

"Brief Survey of General Creation Motifs of the Ancient Near East"

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Among the living beings on our planet the human being is remarkable for his perception of time. Past and future open out to him as an indefinite expanse without beginning or end. And yet he somehow brings within his grasp the totality of time itself. Again and again, in a variety of ways, he has articulated myths of origin that take him back to the first time, and myths that take him forward to the last time. Or we might say that his temporal antennae reach backwards and forwards to a time beyond time, to a time of beginning and ending that is not simply continuous with the present time of days and nights, of weeks and months and years. In the myths of origin he enlarges the temporal horizon and touches the edge of a duration that precedes time itself. Scholars have helped us to recognize that cosmogonic myths are neither adventurous science nor unbridled fiction; and that they are meant to communicate the original and ultimate meaning of things and to provide human life with a guiding pattern.¹

Creation motifs are present in almost all traditional cultures, usually depicted within or about sacred space as a ritual reenactment, typically as a part of a religious ceremony. This seems particularly true of ancient temple practices and, therefore, provides a particular source of interest on this writer's part, considering curiosities held of his own religious tradition. This paper will attempt a brief outline of some of these major myths from the ancient Near East concerning creation. The emphasis will be with those elements where the various descriptions share a similarity

of event or concept. Each myth will then be viewed in light of deciding who or what is regarded as the creator deity, what are the mechanics involved in the creative process, and for what primary purpose was the creation executed.

The earliest creation account found in Egypt is provided by the Pyramid Texts.² It is a cosmogonic concept that involves the genealogy of nine gods, referred to as the Ennead, as well as relating their concurrent interaction. Briefly outlined the myth proceeds as follows: The very first event of time was determined to be the emergence of a hill from a primeval watery chaos called Nunu. This earth hill, who was the god Atum, on his own engendered the pair, Shu and Tefnut. Shu and Tefnut then begat two children, Geb and Nut. Father Shu at this time separated Geb and Nut by raising Nut above her brother. A quarrel over the kingship of Egypt occurred between the sons of Geb and Nut, which resulted in Seth killing Osiris and taking his throne. Osiris and Isis had a son named Horus, who grew up and avenged his father by doing battle with Seth and regaining the throne becoming the true king of Egypt and heir of Osiris.³

Identifying the characters of this story will prove to be the key in deciphering the cosmogony according to Egyptian texts. It should be noted that while each of the characters possessed a human form, they could also depict an aspect of one or more of the elements of the creation. "Atum", who came from the chaotic ocean Nunu, means "the one who has been completed by absorbing others."⁴ The evidence suggests that he was

conceived as a divine representative of first living beings and as the earth hill, or the one standing on the earth hill, who represented the creator-deity. His son Shu was also considered as the air and moisture that carried the sky and his name has the possible denotation of sunlight.⁵ Tefnut appears to simply provide the female supplement to Shu, however, she does signify the first woman and paired with Shu contrasts the individual involvement of Atum. Geb is both the son of Shu and Tefnut as well as the earth, while his sister/wife, Nut represents the sky. The name of Osiris is much more difficult to explain, with regards to the creation myth, but, has been associated with the growing grain and vegetation. Seth and Horus both take on an image associated with animal-shaped diety. Seth was conceived as the arid desert which would account for the capacity to murder his brother, Osiris. In Horus's special form as Harakhty, he is unmistakably delineated as the sun, or ruler of the sky.⁶ Isis and Nephthys, the wife of Seth, are not conceived as part of the divine genealogy concerning ancestral considerations as much as they are linked to the concept of kingship.


The creator-deity in this textual account is Atum, materialized from a primeval chaos, who creates through seemingly unnatural means a posterity dualistic in nature that represents both a human form and a cosmogonic event. It is through Atum's posterity that the earth, sky, light, vegetation, and other creation elements have their beginnings.

Egyptian religion has as a major tenet that the king is a god and is the



sole mediator between the gods and the people.⁷ The purpose of the creation account found in the Pyramid Texts might serve the purpose of being a clarification concerning the transfiguration of the deceased king as well as of the deification of the former crown prince when he ascended the throne. Obviously, the problem is twofold; how does one explain the death of the divine god, Horus, and how does it happen that a mere mortal, though the crown prince, becomes the divine king/god, Horus, when he ascends to the throne of his father. Upon the death of Horus the king, Horus becomes embodied within the king, Osiris and is transfigured to his eternal nature of the eternal king. At the same time another incarnation of Horus is being transacted on earth by the successor to the throne.⁸ A sequence of birth and rebirth seems to occur. Some scholars propose the idea that the genealogy of the gods was to prove the divine character of the king and not to explain the advent of the universe, the creation of the world, or the concept of kingship. With this interpretation, the genealogy would be better understood if read from Horus to Atum, rather than from Atum to Horus. Thus the lineage of Horus could have been to facilitate the idea that the death of the god king was his entry into the final stage of an eternal existence, and further, that the god king was the very ruler of the universe.⁹

The Sumerians seemed to be more concerned with explaining the origin of mankind and fundamental needs of civilization than the creation of the world.¹⁰ There exists, at this point, no Sumerian myths that deal



directly and exclusively with the concept of creation of the universe. However, there are several myths that allude to the creation, and what is now studied as the Sumerian account has been assembled from the inferences and deductions from these other literary documents. A tablet containing a list of the Sumerian gods identifies a primeval sea, the goddess Nammu, who is responsible for bringing birth to heaven and earth. In the myth "cattle and grain" the union of heaven and earth, as described in the Gilgamesh epic, is referred to as a mountain, which makes it possible to deduce that earth was the base of the mountain while heaven was its peak. "The Creation of the Pickax" reveals how heaven, An, and earth, Ki, were also conceived in human form, and from their union was begotten Enlil the god of air. From the Gilgamesh epic, certain cosmogonic concepts are introduced that shed light on the very beginning. At one point, both the heaven and earth were united and some of the gods existed prior to their separation.¹¹ Upon the separation of heaven and earth, the god of heaven, An, carried away heaven, while Enlil, the air-god, carried off the earth, his mother. Other mythological data shows Enlil as the creator of the elements of heaven by begetting Nanna, the moon-god, who then begets Utu, the sun-god. The organization of the earth seems to be a joint effort on the part of Enlil and Enki, the god of water.¹²

It is difficult to assign credit for the work of creation specifically to an individual, however, it appears as though Enlil can be considered responsible as the major contributor. Apparently, the creative process



was a biological phenomena involving the union of God and Goddess, with the main creator being a product of the same system. Because the creation story must be pieced together from assorted myths, we may deduce its purpose in Sumerian culture can only be of a speculative nature. Obviously, as the explanation of their environment, should be considered a partial reason, further the idea that Sumer was the pinnacle of earthlife and the epitome of civilization.¹³ The creation account also produces the genealogy and roles of the Sumerian gods. It is possible that this results in the primary objective of the fragmentary compilation, that is declaring the purpose of man; providing for and rendering service unto the gods.¹⁴

Explanations of the creation from the Assyrians and the Babylonians, no doubt, has been largely influenced by Sumerian traditions. However, it would be erroneous to assume that their scribes copied *verbatim* from Sumerian sources, when, in fact, their accounts show a considerable amount of uniqueness and innovation. Perhaps their most important cosmogonic text is the "Epic of Creation" or as it is often called, the *enuma elish*, which begins when there was neither heaven nor earth, but only Apsu, the sweet water ocean, and Tiamat, the salt water ocean. It is through the mingling of these two primordial oceans that several generations of gods come into existence, among whom is Ea. A disruptive relationship occurs between the parents and offspring that results in Ea vanquishing Father Apsu and making his abode upon him. While at Apsu, Ea's wife gives birth to Marduk, whose qualities are substantially praised

in the documents. Tiamat, in an attempt to avenge Apsu, does battle with Marduk, whereupon, she is not only defeated, but Marduk severs her body creating heaven and earth. He then proceeds to set the constellations in place, the sun and moon in their orbits, create man, and place vegetation and animal life on the earth.¹⁵

Marduk is the creator deity, whose creative techniques seem abnormal compared with his own creation. The creative processes involving the elements of heaven and earth are a combination of biological acts or divine *fiat*. This document was created merely to glorify Marduk and Babylon, as well as represent Marduk's superiority over all other gods.¹⁶ Fortunately, it includes his great acts of creation, the purpose of the creation, and Marduk's genealogy.

The Hittite version of the Hurrian Kumarbi myth comes from a set of tablets found in central Anatolia. There are two main compositions, of which the title of the first has been broken away and the second is entitled the "song of Ullikummi."¹⁷ It is from these tablets that a genealogical outline of the kings of heaven is obtained and with the outline a cursory explanation of the creation. Alalu was the first king in heaven and was served by Anu. After nine years of service, Anu rebelled against King Alalu and caused him to flee from heaven down to the dark earth. Anu then sits on the throne for nine years and is served by Kumarbi. At the conclusion of the ninth year Kumarbi and Anu do battle. Anu is defeated and flees toward heaven, but while in flight, Kumarbi grabs him by the feet, bites off and



devours his manhood. At this point, Anu warns Kumarbi that what he has swallowed will take seed and from him will come the Storm God, Aranzahas (the Tigris), and Tasmisu (a satellite to the Storm God.) Kumarbi quickly spits the seeds from his mouth into the earth, thereby impregnating the earth. The account continues by referring to the Earth as mother having as her offspring the Storm God, the Tigris, and Tasmisu. Other fragments then have Anu plotting with the Storm God to defeat Kumarbi and is successful.¹⁸

It seems apparent that Anu is heaven, and through the instrumentality of his sex organs there is a degree of creation. Kumarbi and earth are also involved as supplements to this episode, which while being fragmentary at best, can be instructive when compared to Hesiod's *Theogony*. It would appear on the surface that the Hittites were not as concerned with devising a new creation script, as they were with establishing their own gods using a borrowed format.¹⁹

Using Hesiod's *Theogony* a Greek version of the ancestry of the gods and an interpretation of the creation can be outlined in quick fashion. In the beginning was Chaos. From Chaos arose Gaia, Tartaros, Eros, and later came Night and Erebus. Night conceived by lying with Erebus, and she begat Aither and Day. Gaia brought forth, on her own, Ouranos, the mountains and wooded glens, and Pontos, the mighty sea. Ouranos proceeds to impregnate Gaia several times, but by laying tightly upon her, won't allow any of the children to be born. One of the children, Kronos, is aided by his mother and

is able to castrate Ouranos, separating him from Gaia, and releasing all the offspring. Two of the offspring, Kronos and Rhea, begat many children, but Kronos would devour each of them at birth. Rhea tricked Kronos into eating a "baby boulder", which produced the effect of Kronos vomiting forth all the other children he had ingested, among whom was Zeus.²⁰

In outlining this genealogy of Zeus we also come across the major components of the cosmogony. Chaos delivers Gaia (earth), Night, and Erebus (darkness). From Night comes Aither (light) and Day. Earth produces the sky (Ouranos) and the sea (Pontos). There is no clear candidate for a creator-deity and the various elements of the creation come about by cosmogonic aspects being embodied within the offspring of the earlier gods. Greek religion does not clearly define a creation event as such, however Greek philosophy was very concerned with accounting for origin and constitution of the universe. The chief Olympic god, Zeus is never portrayed as the creator, rather Hesiod presents a creation in terms of relations of personified cosmic phenomena and virtues. The primary concern of the Theogony is to provide the proper connections for Zeus' position as chief god.²¹

Hebrew scriptures begin with a description of the creation process with the obvious omission of a divine genealogy. The text declares that in the beginning "the earth was without form and void," darkness prevailed and that a mighty wind swept over the surface of waters. Then God commands that light should appear and he separated it from the darkness,



calling them day and night. In succeeding episodes God commands that the waters be separated by a firmament, dry land(earth) should appear and water (sea) gathered to one place, plants and animals brought forth, the sun and moon is set in their respective orbits, and finally man was created "in the image of God."²²

Unmistakably, God is the creator of the Hebrew cosmogony and does so through divine decree. The purpose of originating the heaven and earth is defended in the same text as an effort to provide for mankind a dwelling, whereby they are to subdue the creations of plants and animals, produce offspring, and to have dominion over all the earth.²³

In the preceding cosmogonic outlines there exist many dissimilar themes and elements, which makes a consideration of a single origin appear not to be an appropriate assumption. Those elements that do seem to be reciprocal, though few in number, could be considered in light of an obscure universal origin, however, another explanation might be the need to reconcile or accommodate conflicting traditions and identifications brought about by constantly renewed contacts within the ancient Near East. Particularly, in the event of a predominant culture, there could exist a tendency to modify and conform one's cultural beliefs in order to be more compatible with the current dictates of the social setting. In most of the accounts a major deity was involved or in charge of the creative process. Genealogical information also seems to play a major role, not only in describing the origins of heaven and earth, but, explaining the origins of

the gods, themselves. Several means are used to describe the actual processes involved in the creation, but most either occurred because of biological events or by divine *fiat*. It is interesting to note that some myths had their creator god brought into existence out of an intangible nature, while others simply started with their god on the scene. More than one account begins with "in the beginning" or "before heaven and earth." One point that remains strikingly obvious is that creation did begin in an actual location and that location and event retains a singular importance within all the traditional cultures. And yet within man's memory comes these startling truths and legends of "the time before man."²⁴ Truths and legends, though occasionally similar in elements and mechanics, generally display differences that are more striking and evidence nonsupportive of a central tradition.



Endnotes

¹Kenneth L. Schmitz, The Gift: Creation (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 1982), pp 2-3.

²S.G.F. Brandon, Religion in Ancient History (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1973), p 19.

³Samuel Noah Kramer, Mythologies of the Ancient World (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company Inc, 1961), p 36.

⁴S.G.F. Brandon, A Dictionary of Comparative Religion (NY: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1970), p 208.

⁵Kramer, Mythologies, p 38.

⁶Kramer, Mythologies, p 41.

⁷Kramer, Mythologies, p 42.

⁸Brandon, Ancient History, p 20.

⁹Kramer, Mythologies, p 72.

¹⁰Brandon, Dictionary, p 210.

¹¹Isaac Mendelsohn, Religions of the Ancient Near East (NY: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), p 42.

¹²Helmer Ringgren, Religions of the Ancient Near East (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974) pp 69-71.

¹³Kramer, Mythologies, p 74.

¹⁴Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, Inanna (NY: Harper & Row

Publishers, 1983), p x-xi.

¹⁵Brandon, Ancient History, pp 24-25.

¹⁶Kramer, Mythologies, p 121.

¹⁷Hans Gustav Guterbock, "The Hittite Version of the Hurrian Kumarbi Myths: Oriental Forerunners of Hesiod," American Journal of Archaeology Vol. 52 (1948), pp 124-125.

¹⁸Albrecht Goetze, "Hittite Myths, Epics, and Legends," p 121.

¹⁹Kramer, Mythologies, p 154.

²⁰R.M. Frazer, The Poems of Hesiod (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983) pp 30-59.

²¹Frazer, Hesiod, p 28.

²²The New English Bible (NY: Oxford University Press, 1972) pp 1-2.

²³Bible, p 3.

²⁴Schmitz, Gift, p 6.

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