

# Creation in the Old Testament

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Long before the Israelites appeared in history the people of the Ancient Near East had raised serious and anxious questions about the origin of the world, the gods, and man. At least a thousand years before Abraham began his journey of faith, the great civilizations which had emerged in the Nile Valley and the Land of the Two Rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, had formulated their deepest questions about the universe as they knew it in all its bewildering variety. Confronted with an experience of the world, now comforting now terrifying, man inevitably sought to impose order on what would otherwise be a chaotic and meaningless existence. It has been estimated, for example, that a coherent Mesopotamian view of the world had taken form as early as the Proto-literate period, around the middle of the fourth millenium B.C. The Egyptians were not appreciably later in their quite different and somewhat scattered accounts of the universe and its beginnings<sup>1</sup>. In both cases we have the human effort at understanding the cosmos in terms of highly diversified experiences, from the reassuring periodicity of the Egyptian world to the more tumultuous, violent and unstable elements of the Mesopotamian experience which set the mood of that civilization for centuries. Later we shall examine some of these cosmogonies a little more closely because it is only against such a comparative background that we can understand Israel's response to her unique experience of God and her formulation of a doctrine of creation in which similarities must never be allowed to obscure the fundamental break with the polytheistic cosmogonies of the Ancient Near East. The late Henri Frankfort has brilliantly expressed this radical departure from the mythopoeic thinking of the past:

When we read in Psalm xix that 'the heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork', we hear a voice which mocks the beliefs of Egyptians and Babylonians. The heavens, which were to the psalmist but a witness of God's greatness, were to the

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<sup>1</sup> For a general treatment of ancient cosmogonies, see S.G.F. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East*. Hodder & Stoughton: 1963.

Mesopotamians the very majesty of godhead, the highest ruler, Anu. To the Egyptians the heavens signified the mystery of the divine mother through whom man was reborn. In Egypt and Mesopotamia the divine was comprehended as immanent: the gods were in nature. The Egyptian saw in the sun all that a man may know of the Creator; the Mesopotamian viewed the sun as the god Shamash, the guarantor of justice. But to the psalmist the sun was God's devoted servant who "is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race". The God of the psalmists and the prophets was not in nature. He transcended nature — and transcended, likewise, the realm of mythopoeic thought. It would seem that the Hebrews, no less than the Greeks, broke with the mode of speculation which had prevailed up to their time<sup>2</sup>.

The Hebrews, of course, did not arrive at their idea of God and the world through a process of philosophical speculation but rather as the result of a reflection upon their continuing experience of God Who showed His saving power to Israel. God was known by the way He acted; in this case He was a God Who saves. To live in a world where existence itself is threatened has, more than once, been the lot of Israel. Creation-faith and the idea of a Creator-God must be situated, then, within the context of Israel's experience and developing faith. This does not in the least imply that these beliefs are late developments and explicable solely as a slow evolution from an earlier stage, much less from a polytheistic background for which there is absolutely no evidence in Israel's religious history.

## THE BIBLICAL SOURCES OF CREATION-BELIEF

The Israelite profession of faith in God as Creator was not based fundamentally upon a numinous experience of nature and its forces, as was the case with polytheism. Whatever else Israel had in common with her neighbors she did not share that conviction which underlay mythopoeic thought, viz., that man and nature were consubstantial, the natural world being confronted as a "Thou" and not as an "It". In this view of things the gods were immanent in the manifold phenomena of nature. It is very difficult for us to understand, much less to define, the structure of mythopoeic thought in all its various and strange expressions; there is a vast difference between their way of thinking and our logical perception of the world along with our mental schemes for making the world intelligible. And if we claim to have been emancipated from mythopoeic thinking it is to the Hebrews that we primarily owe this liberation from the tyranny

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<sup>2</sup> H. Frankfort *et al*, *Before Philosophy*, Penguin: 1949, p. 237.

of nature and its unpredictable determinism. Their understanding of reality, centered upon a transcendent God, was indeed based upon experience. And it was an experience of power as we noted earlier. But the point at which they made contact with this power was entirely different from that of the polytheist. The power they experienced showed itself in history; and this power was a personal one, a divine authority concentrated in a single, personal Will which claimed unconditional allegiance from the people He had chosen. The God of Israel would tolerate no other claim. The "Thou shalt" of Hebrew law finds no answering echo among the nations which sought their security in an integration with the forces of nature.

Israel's Creation-faith must be seen, therefore, within an environment<sup>3</sup>. This includes the thought-patterns of her neighbors against which she in great measure reacted negatively, and that of her own proper experience with Yahweh, the God Who first delivered and then chose her as His people. The fundamental affirmation of Israel's Credo is repeated many times in the Old Testament and it is centered in the saving events of the thirteenth century B.C., the Exodus and Covenant upon Sinai. Noteworthy is the fact that creation is not mentioned as an article of faith in any of the early credos (Deut 26:5-9; Joshua 24:2-13)<sup>4</sup>.

If belief in God as Creator is neither the earliest nor the most basic article of Israel's creed it is no less true that the doctrine has found expression in all the major branches of Old Testament literature and over a very long period of time. Best known of the creation accounts is, of course, the Priestly recital which provides a majestic introduction to the entire Old Testament. Redacted in its present form around the 7th century B.C. or slightly later, it derives from a much earlier stage of oral transmission, presumably in the cult. This part of the Priestly tradition appears to be a

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent study of parallels, with the introduction of new material, see A.R. Millard, "A New Babylonian 'Genesis' Story", *Tyndale Bulletin* # 18 (1967) 3-18. He deals with the Babylonian Epic of Atrahasis, four-fifths of which can now be restored. Its peculiar value lies in the fact that its narrative unites both Creation (of man) and Flood so that one should no longer, in dealing with the Babylonian background of Genesis, separate the two. Millard is at pains to point out that while the overall scheme, Creation-Rebellion-Flood, is the same, most of the details are different, especially in the ethical and religious concepts of the respective compositions. He concludes by observing that the Epic of Atrahasis "underlines the uniqueness of the Hebrew primeval history in the form in which it now exists" (p. 18).

<sup>4</sup> It seems significant that Creation-faith is mentioned prominently in the credal recital of the post-exilic community (Nehemia 9:6-37).

specifically Israelite synthesis of elements from Babylonia, Egypt and Canaan, now somewhat obscured by Israelite demythologizing<sup>5</sup>. In fact, the very first verse of Genesis, though open to different translations, is not only a demythologizing of other creation stories but a direct polemic against the ancient idea of creation as a timeless, recurring event in the mythological pattern. There is little doubt that this chapter, despite its late redaction, contains very archaic elements in style, grammar and vocabulary. In all likelihood it is a prose paraphrase of an older poetic text<sup>6</sup>.

Following the Priestly narrative of creation is the Yahwist account (Gen 2:4b-25) which is not, strictly speaking, a creation story since nothing is said about the origin of the universe as a whole. It deals rather with the origin of life upon earth, and especially the life of man. The Priestly tradition begins with the assertion that "God created (*bara'*) heaven and earth". The Yahwistic tradition opens with "the day that Yahweh Elohim made (*'asah*) earth and heaven". The nuance is important both in the verbs used and the order of the direct objects. In the second account the cosmic picture fades out and man upon earth is the center of attention. In one version creation is accomplished by a word, in the other by work. Though there are fleeting references to creation in some poetic texts (Gen 14:19; 49:25; Exod 15:4-12; Judges 5:20f.) creation doctrine is more conspicuous by its absence in the earlier period of Israel's faith. In the prophetic literature the doxologies of Amos 4:13; 5:8f.; 9:5f. proclaim no independent message but they give to the prophetic word a new dimension of depth. The allusions to creation in Jer 5:22-4; 27:5; 31:35f. are significant and were once thought to be the earliest articulations of this belief. Jer 27:5 is a particularly clear and comprehensive revelation of creation as the basis of Yahweh's control over history. To the same prophet we owe the argument that the God of Israel is essentially different from the idols because He has created the world (10:12-16; cf. 14:22). Finally, in his vision of that Day in which Yahweh shall judge His people for their sins, Jeremiah has left us a frightening picture of creation "in reverse".

I saw the earth, and lo, it was  
chaos primeval (*tohu wabohu*);  
the heavens, and their light was gone.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. W.F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, Athlone Press: 1968, p. 80. Albright promises to treat Gen 1 in greater detail in his forthcoming book, *Experience on the Road to Reason: Phoenicia, Israel and Ionia*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. W.F. Albright, *Mélanges Robert*, Paris: 1957, 22-6. In his book *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth*, Leiden: 1955, J.M. Myers has studied the principles involved in determining the poetic origin of a given prose narrative.

I saw the mountains, and lo,  
they were quaking,  
and all the hills rocked to and fro.  
I looked, and lo, there was no man,  
the birds of the sky had all flown.  
I looked, and lo, the tilled land was desert,  
and all its cities were laid in ruins —  
before Yahweh, before His fierce anger. (Jer 4:23-6)

This is probably the most terrifying picture of judgment in the Old Testament. Creation is undone and the universe returns to the primeval chaos. The cosmic dimension of sin is revealed.

It is however in Second Isaiah that creation receives sustained treatment, not for its own sake, but in relation to the wondrous redemptive and creative act which Yahweh is now performing for His people<sup>7</sup>. In the post-exilic wisdom literature creation becomes a prominent theme in Ben Sira 42:22-43:33; Job 38; Prov 8:22-31 while the psalms of nature take up the praise of Yahweh as Creator. Typical of these hymns are Pss 8, 19, 24, 74:12-17, 104, 136. All in all, we can say that the biblical sources of creation-faith include both prose and poetry, that they cover a wide expanse of time, and that they portray creation in relation to other Old Testament beliefs, especially the fundamental affirmation of Yahweh as Savior of Israel. Israel's reflection upon the universe has been integrated, then, into the framework of her salvation history.

## ORIGINS OF THE ISRAELITE IDEA OF YAHWEH AS CREATOR

There is still no agreement as to the time when Israel first began to conceive of Yahweh as Creator. Many would subscribe to the view of van Rad that a coherent doctrine of creation had to await its realignment with Israel's distinctive faith in saving history.

It has long been recognized that more comprehensive statements about the creation of the world by Jahweh are only found in texts of a later time. Leaving the Jahwist out of account, since he does not in fact treat of the creation of the world at all, we are left in the main with Deutero-Isaiah, the Priestly Document, and a few psalms, the last of which are admittedly difficult to date, although there is no reason to regard them as particularly old. It is of course very doubtful whether this really striking state of affairs admits of the simple explanation that before the seventh and sixth centuries Israel never at all venerated Jahweh as the creator of the world. In actual fact, it is hard to imagine that, in the environment of Canaan, whose religious atmosphere was

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. C. Stuhlmüller, "‘First and Last’ and ‘Yahweh-Creator’ in Deutero-Isaiah", *CBQ* 29 (1967) 495-511.

saturated with creation myths, it would not have occurred to Israel to connect creation — that is, heaven, earth, the stars, the sea, plants, and animals — with Jahweh. Probably the sole reason for the lateness of the emergence of a doctrine of creation was that it took Israel a fairly long time to bring the older beliefs which she actually already possessed about it into proper theological relationship with the tradition which was her very own, that is, with what she believed about the saving acts done by Jahweh in history. In the old cultic Credo there was nothing about Creation. And Israel only discovered the correct theological relationship of the two when she learned to see Creation too as connected theologically with the saving history. This was, of course, no light task, and she needed some time to accomplish it<sup>8</sup>.

Von Rad is careful not to rule out the possibility of a very ancient association of Yahweh with creation in view of her contact with a Canaanite civilization to which creation myths were no stranger. Moreover, at the end of the cited paragraph he notes that some very old passages in the Old Testament argue strongly against the usual late dating of belief in creation. These texts are Ps 19; Gen 14:19, 22; 24:3; 1 Kgs 8:12 (emended text).

In the light of our better understanding of Canaanite religion it is now possible to be more specific and lay to rest the very common opinion that kingship and creation motifs in Israel must be attributed to the Jebusite cult of 'El 'Elyon which the Hebrews took over when they conquered Jerusalem<sup>9</sup>. In other words, the motifs had no place in Israel prior to 1000 B.C. This position overlooks the fact that "Creator" was a standard appellation of the chief Canaanite god 'El from very early times. We now have evidence that the title was widespread in the cult of Late Bronze Canaan with which the Israelites were in close and dynamic contact. The Canaanite notion of 'El as creator is clearly reflected in 'el 'elyon qônê shāmayim wa'āreṣ ('El 'Elyon, Creator of heaven and earth) in Gen 14:19 where a formula originating in the early Canaanite cult of 'El has been transferred to Yahweh<sup>10</sup>. It must not be forgotten that Israelite contact with the Canaanites, in their beliefs as well as their cult, began with the occupation of the Land in the thirteenth century B.C. Joshua 17:12f.; Judges 1:17-21; 2:3; 10:6 remind us of the close association of Israel and Canaan from the beginning. Living side by side with a people who worshipped a Creator-god in an elaborate cult it would be very surprising if Israel had not associated this important concept with their own Yahweh. The scattered evidence we have from early poetry supports this conjecture.

<sup>8</sup> G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, London: 1962, p. 136.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. H.J. Kraus, *Psalmen I*, Neukirchen: 1960, pp. 193-206.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. F.M. Cross, "Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs", *HTR* 55 (1962) 241ff.

But we are by no means restricted to contact with Canaan in seeking to explain the origins of Israelite creation-faith. As already indicated, cosmological speculation was characteristic of the ancient civilizations of the Near East and there is plenty of evidence, from the biblical account itself, that Israel was dependent on earlier models, especially Mesopotamian, for her own highly individual account of origins. Much of the early higher culture of the Hebrews, as we find this in Genesis and Exodus, reflects the Mesopotamian background of the Founding Fathers, the Patriarchs, who brought this patrimony with them when they journeyed from the ancestral homeland to Canaan in the first half of the second millenium B.C. The borrowing and readjustment, including a strong demythologizing element, are most apparent in the two creation narratives of Gen 1-2.

Before looking at the parallel creation accounts in Mesopotamia and Israel we might say something about the demythologizing of mythical material in Old Testament literature since a good deal of obscurity and confusion still exist on this subject. At the present time, it is all but impossible to distinguish clearly between foreign, pagan elements in Israel's religion as Moses found it, mythical elements borrowed at an early date from the Canaanites, and finally, a vast number of allusions to Canaanite (Phoenician) literature found in the Old Testament literature composed between 600 and 200 B.C. (Job, Proverbs, Second Isaiah, Song of Songs, and Qoheleth). In all cases, however, the strength of Israel's monotheistic faith led either to an excision or transformation of any polytheistic ideas in this mythical material. The process of demythologizing pagan myths must have begun as early as the thirteenth century B.C. and continued right down to the post-exilic period when the first canonical writings were established. Periods of reform, such as those of Hezekiah and Josiah, undoubtedly accelerated the process. Since religious truth, however, thrives upon the language of symbolism and artistic imagery in its effort to express the ineffable, there is no possibility of eliminating all mythical elements provided that they are reconcilable with orthodox doctrine. Neither Christianity nor Judaism is without its vestiges or remnants of earlier and basically unacceptable religious cultures but these elements have now been purged of any pagan meaning and are accordingly theologically harmless but aesthetically and psychologically useful<sup>11</sup>. It is very difficult to imagine anyone singing a completely demythologized hymn!

One of the best examples of this process of purification of older pagan myths is found precisely in our most important witness to

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Albright, *op. cit.*, 161ff.

Israelite creation-faith, the Priestly narrative of Gen 1. To appreciate what has happened here it is necessary to examine its Mesopotamian counterpart, much earlier than our narrative and undoubtedly having some influence on its formulation. Mesopotamian cosmogony has its canonical version in the Seven Tablets of the great Babylonian Creation Epic, *Enuma Elish*, written in the solemn, hymnic style of Old Babylonian and going back to the first half of the second millennium B.C.<sup>12</sup>. We say "some influence" since it is now recognized that relationships between different cultures and their mutual impact were far more subtle and complicated than the proponents of Pan-Babylonianism ever imagined. It has been argued recently that Babylonian civilization itself was made up of several main strands, among them Sumerian and Amorite, with the result that it is often difficult to know if a particular item of Babylonian civilization originated with one of the feeder-groups or was a new creation<sup>13</sup>. Babylonian culture was a highly composite one and we can no longer simply assume that all of its features or ideas originated in Mesopotamia and then moved westward. T. Jacobsen has recently pointed out that *Enuma Elish*, with its basic image of a victorious struggle over the sea (Tiamat), hardly originated in the riverine civilization of Mesopotamia but was borrowed from a Canaanite milieu, probably through the Amorites<sup>14</sup>.

When on high the heavens had not been named,  
Firm ground beneath had not been named,  
Nothing but primordial Apsu<sup>15</sup>, their begetter,

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<sup>12</sup> The latest edition (without translation) of the text is that of W.G. Lambert and S.B. Parker, *Enuma Elish, The Babylonian Epic of Creation*, Oxford: 1966.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. W.G. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis", *JTS* 16 (1965) 287-300. He has some interesting things to say about *Enuma Elish*: "The first major conclusion is that the *Epic of Creation* is not a norm of Babylonian or Sumerian cosmology. It is a sectarian and aberrant combination of mythological threads woven into an unparalleled compositum. In my opinion it is not earlier than 1100 B.C. It happens to be the best preserved Babylonian document of its genre simply because it was at the height of its popularity when the libraries were formed from which our knowledge of Babylonian mythology is mostly derived. The various traditions it draws upon are often perverted to such an extent that conclusions based on this text alone are suspect. It can only be used safely in the whole context of ancient Mesopotamian mythology" (p. 291).

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. T. Jacobsen, "The Battle between Marduk and Tiamat", *JAOS* 88 (1968) 104-8. In both *Enuma Elish* and the Ugaritic myth of Baal's victory over Yam (Sea) he finds the same mythological motif: a battle between the god of thunderstorms (Marduk) and the sea (Tiamat) in which the storm emerges victorious. Where did the motif originate? Jacobsen argues for a Mediterranean (Ugaritic) environment with later eastward migration to Babylon, possibly through the Amorites, Western Semites who founded the First Dynasty of Babylon.



And Tiamat, she who bore them all,  
 Their waters commingling as a single body;  
 Neither reed hut had been matted nor marsh land had appeared,  
 When no gods at all had been formed,  
 Their names uncalled, their destinies undetermined —  
 Then it was that the gods were formed within them.

We quote the first nine lines of the poem in order to call attention to the peculiar structure of what is known as the "cosmogonic introduction". Its literary form is made up of three elements: (1) temporal clause (11.1-2); (2) parenthetic, descriptive clauses (11.3-8); (3) main statement or independent clause (1.9).

Gen 2:4b-7, the introduction to the Yahwist creation narrative, offers a striking parallel to the ancient "cosmogonic introduction" and it is very probable that Gen 1:1-3 is cast in the same form and can be translated, with Speiser,

1 "When God set about to create heaven and earth - 2 the world being then a formless waste, with darkness over the seas and only an awesome wind sweeping over the water - 3 God said, 'Let there be light'. And there was light"<sup>15</sup>.

The interpretation of Gen 1:1-3 is something which goes beyond philological and grammatical questions. Do we have here a doctrine of creation in the strict sense of an absolute beginning, a *creatio ex nihilo*? Opinions are divided.<sup>16</sup> Very few today would hold that an explicit doctrine of creation in the strict sense has been formulated in these lines and therefore was in the mind of the original author. This seems to suppose a stage of theological reflection which would have been too abstract and philosophically orientated for the Hebrew mind. Furthermore, it is difficult to eliminate entirely the notion of chaos, the antithesis of creation. And yet the Hebrew author of our verses did not presuppose any preexistent material out of which Yahweh formed the world nor could he have tolerated any independent principle outside of the creative act of God. Were one to ask the Hebrew if the primeval matter (of other Near Eastern cosmogonies) had been created by God and was subordinate to Him I believe that by the very logic of his belief in a transcendent God he

<sup>15</sup> E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible, N.Y.: 1964, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> While willing to accept the opinion of Eichrodt that the idea of the absolute beginning of the created world is a logical expression of the Priestly writer's total outlook, I do not believe that one must conclude that the translation "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" proves to be "...the truly pertinent one, not only from the aesthetic-stylistic point of view but also from that of linguistic and intellectual history". W. Eichrodt, "In the Beginning", *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*, N.Y.: 1962, p. 10.

would be obliged to answer: "Yes, of course, God created everything. Does not the first verse of the Bible say that He created 'heaven and earth' which is our idiom for expressing totality?" His belief in *creatio ex nihilo* seems, therefore, to be present implicitly, in his idea of a transcendent God; this would later be explicitated in an environment no longer a stranger to Greek philosophical ideas (2 Mac 7:28).

The first creation narrative of Gen 1 goes back then to antecedent traditions which can be localized in Mesopotamia. There is no question of the Babylonian version being dependent upon the Hebrew. Nor is there any good reason for assuming that both go back to some unidentified third source; the Babylonian account is the prototype even though we cannot determine either the precise date of borrowing or the specific channels through which this influence was exercised. In one way Israel's creation-faith broke sharply with its Babylonian forerunner. This is evident in the concept of creation by God's all-powerful word, though curiously enough, such a concept is found in an earlier Egyptian creation narrative. Another difference has been noticed recently. While scholars usually held that the cosmogonic narrative of Gen 1 provides a classical example of the seven-day scheme familiar from both Akkadian and Ugaritic literature, a fundamental difference has recently been pointed out. The biblical account describes a new event which takes place on each of the six days of creation. Each day has its own story. The Gen passage, according to this scholar, combines the seven-day plan with another scheme which treats six different subjects in detail and then, for reasons of climax, closes the narrative with mention of the seventh and most important theme. In our case this would be the sabbath, towards which the six-day account moves in a crescendo-style.<sup>17</sup>

To return to parallels for a moment, there is some evidence to show that the image of a cosmic struggle between Yahweh and the forces of chaos was never completely eliminated from the biblical record.<sup>18</sup> It is this theme of divine combat against the forces of chaos, fragmentarily preserved here and elsewhere in the Bible, which is closest to the canonical Babylonian account. This latter was predicated upon a primordial combat between the divinities, Marduk and Tiamat, a struggle found, with variations, in practically all the cosmogonies of the ancient Near East. In passing, we may say that

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. S.E. Loewenstamm, "The Seven-Day Unit in Ugaritic Literature", *IEJ* 15 (1965) 121-33.

<sup>18</sup> W.F. Albright, *op. cit.*, 160f. holds that it was once attested in Gen 1:2 where, he argues, a succinct account of Yahweh's triumph over the great Deep (*Tehom-Tiamat*) was deleted in the demythologizing process to which the chapter was subjected.

the notion of conflict is implied in a pagan world view. Where there is a multiplicity of gods there will be a multiplicity of wills which, on the analogy of man, will almost inevitably lead to strife. The literary records confirm this judgment. The biblical reminiscence of a cosmic struggle never displaced the concept of effortless creation by the word; in other words, it never attained canonical status, but traces of this mythical struggle underlie the imagery of Job 9:13; Psalms 74:13-14; 89:10-11; 104:7-9; Is 27:1; 51:9-10<sup>19</sup>. The last passage provides a good example of how historical patterns, based upon the memory of real events, tended to displace mythological patterns. In this Isaian section Israel's victory at the Crossing of the Sea is aligned with the old mythical motif of Yahweh's defeat of Rahab and the dragons of chaos along with the divine victory over the unruly sea (*yam*). Notice that historical event is central and alone meaningful; the secondary mythologizing has given cosmic dimension to the event. The mythical allusions have become a part of the literary presentation and they in no way diminish the historicity of the event with which the poem is primarily concerned.

In both creation narratives, Priestly and Yahwist, man's special place in creation is proclaimed along with the responsibilities which go with this exalted relationship to the Creator. Gen 1 moves majestically through the vast theatre of the universe, from the first flash of light to the climatic moment when the decision is taken in the heavenly council, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (1:26). Since the Hebrews thought in terms of a totality the notion of "image" should be applied to the whole man and not simply to his soul, about which the Hebrews in their psychology had no clear and distinct notion<sup>20</sup>. It is not his essence which is defined but his function as God's representative in exercising sovereignty over creation. As the only creature who can enter into personal, free and responsible relationship with his Maker, man takes on the stewardship of creation. He becomes the unique mirror of God's glory.

We have already noted that the earlier, Yahwistic account in Gen 2:4b-25 is not a cosmogony in the strict sense of the word; it is rather an etiology of man and it is followed by an etiology of sin. Dating from the tenth century B.C., probably from the reign of Solomon, the writer does not oppose his story of human origins to the Priestly account of creation. They are complementary, despite their

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. H. Junker, "Die Theologische Behandlung der Chaosvorstellung in der biblischen Schöpfungsgeschichte", *Mélanges Robert*, Paris: 1957, pp. 27-37.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. A.R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel*, Cardiff: 1949.

differences in perspective and imagery. Comparing the two we might say that the Priestly writer of Gen 1 set a vast stage, carefully ordered into "times and seasons", with man as the high point of the creative activity, and all proclaimed "good" by the Creator. The more anthropomorphic Yahwist narrative then set out to answer our most urgent questions: "Who is this man and what is his nature?" The following scheme makes the dissimilarities evident but shows that there is no fundamental disagreement between the two authors.

P (Gen 1-2:4a)

The earth as a watery chaos.

Creation accomplished in six working days.

J (Gen 2:4b-25)

The earth as an arid desert with no vegetation.

No measure of time in the narrative.

#### *Order of Creation*

- (1) Light
- (2) Firmament-heaven
- (3) Dry land. Separation of earth and sea
- (4) Vegetation
- (5) Heavenly bodies- sun, moon and stars
- (6) Birds and fishes
- (7) Terrestrial animals
- (8) Man

#### *Order of Creation*

- (1) Man
- (2) Garden in Eden
- (3) Tree of life - Tree of Knowledge
- (4) Animals, beasts, birds
- (5) Woman

The differences in approach and emphasis point to different but legitimate perspectives. The Priestly writer stresses the cosmos, the Yahwistic the earth; the emphasis is upon God in the former and upon man in the latter. Mention has already been made of dependence upon Mesopotamian traditions. The use of Mesopotamian material can be documented more extensively in the second than in the first creation account<sup>21</sup>.

A supplementary but sound argument for an early belief in God as Creator may be advanced from the etymology of the name "Yahweh". While it is true that this continues to be a much-debated point the linguistic evidence favoring the causative meaning of the

<sup>21</sup> Cf. W.F. Albright, *op. cit.*, 80-5.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. D.N. Freedman, "The Name of the God of Moses", *JBL* 79 (1960) 151-6; F.M. Cross, *art. cit.*, 250-5; W.F. Albright, *op. cit.*, 146-9.

verb "to be" continues to grow and makes this explanation all but certain<sup>22</sup>. In the proposed explanation Yahweh, the name revealed by God to Moses, is derived from the verbal stem *hwy* "to be, become, come into existence". The simple (*Qal*) imperfect form is ruled out as an explanation for the form *Yahweh* since, philologically, this simple form would be *\*yihwayu*, later *yihwe* and finally *yihye*. The causative (*hiph'il*) imperfect form of the same verb would be *\*yah-wiyu*, becoming *yahwe* (whence our YHWH), with a normal abbreviated jussive form *yahu*. New evidence for this analysis of the divine name *Yahweh* as a causative (*hiph'il*) form has come from Amorite personal names in the Mari material<sup>23</sup>. There is also reason to believe that *Yahweh* is part of a longer, cultic formula. For example, *Yahweh Seba'ot* would mean "He brings into being (causes to exist) the armies of Israel"; *Yahweh Shalom* would mean "He causes peace to exist". Parallels could be adduced from cognate Semitic languages to show that *Yahweh* was originally part of a sentence which belonged in a liturgical context.

Occasionally it has been objected that the causative meaning is too abstract or philosophical an idea for the early Israelites. But this kind of argument runs up against the fact that no category of meaning which is represented by a special morpheme (in this case, the *hiph'il*) in the given language, can be considered too abstract for the genius of that language. Besides, there are innumerable parallels for this causative meaning of the verb in neighboring Semitic languages; and these forms are particularly common in the names of ancient Near Eastern divinities. To "create, cause to be" is one of their chief functions. It is well known, for example, that the gods of Canaan and Mesopotamia are often designated as the creator of heaven and earth, father of all creatures, or progenitor of the world. Procreation or bringing into being was an essential part of the cosmogonic myth in Canaanite and other ancient religions. Granted the causative meaning for the name *Yahweh* it is seen to fit in extremely well with known divine names from contemporary and earlier strata. It provides us with an additional argument that the Hebrews, almost from the beginning, saw their God in terms of His creative function.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. H.B. Huffmon, *Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts*, Baltimore: 1965, pp. 66-73.

## THEOLOGY OF CREATION

We may look at this topic in two ways. First, there is the question of how Israel integrated her belief in Yahweh the Creator into her total picture of God; then we may briefly examine a more particular but no less important issue, viz., the relation of Old Testament creation-faith to the biblical view of man. We might call them the vertical and horizontal dimensions. If we again consult the biblical sources of belief in Yahweh as Creator we see that, with few exceptions such as the Yahwist narrative in Gen 2, our more elaborated statements of the theme are found in later writing, especially the Priestly account of creation, Second Isaiah, Job, and some Psalms. It would seem, then, that it took some time for this belief to be fully assimilated and von Rad, as we saw, is undoubtedly correct when he claims that the late emergence of a fully developed witness to creation can be explained only in terms of Israel's unique faith which was grounded on the radically historical character of Israel's existence. It is a safe generalization that He was known as the creator of Israel before He was known as the creator of the universe<sup>24</sup>.

Israel's basic attitude towards God and nature was entirely different from that of her environment. She did not seek for life's meaning in the rhythms or cycles of nature, as in Canaan and elsewhere. In fact, she desacralized the whole order of nature, radically eliminating all but the vestiges of mythology in her understanding of God and the world. For Israel the event was decisive and it was an unrepeatable event. In this attitude towards event(s) lies the difference between a cyclic or mythical view of history and the Israelite or Christian viewpoint. In the former meaning was found only in what was forever repeated, i.e. the reoccurrence of the divine action which had taken place in sacred time and which was repeated in the observable order of nature. The cycle of the seasons, fertility, rainfall had their prototypes in divine actions which took place in mythical or sacred time. It was in the cult that ancient man hoped to bring about this correlation between sacred and profane time.

Compared with the archaic and palaeo-oriental religions, as well as with the mythic-philosophical conceptions of the eternal return, as they were elaborated in India and Greece, Judaism presents an innovation of the first importance. For Judaism, time has a beginning and will have an end. The idea of cyclic time is left behind. Yahweh no longer manifests himself in *cosmic time* (like the gods of other religions) but in a *historical time*, which is irreversible. Each new manifestation of Yahweh

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. J. Blenkinsopp, *A Sketchbook of Biblical Theology*, London: 1968, p. 45.

in history is no longer reducible to an earlier manifestation. The fall of Jerusalem expresses wrath against his people, but it is no longer the same wrath that Yahweh expressed by the fall of Samaria. His gestures are *personal* interventions in history and reveal their deep meaning *only for his people*, the people that Yahweh had chosen. Hence the historical event acquires a new dimension; it becomes a theophany<sup>25</sup>.

Biblical faith is orientated toward history and the Hebrew (and Christian) idea of God is chiefly fashioned from His self-revelation in historical event and word, as Vatican II clearly affirmed. His control over nature was constantly revealed through His activity in history. Karl Barth wrote:

The Bible speaks in Genesis 1 and 2 of events which lie outside of our historical knowledge. But it speaks upon the basis of knowledge which is related to history. In fact, the wonderful thing about the biblical creation narratives is that they stand in strict connexion with the history of Israel and so with the story of God's action in the covenant with man<sup>26</sup>.

This may be illustrated from the most extensive expression of creation-faith which we have, that of Second Isaiah. This unknown prophet inherited the tradition of a God Who had saved Israel for a special purpose. The divine power, even that of creation, could not therefore be separated from the larger context of redemption. Creation was never an act of sheer power but an expression of His care. Using the technical term for "create" (*bara'*) no less than sixteen times, Second Isaiah saw the forthcoming release of God's people from captivity as a *creatively* redemptive act. In the opening chapter of his message he has the following words:

Who has measured the sea in the  
hollow of His hand,  
and marked off the heavens  
with His span,  
enclosed the dust of the earth  
in a measure,  
and weighed the mountains in a scale,  
and the hills in a balance? (Is 40:12)

In lines reminiscent of Yahweh's ironic questions in Job 38 the poet appeals to a well known Israelite article of faith in order to strengthen a people who might have been tempted to think that Marduk, Babylon's god, was more powerful than Yahweh. Israel's belief in God as Creator was being put to the test; would Israel stand by this ancient belief that the Lord of nature was also the Lord of history? Creation and history go together. The Creator of

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<sup>25</sup> M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, N.Y.: 1961, pp. 110-11; cf. pp. 68-72; see also Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, N.Y.: 1954, pp. 30-1.

the universe was now creating a new redemption<sup>27</sup>. Creation is thus seen to be a continuing action. Yahweh is a living, active God and He is going to create anew this people—if they will believe in Him. The Exodus itself, now to be repeated, was a creative act out of which a people was formed.

I am Yahweh, your Holy One,  
the Creator (*bore'*) of Israel, your King. (Is 43:15)

Second Isaiah reaches back into history, even to the primeval history, in drawing his lessons. He recalls "the days of Noah" and the everlasting covenant (54:9-10) which typifies His covenant of peace. The luxuriance of Eden shall be repeated in a restored Zion (51:3). Outnumbering all reminiscences is that of creation, the time when Yahweh laid the foundation of the earth with His left hand and stretched out the heavens with His right (48:13; 40:12-23; 42:5; 44:24; 45:9-13; 51:13,16). Alluding to the theme of creation out of chaos (*tohu*) he asserts that Yahweh intended the earth as a dwelling for men. *Tohu* occurs a number of times in Second Isaiah, describing the ruined land of Edom (34:11) and designating the nothingness of the makers of idols (44:9). Though he refers to traditions which go back before the patriarchal period, Second Isaiah is careful to integrate any references to the primeval history with his own vision of Israel's coming salvation. Creation is not mentioned except in relation to history. There are even passages where creation and redemption are linked so closely that one is involved in the other<sup>28</sup>. The creative power of Yahweh is strikingly brought into relation with the coming of Cyrus in 48:12-16. The saving act is a form of continuing creation. This conjunction of creation and redemption has been well summed up by von Rad:

Very surprisingly however, there is still another tradition in Deutero-Isaiah, one upon which no previous prophet had called. It deals with the creation of the world by Jahweh. Because Jahweh had the power to subdue chaos, appeal could also be made to him to help his people in times of tribulation in the historical realm (Is 51:9f.); and because Jahweh created the ends of the earth, the message which he is now sending to Israel is also trustworthy (Is 40:27ff.). A special feature in Deutero-Isaiah's thought about creation is, of course, that he does not regard creation as a work by itself, something additional to Jahweh's historical acts. Indeed he seems to make no clear distinction here — for him creation is the first of Jahweh's miraculous historical acts and

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<sup>26</sup> K. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, London: 1949, p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. C. Stuhlmueller, *art. cit.*, 205.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. B.W. Anderson, "Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah", *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*, N.Y.: 1962, pp. 184-5; see also W. Foerster, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament III*, Grand Rapids: 1965, p. 1005.



a remarkable witness to his will to save. This has already been discussed in Vol 1, pp. 137f. The certain evidence for this "soteriological" conception of creation is the fact that Deutero-Isaiah can at one time speak of Jahweh, the creator of the world, and at another of Jahweh, the creator of Israel. Jahweh is Israel's "creator" in the sense that he called this people in its whole physical existence into being, yet he is creator in particular because he "chose" Israel and "redeemed" her. When the prophet speaks of Israel's "creation", however, he is thinking of the historical acts which the old Exodus tradition had ascribed to the God of Israel, and especially of the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea<sup>29</sup>.

Creation-faith in the Old Testament has had a profound influence upon the biblical understanding of man<sup>30</sup>. And to some extent it is due to the recovery of these biblical roots that we have today a deeper appreciation of personal dignity and value, a fact noted more than once in the documents of Vatican II. Creation is revealed to us in the Old Testament as the act of a personal will, communicating divine goodness in the external world and seeking communion with man, the summit of His creative act. As one who transcends the world, whose whole Being is anterior to and independent of the world's existence He nevertheless is One Who enters into a unique relationship with man, calls him to a special responsibility, honors man by confronting him and speaking to him as a "Thou". This must surely be the point of the Yahweh speeches in Job (Job 38-41). The doctrine of creation is in the forefront and it is meant to teach Job that the incomprehensibly wonderful Creator cannot be confined to a humanly-devised set of purposes for He escapes all human calculation. But this insight, overwhelmingly presented in the speeches, might overcome and destroy the wretched sufferer were there not inner solidarity between Creator and creature. Job is the friend of God and the divine word is addressed to him as a "Thou". Personal community is set up between Job and the Lord of nature and, even though the dispositions of God will forever escape him, there is the healing awareness on the part of Job that Yahweh has met his most urgent demand—for He has appeared to Job and spoken to him<sup>31</sup>.

Israel's break with the mythological thinking of her environment and her adoration of a transcendent God, the Wholly Other, called for altogether new patterns in the God-man relationship. This would concern not only their way of conceiving God but their way of serving Him. The expressed will of this God called for unconditional

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<sup>29</sup> G. von Rad, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 240-1.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. W. Eichrodt, *Man in the Old Testament*, London: 1951, esp. chap. 2, pp. 28-39.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. R.A.F. MacKenzie, "The Purpose of the Yahweh Speeches in the Book of Job", *Biblica* 40 (1959) 435-45.

obligation on the part of man. No longer could man take some comfort in being caught up in the rhythm of nature through a series of cultic acts; it was not enough, as the late Prof. Frankfort said, to be "gently carried along on the perennial cosmic tides of the seasons";<sup>32</sup> Man would now take up the burden and the glory of free decision, of personal response to unconditional obligation under which individual life is placed. Our existence in the world, between being and non-being, is indeed a precarious one and we can never feel entirely at home in this world. But more importantly, the Israelite, whether as a member of the community or as an individual, was through his belief in creation, released from the grasp of a divinized nature. He escaped from a sacralized world and now saw himself in a new relation to a Creator Who had called man to a participation in His sovereignty over all other creatures. Nothing in the Old Testament has so vividly captured this sense of the divine majesty and man's dignity as Psalm 8:

O Yahweh our Lord,  
how glorious is your name through all the earth!  
I will adore your majesty  
above the heavens,  
With the lips of striplings and sucklings.  
You built a fortress for your habitation,  
having silenced your adversaries,  
the foe and the avenger.  
When I see your heavens,  
the work of your fingers,  
The moon and the stars which you created:  
What is man that you should think of him,  
or the son of man that you should care for him?  
Yet you have made him a little less than the gods,  
with honor and glory you crowned him.  
You gave him dominion over the works of your hands,  
put all things at his feet . . .<sup>33</sup>.

#### ABBREVIATIONS:

|             |                                          |
|-------------|------------------------------------------|
| <i>CBQ</i>  | Catholic Biblical Quarterly              |
| <i>HTR</i>  | Harvard Theological Review               |
| <i>JTS</i>  | Journal of Theological Studies           |
| <i>JAOS</i> | Journal of the American Oriental Society |
| <i>IEJ</i>  | Israel Exploration Journal               |
| <i>JBL</i>  | Journal of Biblical Literature           |

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<sup>32</sup> H. Frankfort, *op. cit.*, 245.

<sup>33</sup> Translation of M. Dahood, *Psalms I*, Anchor Bible, N.Y.: 1966, p. 48.

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