

A Historian's Approach to Ancient Stories of Origin and Cosmic Order

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Introduction

In antiquity the intent of stories of human and cosmic origin was not objective explanation of a process over time, but narrative portrayal of archetypical events that help the audience make sense out of their own existential human predicament. The truth of such narratives lay not in their pinpoint accuracy in the realms of biology or geology, but in their liturgical power enabling an audience to come face to face with the life forces threatening to overwhelm them.

I. Cosmo-theism: Ancient Stories of Origin and Order

A. Examples. Three Myths of Creation and Order

1. Vedic Myth of Purusha: The Beginning of Sacrificial Worship
 - a. The Text in Context: Primeval Purusha and the Creation of Cosmic Order
 - b. Liturgical Significance: Hindu Sacrifice as the Maintenance of Cosmic Order
 - c. Biblical Reverberations: Genesis 1 and the Ritual Cycle
2. The Canaanite Contest between Baal and Yam: The Beginning of Divine Order
 - a. The Text in Context: The Ongoing Contest between Order and Chaos
 - b. Liturgical Significance: Poetic Recitation Re-invokes the Order of Creation
 - c. Biblical Reverberations: The Poetry of Creation – Example of Psalm 74
3. Babylonian Descent of Ishtar into the Netherworld: The Beginning of Fecundity
 - a. The Text in Context: Ishtar processes to 'Hades' and Back
 - b. Liturgical Significance: Fertility and the Cycle of Life and Death
 - c. Biblical reverberations: Sheol in Samuel, Job and the Psalms: "No One on Earth is Immortal"

B. Invoking the Beginning: Liturgical Meaning of Myths of Creation and Order

1. Liturgical rather than scientific purposes
2. Literary rather than literal shaping of meaning
Examples include a hymn, an epic poem, and a performable drama
3. Origin as Foundation (the Greek *arché* as used in 'archetype') – a-temporality
 - a. Underlying structure rather than formation process
 - b. Aetiological rather than processual understanding of cosmogony
4. Cosmo-centricity
 - a. Cosmo-theistic world view
For descriptive definition see Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt* (Harvard UP 2003)
 - b. Negative anthropology and divine anthropomorphism

II. Transcendental Mono-theism: Socio-Religious meaning of the First Biblical Creation Story

A. First Creation Story in its Historical Context

1. Relative lateness of composition and use: circumstances and needs of Post-exilic Judaism.
See chronology on page 6.
2. Axial Age: emergence of transcendental theism and reaction to cosmo-theism.
Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (1953); Shmuel Eisenstadt, *Axial Age* (1982) and also: Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation* (2006); Gore Vidal, *Creation, a Novel* (Ballantine Bks 1981).
3. First creation story: Reworking of origin tradition in terms of transcendental theism
 - a. Mythopoeic language used in post-mythological text.
 - b. Abandonment of cosmo-theistic world view
 - The new "wisdom:" The Goodness of Creation and the Dignity of Man
4. Universal history from Adam (I Chronicles 1) to Ezra-Nehemiah: God supercedes empires

B. Liturgical character of Genesis 1-2:3 Celebration of the God's creative power

1. First Creation Story as Doxology (Anderson): Role in the Priestly Scriptures
 - a. See Nehemiah 9:5-6, the paean to God's creative power recited by a chorus of eight Levites:

"Stand up and bless the Lord your God saying: From everlasting to everlasting thy glorious name is blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise. Thou alone art the Lord; thou hast made heaven, the highest heaven with all its host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. Thou preservest them all, and the host of heaven worships thee."

- b. Doxological formula: God the creator of the universe has delivered us from bondage; therefore
2. First Creation Story in post-exilic interpretations:
Early interpreters took overall 'confessional' 'truth' for granted, but discussed meaning in verse by verse detail. See James Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Belknap Press 1997), 1-64.

Conclusions

A. To understand human-origin texts in their original historic context includes recognizing that their literary form implies composition for liturgical purposes. Their central use was for reenactment or recitation as a means of confessing the ultimate reality of god's underlying role in the human sphere. This means that such texts were not constructed with the literality of scientific explanation, but are instead to be understood as symbolic representations of the role of deity in the human, tangible cosmic realm.

B. Historical understanding of ancient literatures of origin and order makes "concordist" presuppositions untenable. Ancient accounts, incl. Genesis 1-2:3, were intended for ancient purposes: (1) The texts were not scientific treatises, but liturgical compositions;
(2) Ancient use was aetiological (wisdom), not modern processual (science).

Rig-Veda: Creation as the Sacrifice of Purusha

"Rg Veda," 10.90 in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 2nd ed. and rev. Ainslie T. Embree (Columbia U Press, 1988), 18-19
For discussion of meaning see William K. Mahoney, *The Artful Universe: An Introduction to the Vedic Religious Imagination* (State U of New York Press, 1998), 111-116.

Thousand-headed Purusha, thousand-eyed, thousand-footed — he, having pervaded the earth on all sides, still extends ten fingers beyond it.

Purusha alone is all this — whatever has been and whatever is going to be. Further, he is the lord of immortality and also of what grows on account of food.

Such is his greatness; greater, indeed, than this is Purusha. All creatures constitute but one-quarter of him, his three-quarters are the immortal in the heaven.

With his three-quarters did Purusha rise up; one-quarter of him again remains here. With it did he variously spread out on all sides over what eats and what eats not.

From him was Virāj born, from Virāj the evolved Purusha. He, being born, projected himself behind the earth as also before it.

When the gods performed the sacrifice with Purusha as the oblation, then the spring was its clarified butter, the summer the sacrificial fuel, and the autumn the oblation.

The sacrificial victim, namely, Purusha, born at the very beginning, they sprinkled with sacred water upon the sacrificial grass. With him as oblation, the gods performed the sacrifice, and also the Sādhyas [a class of semidivine beings] and the rishis [ancient seers].

From that wholly offered sacrificial oblation were born the verses [ṛc] and the sacred chants; from it were born the meters [*chandās*]; the sacrificial formula was born from it.

From it horses were born and also those animals who have double rows [i.e., upper and lower] of teeth; cows were born from it, from it were born goats and sheep.

When they divided Purusha, in how many different portions did they arrange him? What became of his mouth, what of his two arms? What were his two thighs and his two feet called?

His mouth became the brāhman; his two arms were made into the rajanya; his two thighs the vaishyas; from his two feet the shūdra was born.

The moon was born from the mind, from the eye the sun was born; from the mouth Indra and Agni, from the breath [*prāna*] the wind [*vāyu*] was born.

From the navel was the atmosphere created, from the head the heaven issued forth; from the two feet was born the earth and the quarters (the cardinal directions) from the ear. Thus did they fashion the worlds.

Seven were the enclosing sticks in this sacrifice, thrice seven were the fire-sticks made when the gods, performing the sacrifice, bound down Purusha, the sacrificial victim.

With this sacrificial oblation did the gods offer the sacrifice. These were the first norms [*dharma*] of sacrifice. These greatneses reached to the sky wherein live the ancient Sādhyas and gods.

Baal dethrones Yamm (The Sea / Judge River)
Cyrus Gordon, *Ugarit and Minoan Crete* (Norton 1966)

> Text 68 relates how Baal vanquishes Yamm and drives him from his sovereignty through the use of two magic clubs fashioned by Kothar-and-Ḥasis for this particular battle.

[] dead [] (68:1)
[] alive []

I shall bring them out

Also I shall drive out []

[] and in the sea - - - - -

In the sea two bosoms []

[Judge] River - - - - there two swords - - - - - I shall kiss [] (:5

"To the earth let *our* mighty one fall

Yea to the dust, *our* strong one."

[From] his mouth the word had not yet gone forth

Nor from his lips, his utterance

And his voice was given forth

Like a mountain under the throne of Prince Sea.

And Kothar-and-Ḥasis declared:

"Did I not tell thee, O Prince Baal,

Nor declare, O Rider of Clouds?

Lo, thine enemies, O Baal,

Lo, thine enemies wilt thou smite

Lo, thou wilt vanquish thy foes

Ugaritic Poetry

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Thou wilt take thine eternal kingdom

(:10

Thine everlasting sovereignty!"

Kothar brings down two clubs

2.

And proclaims their names.

"Thy name, even thine, is Expeller!

Expeller, expel Sea

Expel Sea from his throne

River from the seat of his sovereignty!

Thou shalt swoop from the hands of Baal

Like an eagle from his fingers!

Strike the shoulders of Prince Sea

"Twixt the hands of [Jud]ge River!"

(:15

The club swoops from the hands of Baal

Like an eagle from his fingers.

It strikes the shoulders of Prince Sea

"Twixt the hands of Judge River.

Sea is strong
 He is not vanquished
 His joints do not fail
 Nor his frame collapse.
 Kothar brings down two clubs
 And proclaims their names.
 "Thy name, even thine, is Driver!
 Driver, drive Sea
 Drive Sea from his throne (:20
 River from the seat of his sovereignty!
 Thou shalt swoop from the hands of Baal
 Like an eagle from his fingers!
 Strike the head of Prince Sea
 "Twixt the eyes of Judge River!
 Let Sea sink
 And fall to earth!"
 And the club swoops from the hands of Baal
 Like an eagle from his fingers.
 It strikes the head of Prince [Sea] (:25
 "Twixt the eyes of Judge River.
 Sea sinks
 Falls to earth
 His joints fail

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Ugarit and Minoan Crete

His frame collapses
 Baal drags and poises Sea
 Destroys Judge River.
 By name, Astarte rebukes:
 "Shame, O Aliyan Baal,
 Shame, O Rider of Clouds!
 For Prince Sea was our captive
 For Judge River was our captive." (:30
 And there went out B[aal]
 Verily ashamed is Aliyan Baal
 And [Prince] Sea is indeed dead
 So let Baal rei[gn]!
 Heat ⁹ for the - - - - and [and]
 says: "Sea is dead"
 for - - - - and she answ[ers] (:35
 those lords []
 for the - - - - []
 in his head []
 []
 [] his eyes []

†

Descent of Ishtar into the Netherworld

Stephany Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford U Press 1989)

Ishtar, Queen of Heaven (Abode of the Living), has decided to invade the realm of her sister, Ereshkigal, Queen of the Netherworld (Kurnugi, Abode of the Dead – “the dark house, ... the house which those who enter cannot leave”).

The Gatekeeper has announced that Ishtar is banging on the door, and “when Ereshkigal heard this, Her face grew livid as cut tamarisk,

Her lips grew dark as the rim of a *kunīnu*-vessel.⁷

‘What brings her to me? What has incited her against me?’

Surely not because I drink water with the Anunnaki,

I eat clay for bread, I drink muddy water for beer?

I have to weep for young men forced to abandon sweethearts.⁸

I have to weep for girls wrenched from their lovers’ laps.

For the infant child I have to weep, expelled before its time.⁸

Go, gatekeeper, open your gate to her.

Treat her according to the ancient rites.’

The gatekeeper went. He opened the gate to her.

‘Enter, my lady: may Kutha give you joy,⁹

May the palace of Kurnugi be glad to see you.’

1 He let her in through the first door, but stripped off (and) took away the great crown on her head.

‘Gatekeeper, why have you taken away the great crown on my head?’

‘Go in, my lady. Such are the rites of the Mistress of Earth.’

2 He let her in through the second door, but stripped off (and) took away the rings in her ears.

‘Gatekeeper, why have you taken away the rings in my ears?’

‘Go in, my lady. Such are the rites of the Mistress of Earth.’

3 He let her in through the third door, but stripped off (and) took away the beads around her neck.

‘Gatekeeper, why have you taken away the beads around my neck?’

‘Go in, my lady. Such are the rites of the Mistress of Earth.’

4 He let her in through the fourth door, but stripped off (and) took away the toggle-pins at her breast.¹⁰

'Gatekeeper, why have you taken away the
toggle-pins at my breast?'

'Go in, my lady. Such are the rites of the
Mistress of Earth.'

5 He let her in through the fifth door, but stripped off
(and) took away the girdle of birth-stones
around her waist.

'Gatekeeper, why have you taken away the girdle
of birthstones around my waist?'

'Go in, my lady. Such are the rites of the
Mistress of Earth.'

6 He let her in through the sixth door, but stripped
off (and) took away the bangles on her wrists
and ankles.

'Gatekeeper, why have you taken away the
bangles from my wrists and ankles?'

'Go in, my lady. Such are the rites of the
Mistress of Earth.'

7 He let her in through the seventh door, but stripped
off (and) took away the proud garment of her
body.

'Gatekeeper, why have you taken away the proud
garment of my body?'

'Go in, my lady. Such are the rites of the
Mistress of Earth.'

As soon as Ishtar went down to Kurnugi,¹¹
Ereshkigal looked at her and trembled before her.
Ishtar did not deliberate (?), but leant over her.
Ereshkigal made her voice heard and spoke,
Addressed her words to Namtar her vizier,

'Go, Namtar [] of my []

Send out against her sixty diseases

[] Ishtar:

Disease of the eyes to her [eyes],

Disease of the arms to her [arms],

Disease of the feet to her [feet],

Disease of the heart to her [heart],

Disease of the head [to her head],

To every part of her and to [].'

The Creation Stories in the history of the composition of the Old Testament

I. Considerations

A. Considerations based on form – my own speculations.

1. The Second Creation Story is a real story reminiscent in style, form and content of Ancient Near Eastern myths and Greek fables, the sort of thing handed down over centuries of oral tradition.
2. The First Creation Story appears more like a deliberately composed speculative piece taking information from older written liturgical traditions, like the creation psalms and poems embedded in prophetic books, but distilled into a more stylized speculative form and content, reminiscent of post-mythological literature from the Persian and Hellenistic periods.

B. The following historic chart is based on a combination of the Higher Critical Hypothesis (Wellhausen) combined with recent archaeological corroboration.

Secondary sources I used:

Bernard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, Fourth Ed. (Prentice Hall 1986).

_____, *From Creation to New Creation* (Fortress Press 1994).

Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (Free Press 2001).

Also extremely helpful:

James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (Free Press 2008).

II. Chronological Chart

A. Very old texts embedded in later documents; e.g., Dt 26:5-10, Judges 5 (Song of Deborah)
Date? Possibly Late Bronze Age / Early Iron Age.

B. Old Epic Narrative (J)

This includes the primeval history (Genesis 2:4-10) and the narratives from Abraham through Numbers; Exodus, Leviticus, begun with **The Second Creation Story**.

Date: Anderson, era of David and Solomon; Finkelstein-Silberman, final form in 7th C. (Josiah).

C. Deuteronomist Documents (D)

Triggered by the rediscovery of the law in the reign of Josiah, establish the national epic of the Davidic/Solomonic Monarchy, introduced with the book of Deuteronomy to complete the Pentateuch, followed by most of Joshua, Judges, I II Samuel and I II Kings, First Isaiah.

Date: Late 8th (Hezekiah) – 7th C. (Josiah). Finkelstein-Silberman credit Josiah (622 B. C.) mostly.

D. Priestly Documents (P)

Triggered by the experiences of Exile and Return and toned by the prominence of priests, include the insertion of the **First Creation Story** (Genesis 1-2:3), I II Chronicles, Second Isaiah (40-66), Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, other prophets; goal is to redefine religious distinctiveness of the community in the absence of monarchy (stressing the earlier flight from Egypt as evidence of direct divine intervention) and in reaction to imperial polytheistic mythology of Babylon.

Date: Period of Exile and Return (586-440 B. C.), so-called “Axial Age” in my lecture.

F. Hellenistic Documents

A residue of latest books document the experience of the second temple state under Ptolemaic (Egyptian) and Seleucid (Syrian, “Abomination of Desolation”) rule (apocalyptic sections of Daniel, Ecclesiastes); (also era of Dead Sea Scrolls).