

CREATOR & CREATION



Chapter Two

Creation in the Ancient Near East

Metaphors, Myths, and Scenarios

Nowhere in the Bible is the worldview of the ancient Israelites or their values toward nature explicitly laid out. This is not surprising. Ancient Israel was what Edward Hall has characterized as a high context society. In high context societies a rich common culture is assumed by all the members of the society, and the identity of individual members is defined in terms of that culture. Moreover, because the society is based upon a common culture, each individual requires an adequate understanding of that culture in order to function well within the society. Low context societies like the United States, in contrast, require little knowledge of culture in order for their members to get along, nor does culture play a determinative role in forming individual identity. According to a common axiom, the United States is not a society based on humans, i.e. culture, but on laws. A member of any other society can function well in the United States by simply adhering to minimal legal restrictions (91-101).

This distinction between low and high context societies provides a helpful model for understanding the type of texts each society produces. On the one hand, low context societies tend to produce very detailed texts. Because little culture is shared among its members, texts written for low context audiences must describe in detail all the relevant cultural features that are necessary to understand the text. The texts produced by high context societies, on the other hand, frequently lack this detail. They are written by insiders for insiders, and so most aspects of culture can be assumed. All the members of the society have been socialized into shared ways of perceiving and acting. Therefore, high context audiences do not need to be instructed in the culture because they are already intimately familiar with it (Malina, 1991: 19-20). Such instruction, in fact, would be considered an insult, for it would challenge an audience's identification with its own culture, thus insinuating that they were outsiders.

The Bible was produced by a high context society for high context readers. It assumes a rich culture that the biblical writers felt no need to describe. It is not surprising, then, that the Bible lacks any explicit articulation of the Israelites' worldview and values toward the natural world. Their worldview and values were simply assumed by all members of the society; they formed the presupposition of the biblical writers rather than the subject of their

discourse. Consequently, we cannot expect to discover their worldview and values from a low context reading of the biblical texts.

If we hope to glean their unexpressed worldview and values from the biblical texts, then we must become acquainted with the ancient Israelite culture that is assumed by the texts. In other words, we must read the Bible from the high context perspective in which it was written. Fortunately for our purposes, the biblical texts themselves contain clues in the form of metaphor and myth that help to reveal the relevant aspects of ancient Israel's culture.

Metaphors

A metaphor can be defined as the juxtaposition of two frames of reference – a source domain and a target domain – such that an open-ended analogy is produced (Barbour: 12-14).¹ The source domain is familiar and often concrete, and if communication is to be successful, both the sender and the receiver need to be able to conceptualize this domain readily. The target domain, on the other hand, is typically either an abstract concept from the mental or social world, or an unknown element from the physical world. The target domain becomes accessible by mapping the source domain onto it (Quinn: 57). In other words, the familiar features and relations of the source domain are transferred to the intangible target domain.

As an example, consider the common metaphor that marriage is like a project at which both partners must work. Marriage in this context is the target domain. It is an abstract concept that is difficult to comprehend apart from concrete representations. Therefore, we apply to it a source domain that is readily understandable. We know what it is like to work on a project: We must plan out the project, gather the necessary resources, and above all put out the effort to complete the project. Similarly, a marriage does not simply happen. A couple must plan their marriage and lives together; they must secure necessary resources such as jobs and a home; and they must expend energy to ensure the success of their marriage. The metaphor of a work project thus defines and gives meaning to the otherwise intangible concept of marriage.

Also consider the common Christian metaphor of God the father. In this metaphor “father” is the source domain and “God” is the target domain. All of us know what a father is like, either from direct experience, or from the report of others, and we have undoubtedly formulated an opinion about what a father should be like. However, we do not know directly what God is like. We cannot see God. We cannot touch God. We cannot conclusively identify the actions of God. The idea of God is simply an abstraction that designates the ultimate concern that forms the ground or basis of our existence (Tillich: 44-48). Nevertheless, by mapping the well-known source domain onto God through the use of metaphor, we are able to communicate something about what God is like, namely, that God is like a father.

¹ Literary critics typically make a distinction between metaphor and simile. Both make a comparison between two things, but the latter is considered to be more explicit and uses comparative terms such as “like” or “as.” This distinction, however, is merely formal and has no functional significance. Therefore, I have lumped all comparisons together under the category of metaphor.

From this example, several characteristics of metaphors can be delineated. First and foremost, metaphors are not literally true. In terms of our example, God is not literally a father. The two domains of the metaphor cannot be equated, for there is instead an analogous relationship between them. That is, the two domains are similar in some respects, but dissimilar in other respects. God is like a father in that God is one who protects, disciplines, and provides for humankind. But God is not like a father in that God does not father offspring, nor are human fathers like God when they abuse their children or abandon their families.

A second characteristic of metaphors is that they are open-ended. The analogy produced by a metaphor cannot be reduced to a set of equivalent literal expressions. The correspondence between the two domains cannot be paraphrased exactly. “No limits can be set as to how far the comparison might be extended; it cannot be paraphrased because it has an unspecifiable number of potentialities for articulation” (Barbour: 14). Thus the metaphor of God the father, for example, cannot be replaced by an exhaustive list of statements detailing how God is like a father. It rather invites the reader to explore the various ways in which God resembles a father without predetermining the number and nature of those similarities.

This potential for new insight that is inherent in metaphors has led some to suggest that metaphors actually reorganize thinking by providing new entailments and new inferences (Ferré; Lakoff and Johnson). Although metaphors can and do function in this way, this is the exception rather than the rule. This leads to the third, and for our purposes the most important, characteristic of metaphors, namely, that metaphors are culturally based (Jacobsen, 1973: 275). Rather than being productive of new understandings, metaphors are ordinarily constrained by existing cultural understandings. In other words, the selection of metaphors is a feature of culture. Metaphors are chosen to make a point that the sender of the communication already has in mind.

Let us explore this aspect of metaphors further. Metaphors are used in order to clarify, describe, or illuminate some target domain. Although the target domain is intangible, it is not unknowable. Typically, there is already a preexistent and culturally shared understanding of reality underlying the target domain. One metaphor is then chosen over another because it more readily maps into that cultural understanding. Why is God referred to as a father and not as a tyrant? The absolute power exercised by a tyrant is indeed similar in kind to God’s absolute power. Nevertheless, the Christian tradition has not found the tyrant to be a suitable metaphor for God. Why? The answer is that Christians already have a culturally shared perception of what God is like, and the metaphor of father more readily fits this understanding (Quinn). Because metaphors express cultural understandings, they can thus serve as clues to the culture.

Metaphors vary in their magnitude and in their dimension. The source domain, for instance, can be limited to one word, such as “father,” or it can consist of an elaborate narrative. Metaphors also can be multidimensional in that they can be composed of other metaphors. The result is often an intertwined web of metaphors that serves as the source domain for a complex extended metaphor. Such metaphors are generally in narrative form, and are traditionally referred to as myths. Myth is thus closely related to metaphor.

Myths and Scenarios

In contrast to metaphor, the definition of myth is problematic. Not only is there disagreement among specialists over the essential character of myths – for example, whether they have a formal or a functional character – but there is also little consensus over what constitutes a myth (Honko; Rogerson, 1984; Oden, 1987: 52-57). This is especially true with regard to the presence of myths in the Bible (Rogerson, 1974; Oden, 1987: 40-52). Whether or not the stories in the Bible can be classified as myth depends in large part on how myth itself is defined. Traditionally, myth has been defined as stories about the gods or as stories about world origins. Following this definition, myth can be found in the Bible only, if at all, in the opening chapters of Genesis. But as demonstrated by recent comparative studies, these definitions are clearly too narrow to account for the numerous and diverse myths attested throughout the world (O’Flaherty: 25-43). The following is a more appropriate, albeit cumbersome, definition of myth:

A myth is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it; it is a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past, or, more rarely, in the future, an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered; it is a story that is part of a larger group of stories (O’Flaherty: 27).

According to this definition, which is used in this book, many of the biblical stories should be included under the category of myth.

Myths play a significant role in the personal and corporate life of each culture; they serve a wide range of psychological and social functions. The myths in the Bible are no different. Our focus, however, is not on their function within the ancient Israelite culture, but rather on their metaphorical character. Like all myths, the biblical myths are composed of numerous metaphors, and many of the myths even function as extended metaphors. As a result, myths, like the metaphors from which they are built, are culturally based. Myths are simply narrative elaborations of culturally shared perceptions of reality. The biblical myths, then, serve as further clues to uncovering the culture of ancient Israel. By giving close attention to these metaphors and myths, we are able to penetrate the high context society of ancient Israel, and thus begin to discern the worldview and values of the biblical writers.

Although metaphors and myths allow us to bridge the gap between our low context reading practices and the high context documents of the Bible, they do not do so unambiguously. The dangers of ethnocentrism and anachronism are ever present. For example, in our metaphor of God the father, the modern reader of the gospels might interpret this metaphor from the perspective of his or her own experience of a father rather than from the perspective of what fathers were like in first century Palestine. This latter perspective, of course, was the perspective of Jesus who most profoundly developed this metaphor. Both perspectives might in fact inform us about God, but only the latter perspective will disclose what the gospel writers intended to communicate. A metaphor is only able to communicate if both the sender and the receiver share a similar understanding of the source domain.

Recent research into reading comprehension suggests that people generally read and think by calling to mind a succession of mental images or scenarios (Malina, 1991: 12-17; Pennington and Hastie). These scenarios, which have their basis in culture, are then mapped onto a text producing a culturally determined grid for understanding the text. Communication occurs when the author and the readers share similar scenarios. When the readers do not share the author's scenarios, either through misdirection by the author, or the readers' unfamiliarity with the content of the text, misunderstanding ensues. The author of a text will often provide the readers with hints that signal the proper scenarios. It is the responsibility of readers to call to mind these scenarios if they want to understand what the author intends to communicate. With regard to the previous discussion concerning metaphors, these scenarios are analogous to the culturally shared understandings on which metaphors are based. Therefore, if we hope to avoid the dangers of ethnocentrism and anachronism, the metaphors and myths of the Bible must be read in light of scenarios appropriate to the culture of ancient Israel rather than our own.

Creation myths and metaphors provide the key to ascertaining the ancient Israelites' worldview and values toward nature. These myths describe God's activity in and on behalf of the world and the product of that activity. They reveal the ancient Israelites' assumptions concerning the triangular relationship between humans, God, and the natural world – that is, the primary assumptions of the Classification and Relationship universals – by answering the most basic human questions: Who am I? How do I fit into the worlds of society and nature? How should I live? In many ancient and modern cultures, including the culture of ancient Israel, reality is perceived as a whole; everything fits together in some way. Creation myths are the vehicle by which the diverse parts of reality – the status of humankind, the structures of society and nature, and the relationship of humankind to the natural world – are integrated into the whole. In particular, creation myths proclaim a central absolute (i.e. independent) reality, such as the gods or some other primal force, and describe its relation to all other, relative (i.e. dependent) realities. Around this central reality creation myths construct the basic structure of all cultural values (Sproul: 1-30; Lovin and Reynolds: 1-8).

In order to understand these myths, and the metaphors they embody, as clues to the cultural values of ancient Israel, however, we must reconstruct the culturally shared perception of reality on which these myths and metaphors are based. We must acquire the appropriate scenarios for reading these myths. From the biblical texts alone, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct the proper scenarios or cultural understandings for adequately interpreting creation in the Bible. Too much information is assumed, and the biblical data are too fragmentary. Fortunately, we are aided by numerous creation myths from the cultures surrounding ancient Israel. These myths prove invaluable for providing the appropriate scenarios for understanding creation in the Bible because Israel shared many of the basic cultural values of its ancient Near Eastern neighbors. In the remainder of this chapter we will survey the wide variety of creation myths from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan. Through the cross-cultural comparison of these myths, we will be able to reconstruct an ancient Near Eastern creation model that underlies also the Bible's creation metaphors and myths. This model will then be used to elucidate the worldview of the biblical writers.

Creation myths in the ancient Near East are as diverse as they are numerous. They range from accounts detailing the construction of the world to those that describe the creation of the pickax. In the following discussion I will focus on the metaphors embedded in the myths of both world and human creation. This is due in part to the desire to be as inclusive as possible, but also due to the fact that myths of human creation are often inseparable from myths of world creation. Contrary to the common assumption (see Westermann, 1984: 22-25), “no good evidence exists for the view that there were two distinct traditions of creation, one of creation of the world and the other of creation of human beings” (Clifford and Collins: 8). Nevertheless, it is convenient for strictly analytical purposes to categorize these myths into the two groups of world and human creation.

Mesopotamia

Myths of World Creation

From the first great culture of Mesopotamia, the Sumerians, no myth of world creation has survived. However, there are a few scattered references in other texts that make allusion to this creation, especially in their introductions where Sumerian scribes were accustomed to adding a few lines dealing with creation. In the epic tale entitled *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World*, for example, the first intelligible lines of the introduction read as follows:

After heaven had been moved away from earth,
After earth had been separated from heaven,
After the name of man had been fixed;
After An had carried off heaven,
After Enlil had carried off earth,
After (the earth) had been presented as dowry to Ereshkigal in the nether
world . . .² (Kramer: 37).

The introduction continues by telling how Enki, the god of the sweet waters, sets out to attack Kur, but for what reason, the text does not indicate. According to this brief account, the creation of the world involves the separating of the united heaven and earth, and the dividing of the respective gods of the heaven and the earth. A further detail is given in the introduction to *The Creation of the Pickax*; it was Enlil, the god of the air, who separates the heaven and the earth (Kramer: 39-41).

In turning our attention to the heirs of the Sumerian culture, the Babylonians and the Assyrians, the myths of world creation become more plentiful and detailed. The most elaborate of these creation myths is frequently entitled the *Babylonian Creation Epic*, or more accurately, the *Enuma Elish*, the traditional title based on the first two words of the myth. Although the myth ostensibly describes how Marduk, the chief god of Babylon, rose to prominence among the gods and established monarchy (Jacobsen, 1976: 167-91), it also details his construction and organization of the world and the creation of humankind. Before we examine the myth, however, a helpful distinction needs to be made between the

² This line has been modified following Jacobsen (1970: 122-23).

macrocosm and the microcosm. The macrocosm is the transcendent world of the gods that underlies and supports the microcosm. It may be eternal, or it might emerge from some preexistent state, such as water. The microcosm is best equated with the known world. This is the world of humans, animals, plants, birds, fish, but also of the sun, moon, and stars. It is the physical world that mirrors or replicates the world of the gods.

The *Enuma Elish* begins by describing the primordial state of the macrocosm, before the birth of the gods, when there existed only the two primal forces: Apsu, the fresh water, and Tiamat, the salt water.

When skies above were not yet named
Nor earth below pronounced by name,
Apsu, the first one, their begetter
And maker Tiamat, who bore them all,
Had mixed their waters together,
But had not formed pastures, nor discovered reed-beds;
When yet no gods were manifest,
Nor names pronounced, nor destinies decreed,
Then gods were born within them (Dalley: 231).

From the intermingling of Apsu and Tiamat four generations of gods are born – Lahmu and Lahamu (the silt of an alluvial plain), Anshar and Kishar (the horizons of heaven and earth), Anu (the sky), and Ea (the subterranean fresh water) – each more prominent than its predecessor. These younger gods then gather together to play and dance, but the clamor of their moving about disturbs the rest of their inert parents. Tiamat, the patient mother, is able to indulge their behavior, but Apsu can tolerate it no longer. Apsu thus sets plans to kill the younger gods to restore his rest. Word of Apsu's plot, however, is relayed to the other gods who are shocked into silence, except for Ea who through his superior wisdom devises a scheme to overcome Apsu. By reciting a sleeping spell, Ea subdues Apsu and kills him. After taking the symbols of Apsu's authority for himself, Ea builds his dwelling on top of the Apsu, that is, the subterranean waters. Ea and his spouse Damkina then give birth to Marduk (the storm) who is majestic in form and superior to all the other gods in every way.

Although the gods have been spared the wrath of Apsu, peace does not prevail. Tiamat is continuously disturbed by the commotion of the young gods.

Anu created the four winds and gave them birth,
Put them in Marduk's hand, 'My son, let them play!'
He fashioned dust and made the whirlwind carry it;
He made the flood-wave and stirred up Tiamat.
Tiamat was stirred up, and heaved restlessly day and night (Dalley: 236).

Other, lesser gods are disturbed as well, and they begin to complain to Tiamat: How can Tiamat remain idle as her children, who killed Apsu her lover, intentionally disturb her rest? Their complaint works. Tiamat is incited to destroy her own children. First, she creates a group of horrible monsters, the sight of which is terrifying enough to repel all who look upon them. Then she promotes Kingu to be commander over her army, and gives him the Tablet of Destinies ensuring that his word will be law. When the younger gods discover

Tiamat's plan, they are terrified. Neither Ea nor Anu has the power to resist her assault. Only the incomparable Marduk is able to rival Tiamat.

Anshar, on behalf of the assembly of gods, requests that Marduk act as their champion and defeat Tiamat. Marduk agrees to the task, but only on the condition that if he is victorious, he will rule over the other gods. With the threat of Tiamat at hand, the gods have little choice in the matter, and so consent to Marduk's arrangement, hailing him as king in anticipation of his victory. Gathering together the typical weapons of a storm-god, Marduk marches out to meet Tiamat with lightning before him and seven winds behind him.

Face to face they came, Tiamat and Marduk, sage of the gods.
They engaged in combat, they closed for battle.
The Lord spread his net and made it encircle her,
To her face he dispatched the *imbullu*-wind,³ which had been behind:
Tiamat opened her mouth to swallow it,
And he forced in the *imbullu*-wind so that she could not close her lips.
Fierce winds distend her belly;
Her insides were constipated and she stretched her mouth wide.
He shot an arrow which pierced her belly,
Split her down the middle and slit her heart,
Vanquished her and extinguished her life.
He threw down her corpse and stood on top of her (Dalley: 253).

Upon the defeat of Tiamat, her army scatters. Marduk captures Kingu and takes from him the Tablet of Destinies. The macrocosm is secured.

At this point in the myth the actual construction of the microcosm is described. After scattering his enemies, Marduk returns to inspect the corpse of Tiamat.

He divided the monstrous shape and created marvels from it.
He sliced her in half like a fish for drying:
Half of her he put up to roof the sky,
Drew a bolt across and made a guard hold it.
Her waters he arranged so that they could not escape (Dalley: 255).

In the heavens, directly above Ea's dwelling on the Apsu, Marduk builds the temple Esharra according to the same plans as Ea's temple. He then arranges stations in the heavens for the gods to serve as the stars, moon, and sun, and makes them responsible for signaling the days, months, and years. The rest of Marduk's creation focuses on the terrestrial realm. Although the tablet is damaged, the basic outline can be discerned. Marduk takes the spittle of Tiamat and forms it into clouds. He creates rain and places it under his own control. He heaps up mountains on her head and on her udder, stopping up her bodily portals. These serve as pillars to hold up the roof of the sky. He then bores through the mountains in order to release the Tigris and the Euphrates from her eyes. Finally, he stretches her tail across the sky to form the Milky Way (Pritchard: 501-2; Dalley: 256-57). After completing the creation

³ The -wind is a Sumerian loan-word that the text itself defines as "evil wind."

of the microcosm, Marduk hands over the Tablet of Destinies to his grandfather Anu, and all the gods rejoice and proclaim him “King of the gods of heaven and earth.”

For his first act as king of all the gods, Marduk commands that a temple be built for him on the earth between the subterranean Apsu and his temple Esharra in heaven. In this temple Marduk will establish his cult center and display his kingship. This new temple will be called Babylon, and it will serve as a resting place for all the gods as they travel between the earth and heaven. The remaining feature of the myth that concerns us focuses on Marduk’s creation of humans, but we will return to this later.

According to the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk created the world from the slain body of Tiamat. The act of creation consisted of splitting and arranging the corpse of Tiamat and controlling the flow of the waters that surge from her body. The Babylonians thus conceived of water as the primal substance of the world (compare the similar assessment of the biblical cosmology by Frymer-Kensky, 1987a: 232-35). Life in this world became possible when primal water was controlled and restricted within boundaries.

A similar notion of creation is found in a Neo-Babylonian inscription discovered in the ruins of the ancient city of Sippar. After listing all that did not exist, as in the opening of the *Enuma Elish*, the text states that all the lands were a sea with a mighty spring gushing up from its midst. Then the beginning of Marduk’s creation is described:

Marduk constructed a reed frame on the face of the waters;
He created dirt and poured it out by the reed frame (Heidel: 62).

The text continues by describing the rest of the creative acts of Marduk. Like creation in the *Enuma Elish*, this text portrays the emergence of land out of the waters. But the similarities go much deeper. In the *Enuma Elish* land began to emerge with the birth of Lahmu and Lahamu, the silt, from the primal waters of Apsu and Tiamat. Not until Marduk defeated Tiamat, however, did the land become secure as Marduk separated it from the threatening waters. This myth is rooted in Mesopotamian geography. The great Mesopotamian rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, emptied into an alluvial plain in which new land was continually being formed by the silt carried down by the rivers. The emergence of new land in the alluvial plain became the model by which some Babylonians described the creation of the world (Jacobsen, 1976: 169). This same model underlies the Neo-Babylonian inscription from Sippar: Marduk creates the dirt that will form the alluvial plain (Heidel: 61). The main difference between these two myths is that creation in the *Enuma Elish* results from conflict against the waters (Tiamat), whereas in the Neo-Babylonian text the waters offer no opposition.

Biblical scholars tend to characterize the *Enuma Elish* as the premier example of the Mesopotamian view of creation. At the heart of the *Enuma Elish* is what has been termed the *Chaoskampf*, “the struggle against chaos,” or, more broadly, the conflict myth. This myth presents the ubiquitous struggle between order and chaos. It is essentially a drama celebrating a warrior-god’s ascendancy to kingship over his rivals by his defeat of the chaotic forces of death, and his subsequent ordering of the world into a habitation suitable for human life. It is a cosmogonic myth that describes the creation of a new world complete with social system, kinship organization, and cult, though rarely does it focus on the

origination of the world per se (Clifford, 1985: 509-12; Knight: 134-37). This *Chaoskampf*, which has numerous parallels in the biblical tradition, has been employed by biblical scholars as the primary model for interpreting the biblical creation myths (Gunkel, 1984). However, by emphasizing the exclusive importance of the *Enuma Elish*, other Mesopotamian creation myths that are equally vital for understanding the idea of creation in the Bible have often been neglected.

Certainly the *Enuma Elish* is the most elaborate Mesopotamian creation myth, but it is doubtful that it represents the predominant Mesopotamian view of creation. One prominent Assyriologist even characterized it as a sectarian and aberrant combination of mythological threads that have been woven into an unparalleled composition (Lambert: 291). Although he depicted the myth perhaps too narrowly, he has cautioned us against placing too much emphasis on this myth for understanding the Mesopotamian view of creation. Some scholars have even argued that the *Enuma Elish* is a foreign import into Mesopotamia (Jacobsen, 1968; Komoróczy). The textual evidence suggests that there is no single tradition that made up the Mesopotamian view of creation.

A Mesopotamian creation myth that represents a strikingly different tradition from the *Enuma Elish* has been called the *Theogony of Dunnu*. Although the end of the text is missing, this myth is apparently about the establishment of kingship in Dunnu, which is traced back to the beginning of creation:

At the very beginning Plow married Earth
And they decided to establish a family and dominion.
'We shall break up the virgin soil of the land into clods.'
In the clods of their virgin soil, they created Sea.
The Furrows, of their own accord, begot the Cattle God.
Together they built Dunnu forever as his refuge.
Plow made unrestricted dominion for himself in Dunnu (Dalley: 279).

In the following lines, the Cattle God marries his mother Earth and kills his father Plow and takes over his dominion. Then the Cattle God marries his older sister Sea who kills Earth. The Cattle God and Sea in turn gave birth to a son, the Flocks God, who kills his father and marries his mother. So the generations proceed through incestuous marriage and patricide.

According to this myth, the creation of the world resulted from both procreation and the killing of one's parents. The importance of procreation is understandable. In the *Enuma Elish*, procreation served as the means by which the macrocosm emerged out of the primordial waters. In the *Incantation against Toothache*, the creation of the microcosm is similarly described, though more abstractly:

After Anu had created heaven,
Heaven had created earth,
The earth had created the rivers,
The rivers had created the canals,
The canals had created the marsh,
And the marsh had created the worm . . . (Pritchard: 100).

Just as a human couple is able to produce new life, so also the primal gods produced by procreation through several generations all the vital aspects of the created world. But what is the purpose of killing one's parents? An insight from the *Enuma Elish* proves helpful. In that myth both Apsu and Tiamat are slain, but neither ceases to exist. Rather, they become inert matter, material aspects of the creation. No longer are they active forces in the world. In the same way, each of the succeeding generations in the *Theogony of Dammu* becomes a material part of the world through its death, and each generation ceases to serve as an active agent in the world (Jacobsen, 1984: 15-16).

Myths of Human Creation

Closely related to the myths of world creation are those of human creation. In fact, human creation is often placed in the context of world creation. This is true of the Sumerian myth of *Enki and Ninmah*. This myth begins by describing the structure of the world that resulted from the creation:

In days of yore, the days when heaven and earth had been fashioned,
in nights of yore, the nights when heaven and earth had been fashioned,
in years of yore, the years when the modes of being were determined,
when the Anunnaki gods had been born
when the goddess-mothers had been chosen for marriage,
when the goddess-mothers had been assigned to heaven or earth,
and when the goddess-mothers had had intercourse, had become pregnant,
and had given birth,
did the gods for whom they baked their food portions and set therewith their
tables,
did the major gods oversee work, while the minor gods were shouldering the
menial labor.
The gods were dredging the rivers, were piling up their silt on projecting
bends –
and the gods lugging the clay began complaining about the corvée (Jacobsen,
1987b: 153-54).

The creation of the world had resulted in a great disparity between the major and the minor gods. On the minor gods fell the task of maintaining the earth, particularly the work of dredging the rivers and canals. This is hard, back-breaking work, so the gods began to complain. Fearful to approach Enki, they bring their complaint to Namma, Enki's mother and the mother who bore all the major gods. She intercedes on behalf of the minor gods, and requests that Enki relieve their burden:

My son, rise from your bed, and when you with your ingenuity have searched
out the required skill,
and you have fashioned a fill-in worker for the gods, may they get loose of
their digging! (Jacobsen, 1987b: 155).

With his ingenuity and wisdom, Enki considers the problem that Namma presents him. Remembering his own conception and birth from Namma, he conceives of the idea of creating humans in the same way. Humans will be charged with the tasks of the minor gods;

it will be their duty to maintain the earth by dredging the rivers and canals. Thus Enki requests that Namma create humans:

O mother mine, since the sire who was once provided with heir by you is still
there, have the god's birth-chair put together!
When you have drenched even the core of the Apsu's fathering clay
Imma-en and Imma-shar [= womb-goddesses] can make the fetus bigger,
and when you have put limbs on it
may Ninmah act as your birth-helper,
and may Ninimma, Shuzidanna, Ninmada, Ninshara, Ninbara
Ninmug, Dududuh and Ereshguna [= birth-goddesses]
assist you at your giving birth.
O mother mine, when you have determined its mode of being, may Ninmah
put together the birth-chair,
and when, without any male, you have built it up in it, may you give birth to
mankind! (Jacobsen, 1987b: 156-57).

Namma then gives birth to a human, Enki clothes it, and all the minor gods rejoice. The rest of the myth is about a contest between Enki and Ninmah over who can create the most useless human, but this need not concern us.

According to this creation myth, humans were created in order to relieve the gods from their labor. A closer examination, however, reveals much more. Namma was seen as the power in the riverbed that gives birth to fresh water (Enki) in the spring, but in this myth she is identified more generally as mother earth. The "fathering clay of Apsu," the other important element in the myth, was thought to be the clay beneath the surface of the earth from which the subterranean water (Enki) was born. Therefore, just as Enki was born out of Namma from this clay, so he requests that Namma also create humans. Humans are fashioned from the fathering clay of the Apsu and are born out of the earth, out of Namma, with the help of Ninmah.

Although Ninmah plays a minor role as a divine midwife in the first part of *Enki and Ninmah*, elsewhere in Sumerian mythology, and later in Babylonian mythology, she is identified with the birth-goddess par excellence. She is called by a variety of names – usually Nintur or Ninhursaga, but also Mami, Aruru, and Belet-ili – which originally represented distinct deities, but by the time the myths were composed the deities were united in the form of the great birth-goddess. As the birth-goddess, she was the one who shaped the fetus in the womb:

Mother Nintur, the lady of form-giving,
Working in a dark place, the womb;
to give birth to kings, to tie on the rightful tiara,
to give birth to lords, to place the crown on their heads, is in her hands
(Jacobsen, 1976: 107).

Because this activity is analogous to the activity of artisans, the birth-goddess could be identified as a potter, a bronze-caster, or a carpenter. The birth-goddess was also responsible for the vital task of initiating the birth process:

None but Ninhursaga, uniquely great, makes the innards contract,
None but Nintur, the great mother, sets birth-giving going (Jacobsen, 1973:
288).

She was the power in all facets of the birth process, including the actual delivery and care for the infant. Thus, she is often portrayed as a midwife, acting outside of the womb. Like her role in *Enki and Ninmah*, she aided in the birth of gods and humans.

In *Enki and Ninmah* humans are created with no male assistance. This is unusual in Sumerian mythology. Typically, Enki plays a critical role in the creation of humans by supplying the necessary semen for conception. The Sumerian language makes no distinction between semen and water, encouraging a metaphorical relationship between the two. Just as water enables soil to produce, so semen enables the womb to conceive. Enki, as the god of fresh water, then, is also the progenitor of gods and humans. An excerpt from a myth describing the creation of the plant-gods thus illustrates both Enki's and Nintur's task in the birth process:

Enki, the wise one, toward Nintur, the country's mother,
was digging his phallus into the levee,
plunging his phallus into the canebrake. . .
On Ninhursaga he poured semen into the womb,
and she conceived the semen in the womb, very semen of Enki. . .
In the month of womanhood
like juniper oil, like juniper oil, like a prince's sweet butter,
did Nintur mother of the country,
like juniper oil, give birth to Ninnisiga (Jacobsen, 1987b: 191-92).

A different Sumerian tradition on the creation of humans claims that humans sprouted from the ground like plants. In the introductory lines to the hymn to E-engur, Enki's temple at Eridu, the text states:

When destinies had been determined for all engendered things,
When in the year known as "Abundance born in heaven, . . ."
The people had broken through the ground like grass (Jacobsen, 1970: 112).

This idea is elaborated further in the *Creation of the Pickax*. In this myth Enlil separates the heaven from the earth so that humans can sprout up:

The lord did verily produce the normal order,
The lord whose decisions cannot be altered,
Enlil, did verily speed to remove heaven from earth
So that the seed from which grew the nation could sprout up from the field;
did verily speed to bring the earth out from under heaven as a separate entity
And bound up for her the gash in the "bond of heaven and earth" [= Duranki]
So that the "flesh producer" [= Uzumua] could grow the vanguard of
mankind (Jacobsen, 1970: 113).

Duranki and Uzumua were sacred spots in ancient Nippur. Duranki was the spot at which heaven and earth were attached. When Enlil separated them, the resulting wound in the earth was bound up so that so that Uzumua (located within Duranki?) could grow humankind. The apparent idea behind this text is the insight that seeds need to be covered by dirt in order to sprout, otherwise they will simply bake in the sun.

Having prepared the earth for life, Enlil creates the pickax, the indispensable tool of early agriculturalists, and marvels over its quality. Humans, however, had not sprouted as expected. Apparently, the hard crust of the earth prevented them from breaking through. Thus, Enlil uses his newly created pickax to free them:

[He] drove his pickax into the “flesh producer.”
In the hole which he thus made was the vanguard of mankind
And while the people of his land were breaking through the ground toward
Enlil
He eyed his black-headed ones [= Sumerians] in steadfast fashion (Jacobsen,
1970: 114).

Although this tradition of human creation uses metaphors different from the tradition of *Enki and Ninmah* and related myths, both traditions share the common idea that humans have their origin in the earth. The traditions differ with regard to how humans emerged from the earth. One tradition uses sexual metaphors to describe the birth of humans from the earth. The other tradition prefers agricultural metaphors.

In later Mesopotamian myths of human creation both of these traditions can be found. In the myth of *Atrahasis*, for instance, humans are born out of the earth. The myth begins like *Enki and Ninmah* by describing how the major gods impose the work of the earth on the minor gods. These minor gods are charged with the tasks of digging out the river beds of the Tigris and Euphrates and of clearing the silt from the irrigation canals. Unlike the gods in *Enki and Ninmah*, however, the gods in this myth revolt against the great gods. Incited by an unnamed god, the gods burn their tools, lay aside their spades, and besiege the dwelling of Enlil, who was given dominion over the earth. Enlil is disturbed in his sleep by the noise of their rebellion, and he summons the great gods, Anu and Enki, to decide the dispute. The rebel gods present their case: The gods declare war because their burden is too difficult. Anu agrees with their complaint: “Their work was indeed too hard, their trouble was too much.” Nevertheless, the gods’ revolt cannot simply be dismissed; a penalty must be paid. Thus on the recommendation of Enlil, Anu decides that one god, the leader of the rebellion, should be killed as an example.

Enki now addresses the other great gods. He agrees with Anu that the minor gods’ complaint is justified, but rather than simply kill the leader as an example, he suggests an alternative plan: Let the birth-goddess create humans to carry the burden of the gods. The great gods like Enki’s plan and summon the birth-goddess, here called Nintu-Mami, to instruct her for her task, but Nintu claims that she cannot create a human by herself:

It is not proper for me to make him.
The work is Enki’s;
He makes everything pure!

If he gives me clay, then I will do it (Dalley: 15).

In turn, Enki responds:

On the first, seventh, and fifteenth of the month
I shall make a purification by washing.
Then one god should be slaughtered.
And the gods can be purified by immersion.
Nintu shall mix clay
With his flesh and his blood.
Then a god and a man
Will be mixed together in clay.
Let us hear the drumbeat forever after,
Let a ghost come into existence from the god's flesh,
Let her proclaim it as his living sign,
And let the ghost exist so as not to forget the slain god (Dalley: 15).

All the great gods endorse the plan. They kill the rebel leader. Nintu-Mami then mixes his blood with clay supplied by Enki. From this mixture she creates humans on whom the work of the gods is imposed.

The interpretation of the creation of humans in this text is problematic. The references to the drumbeat and the ghost are not further clarified. One possible interpretation that finds support elsewhere in the myth is that this text describes human nature. Accordingly, the drumbeat is the human heart, and it serves as a sign that humans are created from the rebel god, who is present in humans in the form of a ghost. The beat of the heart serves to remind humans of their purpose in life, to serve and do the work of the gods, and also provides a warning of the possible consequences of rebellion against the gods (Moran).

When Nintu-Mami creates the humans, she takes the clay and mixes it with blood. But the text goes on to state that the great gods spat on the clay. These are undoubtedly metaphors for the conception of a fetus in the womb. The clay is the fetal material supplied by the womb. We would identify the clay with the human egg, but the ancients thought in terms of an inert matter, like the earth's soil that needs seed in order to produce. The gods' spit, then, should be identified with semen. (In the Egyptian myths we will see how Atum's semen was later thought to have come from his mouth.) Only with the spit of the gods are humans able to be created from the clay. Although the mixing of clay and spit represents the conception of humans, the rest of the birth process is not described in this account. Once the gods spit on the clay, Mami states that she has succeeded in creating humans and so relieved the gods from their toil.

The myth of *Atrahasis* then continues with what appears to be a different account of the creation of humans, but on closer examination this second account is revealed to be parallel to the first account. The first account presents the creation of humans in an abstract and general way, whereas the second account is more specific and concrete (Kikawada). In particular, the second account details the process by which humans are created out of clay; it begins as follows:

Far-sighted Enki and wise Mami

Went into the room of fate.
The womb-goddesses were assembled.
He trod the clay in her presence;
She kept reciting an incantation,
For Enki, staying in her presence, made her recite it.
When she had finished her incantation,
She pinched off fourteen pieces of clay,
And set seven pieces on the right,
Seven on the left.
Between them she put down a mud brick.
She made use of a reed, opened it to cut the umbilical cord,
Called up the wise and knowledgeable
Womb-goddesses, seven and seven.
Seven created males,
Seven created females,
For the womb-goddess is creator of fate (Dalley: 16-17).

This passage uses several complex metaphors. It begins by describing the process of making bricks. Like a brick-maker, Enki prepares the clay by stomping it with his feet, but in this context his actions serve as a metaphor for the shaping of the fetus in the womb. Mami recites incantations so that the fetus will be born properly. This was a common task of Near Eastern midwives (Beckman). After her incantation, she pinches off fourteen pieces of clay, which is analogous to the movement of the fetus into the birth canal. Finally, Mami puts down a mud brick as a birthstool (Lambert and Millard: 153), and then delivers seven males and seven females. Although the mother of these newly created humans is never specified, the reference to clay suggests that it is the earth itself. But rather than draw attention to Mami's role as mother earth, the text emphasizes only her role as the divine midwife.

Our interpretation of this second account of human creation is confirmed by the following lines of the myth that give instructions for performing the rituals appropriate for a woman giving birth to a baby. When a woman gives birth, a mud brick should be put in the birthing house for seven days in honor of Mami, and the mother shall sever herself from the baby by cutting the umbilical cord. The next lines of the myth repeat Mami's role in the creation of humans, but with more specific detail:

The womb-goddesses were assembled
And Nintu was present. They counted the months,
Called up the tenth month as the term of fates.
When the tenth month came,
She slipped in a staff and opened the womb.
Her face was glad and joyful.
She covered her head,
Performed the midwifery,
Put on her belt, said a blessing (Dalley: 17).

In this text Nintu-Mami unambiguously acts as a divine midwife and delivers the birth of the humans. More ritual instruction follows and concludes the myth's focus on the creation of humans.

A brief account of human creation is included in the *Enuma Elish*. After Marduk's victory over Tiamat and his creation of the microcosm, the gods praise him for his majesty and great works. In response to this praise, Marduk considers an even greater achievement. Consulting with Ea, another name for Enki, Marduk decides to free the gods from their labor by creating humans:

Let me put blood together, and make bones too.
Let me set up primeval man: Man shall be his name.
Let me create a primeval man.
The work of the gods shall be imposed on him, and so they shall be at
leisure.
Let me change the ways of the gods miraculously,
So that they are gathered as one yet divided in two (Dalley: 260-61).

The last line of this text means that all the gods will be able to rest as one, yet they will still be divided into two classes: the gods above the earth and the gods below. Ea agrees with Marduk's plan but adds the further provision that the one responsible for arousing Tiamat to battle should be killed so that humans can be created. The assembly of gods indict Kingu as the one who started the war by inciting Tiamat.

They bound him and held him in front of Ea,
Imposed the penalty on him and cut off his blood.
He created mankind from his blood,
Imposed the toil of the gods on man and released the gods from it (Dalley:
261).

Then out of gratitude for being freed from their work, the gods themselves build Babylon and its temple Esagila and throw a banquet to celebrate Marduk's kingship.

In the *Enuma Elish* the process of human creation is not described. Although only divine blood is mentioned for the composition of humans, this text undoubtedly stands within the same Mesopotamian tradition described above in which humans have their origin in the earth. Whether humans were born from clay or sprouted like plants, we cannot determine. The sole mention of divine blood and the task of humans – to bear the gods' toil – was sufficient for the myth's purpose.

One final Mesopotamian myth of human creation that needs to be considered is a bilingual text discovered at Assur and dating back to approximately 800 B.C.E. This myth begins by describing how the great gods, after they create the earth, deliberate on what they should create next. Together, they recognize the need for humans to perform the work of the gods in maintaining the earth:

In Uzumua, the bond of heaven and earth,
Let us slay two Lamga gods [= divine craftsmen].
With their blood let us create mankind.

The service of the gods will be their portion,
For all times to maintain the boundary ditch,
To place the hoe and the basket into their hands
For the dwelling of the great gods,
Which is fixed to be an exalted sanctuary,
To mark off field from field,
For all times to maintain the boundary ditch,
To give the trench its right course,
To maintain the boundary stone,
To water the four regions of the earth,
To raise plants in abundance (Heidel: 69-70).

Although this text suggests that humans will be created from the blood of two gods, the role of blood is not mentioned in the actual description of human creation. Rather, humans sprout from the ground like plants:

Aruru, the lady of the gods, who is fit for rulership,
Ordained for them great destinies:
Skilled worker to produce for skilled worker and unskilled worker for
unskilled worker,
Springing up by themselves like grain from the ground,
A thing which, like the stars of heaven, shall not be changed forever (Heidel:
70-71).

This myth uses a variety of metaphors to describe human creation: the agricultural metaphors embodied in Uzumua, the “(place where) flesh sprouted forth,” and the sprouting of grain, the blood of slain gods, and the reference to Aruru who is associated with the birth process. The point of this myth appears to be that Aruru has ordained human reproduction so that humans will be able to procreate and reproduce, unaided by the gods, like grain that sprouts from the ground. The blood from the divine craftsmen – note that in this myth they are not rebel gods – transfers to humans the necessary skills for maintaining the earth; humans are given divine skills so that the gods may rest.

Egypt

In comparison to the creation myths of Mesopotamia, the Egyptian creation myths are much more difficult to understand. In part, this is because the Egyptians found no need to describe the process of creation in its entirety. Although most of the Egyptian myths are basically cosmological or cosmogonical myths – that is, concerned with the composition or creation of the world – they were only secondarily formulated for this purpose. Most of the myths served a ritual or cultic function (Lesko: 91). This is true for the Mesopotamian creation myths as well, but unlike them the Egyptian myths usually make only passing reference to creation. The Egyptian ideas of creation must be reconstructed from numerous disparate sources.

The Egyptian creation myths are also more difficult to understand because the myths have undergone a long history of harmonization and abstraction. In predynastic Egypt, prior

to the third millennium B.C.E., there probably existed a variety of local, independent traditions of creation, each with its own gods and unique depiction of creation. However, with the unification of Egypt and the founding of the first dynasty under Menes, many of the local myths were brought together into an elaborate system, and the numerous gods were arranged into a hierarchy (Lesko: 90). Moreover, the myths were continuously reformulated in response to and in conjunction with Egypt's intellectual tradition. The result was a complex national mythology.

Myths of World Creation

A thorough treatment of Egypt's creation myths is beyond the scope of this chapter, and undoubtedly would try the patience of most readers. Nevertheless, a few examples of this mythology will serve our construction of a cross-cultural model for interpreting the creation metaphors of the Bible. One early example of Egypt's creation mythology is known as the Heliopolitan cosmogony because it originated in the cult of Atum at Heliopolis, the biblical On. This myth presents the classical Egyptian doctrine of the procreation of the world. According to this myth, the creation of the world began at Heliopolis as a hillock emerged out of the primeval ocean Nun. On this hillock the lone god Atum procreated by himself: "Atum is he who once came into being, who masturbated in On. He took his phallus in his grasp that he might create orgasm by means of it, and so were born the twins Shu and Tefnut" (Faulkner: 198). Shu (male) is identified with the air and Tefnut (female) with moisture. Because this first couple was thought to have been born from Atum's mouth, later formulations of the myth state that Atum spit them out (Morenz: 163). Shu and Tefnut then gave birth to the earth, Geb (male), and the sky, Nut (Female). They in turn gave birth to two sons, Osiris and Seth, and two daughters, Isis and Nephthys, thus completing the Ennead (family of nine gods). These siblings possibly represent the political powers of the terrestrial world (Morenz: 162), though they have also been identified with natural powers (Lesko: 93). Finally, Osiris and Isis gave birth to Horus who is identified with the king of Egypt.

Another creation myth focuses on the work of Ptah, the chief god of Memphis. In the Berlin *Hymn to Ptah*, Ptah, the self-created one, is praised as the one who creates the world like a potter fashioning a vessel:

Greetings, Ptah, father of the gods,
Tatenen, eldest of the originals, . . .
who begot himself by himself, without any developing having developed;
who crafted the world in the design of his heart,
when his developments developed.
Model who gave birth to all that is,
begetter who created what exists. . .
Who built his body by himself,
without the earth having developed, without the sky having developed,
without the waters having been introduced.
You tied together the world, you totaled your flesh,
you took account of your parts and found yourself alone,
place-maker, god who smelted the Two Lands [= upper and lower Egypt].

There is no father of yours who begot you in your developing,
no mother of yours who gave you birth:
your own Khnum [= the potter god],
active one who came forth active (Allen: 39-40; with modifications).

An important characteristic of Egyptian creation myths that can be observed from this text is the mixture of both craftsman and birth imagery. Ptah both fashions the world and gives birth to it. Ptah is also compared to Khnum, the potter god who fashions gods and humans on his potter's wheel. But Khnum, as we will illustrate below, is also responsible for creating the semen and fashioning the fetus in the womb (Morenz: 162, 183-84). These two types of creation are thoroughly integrated in the Egyptian myths, and thus probably stem from a single cultural model of creation.

A third Egyptian creation myth that combines elements from the previous two myths is the *Memphite Theology*. Although this myth is only preserved in a very late and badly damaged inscription, it might stem from the Old Kingdom when Memphis was the capital that united Upper and Lower Egypt. According to this myth, Ptah is the creator of even Atum and the rest of the Heliopolitan Ennead, but the mode of creation has been abstracted from the concrete craftsman and birth metaphors to an intangible intellectual creative principle. The creation comes into being through Ptah's efficacious word.

There took shape in the heart, there took shape on the tongue the form of Atum. For the very great one is Ptah, who gave life to all the gods and their *kas* through this heart and through this tongue, in which Horus [= command] had taken shape as Ptah, in which Thoth [= perception] had taken shape as Ptah. Thus heart and tongue rule over all limbs in accordance with the teaching that the heart is in every body and the tongue is in every mouth of all gods, all men, all cattle, all creeping things, whatever lives, thinking whatever he [= Ptah] wishes and commanding whatever he wishes. His Ennead is before him as teeth and lips. They are the semen and the hands of Atum. For the Ennead of Atum came into being through his semen and his fingers. But the Ennead is the teeth and lips in this mouth which pronounced the name of every living thing, from which Shu and Tefnut came forth, and which gave birth to the Ennead. . . Thus all the gods were born and his Ennead was completed. For every word of the god came about through what the heart devised and the tongue commanded (Lichtheim, 1980: 54).

In this myth Ptah is identified with the creative principle that is actualized through his thoughts and speech. The Ennead of Atum serves as the agent through which Ptah's word is translated into material reality. The model for this abstract understanding of creation appears to be the actual workings of the human mind. Just as humans conceptualize and plan and then act on those plans, so also Ptah's conceptualizations result in the creation of the world. Similarly, the Ennead is the agent in Ptah's creating just as the human senses serve as agents of the mind (Allen: 45): "Sight, hearing, breathing – they report to the heart, and it makes every understanding come forth. As to the tongue, it repeats what the heart has devised" (Lichtheim, 1980: 54).

Myths of Human Creation

Egyptian myths have little to say about the creation of humans; their primary focus is world creation and the emergence of the gods (Kákosy: 205). However, short references to human creation can be gleaned from a variety of Egyptian texts. In the *Instruction Addressed to King Merikare*, for instance, humans are compared to god's cattle:

Well tended is mankind – god's cattle,
He made sky and earth for their sake,
He subdued the water monster,
He made breath for their noses to live.
They are his images, who came from his body,
He shines in the sky for their sake;
He made for them plants and cattle,
Fowl and fish to feed them (Lichtheim, 1973: 106).

Although the process of human creation in this text is not explicitly detailed, the language suggests that humans are formed through procreation by the god. Another text, from the *Instruction of Amenemope*, compares humans to a building that god constructs:

Man is clay and straw,
The god is his builder.
He tears down, he builds up daily,
He makes a thousand poor by his will,
He makes a thousand men into chiefs,
When he is in his hour of life (Lichtheim, 1976: 160).

It is interesting to note that neither of the previous texts identifies the god responsible for human creation. Elsewhere, the *Book of the Gates* identifies Horus as the creator of humans (Morenz: 48). In the texts discovered at el-Amarna it is the sun-disk, Aten, who is the creator. In the *Short Hymn to Aten*, Aten is praised for creating all life, including humans:

August God who fashioned himself,
Who made every land, created what is in it,
All peoples, herds, and flocks,
All trees that grow from soil;
They live when you dawn for them,
You are mother and father of all that you made. . .
You are One yet a million lives are in you,
To make them live you give the breath of life to their noises;
By the sight of your rays all flowers exist,
What lives and sprouts from the soil grows when you shine (Lichtheim, 1976:
91-92).

There is an oscillation in this hymn between Aten's natural life-giving power as the sun and Aten's paternal character. Because king Akhenaten, the chief patron of the Aten cult, proclaimed Aten to be the sole god of Egypt, Aten is described as both a father and a mother. This aspect of Aten is further elaborated upon in the *Great Hymn to the Aten*, where

Aten is praised for characteristics similar to both Enki and Nintur, his Mesopotamian counterparts in the creation process:

Who makes seed grow in women,
Who creates people from sperm;
Who feeds the son in his mother's womb,
Who soothes him to still his tears.
Nurse in the womb,
Giver of breath,
To nourish all that he made.
When he comes from the womb to breathe,
On the day of his birth,
You open wide his mouth,
You supply his needs (Lichtheim, 1976: 97-98).

Like Enki, Aten supplies the semen that enables conception in the womb. And like Nintur, Aten shapes the fetus in the womb and acts as a divine midwife to deliver and care for the child at birth.

The preeminent creator of humans in Egypt is Khnum. He is most characteristically portrayed as a potter who fashions both gods and humans on his potter's wheel: "He has fashioned humankind on the wheel; he has engendered gods in order to people the land and the sphere of the Great Ocean" (Sauneron and Yoyotte: 73). In a hymn from his temple in Esna, Khnum is praised for creating every living thing on his wheel:

You are the master of the wheel,
Who is pleased to model on the wheel,
The beneficent god who organizes the land,
Who puts the seeds in contact with the land. . .
You are the all-powerful one,
And you have made humans on the wheel.
You have created the gods;
You have modeled the small and large cattle;
You have formed everything on your wheel each day
In your name of Khnum the potter (Sauneron and Yoyotte: 73).

In addition to fashioning humans on the potter's wheel, Khnum also supplies them with the breath necessary for life. He is the "god who forms bodies, the god who equips nostrils" (Lichtheim, 1980: 115). "The sweet breath of wind goes out from him for the nostrils of gods and humans" (Sauneron and Yoyotte: 74).

As a potter, Khnum has been called a craftsman god. But Khnum also plays a role in the birth process. In fact, these two aspects of Khnum's character are inseparable. Khnum's fashioning of humans on the potter's wheel was thought to be analogous to his work within the womb:

He fashioned gods and men,
He has formed flocks and herds;
He made birds as well as fishes,

He created bulls, engendered cows.
He knotted the flow of blood to the bones,
Formed in his workshop as his handiwork,
So the breath of life is within everything,
Blood bound with semen in the bones,
To knit the bones from start.
He makes women give birth when the womb is ready,
So as to open . . . as he wishes;
He soothes suffering by his will,
Relieves throats, lets everyone breathe,
To give life to the young in the womb (Lichtheim, 1980: 112).

Ancient Egyptians believed that Khnum had a necessary and critical task within the birth process. Like a potter shapes a vessel on his wheel, so Khnum forms the fetus in the womb. Moreover, without Khnum's contribution conception cannot take place. For example, the *Admonitions of Ipuwer* state: "Lo, women are barren, none conceive, Khnum does not fashion because of the state of the land" (Lichtheim, 1973: 151).

Khnum's role in the birth process has been beautifully illustrated on a number of wall carvings in the temple of Deir el Bahari that depict the birth of Hatshepsut, Egypt's only female king (Naville: pls. XLVI-LV). In the first relevant scene, the chief god Amun is tastefully depicted having intercourse with the queen Iahmes, Hatshepsut's mother. The Egyptians believed their kings had two fathers: a divine father who gives the king divine attributes, and a human father from whom the new king will inherit the throne (Gordon, 1977). In this scene Amun assumes the form of the queen's husband in order to impregnate her with divine semen. After the intercourse, the next scene portrays Khnum fashioning Hatshepsut on his potter's wheel. Then in the following scenes, Khnum leads the pregnant queen, with his spouse Heket, a birth-goddess, to the birth place where she delivers Hatshepsut. According to these carvings, Khnum is clearly the one who forms and shapes the fetus in the womb. His work and skill as a potter serve as a metaphor for his activity in the birth process (Morenz: 183-84; Gordon, 1982: 206).

A Canaanite Myth of Creation

The exemplary myth of creation from the Canaanite culture, the culture most familiar to ancient Israelites, is the Ugaritic *Baal* myth, though this is hotly debated among scholars. Because the *Baal* myth lacks a specific description of the process of creation, some scholars have argued that it cannot properly be called a creation myth (Kapelrud, 1980; Margalit; Levenson, 1988: 9-10). Moreover, the Ugaritic myths usually designate El as the creator god rather than Baal, the central character of the *Baal* myth. Although the evidence is scant, El is called the father of gods and humans and the creator of creatures (Pope: 47-54; De Moor). In response, other scholars have argued that a distinction needs to be made between theogonic creation – the birth and succession of the gods – and cosmogonic creation – the creation of the world through divine conflict. El's creation is thus classified as a theogony, whereas Baal's creation is called a cosmogony (Fisher; Cross, 1976; Grønbaek). This distinction, however, does not account for all the evidence, for El also acts in divine combat

(P. Miller: 48-58; Wyatt, 1987b: 189-90), nor does it explain the absence of an explicit description of Baal creating. This latter problem need not detain us. The *Baal* myth is clearly concerned with the structures and order of the world, and as such can be called a cosmogony. The fact that the myth contains no reference to the actual process of creation is insignificant, for it is unreasonable to expect a myth to offer a detailed explanation of its own significance (Wyatt, 1985: 376-77). In other words, the creation of the world is the significance of the myth; it is what results from Baal securing the order of the world. It is sufficient for our purposes simply to focus on Baal's activity.

The unity of the *Baal* myth is also debated. Even the order of the six tablets of the myth, two of which are quite fragmentary, is uncertain. The myth itself appears to be a complex weaving of loosely related mythic traditions. Nevertheless, two prominent episodes of divine conflict stand out, one dealing with control of the macrocosm and one with the microcosm. The first episode begins with all the gods dining at a banquet on El's mountain. Sea, symbolic of the unruly cosmic powers, and similar in character to Tiamat, sends two messengers to challenge El's power over the macrocosm. He demands that El hand over Baal, the storm-god, to be his captive. All the gods cower at the messengers' arrival, and El has no recourse but to deliver Baal into Sea's control. Baal, however, does not give in to Sea so easily. He rebukes the other gods and assaults his messengers. After a break in the text, the myth resumes with Kothar-wa-Hasis, the divine craftsman, prophesying Baal's victory over Sea:

Behold, your enemy, Baal,
 behold, you will kill your enemy,
 behold, you will annihilate your foes.
You will take your eternal kingship,
 your dominion forever and ever (Coogan: 88).

Kothar-wa-Hasis then provides Baal with two clubs by which he strikes and kills Sea:

(The club) struck Prince Sea on the skull,
 Judge River between the eyes.
Sea stumbled;
 he fell to the ground;
his joints shook;
 his frame collapsed.
Baal captured and drank Sea;
 he finished off Judge River (Coogan: 89).

With the defeat of Sea, Baal secures the order of the macrocosm. El remains head of the pantheon and Baal is proclaimed king over the microcosm.

At the beginning of the second episode, Baal declares that his authority over the microcosm is unrivaled:

No other king or non-king
 shall set his power over the earth.
I will send no tribute to El's son Death,
 no homage to El's Darling, the Hero.

Let Death cry to himself,
let the Darling grumble in his heart;
for I alone will rule over the gods;
I alone will fatten gods and men;
I alone will satisfy earth's masses (Coogan: 105).

Baal's boast, however, is premature. Death, the chthonic power of sterility, disease, and drought, demands that Baal surrender his authority to him. Baal is unable to resist his power and submits to Death's ultimatum. Death is pleased by Baal's unhappy decision, and thus issues the terms of his surrender:

As for you [Baal], take your clouds,
your wind, your bolts, your rain;
take with you your seven lads,
your eight noble boars;
take with you Pidray, maid of light;
take with you Tallay, maid of rain;
then head toward Mount Kankaniya:
raise the mountain with your hands,
the hill on top of your palms;
then go down to the sanatorium of the underworld;
you will be counted among those who go down into the earth.
And the gods will know that you have died (Coogan: 108).

Baal obeys Death's command and dies in the underworld.

Baal's demise causes the microcosm to wither at the hands of Death. The once rich fields that had produced bountiful crops with the aid of Baal's rain are now turned into a desert. Life on earth cannot be sustained with Death as Lord. Hence, the gods mourn the death of Baal:

Baal is dead: what will happen to the peoples?
Dagon's son: what will happen to the masses?
Let us go down into the earth in Baal's place (Coogan: 109).

Anat, Baal's sister and wife, demands that Death release her brother, but he refuses. She then takes action into her own hands:

She seized El's son Death:
with a sword she split him;
with fire she burned him;
with a hand mill she ground him;
in the fields she sowed him.
"May the birds not eat his remains,
may the fowl not consume his parts:
let flesh cry out to flesh!" (Coogan: 112).

By her defeat of Death, Anat releases Baal from his grip. Baal's resurrection is foreseen by El in a vision of a fruitful earth:

The heavens rained down oil,
the wadis ran with honey (Coogan: 113).

Baal returns to his throne to exercise his dominion over the microcosm. After seven years, Death seeks justice from Baal for the shame he suffered at the hands of Anat. Unwilling to supply Death with other victims, Baal engages Death in combat. Neither, however, is able to overcome the other. Finally, the threat of El's intervention forces Death to yield to Baal.

Both episodes of the *Baal* myth envelope the same basic structure: The authority of El/Baal over the world is challenged by Sea/Death, both being symbols of chaos; Baal/Anat defeats Sea/Death; and El/Baal is restored to his position (Petersen and Woodward: 239-43). The similarities between the episodes relate to one another as a macrocosm does to a microcosm, further emphasizing the structure and order of the world. The differences between the episodes concern the intention of each. The first episode focuses on the rise of Baal as king over the microcosm. Closely connected with this episode is another in which Baal builds his temple as a sign of his rule over the microcosm. The second episode, however, focuses on the precariousness of life on earth. Life is frequently vanquished by death. Nevertheless, Anat's victory over Death and Baal's resurrection affirms the microcosm's capacity for sustaining life (Clifford, 1984a: 193-95).

An Ancient Near Eastern Model of Creation

From these ancient Near Eastern creation myths, and in anticipation of our discussion of the creation myths and metaphors in the Bible (Chapter Three), a culturally shared model of creation in which these metaphors were rooted can be reconstructed. The basis of this model is a cultural understanding of the human body and its replication onto the earth. In other words, the human body is related analogically to the earth, as a microcosm is related to a macrocosm. The earth is viewed as a large model of the human body, or conversely, the human body is viewed as a small model of the earth. This model is illustrated in figure 6.

	Human Body Microcosm	Earth Macrocosm	
		Metaphorical	Personification
Internal Perspective	Semen Conception Gestation Birth	Seed as Semen Plowing as Conception Sprouting as Birth	Semen as Moisture Gestation as Shaping of Clay Birth as Pinched off Clay
External Perspective	Order Boundaries Differentiation	Order Boundaries Differentiation	Threat to Order Boundaries and Differentiation

Figure 6. An Ancient Near Eastern Creation Model

The human body, according to this model, is viewed from two related perspectives, each accentuating a distinctive feature of the body. From an external perspective, the body is a highly ordered and symmetrical entity with fixed boundaries that differentiate it from other entities. In addition, the body has a number of orifices that can be penetrated and discharge internal bodily fluids.⁴ These orifices make the body vulnerable to external attack (i.e., from unclean food, or rape), and so must be protected. From an internal perspective, the body is animated by the thoughts of the heart and is able, through the intentional act of procreation, to reproduce. The male body is able to inseminate the female body that serves as a womb in which a new human is conceived and develops. Birth then becomes the means of introducing further differentiation by establishing boundaries between the female body and the fetus that is born from it.

These characteristics of the human body are analogically related to similar features of the earth. On the one hand, the same kinds of order, differentiation, and boundaries are discovered on the earth. The diverse geography of the land differentiates one region from another and establishes boundaries. Rivers and springs issue from the orifices of the earth. The seasonal cycle and the regular courses of the sun, moon, and stars further delimit the basic order and structure of the world. On the other hand, the earth functions like a womb in that it produces vegetation as seeds, which are planted in the ground, germinate.⁵ This analogical relationship between the human body and the earth also led to the personification of the earth. The earth and the elements within it are presented as active agents in the

⁴ This aspect of the creation model is reflected in term of rules of purity (Eilberg-Schwartz: 177-94) and need not concern us here.

⁵ Unlike scientific conceptions of procreation, the people of the ancient Near East, as well many modern societies, embrace a theory of procreation that has been labeled “monogenetic.” A woman is like the earth in providing the soil for life, but the man must plant the seed (semen) that contains the essential substance of the new born child (Delaney: 38-39).

creation. Elements of the earth, usually the waters, are personified as unruly or life-threatening monsters which must be conquered before order and differentiation can be established on the earth. Similarly, the land is personified as a female who is inseminated and gives birth to humans.

As a heuristic model of the ancient Near Eastern cultural understanding of creation, this model is able to account for both the interrelationship and the meaning of the individual creation metaphors. The external perspective of the model is reflected in the metaphors of separation and differentiation. In the Sumerian epic tale of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World*, for example, creation is described with these metaphors: The earth was separated from heaven when An carried off heaven and Enlil carried off earth. Similarly, in the *Creation of the Pickaxe* Enlil, the god of the air, separates an originally united heaven and earth. In both of these myths, the creation metaphors serve to present creation as the process of differentiation through the establishment of boundaries.

The parade example of this type of creation is found in the *Enuma Elish* where the creation of the world consists of splitting and arranging the corpse of Tiamat and controlling the flow of her waters by restricting them within boundaries. But unlike the Sumerian examples, creation in the *Enuma Elish* is set within the context of the conflict myth, and so it links metaphors of conflict with the creation metaphors of separation and differentiation. According to this myth, Marduk must first fight and slay Tiamat, who poses a threat to the great gods, before he can create the world from her corpse. A similar linkage of conflict and creation metaphors is present in the biblical texts. In Psalm 74:12-17 God's creation is described according to the metaphors that stem from the external perspective of the creation model: God divides the sea, cuts open the earth for springs and torrents, establishes the courses of the heavenly luminaries, and fixes the boundaries of the earth. Yet integrated into this description are metaphors of conflict: God breaks the heads of the dragons in the waters, and crushes the heads of Leviathan. In other biblical texts the conflict metaphors are less pronounced. Psalm 104:7 refers simply to the waters fleeing at God's rebuke; Job 38:8-11 credits God with locking up an unruly sea. In Genesis 1, of course, no trace of conflict is present, despite the references to the "deep" (Hebrew *tehom* which is cognate to Babylonian *tiamat*, "sea" and the name of Marduk's nemesis) and the "sea monsters." Like the gods in the Sumerian examples, the biblical God creates by peacefully dividing and fixing the boundaries of an otherwise undifferentiated primordial unity.

Previous biblical scholars have assumed that the creation metaphors of separation and differentiation were rooted in the conflict myth, that the establishment of order was the natural outcome of the divine warrior's victory over chaos. As a result, they have interpreted the diminishing presence of conflict metaphors in the biblical texts to be the result of the process of demythologization. In Genesis 1, the culmination of this process, the sea monsters are no longer symbols of primordial chaos but simply creatures created by God on the fifth day, and the waters that are also symbolic of chaos have no personality and offer no opposition to God (this passage will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five). However, an alternative interpretation is suggested by the model of creation. The metaphors of separation and differentiation are primary. The conflict metaphors result from the personification of the primordial unity that is to be differentiated. From the perspective of the *Enuma Elish*, life was only possible when the primordial waters were controlled and restricted within

boundaries. Tiamat and, to a lesser degree, Apsu are the personification of these waters. The conflict myth is a secondary development, a personification, of these primary creation metaphors of separation and differentiation.⁶

The creation metaphors that reflect the internal dimension of the creation model are by far the more numerous. These are the metaphors of procreation. Therefore, Apsu and Tiamat give birth to four generations of gods, representing the major elements of the world, from the intermingling of their waters. Similarly, in the Heliopolitan cosmogony, the gods representing the creation are born from Atum. Because Atum is a lone god, he procreates by himself through masturbation: Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture) are born from his semen. But these gods give birth to Geb and Nut through conventional means. These gods, the personified earth and sky respectively, then give birth to the remaining elements of creation. In the *Theology of Dunnu* the Plow and a personified Earth begin to create all the elements of the world through procreation, but in this case, the process of conception is described in agricultural terms: the Plow “plows” the Earth.

The internal perspective of the creation model is also reflected in the ancient Near Eastern metaphors that present the creation of humans. Through the personification of the earth, humans are formed from clay and born from the earth like a fetus from a womb. The clay in these metaphors is analogous to the human embryo that must develop before it is born. The *Atrahasis* myth describes the birth process in detail. The clay is fertilized by the gods’ spittle, Enki shapes it during the period of gestation, and finally Nintu-Mami pinches off pieces and delivers humans from the womb of the earth. In the *Creation of the Pickaxe* and the bilingual Assyrian text from Assur, however, humans sprout from the earth like grain. Human semen is like seed that is planted and germinates from the ground. Both of these metaphors, reflecting different aspects of the creation model, are also present in the Bible. There are numerous biblical metaphors describing God planting humans in the ground, and Psalm 139:13–15 compares the human womb, in which God knits together the fetus, to the womb of the earth.

Most biblical references to God creating humans from clay, however, have not been interpreted in relation to either the birth or the agricultural metaphor. God’s role in creating humans is rather compared to the dominant Egyptian tradition in which potter-god Khnum fashions both gods and humans on his potter’s wheel. This comparison is appropriate, but Khnum’s role in the creation of humans is often misunderstood. As several hymns to Khnum make clear, Khnum’s role as potter was thought to be analogous to his role in the birth process. Like a potter shapes a vessel on his wheel, so Khnum forms the fetus in the womb. Moreover, Khnum’s role in the birth process has been clearly illustrated on the wall carvings in the temple of Deir el Bahari. According to these carvings, Khnum is clearly the one who forms and shapes the fetus in the womb. His work and skill as a potter serve as a metaphor for his activity in the birth process. Similarly, the biblical references to God

⁶ Our conclusion does not support Westermann’s conclusion that the motif of divine conflict – the struggle with a dragon or chaos – was originally unconnected to the creation theme (1984: 28-33). Westermann is unable to marshal convincing evidence of a conflict myth that is unrelated to creation. For example, the Egyptian myth of Re’s daily struggle with Apophis is presented in the context of the creation of the world. Re’s defeat of Apophis repeatedly secures the created order and the boundaries between day and night.

forming humans from clay should be interpreted according to this same model. The fashioning of clay represents the abstraction of one aspect of the birth process.

A further abstraction of the birth process is detectable in metaphors of creation by command. In the *Hymn to Ptah*, Ptah is praised as the self-created god who gave birth to all that exists. Yet Ptah's procreation of the world is explicitly linked to the thoughts of his heart. He is the one "who crafted the world in the design of his heart," and the "model who gave birth to all that is, begetter who created what exists." In the later *Memphite Theology*, this principle of creative thought is abstracted from the procreative process of creation. Ptah creates not through sexual intercourse, or masturbation, but by the rule of his heart and tongue, that is, by his efficacious command. Nevertheless, traces of the procreation metaphors are still present, for the thoughts of the heart and the commands of the tongue are actualized by the teeth and lips that "are the semen and the hands of Atum." This abstraction of procreation can also be detected in a Ugaritic myth where, by command alone, El impregnates two handmaidens who then give birth to monsters (De Moor: 177-79; KTU 1.12). Sexual intercourse in the procreative process has simply been abstracted to the desire of the heart that initiates it.

The creation metaphors of divine fiat in Genesis 1 can be interpreted in relation to this process of abstraction. Although these metaphors have been abstracted and applied to non-procreative contexts, vestiges of the procreation metaphor in which they are rooted can still be detected. On the third day God commands, "Let the earth put forth vegetation" (v. 11), and the earth produces vegetation. This scenario is analogous to El's impregnation of the handmaidens; this is an abstraction of God's procreative activity of impregnating the earth with seed. Similarly, on the fifth day God commands, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures" (v. 20), and on the sixth day, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures" (v. 24). Yet in fulfillment of these commands the text states that God "created" the sea monsters and fish (v. 21), and God "made" all the earth creatures (v. 25). These metaphors represent a further abstraction of procreation so that the waters and the earth no longer give birth to their creatures.

The correspondence of the diverse ancient Near Eastern creation metaphors to our heuristic model across cultural lines suggests that these metaphors are derived from a single, yet complex, cultural understanding of creation. Moreover, the creation myths and metaphors that we have examined reflect *either* the internal *or* the external perspective of the model, suggesting the development of two distinct, yet related, creation traditions in the ancient Near East: One tradition placed emphasis on procreation, whereas the other tradition placed emphasis on order and differentiation. The *Enuma Elish* could be considered the exception in that both perspectives of the model are present – the creation of the macrocosm through the procreation of the gods, and the creation of the microcosm through the ordering and differentiation of Tiamat's carcass – but these two types of creation remain distinct in the myth.

This heuristic model does not suggest, however, that the ancient Near Eastern peoples could not conceive of creation differently, only that this model is sufficient to account for the interrelationship and meaning of these extant metaphors. The biblical writers' particular use of these metaphors, then, should be interpreted within the context of this shared cultural

understanding. Only when the culturally shared meaning of the metaphor is accounted for can the biblical writers' own unique use of the metaphor be adequately understood.

In the next chapter, we will use this ancient Near Eastern creation model to interpret the biblical views of creation. This creation model will enable us to understand the diverse biblical creation metaphors and myths by placing them within the cultural context of the ancient Near East. In other words, this model provides the culturally appropriate scenarios for interpreting creation in the Bible. It schematizes the common ancient Near Eastern understanding of reality that formed the cultural basis of the distinct creation myths outlined above. Furthermore, the high correspondence between this heuristic model and the biblical metaphors – demonstrated in the next chapter – suggests that these metaphors are based on a similar culturally shared perception of reality. By presenting the basic understanding of reality that was shared by the biblical writers, this model can serve as a key for understanding the basic structure of the Israelites' worldview.