A Comparison: Genesis 1 vs. Enuma Elish, an ancient Babylonian creation myth

The Enuma Elish was discovered by archaeologists in 1849, who were excavating the ancient Royal Library of Ashurbanipal in current day Mosul, Iraq (the site of ancient Ninevah). It was translated and published by George Smith in 1876.

**Some similarities:**
1. Enuma Elish begins "when on high"; Genesis begins "in the beginning"
2. Enuma Elish shows a connection between giving of names and existence; in Genesis, the naming of objects is of importance.
3. Both Enuma Elish and Genesis imply primeval chaos in the beginning, that is, if you interpret darkness and emptiness as chaos.
4. In both, water is divided into upper waters and lower waters.
5. Enuma Elish is recorded on seven tablets, and the Genesis creation is completed in seven days.
6. In the Enuma Elish man is created in the 6th tablet, and in Genesis man is created on the 6th day.
7. In Gen. 1:2 the word translated "deep" is the Hebrew word "tehom." Some scholars equate it with the Babylonian goddess Tiamat. [Etymologically both words probably are derived from a root originally meaning "ocean" or "deep", yet it is clear that among the Hebrews the root never took on the mythological connotation that it did among the Babylonians.]

**Key differences:**
1. Genesis is monotheistic, while Enuma Elish is clearly polytheistic.
2. Enuma Elish is clearly mythological, but Genesis is a polemic against pagan mythology. Genesis makes clear that the things mankind worships as gods are little more than the creations of the one God.
3. In the Enuma Elish, as almost all other near eastern creation myths, creation is accomplished through conflict and warfare with lots of noise. In the Genesis account, however, we find a profound sense of peace and quiet. The opposite of warfare and conflict can be seen in the instant obedience of God's divine fiat, "And God said…" "And it was so…"
4. In the Enuma Elish, magic incantations are the ultimate source of power, thus making the gods subject to nature or magic. In Genesis, power is manifest in the commands (fiat) of God, and nature is one of His obedient subjects.
5. Babylonian gods are identified with nature, but God, in Genesis, is Creator of, and distinct from, all creation.
6. The Genesis account systematically includes all general realms of nature. The Enuma Elish omits major aspects of creation such as vegetation, animals, the sun and light.
7. In Genesis, God forms the heavens and the earth on the first three days. This does not take place until the fourth tablet of Enuma Elish.
8. In Genesis, man is created from clay to rule over the creation. In Enuma Elish, man is created from a god's blood to be slaves of the gods.
9. The first chapters of Genesis are clearly a creation epic. Enuma Elish, within its historical context, was clearly not primarily a creation story, but rather a hymn of praise to Marduk. It was in essence mythological propaganda to put Marduk at the head of the pantheon so as to exalt the city of Babylon and enhance Hammurabi's power.
Some thoughts on biblical interpretation

1. We honor the Bible as the Word of God when we take seriously the form and method by which God gave it to us. God could have *dropped* the Bible ready-made from the skies in 2000 languages. Instead, he *developed* it over long periods of time through many human writers. The Bible was initiated by heaven, yet cradled and colored by earth.

2. The Church recognizes an analogy between Jesus, who as the *living* Word of God incarnate is both fully divine and fully human, and the Bible as the *written* Word of God, which is also divine and human in its origin. To recognize the *human* aspect of the Bible does not in any way disparage its *divine* inspiration.

3. A long tradition of major Christian theologians, such as Origen (c. 185-254), John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), St. Augustine of Hippo (c. 354-430), Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Calvin (1509-1564), among many others, have all recognized that God “accommodates” himself to our human limitations in the way He chooses to communicate. For example, Chrysostom wrote:

   *Christ often checked himself for the sake of the weakness of his hearers when he dealt with lofty doctrines and he usually did not choose words as were in accord with his glory, but rather those which agreed with the capability of men.*

   Similarly, John Calvin wrote:

   *For who, even of slight intelligence, does not understand, as nurses commonly do with infants, that God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? [Biblical anthropomorphic expressions]… accommodate the knowledge of God to our slight capacity. To do this God must descend far beneath his loftiness.*

4. The Bible is a book with a particular purpose—not to provide comprehensive knowledge on every conceivable subject, but on the primary subject of God’s concern, which is that we would come to a true understanding of God and ourselves, and to receive eternal life.

5. Careful study of the universe through scientific investigation is a valid way to honor God, which does not conflict with honoring the Bible as his Word. For example, in his commentary on Genesis chapter 1, John Calvin wrote:

   *Moses wrote in popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labour whatever the human mind can comprehend ... Nor is this science to be condemned ... Astronomy is not only pleasant, but also very useful to be known ... Nor did Moses truly wish to withdraw us from this pursuit. ... Had he spoken of things generally unknown [at that time], the uneducated might have pleaded in excuse that such subjects were beyond their capacity.*