflect the pictures of mythology of the Ancient East; the creations which have not entered into a canon of creation of the Genesis, we will not consider owing to their affinity to other traditions.

The mythology of creation embodied in the Genesis, unlike other cosmogonies of the ancient

world, was destined to have a long life and some kind of “legitimation” as historically authentic event, up to the present day. It becomes obvious when referring to the majority of research works devoted to commenting of the Old Testament (I.Tantlevsky, D.Shchedrovitsky, L.Shihljarov and others): researchers mention the modern scientific facts and bring up to date traditional hermeneutical paradigms for acknowledgement of “materialistic” truthfulness of the Bible creation event. We agree with E. Torchinov that «if <...> theologians looked at a myth as on a myth, perhaps, they would manage to find in it both deeper sense, and deeper vision of reality – not that has been, but what is forever» (Torchinov, 2007).

The obvious affinity of the Bible motives and the Egyptian variants of creation of the world, apparently, can be explained not only by the unity of laws of mythological thinking of the antiquity, but also by direct borrowings that are also proved to be true in history of cross-cultural interactions.

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Мифология творения: Египет и Ветхий Завет

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Вопросы культурного влияния в ветхозаветную эпоху до сих пор остаются достаточно спорными, так как исследование процессов межкультурной коммуникации сталкивается с недостаточностью и сложностью истолкования археологических данных – в частности, данных, касающихся многолетнего пребывания Израиля в долине Нила.

Очевидная близость мотивов библейского и египетских вариантов творения мира, очевидно, объясняется не только единством законов мифологического мышления древности, но и прямыми заимствованиями, что подтверждается и историей взаимоотношений культур.

Ключевые слова: Ветхий Завет, Древний Египет, мифы творения, космогония, хаос и космос, творение словом
