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BIBLICAL CREATIONISM AND ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN EVOLUTIONARY IDEAS

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explore the presence of ideas related to what we call today natural evolution in ancient Near Eastern literature, placing particular emphasis on Egypt. Each text will be explored within its own specific religious and cultural context before any attempt is made to establish cross-cultural comparisons. With respect to the biblical text, especially Genesis 1 through 3, it will be studied in the final form in which it reached us (i.e., its canonical form). These chapters display a unified narrative that contributes to clarifying in a coherent way the variety of its specific details. The study of ancient Near Eastern texts could help us place the biblical text in a context that will allow us to notice details that we may otherwise have overlooked.

THEOGONY AND COSMOGONY IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Archaeologists have found a significant amount of written and iconographic materials in the ancient Near East that have helped scholars gain a better understanding of the Sumerian and Akkadian cultures and religions. More recently, there has been an emphasis on

the influence of those cultures on Western thinking.¹ Egypt has always intrigued the Western world to the point of fascination.² Egyptian ideas are quite widespread in the West and are commonly found in films and comic books. Interestingly, some elements of the cosmogonies of the ancient Near East, including Egypt, phrased in mythological language, appear to have found a more sophisticated expression in modern cosmogony and some theories on the origin of life. These elements will be the focus of this study.

BEFORE CREATION

Egyptians raised the question of origins by asking, first, what there was before creation or beyond the actual cosmos. They basically recognized that there was no final answer to that question. When addressing that specific concern, they used statements of denial. Thus, for instance, Egyptian texts would say that before creation there was no space, no matter, no names, and there was neither birth nor death. Nothing had yet come into being.³ This formula was used to indicate a radical difference between what is and what was not.⁴ Here are some more typical examples in Egyptian myths:

1. When the heaven had not yet come into being, when the earth had not yet come into being, when the two river banks had not yet come into being, when there had not yet come into being that fear which arose because of the eye of Horus.
2. When the heaven had not yet come into being, when the earth had not yet come into being, when men had not yet come into being, when the gods had not yet been born, when death had not yet come into being.
3. When two things in this land had not yet come into being.⁵

1. See Jean Bottéro, "Religion and Reasoning in Mesopotamia," in *Ancestor of the West: Writing, Reasoning, and Religion in Mesopotamia, Elam, and Greece*, ed. Jean Bottéro, Clarisse Herrenschmidt, and Jean-Pierre Vernant (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3–66.

2. For a careful study of this, see Erik Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

3. Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), 174, 75.

4. It is correct to say that not only in Egypt but throughout the ancient Near East, "the typical beginning of cosmogonic myth is performed by subtraction: there is a great resounding 'Not Yet,'" that is to say, at that moment what is now was not yet. See Walter Burkert, "The Logic of Cosmogony," in *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, ed. Richard Buxton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 92.

5. Hellmut Brunner, "Egyptian Texts: Myths," in *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. Walter Beyerlin (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1978), 6.

But Egyptians also speculated that beyond the cosmos we could find what was always there, namely, darkness and a limitless ocean or primeval waters called Nun.⁶ This was a lifeless, motionless state of absolute inertness and nonexistence.⁷

ORIGIN OF LIFE

There were no gods since the time before creation, so properly speaking, creation does not begin with cosmogony but with a theogony that leads to or is, for all practical purposes, a cosmogony. In fact, one of the common and fundamental characteristics of ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies is that they all begin with a theogony.⁸ For Egyptians in particular, the next logical question would have been, how did “what is” come into being? How did the gods come

6. See “From the ‘Book of Nut,’” trans. James P. Allen, *COS* 1, no. 1: 5. For a more detailed discussion of the nature of Nun, see Susanne Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne avant le Nouvel Empire*, OBO, 134 (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 23–31. Bickel indicates that Nun was not a creator-god but the source of energy, which was a determinant factor at the beginning of creation.

7. James P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (New Haven, Conn.: Department of Near-Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 1988), 3, 4; see also George Hart, *The Legendary Past: Egyptian Myths* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1990), 11.

8. This applies also to ancient Mesopotamian religion, in which “theogony was only the first act of cosmogony” (see Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], 81). A couple of examples could be useful. The so-called Babylonian Epic of Creation or *Enūma Elish* (or “when on high”), dated to ca. 1500–1000 BC, begins with a description of the origin of the gods: “When on high no name was given to heaven, nor below was the netherworld called by name, primeval Apsu was their progenitor, and matrix-Tiamat was she who bore them all When no gods at all had been brought forth, none called by names, none destinies ordained, then were the gods formed within the (se two).” See “Epic of Creation,” trans. Benjamin R. Foster, *COS* 1, no. 111: 391. In passing, I should indicate that this epic is not a creation account but a composition about the “elevation of Marduk to the top of the pantheon in return for taking up the cause of the embattled gods, who build his great temple of Esagila in Babylon in recognition of his leadership. The composition could therefore be as readily called ‘The Exaltation of Marduk’” (*ibid.*, 390, 91). See also Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature: Volume I: Archaic, Classic, Mature* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993), 351. Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 82, has stated that “there is no Mesopotamian cosmogonic myth that deals with the origin of the whole cosmos, as is found in the biblical Book of Genesis. Most of the tales are content to fill in only pieces of the puzzle.” Another example is found in Sumerian literature, which although lacking a creation narrative, contains some references to creation, thus providing for us general ideas about their views on the origin of things. “People living in the ANE apparently did not expect a single coherent account, tolerating instead different versions of the beginning of the world.” Compare Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible*, CBQMS, 26 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1994), 15. One of the traditions describes the beginning of creation as “a cosmic marriage in which Heaven (An) fertilized Earth (Ki), and from their union arose gods, human, and vegetation” (*ibid.*).

into existence? The answer they provided was more developed than what we find anywhere else in the ancient Near East.

An Egyptian text states that "(Amun is the god) who was in the very beginning, when no god had yet come into being, when no name of anything had yet been named."⁹ According to the Hermopolitan creation theology, Amun was the creator-god. The statement just quoted gives the impression that he was already there at the beginning or that he was eternal, but that is not the case. It is at this point in Egyptian thought that elements of evolutionary thinking surface. But before we examine these ideas, it would be helpful to know about the main Egyptian theological centers.

There were four main theological centers in Egypt, and they each had different approaches to and emphases on creation.¹⁰ But some of the basic elements of the creation myths remained the same. We know about the importance of Heliopolis in Egyptian theology, whose creator-god was Atum. There was also Hermopolis, where creation was the result of the action of eight primeval gods (the Ogdoad), although Thoth was also considered a creator-god. In Thebes, the creator-god was Amun, and the theological emphasis was on divine transcendence. And finally, there was the Memphite theology of creation, according to which Ptah was the creator-god. Its main emphasis was on creation through the word. These different systems "rested on remarkably similar underlying ideas" and were not necessarily in competition with each other.¹¹ The Heliopolitan theology of origins will be the main focus, because it is "the best-known and perhaps most important of the early Egyptian" cosmogonies.¹² Besides, it provided the basis for all later speculations about origins in Egypt.¹³ In this theology, the creator-god is Atum. The origin of this god takes us into the realm of evolutionary ideas.

9. Brunner, "Egyptian Texts," 7.

10. For further details on these theological centers, see Hart, *Legendary Past*, 11-25; Leonard H. Lesko, "Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology," in *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 91-95; and Jacobus van Dijk, "Myth and Mythmaking in Ancient Egypt," in *CANE*, vol. 3, 1699-702.

11. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 100.

12. Lesko, "Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies," 91.

13. Van Dijk, "Myth and Mythmaking," vol. 3, 1699. Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 120, comments: "The cosmogonic model of Heliopolis exerted an undiminished influence in Egyptian religion throughout the millennia of its history. The model's central concept is the 'coming into being' of the cosmos, as opposed to its creation."

The background of creation

I am the Waters, unique, without second.

The evolution of creation

That is where I evolved,

On the great occasion of my floating that happened to me.

I am the one who once evolved—

Cirplet, who is in his egg.

I am the one who began therein, (in) the Waters.

See, the Flood is subtracted from me:

See, I am the remainder.

I made my body evolve through my own effectiveness.

I am the one who made me.

I built myself as I wished, according to my heart.¹⁴

This is obviously a very important theogonic text and deserves careful attention. The first sentence is spoken by Nun, the personified waters before creation.¹⁵ The speaker in the rest of the text is Atum, the creator-god. The event took place a long time ago, when there were only the primeval waters. Atum describes and explains how he came into being in the absence of life. Therefore, the myth portrays an important Egyptian understanding of the origin of matter and life.¹⁶ Atum's existence begins within the waters through a

14. "Cosmologies: From Coffin Texts Spell 714," trans. James P. Allen, *COS* 1, no. 2:6, 7. The text is dated to sometime between the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom (2181–1655 BC). "This text is part of a series inscribed on coffins . . . , designed to aid the deceased's spirit in its daily journey from the Netherworld of the tomb to the world of the living. This particular spell, in which the deceased is identified with the primordial source of all matter as it first existed within the primeval waters, has so far been found only on one coffin" (ibid.), 6.

15. J. M. Plumley, "The Cosmology of Ancient Egypt," in *Ancient Cosmologies*, ed. Carmen Blackner and Michael Loewe (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), 25.

16. In texts dated to the New Kingdom (ca. 1551–1070 BC), we find a different myth according to which life originated from the Ogdoad, the eight primeval gods. At least some of these gods are personifications of different aspects of the primeval waters. See Hart, *Legendary Past*, 20; Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 27–29, states that caution should be exercised when attempting to identify the Ogdoad with the different elements of the primeval universe. We have four couples representing those different aspects: Nun-Naunet, the watery abyss; Amun-Amaunet, concealed dynamism or air; Huh-Hauhet, chaos or flood force; and Kuk-Kauket, darkness. Compare Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, trans. Ann E. Keep (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973), 175. We seem to have here cosmic matter and energy, without organic life. From this "inorganic matter," life will originate by itself; in other words, this is the "evolution of life within this framework of inorganic matter" (ibid.). According to the myth, "from these eight deities came an egg bearing the god responsible for creating all other gods" and everything else—originally Thoth, but Atum is also mentioned (see Lesko, "Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies," 95). Perhaps we can say that "at some point these entities [the Ogdoad] who comprised the primordial substance interacted explosively and snapped whatever balanced tensions

process of self-development or evolution. The evolutionary process begins with the sudden appearance and development of an egg within the waters of nonexistence. "After a long but undefined period,"¹⁷ the egg or Atum rises and floats on the surface of the waters, where it will evolve into the primeval mound or hill¹⁸ where Atum will stand. At this stage, Atum and the mound are a unity of undifferentiated matter—a cosmic stem cell. The egg and the mound are Atum at different stages of development: "I made my body evolve through my own effectiveness. I am the one who made me."¹⁹ Such phrases speak about self-causality and total independence from anything else.²⁰ This god is *causa sui*. The Egyptians are describing what we would call a cosmic singularity, totally independent of any external force of divine origin. This is the moment when life springs into existence by itself.

had contained their elemental powers. . . . Accordingly, from the burst of energy released within the churned-up primal matter, the primeval mound was thrust clear" and self-generated life appeared (Hart, *Legendary Past*, 21) See also Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 176. This is an almost scientific approach to the origin of life.

17. Günter Burkard, "Conceptions of the Cosmos—The Universe," in *Egypt: The World of the Pharaohs*, ed. Regine Schulz and Matthias Seidel (Köln, Germany: Könemann, 1998), 447.

18. There is a connection between Atum and the primeval mound, because he is occasionally described as a hill. See Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, "Primeval Mound," *British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 229. In fact, "according to the earliest versions of this cosmogony Atum emerged out of the primeval waters in the form of a hill. A latter recension of the story states that Atum arose out of the waters seated or standing upon the hill," notes Plumley, "Cosmology of Ancient Egypt," 28.

19. Van Dijk, "Myth and Mythmaking," vol. 3, 1700, writes: "This Primeval Mound, which in the Heliopolitan version of the creation myth is identical to the sacred precinct of the temple of Heliopolis, is at the same time a manifestation of Atum himself and the place where Atum begins to 'create' or 'develop' himself."

20. Texts about Amun, coming from the theological center in Thebes, are even more emphatic with respect to the self-development of the creator-god. A few lines from one of the texts illustrate this fact. The text is from the New Kingdom period (1551–1070 BC). Cf. "Cosmologies: From Papyrus Leiden I 350," trans. James P. Allen, *COS* 1, no. 16: 24, 25:

You began evolution with nothing,
 Without the world being empty of you on the first occasion.
 All gods are evolved after you,
 [...]
 Amun, who evolved in the beginning, with his emanation unknown,
 No god evolving prior to him,
 No other god with him to tell of his appearance,
 There being no mother of his for whom his name was made,
 And no father of his who ejaculated him so as to say "It is I!"
 Who smelted his egg by himself.
 Icon secret of birth, creator of his (own) perfection.
 Divine god, who evolved by himself and every god evolved since he began himself.

The Egyptian verb translated “to evolve” is *kheper* and means “to change, develop, evolve.”²¹ It is used quite often to refer to Atum as the “self-evolving one.”²² With the creation of space, air, and sky, Atum will evolve even more to become the sun-god, Re, also called Atum-Re.²³ This creation myth is a mythological expression of the spontaneous generation of a unique life from which all life will develop. We can call this an “act of original spontaneous genesis.”²⁴ This has led an Egyptologist to suggest that there are some Egyptian texts that deserve “to be considered a contribution to the philosophical or scientific literature on evolution.”²⁵

Some of the Egyptian ideas that have been discussed are also found in a number of Sumerian and Akkadian texts. According to some of them, creation occurs by means of spontaneous generation and sexual reproduction.²⁶ As in Egypt and in modern science, in the Mesopotamian civilization, it was “assumed that everything now in existence went back to a simple element.”²⁷ According to *Enuma Elish*, the simple element was two bodies of water. It is in the mixing of the two that they acquire spontaneously divine procreative powers, personified as the god Apsu (sweet water) and the goddess Tiamat (seawater).²⁸ It is within these two that the gods are formed.²⁹

21. See Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 29; and Assmann, *Search for God*, 60.

22. “Cosmologies: From Coffin Texts Spell 75,” trans. James P. Allen, *COS* 1, no. 5: 8. See also Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 35, who comments that the phrase “he who came into existence by himself” is the most common characterization of Atum (my own translation).

23. See Shaw and Nicholson, *British Museum Dictionary*, 45, 46; also Karol Myśliwiec, “Atum,” in *OEA*, vol. 1, 158–60; and van Dijk, “Myth and Mythmaking,” vol. 3, 1700.

24. Assmann, *Search for God*, 122; see also Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 35.

25. Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 169. He dedicates a whole chapter in the book to the issue of evolution and creation in Egypt.

26. See Wilfried G. Lambert, “Myth and Mythmaking in Sumer and Akkad,” in *CANE*, vol. 3, 1829. According to him, the basic elements of creation included water, earth, and time; see also Jean-Jacques Glassner, “The Use of Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *CANE*, vol. 3, 1819.

27. Lambert, “Myth and Mythmaking,” vol. 3, 1829.

28. Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 220, writes about this epic of creation: “It starts with the *theogony*, because in the Mesopotamian conception the gods, being part of the cosmos, had to pass also from nonbeing to being, like the rest of the universe. Before the gods existed there was nothing but an immense expanse of water, presented as the unending joining of the female Tiamat, the salt water of the future sea, and male Apsû, the sweet water of the future subterranean sheet of water. At first, deities who were somewhat primitive and roughly made evolved from them.”

29. “Epic of Creation,” trans. Benjamin R. Foster, *COS* 1, no. 111: 391.

The idea of spontaneous generation, which is implicit in the previous text, is explicitly expressed in a bilingual Sumero-Babylonian incantation:

Heaven was created of its own accord.
 Earth was created of its own accord.
 Heaven was abyss, earth was abyss.³⁰

This is a case in which the “spontaneous generation of heaven and earth (namely, the universe) is proclaimed, but then we are told that there was in fact no heaven or earth but only a body of water, which is the implication of the third line quoted.”³¹ It would appear that it is within this body of water that the gods generated themselves. There is another text, dated to the post-early Babylonian period (ca. 1400 BC), containing a prayer to the moon god Nanna-Suen, a creator-god, expressing the idea of spontaneous generation: “O lord, hero of the gods, who is exalted in heaven and on earth, father Nanna, lord Anshar, hero of the gods. . . . Fruit which is self-created, of lofty form. . . .”³² The concept of the self-generation of the moon was quite common and was associated with the fact that during the month it grew in size, disappeared and died, then “came to life again by its own efforts.”³³ In any case, it was from these self-created deities that the rest of the cosmos came into being.³⁴ In other words, the simple diversified itself. This idea is explored more carefully by the Egyptians.

30. Lambert, “Myth and Mythmaking,” vol. 3, 1829.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Hartmut Schmökel, “Mesopotamian Texts: Sumerian ‘Raising of the Hand’ Prayer to the Moon God Nanna-Suen (Sin),” in *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. Walter Beyerlin (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1978), 104. Jean Bottéro and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Lorsque les dieux faisaient l’homme: Mythologie mésopotamienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 471, refer to the idea that a god can come into existence by himself, as “both naïve and profound.”

33. Lambert, “Myth and Mythmaking,” vol. 3, 1829.

34. There is a text from the late Assyrian-Babylonian period (1000–100 BC) that gives the impression that a number of things evolved by themselves after a primeval divine act of creation. It is known as “Incantation against Toothache”: “After Anu created [heaven]. Heaven created the [earth], earth created rivers, rivers created watercourses, marshes created the worm. The worm came crying before Shamash, before Ea his tears flowed down, ‘What will you give me, that I may eat? What will you give, that I may suck?’ ‘I will give you a ripe fig and an apple.’ ‘What are a ripe fig and an apple to me? Set me to dwell between teeth and jaw, that I may suck the blood of the jaw that I may chew on the bits (of food) stuck in the jaw.’ . . . Because you said this, worm, May Ea strike you with the might of his hand!” See Foster, *Before the Muses*, vol. 2, 878.

DIVERSIFICATION OF LIFE

Atum is not simply Atum but the totality of the cosmos. Like the cosmic egg in modern cosmogony, everything in the cosmos was compressed in Atum. In a sense, it could be said that he “‘turned himself into’ the cosmos. Atum was not the creator, but rather the origin: everything ‘came into being’ from him.”³⁵ It is through a process of differentiation that undifferentiated matter will shape the cosmos. This process begins with the origination of Shu (male) and Tefnut (female).³⁶ In Egyptian cosmology, they constitute the air or void that separates the sky from the earth. Probably more important, what we have here is the creation of sexually differentiated deities.³⁷ Their creation is described in different ways (e.g., through masturbation³⁸ or through sneezing³⁹), but there is a text in which a more analytical approach is taken when relating the origin of Shu. It is recited in the first person singular by the deceased who is identifying himself or herself with the *ba* (“personality” or “soul”) of Shu:

I am the *ba* of Shu, the god mysterious (?) of form:
 It is in the body of the self-evolving god that I have become tied together.
 I am the utmost extent of the self-evolving god:
 It is in him that I have evolved.
 [. . .]
 I am one who is millions, who hears the affairs of millions.

35. See Assmann, *Search for God*, 120. Assmann goes on to suggest that “the Heliopolitan concept of the primeval creator god is less a mythology than the germ of a philosophy” (ibid.). See also R. L. Vos, “Atum,” in *DDD*, 119, who comments that Atum was a god with a complicated divine nature “who created the world by developing the potencies of his primordial unity into the plurality of the well-ordered cosmos.”

36. For a detailed discussion of the complex nature and role of Shu and Tefnut in Egyptian texts, see Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 49–53, 129–36. She writes, “The origin of the world is not described as a series of actions directed by the creator but as a slow process of genesis and of disassociation of the three protagonists Atum, Shu and Tefnut who are in a state of symbiotic union” (49; my own translation).

37. Jennifer Houser-Wegner, “Shu,” in *OEAE*, vol. 3, 285.

38. One of the texts read, “Atum evolved growing ithyphallic, in Heliopolis. He put his penis in his grasp that he might make orgasm with it, and two siblings were born—Shu and Tefnut.” See “From Pyramid Texts Spell 527,” *COS* 1, no. 3: 7. The Pyramid texts are dated to the Old Kingdom (ca. 2628–2134 BC).

39. A Pyramid Text, dated to the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040–1640 BC), describes the event as follows: “Atum scarab! When you became high, as the high ground, when you rose, as the benben in the Phoenix Enclosure in Heliopolis, you sneezed Shu, you spat Tefnut, and you put your arms about them, as the arms of *ka*, that your *ka* might be in them.” See “From Pyramid Texts Spell 600,” *COS* 1, no. 4:7, 8. Allen defines the *ka* as “a spiritual aspect of men and gods, a kind of animating force, passed from the creator to the king, from the king to his subjects, and from the father to his children” (ibid., 8, no. 5). For a discussion of creation through masturbation and sneezing, see Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 73–83.

[. . .]

It is in the body of the great self-evolving god that I have evolved,
 For he created me in his heart,
 Made me in his effectiveness,
 And exhaled me from his nose.

[. . .]

I am one exhale-like of form.
 He did not give me birth with his mouth,
 He did not conceive me with his fist.
 He exhaled me from his nose.⁴⁰

The creation of Shu and his twin sister Tefnut is not through procreation but through development and differentiation.⁴¹ Another text says, “I was not built in the womb, I was not tied together in the egg, I was not conceived by conception.”⁴² He is part of the process of self-evolution or development of Atum. From the mythological perspective, one could perhaps conceive of Atum as an androgynous monad who is now evolving into a plurality or, at first, into a duality of gender differentiation.⁴³ The process of the transformation or the actualization of the potentiality of the original undifferentiated matter begins with Shu and Tefnut. From this point on, the Heliopolitan theology of creation is mainly based on procreation among the gods, but even there, the idea of the self-development of Atum is maintained. It is through procreation that the potential compressed in Atum—the millions in him—will actualize itself.⁴⁴ In the Heliopolitan cosmogonic model, “the central

40. “From Coffin Texts Spell 75,” *COS* 1, no. 5: 8, 9.

41. See Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 114–17.

42. “From Coffin Texts Spell 76,” *COS* 1, no. 6: 10.

43. This has been suggested by Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 37; and J. Zandee, “The Birth-Giving Creator-God in Ancient Egypt,” in *Studies in Pharaonic Religion and Society in Honour of J. Gwyn Griffiths*, ed. Alan B. Lloyd (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1992), 168–85; and Gertie Englund, “Gods as a Frame of Reference: On Thinking and Concepts of Thought in Ancient Egypt,” in *The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians: Cognitive Structures and Popular Expressions*, ed. Gertie Englund (Uppsala, Sweden: University Press, 1987), 10, 11.

44. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 29, indicates that “the world in all its diversity is the *khprw* [development/evolution] of that source, the infinite modes of being into which—in which, as which—the primordial Monad has developed.” The initial diversification of the “one” takes place through a process of dualisation, as suggested in Englund, “Gods as a Frame of Reference,” 11. The gods are grouped by two, one male and the other female. In Heliopolis, the original grouping was called the “Ennead” (“the Nine”), composed of eight gods or goddesses plus Atum: Atum was at the head; followed by Shu (god of air) and Tefnut (goddess of moist air?); Atum’s grandchildren Geb (earth god) and Nut (goddess of the sky); and his four great-grandchildren Osiris (god who ruled the dead), Isis (goddess of magic), Seth (god of violence), and Nephthys (consort of Seth). See Shaw and Nicholson, “Ennead,” in *British Museum*

concept is the ‘coming into being’ of the cosmos, as opposed to its creation.”⁴⁵ It may not be too farfetched to suggest that Heliopolis, in a sense, deals “with the rules of the big bang.”⁴⁶

TIME AND CREATION

In the Sumero-Babylonian literature, time was one of the basic elements from which everything that now exists originated.⁴⁷ The idea is found in a text dealing with the ancestry of Anu. There is a pair of gods called Duri (male) and Dari (female). The combination of the two names means “Ever and Ever;”⁴⁸ indicating that time was considered to be fundamental in the emergence of everything else. This is intriguing, because “conceiving something immaterial like time as a prime element represents sophisticated thinking.”⁴⁹ It is clear that the idea of time as a personified creator is ancient and is also found in Phoenician, Iranian, and Indian speculations and among some Greek thinkers.⁵⁰ In the case of Phoenicia, the god Oulomos is mentioned in its cosmology.⁵¹ The name is etymologically related to the Hebrew term *‘ôlām*, “eternity, world.” We also know that during the second millennium BC there was a West Semitic god called *‘ālāmu*.⁵² Unfortunately, we do not know much about him and his role in creation. Among the Greeks the god Chronos played an important role in creation. In the semi-philosophical cosmology of Pherecydes of Syros, Chronos or Time is personified and described as the one without beginning, who created from his semen, without a consort, fire, wind, and water. From these, “the world developed.”⁵³

Dictionary, 93. The role of the Enneads in Egyptian literature is very complex, but for our purpose, it could be stated that this grouping—there were other groupings in Egypt, depending on the theological center—was “a way of expressing the diversity of the components of cosmic order.” See Lana Troy, “The Ennead: The Collective as Goddess: A Commentary on Textual Personification,” in *The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians Cognitive Structures and Popular Expressions*, ed. Gertie Englund (Uppsala, Sweden: University Press, 1987), 59, and “a means of expressing the interdependence and causality that the Egyptians saw among the various forces and elements of the natural world,” as noted by Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 9.

45. Assmann, *Search for God*, 120.

46. Englund, “Gods as a Frame of Reference,” 15.

47. This has been argued by Lambert, “Myth and Mythmaking,” vol. 3, 1832.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*

50. See Martin L. West, “Ancient Near Eastern Myths in Classical Greek Religious Thought,” in *CANE*, vol. 1, 35, 36.

51. Karel van der Toorn, “Eternity,” in *DDD*, 312.

52. *Ibid.*, 313.

53. West, “Ancient Near Eastern Myths,” *CANE*, vol. 1, 35.

The matter of the time, the moment when creation took place, is not addressed in the Egyptian literature. It is clear that the Egyptian understanding of time was primarily linear.⁵⁴ It has been suggested that there was an Egyptian god of time and that his presence was possibly reflected in the Egyptian god Thoth, who “is the god of the moon and of the lunar calendar and, thus, of time.”⁵⁵ He was “the inaugurator of time,” who reckoned time and distinguished months and years.⁵⁶ Thoth had a wide range of responsibilities (e.g., nature, cosmology, writing, science), including that of creator-god in Hermopolis.⁵⁷ If this suggestion is valid, there was an Egyptian god of time who participated in the creation of the cosmos.

We know for sure that in Egypt creation occurred at “the first time,” which “does not just mean the beginning. It only means the beginning of an event. . . . ‘Time’ does not exclude the period after the event; on the contrary, it implies that other ‘times’ followed, in principle times without number.”⁵⁸ We do find the expression “millions of years” as referring to the time from the origin of the creator-god to the end of all things.⁵⁹ In that same context, we even read about “millions of many millions (of years).”⁶⁰ This way of speaking should not be only understood as a way of expressing the idea of eternity but as a statement of a deep-time chronology that would lead to the end of the cosmos.⁶¹

The well-ordered cosmos is not eternal, and neither are the gods and humans who inhabit it. An Egyptian text announcing the return of everything to its state before creation is found in the Book of the Dead and in manuscripts dating back to about the

54. Gerald E. Kadish, “Time,” in *OEA*, vol. 3, 406. Linear is not the only type of time known to the Egyptians. Their understanding of time was complex, including time as “the suspension of time,” that is to say, “time at a standstill,” meaning time as stability and permanency, “a sacred dimension of evenness, where that which has become—which has ripened to its final form and is to that extent perfect—is preserved in immutable permanence.” Cf. Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, trans. Andrew Jenkins (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 18, 19.

55. Carolina López-Ruiz, *When the Gods Were Born: Greek Cosmogonies and the Near East* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 158.

56. R. L. Vos, “Thoth,” in *DDD*, 862, 63.

57. See Denise M. Doxey, “Thoth,” in *OEA*, vol. 3, 398.

58. Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 166.

59. “From Coffin Texts Spell 1130,” *COS* 1, no. 17: 27.

60. *Ibid.*, 30. The translator supplied in parenthesis the phrase “of years” based on the context.

61. On the Egyptian view of the end of the world, see Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 228–31; also J. Bergman, “Introductory Remarks on Apocalypticism in Egypt,” in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, ed. D. Hellholm (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), 51–60.

eighteenth and nineteenth Dynasties (1450–1200 BC). The text narrates a conversation between Atum and Osiris:

“O, Atum, what does it mean that I go to the desert, the Land of Silence, which has no water, has no air, and which is greatly deep, dark, and lacking?”

“Live in it in contentment.”

“But there is no sexual pleasure in it.”

“It is in exchange for water and air and sexual pleasure that I have given spiritual blessedness, contentment in exchange for bread and beer”—so says Atum.

“It is too much for me, my lord, not to see your face.”

“Indeed, I shall not suffer that you lack.”

[. . .]

“What is the span of my life”—so says Osiris.

“You shall be for millions of millions (of years), a lifetime of millions. Then I shall destroy all that I have made. This land will return into the Abyss, into the flood as in its former state. It is I who shall remain together with Osiris, having made my transformations into other snakes which mankind will not know, nor gods see.”⁶²

This is indeed a very dark view of the future of the cosmos, quite similar to what some contemporary cosmologists anticipate happening millions of years from now. The expanding universe, they say, may experience a big crunch that will bring everything, including life itself, to an end.⁶³ The Egyptians also believed that the whole cosmos would be pulled back into itself, thus returning to the darkness and inertia of the pre-creation watery condition. A Ptolemaic text states that at that moment “there is no god, there is no goddess, who will make himself/herself into another snake.”⁶⁴ It would appear that, at the end, only Atum and Osiris remain in that they “change back into the enduring, original form of a snake, that is, into the same form—or rather formlessness—which the eternal enemy of the gods, Apopis, possesses as a power of chaos.”⁶⁵ But the phrase “having made my

62. “Cosmologies: Book of the Dead 175: Rebellion, Death and Apocalypse,” trans. Robert K. Ritner, *COS* 1, no. 18: 28.

63. For a brief introduction to this theory, see Mark Worthing, “Big Crunch Theory,” in *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, ed. J. Wentzel Vrede van Huyssteen et al., vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 62.

64. Quoted in Hornung, *Conceptions of Gods*, 163.

65. *Ibid.*, 164; see also Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 228, 29, who suggests that the creator and Osiris survive “in a form of existence similar to that of the primordial condition” (my own translation).

transformations into other snakes which mankind will not know, nor gods see” could indicate that they do not exist. What cannot be known by humans and cannot be seen by the gods is what does not exist.⁶⁶ But perhaps there was also the possibility of rebirth and, therefore, the chance for a new beginning.⁶⁷

ORIGIN OF THEOGONIC AND COSMOGONIC SPECULATIONS

The speculations of the Egyptians concerning the origin of life and matter are to some extent based on their observation of nature and the conclusions drawn from it. The idea of the primeval mound was probably based on their experience during the flooding of the Nile.⁶⁸ During the summer, the river began to swell until it covered the flat lands beyond its banks. The waters brought with it an excellent load of fertilizing silt. As the waters began to decrease, the first things that appeared were mounds of fertile mud ready to be seeded. When the mounds of slime were bathed by the rays of the sun, there was an explosion of new life on them. This led the Egyptians to conclude “that there is special life-giving power in this slime.”⁶⁹ They had also observed the Dung Beetle—the scarab and, specifically, the so-called rollers—which the Egyptians associated with the fertile mounds.⁷⁰ The female makes a spherical ball of dung inside of which she deposits her eggs. At the proper moment, the young emerge from the dung ball as through a spontaneous generation of life.⁷¹ The scarab became a symbol of life. The Egyptian word for “scarab” is *kheper*, etymologically related to the verb *kheper* (“to develop, evolve”) and to the solar deity Khepri (Atum-Khepri).⁷² It seems obvious that the observations of a natural phenomenon and the interpretation given to it were used by the Egyptians to develop the basic elements of their cosmogony. Their initial point of departure was from below.

66. See Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 169.

67. Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 230, also sees this as a possibility.

68. See John A. Wilson, “Egypt: The Nature of the Universe,” in Henri Frankfort, H. A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, and William A. Irwin, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 36, 50; Hart, *Legendary Past*, 11; Vincent Arieh Tobin, “Creation Myths,” in *OEA*, vol. 2, 469; and James E. Atwell, “An Egyptian Source for Genesis 1,” *JTS* 51 (2000): 449.

69. Wilson, “Egypt: The Nature of the Universe,” 50.

70. On this see Richard H. Wilkinson, *Egyptian Scarabs* (London: Shire Publications, 2008), 7–14.

71. *Ibid.*, 11; and Robert Steven Bianchi, “Scarabs,” in *OEA*, vol. 3, 179.

72. Wilkinson, *Egyptian Scarabs*, 11.

We find a similar situation in Mesopotamian myths. Ancient Mesopotamians began from what they observed in nature and, through speculations, projected it back to primeval times. Their speculations were apparently based “on observations of how new land came into being. Mesopotamia is alluvial, formed by silt brought down by the rivers. It is the situation at the mouth of the rivers where the sweet waters, Apsû, flow into the salt waters of the sea, Ti’āmat, and deposit their load of silt . . . to form new land that has been projected backward to the beginnings.”⁷³ They, like the Egyptians, moved from what they observed in nature to cosmogonic speculations.

INFLUENCE OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN THEOGONIES

Our discussion has shown that creation myths in Egypt and Mesopotamia began with a theogony and were based on the spontaneous generation of divine life, out of which a process of diversification was initiated that brought into existence everything else. These ideas were well known throughout the ancient Near East and influenced Greek mythology. Scholars in Greek classic literature have realized that the ancient Near East was not only the geographic context of Greece but also its cultural context and that Greek religion was influenced by the ancient Near East.⁷⁴ It is now well accepted that Hesiod’s *Theogony*,⁷⁵ written around 700 BC, was influenced by

73. Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976), 169; see also *ibid.*, “Mesopotamia,” in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 171.

74. For a recent discussion of the issues involved, see Scott B. Noegel, “Greek Religion and the Ancient Near East,” in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, ed. Daniel Ogden (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), 21–37. Charles Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 237, states, “The compelling conclusion which is indicated by this investigation of parallels is that extensive influence from Mesopotamia exists in these Homeric hymns and in the works of Hesiod, which generally speaking belong to the early archaic era.” Very useful in the discussion of parallels and the use of proper methodology is Robert Mondi, “Greek Mythic Thought in the Light of the Near East,” in *Approaches to Greek Myth*, ed. Lowell Edmunds (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 198. The most complete discussion and evaluation of the parallels is found in López-Ruiz, *When the Gods Were Born*. For the history and evidence of contacts among the Near East, Greece, and the Aegean islands, consult C. Lambrou-Phillipson, *The Near Eastern Presence in the Bronze Age Aegean, ca. 3000–1100 B.C.* (Göteborg, Sweden: Paul Åströms Förlag, 1990), 39–163.

75. Hesiod (ca. 700 BC) was one of the oldest and best-known Greek poets. See Martin L. West, “Hesiod,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 700. His theogony “is the earliest fully survived example of a Greek tradition of written theogonies and cosmogonies in verse,” as noted by Glenn W. Most, *Hesiod, Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), xxxiv.

ancient Near Eastern theogonic myths.⁷⁶ Scholars are still debating how these ideas reached Greece. Current consensus considers the Phoenicians as the mediators of elements of ancient Near Eastern theogonies and cosmologies throughout the Aegean area.⁷⁷

Hesiod's *Theogony* is a masterful piece of literature that influenced Greek cosmogony in significant ways.⁷⁸ In it, Hesiod narrates the origin of the gods and the cosmos from the very beginnings to the final triumph of Zeus. We are interested in the section of *Theogony* describing the origin of the gods. Hesiod wants the Muses to inform him about the origin of everything. Here is the beginning of the *Theogony*:

(116) In truth, first of all Chasm came to be, and then broad-breasted Earth, the ever immovable seat of all the immortals who possess snowy Olympus' peak and murky Tartarus in the depths of the broad-pathed earth, and Eros, who is the most beautiful among the immortal gods, the limb-melter—he who overpowers the mind and the thoughtful counsel of all the gods and of all human beings in their breasts.

(123) From Chasm, Erebus and black Night came to be; and then Aether and Day came forth from Night, who conceived and bore them after mingling love with Erebus. . . .

(126) Earth first of all bore starry Sky, equal to herself, to cover her on every side, so that she would be the ever immovable seat for the blessed gods; and she bore the high mountains, the graceful haunts of the goddesses, Nymphs who dwell on the wooded mountains. And she also bore the barren sea seething with its swell, Pontus, without delightful love; and then having bedded with Sky, she bore deep-eddying Ocean and Coeus and Crius and Hyperion and Iapetus and Theia and Rhea and Themis and Mnemosyne and golden-crowned Phoebe and lovely Tethys. After these, Cronus was born, the youngest of all,

76. The literature is abundant. For a helpful bibliography, the following works should be consulted: Penglase, *Greek Myths*, and López-Ruiz, *When the Gods Were Born*. Some of the parallels are discussed in *ibid.*, 87–91; see also Jan Bremmer, “Canonical and Alternative Creation Myths in Ancient Greece,” in *The Creation of Heaven and Earth: Re-Interpretation of Genesis 1 in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity, and Modern Physics*, ed. George H. van Kooten (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2005), 79–83.

77. The best arguments for this possibility have been provided by López-Ruiz, *When the Gods Were Born*, 23–47. See Amélie Kuhrt, “Ancient Mesopotamia in Classical Greek and Hellenistic Thought,” in *CANE*, vol. 1, 55–65.

78. David Sedley, *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2007), 2, has noted that “Hesiod’s own perspective on the world’s formation seems to have been seminal in forming the distinctively Greek tradition of cosmogony that grew up in its wake. The agenda of the Presocratic cosmologists was in effect already largely set by this creation myth’s opening.”

crooked-counseled, the most terrible of her children; and he hated his vigorous father.⁷⁹

The text suggests that at the beginning, when there was nothing, Chasm (Chaos), Earth, Tartarus, and Eros originated by themselves.⁸⁰ The process of diversification was ready to begin. Out of Chasm, in what appears to have been an emanation or a self-development, came Erebus and Night. Earth self-generated Sky (Ouranos) and Pontus (Sea). The other gods came into existence through procreation. The text becomes a succession myth describing the supremacy of Sky and how Cronus (the corn harvest god) castrated him⁸¹ and assumed supremacy. Zeus rebelled against his father Cronus, became the supreme god, and fought against the Titans and the monster Typhon. The basic thrust of the narrative is similar to that of the *Enuma Elish* with its emphasis on succession and overcoming the enemy in order for Marduk to become the supreme god. Creation through self-generation and procreation, fundamental in Mesopotamia and Egypt, is also present in Hesiod.

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN ANTHROPOGENIES

In some of the ancient Near Eastern myths dealing with the origin of humans, we also find ideas that are today associated with evolutionary thinking. This does not seem to be the case in Egypt, where we do not find a myth dealing with the creation of humans. What we find is a simple statement that became the common Egyptian view on the topic. The creator-god says,

79. Most, *Hesiod, Theogony*, 13–15.

80. The concept of the spontaneous generation of life became quite popular in late pre-Socratic physics and in writers such as Aristotle and Lucretius. But it also became very important among the Epicureans. Cf. Sedley, *Creationism and Its Critics*, 18, 19, 46, 150.

81. It has been argued that the motif of castration present in this succession myth has been influenced by the Hittite poem *Kumarbi Cycle* (dated to the fifteenth century BC). The possible connection between this text and Greek mythology was first suggested by Hans Gustav Güterbock, "The Hittite Version of the Hurrian Kumarbi Myth: Oriental Forerunners of Hesiod," *AJA* 52 (1948): 123–34, and is now well accepted by most scholars. For a discussion of the hymn, see René Lebrun, "From Hittite Mythology: The Kumarbi Cycle," in *CANE*, vol. 3, 1971–80. The reality of early contacts between Hittites and Greeks is also well accepted. One of the best sources of information on this topic is the collection of essays published in Billie Jean Collins, Mary R. Bachvarova, and Ian C. Rutherford, *Anatolian Interfaces: Hittite Greeks and Their Neighbours—Proceedings of an International Conference on Cross-Cultural Interaction, September 17–19, 2004, Emory University, Atlanta, GA* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2008).

I made the gods evolve from my sweat,
While people are from the tears of my Eye.⁸²

Somehow, the sun-god had temporary blindness, and from the tears of his weeping eye, humans came into existence. Therefore, to be human “means that he is destined never to partake in the clear sight of god; affliction blights everything he sees, thinks and does.”⁸³ In other words, the understanding of humans portrayed in this mythological fragment is negative.

In Sumerian literature, there are some texts addressing the original condition of humans that contain concepts associated today with natural evolution. The first text we would like to quote is found in the cosmogonic introduction to the “Disputation between Ewe and Wheat” (very popular in the old Babylonian period, 1500 BC). The text describes the primitive condition of humans as follows:

(20) The people of those distant days
Knew not bread to eat,
They knew not cloth to wear;
They went about in the Land with naked limbs
Eating grass with their mouths like sheep,
(25) And drinking water from the ditches.⁸⁴

Nothing is said in this text about how these humans were created. What the text describes happened in a very distant time, suggesting that, since then, the condition of humans has changed. At one time, they behaved like animals and did not know anything about agriculture and animal husbandry. Notice that at this early stage of human development humans only ate grass. The idea is not that they were vegetarians but that they were like animals, feeding

82. “From Coffin Texts 1130,” *COS* 1, no. 17: 26. There is another myth, according to which the god Khnum, commonly portrayed as a builder, creates humans from clay on his potter’s wheel. In a text from the New Kingdom (1551–1070 BC), “Khnum is viewed as the creator of mankind who continually creates men and women on his potter’s wheel and endows the human body with all its parts and functions.” See Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Volume III: The Late Period* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1973), 111. The implication appears to be that he did the same when humans were originally created. The text does affirm his work as cosmic potter: “He has fashioned gods and men, He has formed flocks and herds; He made birds as well as fishes, He created bulls, engendered cows . . . [He] formed all on his potter’s wheel” (111, 12). This is creation through craftsmanship. Compare Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 161, 183, 84; Assmann, *Search for God*, 116, 17; Hart, *Legendary Past*, 25–28; and Paul F. O’Rourke, “Khnum,” in *OEA*, vol. 2, 231, 32.

83. Hornung, *Conceptions of God*, 150.

84. “Disputations: The Disputation between Ewe and Wheat,” trans. H. L. J. Vanstiphout, *COS* 1, no. 180: 575. Compare also the discussion in Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 45, 46.

themselves from the grass and drinking water like animals. They looked and behaved like animals.⁸⁵ This comes very close to describing what we call “hominids” today. The text goes on to indicate that the gods “discover the advantages of agriculture and animal husbandry for themselves but their human servants, without those means, could not satisfy them. Enki, wishing to increase human efficiency for the ultimate benefit of the gods, persuades Enlil to communicate to the human race the secrets of farming and animal husbandry.”⁸⁶ In this case, the “evolution” from a pre-fully human condition to humans as social beings happened through divine intervention. For our purpose, what is important is that, according to this text, “the human race was originally created animallike.”⁸⁷

This same two-stage development is applied to the experience of an individual in the Akkadian epic of Gilgamesh, probably written around 1900 BC. The story line is centered on Gilgamesh, the ruler of the city of Uruk. He was a semi-divine being who, because of his powerful personality, “drove on his poor subjects; neither men nor women ever had respite from him. The people of Uruk complained to the gods, who realized that Gilgameš needed somebody equal to himself to measure himself against. And so they created Enkidu, the savage, who grew up in the steppe, far away from human settlements.”⁸⁸ Here is the portion of the text describing him:

[On the step]pe she created valiant Enkidu, Offspring of . . . , essence of
Ninurta.

[Sha]ggy with hair is his whole body, He is endowed with head hair
like a woman.

The locks of his hair sprout like Nisaba.

He knows neither people nor land; Garbed is he like Sumuqan.

85. Concerning this text, Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 46, comments, “There were human beings at that time but they were like animals, living without clothing and without the sustenance provided by grain and flocks.” Marie-Joseph Seux, “La création de monde et de l’homme dans la littérature Suméro-Akkadienne,” in *La création dans l’Orient Ancien*, ed. Louis Derousseaux (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1987), 50, comments on the text, “C’était au temps où l’humanité primitive était encore à l’état sauvage, ce qui nous en vaut une description du plus haut intérêt.”

86. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 46.

87. *Ibid.*, 44.

88. Aage Westenholz and Ulla Koch-Westenholz, “Enkidu—the Noble Savage?” in *Wisdom, Gods and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honour of W. G. Lambert*, ed. A. R. George and I. L. Finkel (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 439. See also Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, 196, 97.

With the gazelles he feeds on grass,
 With the wild beasts he jostles at the watering-place, (40)
 With the teeming creatures his heart delights in water.⁸⁹

The full text refers to Enkidu several times using the Akkadian term *lullû*, meaning “primal or primeval man.”⁹⁰ It is used in some texts in contrast to *mailiku*, which designates the king as a “thinking-deciding man.”⁹¹ The terminology as well as his behavior and physical appearance suggest that we are dealing in this text with a being who is neither an animal nor a fully developed human being—a “hominid” to use modern terminology. Enkidu transitions from his wild life and behavior to the life of culture with the help of a harlot, and he becomes a close friend of Gilgamesh.⁹²

Texts like these are not common in the Sumerian and Akkadian literature, making it difficult to understand their full import. But we should keep in mind that in Sumerian and Babylonian thinking, “the beginning of human existence was neither a golden age nor a period of pristine simplicity. On the contrary, life was savage, and man differed little, if at all, from other animals. Primal man was a beast, and the Babylonian Enkidu was primal man *redivivus*.”⁹³ What we find in these texts is a view of humans that links them quite closely to the animal world. The connection is so close that humans are, in fact, depicted as belonging more properly to the animal world than to that of humans, properly speaking.

89. “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” trans. E. A. Speiser, in *ANET*, 74.

90. See Jeremy Black, Andrew George, and Nicholas Postgate, ed., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 185.

91. See Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 48, esp. n102.

92. Westenholz and Koch-Westenholz, “Enkidu,” 443, 44; and Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 49.

93. William Moran, “The Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *CANE*, vol. 4, 2328. See also Jeremy Black, “The Sumerians in their Landscape,” in *Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen*, ed. Tzvi Abusch (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 44, who states that the Sumerians “knew that mankind, in general, had not inhabited the earth since the very beginning of time—there had been a time when there were no humans—and they knew that the very first men had lived in an uncivilised state like animals. They realised that civilisation had been a later development.” Scholars are still debating whether there is a Mesopotamian myth describing the existence of a paradisiacal world at the beginning of creation that was later damaged or ruined. The textual evidence does not appear to be strong enough to support such a view. For a discussion of the evidence and arguments against a paradise in ancient Babylonian literature, see Bernard F. Batto, “Paradise Reexamined,” in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective: Scripture in Context IV*, ed. K. Lawson Younger Jr., William W. Hallo, and Bernard F. Batto (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 33–66.

BIBLICAL CREATION NARRATIVE

It would be difficult to deny that the ancient Near Eastern cosmogonic ideas discussed above were totally unknown in Israel. The Old Testament speaks about a significant number of political and cultural contacts among Israel, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. We would suggest that the biblical creation account, in describing the divine actions through which God actually brought the cosmos into existence, was deconstructing the alternative theories or speculations of origins common in the ancient Near East. Consequently, the biblical narrative can be used as well to deconstruct contemporary cosmogonies and natural evolution.

CREATION AND GOD

It would be probably right to say that the most striking difference between ancient Near Eastern creation narratives and the biblical one is the total absence of a theogony in the biblical creation narrative.⁹⁴ In fact, we do not find it anywhere else in the Scripture.⁹⁵ This is so unique that it places the biblical creation account within a different conceptual paradigm, as compared to any other creation narrative. In the context of ancient Near Eastern theogonies and cosmogonies, the biblical creation narrative is an exquisite anomaly.⁹⁶ The biblical text assumes the pre-existence of and a radical (Latin, *radix*, “root”) distinction between *’elōhîm* or YHWH and the cosmos. To the question that asks what there was before creation, the biblical answer is: “In the beginning God created.” He is not the Self-Created One but the One Who was and is. This carries with it some important theological and cosmogonic implications.

94. This is recognized by all scholars working with the concept of creation in the ancient Near East; see, for instance, John H. Walton, “Creation,” in *DOTP*, 162. Unfortunately, the theological significance of this important fact is hardly explored, particularly in the area of comparative studies.

95. See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1967), 98, 99.

96. William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 49, acknowledges this uniqueness when he writes, “Genesis 1:1–2:3 is perhaps the Bible’s closest thing to a natural account of creation . . . Compared to the rough-and-tumble, divinely micromanaged, theogonic world of Mesopotamian creation, Genesis 1 is an exercise in mythological reduction, on the one hand, and an acknowledgement of creation’s freedom and integrity, on the other. Creation in Genesis is replete with dynamic order and structure, cosmic qualities readily discerned by science.”

First, the similarities between the biblical creation account and those from the ancient Near East are mainly superficial.⁹⁷ The new biblical paradigm excludes any derivation of the biblical view of creation from ancient Near Eastern sources and would consider such a derivation to be an attempt to force upon the biblical text what is foreign to it. Scholars are now more careful when seeking to identify ancient Near Eastern influences on the biblical writer. The truth is that “given our present knowledge . . . it is difficult to prove that any single work is the source of Genesis 1.”⁹⁸

Second, in contraposition to the idea that the cosmos is the result of the coming into being of God and everything else—surprisingly similar to process theology—the biblical text does not know anything about a cosmos that is the result of the self-evolving of God or that is emerging from within God. The phrase “in the beginning” is pronounced as a corrective and a rejection of the common belief that creation began with a theogony. There is a beginning, but it is a beginning of creation—not of God. Creation is about a divine function and not about divine ontology. It is probably this biblical conviction that has contributed to the development of science in the Christian world. In biblical theology, creation is desacralized, and it is, therefore, open for human study and analysis.

Third, since creation is not the result of a god who is evolving, the cosmos does not come into existence through inner struggles. In ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, evil is part of the creation process itself and is directly related to the development of a diversity of gods and goddesses from the creator-god—be it through procreation or direct self-development. Creation out of chaos, according to which God had to struggle with primeval forces of disorder in order to establish order and harmony, is not present in the biblical creation narrative.⁹⁹ In contraposition to such ideas, creation is the

97. The literature on this topic is abundant, and there is still a very strong emphasis on similarities, in order to argue that the biblical account was determined by ancient Near Eastern mythology. We cannot explore the issue here, but it deserves fresh attention. Interesting comparisons with Egyptian cosmogonies are found in Atwell, “An Egyptian Source,” 441–77; and John D. Currid, “An Examination of the Egyptian Background of the Genesis Cosmogony,” *BZ* 35 (1991): 18–40.

98. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 141.

99. In spite of the fact that some scholars tend to believe that the *Chaoskampf* motif is present in Genesis 1, this is not the case in the canonical text. See Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 79; and particularly, David Toshio Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Study*, JSOTSup, 83 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1989); id., *Creation and*

result of God's effortless work.¹⁰⁰ The singularity of the Creator-God does not allow for any other cosmogony.

Creation and the Emergence of Life

The biblical text makes another exclusive claim: the life we experience, enjoy, and see on earth is not an extension of the divine life but a mode of life created by God and, therefore, essentially different from His. In order to communicate this idea, the biblical text describes creation as taking place through the divine word.¹⁰¹ Creation as the

Destruction: A Reappraisal of the Chaokampf Theory in the Old Testament (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005).

100. S. Dean McBride Jr., "Divine Protocol: Genesis 1:1–2:3 as Prologue to the Pentateuch," in *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of W. Sibley Towner*, eds. William P. Brown and S. Dean McBride Jr. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 9, who considers Genesis 1:1–2:3 to be a cosmological prologue to the Pentateuch, comments, "The protocol attest that the created order emerged incrementally, without hint of conflict or caprice, in obedient response to the articulated will of the Creator."

101. In addition to creation by craftsmanship and procreation, the Egyptians also speculated about creation through the spoken word (see Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 100–11). The best witness to this phenomenon is a text called "The Memphite Theology." It was inscribed on a slab of black granite by order of pharaoh Shabaka (ca. 715–710 BC). The original is now generally dated to the twenty-fifth dynasty (ca. 755 BC). The primary purpose of the text is to promote the political intentions of the Ethiopian kings to make Memphis the capital of Egypt in order to renovate and reawaken the ancient past (Assmann, *Mind of Egypt*, 345). Since theology and politics are inseparable in Egyptian thinking, the god of Memphis, Ptah, the self-created creator, is described as the supreme deity (Tobin, "Creation Myths," vol. 2, 471; on the god Ptah, see Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 137–45), who rules over the unified Egypt (Assmann, *Mind of Egypt*, 348). Memphis is described as the place where "creation emerged from the primal waters and as the seminal locus of pharaonic kingship" (Assmann, *Mind of Egypt*, 346).

The text is usually interpreted as a cosmogony and particularly as a description of "creation as an act of the divine will, intellect, and word" (Tobin, "Creation Myths," vol. 2, 470). The process of conceptualization is described in the text as follows: "The eyes' seeing, the ears' hearing, the nose's breathing of air send up (information) to the heart, and the latter is what causes every conclusion to emerge; it is the tongue that repeats what the heart plans" ("From the 'Memphite Theology,'" trans. James P. Allen, *COS* 1, no. 15: 22). This process was used for the creation of the gods and everything else, including humans (*ibid.*). The text appears to be "a tightly reasoned exposition of Ptah's role as the bridge between the intellectual principle of creation and its material realization in the substance of the created world" (Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 45). This is very similar to Genesis 1, where God creates through His word.

However, the Egyptian text is difficult to interpret and lends itself to speculations about its significance. I am relying on the partial translation provided by Allen, "Memphite Theology," *COS* 1, no. 15: 22, 23 and the more complete one by John A. Wilson, "The Theology of Memphis," in *ANET*, 4–6. As I read the text, I get the impression that it is primarily a theogony, as has been recognized by others; see Ragnhild Bjerre Finnestad, "Ptah, Creator of the Gods: Reconsideration of the Ptah Section of the *Denkmal*," *Numen* 23 (1976): 81–97. It is clear that Ptah created the gods through his word: "So were all the gods born, Atum and his Ennead as well, for it is through what the heart plans and the tongue commands that every divine speech has evolved" ("Memphite Theology," *COS* 1, no. 15: 22). But what the text appears to be saying is that Ptah indirectly created everything through his word. Indirectly in the sense that the gods became instruments of Ptah, an extension of his word, as everything else was coming

self-development of God or as divine procreation is replaced by creation through the word of God and the breath of life. Even the inanimate world is created through God's command. Through His speech, God brings into existence light (Gen. 1:3) and the expansion (1:6), and separates light from darkness (1:4), water from water (1:7), and land from water (1:9). All this happens through the divine command. The raw materials do not have, within themselves, the power to realize themselves. This power comes from outside the sphere of the raw materials and reaches them through the divine word. Life is created in the same way.

The flora comes into existence from within creation itself but not through the power of natural forces. The statement "let the land produce vegetation" (Gen. 1:11)¹⁰² may suggest the natural emergence

into existence. The divine word that created the gods continued to reside in them and expressed itself through them in the creation of everything else (see Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne*, 102, 3). Theologically, Ptah was still creating through his word, and in some way, he was in each god. The potentiality of Atum is no longer realized through self-development or evolution, as was the case in the Heliopolitan theogony, but through the word of Ptah that resided in him and that brought him into existence. In fact, the potentiality of Atum and the Enneads is the word of Ptah itself. If this understanding of the text is correct, then, any similarity with the biblical creation account should not blind us to see a significant difference. The absence of a theogony in Genesis results in a different theology of creation through the word. The supreme God does not need to actualize the power of His word through other deities but through His Own direct effectiveness. Scholars usually point to the similarity and tend to ignore differences (e.g., Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 166; Tobin, "Creation Myths," vol. 2, 471). Assmann, *Mind of Egypt*, 353, points to two differences between the two conceptions of creation. First, "the role of the heart, that is, the planned conception of creation" is absent from the Bible. This may not be necessarily so (cf. Prov. 8:22–31). The second difference is the "role of script, the hieroglyphs, mentioned on two occasions" in the Egyptian text (*ibid.*). Supposedly, the thoughts of the heart expressed themselves not only in speech but also into written language. The thought is a concept and the hieroglyph is the pictorial shape of the thought. Assmann finds in these speculations early traces of the platonic world of ideas and forms (*ibid.*, 353, 54). We agree that the biblical text does not connect creation through the divine word with writing. The Bible emphasizes the divine utterance that becomes the object intended by God without having, at that moment, to take the shape of the written word. The word is, so to speak, written in that which came into existence through it.

One last comment on the Egyptian text: it could very well be that the idea of creation through the word was taken from the Egyptian wisdom traditions. The text describes the emergence of thoughts in the mind of Ptah as a process by which information was gathered through the senses and then embodied in a thought or an idea. This was then objectified through the word. But if when Ptah created himself there was nothing, then the senses could not have gathered information that would have stimulated his thinking. Yet, that is what the text is saying. For the Egyptians this logical inconsistency would not have been a problem, because they would have interpreted the text as similar to the way in which wisdom sayings were generated—i.e., gathering of information through sight, touch, taste, smell, hearing, analyzing, and formulating conclusions, thoughts, ideas that were then expressed through the spoken word. This text has taken the process by which wisdom sayings were formulated and used it to speculate about the creation of the cosmos through the spoken word. This is totally absent from the biblical understanding of creation through the divine word.

102. Scripture quotations in this chapter are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of

of life from the inanimate, but that is not the case. The idea is that the barren land is unable to produce grass and trees by itself; it needs to hear the voice of the Lord commanding grass and trees to come into existence all over the ground.¹⁰³ The word of God mediates the creation of such life and, at the same time, establishes the way things will continue to be. The perpetuation of grass and trees is possible, because the Creator established a natural law.

God created fish to teem in the waters and birds to fly in the sky (Gen. 1:20). Fish do not sprout out of the water by themselves but, like the birds, are created to live within a particular habitat. It is through the divine command that this takes place and not as the result of the intrinsic power of nature. This is life created through the divine word. Concerning animals, we read: "Let the earth produce living creatures" (1:24). This does not mean that the earth participated in the creation of animals or that it had the potential to produce animals. It is only the divine command that creates the animals out of the earth. The rest of the text indicates that the earth is their natural environment—"all the creatures that move along the ground" (1:25).¹⁰⁴ In other words, the command is "addressed to the earth as the place where these creatures are to live."¹⁰⁵ Life is created exclusively through the divine word.

In the case of humans, their life is created in a unique way: God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Gen. 2:7). The text does not say that God gave them His breath of life but that He breathed into them the breath of life. To have the breath of life means to be alive and the divine breathing of it into humans simply means the "giving of life to humans, nothing more."¹⁰⁶ This is not life emanating from the divine

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103. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, NAC, 1A (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 152; also Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, CC (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1994), 124.

104. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 142, has pointed out that the phrase, "Let the earth bring forth" in Genesis 1:24 "cannot mean a direct participation of the earth in the creation of the animals—there is no sign of this in the action-account—but only that the animals belong to the earth. The earth with its variety of formations, surfaces and structures provides the living conditions for the different species of animals. We can say that certain formations bring forth certain fauna." See also Donald E. Gowan, *From Eden to Babylon: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1–11* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 26.

105. W. D. Reyburn and E. M. Fry, *Handbook on Genesis*, UBS Handbooks (New York: United Bible Societies, 1997), 48.

106. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 207. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC, 1 (Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1987), 60, states: "When this verse says God blew into man's nostrils the breath of life, it is affirming that God made him alive by making him breathe."

life to take a new form or to go through further self-developments. This is God creating human life.

In the biblical narrative, life does not create itself at any stage in the process of coming into being. Its origin remains hidden in the mystery of the divine act of creation. Once created, life is empowered by the Creator to perpetuate itself through procreation. This is based on the creation of gender differentiation, and therefore, it is a potential that is part of life itself and that humans can explore and understand. The origin of life is inaccessible for scientific analysis, but its nature and perpetuation through procreation are not.

The biblical text implicitly rejects the idea that the diversification of life is the result of a self-created life evolving or developing into a multiplicity of forms. The biblical paradigm depicts God Who effortlessly creates life in its different forms, thus excluding the development of one form of life into a different one. Each creation of life is described in the text as an event in itself, and that particular life does not evolve or develop in any way into the creation of other forms of life. This is an amazing thought in the context of ancient Near Eastern creation stories. The only thing that provides coherence and unity to the different expressions of life in the biblical creation narrative is the fact that there is only one Creator.

Creation and Time

Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts do not date the moment of creation. They, like the Bible, speak about a beginning, which includes the creation of time. There is no awareness of what today is called “deep time.” As we already pointed out, Egyptian cosmogonies make reference to millions of years, running from creation to de-creation and perhaps, in that sense, it would be possible to introduce some notion of deep time. In natural evolution, deep time is the creator who brings into being the cosmos and all forms of life found on our planet.

Such ideas contrast in significant ways with the information provided by the biblical text in which a chronology of millions of years and the existence of a god of time are unknown. This does not mean that the biblical creation narrative is not concerned with time. As a matter of fact, there is throughout the narrative a significant emphasis on time and its direct connection to the origin of life on the planet, but time is not raised to the status of creator. Time is created by God to frame His creative acts; it is under His rule. When it comes to the creation of life

on the planet, deep time is totally absent from the text. Everything takes place in a week (Exod. 20:11). This particular biblical emphasis on time excludes the ancient Near Eastern idea of the self-development of undifferentiated divine essence into millions by means of time.

ORIGIN OF HUMANS

The biblical creation narrative distances itself from ancient Near Eastern anthropogonies by emphasizing the uniqueness of the creation of humans and the essential differences between humans and animals. Although some similarities can be detected, they are placed at the service of different ideologies. It is obvious that the primeval human, who in ancient Near Eastern texts looked and behaved like an animal, is totally absent from the biblical text.

Creation and Role of Humans

The uniqueness of humans is emphasized in the biblical text by the author's description of humankind's true nature and role within the created world. The general tendency in ancient Near Eastern texts is to undermine the value and uniqueness of human life and existence. The most common reason for the creation of humans in the Sumerian and Babylonian narratives lacks any interest in the self-value of humans. They were created as a result of the selfish concerns of a group of small deities, who got tired of working for the major deities.¹⁰⁷ According to *Enuma Elish*, Ea, the father of Marduk, created humans from the blood of the rebellious god Kingu: "They bound him (Kingu), brought him to Ea, imposed punishment on him (and) severed his arteries. From his blood he formed mankind. He imposed on him service for the gods and (thus) freed them."¹⁰⁸ Humans were created from

107. See Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium B.C.* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), 68-73. The weaker gods, called the Igigi, "had to perform by themselves all the works of irrigation and drainage which were necessary for life in Mesopotamia. They finally became tired of the work, went on strike, and threatened the ruling Anunnaki." See Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient: An Introduction to the Study of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 211. See also Bernard F. Batto, "Creation Theology in Genesis," in *Creation in the in the Biblical Tradition*, ed. Richard J. Clifford and John J. Collins, CBQMS, 24 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1992), 22, 23.

108. Hartmut Schmökkel, "Mesopotamian Texts: Akkadian Myth 'When on high' ('Creation Epic')," in *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. Walter Beyerlin (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1978), 84. In the Atrahasis Epic, composed around 1600 BC, the gods are complaining saying, "Every single [one of us gods has declared] war; we have . . . our . . . in the [excavation]. [Excessive] toil [has killed us], [our] work was heavy, [the distress much]." See W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-Ḥašis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (repr. ed.; Winona

an inferior, evil god to relieve the gods from their burdensome and exhausting responsibilities. Humans were the servants of the gods.

In the biblical text, humans are created in God's image to enjoy fellowship with Him (Gen. 1:26, 27).¹⁰⁹ The image was not something that, through time, they were able to develop, but it was something granted to them as a gift when they were created on the sixth day of the creation week. As God's image, they were rational, free beings, able to communicate with God through language (2:17, 20; 1:28; 3:10). As made in His image, humans were to represent Him to the rest of the created world (1:26). In contrast to the biblical depiction of humans, ancient Near Eastern incipient evolutionary ideas devalued humankind.

Animals and Humans

Against the strong ancient Near Eastern tendency to blur any distinction between humans and animals during primeval times, the biblical text emphasizes the differences between them.¹¹⁰ This

Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 51. A god, who was the ringleader of the rebellion, is killed, his blood is mixed with clay, and the goddess snips off fourteen pieces of the mixture, and after nine months, humans emerged from the clay. Then, Bēlet-ilī said to the great gods, "You commanded me a task, I have completed it; you have slaughtered a god together with his personality. I have removed your heavy work, I have imposed your toil on man. You raised a cry for mankind, I have loosed the yoke, I have established freedom" (ibid., 60, 61). A tablet dated to the neo-Babylonian period (c. 625–539 BC), whose purpose is to emphasize the unique nature of kingship, makes reference to the creation of humans by Bēlet-ilī. Ea is speaking to Bēlet-ilī: "Bēlet-ilī, you are the mistress of the great gods. You have created lullū-man; form now the king, the thinking-deciding man! With excellence cover his whole form, Form his features in harmony, make his whole body beautiful! Then Bēlet-ilī formed the king, the thinking-deciding man. The great gods gave the king the battle. Anu gave him the crown, Ellil ga[ve him the throne], Nergal gave him the weapons, Ninurta ga[ve him shining splendor], Bēlet-ilī gave [him a handsome appeal]rance" (quoted in Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 70; the original text and its translation were published by W. Mayer, "Ein Mythos von der Erschaffung des Menschen und des Königs," *Or* 56 [1987]: 55–68). See also the myth "Enki and Ninmah," where Enki wants to create humans to do the hard work of the gods. He uses clay to create humans. The mother of the Enki, Nammu, takes pieces of clay and gives them a human form, places the figurines in the womb of two birth goddesses, and they give birth to humans. For the full text, see "Enki and Ninmah," trans. Jacob Klein, *COS* 1, no. 159: 516–18.

109. There is a significant amount of literature on the topic of humans as the image of God and the presence of the concept in Mesopotamia and Egypt. The concept is used in those cultures to refer primarily to the king as the representative of gods. It is rarely applied to humans in general, but when it happens, its significance is not clearly discernible in the texts. Therefore, we should be careful not to read too much into the ancient Near Eastern texts. See Norbert Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch: Themes of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 7. For a good bibliography on this topic and a useful and balanced discussion of the main issues, see F. J. Stendebach, "בְּצַלְמֵי שֵׁמֶם," in *TDOT*, vol. 12, 386–95.

110. This does not deny that the biblical text also points to some similarities; see Marsha M. Wilfong, "Human Creation in Canonical Context: Genesis 1:26–31 and Beyond," in

is done in different ways. First, both animals and humans were created by God but only humans were created in God's image.¹¹¹ This explains the fact that humans had dominion over the animals and that Adam did not find a suitable helper for him among them (Gen. 2:20). Second, in the biblical account, animals and humans came into existence in different ways. As we already indicated, at the command of God, animals and birds were created or formed from the earth (2:19), but in the case of humans, God formed them from the dust of the ground¹¹² and breathed the breath of life into them (2:7).¹¹³ The situation is different in ancient Near Eastern texts. In the Sumerian text called the "Eridu Genesis," dated to around 1600 BC, the creation of animals is described as follows:

When An, Enlil, Enki, and Ninḥursaga
Fashioned the dark-headed (people),
They had made the small animals (that come up) from (out of) the earth
Come from the earth in abundance
And had let there be, as befits (it), gazelles,
(Wild) donkeys, and four-footed beasts in the desert.¹¹⁴

This is a case in which the origin of animals is somewhat similar to the biblical narrative. In both cases, all types of animals are created by

God Who Creates, 45.

111. Creation in the image of God sets humanity totally apart from the rest of creation. See Stephen A. Reed, "Human Dominion over Animals," in *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium: Volume 1: Form, Concept, and Theological Perspective*, ed. Wonil Kim et al. (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 2000), 335.

112. The verb *yāšar* is used in Genesis 2 to refer to the creation of both animals and humans (2:7, 19) and outside Genesis to the creation of everything else (e.g., Jer. 10:16). See B. Otzen, "יָשַׁר, *yāšar*," in *TDOT*, vol. 6, 261, 62. The verb is translated as "to create, form, fashion." One of the differences between humans and animals is that humans were formed from the "dust" (*āpār*, "soil") of the earth (*āpār min-hā'ādāmā*) but the animals are from the earth (*min-hā'ādāmā*). The significance of this distinction is far from being clear and should not be pressed too much, but perhaps the mention of dust or soil points more directly to the work of God as the one who fashioned or gave shape to humans. See William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 137, 38, where he states, "Dirt or fine soil [*āpār*]*—usually translated 'dust' (NRSV)—from the ground suggests that the man is a particularly refined object taken from the ground, in subtle distinction from the animals, which were created simply 'from the ground.'*" But, as we already indicated, God breathed the breath of life only into humans. Of course, animals also breathe (Gen. 7:22), but the human experience was unique. Compare Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 196, 97.

113. Eichrodt, *Theology*, vol. 2, 121, wrote about the creation of humans: "It was clearly the narrator's intention to mark Man out from the other creatures, since only in his case does he relate a direct transfer of the divine breath . . . Man receives his life by a special act of God, and is thus treated as an independent spiritual I, and accorded a closer association with God than the animals."

114. Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once . . . : Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), 146.

bringing them out of the earth. In the case of the Sumerian text, this happens through the cosmic marriage—an idea totally absent from biblical cosmogony.¹¹⁵ The creation of humans is alluded to in the text (the gods fashioned humans), but no details are given. We should compare this text with another Sumerian one known as “Hymn to E’engura.” In it, the creation of humans occurs when the gods are fixing the destinies, creating the year of abundance, and building the temple. In this text, the creation of humans is also related to the cosmic marriage and could be described as the emergence of humans:¹¹⁶

When the destinies had been fixed for all that had been engendered
 (by An),
 When An had engendered the year of abundance,
 When humans broke through earth’s surface like plants,
 Then built the Lord of Abzu, King Enki,
 Enki, the Lord who decides the destinies,
 His house of silver and lapis lazuli.¹¹⁷

When the two texts are compared, it is clear that no distinction is made between the way humans and animals were created. They both broke through the earth’s surface, emerging from it as a result

115. In Sumerian cosmogony, the separation of heaven and earth is of central importance, and it is through their reunion that animals, plants, and humans were created. See Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, 95, 96. This reunion is called the cosmic marriage (cosmogamy), which included a dialogue between the two gods and sexual intercourse. A text dated to around 2350 BC states, “Heaven talked with Earth, Earth talked with Heaven He kissed her. The semen of seven twins he impregnated into her womb,” as quoted in Beate Pongratz-Leisten, “Sacred Marriage and the Transfer of Divine Knowledge: Alliances between the Gods and the King in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *Sacred Marriages: Divine and Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*, ed. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 45. Pongratz-Leisten briefly discusses Sumerian cosmogamy on pages 44 to 47.

116. Since the text is dealing with cosmic marriage, it assumes that the earth was fertilized by the sky, planting in it the human seed from which humans came into existence. See Seux, “La création du monde et de l’homme dans la littérature Suméro-Akkadienne,” in *La création dans l’Orient Ancien*, ed. Louis Derousseaux (Paris: Editions Cerf, 1987), 59–61, who refers to this creation tradition as “emersio” (“act of emerging, emergence”), in contrast to “formatio” (“forming, shaping).

117. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 29, 30; and J. van Dijk, “Le motif cosmique dans le pensée sumérienne,” *AcOr* 28 (1964): 23. The same idea is found in other texts, like the one dated to the old Babylonian period (ca. 1900–1595 BC; the date of the original composition is unknown), in which Enlil is described as the god “who will make the seed of mankind rise from the earth.” See “The Song of the Hoe,” trans. Gertrud Farber, *COS* 1, no. 157: 511. The same text adds: “Here, ‘where the flesh sprouts,’ he set this very hoe to work: he had it place the first model of mankind in the brickmold. And (according to this model) his people started to break through the soil towards Enlil.” The text combines two different traditions of creation, namely “the creation from seeds where mankind grows like a weed and breaks through the soil, and the creation through the molding of a clay model” (ibid.). For other texts expressing similar ideas, see Seux, “La création du monde,” 60, 61.

of the cosmic marriage. The singularity of humankind at the moment of its origin is not emphasized at all.

A third important distinction between humans and animals in the biblical account is found in the diet assigned to them (Gen. 1:29, 30). This will become a major bone of contention between the woman and the serpent, one of the beasts of the field. According to Genesis 3:1, the serpent says to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The Hebrew text could be translated as a statement of fact:¹¹⁸ "God indeed said to you that you should not eat of any tree in the garden." It could also be a statement of surprise: "So, God has said to you that you should not eat from any tree in the garden!" Whether it is a question or not is right now not of decisive importance. It is the implication of the statement that is important. It is clear that "the tempter begins with suggestion rather than argument."¹¹⁹ He is suggesting that God said something about human diet different from what Eve knew. We should ask why this is important. What the tempter is attempting to instill in Eve's mind is that humans have been forbidden by God to eat from the trees of the garden. It has been suggested that the phrase "not from any tree" should be translated "not of every tree,"¹²⁰ but the fact is that the proper translation of the Hebrew phrase *lō' mikkōl* is "not at all," and in this particular passage, it should be translated "from no tree at all." Besides, the answer given by Eve to the serpent clearly indicates that she understood the phrase to mean "from no tree at all."¹²¹ While the serpent insinuated that humans had been forbidden by God to eat from the trees of the garden, Eve, using the

118. The meaning of the two introductory particles, *'ap ki*, is not clear. The first one, *'ap*, usually means "also or even," while *ki* is generally translated with "for or because," etc. The combination of the two never introduces a question. It is used to introduce a statement: "Well now . . .," "look here . . .," or "how much more if . . ." (1 Sam. 21:6; 2 Sam. 16:11). See John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910), 73; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB, 1 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 23; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), 186. Others take the particle *'ap* to be emphatic ("indeed or really") and *ki* as being used to introduce the question. See Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Adam to Noah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), 144; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 239; *DCH*, vol. 4, 390, translates the phrase "indeed or really" and renders the question, "God really said?" The emphatic meaning would require emendation, "Did God really say?" We can perhaps retain the question if we keep in mind that in Hebrew yes-or-no questions do not require the use of the interrogative. Compare Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 235.

119. Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1967), 72.

120. G. Ch. Aalders, *Genesis: Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1981), 99.

121. Suggested in *HALOT*, vol 1, 474.

language of Genesis 1:29, clarifies that they can eat from the *pěri-‘ēš*, “fruit-bearing trees” of the garden.

Therefore, the topic of discussion presented by the serpent is about food—about what God assigned humans to eat. It is a little strange that the enemy would use this line of argumentation to initiate the conversation. But the topic of food is an important one in the creation narrative.¹²² In Genesis, God is the One Who determines what His creatures should eat (1:29, 30; 2:17; 3:18). As already indicated, diet set humanity apart from the animal world and constituted part of the order of creation. They, like the rest of the animal world, were vegetarians. The animals were to feed themselves with “green plants” (1:30), but humans were only to consume “seed bearing plants” and “every tree that has fruit with seed in it” (1:29).¹²³ This is an important marker of differentiation. In Genesis 2:16, 17, the Lord indicated that Adam and Eve were “free to eat from any tree in the garden” with one exception. The emphasis in Genesis 2 is on the fruit of the trees as part of human diet. By suggesting that humans should not eat from the trees of the garden, the enemy may have been trying to alter or weaken the dietary boundary that contributed to the differentiation of humans from animals.¹²⁴ One wonders whether the insinuation was that humans and animals basically belong to the same category of creatures—they were both to eat green plants. If that was the case, then the serpent was attempting to bring Eve to its own level of existence. What was at stake was the conception of humans as the image of God.¹²⁵ We already

122. The verb *‘ākal*, “to eat,” and the noun *‘āklā*, “food,” are used twenty times in Genesis 1 through 3, thus indicating the importance of this motif in the creation account. Fifteen of the occurrences of the verb are found in Genesis 3. See Gowan, *From Eden to Babylon*, 43.

123. The reference appears to be to grain and fruit, while the animals were to eat grass and plants. See Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 162.

124. Brown, *Ethos of the Cosmos*, 147, misses the point when he comments that “if what the serpent suggested were true, the human citizens of the garden would starve.” But he is right when adding that “the serpent’s outrageous query serves as a hook to engage the woman” (*ibid.*).

125. This idea could be strengthened if we accept the suggestion that the divine image particularly expressed itself in the human dominion over animals and that the dominion was, to some extent, defined and delimited by the vegetarian diet that the Lord assigned to humans. In that case, any modification of the diet would have negatively impinged on the nature of the image of God in humans. The connection between the image of God and the human diet has been suggested by Paul Beauchamp, “Création et fondation de la loi en Gn 1,1–2,4a: Le don de la nourriture végétale en Gn 1,29s,” in *La création dans l’orient ancien*, ed. Louis Derousseaux (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1987), 139–82. Beauchamp also argues that the original diet was an expression of human kindness toward animals, and therefore, it was a sign pointing to the absence of war among humans. This pacific coexistence, he suggests, is the principal constitutive element of humans as the image of God (142). See also Carlos R. Bovell, “Genesis 3:21: The History of Israel in a Nutshell?” *ExpTim* 115 (2004): 364.

quoted an ancient Near Eastern text which stated that primeval humans behaved like animals, “eating grass with their mouths like sheep and drinking water from the ditches.”¹²⁶ In that text, there is no dietary differentiation between humans and animals.¹²⁷ This appears to be what the serpent is attempting to introduce in the biblical narrative. By devaluing humans, the serpent forces Eve to react and to defend herself, and consequently, she becomes more vulnerable. Humans, she says, are to be differentiated from animals: “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden’” (3:2, 3a). If we are correct, then the rejection of this apparent attempt to group humans and animals together, indispensable in evolutionary thinking, deconstructed some ancient Near Eastern anthropogonies.

Self-Evolving of Humans

The idea that it is possible for humans to evolve from one level of existence to a higher one is found in Genesis, but it is not endorsed by the biblical writer. It is placed in the lips of the serpent *after* creation week. It is introduced in the narrative as an alternative to the divine plan for humans, and unfortunately, it captured their imagination. This represented a new worldview that was offered to humans by the serpent. According to it, humans have the potential within themselves to evolve into something unimaginable; they could be by themselves immortal and totally independent from God (Gen. 3:4, 5). They could leave behind their previous mode of existence and evolve, or self-

126. “Disputation,” trans. H. L. J. Vanstiphout, *COS* 1, no. 180: 575.

127. There is an Egyptian text, dated to around 1550–1350 BC or even earlier, in which the dietary distinction between animals and humans is very similar to the biblical one. The text is a hymn to Amun-Re, who is depicted in it as the supreme creator-god. The section that is important to us reads: “He who made herbage [for] the cattle, and the fruit tree for mankind, who made that (on which) the fish in the river may live, and the birds soaring in the sky” (see “A Hymn to Amon-Re,” trans. John A. Wilson, in *ANET*, 366). A translation of the same text published in 1997 differs from that provided by Wilson in 1969. It reads: “Who made the herbage [for] the herds, the tree of life for the sunfolk, who made that on which the fish live [in] the river, and the birds flying through heaven” (see “The Great Cairo Hymn of Praise to Amun-Re,” trans. Robert K. Ritner, *COS* 1, no. 25: 39). This difference in translation suggests that the text is not as clear as one would like it to be. The tree is probably the *ished* tree, “a tree revered as the tree of life, on whose leaves the names and years of kings were recorded by the gods. The scene of recording is often depicted in Ramesside temples. The tree is depicted as a leafy fruit-tree. Just what kind of tree the Egyptians thought of is not known” (see Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Volume II: The New Kingdom* [Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1973], 26). We should keep in mind that we do not have texts from Egypt describing the primeval condition of humans. It could very well be that Egyptian mythology differed at this point from the Sumero-Akkadian ones.

develop, into a divine mode of existence.¹²⁸ The biblical text rejects this worldview by describing the negative results of embracing it.

Instead of progress, humans were significantly dehumanized and unable to properly relate to each other and to God. One wonders whether hiding among the trees and putting on leaves as a kind of garment was not pointing to the fact that humans were identifying themselves with the trees (Gen. 3:8, 10). If that is a valid reading of the text, then, as a result of seeking to be like God, they had fallen almost to the level of the flora.¹²⁹ The fact that an animal was instrumental in their fall suggests that they lost their dominion over the fauna,¹³⁰ thus damaging the image of God. This permanent loss of dominion over the fauna appears to be expressed through the new garments that the Lord provided for them from the skin of animals (3:21).

While in Genesis 1 and 2, the distinction between humans and animals is clearly maintained, in Genesis 3, the distinction begins to deteriorate. An animal entered into a dialogue with Eve and deceived her; God explicitly states that humans will exist in conflict with this animal (Gen. 3:15), and finally, God clothes them with the skin of animals. All of these imply the human loss of their dominion over the fauna that God had entrusted to them.¹³¹ By dressing them with the skin of animals, it is indicated that they are no longer in the condition in which they were before—they are now closer to the animals.¹³² But there is more. As a result of the fall of Adam and Eve, the

128. What the enemy is offering Eve is the possibility of becoming divine; see Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 89. If we take the term *ʾēlohîm* to be a plural, as von Rad suggests, then the concept of polytheism is being introduced into the discussion. The LXX has the plural *theoi*.

129. Daniel Patte and Judson F. Parker, "Structural Exegesis of Genesis 2 and 3," in *Genesis 2 and 3: Kaleidoscopic Structural Readings*, ed. Daniel Patte (Chico, Calif.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1980), 74, come very close to this idea when they write, "By attempting to transcend their own nature they ended up not in the divine realm (like God) but alienated from the divine, . . . and in the vegetable world (cf. 3:7–8: they wear leaf aprons, they hide 'in the middle of the trees', identifying themselves with the trees, and not 'in the middle of the garden' which would have symbolized the identification with the divine)."

130. M. D. Gow, "Fall," in *DOTP*, 287.

131. It is interesting to observe that the enemy in Genesis 3 is not depicted as angelic or human but as subhuman—as an animal. When sin is mentioned in Genesis 4:7 (involving the case of Cain), it is described as an animal ready to attack its prey.

132. Bovell, "Genesis 3:21," 364, states, "Yahweh, however, is not only distinguishing the couple from the divine, but he is going a step further and identifying them with the animals. . . . To wit, the man had become just like one of the animals." His main argument is that this particular passage describes the reason for the exile of Israel, namely Israel lost its connection with God and became like the Canaanites. This argument is debatable, but for our purpose, what is important is to notice that Bovell also noted a connection between the new clothing and the loss of dominion. He went too far by suggesting that humans became

human diet is altered, and humans will also eat green vegetables or legumes (*‘ēšeb haššādeh*, “green plants of the field”; 3:18),¹³³ making their diet more closely resemble the animal diet.

The human quest for self-development or evolving into the divine and the acquisition of self-preservation—immortality—proved to be a failure. Yet, both ideas found fertile ground in the religions of the ancient Near East. Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Hittite religions developed well-established rituals to facilitate the transition of the individual from this life to the other life.¹³⁴ The movement from the human level to the divine took place particularly in the sphere of the king, who, in some cultures, was considered to be divine¹³⁵ or who was transformed into a god after dying.¹³⁶ In this last case, the evolutionary

like animals. The text suggests that humans retained their ability to communicate with God and to listen to Him, but unquestionably, their status was no longer the same as before. This is suggested by the new clothing made out of the skin of animals.

133. See *HALOT*, 889, where the Hebrew phrase *‘ēšeb haššādeh* is understood to designate green vegetables. But it has been argued that when Genesis 2:5 and 18 are analyzed together, it is better to understand the phrase “plants of the field” as designating wheat, barley, and similar grains. This would be “the food Adam will have to eat as a result of his sin and that he will obtain . . . only through ‘painful toil’ and the ‘sweat of [his] brow.’ In other words, ‘plants of the field’ are those plants grown through the labor humanity became burdened with because of the fall into sin.” See Randall W. Younker, “Genesis 2: A Second Creation Account?” in *Creation, Catastrophe, and Calvary*, ed. John Templeton Baldwin (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000), 73; see also Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 169. What is important in this context is that, after the Fall, there is an emphasis on a human diet that is closer to the animal diet than before.

134. For an introduction to ideas of the afterlife in these religions, see Leonard H. Lesko, “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egyptian Thought,” in *CANE*, vol. 3, 1763–74; JoAnn Scurlock, “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought,” in *CANE*, vol. 3, 1883–93; and Volkert Haas, “Death and the Afterlife in Hittite Thought,” in *CANE*, vol. 3, 2021–30.

135. This was the common understanding of kingship among the Egyptians. It appears that, early in Egyptian thinking, it was believed that “to assume life in the cosmos after death was . . . a divine capacity, and the king was the only mortal who possessed it.” Compare Ragnhild Bjerre Finnestad, “The Pharaoh and the ‘Democratization’ of Post-Mortem Life,” in *The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians: Cognitive Structures and Popular Expressions*, ed. Gertie Englund (Uppsala, Sweden: University Press, 1987), 89. Scholars believed that, at some point, the idea was democratized making heaven accessible to every Egyptian (e.g., Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 204). But perhaps Finnestad, “The Pharaoh and the ‘Democratization,’” 91, is right when suggesting that “when the category of pharaoh, or the role of pharaoh, or the person of pharaoh, is applied to the dead Egyptian ‘private’ man, this implies that his death, or rather, his life after death, is not regarded as a merely private matter, or as a matter for his family only, but as something that is conditioned by, and belonging to, the entire Egyptian people. It is through this evaluation that ‘private’ man has access to the cosmic life described in the royal mortuary literature.” The result of this would be that “the dead person was absorbed into the substance of the deity” (Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 211). In the case of Mesopotamia, the king was considered divine during the old Babylonian period, but during the first millennium, this understanding was weakened; see Philip Jones, “Divine and Non-Divine Kingship,” in *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*, ed. Daniel C. Snell (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 353–65.

136. The Hittites deified their king after he died. See Henri Cazelles, “Sacral Kingship,” in *ABD*, vol. 5, 864; and Gary Beckman, “Royal Ideology and State Administration in Hittite Anatolia,” in *CANE*, vol. 1, 531.

goal was reached in the sphere of the spiritual world and connected evolutionary ideas with spiritual concerns. What is particularly important in the biblical narrative is that at the moment when evolutionary ideas are insinuated, the biblical text rejects them by emphasizing their negative impact on human existence.

CONCLUSION

In the study of the history of evolutionary ideas, the literature of the ancient Near East should be taken into consideration. Behind the myths, there are some interesting reflections and speculations about the origin of life and its development from simple elements like water, matter, and time. These self-created elements are personified in the myths as divine beings who evolve, or self-develop, into the multiplicity of phenomena that we, as one of the phenomena in the cosmos, can now observe and experience. None of this is, properly speaking, natural evolution, as it is understood today, but it does contain elements of the evolutionary ideology promoted today in some scientific circles. In that sense, the ancient Near Eastern views should be considered part of the history of the idea of natural evolution.

Once we recognize that such ideas were part of the cultural and religious environment of the people of God in the Old Testament, the reading of the biblical creation account reveals the uniqueness of its cosmogony and anthropogony. In revealing how Yahweh created the cosmos, life in general, and human life in particular, the biblical text was indeed deconstructing the elemental evolutionary views present in the Egyptian and ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies and anthropogonies. We can then suggest that the biblical text is to be used as a hermeneutical tool to evaluate and deconstruct contemporary scientific and evolutionary theories and speculations related to cosmogony and anthropogony. It is surprising to realize that an ancient text, the biblical creation account, could have had such a unique role in the ancient world and that it can continue to address the same concerns in a technological and scientific global culture. Qohelet, who was very much interested in creation, said it well: "There is nothing new under the sun" (Eccles. 1:9).