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Exegetical Approaches

with translations by Marion Salzmann

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Vorwort

Exegeten bewusst lutherischer Prägung erörtern Methoden der Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift. Alle Beiträge in diesem Band sind getragen von der gemeinsamen Überzeugung, die Heilige Schrift als Gottes Wort auszulegen. Und doch sind selbst in dieser eng verwandten Konfessionsfamilie unterschiedliche Zugangsweisen festzustellen, die miteinander ins Gespräch gebracht werden.

Die Auswahl der in diesem Band vereinigten Beiträge zur Methodendebatte in den exegetischen Fächern ist somit in mehrfacher Hinsicht ungewöhnlich: Zum einen sind Alt- und Neutestamentler vertreten. Zum zweiten gehören alle Beiträger in das Spektrum des konfessionellen Luthertums. Und zum dritten bringen sie bewusst ihr jeweils europäisches, nord- wie südamerikanisches und auch südafrikanisches Gepräge mit. Dabei sind – mit einer Ausnahme – alle Vorträge auf die Auslegung je eines biblischen Textes fokussiert; jedem Referat ist eine kurze Erwiderung zugeordnet.

Der Aufbau des Buches folgt den Arbeitsschritten eines Symposiums, das im November 2013 in Oberursel stattfand. Grob werden hier „Historische Zugangsweisen", „Literarische Zugangsweisen" und „Kontextuelle Zugangsweisen" voneinander unterschieden. Der Beitrag unter der Kategorie „Text und Autorität" befasst sich mit dem Sondergebiet Textkritik. Für die Drucklegung wurden die Beiträge überarbeitet und erweitert.

Bei den Historischen Zugängen setzt sich *David L. Adams* mit dem religionsgeschichtlichen Vergleich für Genesis 1 auseinander und kommt zu dem Schluss, dass das geschichtliche Denken so etwas wie das Alleinstellungsmerkmal der biblischen Schöpfungsgeschichte ist. *Jorg Chr. Salzmann* bearbeitet die Geschichte vom Seewandel (Mt 14,22–33) mit verschiedenen Methoden und versucht dabei deutlich zwischen historischer Methodik in der Textbearbeitung und der Frage nach der Historizität von Ereignissen zu unterscheiden.

Unter Literarischen Zugängen stehen je ein Beitrag von *James W. Voelz* und *Achim Behrens*. Die erklärte Absicht von *Voelz* ist, den biblischen Text für sich sprechen zu lassen und ihn nicht in eine moderne Welt einzupassen. Exemplarisch führt er das an der Heilung eines Blinden (Mt 14,22–33) durch und macht auf einzelne Züge dieser Erzählung auch und gerade innerhalb ihres markinischen Kontextes aufmerksam. *Behrens* führt unter dem Paradigma der „syntaktischen Wiederaufnahme" am Beispiel der Visionen im Amosbuch (Am 7,1–8,2) vor, wie die literarische Gestaltung alttestamentlicher Texte unter den Gesichtspunkten einer Textgrammatik erfasst werden und zu neuen Deutungseinsichten führen kann.

Der Beitrag von *Timothy E. Saleska* zu den Kontextuellen Zugängen verbindet den literarischen, von der Redaktionsgeschichte beeinflussten Zugang zur Psalmeninterpretation am Beispiel von Psalm 1 mit der Frage, wodurch die jeweils wahrgenommenen Kontexte bestimmt sind. Er kommt zu dem Ergebnis, dass hier letztlich

der Kontext der Ausleger den Ausschlag gibt. Von einem ganz bestimmten, durch die Apartheid geprägten Kontext geht *Dieter Reinstorf* aus. Den methodischen Dreischritt von Kontextualisierung, Distanzierung und Aneignung führt er in seiner Auslegung von Gal 3,26–28 exemplarisch durch.

Unter Text und Autorität schließlich verhandelt *Jeffrey J. Kloha* neuere Einsichten der biblischen Textkritik. Sein besonderes Augenmerk gilt der Frage, wie man mit einem nicht bis in die letzte Silbe hinein festgelegten, „plastischen" Text umgehen kann, ohne dabei die Autorität des Gottesworts in Frage zu stellen oder gar zu verlieren.

Was die jeweiligen Respondenten (zwei Nordamerikaner, ein Südamerikaner, ein Schwede und zwei Deutsche) in ihren kurzen Stellungnahmen anzumerken haben, lässt erkennen, wie spannungsreich, klärungsbedürftig aber auch ertragreich die Diskussion um die Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift innerhalb des konfessionellen Luthertums geführt werden kann – und muss! Dies nachzuvollziehen sei allen Lesern ans Herz gelegt, um noch tiefer in die Debatte einzusteigen.

Dass der vorliegende Band keine erschöpfende Diskussion sämtlicher exegetischer Methoden bieten kann, versteht sich von selbst. Er will dazu anregen, selbst kritisch und reflektiert sowie mit methodischer Vielfalt an den biblischen Texten weiter zu arbeiten.

Oberursel, im Oktober 2015 Achim Behrens/Jorg Christian Salzmann

Preface

Exegetes with a markedly Lutheran standing discuss methods of Scriptural interpretation in this volume. All contributions are witness to the common conviction that Holy Scripture is expounded as God's Word. But even in this closely related Lutheran "family" approaches vary and must be debated.

The choice of articles incorporated in this volume is unusual in several ways. For one thing it includes Old- and New Testament scholars. For another all the authors are confessional Lutherans. Thirdly, each of these European, North American, South American and South African colleagues bring with them their own particular outlook. With one exception, each article focusses on the exegesis of a biblical text. Each presentation is followed by a short response.

The book follows the structure of a conference held in Oberursel/Germany in November, 2013. "Historical Approaches", "Literary Approaches" and "Contextual Approaches" are roughly grouped together. The article in the group "Text and Authority" is concerned with the particular area of textual criticism. The contributions have been revised and expanded for publication.

In the group concerned with "Historical Approaches" *David L. Adams* compares Genesis 1 with ancient Near Eastern texts. He comes to the conclusion that historical thinking is a characteristic unique to the biblical story of creation. *Jorg Chr. Salzmann* applies various methods to Matt 14:22–33 (walking on the water) and attempts to differentiate clearly between using historical methods to interpret a text and determining the historicity of events.

The "Literary Approach" is demonstrated by *James W. Voelz* and *Achim Behrens*. *Voelz* specifically intends to let the biblical text speak for itself without adjusting it to the modern world. He demonstrates this in Mark 8:22–26 (healing of a blind man) and calls attention to particular features of the narration, in particular in the Markan context. *Behrens* uses the paradigm of "syntactical resumption" to demonstrate in Amos 7:1–8:2 how the literary composition of Old Testament texts can be understood through their textual-grammatical structure, leading to new insights.

The article by *Timothy E. Saleska* in "Contextual Approaches" contemplates Psalm 1. He combines a literary approach to the interpretation of the Psalms, influenced by Redaktionsgeschichte, with the question of how the perceived context of each text is determined. He concludes that ultimately the exegete's own context is decisive for his interpretation. *Dieter Reinstorf* takes a specific context influenced by apartheid as his starting point. He demonstrates the methodical triad of contextualisation, dissociation and appropriation, taking Gal 3:26–28 as an example.

And finally *Jeffrey J. Kloha* in "Text and Authority" debates recent insights in biblical textual criticism. His particular interest lies in the treatment of a "plastic" text – which is not determined down to the last syllable – without questioning or indeed forfeiting the authority of God's Word.

The comments made by the respondents (two North Americans, one South American, one Swede and two Germans) show that discussion of Scriptural interpretation among confessional Lutherans can be rich in tension and ambiguity while remaining fruitful – and that it is a "must". We commend the responses to our readers for deeper access to the debate.

It goes without saying that this volume cannot attempt to be an exhaustive discussion of all exegetical methods. It hopes to stimulate further work on biblical texts which is both critically reflective and methodically varied.

Oberursel, October 2015 Achim Behrens/Jorg Christian Salzmann

1 Historical Approaches/ Historische Zugänge

Some Observations on the Historicity of the Biblical Creation Account

David L. Adams

I begin with a simple observation that ought to be self-evident among those whose profession it is to study historical texts, biblical or otherwise:

> It is not possible to determine the historicity of any event by the study of a text that purports to describe that event.

In saying that this principle *ought* to be understood, I am well aware that it is frequently either not understood, or that it is misunderstood. This seems to be especially true for those who comment upon the biblical creation account, for commentators frequently attempt to make some argument, or draw some conclusion, about the historicity of the biblical claim that Yahweh created the cosmos by making some reference to the text.

For some, it is axiomatic that the mythic character of the biblical creation account precludes any question of its historicity. For others, the fact that the text is narrative rather than poetry, serves as evidence for the historicity of the biblical account of creation, the assumption being that narrative is inherently more 'historical' than poetry. More recently, John Walton has argued that the text must be read from a functionalist perspective and that, because the text is concerned with the function of the things created, no conclusion may be drawn as to the historicity of the events described. Arguing that the theological message of Genesis 1 is the establishment of the view that creation is the cosmic temple in which God has taken up residence, and from which he runs the cosmos, Walton writes of his work, "Genesis 1 has been presented as an account of functional origins ... rather than an account of material origins ... As an account of functional origins, it offers no clear information about material origins."[1] All of these positions are fundamentally flawed.

No text, biblical or otherwise, can *prove* the historicity of any event. Moreover, no analysis of literary aspects, of the genre, or of the function of a text can prove or disprove the historicity of any event described in the text.[2] Events and texts belong

1 John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (2009), 163.

2 To be fair to Walton, this is consistent with his position. Walton's error is not that the conclusion that he draws about the events is based on his understanding of the relationship between text and events. Rather his error is in his misapplication of an otherwise basically correct observation that, when speaking of the things created, the biblical creation account describes them primarily in terms of the function they perform. While the basic observation is correct, the broader conclusions

to two phenomenologically distinct categories that do not intersect. As a result, the most that we can learn from a text is what the author believed to have happened, or what he wants the reader to believe about what has happened.

Let me make my own position clear from the outset: I believe that Yahweh created the cosmos out of nothing over the course of six, literal, 24-hour days. Moreover, I believe that this understanding of the creation account of Genesis 1 is fundamental to biblical Christianity, so that the rejection of this position undermines the entire structure of the Christian faith.

That this conviction is a matter of faith rather than an assertion proved by some spurious conviction about the relationship between literature and history is consistent with the Bible's own view, as expressed by the author of the book of Hebrews (11:3):

> Πίστει νοοῦμεν κατηρτίσθαι τοὺς αἰῶνας ῥήματι θεοῦ, εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων τὸ βλεπόμενον γεγονέναι. – *By faith* (emphasis mine) we understand that the universe was formed by the (spoken) word of God, so that what can be seen did not come into being out of visible things.

This recognition, that our acceptance of the historicity of the creation account is a matter of faith rather than a matter that can be proved or disproved from the text of Genesis 1 (or otherwise, for that matter), does not mean that the text has no historicity. Rather, it leads us to approach the question of the nature of the text's historicity from a different perspective:

> The historical significance of the creation account is the way in which the message of the text is rooted in, and directed at, its own historical context, and in the implications of the claims that it makes based on Yahweh's actions in creating the world.

The biblical creation account presents an understanding of the nature of God, and of his relation to the material world, that is radically different from that of Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors. Furthermore, it bases that understanding on the implications of Yahweh's actions in creating the world. In that radical difference between the biblical creation account and those of Israel's Ancient Near Eastern neighbors lies the Old Testament's most fundamental understanding of who Yahweh is, and of how he relates to the material world and to us, as a part of it. To understand this – and especially to understand both its necessity and its significance for Christian theology – one must consider the biblical creation account in the context of other creation accounts from the Ancient Near East.

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that Walton draws from it, and his application of those conclusions to the theological understanding and significance of the biblical creation account are not correct. Moreover, it is not the case, as Walton appears to assume, that a text that speaks of material things primarily in terms of their function cannot also communicate something about the material substance of the things being described or the circumstances or manner of their coming into being.

The Role of Myth in Ancient Near Eastern Thought

In his work on the nature of mythology, G. S. Kirk identifies three main types of myths: (1) myths told for entertainment; (2) myths that have a transformative power over the material world, and which are often used in the cultus to bring about or sustain a desirable state of affairs, or to support an institution such as a kingship; and (3) explanatory or speculative myths, which attempt to account for the state of the world or the origin of a particular condition or practice.[3] Of these, the second and third are particularly significant for Ancient Near Eastern religious thought. The creation accounts of the Ancient Near East clearly belong to Kirk's third category, myths that attempt to account for the state of the world.

It is fairly common for those raised within the intellectual framework of modern western thought to take it for granted that such mythological tales from the Ancient Near East are to be understood as fantastic, made-up stories about the gods of the ancient world. To us they all appear to belong to Kirk's first category, as stories told for entertainment. It must be said at the outset, however, that this is not how the ancients understood their myths. From their perspective, myths were a means of exploring, explaining, and interacting with the cosmos. They were science, theology, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and religious practice all together. As Christiane Zivie-Coche summarizes the nature of myth in Egyptian thought:

> The telling of myth, whether its implicit presence in the carrying out of rituals, or its actualization in a dramatic performance such as the one repeated each year for Horus of Edfu, perpetuated it and ceaselessly reactualized it in the present time. Stories about deities were necessarily true, because they expressed the reality of the visible and the invisible world, such as the Egyptians understood it, and because they were the metaphorical image that established a link between the real world and that of the imaginary. To ask whether the Egyptians believed in their myths is thus scarcely a meaningful question.[4]

Erik Hornung makes a similar observation about the reality of the deities of Egypt when he writes, "There is no need to enter into questions of belief, of the existence or nonexistence of God or of gods. The historical reality of the Egyptian gods is amply demonstrated by the fact that the Egyptians lived with them and carried on a lively dialogue with them for thousands of years."[5] Hornung is not arguing that the fact that the gods of Egypt worshiped for thousands of years proves their existence, but rather that it proves that the Egyptians *believed in* their existence and structured their lives accordingly.

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3 Geoffrey S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Function in Ancient and Other Cultures* (1970), 252–261.

4 François Dunand/Christiane Zivie-Coche, *Gods and Men in Egypt: 3000 B.C.E. to 395 C.E.* (2004), 37.

5 Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of Gods in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (1982), 31.

For the inhabitants of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, belief in the gods entailed belief in the myths by which knowledge of the gods was communicated. The truthfulness of the myths was no more susceptible of doubt than the existence of the gods themselves or of the material world through which the gods were manifest. As Christiane Zivie-Coche further observes:

> The reality of the gods was thus on the same plane as that of the sky, of the air, of the land, and of living beings. This is why belief and faith in these gods were not posed in the terms to which the revelation of monotheistic religions has accustomed us. Since the gods were phenomenological realities that belonged to he physics of the universe, and in this regard were immanent in it, it was absurd to believe or not to believe in their existence.[6]

Put it in other terms, to the inhabitants of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt their myths were as certainly, and self-evidently, true as the results of science are to modern man.

Creation in Ancient Near Eastern Thought

When comparing the biblical creation account with the creation accounts of the Ancient Near East, an important distinction is necessary from the outset. This essay will continue to refer to those mythological texts that preserve some version of the coming-into-being of the world as 'creation accounts'. Properly speaking, however, there is no such thing as a 'creation account' among the surviving texts from the Ancient Near East. While there are texts, both from Mesopotamia and Egypt, that speak about the formation of the world as it exists today, these texts are not, technically speaking 'creation accounts' for three reasons.

First, the texts are more about the coming-into-being of the gods than the coming-into-being of the world. Given the understanding of the relationship between the gods and the material cosmos that existed in these religions, these two issues are ultimately different ways of saying the same thing. However, to the extent that it is possible, and from the modern perspective necessary, to distinguish these, the coming-into-being of the material cosmos is secondary to, and dependent upon, the coming-into-being of the gods. In the same way, the ordering of the relationships between the gods entails the ordering of the material cosmos as well.

Second, what is said about the formation of the world in these texts is said in the context of discussing other issues. For example, the primary thrust of the most complete Mesopotamian account of creation, the *Enuma Elish* is to explain the ascendency of Marduk and the establishment of his primary sanctuary, the *Esagila*, in which the *Enuma Elish* was recited annually as a part of the New Year's festival's

6 Dunand/Zivie-Coche, *Gods and Men*, 6.

ritual recapitulation of these events. There is no single surviving text whose primary focus is the creation of the world.

Third, what the mythological texts say about the formation of the world as it exists today is not a description of 'creation' in the sense in which that term has been understood in its historic Judeo/Christian conception. None of these accounts relate the coming-into-existence of the fundamental substance of the material reality (what we might call *matter* per se, for the fundamental substance of reality – i.e. matter – is understood by them to be eternal). As the eminent Assyriologist Jean Bottéro summarized the Mesopotamian view:

> [C]ompletely absent from that culture was the idea that something had come from nothingness. There was never any notion of an ex nihilo creation. At the beginning of the world, at the beginning of everything, there was an enormous chaos, something huge and compact, in which every-thing was included and mixed together, and from which everything had gradually been extracted, made explicit, and put into place, through the intervention of an actor: a demi-urge.[7]

What is described in these accounts, then, is the coming-into-being of the individual gods, typically through a process of procreation, and the defining of the relationships that characterized the divine order. As a consequence of this the material cosmos is ordered and shaped into the form in which it now exists by the imposition of order upon the preexisting, unformed chaos that existed before the world as we know it came into being.

Creation in Mesopotamian Thought

As we have noted, the best-known account of creation from Mesopotamia is preserved in the *Enuma Elish*. Several versions of this work have survived, and the differences between them are relatively minor.[8] The text records the account of how Marduk rises to preeminence among the gods. As a part of this process the coming into existence of the gods is described through the procreation of Apsu and Tiamat (Tablet I). After one of their sons, Ea, foils Apsu's plans by killing his father, civil war breaks out among the gods as Tiamat seeks to avenge the killing of her husband. Marduk, the son of Ea, emerges as preeminent by slaying Tiamat, cutting her body into pieces, and using the pieces of her body to arrange the material world

7 Dunand/Zivie-Coche, *Gods and Men*, 6.

8 The name *Enuma Elish* ("When on high") is taken from the first two words of the account as preserved in Akkadian language. The fullest and best-known version of the *Enuma Elish* consists of about 1100 lines of poetry covering seven tablets. Its composition is dated variously to either around 1700 or 1100 B.C. It is commonly believed to have been written to explain the elevation of Marduk to the central position in the Babylonian pantheon by King Hammurabi after he established the city of Babylon, whose patron deity was Marduk, as his capitol, around 1750 B.C.

(Tablets IV and V). He also kills Tiamat's consort, Kingu, and uses his blood to form mankind to act as the servants for the gods (Tablet VI).

Insofar as it relates the origin of the world, the *Enuma Elish* begins by describing a state in which primeval matter exists without distinctions:

> When on high the heaven had not been named,
> Firm ground below had not been called by name,
> Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter,
> (And) Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,
> Their waters commingling as a single body;
> No reed hut had been matted, no marsh land had appeared,
> When no gods whatever had been brought into being,
> Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined ...[9]

As the *Enuma Elish* envisions it, the primeval state of the cosmos consisted of a single undifferentiated 'substance'. In this primeval state not only was the material world not differentiated from the gods, but even the first gods, Apsu and Tiamat, are not distinguished one from another. The text describes this by saying, "Their waters commingling as a single body." Apsu is the god, originally worshipped among the Sumerians of southern Mesopotamia, associated with the waters of the underworld, from which the springs come. Tiamat is the goddess, apparently of Semitic origin, associated with the waters of the sea. Bottéro notes that some of the lists of the ancestors of the gods give a name to this undifferentiated substance that is the ultimate source of all things, which he describes as being a solitary "figure, place, and matter" believed to be of a watery nature, known as "Nammu, the Lady of the God, the Mother who gave birth to the Universe."[10]

In this stage the one primeval substance from which all things, divine and material, come is characterized as *water*. The characterization of this primeval substance as water is natural enough. Water is the only thing known to ancient man that has substance but no inherent form. Thus water quite naturally comes to represent chaos, i.e. unformed matter.

The manner in which Apsu and Tiamat become individualized is not recounted, but the account continues with the emergence of two pairs of children born to this first divine couple: Lahmu and Lahamu, and Anshar and Kishar. The theogony continues with the births of two more gods through Anshar, Anu and his son Ea (Nudimmud). The tale assumes the birth of other deities who are not named because they are not primary characters in the plot of the unfolding story.

In the subsequent violent internecine conflict between the gods, Anu and Ea realize that they are not strong enough to defeat Tiamat's forces. They then call upon

9 *Enuma Elish*, Tablet I, lines 1–8; ANET, 60–72. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the *Enuma Elish* and other ancient texts are taken from ANET.

10 Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia* (2001), 74–75.

Marduk, the son of Ea, who agrees to fight for them after receiving the promise of the gods that he will reign supreme among them. Marduk confronts, fights, and ultimately kills Tiamat, then captures her consort Kingu. From the body of Tiamat he forms the material world.

> Then the lord [i.e. Marduk] paused to view her dead body,
> That he might divide the monster and do artful works.
> He split her like a shellfish into two parts:
> Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky,
> Pulled down the bar and posted guards.
> He bade them to allow not her waters to escape.[11]

After appointing the places of the other gods by arranging their images in the sky, he completes the work of arranging the material world by arranging for the monthly cycle of the moon in relation to the sun:

> In her [i.e. Tiamat's] belly he established the zenith.
> The Moon he caused to shine, the night (to him) entrusting.
> He appointed him a creature of the night to signify the days:
> "Monthly, without cease, form designs with a crown."[12]

Upon the demand of the gods that they be relieved of the work they were required to do, Marduk proposes to create mankind to act as servants for the gods, to relieve them of the tedium of having to work to supply their own daily needs.[13] This he does by consulting with his father, Ea, to kill Tiamat's consort Kingu:

> They bound him [i.e. Kingu], holding him before Ea.
> They imposed on him his guilt and severed his blood (vessels).
> Out of his blood they fashioned mankind.
> He [i.e. Marduk] imposed the service and let free the gods.
> After Ea, the wise, had created mankind,
> Had imposed upon it the service of the gods ...[14]

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11 *Enuma Elish*, Tablet IV, lines 135–140; ANET, 67.

12 *Enuma Elish*, Tablet V, lines 11–14; ANET, 68.

13 As Bottéro, *Religion*, 114, puts it, "The faithful were convinced that humans had been created and put on Earth for the sole purpose of ensuring, through human industry and solicitude, that the gods led an opulent and worry-free life, free to concentrate on the government of the world and its inhabitants."

14 *Enuma Elish*, Tablet VI, lines 31–36. The Atrahasis Myth provides an alternative, and more detailed, account of the creation of mankind. In it the basic reason for the creation of mankind is the same, the desire to relieve the gods of the labor required to produce their daily needs. In that account, however, the details are different. There, it is Ea rather than his son Marduk who is responsible for creating man, and it is a minor deity known as Wê who is slain and whose blood is used to create mankind.

Having thus provided for the gods by creating man, Marduk appoints the gods to rule over the various aspects of the material world. The Anunnaki-gods respond by building the city of Babylon as a shrine and abode for Marduk, and declare fifty holy names for him as a testimony of his supremacy.

From this brief survey of the *Enuma Elish* it should be apparent that in the Mesopotamian tradition there existed a single primeval substance from which everything – the gods, the material cosmos, and mankind – has its origin. This primeval substance has no origin, existing before the differentiation of the first deities, and may be described as at once divine (being the substance of the gods) and material (being the substance of the material cosmos). This essential understanding of the nature of the gods and the material cosmos is a decisive factor in the shape of Mesopotamian religion, both in terms of its conception of divinity and also of the character of its religious practice.

Creation in Egyptian Thought

That Egyptian religion also held that before 'creation' there existed a state of being in which "there were not yet two things,"[15] is apparent from the surviving texts that speak of the coming-into-being of the cosmos as we know it. Hornung summarizes the general process of 'creation' as the Egyptians understood it:

> The origin of the created world in a process of diversification, of the separation of elements that were previously united, dominates Egyptian ideas of creation. Earth and sky, which were originally united, are separated by Shu; light comes forth from darkness; land emerges from the primeval water; the creator god "divided (*wpj*) the nature of the one from that of the other," thus endowing every being with its unmistakable individuality.[16]

Our knowledge of the details of the ancient Egyptian understanding of creation is limited both by the lack of a clear and detailed narrative in which the creation is described and by the competing theological systems of the various Egyptian religious centers.

The most common understanding appears to have been that the god Atum emerged from within the goddess Nun (representing chaos, or undifferentiated matter). The god Atum then generated four pairs of gods. These eight deities represent the parts of the body of Atum, which he generates by naming them. These eight gods (together with Atum) were known as the Ennead (i.e. the Nine). From the mating of one of these pairs, Nut and Geb, have come both the other gods and the material world as we know it. By this means it appears that the order of the cosmos

15 This phrase is used to describe the initial state of existence in the ancient Egyptian coffin texts. Raymond O. Faulkner (ed.), *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts* (1973–1978), 2, 396b; 3, 383a.

16 Hornung, *Conceptions*, 171–172.

is regarded as the creation of Atum, by whom it is preserved until he allows it to return to a state of chaos (Nun).

This Egyptian tradition is both less fully articulated and less consistent in detail in the surviving sources than its Mesopotamian counterpart.[17] Despite the many differences in detail between the surviving versions, the fundamental cosmology is nevertheless quite consistent. In the Egyptian conception the initial state of the cosmos consists of an inchoate and undifferentiated primeval watery matter, characterized as the deity Nun.[18] From this state arises the 'creator god' Atum/Re at what was called the 'First Occasion'. In one version from Heliopolis Atum/Re speaks:

> "I am Atum when I was alone in Nun; I am Re in his (first) appearances, when he began to rule that which he had made."
>
> Who is he? This "Re, when he began to rule that which he had made" means that Re began to appear as a king, as one who was before the liftings of Shu had taken place, when he was on the hill which is in Hermopolis ...
>
> "I am the great god who came into being by himself."
>
> Who is he? "The great god who came into being by himself" is water; he is Nun, the father of the gods.[19]

The passage alludes to the primeval state in which there existed a single 'substance', Nun, the undifferentiated waters of chaos from which come all things. From Nun the sun-god, Atum/Re, is differentiated by arising on a primeval hill, which emerges from the chaos. The details are obscure and appear to conflict in the various versions of the myth. Sometimes Atum/Re is characterized as the *Benu* bird sitting on the *Ben-ben* hill, the primeval hill that is the prototype for the pyramid. In

17 In neither Mesopotamia or Egypt was there a coherent collection of holy writings that were regarded as authoritative. For Egypt, especially, there are relatively few early written religious texts. What we know of Egyptian religion, especially of the early periods, must be pieced together from a variety of fragmentary, inconsistent and sometimes contradictory literary sources, supplemented with a careful analysis of the material remains from Egyptian archaeology that reflect religious ideas through artwork and architecture. Moreover, many of the texts that do discuss the origin and order of the cosmos appear only in relatively late sources. The result is a necessarily incomplete and unsatisfying picture. The further fact that a large proportion of the surviving texts come from the genre of funerary texts should further caution us that our picture of Egyptian religion maybe distorted in the direction of funerary and afterlife concerns, and certainly does not represent the wide range of concerns that constitute the daily practice of religion in ancient Egypt.

18 A very good, if necessarily artificially reconstructed, summary of the process of the mythological history of the cosmos in Egyptian thought, including especially the coming-to-be of the world, is provided by Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology* (2002), 57–89.

19 *Another Version of the Creation by Atum*, ANET, 3–4. In this less detailed version of the mythological system from Heliopolis, the Ennead begotten by Atum includes four pairs of deities: Shu (god of air) and Tefnut (goddess of moisture); Geb (god of earth) and Nut (goddess of the sky); Osiris (the god of afterlife) and Isis (goddess of fertility); Seth (god of storms and the desert) and Nephthys (goddess of divine protection). From the mating of these four pairs everything else comes into existence.

other cases Atum/Re appears to be the hill itself. In either case, emergence of Atum is the beginning of creation, in the sense that it is the first distinction in the undifferentiated primeval substance that is Nun, and from which come all of the remaining distinctions that comprise the form and order of the material world. Atum then generates the first pair of deities, Shu and Tefnut.

That the emergence of Atum/Re as the first differentiated being marks the beginning of the process of the formation of the world as it is known to man is even more clear from the creation account preserved in "The Book of Overthrowing 'Apep" from the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus:

> Thus spake the Lord of All [Atum/Re] after he had come into being: It was I who came into being as Khopri. When I came into being, 'Being' came into being, and all beings came into being after I came into being; manifold were the beings which came forth from my mouth ere the sky had come into being, ere the earth had come into being, ere the ground and reptiles had been created in this place ... I alone made every shape ere I had spat out Shu, ere I had expectorated Tefenet, ere there had come into being any other who could act with me ... I indeed made excitation with my fist, I copulated with mine hand, I spat with my own mouth; I spat out Shu, I expectorated Tefenet ... They brought back to me mine Eye with them after I had united my members; I wept over them, and that is how men came into being from the tears which came forth from mine Eye ... I created all reptiles and all that exists among them. Shu and Tefenet begat Geb and Nut, and Geb and Nut begat Osiris, Horus Mekhantenirti, Seth, Isis, and Nephthys from the womb, one after another, and they begat their multitudes in this land.[20]

Other theological centers in Egypt offered variations on this mythological account of creation. Among the most significant of these variations occurs in the "Theology of Memphis" in which the god of Memphis, Ptah, is given a prominent place in the cosmology by being associated with the primeval deity, Nun, from which all things come.[21]

Through identification with the undifferentiated substance of chaos, from which arise the gods and all things, Ptah(-Nun) is said to be the source of all that exists:

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20 The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus (British Museum no. 10188) is a relatively late manuscript – the Colophon dates the copying to c. 312 B.C. – containing 4 ritual texts: the *Songs of Isis and Nepthys*, the *Ritual of Bringing in Sokar*, the *Book of Overthrowing 'Apep*, and the *Names of 'Apep, which shall not be*. The quoted text is from the third of these, believed to be a ritual text intended to provide magical protection for the sun-god from the storm-demon 'Apep during the former's daily transit of the sky. The translation is from Raymond O. Faulkner, *The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus: III: D. The Book of Overthrowing 'Apep*, JEA 23 (1937), 172.

21 ANET, 5. According to this version Ptah begets Atum, who in turn generated the other eight gods of the Ennead by masturbation (cf. also *The Repulsing of the Dragon*, ANET, 6) and by naming them. In the version preserved in *The Repulsing of the Dragon* Shu and Tefnut were generated by Atum, and the other deities of the Ennead came into being through their procreative acts.

> And so Ptah was satisfied, after he had made everything, as well as all the divine order. He had formed the gods, he had made cities, he had founded nomes, he had put the gods in their shrines, he had established their offerings, he had founded their shrines, he had made their bodies like that (with which) their hearts were satisfied. So the gods entered into their bodies of every (kind of) wood, of every (kind of) stone, of every (kind of) clay, or anything which might grow upon him, in which they had taken form. So all the gods, as well as their *ka*'s gathered themselves to him, content and associated with the Lord of the Two Lands.[22]

The later ascendancy of Thebes introduces other variations to the creation mythology of Egypt, in which the god of Thebes, Amun, takes the place of honor.

Despite the considerable variation and contradiction in the details, the theological systems of the rival cultic centers at Heliopolis and Memphis and Thebes nevertheless reflect an essentially consistent underlying cosmology that is, in terms of its conception of the relationship of the divine to the material world, quite close to that of Mesopotamia. In both Mesopotamia and Egypt the prevailing cosmology conceived of a single undifferentiated primeval 'substance' from which both the gods and the material world have their being. Despite many differences in details, the gods and the material world come into being through a process that is most often characterized as procreative. As Hornung notes:

> The process of creation is precisely the emergence from the single creator god, whose sex is not differentiated, of a sexually differentiated divine couple, Shu and Tefnut, who in their turn conceive other couples of both sexes and thus initiate procreation and birth. One of the characteristics of the world before creation is therefore that "birth had not come into being" in it, and the oldest god had to arise "of himself."[23]

Curiously, by our standards at least, the origin of mankind does not seem to play a major role in the creation myths of Egypt. As seen in the excerpt from the "Book of Overthrowing 'Apep" quoted above, to the extent that it is described at all, mankind's origin is attributed to tears shed by the 'creator god' Atum/Re, or in some versions by the deity known as 'the Sole Eye' of Atum sent out by him to survey his creation.[24] Whatever the details, it is noteworthy that in Egyptian mythology, like that of Mesopotamia, humans have their origin in the material substance of the

22 Ibid.

23 Hornung, *Conception*, 171.

24 It is difficult to assess the significance of mankind coming into being through the shedding of tears. Noting that the Egyptian word for mankind, *remetj*, forms a pun with the word for tears, *remi*, some are inclined to see little significance in the process. Others find more meaning there. Pinch, for example, notes that the origin of mankind in the tears of the creator-god suggests a sorrow-filled conception of human life: "It is these tears of sorrow and loneliness that produce humanity. In contrast, deities arise as a byproduct of Ra's joy when his mother, Neith, returns. So, most versions of the tears myth provide an explanation for the perpetually sorrowful and imperfect state of humanity." Pinch, *Mythology*, 67.

deity (tears in Egypt, blood or semen in Mesopotamia), and so share to a limited degree in the divine life and power. Here also the continuity of the material world with the world of the divine is emphasized.

Creation in Biblical Thought

On the basis of the preceding summary we may identify some points at which the biblical creation account is like the creation accounts from Mesopotamia and Egypt, and other points at which they differ. Yet it must be said that even at those points where the biblical account of creation is most similar to the mythopoeic accounts, they are not the same. For example, we observe that the end result of both the biblical and the mythopoeic accounts is the ordered and functioning cosmos within which humans live. Yet in the mythopoeic accounts the coming-into-being of the cosmos is a side-effect of the coming-into-being of the gods, a concept entirely absent from the biblical account. Similarly, in the biblical account of creation the undifferentiated matter that God first brings into being is characterized as water (Gen 1:2, 6–7), the same characterization given to the undifferentiated eternal material substance/deity (Nammu in Mesopotamia and Nun in Egypt) in the mythopoeic accounts. However in the biblical account the water is never characterized as a deity, but as a thing brought into being by the creative activity of Yahweh.

A fuller analysis of the similarities and differences between the mythopoeic accounts of creation and Genesis 1 would reveal that the similarities fall into two general categories: verbal similarities (i.e. the use of cognate, or related, words) and metaphors. Given the relations between the Akkadian languages of Mesopotamia and biblical Hebrew, verbal similarities are both frequent and inevitable. Their presence in the creation account by itself neither constitutes evidence of direct borrowing of material at the literary level nor is it evidence of an equality of shared ideas in the underlying conceptual framework. Similarly, given the broader cultural connections and related nature of the subject matter, some overlap of usage from the limited stock of available metaphors is to be expected. As with the occurrence of cognate words, this overlap in the use of metaphors by itself tells us nothing about the underlying conceptual framework. As a result, what emerges as distinctive in a comparison of the biblical creation account from similar accounts from the Ancient Near East is much more important than such superficial similarities. In particular, three elements of the biblical creation account stand out as substantially, even radically, different from the creation accounts from Mesopotamia and Egypt. Each of these elements represents a critically important component of the theology of the Bible.