CTJ 43 (2008): 48-63

Creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3 and the Ancient Near East:

Order out of Disorder after *Chaoskampf*

John H. Walton

Though Hermann Gunkel was not the first scholar to pay attention to the chaos and combat motif in the literature of the Ancient Near East, it was his book *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* in 1895 that offered the most detailed study of the motif and brought it into prominence by providing a paradigm for ancient creation narratives. In his view, the combat against chaos motif that was represented in Marduk's battle against Tiamat in the Babylonian Creation Epic known as *Enuma Elish* stood as the reigning model of creation in the ancient cognitive landscape. As such, he proposed that it provided a background for understanding some of the Psalms and prophetic passages where combat with forces of chaos (dragon or sea) is evident. From there, he projected it back into Genesis 1 where combat is not immediately evident.

Over a century has passed, and Gunkel's work has continued to stand as a seminal investigation, but as additional creation accounts have emerged from the ancient world, as well as additional examples of chaos combat, the motif has been regularly reevaluated. Some of this reevaluation has resulted in total rejection of the association of this motif with Genesis 1, as illustrated by D. Tsumura.

> The background of the Genesis creation story has nothing to do with the so-called *Chaoskampf* myth of the Mesopotamian type, as preserved in the Babylonian "creation" myth *Enuma Elish.* In Gen 1, there is no hint of struggle or battle between God and this *tehom*—water.[1]

But before we draw conclusions about the presence or absence of the motif in the Hebrew Bible, and whether to view it as prominent, refuted, historicized, assumed, or ridiculed, we should explore at least briefly how central it actually is in the Ancient Near Eastern cognitive environment. After all, it was relatively easy for Gunkel to contend that *Chaoskampf* was the major motif of Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts when there was really only

[1]D. Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 143.

one account to consider. In light of the current wealth of material available to us, it is best to see the *Chaoskampf* motif in the context of a larger motif that we will label "Theomachy"—divine conflict.

Theomachy[2]

In the cognitive environment of the Ancient Near East, the gods become involved in conflict under a variety of circumstances and at various levels: among themselves on an individual or corporate level, with entities or nonentities representing threat, or with humans. The nature of the adversary and the question concerning what is at stake in the conflict must be addressed, however, before decisions can be made about what role theomachy plays in the cognitive environment and what relationship it might have to cosmogony. In the past, this discussion has become confused by too facile an application of a term such as *Chaoskampf* to a wide variety of conflicts, and the underlying presupposition that theomachy, *Chaoskampf*, and cosmogony were all to be automatically linked (i.e., if one were present, the others could be assumed).[3] I will use *Chaoskampf* only to refer to conflict focused on attempts to contain macrocosmic disorder.[4]

We must begin then with a more carefully nuanced classification of the categories of Theomachy.

Categories of Theomachy:

1. dissatisfied class revolt among the divine proletariat concerning roles
2. order vs. disorder in the macrocosmos (*Chaoskampf*)
   a. initial establishment of order (cosmogony)
   b. one-time threat from chaos monster
   c. renewal on a seasonal or daily basis
3. struggle for rule among the gods between individual competing claimants
4. generational coup seizing rule among the gods

---

[2]The following section is an excerpt from Eisenbrauns book, forthcoming.

[3] The linkage was introduced by Gunkel and affirmed by others who have been inclined to infer cosmogony when a *Chaoskampf* motif was 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. For argument against this association, see for instance R. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: The Reassessment of the Theme of "Chaos" in the Hebrew Bible* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 20.

[4] I use *macrocosmic* as a subcategory referring to what we might call the *natural* world. I resist using *natural world* because it reflects a concept entirely foreign to the ancient cosmic environment. Macrocosmic would distinguish among the operation of the elements included in their cosmic geography as opposed to those elements associated with human society (which they would have considered cosmic as well).

Dissatisfied class revolt among the divine proletariat concerning roles. Theomachy at this level 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 it takes the form of grumbling and Enki responds before it comes to blows. In *trahasis* it goes to the next level with an actual insurrection among the gods resulting in the death of the ringleader. In *Enuma Elish,* the adversary must be defeated, including the ringleader, Kingu, and the champion, Tiamat (as well as her hordes). In all three of these, the result is the creation of humans to take over the work of the gods, and the role of the gods relative to labor is what is at stake. The class revolt category of theomachy does not of itself deal with cosmogony, and the only sort of chaos that is central to the plot is the chaos among the social ranks of the gods, so this should not be included in the *Chaoskampf* category.

Order vs. 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 that did not mean that the battle was over. Recurrent threats occurred both in the form of occasional attacks and in the seasonal and daily cycles. Though the legitimacy of applying the term *chaos* to these situations has been rightly contested, we can adopt it for the description of this category of theomachy with the important qualification that it pertains to elements representing macrocosmic disorder, whether they are personified or not. Given this qualification, we can now discuss the three subcategories of *Chaoskampf.* All three of these subcategories have in common the feature that the adversary represents macrocosmic disorder. This type of adversary is what distinguishes the *Chaoskampf* category from the others.

The first *Chaoskampf* subcategory is comprised of those texts in which macrocosmic order is being initially established (cosmogony). The classic piece of literature is *Enuma Elish,* but it must be recognized that this is nearly the only piece of ancient literature with this feature.[5] This category represents the second of three types of theomachy represented in *Enuma Elish.* Here Tiamat, the personified Sea, is the enemy, and cosmogony results. The only other example I have been able to locate in ancient literature was in the single line in the Egyptian Instruction of Merikare: "He [Re] made sky and earth for their sake; he subdued the water monster."[6] The common

[5] Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction,* 190.

[6] COS-1.35, line 131. This may also have to be discarded, however, if Lesko's translation has reason to be 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, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 103. The alternate reading offered by Lesko reflects the suggestion originally made by Posener that the word translated "monster" (*snk,* which occurs in all manuscripts of the work) is a metathesis for *skn* ("greed"). See J. Hoffmeier, "Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 and 2 and Egyptian Cosmology," *JANES* 15 (1983): 29-39n90.

ground in this category is that the adversary is the representative of the Sea and macrocosmic order is established.

The difference in the second subcategory is that here an adversary arises who threatens an already established order among the gods and therefore at least indirectly in the macrocosmos.[7] Examples include a couple of little known Akkadian tales (Nergal/Labbu;[8] Tishpak/Lion-Serpent[9]) as well as the more famous Akkadian tale of Ninurta and Anzu.[10] Even though cosmic order is threatened by the beasts who serve as adversaries, the eventual victory over them does not result in cosmogony, thus *Chaoskampf* without cosmogony.[11]

In the third subcategory, the adversary threatens in regular cycles, usually associated with seasonal fertility, or in the daily appearance of the sun. The former is known from the Levant (Baal/Mot; Illuyanka) and the latter from Egypt (Apophis). Unlike the situation in *Enuma Elish*, neither of these threats results in a cosmogony.

Struggle for rule among the gods between individual competing claimants. In this category of theomachy, the question to be resolved is which god is in charge. The adversary is an individual deity and what is at stake is control of the divine realm. Here, we find a third category where *Enuma Elish* fits in (the dispute between Kingu and Marduk) as well as examples from everywhere in the Ancient Near East: Seth and Horus in Egypt, Yam and Baal in the Levant, and the Hittite Kumarbi Cycle. The adversary in these cases is positioned within the bureaucracy rather than within the cosmos per se. These do not always involve actual combat, and the defeated adversary is not necessarily destroyed. These examples do not represent cosmic conflict but political conflict. What has been called *Chaoskampf* at Ugarit is now widely recognized as dealing with political power rather than cosmology, and it can be seen with the present classification system, it fits much more easily into this category.[12]

---

[7] It is certainly possible to also view the threat from Tiamat in *Enuma Elish* in this category. The difference is that in the examples included here cosmogony does not result.

[8] Foster, *Before the Muses*, 579-80; see discussion in T. Lewis, "CT 13.33-34 and Ezekiel 32: Lion-Dragon Myths," *JAOS* 116 (1996): 28-47.

[9] Foster, *Before the Muses*, 581-82.

[10] Foster, *Before the Muses*, 555-78. Other minor Ninurta battles may be included here, e.g., Ninurta and Azag.

[11] See N. Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1987), 45.

[12] N. Wyatt, *Myths of Power: A Study of Royal Myth and Ideology in Ugaritic and Biblical Tradition*, UBL 13 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996); idem, "Arms and the King: The Earliest Allusions to the Chaoskampf Motif and Their Implications for the Interpretation of the Ugaritic and Biblical Traditions," in 'Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf. . . .' Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient. Festschrift für O. Loretz, AOAT 250 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998),

Generational coup seizing rule. In the *Theogony of Dunnu* the combat takes place as one generation of deity seeks to supplant the previous one. It is not the corporate younger generation pitted against the older ruling elites but individual gods engaged in acts of conquest that include incest, patricide, and matricide.

Theomachy Conclusions

Having articulated the proposed classification system, we are now in a better position to identify the relevant features of the cognitive environment.

- Theomachy is a regular feature across the Ancient Near East, but almost never in relation to cosmogony
- Adversary is never a nonpersonified representative of macrocosmic chaos/nonfunctionality
- In three of the four categories, that which is at stake is rule and role among the gods, not order in the cosmos
- With rare exception (category 2a), cosmogony is not characterized by theomachy

These negative results succeed in telling us primarily what are *not* standard ingredients in the cognitive environment. Neither Canaan nor Egypt has a revolt of the gods, they have only one god challenging another god. In neither instance, however, is there any reason to conclude that the conflict is related to cosmogony. *Enuma Elish*, as we have seen, merges three categories of theomachy: dissatisfied class struggle resolved by creating humankind; macrocosmic chaos, represented in Tiamat's involvement, resolved in cosmogony; and struggle for rule, represented in Kingu's possession of the tablet of Destinies, resolved in Marduk's ascension to the throne. In this way, it should be viewed as an idiosyncratic conglomerate of theomachy categories rather than a foundational cosmogonic paradigm. Therefore, even in the Ancient Near East, *Enuma Elish* cannot be claimed as the basis for concluding that theomachy is primarily or inherently related to cosmogony. We have no reason to expect that an Ancient Near Eastern cosmogony would feature theomachy. Rather, cosmogony is simply one among many contexts in which theomachy may be employed.[13] Thus, as Saggs points out, *Enuma Elish* cannot be considered a paradigm for Ancient Near Eastern creation myths.[14]

833-82. See the careful assessment of the *Chaoskampf* motif in Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction*, 143-97; and R. S. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: The Reassessment of the Theme of "Chaos" in the Hebrew Bible* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005).

[13] This follows some of the arguments made by R. Watson, Rebecca S. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: The Reassessment of the Theme of "Chaos" in the Hebrew Bible* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 3.

[14] H. W. F. Saggs, *The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel* (London: Athlone Press, University of London, 1978), 57.

Turning to the biblical material, we are now in a position to examine it in a different light and classify the examples of theomachy that are found there. Are any of them in the more technically defined *Chaoskampf* category? The question is not whether the biblical account is mythological or antimythological.[15] The use of such categories would presuppose a universally accepted definition of myth. Instead, we simply must ask what use the biblical authors and traditions make of the theomachy motif and what categories of theomachy they represent.

Suggested Cases of Theomachy in Biblical Poetry

Reference	Genre	Focus	Divine Warrior	Lord of the Cosmos	*chaoskampf*
	Praise Lament Wisdom	Individual Communal	Victory over human enemy	No enemy obedience	Divine enemy; order restored
Ps. 18:7-19	P	I	x		
Ps. 29	P	C	(x)	x	
Ps. 33:6-11	P	C	(x)	x	
Ps. 44:2-7	L	C	x		
Ps. 65:5-13	P	C		x	(x)
Ps. 68:4-18	P	C	x		
Ps. 74:12-17	L	C	(x)		x
Ps. 77: 16-19	L	C	(x)	x	
Ps. 78	W	C	x	(x)	
Ps. 89:9-13	P	C	(x)	x	(x)
Ps. 104	P	C		x	
Ps. 106:9-11	L	C	x	(x)	
Ps. 114:3-6	P	C		x	
Ps. 124:3-5	P	C	x		
Ps. 135:6-7	P	C		x	
Ps. 135:8-12	P	C	x		
Ps. 136:10-22	P	C	x	(x)	
Ps. 144:5-7	P	I	x		
Isa. 27:1			x		(x)
Isa. 30:27-33			x		
Isa. 51:9-16			x	(x)	(x)
Job 7:12					(x)
Job 26:7-13				x	(x)
Job 38:8-11				x	

Notes:
(x) = secondary motif or associative connection
Ps. 89:10; Isa. 27:1; Isa. 51:9: metaphorical connection between DW and CK; battle but no reference to establishing order in the cosmos

[15] One example of an attempt to get to the myth behind the "antimythological" treatment in the Bible is found in M. Wakeman, *God's Battle with the Monster* (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

After investigating, cataloging, and classifying all of the passages in the Hebrew Bible that have been at times treated in the category of Theomachy or *Chaoskampf*, we find that there are three fairly distinct and easily recognizable motifs involved. The Divine Warrior category includes those passages in which victory over human enemies is recognized or requested. These are occasionally the personal enemies of the Psalmist but more frequently the enemies of Israel. This Divine Warrior motif in which a god fights battles on behalf of his people is well-known throughout the Ancient Near East and stands as a category in its own right rather than a subcategory of Theomachy. It is not concerned with cosmogony or with cosmic order, though there is no doubt that enemy armies can create chaos for a country. A number of examples occur in the literature where cosmic disorder or battle is used as a metaphor for political disorder and armed conflict.

I have titled the second category, Lord of the Cosmos. In this category, God is exercising his control over the world. None of the elements of the cosmos are treated as enemies here, only as forces under complete control and obedient to their master. The only hint of theomachy comes in terminology such as the waters "fleeing" before him. No threat is posed, but mastery is evident. These at times include cosmogony but not essentially so.

Finally, this leaves only the *Chaoskampf* column in which all but one entry are simply using a *Chaoskampf* motif as a metaphor for one of the other motifs. In the end, this leaves only Psalm 74 that combines the elements of theomachy/*Chaoskampf* and cosmogony. Even here, however, there is no sign of anything similar to the threat that is posed in *Enuma Elish*. Psalm 74 alone would provide no basis for concluding that Theomachy/*Chaoskampf* was a dominant cosmogonic motif in Israelite thinking or to presuppose that motif as an underlying foundation to Genesis 1.

A more substantiable motif for cosmogony in the poetical texts is that of the Lord of the Cosmos. The Hebrew Bible is consistently interested in divine kingship, an interest it holds in common with the rest of the ancient world. Cosmogony is one context in which divine kingship can be demonstrated, but it is only one of many. Yahweh's kingship is expressed over the operations of the cosmos, whether they pertain to precipitation[16] or politics. He is superior to other gods (though he does not bother to fight them and is not said to rule over them—these would give them too high a standing), and he rules nations and empires. Theomachy is typically a motif in contexts in which Yahweh is harnessing those powers that would rebel against his rule. The passages in the prophets and the Psalms nowhere indicate that the *formation* of the cosmos comes as a result of defeat of other powers,[17] only that Yahweh's *rule* of the cosmos is accomplished as he defeats rebels

[16] See Forsyth, *Old Enemy*, 53-54 for Ninurta's rule being displayed by his harnessing of the Anzu bird from whose mouth the rain waters flow.

[17] Watson, *Chaos Uncreated*, 235.

or harnesses powers. Even forty years ago, B. Anderson had identified the biblical use of the Theomachy motif as a reinterpretation "used poetically in the Scriptures to express a dramatic conflict in which man's existence is at stake."[18] However, even in most of these, the motif is more closely identifiable with divine warrior language than with Theomachy language.

We would conclude that many of the biblical passages that have at times been discussed under the categories of theomachy or *chaoskampf* have been misclassified. It should not be surprising that theomachy is difficult to identify in biblical passages because most of the theomachy categories discussed in connection with the Ancient Near East can only operate in a polytheistic system. Despite the fact that throughout much of Israel's history they had not succeeded in discarding polytheism, the biblical text does not adopt a polytheistic worldview for itself.

Any reading of Genesis 1 makes it clear that the author has not employed a theomachy motif in this cosmogony. The absence of this motif could only be labeled as polemical if theomachy were a consistent motif in cosmogonies. Its absence cannot be used as evidence that it has been suppressed.[19] We have seen that it is not a consistent motif, and therefore we must seek an alternative cognitive environment for Genesis 1 in relation to the cosmogonic cognitive environment of the Ancient Near East.

Genesis 1 as Ancient Near Eastern Temple Cosmology

Just as Gunkel and others in the nineteenth century laid the foundations for radically new perspectives on ancient cosmology through comparative studies, Darwin and others laid the foundations for radically new perspectives on modern cosmology and the sciences. Consequently, traditional beliefs in the Bible were assailed from two directions as its uniqueness in the ancient world and its sufficiency for the modern world were both questioned.

In the aftermath of Charles Darwin's *Origins of Species*, the nineteenth century saw the opening of a great divide between science and faith that continues unabated today as controversy rages concerning the roles of evolution, creationism, and, more recently, intelligent design. Just as Gunkel's position was based on the flawed premise that *Enuma Elish* and Genesis had to share a common literary motif, I would propose that the current controversy between Genesis and science is likewise based on a flawed premise that they share a common philosophical paradigm. Correcting this misconception can offer a productive path toward resolving some of the deep-seated animosity that has characterized the debate. We begin with some historical observations.

---

[18] B. Anderson, *Creation Versus Chaos: The Reinterpretation of Mythical Symbolism in the Bible* (New York: Association Press, 1967), 8.

[19] Watson, *Chaos Uncreated*, 24.

In many areas, the contributions of the classical Greek philosophers radically changed the intellectual landscape. Among them is that somewhere in the philosophical development from the classical Greeks to the Enlightenment (when naturalism and materialism became entrenched), a change had gradually occurred regarding ontology. People had come to believe that something existed by virtue of its physical properties.[20] The belief that reality was defined as what could be encountered by the five senses can be referred to as a "material ontology." Ontology (what it means to exist) is inseparable from creation (bringing something into existence). In a material ontology, creation becomes something like a manufacturing process focusing on material origins and thus any account of creation would naturally be considered an account of material origins. Genesis 1 came to be understood in this philosophical context as offering a descriptive mechanism of material origins.

Then along came Darwin offering an alternative descriptive mechanism for material origins (evolution), and people of faith and people of science took up their adversarial positions. Thus, the debate has been framed—competing accounts of material origins with Darwin pitted against God, evolutionism against creationism, science against the Bible. Creationists made their claims about the "biblical view of creation" based on their unexamined assumption that the Bible offered an account of material origins from within the framework of a material ontology—without realizing how anachronistic that assumption was. Material ontology had become so thoroughly accepted that no one was aware that ontology did not have to be material and had not always been so.

Gunkel and other comparativists had the right idea that the Bible needed to be examined against its Ancient Near Eastern environment but made the mistake of thinking that the major issue was who borrowed what from whom. They attempted to use comparative studies to answer the hot critical issues of the day such as the date and uniqueness of the biblical record. In reality, the greater role of comparative studies is to fill in the details of the cognitive environment of the ancient world and then determine how each or all of the traditions from the ancient world intersect with that cognitive environment and reflect its premises.

As we study the cosmology of the Bible, an ancient document by any assessment, we first need to go back into the ancient world, and investigate their ontology. Research suggests that the ancient world did not have a material ontology but a functional ontology. In a functional ontology, something only exists when it has a role and purpose in an ordered system. Its

[20] This ontological shift was in itself the result of an epistemological shift that resulted in the conviction that science was the only way to arrive at sure knowledge.

existence has nothing to do with its material status.[21] In such an ontology, to bring something into existence (i.e., to create something) means to give it a function and role, not to give it physical properties. We must see and hear the text the way that the ancient Israelite saw and heard the text. We cannot understand outlooks on creation until we understand how someone thinks about ontology. Because the Bible is a document from the ancient world, we expect it to be framed in terms of its ancient cognitive landscape. We must see the world the way the text sees the world. Basically, we must see Genesis 1 as an ancient cosmological text. Despite significant differences from culture to culture, a number of ideas and characteristics are common in creation accounts from antiquity.

1. They contain little information concerning material origins.
2. The precreation state is not absent of matter but absent of function.
3. Creation involves the giving of functions often in terms of separating, naming, and assigning roles.
4. Temple and cosmos are largely synonymous (homological), each representing an image of the other.

Each of these can be documented in detail in primary and secondary sources.[22] In the ancient world, their concern was focused on the gods and how the cosmos was run by the gods more than in physical properties of the cosmos. To explore Genesis 1 in this light, four elements are pertinent to the investigation:

1. The beginning point
2. The meaning of the Hebrew verb for "create" (*bara'*)
3. The activities of the six days
4. The significance of the seventh day

Beginning Point

The beginning condition in Genesis consists of primordial cosmic waters as attested throughout the ancient world. This beginning state has no

---

[21] For example, in Egypt they considered the barren wilderness as nonexistent (though it was physically there).

[22] I have done this elsewhere, see *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), which includes about 100 pages devoted to the issues involving Genesis 1-2 and Science and Faith; *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, s.v. "Creation, Ancient Near East," by J. Walton (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003); *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) includes a full chapter on cosmology integrating Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern cognitive environments; *Genesis One as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, forthcoming 2007), a full study of the Ancient Near Eastern data and its application to Genesis 1.

[23] Genesis 1:1 simply offers a literary introduction to the narrative, not an actual creative act itself (i.e., "In the beginning God created the cosmos" [let me tell you how he did it]).

personality and offers no opposition. Then the creative acts, however they are defined, take place in the seven days, which begin in verse 3.[23] It has been demonstrated through semantic analysis that the Hebrew terms translated "formless and empty" in verse 2 refer primarily to a nonfunctional and nonproductive condition.[24] If Genesis 1 were an account of material origins, we would logically expect it to start when no material existed. Yet, in Genesis 1:2, the situation described is not absent of matter[25] but absent of function.

Create

This Hebrew verb occurs about fifty times in the Old Testament, sufficient to arrive at a synchronic understanding of its semantic range. The subject is always God, so it is an activity ostensibly restricted to deity. Its direct objects are consistently nonmaterial, suggesting that the verb does not refer to a material-making process.[26] Many interpreters of the past, noticing that the verb was never accompanied by an identification of materials used in the process, concluded that the verb meant to manufacture a material object out of nothing (thus creation *ex nihilo*). That conclusion assumed that the verb was operating within a material ontology and offering a material explanation of origins (i.e., something material being manufactured out of no material). Usage, however, suggests that the verb concerns the creative act of assigning roles within a functional ontology—that *bara'* means to bring something into existence functionally, not materially. This, of course, would explain why materials are never mentioned—it is not a material process or product.

Six Days

The biblical text reports that in six days God made heaven and earth. If this is an account of functional origins, these six days do not mark the material beginning of the cosmos but the functional beginning. Consequently, the age of the material earth would have no relationship to these six days, for the material cosmos could have been in existence for endless ages before this creation of functions. It should be noted that the ancient idea of

---

[24] Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction.*

[25] "darkness was over the surface of the deep and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters"

[26] Objects of the verb include people groups (Ps. 102:19; Ezek. 21:35); Jerusalem (Isa. 65:18); phenomena such as wind, fire, cloud, destruction, calamity or darkness (Ex. 34:10; Num. 16:30; Isa. 45:7; Amos 4:13); and abstractions such as righteousness, purity, or praise (Ps. 51:21; Isa. 57:19). Even when the object of the verb is something that could be "manufactured" (e.g., Sea Creatures in Gen. 1:21), the point need not necessarily be physical manufacturing as much as assigning roles. This direction is picked up nicely in Genesis 5:2 where God "creates" people male and female, that is, with established gender functions.

functions was not the same as our scientific descriptions of functions (e.g., the sun as a burning ball of gas that holds planets in orbit by its gravitational pull). Rather their understanding of function centered entirely on the role played in human existence: a utilitarian perspective that coincides more closely with what we sometimes call the anthropic principle. The text itself indicates this interest in functions explicitly in day four where the celestial bodies are clearly described in functional terms.[27] Thus, the objects in the cosmos do not become functional in any meaningful way until people are put in place. The report of day 1, carefully examined, provides important evidence of this perspective. Verse 5 indicates that "God called the light day, and the darkness he called night." Because the establishment of day and night stands as the concluding statement of the activity for day 1, we would rightly infer that the text is not talking about the light and darkness brought into being as material things (they were not considered so), but that they are established as periods. The introduction of light was the means of creating day and night. It is the *period* of light that is called day, and the *period* of darkness that is called night. We must therefore logically conclude, that what were separated in verse 4 were again not *objects* (light and darkness) but *periods* of light and darkness. For the sake of consistency, we must therefore also conclude that the initial statement on day 1 in verse 3 should be read, "Let there be a period of light." Consequently, we can see that Genesis reports that on day 1 God created time—the primary function of our cosmos that frames our existence in every way.

Once we recognize this functional emphasis, the other days fall into place. On day 2, God creates weather by setting up the mechanisms of its operation.[28] On day 3, God established the basis for fecundity and agriculture; or more basically, for food. The first three days describe the origins of the three main functions of the cosmos that frame the existence of all human beings of every culture throughout time. These three functions are revisited in the recreation account after the flood in the conclusion offered in Genesis 8:22. In contrast, days 4 through 6 involve installing the functionaries each in their respective spheres.[29] We would conclude, then, that in these six days, God set up a cosmos to function for human beings, with the functions described in ways that were pertinent to them. Thus, as in the

[27] Notice, it is not scientifically functional but anthropologically functional. That is, the text is not interested in whether something functions in nature or in scientific ways (sun as a star in a galaxy providing a center of gravity and providing light as a ball of burning gas) but in providing functions for human life and existence (notice in day 4: signs, seasons, days and years.

[28] The mechanism is the dome of the sky that held back the cosmic waters above.

[29] Here, we find that the text now provides a very logical answer to the age-old question about how there can be light on the first day when the sun is not created until day 4. The function on day 1 is time. The sun and moon are simply functionaries operating in that sphere. Neither day 1 nor day 4 concern the material origin of physical objects, so one need not assume that the sun as a material object came into being on day 4.

rest of the Ancient Near East, cosmogony is understood as an account of functional origins—creation as *they* perceive it is not a material process.[30] Likewise, Yahweh is not overcoming enemy forces of chaos, but rather he is resolving nonfunctionality (= nonexistence) into a functional, ordered system. In this way, Genesis is an ancient account dealing with ancient issues in ancient ways with an ancient perspective on ontology. As such, it does not have anything to offer to the modern scientific discussion of material origins. Yet, even as it operates within the ancient cognitive environment by dealing with functions, it does so from its intentional monotheism in which there are no threats, no rebels, no conflict, and no need to overcome obstacles. Yahweh's rule is unchallenged, and the order that he seeks to establish is not because he needs a functioning environment but because he is setting up a functioning environment for his human creatures. Thus, the Genesis account is theologically distinct from ancient cosmologies and philosophically distinct (ontology) from modern cosmologies.

The key to understanding the intrinsic nature of the Genesis cosmology is in an element that is often neglected, the seventh day.

Seventh Day

The account of the seventh day is often treated as a theological, etiological appendix tacked on after the most important occurrence (the creation of people) has been recounted. That assessment is distorted by our material perspective. Because we have observed that nothing material is manufactured on the seventh day, we devalue it as largely irrelevant to what we have considered an account of material origins. Once we have made the adjustment to a functional ontology, however, we see the seventh day in a new light. In the ancient world, the "rest" of the gods was always in a temple; in fact, temples were built with the purpose of deity resting in them.[31] This rest of the gods often involved their taking control of the cosmos. A god could rest because order had been achieved and everything was now ready

[30] Some might object that if the material solar system existed, then time would have existed and therefore could not just have been set up in day 1. This objection betrays that we are still thinking within a material ontology. The function of time is not just based, as we are inclined to think, on the physical mechanics of time—it requires the presence of someone for whom time functions. That is, time cannot really achieve its function until people are put in place, because all of the cosmos is set up around them. This conclusion is confirmed by the repeated refrain throughout Genesis 1 that it was "good." The assessment that each component was good means that it functioned properly with reference to people. Despite the wide semantic range of the Hebrew word, this case can be made contextually. We have to understand what this passage considers good by comparing it to what it does not consider good. We find such a negative assessment in Genesis 2:18—"It is not good for man to be alone."

[31] J. D. Levenson, "The Temple and the World," *Journal of Religion* 64 (1984): 275-98; V. Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House*, JSOTS 115 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

to run smoothly. Deities ran the cosmos from their temples. When stability had been assured, the regular daily business could be carried out without interruption.

Consequently, when Genesis indicates that God rested on the seventh day, it tells us that in this account of the functional origins of the cosmos, the cosmos is being portrayed as a temple.[32] This connection, which would have been transparent to the ancient audience, provides the key to understanding Genesis 1. In the ancient world, the physical temples may have often required long years of construction, but even after the entire construction phase was completed, it was not yet a functioning temple. The temple was made functional in a typically seven-day dedication ceremony. In this dedication ceremony, the functions of the temple were initiated, the functionaries installed, and then, on the seventh day, the symbol that represented the deity was brought in and placed in the central room of the temple. Only then could the temple begin functioning as it was designed to do.

We would conclude then that Genesis 1 is composed along the lines of a temple dedication ceremony in which over a seven-day period, the functions of the cosmic temple are initiated and the functionaries installed. The functions center on the royal and priestly roles of people, but the imagery is defined by the presence of God who has taken up his rest in the center of this cosmic temple. Through him, order is maintained, and nonfunctional disorder is held at bay—through him all things cohere. Genesis 1 is thus an account of the functional origins of the cosmic temple, and we need not force it to address material origins. In ancient cosmology, it was important to know who was in charge and responsible for establishing and maintaining order. This is similar to the information each of us would need in our place of employment. In our material ontology, everyone considers the cosmos a machine, and we argue about whether "Someone" built it and runs it. In the ancient functional ontology, they think of the cosmos as a company, or even more to the point, a kingdom, founded to carry out the business of the deity.[33] In adopting this position, I am not suggesting that God is not responsible for material origins. Neither my theology, the church's theology, New Testament theology, nor Israelite theology would allow for anything being placed outside of God's control. I am merely suggesting that we misunderstand Genesis 1 if we think that it provides an account of material origins. It has other interests that are arguably more central both practically

---

[32] Such an image is a familiar one throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. See G. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004); J. Laansma, *I Will Give You Rest* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1997).

[33] Today even if we were inclined to think about the cosmos as a company, we would still insist that we would retain power. The analogy seeks to point out the difference between a personal and impersonal view of the cosmos. For the contrast of machine to kingdom, see J. Stek, "What Says the Scripture," in *Portraits of Creation*, ed. H. J. van Till (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 203-65.

and theologically. If this is true, the Bible offers no account of material origins and no explanation of that process or its mechanisms. We know that God can, and often does, do his work through processes that science can observe and describe (Ps. 139), and it would not be surprising if the material origins of the cosmos came about in scientifically describable ways.

Some might wonder why the account cannot be considered to include both the functional and the material. That possibility is certainly not outside the range of possibilities, but we must be able to demonstrate the nature of the text, not just deal with what might be. I have demonstrated that the nature of the governing verb (*bara'*) is functional, that the context is functional (starts with nonfunctional in Genesis 1:2 and come back to functionality in Genesis 8:22), that the cultural context is functional (Ancient Near Eastern literature) and that the theology is functional (temple). A material interest cannot be assumed, it must be proved, and we must ask ourselves why we are so interested in seeing the account in material terms.

When we look at the possible evidence for the material interests of the account, we will find that we face significant obstacles. Of the seven days, three have no material suggestion at all (days 1, 3, and 7). Day 2 has a potentially material component (the firmament), but no one believes there is actually something solid there. Days 4 and 6 have material components, but the text explicitly deals with them only on the functional level (celestial bodies for signs, seasons, days, and years; human beings in God's image, male and female, with the task to subdue and rule). This leaves only day 5 in discussion, where functions are mentioned (e.g., let them swarm) and the verb *bara'* is again used.[34] As a result, it is difficult to sustain a case that the account is interested in material origins if one does not already come with that presupposition.

In conclusion then, as an account of cosmogony through temple building, Genesis 1 resonates well with the ancient world but need not be provided with theomachy or a *chaoskampf* motif. As a functional account of origins, it does not offer a competing paradigm to information pertaining to material origins provided by modern science, though it does insist on God's involvement in origins—he is the one who made the cosmos functional and sustains its operations. The result of this is a more vibrant and robust theology of creation than currently exists in modern thinking. Once we turned Genesis 1 into an account of material origins, it became an account of something that took place in the ancient past and is over and done

[34] Some might contend that the Hebrew verb *'asah* ("make" vv.7, 16, 25, 26) and *natan* ("set" v. 17) provide evidence for the material nature of the text. These discussions are more complex and have been treated at length in the Eisenbrauns publication. To summarize, *'asah* is often translated "do" (e.g., one's business) and the evidence favors that understanding here (cf. the use in Ex. 20:8-11). In similar fashion, *natan* often means "appoint" and that suits this context well.

with—a historical event. Once creation is understood functionally, God's role as Creator can be recognized as ongoing—a role on which we, and our world, are totally dependent moment by moment.

ATLAS Serials

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.