

Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology

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Contents

Preface

Abbreviations

1. Cosmology and Comparative
Studies: Methodology

Identifying Cognitive
Environment

Comparing Cognitive
Environment

- The Hermeneutics of Comparative Studies and the Cognitive Environment
2. Creation in Ancient Near Eastern Literature
 3. The Ancient Cosmological Cognitive Environment
 - Ontology
 - Nonexistence
 - Before-and-After Pictures, and Activities Involved with Bringing into Existence
 - Separating Heaven and Earth
 - Building Blocks, Causation, and Teleology
 - Cosmic Governing Principles
 - Roles and Positions of the Players
 - Cosmic Geography
 - Cosmos, Temple, and Rest
 - Summary of the Cosmological Cognitive Environment of the Ancient Near East
 4. Genesis 1
 - Genesis 1:1
 - Genesis 1:2 and the Pre-cosmic Condition
 - Days 1-3 (Genesis 1:3-13)
 - Days 4-6 (Genesis 1:14-31)
 - Day 7 (Genesis 2:1-3): Temple and Rest in Genesis
 5. Conclusions
 1. Shared Broad Cognitive Environment
 2. Shared with Egypt Only
 3. Shared with Mesopotamia Only
 4. Israelite Distinctives Based on the Ancient Near Eastern Platform
 5. Israelite Distinctives That Have No Known Antecedents
 6. Ancient Near Eastern Distinctives That Have No Israelite Reflections
 - Conclusion

Bibliography

Indexes

Index of Authors

Index of Scripture

Index of Ancient Sources

Preface

During my first 20 years of teaching [Genesis 1](#) to classes of all sorts, I experienced the nagging feeling that I was missing something very important that was just out of my grasp. Since my wife was trained as a scientist, conversations between us about the interface of [Genesis 1](#) and science were common. All of my own training and research in Hebrew language and exegesis as well as in ancient Near Eastern languages and literature brought regular insights and progress, but there were still

too many pieces that weren't fitting together.

All of this changed rather dramatically in \triangleright the fall of 1998. I was teaching a Hebrew Exegesis class, and we were working through [Genesis 1](#). We got to v. 5, and I posed a question to the class: "Why didn't God call the light "light?" The device of metonymy was one that I had included in my lectures for years (thus "light" was understood as "period of light"), but putting the question in this way began to make a few new connections for me. Explaining that the naming procedure indicated that it was day and night that were being created, more than light, and that light was not an object but should be understood metonymically, I concluded with the blunt statement, "So on Day 1, God created time."  As an observation, it was more

mundane than brilliant, but the world suddenly tilted on its axis as I made the next, logical observation: “We ought then to think of creation in terms of functions rather than material objects.” ¶ The remainder of the class period was spent “working the problem”: What were the ramifications? Did this concept prevail throughout the rest of the chapter? Rather suddenly, all of the exegetical insights that I had been gathering through the years, and all that I had learned about the ancient Near East began to fit into place, and in a very short time I had devised the position that I have now presented in detail in this book. No longer did it seem true what Heidel had suggested and so many scholars (including me) had repeated throughout the decades, that one of the key differences between ancient

Near Eastern cosmological texts and [Genesis 1](#) was that in the ancient Near Eastern texts the gods were merely organizing and ordering creation, while in [Genesis 1](#) God was really making something—true creation, as it were. This no longer appeared to be a valid distinction. ¶

Research led me to understand that many of the “pieces” of my hypothesis had indeed been found previously, but they had not been compiled into a single perspective on the text. As I continued to think through all the aspects, converse with students and colleagues, interact with my wife, and began writing down my findings in various contexts, I was able to refine, support, and communicate my position more effectively. As I lecture widely both at my institution and around the country on the topic, I am con-

stantly amazed at how difficult it is for us moderns to set aside our cultural preconceptions in order to begin to think in new ways. The ancient Near Eastern mode of thought is not at all intuitive to us, but our understanding of ancient perspectives can only approach accuracy when we begin to penetrate ancient texts on their own terms rather than impose our world view. In this task, we are aided by the ever-growing corpus of literature that is being recovered and analyzed.

After an introduction to present some of the history of comparative studies and the ways that comparative methods have been applied to the study of ancient texts in general and cosmology in particular, I focus in the first half of the book on the ancient Near Eastern texts that inform our understanding about ancient ways of thinking about cosmol-

ogy. Of primary interest are the texts that can help us discern the parameters of ancient perspectives on cosmic ontology—that is, how the writers perceived origins. Texts from across the ancient Near East are presented, including primarily Egyptian, Sumerian, and Akkadian texts, but occasionally also Ugaritic and Hittite, as appropriate. My intention, first of all, is to understand the texts but also to demonstrate that a functional ontology pervaded the cognitive environment of the ancient Near East. This functional ontology involves more than just the idea that ordering the cosmos was the focus of the cosmological texts. I posit that, in the ancient world, bringing about order and functionality was the very essence of creative activity. I also pay close attention to the ancient ideolo-

gy of temples to show the close connection between temples and the functioning cosmos.

The second half of the book is devoted to a fresh analysis of [Gen 1:1-2:4](#). I offer studies of significant Hebrew terms and seek to show that the Israelite texts also evidence a functional ontology and a cosmology that is constructed with temple ideology in mind, as in the rest of the ancient Near East. I contend that [Genesis 1](#) never was an account of material origins but that, as in the rest of the ancient world, the focus of the creation accounts was to order the cosmos by initiating functions. I further contend that the cosmology of [Genesis 1](#) is founded on the premise that the cosmos should be understood in temple terms. ✎ All of this is intended to demonstrate that, when we read [Genesis 1](#) as the ancient document it is,

rather than trying to read it in light of our own world view, the text comes to life in ways that help recover the energy it had in its original context. At the same time, it provides a new perspective on [Genesis 1](#) in relation to what have long been controversial issues. Far from being a borrowed text, [Genesis 1](#) offers a unique theology, even while it speaks from the platform of its contemporary cognitive environment.

I am grateful to the individuals who have been conversation partners along the way and have helped me to shape and define my thinking. These include colleagues, students, family, and listeners in audiences around the country who ask perceptive questions and interact in productive ways so that I can continue to refine my thinking and my communication. I am also grateful to Jim Eisenbraun and his staff for

being willing to sponsor my efforts to offer some fresh thinking. What I have presented here is a work in progress. I hope that many who read this book will be stimulated to deeper thoughts and more connections that can strengthen the perspective that I have launched, even as the theory may eventually take on different forms or elements.

Abbreviations

Chapter 1

Cosmology and Comparative Studies: Methodology

Cosmology has always been a matter of interest to humanity. From the earliest speculations found in Sumerian and Egyptian mythologies to the modern debate about the relationship between science and faith and the controversies surrounding Evolution and Intelligent Design, people have proposed a wide variety of theories of origins and at times have argued heatedly about the superiority of one view over another.

For millennia, the account in [Genesis 1](#) served as the foundation of cosmology for those who embraced a biblical faith, and through them, for the Western world.¹ This foundation was first challenged philosophically in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, when the idea of the supernatural—that there were forces beyond nature—was called into question. Consequently, a dichotomy between “natural” and “supernatural” became entrenched and people began to see cosmology in more naturalistic terms. The foundation built on [Genesis 1](#) was challenged scientifically when evolutionary biology blossomed out of the research of Charles Darwin. And finally, it was challenged theologically when archaeologists recovered ancient mythological accounts that provided a literary context for [Genesis 1](#).

Because of these developments, the confidence of the Western world in [Genesis 1](#) as a foundation for cosmology has eroded, even

¹ Of course, there has always been variety in the interpretation of [Genesis 1](#).

among individuals who embrace a biblical faith. One response has been to attempt to transform [Genesis 1](#) into a veiled cosmology, accessible only to the trained modern eye that is able to detect an uncanny correspondence with contemporary scientific knowledge. This concordist approach wants to read [Genesis 1](#) as modern cosmology. Others have claimed that [Genesis 1](#) has only a literary or theological role, which virtually removes it from discussion of cosmologies even while it retains a sometimes vague theological point. Finally, many have positioned [Genesis 1](#) in the context of literature emerging from the ancient world, where it becomes just one more mythological cosmology, borrowed from the common stock of ancient tradition and of interest only to those with antiquarian curiosities. This book explores [Genesis 1](#) as an exemplar of ancient cosmology and attempts to understand it as such.² 

Reading [Genesis 1](#) as ancient cosmology requires that the cognitive environment (how people thought about themselves and their world³), as it can be understood within the broad spectrum of

² Significant contributions have already been made in defining how ancient cosmologies differ from modern views of cosmology. See R. J. Clifford and J. J. Collins, “[The Theology of Creation Traditions](#),” in *Creation in the Biblical Traditions* (ed. R. J. Clifford and J. J. Collins; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1992), 1–15. Clifford and Collins (pp. 9–10) define the key distinctions as involving process (personal), product (organized human society), manner of reporting (drama), and criterion of truth (plausibility). I agree but will try to move beyond these categories to consider additional issues.

³ Other terms could be used: conceptual world view, philosophical *Sitz im*

ancient Near Eastern cosmological texts be taken into account. ✎
This claim, however, leaves open the question whether [Genesis 1](#) used any ancient texts as sources—whether as patterns or templates or as foils. The premise of this book is that many attempts to trace literary trails from ancient Near Eastern texts to Genesis have been too facile and the results too simplistic. Though we should not abandon consideration of the potential literary relationship between specific texts, we also need to recognize that the transmission of traditions is a complex process. We should not be optimistic that we will find demonstrable literary connections in the varied remnants of ancient literature.

Reconstructing literary relationships often becomes an elaborate connect-the-dots game in which the results resemble more the apparent randomness of a Rorschach inkblot test than the clear literary links that are claimed. Our efforts should focus on using all the literature at our disposal to reconstruct the ancient cognitive environment, which can then serve as the backdrop for understanding each literary work. Rather than employing comparative methodology as an apologetic serving our own ideologies, promoting theological or antitheological agendas, we must as careful scholars allow the text, as a product of its cognitive environment, to be interpreted within the context of this cognitive environment.

For decades, comparative study of ancient Near Eastern texts and the Bible has been trying to climb out of the morass that resulted from the aftermath of Franz Delitzsch's Babel-Bibel lec-

Leben, Zeitgeist, and undoubtedly others.

tures. As methodology has been refined through the study of many throughout the decades since then, a clearer focus has emerged to take literary context into account and show more sensitivity to both comparisons and contrasts. The discussion also began to be expanded beyond basic literary comparisons into the conceptual realm through studies by Speiser, Finkelstein, Jacobsen, Lambert, and many others.

When comparative study is carried out at this conceptual or cognitive level, some adjustments in methodology need to be made. When literary pieces are being compared to consider the question of dependency among them, the burden of proof has been on the researcher to consider the issues of propinquity and transmission. After all, if Israelite literature were to be suspected of borrowing an Akkadian text, the claim of borrowing would need to be substantiated by evidence that the Israelite writers were aware of the Akkadian text and could plausibly have had access to it. Questions of literary genre, structure, and context would all need to be investigated, as well as the geographical, chronological, and national or ethnic context from which the literature had arisen.⁴ When one considers the cognitive environment, however, the purview is broader and the demands of literary context are not as stringent, although they cannot be ignored altogether. There is a great difference between explicit borrowing from a specific piece of literature and creating a literary work that

⁴ For example, see Tigay's criteria in "On Evaluating Claims of Literary Borrowing," in *The Tablet and the Scroll* (ed. M. Cohen et al.; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1993), 250–55.

resonates with the larger culture that has itself been influenced by its literatures. As a modern example, when Westerners speak of the philosophy lying behind the common saying “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die,” they resonate with an idea that has penetrated society; many who use the phrase would not recognize it as borrowed from the writings of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Over time, the philosophy of Epicurus has seeped into the culture, and modern statements reflect this penetration and reflect his philosophy without quoting it directly.

A second example, more pervasive in our world today, comes from Newtonian physics. Few moderns read Newton. Many have no idea that many of the ways they think about the world (that is, their cognitive environment) are linked to Newtonian physics. The premises of Newtonian physics have permeated the culture so deeply that they have become part of the common understanding of the culture. In cases like this, the demands of propinquity can be relaxed considerably. A cultural trail is not as well defined as a literary trail, nor will tracking it require the same criteria.

As a result of half a century of the persistent scholarship of Assyriologists, Hittitologists, Egyptologists, Ugaritologists, and Sumerologists, we are now in a position to add significant nuance to the ways we think about the effects of the ancient Near Eastern cognitive environment on the authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible.

We are now able to create a spectrum of categories that help to define the varieties of differences and similarities between various bodies of literature, both inside the Bible and in the ancient

Near East. We will begin on the negative side, that is, the side of the spectrum in which the Hebrew Bible totally ignores ideologies that are found in ancient Near Eastern literature and presents a quite different view (e.g., certain notions of theogony are discarded). At a small gradation toward the other side of the spectrum are topics in which the Hebrew Bible evidences at least a hazy familiarity with the ancient Near Eastern ideas: for instance, the caricature or ridicule of other nations' deities (e.g., comments that reflect contact with the idea that a god could take a nap). In a third category, the Hebrew Bible demonstrates more-detailed awareness of viewpoints current in the ancient world but rejects them in favor of a carefully articulated alternative (e.g., it is aware of polytheism but clearly rejects it). Further over on the spectrum are the issues in which the Hebrew Bible does not reject outright the views current in the ancient Near East but expresses disagreement, either through polemical statements or even by providing an alternative perspective (e.g., the role for which humans were created). A fifth category features a clear awareness of an idea that has been adapted and transformed by Israelite authors (e.g., the idea that humans were made from the dust of the earth). A sixth kind of relationship is found in areas in which the Hebrew Bible consciously imitates concepts current in the ancient world (e.g., descriptions of temple architecture and ideology). Finally, in regard to a large number of issues, evidence supports the idea that the Hebrew Bible subconsciously reflects a shared heritage from the cognitive environment of the ancient Near East (e.g., the notion that the deity rests in a temple).

In this book, I will address some of the ways that [Genesis 1](#) has

been and can be reassessed in light of this conceptual spectrum. Early study comparing the Hebrew Bible with the ancient Near East focused primarily on individual features (e.g., creation by the spoken word; people created in the image of deity) but this soon developed into speculation concerning outright literary borrowing. As the discipline matured and the complexity of literary relationships became more apparent, most scholars recognized that much more information would be necessary in order to achieve sufficient confidence to be able to reconstruct a literary trail. By now, the individual features had been treated extensively in the secondary literature, and as a result of growing reticence to make broad claims regarding the literary connections, attention appropriately turned to the study of the cognitive environment. This shift is specifically documented with regard to the cosmology texts in the work of R. Simkins, who calls for precisely this realignment of emphasis.

This common creation model suggests that the Israelites shared a similar conception of reality, rooted in basic experiences of the human body and the earth, as their ancient Near Eastern neighbors. Indeed, the Israelites were part of the larger ancient Near Eastern cultural milieu in that they shared similar understandings of the world with their neighbors. The differences between the Bible and other Near Eastern literature can only be understood from within the context of their similarities. These differences reflect the cultural particularities of each people, not extensively different and unrelated cultures.⁵

Early studies identified the obvious differences, such as the Bible's monotheism in contrast to ancient Near Eastern litera-

⁵R. Simkins, *Creator and Creation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 89.

tures' polytheism, the absence of theogony in the biblical text, and the absence of theomachy ⁶ in Genesis despite vestiges of it in the poetic and wisdom literatures. Recently, aspects of the ancient Near Eastern cognitive environment that appear to be reflected in [Genesis 1](#) have been identified in studies focusing on the relationship between cosmos and temple and a related concept, the importance of deity entering rest.⁶

Identifying Cognitive Environment

Cognitive environment can be inferred and reconstructed from non-contemporary cultures only through three resources: the texts that are left to us, artifacts that archaeology exhumes, and

⁶ J. Levenson, “[The Temple and the World](#),” *Journal of Religion* 64 (1984): 275–298; J. M. Lundquist, “[What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology](#),” in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God* (ed. H. B. Huffmon, F. A. Spina, and A. R. W. Green; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns: 1983), 205–20; G. J. Wenham, “[Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story](#),” in *I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood* (ed. R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumura; Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 4; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 399–404; M. Weinfeld, “[Sabbath, Temple and the Enthronement of the Lord: The Problem of the Sitz im Leben of Genesis 1:1–2:3](#)” in *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l’honneur de M. Henri Cazelles* (ed. A. Caquot and M. Delcor; [AOAT](#) 212; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker / Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), 501–12. See discussion of this and other accounts of temple building and its relationship with rest in Victor Hurowitz, [I Have Built You an Exalted House](#) (JSOTSup 115; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), Appendix 5, pp. 330–31.

the iconography found on objects and architecture from the ancient world. As with any other attempt to place ideas in context, comparing *and* contrasting the cognitive environment are both important. One of the most obvious dangers in this process is that we impose our modern cognitive environment on the ancients simply because we have failed to recognize that our own categories are not relevant to the ancients' way of thinking. For instance, it was long claimed that *Enuma Elish* should not be considered a creation text because nothing was actually "made" by Marduk. This claim arises out of a basic assumption that the ancient understanding of the creative act should correspond to our own—or even more so, that creative activity can only be construed in one way (our modern way!). Consequently, the first important guideline to bear in mind is that we cannot seek to construe *their* world in *our* terms. ✎

An example of the way this guideline functions can be found in the study of cosmic geography. Specifically, we cannot begin with our modern conception of cosmic geography when we try to understand the ancients' cognitive environment or the texts that derive from it. When we use ancient texts and iconography as witnesses to the ancients' cosmic geography, a cognitive environment can emerge featuring both diversity and broad commonality. For example, we find ample evidence that the ancients believed that a material (often conceived as solid) sky was suspended above the earth. This is common ground that can be confirmed across a variety of cultural, chronological, and geographical boundaries. At the same time, variations concerning the material that is

involved (cloth? stone?) and what holds it up (ropes or chains from above? mountains below? gods?) are observable. As information of this sort is gathered, we can consult the biblical text to determine whether it displays evidence that reflects the common ground, along with whatever variations from the common ground are also discernible. This specific detail is only one of many characteristics that need to be investigated to understand the basic shape of the cosmic geography common to the ancient world as a whole, as well as the points at which differences emerge. We will discover that the ancient materials at our disposal sometimes reflect cosmic geography in political terms (see, e.g., some of the Egyptian diagrams), in theological terms (e.g., again, Egyptian diagrams, and Mesopotamian astrolabes), in topographical terms (e.g., the Babylonian map of the world), in mythological terms (e.g., the treatment of Tiamat in *Enuma Elish*) but never in terms even remotely related to modern understandings of cosmic geography (a spherical, rotating earth with several major continents, surrounded by an atmosphere and revolving around a star, the sun, in an orbit that is spaced among the other eight planets of our solar system in a galaxy of billions of stars that itself is one of billions of galaxies in an expanding universe). Furthermore, cosmic geography is only one element of a cosmological cognitive environment.

Even as we engage in this process, we must recognize that some dangers exist. First, we must be wary of a tendency toward overextrapolation from unclear, ambiguous, or isolated texts. An example of this is the overzealous generalization that, in the

ancient world, mountains were believed to hold up the sky. This view is certainly present in the ancient Near East, but it cannot be claimed to be the common view. Sometimes, overextrapolation is reflected in a failure to engage the ancient view fully (e.g., projecting the Greek notion of chaos onto the ancient Near East). A second danger is overinterpretation, which can happen easily when we deal with iconography, as can be seen in some of the more imaginative treatments of the cosmic role of the sacred tree.⁷ A third danger is the inclination to link too closely elements that are only remotely related, thereby creating a pattern of commonality where none exists. There is good reason to see overinterpretation as being the culprit when connections are drawn between the Mesopotamian primordial goddess Tiamat and the Hebrew word *tehom* ([Gen 1:2](#)). A fourth danger is the failure to explore a cultural feature in its own context (textual or cultural) before assigning it a larger role in the cognitive environment. An example of this can be found in the discussion of the translation of the Hebrew word *ruah* ‘wind’ versus ‘spirit’ in [Gen 1:2](#). Finally, scholars sometimes are too quick to assume that a shared cultural idea exists even when the text is silent, or at least not explicit, on the very topic being considered. An example of this is the assumption that theomachy forms the backdrop of [Genesis 1](#) even though no evidence of it is found in the text of Genesis. The fact that various scholars have differing criteria and differing presuppositions concerning comparative studies means that one scholar may feel that he or she is applying a rigorous methodology to a particular study, while

⁷ Cf. S. Parpola, “[The Assyrian Tree of Life](#),” *JNES* 52 (1993): 161–208.

another scholar may conclude that the first scholar has succumbed to an excess of enthusiasm and offers a marquee example of the dangers discussed above. Inevitably, some readers will conclude that this book falls prey to the very dangers that it warns others about. But this is precisely why we must continue to engage in the corporate exercise of comparative study—so that many minds and hands may work together to produce useful studies and reach conclusions that can be supported by many if not all scholars.

Comparing Cognitive Environment

In preparation for exploring the way that [Genesis 1](#) presents its version of ancient cosmology, we need first to identify the basic elements of the cognitive environment that are present throughout the ancient Near East with regard to cosmology. The basic components of the shared ANE cosmology will be introduced and explored in depth in the following chapters based on the evidence found in ancient Near Eastern literature; then, we will explore these components in relation to [Genesis 1](#).

Ontology

To create is to bring something into existence that did not exist prior to the act of creation. Consequently, if we are to understand ancient ideas about creation we need to gain an understanding of *ancient ideas regarding existence*. This puts understanding the cosmic ontology of ancient peoples center stage. Modern cosmic ontology—*our* cosmic ontology—is primarily material, and the

result is that when we think of the act of creation, we think mostly about the origins of matter in its various forms throughout the universe. This way of thinking is not the only ontological option, and I will propose that it is not the option that was current in the ancient cognitive environment.

Centrality of Order/Disorder

It is clear from the cosmological literature of the ancient Near East that order in the cosmos and the control of the functions of the cosmos were more prominent in the ancient thought world than any consideration of the material origins of the cosmos. In what follows, I will show that ancient Near Eastern literature is concerned primarily with order and control of functions of the world that exists rather than with speculations about how the material world that exists came into being.

Metadivine Functions

The attributes, or factors, that were thought to define the shape and operation of the cosmos (Sumerian ME, imperfectly translated by Akkadian *parṣu*) and the tablet of destinies (containing decrees concerning the job descriptions of all members of the cosmos) both offer valuable evidence for understanding ancient perspectives on the cosmos, revealing what ancient peoples thought was most important about the world in which they lived. Though Egyptian literature does not have terminology to describe control features, the same concepts nevertheless are central there, as in Mesopotamia. A study of these concepts reveals how pervasive

the issues of rule and authority were for ancient thinking. The model of the cosmos as a kingdom was more relevant in the ancient world than our modern model of the cosmos, which typically portrays it as a machine. ✎

Position of Deity in the Cosmos

Throughout most of the literature of the ancient Near East, it is clear that deities are viewed to a large degree as being inside the cosmic system, as being a part of it. Order in the divine world was considered to be an essential part of the same order that humans experienced in their world. Concurrently, the literature suggests that there are aspects of the cosmic system that are beyond the divine realm. Thus, while divine control extends far beyond human control, it is not all-encompassing and there are parts of the cosmos that it does not reach.

Theogony/Cosmogony

A long-recognized aspect of ancient Near Eastern cosmology is the interrelationship of theogony and cosmogony. It could be noted that this interrelationship is itself a reflection of the ontological concepts identified above: that is, if existence was understood primarily in terms of the *functions* of the constituent parts of the cosmos, then both the gods and these parts exist only by virtue of their *functions*. So, for instance, neither the sun nor the sun-god has functions independent of the other; they are identified with each other.⁸ When the functions that they jointly represent came into being, they both came into being and began to func-

tion in tandem. Thus, theogony is inseparable from cosmogony. It is the fact that the function of the material object—the sun—overlaps with the function of the deity—the sun-god—that creates a cognitive environment in which theogony and cosmogony are deeply intertwined.⁹

Theomachy

The idea that creation came about through conflict among the gods—that is, *theomachy*—is most evident in Akkadian sources. Theomachy is nearly absent in Sumerian sources and has much less significance in Egypt. Furthermore, not all theomachy in Akkadian sources is related to cosmology, so it cannot be assumed that creation is the focus in a given literary text merely on the basis that theomachy is evident. In the investigation below, I attempt to ascertain the extent to which theomachy is a part of the general ANE cognitive environment.

Cosmic Geography

Cosmic geography offers a description of the shape of the cosmos. As already mentioned, however, the “shape” is rarely under-

⁸ See especially F. Rochberg, ‘The Stars Their Likenesses’: Perspectives on the Relation between Celestial Bodies and Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *What Is a God?* (ed. B. N. Porter; TCBAI 2; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 41–91.

⁹ This blending of theogony and cosmogony in Egypt is termed “cosmotheism” by J. Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), 204.

stood in purely material terms. Where texts describe the processes by which the cosmos was given its shape, we can gain information about how the ancients thought about origins.

Temple/Rest

One of the major constituent elements of the cognitive environment with regard to ancient cosmology that has been identified in recent years is the relationship between the cosmos and the temple. Because of this relationship, and because how the ancients thought about each illuminates the other, we find that texts concerned with temple building and temple dedications provide information about issues related to the cosmos. One of the most important of these issues is the concept of divine rest—the idea that deities in the ANE find rest in temples and that temples are built for the deity to rest in. As we investigate the notion of divine rest in both temple and cosmology texts, its place in the cognitive environment becomes increasingly important for our subject.

Role of Humanity

A final major component of the cosmological cognitive environment is the role attributed to people in the cosmos. Investigating how ancient peoples thought about the centrality of humans, the function/role of humans, the component parts of humans (dust, clay, blood of gods, etc.), and the image of deity are all significant to our understanding of their belief systems.

In all of these areas, naturally, we must apply careful methodol-

ogy to guard against adopting premature generalizations into our inventory of components of the broader cognitive environment. The cognitive landscape is replete with variety, and the variety must be recognized and allowed to stand in its uniqueness.¹⁰ At the same time, there is much common ground to be identified. Note, for instance, the assessment of J. Allen, who, after studying the rich variety of Egyptian cosmological texts, comments:

Like later philosophers and scientists, the Egyptian thinkers must have speculated, discussed, and passed on their concepts to subsequent generations. This continuity of tradition is reflected in the creation accounts we have examined. Despite differences in age and origin, imagery and subject matter, these sources all reflect an understanding of creation that was remarkably consistent throughout the 2300 years of history they span.¹¹

We would find that the same is true at the most basic level for Mesopotamian sources and in more general terms, when Egyptian and Mesopotamian traditions are compared. This is not to ignore the important differences but simply to note that it is important to recognize common ground when it exists. And we will explore the extent to which ancient Israel shared this common ground.

Even before we look at the evidence, we may wish to ask: should we expect to find any uniqueness in the Hebrew Bible? Levenson has suggested that cultural purity is a chimera:

¹⁰ See the call for careful synchronic analysis by L. Lesko, “[Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology](#),” in *Religion in Ancient Egypt* (ed. B. Shafer; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 122.

¹¹ J. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 56.

First, the quest for the distinctive in Israel is a wild-goose chase. The number of unparalleled elements shrinks yearly, and one can suspect that if we come into any substantial body of texts from Israel's most immediate neighbors—Edom, Moab, and Ammon—it might approach zero. This is not to say that institutions come into Israel unchanged. On the contrary, nothing changes cultures without changing.... The crucial fact is that Israel emerged in history. Unlike Sumerian kingship, it was not lowered from heaven, nor was it an immediate product of the “big bang.” Thus, the critical historian must assume that every element in Israel has ancestors or at least relatives among the “pagan” cultures.¹²

Though we may not share Levenson's willingness to include all matters Israelite in his sweeping statement, his general point is well taken. In ancient Israel's literature, we will find far more similarity with other ANE literatures than distinctiveness from them, and the distinctions that we discover may often turn out to be ripple effects that resulted from the modifications brought about through interaction with one or two important, distinctive theological tenets.

The Hermeneutics of Comparative Studies and the Cognitive Environment

All literature is dependent on the culture from which it emerges and on the literature of the cultures with which it is in contact. ✎ This is no less true if the literature being discussed is mundane business texts, government reports, “high” literature, or texts considered to be holy or canonical because they were thought to be divinely revealed. That all literature is dependent,

¹² Levenson, “Temple and the World,” 281.

however, does not rule out the possibility that new ideas or perspectives may emerge; it only recognizes that no literature or idea is without a precursor of some sort, even if there is something in the “new” literature that departs from the “old.” For interpretation to be legitimate, it must acknowledge the debt that the “new” owes to the “old” and explore the intertextual linkage between the two. It would be foolish to study Midrash in isolation from an understanding of the world view represented in and promulgated by the Mishnah. Study of the Christian Church Fathers would be flawed without understanding the pervasive influence of the New Testament on the world in which they lived and wrote. Calvin or Aquinas, later in Christian history, need not quote Augustine or Aristotle directly, but their writings spring from the world that was shaped by these earlier philosophers. Though the New Testament often alludes to the literature of the Old Testament and thus assumes familiarity with the earlier literature on the part of its hearers/readers, at the same time, the Old Testament has shaped the world and world view of Second Temple Judaism and the New Testament interacts with that cognitive environment in many different ways (sometimes being influenced by the Hellenistic world at the same time). We should not be surprised, then, that understanding the Hebrew Bible requires its interpreters to recognize the pervasive connection that ancient Israel had with the legacy of ancient Near Eastern literature and thought. ♣ This relationship, however, is not merely a matter of literary adoption at some point in time; that is, we cannot simply consider what we may think Israel has derived from contemporary literature. The

relationship is more complex, because Israelite literature reflects the broad ancient stream of culture from which it was watered in the course of centuries or even millennia. As a result, the issue is not whether Israel borrowed or adopted another culture's ideas. The stream was so pervasive and persistent that some of the ideas we are considering had become a "native" way of thinking; they had long been a part of the conceptual framework of the ancient world and had much earlier taken root in whatever context(s) the Israelite cognitive environment took shape. H. H. Schmid expressed these same ideas several decades ago in contrast to the model offered by G. von Rad.

Wherever we looked we saw, to be sure in manifold variations but still with great clarity, that the controlling background of OT thought and faith is the view of a comprehensive world order and, hence, a creation faith in the broad sense of the word—a creation faith that Israel in many respects shared with her environment.... Israel participated fully in the thought world and in the creation faith of the world of the ancient Near East and understood—and indeed could only understand—her particular experiences of history and experiences of God in this horizon. As would be expected, Israel's historical experiences necessitated some modifications, but that was the case also with other cultures of the ancient Near East which likewise gave their own relatively independent expression to the common way of thinking. In short, it has been shown that, contrary to what von Rad's position would logically lead us to believe, Israel did not create from her own faith a peculiar realm of life and experience. Rather, from the outset Israel's experiences occurred in the context of and in vigorous engagement with the already given sphere of common ancient Near Eastern way of thinking, particularly creation thought.¹³

That one culture shares a world of ideas with another culture suggests neither priority (in time) or superiority (in value or quality) of the ideas, nor that one system is “primitive” because it is older or “secondary” because it is more recent. Neither Shakespeare’s debt to the Bible nor the innumerable ways that his literary works reflect (his own) Elizabethan times leads to characterizations of this sort.

The author and audience meet in communication. Communication is based in the context of language, culture, and world view as it engages the world of ideas and perspectives that affect branches of learning that in modern times we have come to call economics, sociology, philosophy, psychology, and so on. No aspect of human existence escapes context: from unrecognized subtleties to the most blatant idiosyncrasies, people live in context, learn in context, and can only communicate in context. Interpretation must therefore take stock of context. When we come to the Hebrew Bible, this is a mandate whether we are inclined to think of the text as the very words of God or as human, northwest Semitic texts.

Let us consider for a moment each of these extremes. Individuals who consider the biblical text to be the very words of God in the narrowest sense are most inclined to isolate it from its cognitive environment and cultural context, believing that the pure

¹³ H. H. Schmid, “Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation: ‘Creation Theology’ as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology,” in *Creation in the Old Testament* (ed. B. W. Anderson; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 102–17; quotation from p. 111.

character of the text would be sullied and its authority compromised by any dependency on extrabiblical literature or cultural influence. In this perspective, any hint of human origins of the literature of the Bible is considered to be a dilution of its value at best or, more likely, a direct attack on the divine nature of sacred writ. It is understandable that the occasional uneducated or uninformed layperson might cling to this perspective out of fear, but we expect more from academically trained persons than obscurantism of this sort.

Those who are more inclined to think of the text of the Hebrew Bible as nothing more than northwest Semitic texts, presented in a thinly veiled repackaging, must also consider more carefully the subtleties of cultural sharing and exchange. Each culture has distinctive perspectives, even if it also shows various kinds of dependencies. Today, we are well aware of this as we observe the influence of Western culture throughout the world, sometimes good, sometimes bad. Even cultures that are intentionally engaged in overhauling their cultural traditions in favor of Western ideals do not adapt every idea or practice that they encounter.

Certainly the Israelites were no different. Even scholars who are not willing to grant credence to the divine activity that the Israelites claimed, the *Israelite* belief that there *was* divine activity in various ways and contexts itself defines a set of distinctives.¹⁴ It

¹⁴ This is similar to P. Machinist's question, "How did Israel, in its biblical canon, pose and answer the distinctiveness question for itself?" See "[The Question of Distinctiveness in Ancient Israel: An Essay](#)," in *Ah, Assyria!* (ed. M. Cogan and I. Eph'al; *ScrHier* 33; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991), 196–212

is true that the more we discover from the ancient world through excavation of artifacts and study of its excavated literature, the more the distinctives of ancient Israel diminish—or, perhaps better, the more the distinctives change categories. For example, the laws found in the Pentateuch can no longer be considered distinctive when compared with the legal texts of the ancient Near East, but they still must be recognized as representing a distinctive theory of law.

We should expect that, as discoveries are made and our understanding is advanced, the distinctiveness of cultures will be understood in new ways (and this is true of all cultures; it is hardly unique to ancient Israel). But some distinctives will always be retained; they will never be reduced to zero. All interpreters would agree that cultures modify and adapt in unique ways the elements of culture that they have in common with the peoples around them. Israel's adaptation of ideas or materials from surrounding cultures was guided by what the people of Israel believed about their interaction with Israel's god, Yahweh, and modern interpreters can choose to agree with the Hebrew Bible's perspective or not. Whatever the modern interpreter's assessment of the divine role, the Israelites' self-identity was based (eventually—we need not quibble about the time-frame here) on the belief that there was only one God, and God chose their forefathers to be in a unique relationship with them (a relationship defined by the covenant).¹⁵ Other cultures in other times may have

(quotation from p. 202).

¹⁵ Machinist, "Question of Distinctiveness," 205.

had some form of monotheism, but it was never identical to the Israelite form. Perhaps we will someday find evidence that another ancient culture believed that their god chose them and made a covenant with them, entering into a special sponsorship relationship with them. But if this proves to be the case, to be fair both to Israel and to any other yet-to-be-discovered covenant people, each group's distinctives will nonetheless need to be evaluated fairly.

I have been discussing the extreme ends of the spectrum but do not intend to imply that a choice must be made between two extremes: (1) the view that the Hebrew Bible is entirely distinctive at every point in contrast with (2) the view that it has nothing distinctive to offer. These extremes are clearly artificial but have been chosen to make the hermeneutical points clear. Most individuals find themselves somewhere in between the extremes, and any number of variations on positions between the extremes of the spectrum are possible. Once we acknowledge that there *was* an ancient cognitive environment and that it is reflected even some of the time in the Hebrew Bible, then it becomes our responsibility as interpreters to acknowledge this reality and come to terms with understanding it. On the other hand, once we recognize that there *are* distinctives, however slight they may be, it also is our responsibility to recognize the distinctives and to evaluate their effect on our understanding of the Hebrew Bible.

At this point, we are far beyond the usual whipping boys of borrowing or accommodation. All of us need to move beyond the "fundamentalist" and "liberal" labels; whether we consider the Bible to be God's holy Word revealed through the apostles and prophets or one people's adaptation of common ANE themes and

tropes (to cite again the two extremes), or anything in between, we need to sharpen our hermeneutics. We can no longer ignore the vast literature of the ancient Near East and the possibilities of insight into the Israelite literature preserved in the Hebrew Bible that they offer. Nor can we retain a position that is so disrespectful of ancient Israelite culture that we rule out the possibility that it was a unique culture with its own claim to a self-identity based on distinctive cultural perspectives. The goal of this book is to follow a path that seeks the commonalities that resulted from a shared cultural environment but also attempts to understand the nature of the Israelite “stamp” that shaped its own cosmology. ✎

Chapter 2

Creation in Ancient Near Eastern Literature

In this chapter, I present two tables that summarize the segments of creation that appear in various strands of ancient Near Eastern literature. The notes that follow provide information about the analysis presented in the tables.

Notes to the Tables

A few important observations may be made about the columns and rows that are empty as well as those that show a concentration of shared elements.

In the “Features” chart (table 2.1), the columns for the Sumerian

composition *Bird and Fish* is empty, as are the columns for the Akkadian works *Worm and Toothache*, *Two Insects*, *Tamarisk and Palm*, and *Great Astrological Treatise*. All of these are included in the chart, however, because they contain information used in the second table (table 2.2: “Elements”). The absence of information for these works in the features chart is the result of the literary genre to which the works belong: all but the last belong to the wisdom dispute category. The cosmogonic introductions of these pieces tend to focus specifically on the parties that will be involved in the dispute.

Empty columns in the features chart are noticeable for three items. Theomachy is absent from all of the Sumerian sources surveyed and is represented only once in passing in the Egyptian material, and apart from *Enuma Elish* is represented only in late sources in Akkadian. “Separating as an act of creation” is absent in both Sumerian and Akkadian sources but is well represented in Egyptian sources. I am distinguishing “separating as an act of creation” from the original separation of heaven and earth, which is much more prevalent (see below). Outside Egypt, separation as a creative act at various levels of creation is lacking. Also absent from the Sumerian material and only represented once in Egyptian and once in Akkadian is the element of divine rest associated with creation.

Table 2.1. Summary of Features Appearing in Ancient Cosmological Accounts

	Egyptian						Sumerian					
<i>Primary</i>												

Primary Sources			
10188	BM	Rhind	pBremner- Hermopolitan:
80	76-	spell	Hermopolitan: CT
	Book /	335	Heliopolitan: CT
		350 I	Leiden Papyrus Theban:
			<i>Theology Memphite</i>
			<i>Merikare of Instruction</i>
			<i>Tree Huluppu</i>
			<i>Wheat and Ewe</i>
			<i>Fish and Bird</i>
			<i>Hymn engura E-</i>
			<i>Hoe the of Song</i>
			<i>Order World and Enki</i>

10188	B_M	Rhind	pBremner-
80	76-	spell	CT
of	Book /	335	CT
		350	I Leiden
			<i>Merikare</i>
			Hymn
			Hoe
			<i>Order</i>

Society or Civilization					.	.
Celestial Bodies			.	.		

.	☐	.	.	.	

The most frequent features in the Egyptian sources are the references to the precosmic condition and the attention to theogony. In the Sumerian documents, the separation of heaven and earth is prominent, and the creation of human beings is most common in both Sumerian and Akkadian sources. It is worthy of note that the Egyptians focus more on divine origins while in Mesopotamia the greater focus is on human origins.

In the “Elements” table (Table 2.2), there are no empty rows. A glance at the columns shows there is no reference in Egyptian sources to the origins of the waters—and this category does not include the primordial waters that are present at the beginning (instead of being created). There is only one reference to the creation of (??) the sky (although the god Shu is important and ubiquitous in the sources) and only one reference to plants. Note that, generally, in the Egyptian portion of the tables, comment in the sources is sparse once the origins of the gods and of heaven and earth are addressed.

In Sumerian sources, the empty columns pertain to the emergence of the dry land and the creation of the celestial bodies and the sky. The imbalance in the columns is probably due to the fact that so many of the sources are either cosmogonic introductions to wisdom stories (and therefore more narrowly focused) or myths connected to Enki, the deity who naturally is active in the

terrestrial or chthonic realms. In Akkadian, the only blank column pertains to the creation of birds and fish, but this absence may simply be due to lacunae in *Enuma Elish*.

The heaviest concentration of references to specific elements in the Egyptian sources is found in the first two columns, which deal with the origins of the gods and the origins of heaven and earth. In the Sumerian material, the three major categories are heaven and earth, fecundity (Enki's influence again), and aspects of society or civilization, demonstrating that these elements are just as much the object of creation as the "natural" world. In Akkadian sources, the distribution is fairly even.

One item that is not reported in the tables should be mentioned: among all of these cosmogony works, only *The Instruction of Merikare* mentions that people are made in the image of deity. This will be discussed in more detail in chap. 3.

Chapter 3

The Ancient Cosmological Cognitive Environment

In the following chapters, I present data from the ancient Near East that articulate the ancient cosmological cognitive environment, organized according to the categories presented in chap. 1. It is my intention to highlight both the commonality and the diversity evident in the data. This analysis will then serve as a template for my investigation of [Genesis 1](#) in the second part of the book.

Ontology

The philosophical concept of *ontology* can be applied to many different ideas (such as, e.g., evil, belief, the cosmos), but here we are dealing specifically with *cosmic ontology*. Understanding ancient peoples' cosmic ontology must precede discussion of their understanding of cosmic origins because ontology determines what aspect of origins will be of interest and ultimate significance.

In the post-Enlightenment Western world, the framework of cosmic ontology has become strictly material—that is, the cosmos is perceived to exist because it has material properties that can be detected by the senses. The functioning of the cosmos is consequently understood as resulting from its material properties, and its origins are described in material terms. In a material ontology, something is created when it is given or otherwise gains its material properties. In material ontology, there is great interest in investigating and understanding the physical nature of reality, especially in terms of its building blocks, from the smallest constituents, including molecules, atoms, cells, quarks, and so on (the constituent parts), to the largest agglomerations of constituents, including planets, solar systems, and galaxies. In a material ontology, material origins are of ultimate importance and of central concern.¹

However, we have no reason to think that cosmic ontology in

¹ It should be noted that the situation may gradually be changing in postmodern thinking. F. B. Burnham (“[Maker of Heaven and Earth: A Perspective of Contemporary Science](#),” *HBT* 12 [1990]: 3–16) identified a transition to what he termed “relational ontology.”

the ancient world was conceived as having a material basis. Though an ancient material cosmic ontology cannot be ruled out, it certainly should not be assumed as the starting point for our consideration. Good methodology demands that we take our lead from the texts themselves when thinking about how the ancients framed their own ontological perspectives.² If their ontology was not material, then they likely would have had little interest in material origins. The focus of their ontology would also naturally be reflected in their accounts of origins.

Classical Newtonian science was atomistic and reductionistic. It reduced the basic stuff of reality to distinct, elementary particles which could be isolated, measured and predicted. In the postmodern scientific picture, reality cannot be broken down into separate particles or discreet material entities. Nothing can be isolated from its environment. Instead, reality is constituted by events and relationships. Relationships, not things, are fundamental. (p. 5)

This is much closer to the ancient ontology that I believe emerges from the texts, but we must always remember that we should not impose any modern or postmodern ontology (our own ontology) on ancient texts. Burnham's comment does demonstrate the point, however, that a material ontology is not the only option.

² Ontology per se has received little direct attention in the discussions of ancient Near Eastern thought. For one example from Mesopotamia, see the brief comments by T. Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," in *Ancient Israelite Religion* (ed. P. Miller, P. Hanson, and S. D. McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 18–20; Jacobsen suggests that the ontology of the ancient inhabitants of Mesopotamia included both what was tangible and what was intangible. For Egypt, see E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), 172–85.

By asking three questions, I will establish what the ancients believed was required for something to exist: (1) What did they consider to constitute nonexistence? (2) What activities do they describe as bringing something into existence, and what is the situation “before” and “after” these acts? and (3) How did the ancients describe the existing cosmos that they perceived with their senses—that is, the elements that they considered to be foundational building blocks of the cosmos? Based on these three questions and other studies, I will suggest that cosmic ontology in the ancient world was a *functional ontology*—that is, everything exists by virtue of its having been assigned a function and given a role in the ordered cosmos. ✎

Nonexistence

Egyptian literature addresses most directly the categories of what can be considered to exist in contrast to what does not exist, using very clear terminology.³ E. Hornung at first appears to affirm the material nature of existence in Egyptian thinking when he notes that the absence of matter is included in what Egyptian texts classify as the nonexistent. Nevertheless he follows this comment immediately with the observation “that which is nameless does not exist,” implying that material properties are not criteria for the distinction.⁴ In fact, he later admits that “everywhere

³ Particularly the negations of the verb ‘to be’, *tm wnn*, *nn wn*, as well as *jwtj/jwtt*; see Hornung, *Conceptions*, 173–74.

⁴ Hornung, *Conceptions*, 175. In fact, what he appears to mean is not the

in the landscape we would come across the non-existent, especially in the desert, which contains fabulous animals that do not exist.”⁵ He maintains that the existent and the nonexistent together compose the totality of all that is conceivable.⁶ With this distinction between existent and nonexistent in mind, we see that, for the Egyptians, creation did not involve transformation of the nonexistent into the existent (which is what most moderns would most easily consider to be the definition of “creation”).⁷ Instead, space is created for the existent as the nonexistent is pushed behind boundaries or beyond limits while yet remaining alongside that which is existent.⁸

For the world of creation, the elements from which the state before creation is constituted—primeval flood, primeval darkness, weariness, and negation—are present in two ways. They are the final limit, or the realm beyond all boundaries, which is encountered when one reaches outside the limited world of being; and they are also present in our midst within the ordered world of creation.⁹

total absence of matter (i.e., anything material) but the absence of differentiated forms of matter, since every statement that he makes shows that the primeval oneness had a material aspect (though its material aspect was irrelevant).

⁵Hornung, *Conceptions*, 180.

⁶ Hornung, *Conceptions*, 176; it would be an intriguing exercise to think about this in comparison with modern discussions about matter and anti-matter.

⁷ Hornung, *Conceptions*, 177; S. Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1973), 171–72

⁸Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 168.

Thus, living beings may encounter the nonexistent in a variety of ways.¹⁰ When a pharaoh such as Ramesses II is said to “make rebellious foreign lands non-existent,” it does not mean that he annihilates them or sends them into oblivion but that he drives them out of the realm of the existent beyond the boundaries into the realm of the nonexistent.¹¹ Hornung offers his summary conclusion: “For [Egyptians] the nonexistent is the inexhaustible, unrealized primal matter.”¹²

While Hornung considers the precosmic status to be characterized by the nonexistent,¹³ Assmann, in contrast, observes that “the Egyptian concept of ‘nothingness’ is not a part of the extracosmic or precosmic sphere but of the ‘inner cosmic.’”¹⁴ Hornung’s evaluation is supported by a statement in Papyrus Leiden 1 350: “You began evolution with nothing, without the world being empty of you on the first occasion.”¹⁵ Hornung’s conclusions about

⁹ Hornung, *Conceptions*, 177.

¹⁰ Hornung, *Conceptions*, 179; Assmann, *Mind of Egypt*, 205–6.

¹¹ Hornung, *Conceptions*, 180. In Egypt, death and the netherworld are part of the existent.

¹² Hornung, *Conceptions*, 182.

¹³ Hornung, *Conceptions*, 176.

¹⁴ Assmann, *Mind of Egypt*, 206. He identifies two kinds of chaos: the precosmic/extracosmic chaos, primarily the primal waters, which is characterized by oneness, and an inner cosmic chaos characterized by “nothingness, destruction, entropy.” It is the latter that would be what Hornung calls the nonexistent.

¹⁵ J. Allen’s translation in [COS 1.16](#) from the 80th chapter. Allen comments

the nonexistent bring out the salient features that are significant for our study:

One could say that in Egypt “the nonexistent” signified quite generally that which is inchoate, undifferentiated, unarticulated, and unlimited; or in affirmative form, the entirety of what is possible, the absolute, the definitive. In comparison with the nonexistent, the existent is clearly defined, and articulated by boundaries and discriminations.¹⁶

Allen, though choosing different terminology, follows the same line of thought when he describes the antithetical nature of the two realms.

What lies outside the biosphere of earth, sky, and Duat is not “nothingness” but a universe that is the antithesis of all that defines the world. It is infinite, where the world is bounded; formless and chaotic, where the world is shaped and ordered; inert, where the world is active; and wholly uniform in substance (water), where the world is materially diverse.¹⁷

This Egyptian view of nonexistence is not found throughout the ancient world and thus constitutes a unique element of the Egyptian cognitive landscape. But the inchoate nature of this nonproductive, nondiversified, nonfunctional precosmic state is evidenced more widely and in a variety of forms, as can be discerned by evaluation of the literature left by other ancient cultures. Whether one accepts Hornung’s or Assmann’s interpretation of the continuity or discontinuity between precosmic and inner

in a footnote that the text indicates that Amun began evolving “without what exists.”

¹⁶ Hornung, *Conceptions*, 183.

¹⁷ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 57.

cosmic nothingness, both conclude that the Egyptian view of nothingness/nonexistence points to the fact that the Egyptian ontology was nonmaterial. It is this belief that we will show was common throughout the ancient Near East.

In reference to Mesopotamia, Clifford observes, “The cosmogonies do not express nonexistence abstractly as nothingness, but as a period when essential institutions did not yet exist.”¹⁸ In the past, the precosmic condition was often labeled “Chaos,” and this terminology often included a personification or characterization of this condition as evil.¹⁹ In the Classical world, Chaos in Hesiod’s *Theogony* and in Virgil’s *Aeneid* is personified as the primal state in which earth, sky, and seas were all merged.²⁰ More generally, *chaos* is the opposite of *cosmos*, which refers to the *ordered whole*.²¹ It is this latter juxtaposition that is particularly evident in the ancient

¹⁸ Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and the Bible* (CBQMS 26; Washington DC: Catholic Biblical Association), 64.

¹⁹ Examples abound from H. Gunkel’s, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006) to B. W. Anderson, *Creation versus Chaos* (New York: Association Press, 1967) and S. Niditch, *Chaos to Cosmos: Studies in Biblical Patterns of Creation* (Scholars Press Studies in the Humanities 6; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985)—just to name a few that contain *chaos* in the title.

²⁰ *Aeneid* 4.707; *Theogony* 2.116–53. This was adopted and further refined by the Gnostics; see E. Hornung, *Conceptions*, 177 n. 127.

²¹ G. E. R. Lloyd, “Greek Cosmologies,” in *Ancient Cosmologies* (ed. C. Blacker and M. Loewe; London: Allen and Unwin, 1975), 200.

Near East. Egyptian philosophers conceived of the precreation state as the opposite of the created state. In Mesopotamian views of the precosmic condition, chaos was personified only secondarily in the conflict myths in which the created order was considered to be at risk. In this cosmological literature, the creatures posing the threat must be overthrown and order reestablished.²² “The conflict myth is a secondary development, a personification, of these primary creation metaphors of separation and differentiation.”²³

Whether the term *Chaos* is appropriate as a label for the precreation state depends, naturally, on how it is defined and used. One option is to define it as the opposite of order and functionality; it is that which is unproductive. In this definition, chaos is neither a gaping void nor a personified enemy of order.²⁴ In the ancient Near East, creation involves bringing order and organization to the cosmos. In modern discussions of this topic, this (sometimes) threatening disorder is often labeled *chaos*, and we can retain the terminology as long as this careful definition is maintained. It is better, however, to avoid the multivalent senses that *chaos* has and instead to use *precosmic condition* (Greek *kosmos* implies order) as our term in order to avoid misunderstanding the various uses of

²² Here we refer to creatures such as Tiamat and her cohorts in *Enuma Elish* and Anzu in the *Tale of Anzu*.

²³ Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 78.

²⁴ All of this is thoroughly sorted out and discussed in a monograph by R. S. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: A Reassessment of the Theme of “Chaos” in the Hebrew Bible* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005).

chaos.²⁵ In the ancient Near East, the precosmic condition is therefore neither an abstraction nor a personified adversary. The primordial Sea, which is the principal element of the precreation condition, is personified as Nammu in Sumer⁴¹ and as Nun in Egypt.

Before-and-After Pictures, and Activities Involved with Bringing into Existence

As noted above, Hornung's description of the creation cosmology of ancient Egypt entails ordering the realm of the existent.²⁷ This ordering takes place through a number of different processes, some directed by deity (procreation, fashioning, or use of bodily fluids), and others that are expressed in a sort of middle voice: they 'evolved' or 'developed'.²⁸ In all of these cases, origination in

²⁵ I prefer *precosmic condition* or *precreation* over *chaos*, and in this book, unless I capitalize *Chaos*, I will use the word only in a nontechnical, nonpersonified sense.

⁴¹ This is a general statement and as such is reductionistic. For further discussion of the variety of primal materials in Sumerian thinking and a thorough analysis of them, see J. Westenholz, "Heaven and Earth: Asexual Monad and Bisexual Dyad," in *Gazing on the Deep: Ancient Near Eastern and Other Studies in Honor of Tzvi Abusch* (ed. J. Stackert et al; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2010), 293–326.

²⁷ Hornung, *Conceptions*, 184.

²⁸ The Egyptian term is *hpr*; see translations in [COS 1.2; 1.5; 1.9; 1.10; 1.14; 1.15; 1.16](#); and frequent textual notes in Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 74–95 and commentary on p. 29.

Egypt is a process of transitioning from one to many, from unity to diversity.²⁹ The god Atum is conceptualized as the primordial monad—the singularity embodying all the potential of the cosmos, from whom all things were separated and thereby were created.³⁰ Egyptians were not concerned with abstractions such as the eternality of matter, nor were they interested in the origin of matter per se; but the *continuity* of matter from the original pre-cosmic condition to the current state of differentiated elements was of utmost importance.³¹ Creation involved the transition from primordial unity to the diversity of the world that they experienced.

The world is the creator's own self-realization, his development into the elements of nature. All things that exist are developments (*hprw*) of the creator himself: "he created the identities of his parts."³²

In all of this, however, it should be recognized that these creative activities focused on the gods first and foremost and only indirectly on the cosmic parties that they represented. In other words, the Egyptian texts are much more interested in the theogony side of the spectrum than on the cosmogony side, although the two are inevitably connected. The very fact that they *are* inseparable says much about ontology in ancient Egypt. CT 261 expresses this teleology as well as the underlying functional ontology by the claim of

²⁹ Assmann, *Mind of Egypt*, 206.

³⁰ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 57–58: "Creation is the process through which the One became the Many."

³¹ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 14.

³² Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 33, quoting from CT 335 = BD 17.

the creator:

I am the one who gave life to the Ennead.
I am Acts-As-He-Likes, father of the gods,
High of stand,
Who made the god functional in accordance with that which he who bore
all commanded.³³

Though creation in Egyptian texts is more developmental than causal,³⁴ transitive verbs do occur in the texts. Egyptian terms that relate to creation include *írí* ‘to make’, *msì* ‘to beget’, and *ḳm3* ‘to form, fashion’.³⁵ A survey of the literature shows that, in cosmic contexts where a deity is the subject, the objects of these verbs are primarily functions rather than anything strictly material. The texts are more interested in the unfolding process than the means or mechanisms by which the unfolding was accomplished.³⁶ First and foremost, creation was considered to be not an account of the manufacturing of material things but a teleological account that reflected divine purpose.³⁷ “In the Egyptian under-

³³ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 37. This is actually a speech by Magic, that is, the magic that was wielded by the creator-god to bring about the development of all of creation by the spoken word. Thus, it is an intriguing parallel to Dame Wisdom in [Proverbs 8](#).

³⁴ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 36.

³⁵ For discussion of the terminology, see J. Bergman, “*Bara*’: *Egypt*,” *TDOT* 2:242-44.

³⁶ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 36.

³⁷ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 36; notice [CT 714](#): “It was as I wished, according to my heart, that I built myself.”

standing of reality, all the elements and forces that a human being might encounter in this world are not impersonal matter and energy but the forms and wills of living beings.”³⁸

This is further illustrated by the “before” and “after” portrayals of creation found in Egyptian literature. The precosmic condition, whether or not it can be labeled *nonexistent*, can be defined both by components that are cited as lacking and by components that are present. Absent components include the spatial world (not yet separated), inhabitable places, life and death, procreation, time, conflict, and diversity.³⁹ The positive description features limitless waters and total darkness.⁴⁰ There are many examples of this, in which components are counted among the “existent,” even though these elements had not yet come into being at the beginning—despite the fact that the precosmic state is not labeled “the nonexistent.” The existent entities had not yet come into being because they had not been separated out from the initial oneness or given a name.⁴¹ As noted above, Atum was conceptualized as the primordial monad—the singularity embodying all the potential of the cosmos, from whom all things were separated and

³⁸ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 62.

³⁹ Hornung, *Conceptions*, 174–76.

⁴⁰ Hornung, *Conceptions*, 177; CT 80; COS 1.8; also anticipated as the condition the earth will return to at the end of time; see the Book of the Dead chap. 175: “I shall destroy all that I have made, and this land will come back into Nun, into the floodwaters, as in its beginning.”

⁴¹ See Papyrus Berlin 3055, 16:3–4 and its quotation in Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 165.

thereby were created. Everything else was brought into existence by being differentiated. The “after” picture is consequently one of immense diversity.⁴²

In addition to there being no names and no diversification, the “before” picture has no space for life to exist. The Heliopolitan text CT 80 portrays the primordial condition before creation described by Shu as having no “Place.”⁴³

Not finding a place in which I could stand or sit,
Before Heliopolis had been founded, in which I could exist;
Before the lotus had been tied together, on which I could sit;
Before I had made Nut so she could be over my head and Geb could marry
her⁴⁴

As with all of this literature, this text does not deal with material origins but reflects a continuum between origins and life in the everyday world.⁴⁵

In Akkadian, the main verbs meaning ‘create’ are *banû* and *bašāmu*⁴⁶ The former is used generally, with an extensive range of

⁴² Hornung, *Conceptions*, 171; Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 173. Texts include Pyramid Text 1208c (Morenz, 173); CT 4 36 (spell 286) (Morenz, 173); Heliopolis (Morenz, 173); Stele Leyden 5.12 (Morenz, 173); “Ptah, Lord of maat ... who lifted up the sky and created things that be” (Morenz, 174); *Memphite Theology*, line 14: Ptah, creating through the Ennead, is identified as the one who “pronounced the identity of everything.”

⁴³ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 25

⁴⁴ CT 80 48–51.

⁴⁵ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 25.

⁴⁶ See some discussion of additional verbs in Clifford, *Creation Accounts*,

meanings, including “build, construct, form, make, manufacture” and is sometimes translated ‘create’. When a deity is the subject in a cosmic context, objects include:

- mankind or individual humans
- heavens [see “When Anu had created the heaven, the heaven had created the earth, the earth had created the rivers,” etc.]
- offices (high-priestess, kingship)
- mountains
- various abstract features (e.g., womb [not the female organ] that produces features, warfare, conjuration, justice)
- cosmic features (e.g., evil wind) and physical things that are given cosmic qualities (e.g., barley, flax)
- items created to perform functions (stars created to destroy evil ones)
- a plan or a situation

The second verb, *bašāmu*, is used more narrowly. Its objects include:

- buildings or plans for them (usually sanctuaries)
- pictures (e.g., reliefs on steles)
- arable land (e.g., by building dikes)
- people in the womb

71–72; H. Ringgren, “*Bara’*: Mesopotamia,” *TDOT* 2:244; *CAD* B 88–89 for *banû*; *CAD* B 137–38 for *bašamu*. Sumerian verbs for the creation of humanity are discussed in G. Pettinato, *Das altorientalische Menschenbild und die sumerischen und akkadischen Schöpfungsmythen* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1971), 48–57, and Akkadian verbs cited there, pp. 57–60.

- strategies
- weapons (magical ones for the gods)
- divine images
- cosmic components (constellations, firmament [*burumu*])

When creation activities are documented in Sumerian and Akkadian sources, we are able to observe the situation both before and after the activity, as well as what sorts of verbs are used. This helps to determine the focus of the creative activity. We will begin with Sumerian texts.

NBC 11108

Earth was in darkness, the lower world was [invi]sible;
 The waters did not flow through the opening (in the earth),
 Nothing was produced, on the vast earth the furrow had not been made.
 The high priest of Enlil did not exist,
 The rites of purification were not carried out,
 The h[ierodul]e (?) of heaven was not adorned, she did not proclaim [the
 praises?]
 Heaven and earth were joined to each other (forming) a unit, they were
 not [married].
 Heaven showed its shining face in Dagan [= heavenly dwelling],
 As it coursed, it could not reach the fields.
 The rule of Enlil over the land had not yet come about,
 The p[ure lad]y? of E'anna had not yet [receiv]ed [offerings]?
 The gr[eat gods], the Anunna, were not yet active,
 The gods of heaven, the gods of ea[rth] were not yet there.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 28, translated into English from J. van Dijk's French translation in "Existe-t-il un 'Poème de la Création' Sumérien?" in *Kramer Anniversary Volume: Cuneiform Studies in Honor of Samuel Noah*

The “before” picture here comprises darkness, water, and the nondiscrete heaven and earth (on the positive side) and the absence of productivity, of the gods, and of the operation of the cult (on the negative side). Creative activities then alter this landscape. An alternative perspective can be seen in *Enki and Ninhursag*, where it is not the cultic system that is absent but the social system.⁴⁸

Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Underworld (or The Huluppu Tree)

in days of yore, when the necessary things had been brought into manifest
existence,
in days of yore, when the necessary things had been for the first time
properly cared for,
when bread had been tasted for the first time in the shrines of the Land,
when the ovens of the Land had been made to work,
when the heavens had been separated from the earth,
when the earth had been delimited from the heavens,
when the fame of mankind had been established,
when An had taken the heavens for himself,
when Enlil had taken the earth for himself,
when the nether world had been given to Ereškigala as a gift;⁴⁹

Kramer (ed. B. Eichler et al.; AOAT 25; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1976),
125–33.

⁴⁸ Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 36.

⁴⁹ Electronic corpus of Sumerian Texts translation, <http://etc-sl.orinst.ox.ac.uk> lines 4–13. “Necessary things” = Sumerian niĝ₂-du₇ ‘that which is proper or appropriate’.

Clifford points out the focus on organization evident in this account.⁵⁰ Origins are introduced in the first two lines, and then the specifics of what this refers to are detailed in the following lines. Areas that are addressed include the operation of the cult, cosmic separation, naming of mankind, and jurisdictions of the major gods.

Similar observations can be made concerning major pieces of literature such as *Enuma Elish*. The initial primordial context is addressed very briefly in theogonic terms. The situation before creation is described in terms of the absence of names, gods, and destinies.

I 1-2: When on high no name was given in heaven, nor below was the netherworld called by name ...

I 7-9: When no gods at all had been brought forth, none called by names, none destinies ordained, then were the gods formed.

I 10: Laḥmu and Laḥamu were brought forth, were called by name

I 16: Then Anu begot in his own image Nudimmud⁶⁶

Later in the piece, after Marduk has defeated Tiamat's forces, a more extensive account of creation provides details of his work. Note the following excerpts, which have been chosen to highlight the terminology.

IV 138-44

Half of her he set up and made as a cover, heaven.
He stretched out the hide and assigned watchmen,
And ordered them not to let her waters escape.

⁵⁰ Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 24-25.

⁶⁶ [COS 1.111](#).

He crossed heaven and inspected its firmament,
He made a counterpart to Apsu, the dwelling of Nudimmud.
The Lord measured the construction of Apsu,
He founded the Great Sanctuary, the likeness of Esharra.

V

- 1: made the position(s) for the great gods
- 2: established (in) constellations the stars. Their likenesses
- 3: marked the year
- 4: set up twelve months of three stars each
- 5: patterned the days of the year
- 12: made the moon appear, entrusted (to him) the night
- 54: he opened underground springs, a flood was let flow
- 55: From her eyes he undimmed the Euphrates and Tigris
- 61: He set her crotch as the brace of heaven,
- 62: Spreading half of her as a cover, he established the netherworld⁵²

Marduk then proceeds to assume his prerogatives (V 65) and takes the throne (V 78-104). The other gods then proclaim: “Over all things which your hands have created, who has authority, save for you?” (V 133-34). In this way, it is clear that all of the previous description was part of the act of creation.

The principal acts of creation are naming, separating, and temple building. While separating holds a prominent position in Egyptian and Sumerian texts, the significance of naming can be seen in its role in *Enuma Elish*, as observed by B. Foster.

The poem [*Enuma Elish*] begins and ends with concepts of naming. The poet evidently considers naming both an act of creation and an explanation of something already brought into being. For the poet, the name,

⁵² COS 1.111.

properly understood, discloses the significance of the created thing. Semantic and phonological analysis of names could lead to understanding of the things named. Names, for this poet, are a text to be read by the informed, and bear the same intimate and revealing relationship to what they signify as this text does to the events it narrates.⁵³

All of this indicates that cosmic creation in the ancient world was not viewed primarily as a process by which matter was brought into being but as a process by which functions, roles, order, jurisdiction, organization, and stability were established. This makes it clear that creation in the ancient world was defined by the determination of functions and, in turn, demonstrates that the ontology of ancient peoples was focused on a thing's functional, rather than its material, status.⁵⁴

A final example from Mesopotamia, from the Seleucid period (1st

⁵³ B. Foster, *Before the Muses* (3rd ed.; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2005) 437–38. The relationship between naming and creation is also affirmed in J.-J. Glassner, “The Use of Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *CANE*, 3.1818.

⁵⁴ An uncritical reading of Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 45–46 and 59–63, could potentially lead to the conclusion that he thinks otherwise, because he repeatedly refers to “substance” and “material reality” throughout the discussion as he writes about what Ptah created according to the *Memphite Theology*. A more careful reading, however, makes it evident that what he means by the “material” is not what we mean by “matter” but the “forces and elements of the world” (p. 45). The distinction Allen is trying to make is the contrast between the perception of Ptah—i.e., his concept of the world—and the resulting reality (p. 47), which is what he refers to by the word “material.”

ca. 3rd–2nd century B.C.E.), is a work entitled:

Cosmogony and the Foundation of Eridu

All lands were sea

The spring in the midst of the sea was only a channel

Then Eridu was made, Esagil was built,

Esagil that Lugaldukuga erected in the heart of the apsu

Babylon was made, Esagil was completed.⁵⁵

In this text, the primordial state is once again the familiar unbounded waters. The creative act referred to, however, is the founding of city and temple. This feature was already present in some of the earlier works, particularly *Enuma Elish*, where it was one part of the activity (and the climax of the creative activity), but here it is the first of a number of other activities (creating humans, animals, Tigris and Euphrates, etc.).

Separating Heaven and Earth

Often, the transition from the precosmic condition to the activities involved in creation is the separation of heaven and earth. In Egypt, the separating of heaven and earth is not frequently mentioned as a major event but as one of many stages involved in the one becoming many. In Mesopotamian accounts, the separation is simply mentioned, without any statement about the mechanism involved.⁵⁶ On the other hand, Egyptian accounts focus more on

⁵⁵ Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 63.

⁵⁶ For extensive discussion see J. Westenholz, “[Heaven and Earth: Asexual Monad and Bisexual Dyad](#),” in *Gazing on the Deep: Ancient Near Eastern and*

what separates heaven earth—namely, the sky god Shu—than on the separation itself. The Coffin Texts describe this process:

For I [Shu] am weary at the Uplifting of Shu,
Since I lifted my daughter Nut atop me,
That I might give her to my father Atum in his utmost extent.
I have put Geb under my feet.⁵⁷

Allen identifies the separating of heaven and earth as the first act of creation and a necessary precondition for the rest of creation:

Shu's role, however, is the pivotal one, both in the created world and in the process of its creation. Before the creation, all things were undifferentiated in the primordial Monad, Atum. The creation of a void (Shu) within that unity inevitably produced, at the same time, a distinction between top and bottom—between sky-vault above the void and the earth beneath it, with the void separating the two.⁵⁸

To the Egyptians, the universe consisted of a limitless ocean (Nun) above the sky, paralleled by waters under the earth.⁵⁹ The waters above the sky and under the earth were separated by Shu, the god of the air.

This notion is referred to again in the Book of the Dead chap. 17:

I am Atum when I was alone in Nun. I am Re in his appearances in glory, when he began to rule that which he had made. Who is he? "Re when he

Other Studies in Honor of Tzvi Abusch (ed. J. Stackert et al; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2010), 293–326, especially pp. 304–7.

⁵⁷ CT 76 10–13, translation by Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 18.

⁵⁸ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 20–21.

⁵⁹ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 4

began to rule that which he had made” means: when Re began to appear in the kingship which he exercised as who existed before the liftings of Shu had occurred, while he was on the hill which is in Hermopolis.⁶⁰

In Hittite literature, heaven and earth were understood to have been cut apart with a copper cutting tool.

When they built heaven and earth upon me, I was aware of nothing. And when they cut heaven and earth apart with a copper cutting tool, I was even unaware of that.⁶¹

It is in Sumerian accounts that the most frequent references to the separation of heaven and earth are found but often only in passing.

Song of the Hoe

Not only did he [Enlil] hasten to separate heaven from earth, and hasten to separate earth from heaven, but, in order to make it possible for humans to grow in “Where Flesh Came Forth” (the name of a cosmic location), he first suspended the axis of the world at Dur-an-ki.⁶²

Huluppu Tree

In “The *Huluppu Tree*,” a section in *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld* (see translation above, p. 32) the separation is accomplished by An carrying off heaven and Enlil carrying off earth.

⁶⁰ Lesko, “Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,” 113.

⁶¹ H. Hoffner, “*Song of Ullikummi*,” in *Hittite Myths* (SBLWAW 2; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1990), 59, §61. The speaker is Ubelluri, a god whose place is similar to Atlas in Greek mythology, who holds up the cosmos from his place in the netherworld.

⁶² <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk> 5.5.4.

Also translated above, in [NBC 11108](#), the future separation of heaven and earth is noted as not yet having taken place. Two other sources mention the separation briefly in passing.

Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave

When in ancient days heaven was separated from earth, when in ancient days that which was fitting ..., when after the ancient harvests ... barley was eaten (?), when boundaries were laid out and borders were fixed, when boundary-stones were placed and inscribed with names⁶³

Silver and Copper

(Copper speaks:) "... the heavens were separated from the earth, there was no drinking water."⁶⁴

The theme of separation of heaven and earth is less common in Akkadian sources.⁶⁵ It is not explicitly mentioned in *Enuma Elish* but is perhaps alluded to in the first two lines, which indicate that the heaven and the earth had not yet been named. This may imply they had not yet been separated. In line 12, Anshar and Kishar are formed and named, representing the now-identified totality of heaven and earth.⁶⁶

⁶³ <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk> 1.8.2.1.

⁶⁴ <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk> 5.3.6.

⁶⁵ In fact, reading the entries in the *CAD* on *nesû*, *zâzu*, *šamû*, *burûmû*, *qaqqaru*, and *eršetu* turned up no references to the separation of heaven and earth (as distinguished from the separating of the waters in the splitting of Tiamat's body).

⁶⁶ See Foster's note in *Before the Muses*, 439 n.4.

Finally, in *KAR* 4, the Sumerian version begins, “When Heaven had been separated from Earth—hitherto they were joined firmly together...”⁶⁷ Because this text is preserved in both the Sumerian and Akkadian versions, it might have provided the only Akkadian text that referred explicitly to the separation of heaven and earth. Unfortunately, the Akkadian version of line 1 is not preserved.

This survey shows, then, that a precosmic condition is followed by the first step in creation, which often is the separation of heaven and earth. From this step forward, a variety of creation verbs are used in the description of the subsequent stages of creation, and these verbs find their correlates in the basic building blocks of creation.

Building Blocks, Causation, and Teleology

In this section, based on what the texts reveal, I will demonstrate that, when the ancients thought about the component parts of the cosmos—even as it is expressed in statements about cosmic geography, they focused on function rather than material. When they ponder causation, their thinking reflects a world in which divine activity moves objects rather than a world of material objects acting in accordance with natural laws.⁶⁸ The perspective

⁶⁷ Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 49. For details of the controversy surrounding this poorly preserved line, see G. Pettinato, *Das altorientalische Menschenbild und die sumerischen und akkadischen Schöpfungsmythen* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1971), 79 n. 1. The separation of heaven from earth in this text, however, is not controversial.

⁶⁸ Note W. G. Lambert, *RLA* 6:218–19: “In ancient Mesopotamia there was

of the ancients on the nature of the material world and causation firmly support what is patently obvious to anyone reading the texts—that they viewed cosmic origins and operations in teleological terms.⁶⁹ Purpose and intentionality characterized the work of the gods. Though their purposes were not always transparent, and no overarching plan was evident to human beings, the gods had their reasons and were acting in accordance with those reasons. Even when no specific goals could be discerned by mortals, the cosmos was driven from beginning to end by the purposes of the gods.

[Ptah's] heart and tongue have control over all limbs showing that he is preeminent in every body and in every mouth—of all gods, all people, all animals, and all crawling things that live—planning and governing everything he wishes.⁷⁰

That all of the world was governed by the gods' activities is an integral element of the cognitive environment of the ancient

comparatively little interest in cosmogony as such. Few texts deal in any detail with the processes whereby the physical universe originated and attained its present form. A much greater interest was taken in the ancestries of the gods, and these frequently have cosmogonic associations.”

⁶⁹ I am using *teleology* to refer to the branch of cosmology that deals with final causes; specifically, teleological affirmation reflects a belief that origins are driven by intention and purpose. This intention or purpose does not necessarily include a final goal for the end of time, though it may do so.

⁷⁰ *Memphite Theology*, column 54; see [COS 1.15](#).

world, and it is diametrically opposed to the reigning modern paradigm, which is thoroughly dysteleological: origins and causation are seen in impersonal terms, the simple result of random reactions within the bounds of natural laws, discernible only within an empirical framework. 📌

In the *Memphite Theology*, important components of creation are listed in terms of functions, such as male life-principles, female life-principles, what is loved, what is hated, life to the calm, death to the wrongdoer, construction and craft, working hands, walking feet, and movement of limbs. The *Memphite Theology's* description of the created world singles out the most important aspects of creation, as it was understood by the Egyptians.

The late demotic Papyrus Insinger, which M. Lichtheim dates to the Ptolemaic period, contains a series of instructions made up of individual proverbs. The 24th instruction concerns the wisdom of recognizing the role of deity and how foolish it is to discount the gods. Toward the end of column 31, a couple of rhetorical questions introduce a list of what god has created.

How do the sun and moon go and come in the sky?

Whence go and come water, fire, and wind?

Through whom do the amulet and spell become remedies?

The hidden work of the god, he makes it known on the earth daily.

He created light and darkness in which is every creature.

He created the earth, begetting millions, swallowing (them) up and begetting again.

He created day, month, and year through the commands of the lord of command.

He created summer and winter through the rising and setting of Sothis.

He created food before those who are alive, the wonder of the fields.

He created the constellation of those that are in the sky, so that those on earth should learn them.
He created sweet water in it which all the lands desire.
He created the breath in the egg though there is no access to it.
He created birth in every womb from the semen which they receive.
He created sinews and bones out of the same semen.
He created coming and going in the whole earth through the trembling of the ground.
He created sleep to end weariness, waking for looking after food.
He created remedies to end illness, wine to end affliction.
He created the dream to show the way to the dreamer in his blindness.
He created life and death before him for the torment of the impious man.
He created wealth for truthfulness, poverty for falsehood.
He created work for the stupid man, food for the common man.
He created the succession of generations so as to make them live.⁷¹

Examples such as this demonstrate that, across all periods, in Egypt the components of the real world convey a functional view of reality, not a material view, and that causation emanates from the divine, not from within the material world itself.

In Mesopotamia, the situation is no different. A full discussion of the archetypal functions (Sumerian ME) will be undertaken below (pp. 46–62), but for now it should be observed that these are the building blocks of the cosmos.

Enki and World Order

Counting the days and putting the months in their houses, so as to complete the years and to submit the completed years to the assembly for a decision, taking decisions to regularise the days: father Enki, you are the king of the assembled people. You have only to open your mouth

⁷¹ M. Lichtheim, *AEL*, 3:210–11.

for everything to multiply and for plenty to be established. Your branches ... green with their fruit, ... do honour to the gods.... in its forests is like a fleecy garment. Good sheep and good lambs do honour to.... When ... the prepared fields, ... will accumulate stockpiles and stacks.... there is oil, there is milk, produced by the sheepfold and cow-pen. The shepherd sweetly sings his rustic song, the cowherd spends the day rocking his churns. Their products would do honour to the late lunches in the gods' great dining hall.

At my command, sheepfolds have been built, cow-pens have been fenced off. When I approach heaven, a rain of abundance rains from heaven. When I approach earth, there is a high carp-flood. When I approach the green meadows, at my word stockpiles and stacks are accumulated. I have built my house, a shrine, in a pure place, and named it with a good name. I have built my Abzu, a shrine, in ..., and decreed a good fate for it.⁷²

The text goes on to describe Enki's role in assigning functions to the gods, the temples, and the cosmos. The functions fall mainly into the categories of time, weather, and fertility, though aspects of culture and society are also mentioned. In this document, we can see both the essential building blocks of the cosmos (the functions represented by the Sumerian ME) and the location of causation, which is fully in the realm of deity.

Inanna and Enki

Aspects of human society and culture are even more evident in *Inanna and Enki*, which preserves a list of nearly 80 ME. This list should not be considered comprehensive (perhaps it lists only those that become associated specifically with Inanna and her

⁷² <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk> 17–31 and 89–95.

town of Uruk), but it is sufficiently representative to provide an understanding of the kinds of items that the composers of this story considered to be the building blocks of the cosmos.

heroism, power, wickedness, righteousness, the plundering of cities, making lamentations, rejoicing, deceit, the rebel lands, kindness, being on the move, being sedentary, craft of the carpenter, the craft of the coppersmith, the craft of the scribe, the craft of the smith, the craft of the leather-worker, the craft of the fuller, the craft of the builder, the craft of the reed-worker, wisdom, attentiveness, holy purification rites, the shepherd's hut, piling up glowing charcoals, the sheepfold, respect, awe, reverent silence, the bitter-toothed (?), the kindling of fire, the extinguishing of fire, hard work, the assembled family, descendants, strife, triumph, counselling, comforting, judging, decision-making, the office of *en* priest, the office of *lagar* priest, divinity, the great and good crown, the royal throne, the noble sceptre, the staff and crook, the noble dress, shepherdship, kingship, the office of *egir-zid* priestess, the office of *nin-diġir* priestess, the office of *išib* priest, the office of *lu-mah* priest, the office of *gudug* priest, constancy, going down to the underworld, coming up from the underworld, the *kur-ġara* priest, the sword and club, the cultic functionary *saġ-ursaġ*, the black garment, the colourful garment, the standard, the quiver, sexual intercourse, kissing, prostitution, forthright speech, deceitful speech, grandiloquent speech, the cultic prostitute, the holy tavern, the holy *niġin-ġar* shrine, the hierodule of heaven, loud musical instruments, the art of song, venerable old age.⁷³

From the list of these items, it is evident that the ME include both cosmic and cultural operations and that both kinds of activities

⁷³ Taken from <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk> Segment D lines 1-24; Segment F 16-34.

equally define the way the created world functions. The context likewise makes it clear that the administration of these functions belongs in the divine realm.

Enuma Elish

One more example should suffice to illustrate what the ancients thought constituted the main building blocks of the cosmos and what were the most important elements to include in any description of origins in a cosmogonic account. In tablet V of *Enuma Elish*, Marduk is “creating the cosmos,” though his activity could just as easily be described as “reorganizing” the cosmos. It is difficult, however, to distinguish between these two labels, for when functions are involved, creation and reorganization overlap considerably.

The tablet begins with Marduk’s organizing the celestial sphere with regard to the stars, constellations, and the phases of the moon (lines 1–24). Lines 25–45 are not represented in many of the translations included in major modern anthologies of ancient texts. Even in their broken form, however, these lines’ basic content can be discerned.⁷⁴ In lines 38–40, Marduk makes the night and day and sets it up so that there is an equal number of hours of light and hours of darkness throughout the course of the year.⁷⁵ In line 46, he fixes the watches of night and day. All of these creative

⁷⁴ See Foster, *Before the Muses*, 464; W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (MC 8; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 117–18.

⁷⁵ For this interpretation, see Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, 117.

activities clearly have to do with organizing time.

Lines 47–52 are more readable, though a few breaks still hamper our understanding.⁷⁶ These lines deal with the creation of the clouds, wind, rain, and fog and with Marduk’s appointing himself to control them. In short, it is here that the functions relating to the weather are created.

Finally, in lines 53–58, the waters of Tiamat are harnessed in order to provide the basis of agriculture. The piling up of dirt, releasing the Tigris and Euphrates, and digging holes to manage the catchwater are included.

What follows is the establishment of the three realms of ancient cosmic geography (lines 59–68) and then the transition into the enthronement of Marduk and the building of his temple and the city of Babylon—the grand climax. It is no surprise that a creation text should ultimately be about the god who controls the cosmos and the origin of his temple. We will see below that cosmic origins and temple origins are intricately intertwined.

In an older Sumerian debate text, *The Debate between Winter and Summer*, Enlil is involved in creation in these same three functional areas as Marduk in *Enuma Elish* (Marduk: basis for time, weather, agriculture; Enlil: day and night [time]; fertility [basis for agriculture]; sluices of heaven [basis for weather]):

An lifted his head in pride and brought forth a good day. He laid plans for ... and spread the population wide. Enlil set his foot upon the earth like a great bull. Enlil, the king of all lands, set his mind to increasing

⁷⁶ The break at the end of line 48 is particularly annoying, because the object is lost in the break: ‘Marduk created (*banu*)...’.

the good day of abundance, to making the ... night resplendent in celebration, to making flax grow, to making barley proliferate, to guaranteeing the spring floods at the quay, to making ... lengthen (?) their days in abundance, to making Summer close the sluices of heaven, and to making Winter guarantee plentiful water at the quay.⁷⁷

In Mesopotamian sources, as in Egypt, when the texts report on the components of the cosmos, the building blocks overwhelmingly involve functional aspects of these components rather than treating them primarily as material objects. Even when material objects are mentioned, it is their functions, not the structures or substance of these material objects that are the focus of attention. Causation, likewise, was not thought of as involving material natural processes; instead, causation is always the prerogative of deity.

Summary and Conclusions regarding Ontology

We have seen in the above sections that the precosmic world was understood not as a world absent of matter but as a world absent of function, order, diversity, and identity. The before-and-after pictures, with the acts of creation serving as a transition between them, focus on the origins of function and order. The verbs that are used operate in the same semantic realm. Cosmos and culture are related, and their components are listed as functions rather than as objects. Causation is entirely in the realm of the gods and is characterized by a teleological perspective that transcends and virtually ignores the material, physical, natural

⁷⁷ <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk> 5.3.3, lines 1–11.

world. Reality and existence in the cognitive environment of ancient peoples can be understood as predominantly comprising function and order, not matter and objects.⁷⁸ The acts of creation involved naming, separating, and temple building. ✎ This coincides with what Eliade observed concerning the perspective prevalent in the ancient world: the “ontological thirst” of the ancients was the pursuit of a view of reality that could give meaning to life.⁷⁹ Modern material ontology offers no secure understanding of the meaning of life, but the functional ontology of ancient Near Eastern peoples gave meaning to the reality that they experienced in the way the world worked.

In the ancient cognitive environment, it was more important to

⁷⁸ H. Renckens was already anticipating this direction in *Israel’s Concept of the Beginning* ([New York: Herder and Herder, 1964], 82–85), when he noted that Israel never considered the question of creation to concern the origin of matter. He notes that “it must be remembered that our generally accepted definition of creation as ‘to bring forth something out of nothing’ presupposes a concept of being and of nonbeing which is simply not that of the Bible, or at any rate is there only as part of a much broader and more concrete way of looking at things” (p. 85). The interest in order rather than matter was also observed by R. Coote and D. Ord, *In the Beginning: Creation and the Priestly History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 4.

⁷⁹ M. Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper, 1954). Of course, as important as Eliade’s work was, philosophy and anthropology have developed further. We need not retain Eliade’s assessment that this represents a mythical view of reality; it is simply a functional view of reality.

determine who controlled functions than who or what gave something its physical form. We could therefore conclude that *in the ancient world something was created when it was given a function*. Allen captures this common ancient perspective when he summarizes Egyptian thinking by observing that “the Egyptian explanations are more *metaphysical* than physical.”⁸⁰ Similarly, Assmann emphasizes the element of time as more determinative of ancient ontology than space or substance.

Our consideration of the Egyptian concept of “cosmos as drama” has already made it clear that the Egyptians did not conceive of reality as primarily spatial and material, but as temporal and performative, as a living process that was represented most impressively in the course of the sun. Cosmological thought and concepts centered on the sun’s course were thus expressed principally in temporal terms. The Egyptians had no concept of “space” in the sense of a primary category of cosmic totality, but rather one of “time.”⁸¹

The idea that the ancients did not have a material ontology of course does not mean that they had no interest in or awareness of the physical world around them. That is, it is not as if they had a mystical view of the world rather than paying attention to the real world they experienced every day. The point is, however, that to them the “real” world was a world of divine presence and activity. Their cosmological ontology reflects that it is the *functioning* of

⁸⁰ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 56. See also V. A. Tobin, “Myths: Creation Myths,” *OEA* 2:469.

⁸¹ J. Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 74.

that ordered, real world that is of importance, not its physical makeup or the physical origins of the material objects. The “hardware” is incidental; it is the “software” that counts. This is reflected in V. Tobin’s summary statement about ancient Egypt, which is just as true of the rest of the ancient world.

When the Egyptians contemplated the created universe through their myths and rituals, they would have been aware that the world around them was not simply a collection of material things. The universe was for them an awesome system of living divine beings. The earth, the sky, and the Nile were all entities that had a distinct life-force and personality and drew their life from the original creative power, no matter what name that power may have borne. These living beings were arranged and ordered in a definite system, purposely conceived as in the Memphite tradition, and naturally produced through the process of regeneration as was stressed by the Heliopolitan system. Egyptian creation myth emphasized the fact that there was order and continuity in all things and thus gave the optimistic assurance that the natural, social, and political order would remain stable and secure.⁸²

In a material ontology, the world is full of objects. To us moderns, a cow or a tree can be nothing more than an object to be exploited for its material value (milk and meat in the case of the cow, wood or maybe shade or even beauty in the case of the tree). But in some cultures, where cows or trees have religious significance, they do not serve as objects that function only in terms of their material components or offer only material for exploitation. Although giving milk or shade are functions, the cow and tree are considered to have sacred functions that at times preclude the exploitation of

⁸² Tobin, “Myths: Creation Myths,” 471.

their material functions. They have been personified (imbued with the divine) or at least sacralized. The personification or sacralization of material things was common in the ancient Near East. Israel's theology moved away from the sacralization of the surrounding world. Isaiah the prophet argues that the wood used to make an idol is nothing more than wood and cannot attain the sacralized status that was attributed to the wood through the image-making process. But though the world around them was desacralized by Israel, this does not mean that the material of the world was objectified. The function performed by anything in the world is a result of its having been assigned this function by deity. The physical properties of the thing are designed to facilitate this function rather than to determine it.⁸³ Israel's movement toward desacralization may have been the first step toward a material ontology, but the functional perspective continued to dominate its understanding of the world.

In our modern, material ontology, we are inclined to think of the cosmos as a machine—often with no one running it (that is, the modern perspective is dysteleological). When we moderns think about the ancient world (including the Bible), it is most natural for us to imagine that ancient peoples simply thought of the world as a machine with Someone running it, rather than seeing that they did not in any respect conceive of the world as a

⁸³ When a child uses a colander as a knight's helmet, the function is what she says it is or imagines it to be. The physical features are a convenience that facilitates this function, but the child has no idea what a colander is, nor does he objectify it as a colander.

machine.⁸⁴ In the ancient functional ontology, the cosmos is more like a business.⁸⁵ In this metaphor, it is clear that a business only functions in relationship to people, both the company's employees and its customers.

Thus, I must observe that, in like manner, the functions of the cosmos and culture are all in relation to people (and at times in relation to the gods, insofar as they share the world with people). R. Clifford draws a similar conclusion when he observes that ancient cosmology accounts are interested in the emergence of a particular society rather than in the emergence of the physical cosmos.⁸⁶ As a result, they show how the world became an adequate place in which people could live: "And God saw that it was good."

Cosmic Governing Principles

Mesopotamia: Sumerian ME and Decreeing Destinies

⁸⁴ Note this statement by F. Wiggermann: "If nature is defined as a machine lacking free will, there is no nature in Mesopotamian thought," in "[Mythological Foundations of Nature](#)," in *Natural Phenomena: Their Meaning, Depiction and Description in the Ancient Near East* (ed. D. J. W. Meijer; Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1992), 279.

⁸⁵ J. Stek, "[What Says the Scripture](#)," in *Portraits of Creation* (ed. H. J. van Till; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 203-65; on p. 255, he draws a contrast between machine and kingdom.

⁸⁶ R. Clifford, "[The Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation](#)," *JTS* 46 (1985): 507-23.

As shown in the previous chapter, in a modern material ontology, the building blocks of the cosmos are material objects (atoms, molecules, cells, etc.), whereas in the ancient functional ontology, the building blocks are functional processes. The next aspect of the ancient Near Eastern cognitive environment that warrants investigation is what the ancients considered to be the foundational realities of the cosmos: the impersonal cosmic principles that make the cosmos what it is, which the Sumerians designate by the word *ME*. We will explore the origin of these realities and their administration as well as the relationship of deities to these realities. These have already been introduced above as building blocks in the functional ontology of the ancient world, identified by the Sumerian term *ME*, to which we now turn our attention.

The most important reflection of the fundamentally functional emphasis in the thinking of ancient peoples about their world is embodied in the conceptual spectrum framed by the terms *paršu*, *uṣurtu*, and *šimtu* in Akkadian and *ME*, *GIŠHUR*, and *NAMTAR* in Sumerian. The semantic notions expressed by these terms are at the heart of the functional cosmos and play a major role in the establishment and operation of both the cosmos and the temple, as well as, of course, human society.

There continues to be considerable debate regarding the best definition and translation of the Akkadian and Sumerian terms. The confusion was present early on, because most modern scholars have concluded that the Akkadian translation for *ME*, *paršu*, itself was a misunderstanding.⁸⁷ Some of the translations suggest-

⁸⁷ See for example Glassner's assertion that "Akkadian had no equivalent

ed for ME include ‘functions’, ‘decrees’, ‘ordinances’, ‘prescriptions’, ‘rules’, ‘attributes’, ‘divine powers’, ‘arts of civilization’, and ‘cultural norms’, just to name a few. It becomes even more complicated when *šimtu* enters the picture. The description provided by van Binsbergen and Wiggermann suffices as a starting point for our discussion:

While NAMTAR (*šimtu*) connotes the governmental decisions made by Enlil, ME (*paršu*) evokes an impersonal and timeless order, the nonvolitional state of equilibrium to which the universe and its constituent parts are subjected. The ME are at home in the old religious center of Eridu and guarded by its god Enki/Ea. The ME are not created, but they are simply there as part of the universe; they are the rules of tradition, the unchanging ways in which the world of man and things is supposed to be organized; they can be disused or forgotten, but never destroyed. Together they constitute natural law, a guideline for behavior untainted by human or divine interference.⁸⁸

for the Sumerian ME” in “The Use of Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *CANE* 3.1820. “In its most common Akkadian use, *paršu* refers to a cultic ritual or ceremony” and “is strongly associated with verbs of cultic performance, specifically dealing with ritual or ceremony.” Joshua Walton, unpublished study of *paršu*, Harvard University, 2010. In a small number of cases, *paršu* is used simply as the Akkadian translation of ME, as is the case in *Enuma Elish* and *Anzu*.

⁸⁸ W. van Binsbergen, and F. Wiggermann, “[Magic in History: A Theoretical Perspective, and Its Application to Ancient Mesopotamia](#),” in *Mesopotamian Magic* (ed. T. Abusch and K. van der Toorn; Groningen: Styx, 1999), 21. As an aside, I am inclined to see some similarity between the control attributes in Akkadian and the concept of *tradition* in *Fiddler*

A. Livingstone suggests that ME “denotes an abstract concept, ‘archetype,’” an understanding that he derives from B. Alster.⁸⁹ Alster includes four items in the range of ME:⁹⁰

- archetype or cultural norm
- visible manifestation of said archetype
- process relating to the actualisation of the archetype
- anything that symbolizes the capability of actualizing the archetype

H. Vanstiphout prefers ‘first principles’ or ‘quintessences’ and offers the following definition:

The MEs are the eternal and unchangeable first principles, or quintessences, of everything that exists. They are also the blueprints for everything that exists, in that they prescribe how it should exist.”⁹¹

on the Roof (van Binsbergen and Wiggermann even translate ME ‘tradition’ in “Magic in History,” p. 20). In the village of Anatevka, the precarious stability and order is maintained only by the traditions that govern the lives of the people and the roles that they take as a result. Any disruption of roles and traditions threatens to bring upheaval and chaos. In modern parlance, we might use the term *fabric* as a metaphor, apply it to “the fabric of life,” “the fabric of civilization,” or “the fabric of the cosmos.”

⁸⁹ A. Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 58.

⁹⁰ B. Alster, “On the Interpretation of ‘Inanna and Enki,’” *ZA* 64 (1975): 33–34 n. 33.

⁹¹ H. Vanstiphout, “Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus, Or How and Why Did the Sumerians Create Their Gods?” in *What Is a God?* (ed. B. N. Porter;

In his analysis, the ME defines the gods, not the other way around; it is the god who is contingent, not the ME. He concludes that ME refers to the “abstract but no less real quintessence of all things, procedures, action, interrelations.... Without its ME, nothing can exist. And the point of any kind of existing ‘thing’ is to conform as closely as possible to its ideal, if unreachable, form, which is its ME.”⁹² In an attempt to synthesize these ideas, I have occasionally used the rendering ‘archetypal quintessence’ for the Sumerian ME; however, recognizing that the expression, as all the others, remains as cumbersome as it is arguable, I have usually just reverted to using the Sumerian term.

The third pair of terms, GIŠHUR/*uṣurtu*, has been the subject of less controversy but also plays an important role. It is often translated ‘design’ or ‘plans’ (such as, for instance, architectural plans), referring to the actions that flow out of the MEs and produce the decrees. Perhaps the best way to understand these terms and their usage in ancient literature is to incorporate them into an extended metaphor. Y. Rosengarten attempts precisely this by suggesting that MEs should be understood in relation to “prescriptions” governing the cosmos.⁹³ The MEs themselves are like the descriptions of medications in a pharmaceutical dictionary. The gods are the doctors who prescribe the medications. The kings are the pharmacists who distribute the medications, and the rites then would be the instructions for use and dosage of the medication. Rosen-

TCBAI 2; Winona Lake: IN, Eisenbrauns, 2009), 15-40, quotation on p. 35.

⁹² Vanstiphout, “Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus,” 34.

⁹³ Y. Rosengarten, *Sumer et le Sacré* (Paris: Boccard, 1977), 5.

garten's suggestion is useful, but I also offer a complementary metaphor (briefly suggested in the last section), which is to compare the cosmos with a business entity.⁹⁴

In this metaphor, the ME would be the business or the industry and perhaps its expression in a mission statement. Execution and application of the ME would indicate levels of control in the business. The GIŠHUR would be the articles of incorporation and the business's vision statement. The NAM would be the job descriptions, and the Tablet of Destinies would be equivalent to the corporate organizational chart. The main gods (Anu, Enlil, Enki) would be the officers of the company or the board of directors, and the lesser gods would have the role of vice-presidents. Kings would be something like department supervisors and priests similar to managers and, in some senses, like union bosses. Temples and cities would be roughly equivalent to the departments of the company or, perhaps, franchises, and people would be the employees, whose rituals are akin to punching the clock and putting in their time to help the company run; their only lot in life is to work their fingers to the bone until they are fired or reach retirement, having given their blood, sweat, and tears in service to the company and its officers, with little to show for their efforts. If we apply this metaphor to *Enuma Elish*, the theogony with which the text opens pertains to the founding (birth) of the company. The account begins when there were no company, no employees, and

⁹⁴ L. Handy also uses a company paradigm to discuss the roles of various gods within the divine hierarchy in the pantheon at Ugarit; see *Among the Host of Heaven* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994).

no jobs. The organizational work of Marduk later in the text represents the incorporation of the company under his management. As we examine each of these pairs of terms in the literature, we will be able to connect them with this metaphor at the various levels on which they function.

Egypt: Tefnut, Shu, and Maat

In Egypt, the governing principles are not as prominent in the literature as in Mesopotamia but are to some extent mirrored in the paradox of *Eternal Sameness* and *Eternal Recurrence*. The former, represented as ‘Order’ (*ma’at*, connected with Tefnut) is reflected in the unchanging, static aspects of the cosmos (such as, for example, sky above the earth, flow of the Nile, day following night). The latter is represented as ‘Life’ (connected with Shu) and is reflected in the rising and setting of the sun, the flooding and receding of the Nile, birth and death, and so on.¹⁴⁵ As in Mesopotamia, the operational oppositional pair is static versus dynamic. The static eternal sameness of order is similar to the MES in Mesopotamia. The dynamic eternal recurrence overlaps in part with the decreeing of destinies. Nonetheless, there are significant differences that need to be noted. In Egypt, these aspects of the cosmos came into being at the initiation of Atum. Tefnut, as a deity, does not exist outside of and separate from the gods in the way that the MES do in Mesopotamian. Shu, likewise a deity, is not a principle pursued or administered by the gods. These deities are aspects of creation but not governing principles. The nature of the dichotomy (static versus dynamic) shared with Mesopotamian civilization is more important than the diverse forms that it takes in the two regions.

If we examine the Egyptian cognitive environment for governing principles, the most likely candidate is Maat. But Maat is more

¹⁴⁵ CT 80; Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 25–26; see also CT 1130 and comment by Assmann, *Search for God*, 178.

the *goal* of the rule of gods and kings than the mechanism by which rule and function are established. Maat, as order, stands in contrast to Isfet, disorder, and either one can displace the other. Though all of these Egyptian concepts differ significantly from their putative Mesopotamian counterparts, all of the terms from both locations nevertheless convey the centrality of the concept of order and function within the cognitive environment of the ancient Near East against the background of a cosmos balanced between the static and the dynamic.

Several texts deal more specifically with gods' being assigned functions. For example, in a text found on the Tutankhamun shrine and in several 19th-Dynasty tombs, Re assigns functions to Thoth. The named functions include his role among the gods (he is a scribe), as well as his cosmological functions. He is therefore designated Re's "place-taker" during the night hours, when Re is passing through the netherworld; and, furthermore, this explains "how the moon of Thoth came into being."¹⁴⁶ Thus, in Egypt as well, it is clear that "coming into being" occurs when a function is assigned.

Conclusion

In the cognitive environment of the ancient world, the cosmos was governed by the gods as they served as administrators of the MEs, delegating them throughout the cosmos by decreeing des-

¹⁴⁶ [ANET, 8](#), "The Assignment of Functions to Thoth." See also Atum's assignment of role to Osiris in chap. 175 of the Book of the Dead (Papyrus of Ani).

tinies. The MES were not created by the gods but came into existence along with the cosmos and the gods themselves. These governing principles define existence, because they determine how the world functions. Creation is characterized by these MES' coming into existence, being organized and delegated, and being exercised. If the governing principles pertain to the functional cosmos, and the governing principles define existence and creation, this confirms that ontology and cosmology in the ancient cognitive environment were fundamentally functional in nature.

Roles and Positions of the Players

Divine Place in the Cosmos

In the cognitive environment of the ancient Mesopotamian world (with echoes in Egypt), it could be said that deities were inside the cosmos, not outside it.¹⁴⁷ This statement is arguably more defensible on the basis of the Mesopotamian evidence than the Egyptian, though in Egypt the most notable potential exception occurs only at the very beginning of the “creation” process in the person of the primal deity who “became millions.” This deity,

¹⁴⁷ I am not addressing here, nor am I interested in addressing the once-popular “myth-versus-history” discussion that was prominent in the writings of Y. Kaufmann and B. Anderson, to name two authors. See the summary and critique of that approach in Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 82–88. See also P. Machinist, “[The Question of Distinctiveness in Ancient Israel: An Essay](#),” in *Ah, Assyria!* (ed. M. Cogan and I. Eph'al; *ScrHier* 33; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991), 196–212 (especially p. 200).

however, as noted by Hornung, can only be encountered through the “millions” that he became, and all of this process of becoming occurs inside rather than outside the cosmos.

For the Egyptians, the fact that their gods exist means that they are subject to the limitations and diversity that characterize all existence. The undifferentiated one of the beginning differentiated himself through his work of creation, he “made himself into millions”; mankind can experience him only in the multiplicity of the created, mortal, and changing gods.¹⁴⁸

If we accept the conclusion that the ontology of the ancient world was functional, it is logical also to conclude that the extent to which deities were made manifest in the components of the cosmos was the extent to which their existence was tied to these components. Their role was to maintain the functioning cosmos, and this role gave them life and defined their existence.

In Egyptian religion the will of the gods was bound up with the maintenance of the cosmic process. The lot of the gods was to forever play their part in the daily drama of the cosmic process. The ritual reenactment of this process was designed not only to adapt the order of the human world to the order of the cosmos but also, and indeed primarily, to keep the cosmic process itself in good working order.¹⁴⁹

This intrinsic correlation between deity and the cosmos is what leads inevitably to the close connection between cosmogony and theogony.

The cosmic dimension of the divine was not confined to the sheer mate-

¹⁴⁸ Hornung, *Conceptions*, 185.

¹⁴⁹ Assmann, *Mind of Egypt*, 205.

riality of cosmic elements such as earth, air, water, and so forth, or to celestial bodies such as the sun and the moon, but rather that it referred to specific complexes of actions, traits, attitudes, and qualities that were interpreted as cosmic phenomena “in action” and in which humankind also participated. Nut was not so much the sky as what the sky did.¹⁵⁰

J. Assmann has used the term “cosmotheism” to describe polytheistic religions that “worship the cosmos as the collective manifestation of various different deities.”¹⁵¹ He explains:

Gods had names, genealogies, and a mythically revealed spectrum of roles; they had a “portfolio,” a sphere of cosmic, vegetative, or cultural competencies; and finally they had cult locations from which they exercised their earthly rule.¹⁵²

We thus see the interplay between cosmic roles and political roles. Even in the initial Ennead of the Heliopolitan cosmological tradition, the integration of the cosmological with the political can be seen:¹⁵³ both constitute representations of how the cosmos is ordered on the inside.

Table 3.1. Hierarchy of the *paršu* (me) / *šimtu* (nam) complex
Each level links to the level above and below it.

¹⁵⁰ Assmann, *Search for God*, 81.

¹⁵¹ Assmann, *Mind of Egypt*, 204.

¹⁵² Assmann, *Mind of Egypt*, 205.

¹⁵³ Tobin, “Myths: Creation Myths,” *OEA* 2:469. This is in contrast to the Hermopolitan Ogdoad, which represents pairs of contrasting principles, but in agreement with the *Memphite Theology* in which Ptah, as creator of all things, combines the cosmological and the political in his creative work.

Level	Primary Texts	Comments
cosmic	<i>Enuma Elish</i> V (paths of stars; moon; precipitation; water sources; all described as <i>parṣu</i> in <i>Ee</i> V 67, parallel to <i>uṣurtu</i>) ^{3a} <i>KAR</i> 4 (<i>uṣurtu</i>)	<i>Ee</i> V 39–46 (time) <i>Ee</i> V 47–52 (weather) <i>Ee</i> V 53–58 (agriculture)
gods' attributes/offices (associated with cultural norms)	<i>Tale of Anzu</i> (Tablet of Destinies) <i>Enuma Elish</i> I, III (Tablet of Destinies) <i>Ee</i> VI 96 (Marduk's destiny) <i>Enki and World Order</i> <i>Inanna and Enki</i>	ME controls <i>šimtu</i> ? <i>Ee</i> VII 141; <i>Anzu</i> I 73–75 94 items, connected with Inanna's attributes and the cultural norms she controls, extended to city
temple/city	Gudea A ix 12 ME possessed by temple Gudea B vi 15 Gudea B vi 7–10 Gudea B xiii 6 <i>Enki and World Order</i> (shrine of Ur)	Declared at dedication <i>šimtu</i> throne in the temple Ningirsu designates roles of functionaries as result of his ME Suen made its me surpassing Extended to city
king	Akitu Sennacherib and the	

	Tablet of Destinies Substitute King Texts	
mankind	<i>Enki and Ninmah</i> Connected to death (<i>šimat amelutim</i>)	Namtar: find a function in society for ^b
individuals	<i>šuilla</i> prayers ^c	Results learned through divination, ^d avoided through <i>namburbi</i>
inanimate objects	Hymn to Shamash ^e	House ^f
rituals	E.g., Hammurabi Prologue ii.64	

Nearly everything that has been observed above regarding Egypt is also true of Sumerian texts from Mesopotamia. The cosmic deities do not govern the cosmos from an independent existence outside the cosmos. The cosmos functions as a result of the gods' being who they are. The daily function of the cosmos is the story of the lives of the cosmic deities. They are not only manifest in the components of the cosmos; the cosmos is their very identity. Though mythology developed personalities for these deities in narrative contexts, the foundation of these personalities is grounded in their cosmic identity. Running the cosmos is not something they do; it is a result of who and what they are. It is from this cosmic identity that their portfolio of competencies is derived. Cosmic deities are those who are associated with the stat-

ic aspects of the cosmos. Some deities, such as Enki, have a role both in the static and the dynamic aspects of the cosmos, but the relationship between the cosmos and the cosmic deities is inextricably intertwined.

A change can be observed, however, in the second millennium, when a new reigning paradigm emerged in the literature represented particularly by *Enuma Elish* in Mesopotamia and also, to a lesser degree, in New Kingdom Egypt and in Ugaritic literature. In this new paradigm, instead of ruling deities who are cosmic deities having primordial status, the ruling deities are given a rank higher than the cosmic deities. Consequently, the cosmos as well as the primordial cosmic deities are supervised by a ruling deity who is the arbitrator of roles and who resolves conflict. L. Handy has explored this ruling function in the mythology of Syria-Palestine and observes that the role of El involves running the cosmos by serving as the supervisor of the gods whose individual portfolios identified them with components of the cosmos.

Keeping proper order among the deities appears to have been a major task for El. In this duty El was the organizer of the cosmos; it was his job to see that the universe functioned properly and that all of the deities properly filled their positions in the divine scheme. El did not do the work of running the universe but made certain that those who were supposed to do the work, both human and divine, functioned correctly.¹⁵⁴

Handy proceeds to label “active deities” those who actually do the business of running the cosmos.

¹⁵⁴ Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven*, 87.

Serving under the authority of those who actually owned the universe, the active gods were expected to perform in a way that would enable the cosmos to operate smoothly. Each of the gods at this level of the pantheon had a specific sphere of authority over which to exert his or her control.¹⁵⁵

Recognition that there are competing paradigms for describing the way that the cosmos and the gods function (cosmogonic/theogonic model versus the political/bureaucratic model) draws our attention back to *Enuma Elish*. In this myth, we may actually be able to see the paradigm shift. The older Near Eastern view of the cosmos run by the primordial cosmic deities (cosmogonic/theogonic model) is represented briefly in the theogony of tablet I, though the text does not pause to develop the resulting cosmology that we know well from Sumerian texts. However, Marduk's ascension reflects the new paradigm (the political/bureaucratic model) in which a noncosmic deity¹⁵⁶ is elevated to a ruling position over the cosmic deities as arbitrator and supervisor of cosmic functions (as Handy observed at Ugarit).¹⁵⁷ In *Enuma Elish*, this shift occurs after theogony—the foundation of the reigning paradigm—has resulted in theomachy.¹⁵⁸ Resolving

¹⁵⁵ Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven*, 97.

¹⁵⁶ In his ascension, he is given cosmic powers; compare his 47th name, ADDU, identifying him as a storm-god.

¹⁵⁷ Of course, in the case of El, the Ugaritic literature does not portray him as elevated to this position; instead, he always already has it in the literature that is extant.

¹⁵⁸ The texts from Ugarit certainly feature theomachy prominently, but

the conflict in the theomachy is what elevates the noncosmic ruling deity and necessitates his role. In this sense, theomachy can be seen as the mythological mechanism of the paradigm shift.¹⁵⁹ Theomachy only appears to take its place as a narrative element in cosmogony when the paradigm is shifting away from a cosmogonic/theogonic model of cosmic operations to a political/bureaucratic model (to be discussed in detail in the next section, pp. 68–74). Consequently, deities such as Marduk are associated nearly exclusively with the dynamic aspects of the cosmos, which is usually understood in relation to ruling functions.

A similar paradigm shift can be seen in the Egyptian *Memphite Theology*, which recounts the transference of rule to Ptah, a god who is originally neither cosmic nor primordial,¹⁶⁰ a transfer that

because the texts preserve very little that could be called cosmogony, an earlier paradigm (or the lack of one) cannot be posited, nor can theogony and cosmogony be linked in the literature left to us in this language.

¹⁵⁹ In this regard, it is interesting to notice that there is barely a hint of *Chaoskampf* or theomachy in Sumerian and Egyptian sources. In Egypt, Amun/Re does daily battle with Apophis, who represents the forces of disorder (see, e.g., CT 160; COS 1.21), but this is only a personification of disorder, not a case of divine entities taking sides and engaging in warfare that needs to be resolved by action of the pantheon.

¹⁶⁰ Ptah is given a primordial role in the *Memphite Theology* and a cosmic role by being identified with Ta-tenen, who represents the primeval hillock. These developments appear to have taken place in the New Kingdom period. For a thorough summary of Ptah and his role, see the entry by J. van Dijk in *OEAE* 3:74–76. A similar role for Ptah is found in the Ber-

parallels the conferring of rulership on Marduk in *Enuma Elish*. However, instead of theomachy being the mechanism that triggers the paradigm shift, the *Memphite Theology* simply puts Ptah at the beginning of the theogonic process. In this case, then, the cosmogonic/theogonic model is not replaced by another (political/bureaucratic) model; instead, the deity in the theogonic model is replaced, because Ptah is portrayed as the one who made Atum and the Ennead. His rule over the cosmos is demonstrated as early as the Coffin Texts:

I am the one who makes vegetation grow,
 who makes green the banks of the Nile Valley,
 lord of the highlands, who makes green the wadis;
he who is over the Nubians, Asiatics, and Libyans,
 for the Nine Bows have been gathered for me,
 and totality has been given to me by the Sun, Lord to the Limit.
I am South of His Wall, sovereign of the gods.
I am King of the sky,
 Distributor of *kas*, who officiates over the Two Lands;
 Distributor of *kas*, who gives *bas*, manifestations, *kas* and beginnings.
I am Distributor of *kas*, and they live according to my action:
 when I wish, I make it possible for them to live,
there being none of them who can speak to me
 except for the one who made that unique identity of mine,
because I am Annunciation in his mouth
 and Perception in his belly.¹⁶¹

Allen notes that, in this earliest portrayal of Ptah's ascension into a new role, the author "apparently perceived Ptah's function as the

lin Hymn to Ptah from the 22nd Dynasty (Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 39–40).

¹⁶¹ CT 647; see Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 39.

exact cosmic counterpart to Egyptian kingship,”¹⁶² much like the role played by Marduk in *Enuma Elish*. Despite the many differences that exist between the roles of Ptah and Marduk and the complexities of each of their profiles and history, it is nonetheless clear that both are participants in a paradigm shift in which rule of the cosmos is transferred to a deity who previously had not been involved in a cosmogonic/theogonic system, having been neither primordial nor cosmic.

In the revised cognitive environment that results from this paradigm shift, the cosmos has a Divine Creator-King. Nonetheless, even without having been inserted into a cosmogonic/theogonic model, the newly empowered Marduk is still clearly inside rather than outside the cosmos. This is evident from some of the names (and their accompanying explanations) that Marduk is given in tablet VII of *Enuma Elish*.

VII 6: Who implements the decrees of Anu, Enlil, Ea

VII 11: devises a spell (is not the creator of magic)

VII 70-77: Did not create Tiamat, but defeats her and manipulates her corpse to set up functions

VII 106: Took charge of all commands

Even though he is designated the one who “created the firmament and fashioned the netherworld” (VII 134-35), Marduk is inside the cosmos and remains subject to the MES. He has been elevated to an executive position but is still part of the corporate system.

The roles of the gods may be summarized as follows:

- They are identified with components of the cosmos in cos-

¹⁶² Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 41.

mogonic/theogonic models

- They fill an executive role in the “company” in the political/bureaucratic model
- They exercise operational jurisdiction (through the destinies they decree)

These roles and models all concern functions, not material origins, and the functions all operate from within the system rather than acting on it from outside. The authority and jurisdiction of any god is circumscribed by his or her relationship to the components of the cosmos or to other deities.

Theomachy

In the cognitive environment of the ancient Near East, the gods become involved in conflict¹⁶³ under a variety of circumstances and at various levels: (1) they fight among themselves on an individual or corporate level, (2) they battle with entities or nonentities that represent a threat of some kind, and (3) they enter into conflict with humans. I refer to all three of these potential scenarios by the term *theomachy*. The nature of the gods’ adversary and determining what is at stake in the conflict must be considered, however, before we can decide what role theomachy plays in the cognitive environment and what relationship it might have to

¹⁶³ Parts of this discussion were included verbatim in a journal article while this book was awaiting publication; see my “Creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3 and the Ancient Near East: Order out of Disorder after *Chaoskampf*,” *CTJ* 43 (2008): 48–63.

cosmogony in any specific culture or text. In the past, much confusion has resulted from the too-facile application of a term such as *Chaoskampf* to a wide variety of conflicts, as well as the frequent underlying assumption that theomachy, *Chaoskampf*, and cosmogony are all to be linked as a matter of course (i.e., if one was present, the others also were present).¹⁶⁴ In this book, I use *Chaoskampf* only to refer to macrocosmic disorder.¹⁶⁵

At the beginning, then, it is helpful to lay out a more carefully nuanced classification of the categories of theomachy.

Categories of Theomachy

- class revolt and dissatisfaction with assigned roles among the divine proletariat
- order versus disorder in the macrocosmos (*Chaoskampf*), tak-

¹⁶⁴ The connection was introduced by Gunkel and has been affirmed by others who have been inclined to infer the presence of cosmogony when a *Chaoskampf* motif has been identified; cf. J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); L. R. Fisher, "Creation at Ugarit and in the Old Testament," *VT* 15 (1965): 313–24; R. Clifford, "Cosmogonies in the Ugaritic Texts and in the Bible," *Or* 53 (1984): 183–201.

¹⁶⁵ I use *macrocosmic* as a subcategory that refers to what we might call the "natural" world. I resist using the term *natural world* because it reflects a concept entirely foreign to the ancient cosmic environment. The term *macrocosmic* distinguishes between the operation of the elements included in cosmic geography and elements that are associated with human society (which the ancients would have considered to be cosmic as well).

ing at least three different forms:

initial establishment of order

response to a one-time threat from a chaos monster

renewal of order on a seasonal or daily basis

- a struggle for rule among the gods involving competing claimants
- a generational coup, with “younger” gods’ seizing the rule from “older” deities

Class revolt among the divine proletariat who are dissatisfied with their roles. Theomachy of this kind occurs only in Mesopotamia in the ancient Near East and is most familiar from the major Akkadian epics, *Atrahasis* and *Enuma Elish*. In Sumerian literature, it is much rarer, occurring only briefly in *Enki and Ninmah*, where the dissatisfaction takes the form of grumbling, and Enki responds before the tension comes to blows. In *Atrahasis*, the tension erupts into an actual insurrection among the gods, resulting in the death of the ringleader. In *Enuma Elish*, the adversary and the ringleader, Kingu, must be defeated, as well as the champion, Tiamat (and her hordes). In all three situations, the result is that humans are created in order to take over the work of the gods. Thus, *Enuma Elish* includes a new category of adversary, the cosmic creature, Tiamat, thereby expanding the theomachy to a macrocosmic level. In all three of these examples, the role of the gods is what is at stake. But in *Enuma Elish*, it is not simply the roles of the gods in relation to their workload that then is imposed on humanity; the question of who is in charge among the gods is at stake, and, thus, the central role of the Tablet of Destinies comes into question. The

class revolt element, however, has to do with the labor burden, while the Tablet of Destinies issue belongs to another category entirely. I therefore conclude that the class-revolt specie of theomachy does not of itself have anything to do with cosmogony, and the only chaos that is central to the plot is the chaos among the gods with regard to their social rank; thus, class revolt incidents do entail theomachy but should not be included in the *Chaoskampf* category.

Order versus disorder in the macrocosmos (Chaoskampf). In the ancient cognitive environment, disorder threatened on numerous fronts. The joint task of gods and humans was to contain and combat the inclination toward disorder or the incursion of it into the ordered world. Order was first established at some point in the past, but this by no means meant that the battle was over. Recurrent threats came both in the form of occasional attacks and in the seasonal and daily cycles of ordinary life. Although the legitimacy of applying the term *chaos* to these situations has been rightly contested, we can adopt it to describe this category of theomachy, with the important qualification that it pertains to elements representing macrocosmic disorder, whether they are personified or not. Having established this qualification, we can now discuss the three subcategories of *Chaoskampf*. And we note that all three subcategories have in common the feature that the adversary is macrocosmic disorder. It is this adversary that distinguishes *Chaoskampf* from the other categories.

One *Chaoskampf* subcategory comprises texts in which macrocosmic order is being initially established. The classic literary work in which this subcategory is found is *Enuma Elish*, but it

must be recognized that this is nearly the only piece of ancient literature having this feature.¹⁶⁶ The *Chaoskampf* subcategory is the second of three types of theomachy found in *Enuma Elish*. Here, Tiamat, the personified Sea, is the enemy, and cosmogony is the result of the conflict. The only other example I have been able to locate in ancient literature is in a single line in the (Egyptian) *Instruction of Merikare*: “He [Re] made sky and earth for their sake; he subdued the water monster.”¹⁶⁷ The common ground in this subcategory is that the adversary is the representative of the Sea, and macrocosmic order is established as a result of the conflict.

Having said this, however, we must identify a significant caveat. As Alan Millard has pointed out, in *Enuma Elish* the cosmogony that results from the *Chaoskampf* is not an initial cosmogony.¹⁶⁸ The first three tablets clearly testify to a world already in existence. The cosmogony is presented as a reorganization of

¹⁶⁶ D. Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction: A Reappraisal of the Chaoskampf Theory in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 190.

¹⁶⁷ *COS* 1.35, line 131. This example may also need to be discarded, however, if Lesko’s translation is preferred: ‘He repelled the greed of the waters’. See L. H. Lesko, “Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,” in *Religion in Ancient Egypt* (ed. B. E. Shafer; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 103. The alternate reading offered by Lesko reflects a suggestion originally made by Posener that the word translated ‘monster’ (*snk*, which occurs in all manuscripts of the work) is a metathesized form for *skn* (‘greed’). See J. Hoffmeier, “Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 and 2 and Egyptian Cosmology,” *JANES* 15 (1983): 39–49, especially p. 48 n. 90.

¹⁶⁸ Private communication.