

## PART 1 †

**M**OST CULTURES HAVE stories about creation or about beginnings; in fact, each culture usually has many such stories, which are not always compatible with each other. The texts presented in this part were selected because, despite their many differences, they are genealogically related to each other. They represent different branches and offshoots of a vast family tree of ancient creation literature whose origins lay in Mesopotamia and that flourished in the literary cultures of Greece and Rome. These texts were written by Babylonians, Egyptians, Hittites, Canaanites, Israelites, Greeks, and Romans. Across the huge chronological and cultural distances that separated them, authors reworked traditional themes, always enriching them with new elements and adapting them to contemporary concerns. All together they share many common motifs, which reveal the kinship, intense contact, and mutual influence among the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean.

**Cosmogonies** are stories about the birth of the cosmos. Most of them place the beginning of the world in natural elements or abstract states, such as Earth, Sky, the primordial waters, Chaos, or the Void. Sometimes these entities are presented as divine, but generally they lack the individual, **anthropomorphic** personalities that mythologized gods normally exhibit. Cosmogony is followed by **theogony**, which explains the birth and family relations of the gods, including their struggles for power. This stage sometimes leads to an account of the origin of humankind, or **anthropogony**, which, in turn, can lead to human **genealogies**, from the heroes to the founders of cities and kings of historical societies. For any culture, then, these myths and legends, taken together, can provide a “brief history of time,” the backbone of which is genealogical succession and which can potentially stretch from the poet’s age back to the origin of all things. The transition from cosmic and natural entities to anthropomorphic gods and then to human beings is paralleled by a perception that the universe has moved from simplicity toward complexity, from a less differentiated and

defined state of being to a more orderly cosmos governed by a group of gods and heroes entangled in complex relationships.

All of these creation myths, after all, are the products of **polytheist** societies, that is, societies that worshipped many gods at the same time. This **pantheon** normally formed one divine family (such as the gods of Olympus), sometimes with exiled ancestors and relatives; but in other traditions the gods are more like a group of political adversaries (such as in the *Baal Cycle*, Part 3, document 5.a). Even in the case of the Hebrew Bible, the canonical text of one of the earliest **monotheist** religions, most scholars agree that its account replaced a previous polytheist schema similar to that of other Near Eastern cultures of its time, traces of which still survive, for instance, in the book of Genesis and in some Psalms (e.g., Part 2, documents 3 and 4, and Part 3, document 6).

In these theogonies, at any time, one god rules over the cosmos, imposing his order on it; in other words, heaven is a monarchy. This most powerful god is represented as a king whose position must be accepted by his fellow gods (as when Zeus is acclaimed king in the *Theogony*, document 1.5) but whose power is often threatened and contested, sometimes by his son (Kronos by Zeus in the *Theogony*), by a more distant relation (Tiamat by Marduk in the *Enuma Elish*, document 1.1), by his cupbearer (Anu by Kumarbi in the *Kumarbi Cycle*, Part 3, document 4.b), or by a rival divine lord (Baal by Mot in the *Baal Cycle*, Part 3, document 5.a). These contests are always ultimately resolved by the accession of a new king in heaven and the emergence of a new order. This divine hierarchy, of course, mirrored the predominant monarchic regimes of the societies that produced these creation myths. In fact, the chain of kings in heaven had a parallel in the Near Eastern and Greek king lists, only the former were much shorter, corresponding usually to the history of a single dynasty. (Some later Greek thinkers, labeled Euhemerists, would in fact argue that the gods were originally kings and their sons were later worshipped by their followers.)

The governing god is often in constant fear of losing control, and the struggles with his rivals are a persistent feature of these myths. This motif is sometimes called by scholars a “succession myth” and is best exemplified in the Hittite *Song of Birth* that opens the



Hurro-Hittite *Kumarbi Cycle* and Hesiod's *Theogony*. Rival gods are not the only threat that the king in heaven faces. He often has to fight off monsters created by rival gods, such as the giant rock Ullikummi and the serpent Hedammu in the *Kumarbi Cycle* and the serpent monster Typhon/Typhoeus in the *Theogony*. Even clashes with other gods are not always fought in a warrior-like way but sometimes include savage and unnatural acts, such as castrating the king (as Kronos does to Ouranos in the *Theogony*) and then even swallowing his genitals (as Kumarbi does with Anu), swallowing your own children (Kronos), or gobbling up a wife pregnant with a potential successor (as Zeus does to Metis). These strange acts of violence in turn give place to unnatural births from male deities (Athena from Zeus' head and Teshub from Kumarbi). Such acts represent the rival's attempt to interrupt the natural continuity of his predecessor's rule, to take control over the female capacity of procreation, and to prevent the succession from passing from an older to a younger god in ways that can be emulated by others. The Hurro-Hittite story, however, has been included with the rest of the *Kumarbi Cycle* in Part 3 (document 4.b) in order to keep that group of texts together and because it does not deal with the creation of the world but only with the struggle between the gods.

The cosmogonic texts that actually survive from antiquity are a fraction of those that were produced, and even the written versions of these myths captured only a small part of a broader background of oral performance and religious knowledge. What authority did the written versions enjoy? The book of Genesis (document 1.4), we all know, eventually became part of a people's scripture, and for many people today remains the definitive account of the origin of the world. The *Enuma Elish* (document 1.1) was recited as a hymn in honor of Marduk at the New Year's Akitu festival in Babylon. But the religious authority or the canonical status of the other texts is difficult to establish. There were no mechanisms in Greece, for instance, to establish any kind of religious uniformity or to treat any one text as authoritative. This brings us to the question of authorship and the poet's engagement with tradition. You will notice, in this and later sections, that we do not always know who composed these texts. This is especially the case with the Near Eastern texts. We cannot always treat these works as

the products of an individual's creative genius as we are habituated to do because of our relationship with modern literature. Many of these texts are literary versions of older, also anonymous, oral traditions. It is difficult to assess the degree to which the person who wrote them departed from the oral tradition or how his version compared with other existing versions of the same story because usually they have been lost. All we know is that one or more professional scribes, possibly commissioned by religious authorities, consolidated what they considered a "standard" version of a given myth at a given time in a process that could be repeated subsequently as views and needs changed. Sometimes, as with the *Baal Cycle* (Part 3, document 5.a) and the "standard" version of *Gilgamesh* (e.g., Part 3, document 1), we have the names of the scribes (Ilimilku and Sin-liqe-unninni, respectively), but it is not easy to evaluate their role as "authors." Yet given the quality and uniform style of the texts written by each and based on a comparison with older versions in the case of *Gilgamesh*, some scholars believe that these scribes had an independent poetic voice.

Beginning with the Greek poets Homer and Hesiod and continuing with the later Greek and Roman authors such as Apollonios, Virgil, and Ovid, literary works become more strongly identified with their individual authors. These poets definitely shaped their creations with the knowledge of existing myths and old traditions constantly in view, but they certainly adapted, adjusted, and innovated as they saw fit. It is not clear that the works of Hesiod represent what other Greeks were thinking about the gods at that time as we have no Greek cosmogonies preserved prior to his, but their literary success quickly made them canonical. Subsequent Greek and Roman authors found cosmogony to be a fascinating type of literature, which they incorporated, always with new twists, into their epic poetry, comedy, and philosophy.

The production of cosmogonies declined in later antiquity, though older texts were still preserved. In part, this was because of a shift in religious thought. **Neoplatonism** promoted the belief in an eternal world, and, while it postulated a metaphysical hierarchy that stretched from the material world up to impersonal divine principles, the relationship among those elements was considered to be permanent. This system of thought was not compatible with cosmogony. At the

same time, the rise of Christianity imposed a theological model according to which there was only one God who does not change and who does not face any (serious) rivals. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1.1). After the fourth century CE, the Father and the Son were declared to be one and the same deity, so the possibility of conflict within a divine family along Near Eastern and ancient Greek lines was forestalled. However, elaborations on God’s creation of the world and on the role of Adam and Eve still occupied a central place in Jewish and Christian texts that fall outside the canonical books of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (Gnostic texts, Christian apocryphal texts, Jewish pseudepigrapha, Kabbalah, the Dead Sea Scrolls), which are still proliferating due to discoveries of new texts (mostly papyri) from the ancient world. †

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