

COSMOGONY,

COSMOLOGY. The theory and lore concerning the origin and structure of the universe.

A. Definitions

B. Cosmogony and Cosmology in the Hebrew Bible

1. The Significance of Cosmological Material for Biblical Religion
2. Varieties of Cosmology in the Hebrew Bible
3. The Cosmic Battle Pattern
4. The Creation of the First Humans
5. The Role of Second Isaiah in Centralizing the Cosmological Argument
6. The Priestly Account of Creation
7. The Wisdom Tradition
8. Cosmogony in Apocalyptic Thought
9. The Hebrew Bible's Portrait of the Cosmos

C. Cosmology in the NT

1. Sources of Early Christian

Cosmological Thought

2. Cosmological Assumptions in Pauline Theology
3. The Johannine Tradition
4. Later NT Thought

D. The Functions of Religious Cosmogonies/Cosmologies

1. Older Views
2. Recent Formulations of the Place of Cosmology in Religion

A. Definitions

Cosmogony and cosmology are both terms whose etymologies remain helpful in defining them for the purposes of discussing their place in biblical thought. The first element in both words is obviously the same Greek word that lies behind the English “cosmos,” and thus refers to the entire universe as an organized entity. A cosmogony (*kosmos* + *genia* = “birth”) is thus an account, usually in the form of a mythological tale, about the genesis

or birth of the structured universe. A cosmology (*kosmos* + *logia* = “report”) is a blueprint or map, in the widest sense, of the universe as a comprehensible and meaningful place.

Occasionally, scholars have maintained that it is important to make a firm separation between these two terms—a separation between cosmogony, on the one hand, as a mythical account of the original events that produced an ordered universe, and cosmology, on the other hand, as speculation about meaning and value in the universe in the most general sense and even in the absence of any mention of originating events. Though such a terminological division may be useful in discussing nonbiblical religions, the fact is that the locus of almost all cosmological thought in the Hebrew Bible and in the NT is in cosmogonic

texts. Hence, the two terms have traditionally been used almost interchangeably in discussions of early Judaism and Christianity; and they will be so used here.

The present treatment of cosmogony and cosmology in biblical texts is composed of three major sections. The first and much the longest is devoted to the Hebrew Bible, whose lengthy history of composition and transmission has led to a striking variety of quite different cosmological views. A second and shorter section is concerned with cosmological materials in the NT. Finally, the concluding section will concentrate on a series of questions posed by historians of religion but too often neglected in treatments of biblical cosmogonic lore: What is the role of cosmological speculation in religious thought generally?

Why is it that almost no religion's scriptures omit some discussion of the origin of the universe?

B. Cosmogony and Cosmology in the Hebrew Bible

1. The Significance of Cosmological Material for Biblical Religion. Initially, one might ask if statements about the origin and meaning of the universe played a significant role in the religion of ancient Israel. Both internal evidence from the Hebrew Bible and the conclusions of a previous stage in biblical scholarship suggest that such a potentially troubling question is not out of place. With regard to the biblical evidence, it has been noted that there is no single word in biblical Hebrew which bears the weight carried by the Greek word *kosmos*. The notion that the universe is a rationally comprehensible totality is one

that is met with frequently in Greek thought and that is represented already by the use of this term *kosmos*. The postbiblical usage of the Hebrew word “ancient,” “everlasting” (*lām*) carries similar connotations; but *lām* is not used in such a cosmic sense within the Hebrew Bible, and other expressions (“earth” [*tēbēl*], “heaven and earth” [*haššāmayim wēhā’āreṣ*], or “the all” [*kol*]) are similarly limited. Secondly, only rarely does the Hebrew Bible concentrate at sustained length on cosmogonic narratives. Though hints and allusions abound to what must be assumed to be a popular reservoir of thoughts on the origin and shape of the universe, accounts that extend beyond a few verses are essentially limited to those in [Gen 1:1–2:4a](#) and [2:4b–25](#); and of these, the second is more cor-

rectly seen as an account of the origin of humanity (an anthropogony).

On the basis of these observations and others, many scholars, especially those working during the early and mid-20th century, concluded that cosmogonic thought was very much a subsidiary and probably too, a quite late concentration for ancient Israel. Thus, the well-known German form-critic Gerhard von Rad, who placed historiographic concerns at the heart of Israel's theology, urged repeatedly that "Israel's faith is based on history rather than cosmology" (ROTT 2: 347). The historian of religion Mircea Eliade concurred: "This God of the Jewish people is no longer an Oriental divinity, creator of archetypal gestures, but a personality who ceaselessly intervenes in history ... the Hebrews

were the first to discover the meaning of history as the epiphany of God, and this conception, as we should expect, was taken up and amplified by Christianity" (1959: 104). Von Rad, Eliade, and others then went on to claim that historiographical, functional, and soteriological concerns dominate in the religion of Israel as speculative, cosmological concerns dominate elsewhere, for example in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, or India.

However, the position that cosmological thought plays but a secondary role in the Hebrew Bible is one that has found fewer defenders in the most recent period. The internal evidence most cited for revising the earlier, minimizing assessment of the role of cosmology in biblical religion is, first, that the present shape of the Hebrew Bible does accord

primacy to two separate creation accounts. Thus, from a canonical perspective, the ancient Jewish community which based its beliefs and rituals upon the Hebrew Bible clearly saw cosmogony as basic to its religion. Secondly, and especially in the years following the recovery of the ancient, mythological texts from Ugarit (Ras Shamra) on the Syrian coast, the number of allusive references to cosmogonic battles in the Hebrew Bible has been given renewed appreciation.

Beyond this evidence, progress in the study of comparative religion has suggested that no religion entirely omits cosmological reflection. Thus, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, whose *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* has been perhaps the single most influential volume for the

study of comparative religion, argued both that “there is no religion that is not a cosmology” (1915: 21) and that “all known religions have been systems of ideas which tend to embrace the universality of things, and to give us a complete representation of the world” (1915: 165). Durkheim’s view is that all religions offer their adherents a satisfying explanation of the world, so that cosmology can be sought and found in many texts that are not overt cosmogonies. The analyses of Durkheim and others have begun to persuade biblical scholars that the older view was too limiting and too much in the service of demonstrating the uniqueness of Israel’s religion. The position that the Hebrew Bible is essentially concerned solely with history or with soteriology, to the exclusion of cosmology, has

had a similar fate. Two recent summaries of Israelite cosmogony can therefore conclude, in opposition to the older view, that creation is not to be seen in the Bible as transformed and historicized, but rather remains fundamentally mythical (McKenzie 1976: 199) and that “at all points in the cosmogonic traditions, even in places where Israel’s election or deliverance from enemies is involved, there is a more fundamental level of meaning: the nature of reality itself” (Knight 1985: 134).

Hence, the view commanding increasing assent is that cosmological thought is of greater significance for both ancient Judaism and early Christianity than earlier critics had judged. Still, it remains true and worth accenting that various religious traditions do place a different weight upon

such thought, and that on any chart measuring comparative attention granted to cosmology the biblical religions would not rank near the top. Among the neighbors of ancient Israel, both Egypt and Mesopotamia seem to have engaged more fully and at an earlier date in speculations about the origin and the basic blueprint of the cosmos than did Israelites; and early Greek thought shows a similar concentration upon questions of origin and rational organization. Perhaps the most elaborate religious cosmologies are those developed in India, whose chronologies of the ages of the universe are especially noteworthy ([EncRel](#) 4: 107–13) and contrast greatly with the very brief (cosmically speaking) time spans narrated in the Hebrew Bible and in the NT. Among the reasons for this relative dearth of cosmogonic

speculation may be the composite origins of the biblical portrait of Yahweh, the God of Israel. It has been pointed out that elements of both the god Baʿl Haddu and the god ʾEl from the religion of most ancient Syria-Palestine have gone into the Israelite descriptions of Yahweh ([CMHE](#)); and the developing polemic against Baʿl Haddu, whose myths are throughout cosmogonic tales, may have militated against the utilization of the full repertoire of cosmogonic myths in portraying Yahweh.

2. Varieties of Cosmology in the Hebrew Bible. A second, prefatory remark about the most general role of cosmology in biblical thought is that this thought displays a notable lack of uniformity and consistency. There is perhaps just sufficient uniformity to allow for the construction of a

general world view (see [sec. B.9](#) below); but the contrasts between, for example, the allusions to an original cosmic battle against the forces of chaos, on the one hand, and the portrait of Wisdom's controlling role in the orderly creation of a rational cosmos, on the other hand, remain what is most striking.

The reasons for this lack of uniformity are not difficult to discover. In the first place, the process of the composition and transmission of the materials now in the Hebrew Bible was one that stretched over something like a full millennium. It should not, therefore, occasion surprise if the cosmogonic accounts which appear to have originated in premonarchical Israel differ dramatically from those now found in Proverbs or the book of Daniel. Secondly, one of the distinctive attributes

of the religion of Israel is the allowance for and the preservation of quite different theological positions. Such tolerance of diversity obtains in the area of cosmology as it does elsewhere, so that a recent scholar is on quite firm ground when he concludes of cosmological materials in the Hebrew Bible that “at this point, as in many others, Israel was able to maintain and affirm pluralism as a distinct aspect of her heritage and identity” (Knight 1985: 137).

Of course, both the recent move toward widening the definition of cosmology to include materials previously omitted in discussing cosmology in the Hebrew Bible and the absence of uniformity within this collection of texts create difficulties for any attempt to construct a schematic portrait of cosmology in the Hebrew Bible. In what follows, cosmo-

logical materials are treated in rough chronological order, with the frank recognition that the assignment of absolute dates to many strands in the Hebrew Bible must be done with greater hesitancy than was true only a generation ago. Nor is there any attempt, given the constraints of space, to be truly comprehensive. For example, neither the flood story in [Genesis 6–9](#) nor the accounts of the significance of the temple in Jerusalem (e.g., in [1 Kings 8](#) or [Ezekiel 40–48](#)) receives attention below; and yet each could be seen as presenting material of cosmological significance and must be covered in any fuller account.

3. The Cosmic Battle Pattern. Already at the end of the 19th century the great scholar of Israel’s preliterate traditions, Hermann Gunkel, noted that a careful reading of

the Hebrew Bible revealed allusions to a common ANE cosmogony based upon a primordial combat between the creator and the forces of chaos (Gunkel 1895). Prior to the uncovering and translation of the Ugaritic texts, the source of these traditions was regularly seen to be Mesopotamia, the location of the creation tale *Enuma Eliš* with its account of the battle between the god Marduk and the dragon goddess Tiamat, and perhaps too in Egypt, which knew the tradition of a fundamental combat between the creator god Re and the dragon Apophis. The mythological texts from Ugarit in Syria now demonstrate that there is no need to go so far afield in the search for the literary and theological models which Israelite poets found so useful. These texts, as best the narratives they relate can be

reconstructed at present, tell of a primeval battle between the god Baʿl Haddu (familiar as Baʿal in the Hebrew Bible) and the forces of chaotic destruction and death. The latter are called by such titles as Prince Sea (*ym*) and Judge River (*nhr*) in the primary version of this combat tale, while what appear to be alternate versions of the same, basic tale label these forces Lotan (*ltn*, the equivalent of the biblical Leviathan) or the seven-headed serpent (Herdner 1963: CTCA Text 2 or 5).

On the basis of these texts from ancient Syria and of their transformations in the Hebrew Bible, a common Syria-Palestinian pattern for the shape of the cosmogonic battle myth can be reconstructed. This pattern consists of four rounds: (1) a Divine Warrior goes forth to battle the chaotic monsters, variously called Sea, Death,

Leviathan, Tannin; (2) the world of nature responds to the wrath of the Divine Warrior and the forces of chaos are defeated; (3) the Divine Warrior assumes his throne on a mountain, surrounded by a retinue of other deities; and (4) the Divine Warrior utters his powerful speech, which leads nature to produce the created world ([CMHE](#), 162–63). Though there is no single biblical text which relates this battle in its fullest form, once the pattern is made clear, it seems undeniable that it lies behind and is responsible for a great number of biblical allusions which should be accounted as cosmogonic. For example, the titles Leviathan, Sea, River, Sea Monster (*tannîn* or the like), and Dragon (*rahab*) all are used of opponents of Yahweh the God of Israel in settings describing the earlier days of

the cosmos.

The recognition of the existence and the continued power of this cosmic battle pattern has brought to life the cosmogonic significance of a number of biblical texts whose importance for the study of Israelite cosmology had long gone unrecognized. In some cases, the briefest of allusions suggests resonance with a widespread knowledge of this cosmogonic struggle tale. For example, [Psalm 29](#), which was perhaps first composed in honor of Baʿl Haddu and only later transformed into a hymn honoring Yahweh, portrays the victorious God of Israel enthroned upon the “Flood dragon” (*mabbûl*; [Ps 29:10](#)). In [Ps 68:22–23](#) (—[Eng 68:21–22](#)) we read of God defeating both the “Serpent” and the “Deep Sea” (see Dahood *Psalms II* 51–100 [AB](#), 131, for the text and

translation here). [Ps 74:13–14](#), in the midst of a section explicitly devoted to creation, tells of Yahweh’s victory over “Sea” (*yam*) and the crushing of the heads of the “Sea Monster” (*tannînîm*) and of Leviathan. Another hymn to God as creator ([Psalm 89](#)) refers to Yahweh’s reign on the back of “Sea” (*yam*) after defeating the dragon Rahab ([Ps 89:10–11](#)—Eng [89:9–10](#)). [Psalm 104](#), long of special interest because of its similarities with the Egyptian celebration of creation called the Hymn to the Aton, again mentions Leviathan among other watery demons defeated by Yahweh.

It now seems likely that early audiences of all these psalms will have been able to fill out such brief allusions with the larger story so similar to them. Nor are these allusions confined to the Psalter. The hymn

in [Habakkuk 3](#), now generally regarded as a very early hymn inserted into a later context, has “River” and “Sea” as the enemies of Yahweh ([Hab 3:8](#)). Later prophetic texts display the same awareness of the creator’s battle prowess in the struggle against chaotic foes which preceded the present cosmic order. The fire which Yahweh directs, according to one of Amos’ visions, devours the “Great Abyss” (*těhôm rabbâ*), which appears to be a reference to a sea serpent ([Amos 7:4](#); Wolff *Joel and Amos Hermeneia*, 292–93); and another of this prophet’s visions portrays Yahweh commanding the “Serpent” (*nāḥāš*) who dwells in the underworld below ([Amos 9:2–3](#)). Leviathan in [Isa 27:1](#) is seen as a “Sea Monster” (*tannîn*), and perhaps too as a fleeing, wriggling

snake, if the mythological monsters in this verse are all various epithets for the same cosmic foe. But perhaps the most elaborate series of allusions to this primeval scene made by an Israelite prophet are those contained in the hymn in honor of Yahweh's great strength now to be found in [Isa 51:9–11](#). The setting here is clearly that of the earliest days of the world, the days and generations long past, when Yahweh smote Rahab, pierced the “Sea Monster” (*tannîn*), and dried up the waters of “Sea” (*yam*) and the “Great Abyss” (*těhôm rabbā*). A recent study of this hymn observes that “the allusion is to the cosmogonic myth, the battle of creation, in which the monster of chaos is slain by the God who thereby establishes kingship” ([CMHE](#), 108).

Demonstrating both the

longevity and the power of this theme in a variety of different Israelite settings, another series of similar allusions are to be found in the poetry of the book of Job (Pope [Job AB](#)). [Job 3:8](#) refers to Leviathan, [7:12](#) to the “Sea Monster” (*tannîn*) as cosmic foes of the created order, while [26:12](#) credits God again with smiting Rahab. At much greater length, the second speech from the whirlwind in [Job 40–41](#) contrasts God's powers over Behemoth and Leviathan with the powerlessness of one such as Job. Leviathan is now well known as Lotan, the enemy of Baʿl and ʾAnat from the Ugaritic cosmogonic myths; and, while Behemoth may refer to the hippopotamus in some biblical texts, here the beast is best seen as another power of universal chaos, perhaps even equated with the bull of heav-

en slain by Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh (Pope *Job* AB, 322).

The cumulative effect of all these allusions, tantalizingly brief and vague though each may seem when seen in isolation, is impressive. The texts' very brevity bears witness to the familiarity with the cosmic battle pattern that the author of each could assume on behalf of his listeners. Just as the briefest mention of words and phrases like the Pilgrims, the Founding Fathers, or the Gettysburg Address will resonate widely to an American audience, so too the very spare report of the Sea, the Dragon, or of Yahweh's splitting a sea monster will have called forth for an Israelite audience the entire myth in which these cosmic enemies attempt to play their destructive roles.

Earlier scholars were trou-

bled by the implications of these battle scenes, since they so clearly compromise later Jewish and Christian understandings of the Hebrew Bible as consistently monotheistic. But the Hebrew Bible itself bears clear witness to monotheism as a slowly developing notion within early Israel, and one that for many centuries found no difficulty in portraying Yahweh's creative activity in the terms of the familiar cosmogonic battle pattern.

4. The Creation of the First Humans. The narrative that runs from [Gen 2:4b](#) through the remainder of [Genesis 2](#) is, as was observed above, more properly an anthropogony ("human creation account") than a cosmogony. This story is normally credited to the Yahwist or the "J" source of the Tetrateuch. The Yahwist's activity is traditionally placed in ☞

the 9th century B.C.E.; but renewed doubt has been expressed of late about our ability to assign a date to this narrative strand with much confidence. The story of the creation of the first man and the first woman in [Genesis 2](#) is surely situated in the remotest past, but as surely this story occurs after the initial cosmogony. About the only clear reference here to events of that earlier, cosmogonic event is that to the underworld reservoir of water which irrigated and hence brought fertility to the otherwise dry and sterile ground ([Gen 2:6](#)). The Hebrew word used to designate this reservoir (*d*) is a loan word from Mesopotamia ([Sum ID](#), [Akk edu](#)), demonstrating again the reliance of many of the details in the primeval history ([Genesis 1-11](#)) upon traditions developed in the Tigris-Euphrates

Valley.

As is true both of much of the Yahwist's materials in [Genesis](#) and of the recently more fully understood Epic of Atrahasis from Mesopotamia, the chief concern in this anthropogony is to describe accurately the status of humanity, and thereby to distinguish humanity from the attributes of the gods (Oden 1981). Another concern of the narrative in [Genesis 2](#), as in so many accounts of the genesis of humanity throughout religious myths, is the origin of the distinction between the sexes (Trible 1978: 72-143). Yahweh here creates humans by forming or shaping them, working as does a potter ([Gen 2:7, 19](#)) and using bits of soil as the basic material. As a deity, Yahweh possesses both great wisdom and immortality. Humans initially lack both

attributes but hunger ceaselessly for a higher status; and it is this lust for a different position on the cosmic hierarchy that continually causes trouble for humanity. The facts that the tale is set in a garden, so often associated with royalty in the ANE, and that the concern is both the wondrous powers and yet the limitations of humanity have led several scholars to propose the Israelite royal court as the original setting for the narrative's generation and transmission (Coats 1983: 39).

Genesis 2 is not the only account of the creation of primal humanity in the Hebrew Bible, even if it is at once the most familiar and the most sophisticated. Another and related report is to be found in Ezekiel 28, the prophet's lament over the prideful fall of the king of Tyre. Here we encounter again

allusion to the creation of early humanity (using the special biblical term for divine creation, *bārā'*) in the setting of a garden. And here too read of a human's wickedness and violence requiring his expulsion from the garden. In both stories, the glory of humans as originally created is stressed, but so too is the human propensity to strive pridefully for a status that belongs properly to God.

5. The Role of Second Isaiah in Centralizing the Cosmological Argument. ♣

The 6th-century B.C.E. author of the poems now contained in Isaiah 40–55 (and perhaps of material found elsewhere in the book of Isaiah) was hardly the first in ancient Israel to credit Yahweh with creation. But this poet may have been the first to expand upon the series of cosmogonic allusions noted

above (B.3) to establish something like a full cosmological argument for the unique and incomparable abilities of the God of Israel. Of the biblical occurrences of the Hebrew word “to create” (*bārāʾ*), used solely of divine creation, over a third occur in this section of the book of Isaiah. Isa 40:12–26 offers a quite complete description of the cosmos shaped by Yahweh, a description of the earth founded upon the seas and of Yahweh enthroned above the vault or disk of the tentlike earth. For this poet, Yahweh is the “Creator of the ends of the earth” (*ḥrē qēṣṣṭ ḥāʾāreṣ*, Isa 40:28), who created both darkness and light (Isa 45:7).

Many have asked why Second Isaiah first combined the previously scattered allusions to Yahweh as creator into a coherent argument for the

superiority of Yahweh over all other so-called deities. An answer ready to hand is provided by the setting in which Second Isaiah’s prophetic activity occurred. Isaiah 40–55 are the work of a prophet of the Babylonian Exile, whose Israelite audience will have been bombarded by the cosmogonic claims made on behalf of Mesopotamian deities. These claims are countered and thereby refuted by Second Isaiah’s full articulation of the cosmological argument in service of the worship of Yahweh.

6. The Priestly Account of Creation. Both because of its present position opening the Hebrew Bible and because of stylistic features lending to it a tone of high formality and comprehensiveness, the priestly account of creation (Gen 1:1–2:4a) has long been the normative cosmogony for

Judaism and Christianity. Like Second Isaiah, those responsible for the composition of this overture have self-consciously utilized the announcement that the God of Israel is creator as a major theological confession. The seven-part, climactic structure helps to indicate that everything in the cosmos is due to the power and generosity of this deity; and the parallelism so noticeable between the various stages in creation adds a tone of purposeful structure (Knight 1985: 144). The rhetorical style of this account, in addition to both a manifest concern for cultic matters and a repetition of blessing formulas, have long pointed to priestly circles for its origin. According to the traditional documentary hypothesis, these indications would assign to [Gen 1:1-2:4a](#) a fairly late date, perhaps in the 6th or 5th century

B.C.E. However, several scholars have questioned so late a date for any part of the so-called “P Work,” and others have observed that even if the seven-day cosmogony here owes its present formulation to activity after the Exile, this cosmogony’s remoter origins may lie much earlier in the history of Israel ([ROTT](#) 1: 140).

Though the creation of humanity is surely accented as the climactic achievement of God’s creative activity, the priestly account of creation concentrates less upon anthropogony than does the Yahwistic narrative which follows and does offer something much more in keeping with traditional cosmogonic lore. This almost symphonic overture truly does situate the reader “in the beginning.” This remains true whether or not one adheres to the traditional rendering of the

first words of Genesis (“In the beginning”) or rather adopts the alternative suggestion that the first verses of [Genesis 1](#) are to be read as a dependent clause and hence translated something like “When God set about to create the heaven and earth” (Speiser *Genesis AB*, 3, 12).

The portrait here is of a mighty or divine wind hovering over watery and dark undifferentiated matter. The phrase describing this undifferentiated matter (Heb *tōhû wā-bōhû*), the formless abyss over which the mighty wind of God soars, has prompted two areas of inquiry. The first concerns the origin and meaning of these puzzling words. The phrase is probably best seen as a hendiadys, that is, the use of two words to express but a single notion, in this case that of vast formlessness (Speiser, 5). As such, the matter which existed

prior to the formation of a structured cosmos here is much in keeping with other cosmogonies, for example, that of India where again “‘At first there was only darkness wrapped in darkness’” and where everything “‘was only unilluminated water’” (Rigveda; [EncRel](#) 4: 107). Secondly, references in some material which is remotely of Phoenician origin suggest that here too, as in so many areas of the religion of ancient Israel, the ultimate source of the priestly vocabulary and of the resulting portrait is the cosmological speculation of ancient Israel’s Canaanite neighbors. The Phoenician cosmology, now found among the works of the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 3d–4th century C.E.) but attributed to an ancient worthy called Sanchuniathon, mentions both “gas and chaos”

as the material existing prior to creation and a certain “Baau” which might well be related to the Heb *bōhû* (Attridge and Oden 1981: 36–39, 75–80). If Phoenician speculation played a role in helping Israel to formulate the priestly account, this is not to say that other influences are not felt as well; for example, the portrait of the cosmos in [Psalm 104](#) is discernibly similar to that in [Genesis 1](#), and the Egyptian nature of this psalm has been noted above.

Out of this mass of undifferentiated and dark primal matter, God creates the cosmos by the power of speech alone. This mode of creation, which is to be encountered elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (for example, [Ps 33:6](#), where the heavens and their inhabitants are made by Yahweh’s “word” and “the breath of his mouth”), is one

familiar throughout the [ANE](#). To both the Babylonian deity Marduk, who in *Enuma Eliš* causes a constellation (probably not a “garment,” as in older translations) to vanish and then to reappear by speech alone, and to several Egyptian gods is attributed this same awesome power. A question which greatly exercised later theologians is that of whether or not we have to do here with *creatio ex nihilo*. This formulation is surely known elsewhere, for example in Egypt where a creator is called the one who begot himself, in Polynesia where a god is called the parentless (though there is some suggestion that later, Christian influence may be here operative), and also in India. The formulation also does appear in postbiblical Judaism, probably first in [2 Macc 7:28](#) from the 1st centu-

ry B.C.E. But the priestly account in [Genesis 1](#) seems not concerned with either affirming or denying *creatio ex nihilo*: it moves very quickly from the simple statement that the world was an undifferentiated waste without limit to a concentration upon the fullness and the surpassing quality of what God created.

The incomparability of the divine creative activity is accented by the priestly account, not just by the formality with which creation's stages progress toward a well-structured fullness, but also by a distinctive vocabulary. Rather than utilizing available terms which suggest that God shaped or formed the cosmos on the model of various human activities, the priestly writers are careful to reserve the term *bārā'*, "to create," for God's action alone. Still, if the use of

such vocabulary reinforces the theme of the Yahwist's narrative that human status is never divine status, it remains true that the seven-day cosmogony in [Gen 1:1-2:4a](#) does grant powerful rank and fearsome responsibility to humanity. Humans are the "image" (*ṣelem*) and "likeness" (*dēmût*) of divinity itself, and human authority over the earth is overtly portrayed on the analogy of God's own authority over all of creation ([Gen 1:26](#)).

7. The Wisdom Tradition.

Affirmations of the unique creative power of Israel's God are to be found not only in royal circles and among priests, but also within the wisdom or sapiential tradition. This tradition is that which finds extended expression in genres long designated as works of wisdom, materials such as Proverbs or Job, but additional-

ly in other results of Israel's literary and religious heritage, for example prophetic statements. To Jeremiah is attributed the statements that Yahweh made the world through his "wisdom" (*ḥokmâ*) and "understanding" (*těbûnâ*) ([Jer 10:12](#)); and Second Isaiah as well portrays Yahweh's creative capacity as part of a comprehensive and comprehensible scheme for the structure of the cosmos ([Isaiah 40](#)). If the relatively recent trend in biblical scholarship to attribute a most significant role to the wisdom tradition in shaping the religion of Israel should continue to command assent, then it is quite possible that the major impetus to cosmological thought in ancient Israel resulted from this tradition which attempted most directly to understand and categorize the universe's structuring prin-

ciples.

The most extended report of creation in this context is that now to be found in [Prov 8:22–31](#) as a part of an entire chapter devoted to extolling the concept of "Wisdom" (*ḥokmâ*). Wisdom is here portrayed as the oldest of all created things. Wisdom attended upon Yahweh in the formation of the oceans, the mountains, and the earth, and in the stabilizing of various cosmic features. Given the continued interest in Israel and elsewhere in first things and in the order of creation, a long debate has ensued concerning the question of whether Wisdom was "begotten," "acquired," or "created," with the balance of probability now leaning toward the last of these renderings for the Hebrew verb *qānâ* on the basis of the word's use in the Ugaritic texts (McKane *Proverbs* [OTL](#), 352–54;

Dahood 1968: 513). In any case, the emphasis throughout is clearly upon the almost unimaginable intellectual power of Yahweh's attribute of Wisdom in supplying a reasoned blueprint for the cosmos. Toward the conclusion of this cosmogony from the wisdom tradition, the figure of Wisdom is portrayed both as a child delighting the resulting cosmic order and as perhaps a master craftsman or technician ([Prov 8:30-31](#)). The latter description is dependent upon the correct understanding of the noun *'āṣn* ([Prov 8:30](#)), which may mean "artisan" but might also suggest again "child," or "teacher," or perhaps "faithful companion" (McKane *Proverbs* OTL, 72).

As with the cosmogonies in [Genesis 2](#) and [Genesis 1](#), considerable attention has been granted to the questions of the

origin of the role assigned to Wisdom in [Proverbs 8](#) and of the resulting stages in the creation process. Egyptian tradition long established a position of preeminence for the concept of wisdom, often spoken of in terms of a deity called Maat who accompanies the creator's activities, so that here as in the case of [Psalm 104](#) direct Egyptian influence is certainly possible. But the full appreciation of the Ugaritic texts has demonstrated conclusively that Canaanite tradition is the immediate point of impact upon multiple areas of Israel's thinking, whatever may be the more remote origins of any of these thoughts, so that we should probably again look to Canaan for the most direct source of the inspiration for [Prov 8:22-31](#). But the many uncertainties surrounding the origin and translation of these

verses should not obscure their chief point, which is to recognize the orderly cosmos as an object of great delight and wonder. As such, [Proverbs 8](#) is very much in keeping with the trajectory of later biblical thought and of Jewish and Christian thinking beyond the biblical period (Philo, for example) with regard to cosmological matters.

8. Cosmogony in Apocalyptic Thought. Eschatology, as teachings about final things, and apocalyptic thought, which reports revelations about these same final matters, might initially seem the least likely locus for cosmogonic materials.

However, as soon as one reflects that eschatological speculation is in fact but the future translation of cosmogony, then the bearing of such materials upon cosmology is perhaps clear. Eliade, for

example, has noted that the chronological setting of cosmogonies in the remotest period, a period that Eliade labels *in illo tempore*, is in fact repeated in apocalyptic materials: “*in illo tempore* is situated not only at the beginning of time but also at its end ... The only difference is that this victory over the forces of darkness and chaos no longer occurs regularly every year but is projected into a future and Messianic *illud tempus*” (1959: 106). Thus, if cosmogonic myths recount the origins of the intelligible universe, apocalyptic myths recount this same universe as created anew in the future.

The initial stages in Israel’s development of an apocalyptic tradition are apparent already in the prophets of the exilic period; and it is likely that the apocalyptic tradition is to be traced quite directly to the

unfolding of prophetic thought (Hanson 1975). The phrase “in later days,” “in following eras” (*’aḥārīt hayyāmîm*), sometimes refers to a kind of hazy boundary between the near future and the far, clearly eschatological future (as in [Jer 23:20](#)), but in later biblical texts has become a technical term for the end of history as previously experienced ([TDOT 2: 211–12](#)). Perhaps the single and clearest results of this developing apocalyptic tradition are to be seen in [Zechariah 14](#). Those responsible for this chapter extend the thought of Second Isaiah with regard to the revelation of new things and that of Third Isaiah regarding “new heavens and a new earth” ([Isa 65:17](#)) to arrive at a portrait of a final cosmogonic battle which will erase the former created order. [Zech 14:6–8](#) shows with particular clarity the

announced end of series of paired concepts (day and night, heat and cold, seasons of planting and harvest) which had served to define the originally structured cosmos (Hanson 1975: 376–79). But the very conclusiveness of the former created order’s giving way to a new order reveals that such apocalyptic thought should be thought of as additional cosmogonic material within ancient Israel.

9. The Hebrew Bible’s Portrait of the Cosmos. The variety in date, origin, and scope of the Hebrew Bible’s cosmological materials means that achieving a single, uniform picture of the physical universe is hardly possible. Still, sufficient overlap does obtain between the many accounts of the universe, however these may vary in their details, to allow for a few generalizations. The earth on

which humanity dwells is seen as a round, solid object, perhaps a disk, floating upon a limitless expanse of water. Paralleling this lower body of water is a second, similarly limitless, above, from which water descends in the form of rain through holes and channels piercing the heavenly reservoir. The moon, sun, and other luminaries are fixed in a curved structure which arches over the earth. This structure is the familiar “firmament” (*rāqîaʿ*) of the priestly account, perhaps envisioned as a solid but very thin substance on the analogy of beaten and stretched metal.

Though some texts appear to convey a picture of a four-storied universe ([Job 11:8–9](#) or [Ps 139:8–9](#)), the great majority of biblical texts assume the three-storied universe so clearly assumed in other, ancient tradi-

tions. Thus, the Decalog’s prohibition of images specifies “heaven above,” “earth below,” and “water under the earth” as the possible models for any such forbidden images ([Exod 20:4](#)). If we understand the common term “earth” (*ʿereṣ*) as designating at times the “underworld,” then the combined references in [Ps 77:19](#) to heaven, the “world” (*tēbēl*), and the “earth” (*ʿereṣ*) are another appeal to the universe as a three-storied structure (for other texts where *ʿereṣ* may refer to the underworld, see Stadelmann 1970: 128, [n. 678](#)). Clearer reference still to the same structure is to be found in [Ps 115:15–17](#), where we find grouped together “the heaven of heavens,” “the earth,” and the realm of “the dead” (cf. [Ps 33:6–8](#) and [Prov 8:27–29](#)).

The curving, solid structure which arches over the realm of

humanity is sometimes called a “disk” or “vault” (*hûg*; Isa 40:22; Prov 8:27). That which allows the heavenly abyss to water the earth are occasional interruptions in this solid structure, openings called variously windows, doors, or channels. In some texts, that which suspends the habitable earth above the underworld’s waters (see 1 Sam 2:8 for another reference to these rivers) are pillars or some such foundational structures. These seem envisioned in Job 38:4–6; Pss 24:2; 104:5; Prov 8:29, and elsewhere. Finally, the realm beneath the arena of human activity is not only imagined as one of watery chaos but also given the specific designation “Sheol” (*šě’ôl*), usually translated “the underworld.” In the different elaborations upon just what one should imagine Sheol as including, again there is little consis-

tency. At times, Sheol is personified, with a belly or womb and a mouth (Jonah 2:3—Eng 2:2; Prov 1:23; 30:16; and Ps 141:7), while at others Sheol is rather more architecturally portrayed (Isa 38:10; Job 7:9–10; 14:20–22; 17:13; 18:17–18), as a dark and forgetful land or city (Stadelmann 1970: 166–76).

C. Cosmology in the NT

1. Sources of Early Christian Cosmological Thought.

References to the origin of the cosmos and to this cosmos’ structure are rather less frequently to be found in the NT than in the Hebrew Bible. This cosmological sparseness is to be accounted for partly, and most obviously, because of the smaller size of this collection of texts from early Christianity and partly because the essentials of the portrait painted in the Hebrew Bible are assumed. However, another important

reason for the absence of much cosmological lore in the NT is based upon the conclusions of research into the situation in which early Christians felt themselves to lie. Throughout the 20th century, biblical scholarship has confirmed in general the view that the first Christians expected the second coming of the Messiah imminently, and this notable eschatological immediacy does not allow for such speculation as obtains in many religious traditions. One might here contrast Chinese Buddhism, whose expectations of the coming of a future Buddha Maitreya ([EncRel](#) 4: 116) are certainly messianic; but these expectations still sit quite easily within a vast chronological scheme.

The first and chief source of such NT cosmogonic thought as is to be found is, of course, the material from the Hebrew

Bible reviewed above. Especially fruitful ground was found in the cosmological thought of the wisdom tradition, both within the Hebrew Bible and then in later, Hellenistic Judaism. Greek notions of the cosmos' administration through principles of rational organization were also important. To the extent that a fully developed portrait of a cosmic redeemer had been developed within pre-Christian Gnosticism (and the extent of this development remains the subject of scrutiny and disagreement), this portrait too will have exercised its influence upon the first Christian writers, especially in regard to an important departure from Hebrew Bible thought. For gnostic thought, the created world is no longer a divine blessing but is rather evaluated negatively and seen as under the domain of demon-

ic powers. The view of redemption by Christ as redemption from this world obviously shares elements of such thought.

2. Cosmological Assumptions in Pauline Theology.

The references to cosmology in letters generally recognized to be of Pauline authorship appear largely, or wholly, to be allusions to pre-Pauline confessional formulas. Thus, the affirmation in [1 Cor 8:6](#) that there is one God from whom “all things (*ta panta*) come” and also one Lord, Jesus Christ, “through whom all things are” reads like a development of the Jewish confession that Yahweh is one into a twofold formula of one God and one Lord (Conzelmann *1 Corinthians Hermeneia*, 144). God as creator of the cosmos is here affirmed, but the affirmation is assumed rather than developed, and is

plainly subsidiary to a confession of Christ’s soteriological role. Much the same could be said of the hymn, widely seen as pre-Pauline and often attributed to gnostic influence, in [Phil 2:6–11](#). This hymn insists upon the cosmic and preexistent status of the Christian Lord, whose role in rescuing humanity from domination by earthly powers is again stressed. Indeed, it is perhaps worth accenting that confessions of Christ’s cosmic role are at the heart of NT cosmology.

At several places in Paul’s letter to the Romans one can again catch glimpses of the cosmological foundations of early Christian thought. In his expansion upon the theme of justification in [Romans 4](#), Paul notes that the God of Abraham is the one who calls into being that which was not ([Rom 4:17](#)). As with [Gen 1:1–3](#), this verse

has been read as a reference to *creatio ex nihilo*, though in the context of Paul's argument the chief intent is plainly to emphasize the power of God rather than to address this issue at all. [Rom 8:19–22](#) alludes to a position never fully developed, that of creation's pained and groaning longing for release from futility; the background here might equally be gnostic speculation (Bultmann 1951: 174, 230) or the laments about the present world order expressed in Jewish apocalypticism. Finally, quite in keeping with [1 Cor 8:6](#) is Paul's statement in [Rom 11:36](#) that "everything" (*ta panta*) is from God.

3. The Johannine Tradition. Much as the priestly account of creation in [Gen 1:1–2:4a](#) has become determinative for later Jewish and Christian theology, so too the preface to the fourth gospel is the most

readily cited piece of cosmogonic teaching in the NT. The literary style of [John 1:1–18](#) once more, as in the case of [Phil 2:6–11](#), has suggested to many scholars an origin in a ritual hymn. In deliberate imitation of [Genesis 1](#) in the [LXX](#) version, this preface too opens "In the beginning," here to emphasize the cosmic and remotest origins of the Logos ("Word") figure. Though there is no reflection on the mechanisms of creation at all, that everything was created through the Logos is affirmed by this preface in clear terms ([John 1:3](#)). Similarly not reflected upon are a host of questions about this figure which have exercised later theologians and scholars: the Logos is of cosmic status and existed with God from the beginning of all, but how exactly is one to imagine this figure? As a person, or as the personi-

fied revealing and creating abilities of God? And how does one deal with the apparent paradox of the Logos as both fully equal with God and yet equally and clearly subordinate to the Father? The question of the origin of the Logos concept in Johannine thought is similarly difficult to answer, with both the wisdom speculation of Jewish thought and the gnostic redeemer scheme possible sources. What is clear throughout [John 1:1–18](#) is just what had been stressed by Paul, the soteriological function of the Logos who became flesh for the salvation of humanity.

The final book in the present NT canon, the book of Revelation, returns in fairly elaborate fashion, to the cosmogonic battle scenes witnessed allusively throughout parts of the Hebrew Bible (Collins 1976). In addition to affirmations of God

as the creator of all ([Rev 4:11](#)), and as the omnipotent being (*pantokratōr*) who is at once beginning and end ([Rev 1:8](#); [21:6](#); [22:13](#)), four visions in the book of Revelation are devoted to allegorical rehearsals of the old cosmic battle scenario, as first Gunkel recognized nearly a century ago. In [Revelation 12](#), the chaotic enemy is the serpentine dragon, reminding us of the Sea Monster figure (*tannîn*) in the Hebrew Bible. [Revelation 13](#) introduces two such forces of chaos, perhaps Leviathan and Behemoth in their cosmically destructive modes (Ford *Revelation AB*, 217). The description of the great harlot in [Revelation 17](#) reminds one of many of the Hebrew Bible's allusions to the threat posed by undifferentiated water; and again in [Revelation 21](#) the sea as enemy recalls the opponents of Yahweh's cos-

mogonic task. In all of these visions, the function of apocalyptic in repeating and renewing the original cosmogony is thus especially clear.

4. Later NT Thought. Even after the initial, creative period of Christian self-expression, little extended discussion of cosmological issues, at least as these are standardly defined, is to be found in the NT. This suggests that the spareness of early Christian cosmology is at least as much the result of a Christian hesitancy to formalize, much less to make of creedal significance, such issues as it is a consequence of the sense that the second coming of the Messiah was imminent. [Col 1:15–20](#) is perhaps the fullest of these brief expressions of what was assumed on behalf of early Christianity about the cosmos. Here, another likely instance of a hymn

reutilized in a different context, Christ is affirmed as uniquely preceding all creation, and as the being through whom everything was established. These affirmations recall most centrally the role accorded Wisdom in [Proverbs 8](#) and in post-biblical Jewish thought, though such views, without, of course, the identification of Christ as the medium of creation, can also be found expressed throughout Hellenistic thought. Finally, [2 Peter 3](#) returns one to the cosmogonic formulations of the Hebrew Bible, in attributing creation to divine speech and in comparing the coming destruction of the known cosmos to that familiar from the biblical flood tale.

D. The Functions of Religious Cosmogonies/Cosmologies

Most scholarly accounts of the place of cosmogonic lore in the religions of Israel and of

early Christianity dwell upon the origin, the initial cultic setting, and the eventual literary context of this lore. Given biblical scholarship's understandable concern for questions of historical origin and transmission (Oden 1987: 1-39), this concentration is hardly surprising. But such concentration requires supplementing with questions of function and meaning. Why is it that few, if any, religious traditions omit some attention to cosmology? Why are the religious communities responsible for collections of sacred texts so concerned, some might say obsessed, with inquiry into the earliest days of the cosmos? Some attention must be paid to these and similar questions here, though the fact that cosmological materials are most frequently to be found in the context of cosmogonic

myths means that the following discussion overlaps to some extent issues raised in any account of the origin and role of myths in religion most generally. See [MYTH AND MYTHOLOGY](#).

1. Older Views. Since cosmogonic myths standardly treat data like the shape of the universe, the ultimate sources of meteorological phenomena, and the origin and meaning of the moon and stars, a view long popular was that cosmology is primitive science. This view can be found expressed even in antiquity; but it commanded especially wide assent in the 19th century, during the early days of the systematic study of comparative mythology and of the origin of modern anthropology. However, analyzing cosmologies as strictly analogous to scientific inquiry has never ceased to find a few pro-

ponents and has most recently witnessed a revival.

Humans need, this view affirms, satisfying answers to some basic questions about the world of nature; and, this explanation continues, as science answers such questions for moderns, so cosmological narratives answered them for traditional societies. Predictably for the 19th-century heyday of this explanation, cosmogony was thus readily accommodated to an evolutionary scheme. Early humans were seen as adequately served by religious cosmologies; but modern humanity was credited with evolving more demanding standards which could be met only by fully scientific, verifiable explanations. Applying this view to the combat myth in biblical texts, for example, one might say that the origin of such myths was the desire to

explain the alternating wet and dry seasons. This desire was long fulfilled by cosmogonies which deified the powers of wetness or aridity; today, however, such early cosmogonies no longer continue to provide satisfactory answers and hence have been replaced by impersonal accounts.

A second explanation, often placed in tandem with the model of cosmogony as primitive science, was the myth-ritual hypothesis. According to this view, all myths originated as rituals. Traditional humans, the proponents of myth-ritualism asserted, acted before they reflected. The myths which have survived are the later attempts to make sense of the primary and generative rituals. These myths are, to use an analogy much favored by myth-ritualists, the libretti to the more fundamental ritual dra-

mas. Assertions about the cultic origins of much biblical material owe a great deal to the base assumptions of the myth-ritual model. For example, we have seen that a setting in the priestly cult is often posited for the seven-day cosmogony in [Genesis 1](#), and a royal cult origin for the anthropogony in [Genesis 2](#).

Attractive as each of these hypotheses is, neither has been able to sustain itself fully in the face of more recent research into the role played by cosmologies in various religious traditions. With regard to the former hypothesis, 20th-century ethnological work has established that so-called “primitive” or “traditional” cultures are fully as capable of scientific, rational, and empirical thinking as are their modern counterparts. If religious cosmologies can exist, as they

do, side by side with accounts that must be judged scientific, then it must be that these cosmologies play a role somewhat different from that played by scientific thought. Cosmogonies thus do not necessarily give way in an evolutionary scheme to scientific thought.

With regard to the myth-ritual model, demonstrating that all myths originated as rituals has proved exceptionally difficult. The favored example of the myth-ritualists, the alleged origin of the Babylonian *Enuma Eliš* myth in the setting of the Akitu festival, now turns out to be an example which may rather be that of an earlier myth only later adapted to a ritual setting (Smith 1982: 92). Hence, if some myths originated as rituals, other rituals appear to have begun as myths. Additionally, positing a ritual origin for all cosmogonic

myths offered no real explanation of these myths; it only postponed the question of explanation, offering instead a genetic description. That is, even if research should document the general priority of ritual over myth, one would still be left wanting a sustainable account of the meaning and function of ritual.

2. Recent Formulations of the Place of Cosmology in Religion. Given the apparent inadequacy of older hypotheses, many 20th-century scholars have sought alternative explanations for the demonstrable concern on behalf of so many religious traditions to answer cosmological questions. In fairness, it must be said that many or all of these latter explanations have also been found wanting, so that a major agenda for future research remains inquiry into the deep-

est role played by cosmological materials.

The explanatory model which has continued to play the largest role for contemporary students of cosmology is the so-called “charter” position, in its various formulations. This position, that cosmologies provide a charter for all behavior and for the meaning of all actions to religious communities, is one that received major impetus in the work of Emile Durkheim. According to Durkheim, all of the classification systems to be encountered in religious traditions, including preeminently religious cosmologies, “are modelled upon the social organization” and “have taken the forms of society for their framework” (1915: 169). All such classifications are hierarchical; and, since “hierarchy is exclusively a social affair,” these clas-

sifications are taken “from society and projected ... into our conceptions of the world” (1915: 173).

This essential perception that cosmologies owe their origins to human social formations was then greatly extended and worked out in detail by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. His field work demonstrated to him that “religious faith establishes, fixes, and enhances all valuable mental attitudes, such as reverence for tradition, harmony with environment, courage and confidence in the struggles with difficulties and at the prospect of death” (1954: 89). A cosmological myth “fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical

rules for the guidance of man”; such a myth is thus no “idle tale,” nor “an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery,” but rather “a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and wisdom” (1954: 101).

Many subsequent students of religious cosmogony have found further support for the position first defended by Durkheim and Malinowski. C. Long, for example, has very recently argued again that “the cosmogonic myth provides a model that is recapitulated in the creation and founding of all other human modes of existence”; this myth provides “a charter for conduct for other aspects of culture” ([EncRel](#) 4: 94). So too Bolle’s summary of cosmological thought concludes that “views of the cosmos are in harmony with the social order in a tribe or tradition, and as a rule reflect the

prevailing mode of production” (*EncRel* 4: 102). Nor is it simply that a cosmology reflects in some fashion the social formation. As charters, cosmologies also carry with them ethical implications: “the behavior required of man is often described and always implied in the account of the world’s structure” (*EncRel* 4: 104).

The historian of religion who has devoted the greatest attention to cosmological thought is surely Mircea Eliade. Eliade’s position is in many regards a combination of several noted above. Cosmological thought for him often has a ritual origin, satisfies an intellectual need to provide explanations of puzzling phenomena, and is also a comprehensive charter for ethical conduct. Eliade begins by affirming the absolutely central role of cosmogonic

lore in traditional societies. Indeed, he repeatedly proposes the presence of cosmogonic lore as the defining characteristic of traditional as opposed to modern, historically based societies: “Whether he abolishes it periodically, whether he devaluates it by perpetually finding transhistorical models and archetypes for it, whether, finally, he gives it a metahistorical meaning (cyclical history, eschatological significations, and so on), the man of the traditional civilizations accorded the historical event no value in itself” (1959: 141). In the alleged absence of a developed historical consciousness, traditional humans, argues Eliade, turn always to accounts of what occurred in the earliest days of the cosmos. Only things that happened “in the beginning, ‘in those days,’ *in illo tempore, ab origine*,” have full significance

for traditional societies (1959: 4).

If this schematic presentation of two worlds of thought offers for Eliade a rationale for the setting of cosmologies in remotest antiquity, their function is then accounted for by utilizing a version of the charter position. Hence, cosmogonic myths “preserve and transmit the paradigms, the exemplary models, for all the responsible activities in which men engage” (Eliade 1959: viii). But, as noted previously, Eliade goes on to combine cosmogonic myths’ charter function with the view that these myths also satisfy intellectual needs: “primordial, sacred history ... is fundamental because it explains, and by the same token justifies, the existence of the world, of man and society ... It relates how things came into being, providing the exem-

plary model and also the justifications of man’s activities” (1984: 141).

The many writings of Eliade possess the clear virtue of offering a comprehensive account for the role of cosmological thought, an account evidenced by material drawn from the widest array of religious traditions. Still, the very comprehensiveness of his position means it remains open to some of the same criticisms offered against its component parts. For this reason, others have attempted a fresh approach to the questions of the meaning and function of cosmogony. At once the most novel and the most controversial of these attempts is that provided by the French anthropologist and philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss. See [MYTH AND MYTHOLOGY](#). Lévi-Strauss begins by stressing the prima-

cy of language. He thus looks to modern linguistics, rather than to sociology or biology, as providing the disciplinary paradigm upon which study of cosmogonic myths should be founded. The unique phenomenon of language means that human beings are caught in a kind of cosmic contradiction: they are at once animals, hence a part of nature, and yet also distinct from the rest of nature since through language they create the mental world in which they live. This contradiction is then found to be mirrored in any number of cultural creations, including kinship structures and religious myths.

Given Lévi-Strauss' prioritizing of linguistics, his analyses of myths always concentrate upon structures of relationship, rather than upon individual items in any mythological repertoire. As meaning in lan-

guage is always relational rather than essential, so too meaning in myths must be sought structurally. Perhaps the best, brief example of how Lévi-Strauss' structural method works when applied to cosmological myths is his analysis of the British Columbian myth of Asdiwal (1976: 146-97). Although he analyzes this myth in terms of four distinct levels (the geographical, the technoeconomic, the sociological, and the overtly cosmological), he discovers that each level in fact is a redundant expression of the same message. This message is the attempt "to justify the shortcomings of reality" (1976: 173). Similarly, Lévi-Strauss' well known and early analysis of the Oedipus myth concludes that, "although experience contradicts theory, social life validates cosmology by its similarity of structure.

Hence cosmology is true” (1963: 216). That is to say, the human situation as one caught in the web of various contradictions has given rise to the repeated articulation of cosmogonic myths whose structures makes these contradictions, not disappear, but in a sense become mentally tolerable.

Though the search for an adequate explanation for the function of cosmologies is hardly completed, many scholars have adopted a version of Lévi-Strauss’ analytical model. For example, Jonathan Z. Smith has recently argued that “those myths and rituals which belong to a locative map of the cosmos labor to overcome all incongruity by assuming the interconnectedness of all things, the adequacy of symbolization (usually expressed as a belief in the correspondence between macro- and micro-

cosm) and the power and possibility of repetition” (Smith 1978: 308–9). Finally, Geertz too sees the problematic issues of human religious life, such as the classic theodicy dilemma, giving rise to “the uncomfortable suspicion that perhaps the world, and hence man’s life in the world, has no genuine order at all—no empirical regularity, no emotional form, no moral coherence. And the religious response to this suspicion is in each case the same: the formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience. The effort is not to deny the undeniable—that there are unexplained events, that life hurts, or that rain falls upon the just—but to deny that there

are inexplicable events" (Geertz 1973: 108).

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