“Alfred Loisy and les Mythes Babyloniens: Loisy’s Discourse on Myth in the Context of Modernism.”

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Alfred Loisy and les Mythes Babyloniens: Loisy’s Discourse on Myth in the Context of Modernism*

Abstract: With the 1901 publication of his Les Mythes babyloniens et les premiers chapitres de la Genèse, the French Catholic scholar Alfred Loisy examined carefully parallels between Babylonian literature and the Book of Genesis. In German scholarship, this had been a growing fascination since at least the 1895 publication of Hermann Gunkel’s Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit. Loisy’s use of the concept of “Myth” provides an important window into the appropriation of German scholarship on religion and the Bible into the French scholarly world. Through Loisy’s work, what had been primarily a German Protestant academic discussion became one of the matchsticks that ignited what would become known as the Roman Catholic Modernist Crisis. This present article situates Loisy’s appropriation of “Myth” from the German scholarship he mastered within the proximate cultural, historical, and religious context that became Roman Catholic Modernism.

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Alfred Loisy (1857–1940) is best known as one of the key players in the Roman Catholic Modernist controversy which took the Catholic world by storm after Pope St. Pius X’s (pope from 1903–1914) summary condemnation of Modernism as a “collection of all heresies” in the Pope’s 1907 encyclical, *Pascendi dominici gregis*.1 Pius X excommunicated Loisy the following year, the day before *Pas-

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Loisy’s early work on the Bible made frequent reference to comparative ancient Near Eastern written documents, primarily Akkadian cuneiform tablets. Loisy’s use of such material did not represent the work of an amateur sitting through pre-digested studies of these ancient Near Eastern documents, selectively using the work of other scholars where it seemed to relate to the biblical texts. Rather, Loisy’s work was that of a gifted assyriologist, who even wrote his own grammar of the Akkadian language, his Grammaire Assyrienne, which was never published. Loisy was not only able to make his own French translations of the cuneiform material, but was able to enter the assyriological philology debates concerning competing translations and textual readings of the cuneiform documents. In this work, Loisy discussed the various traditions he thought lay behind the texts that he was examining.

This article focuses on two of Loisy’s books that address these ancient Near Eastern and biblical traditions. The first, Les mythes chaldéens de la création et du Déluge Loisy published in 1892, a mere two decades after George Smith (1840–1876) first identified fragments from the Epic of Gilgamesh pertaining to a flood event. The second volume under consideration, Les mythes babyloniens et les premiers chapitres de la Genèse, which Loisy published in 1901, was, as far as I have been able to ascertain, the first French language book-length scholarly treatment of parallels between Babylonian literature and Genesis. I begin my treatment of these books by providing an overview of Loisy’s background and training in ancient Near Eastern and biblical scholarship. Then I examine how Loisy employed the categories of “myth” and “legend” in these two publications.

2 Pius X promulgated Pascendi on SepteLe mythes babylonienser 8, 1907, and Loisy was excommunicated on March 7, 1908.
4 Alfred Loisy, Les mythes babyloniens et les premiers chapitres de la Genèse. Paris: Alphonse Picard & Fils, 1901. Les mythes babyloniens was based on a series of articles he published in the journal Revue d’histoire et de littérature religieuses under the same title as the book volume, and published the same year.