

# CREATOR & CREATION



## Chapter Three

### Creation in the Bible

#### The Problem with Creation in the Bible

Creation in the Bible is described with metaphors and myths similar in kind to those used in the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Canaanite cultures. God fights the sea-dragon, battles the chaotic waters, separates the heavens from the earth, divides the primeval waters, acts through the spoken word, fashions people out of clay, gives birth to people, delivers humans out of the womb, plants a garden, and causes the earth to produce animal and plant life. Each of these metaphors has its basis in a culturally shared perception of reality that can be elucidated by the creation model reconstructed in the previous chapter. This thesis will be discussed and illustrated in the following sections. At this juncture, however, attention needs to be turned to the character of these metaphors and the significance of these similarities.

Biblical scholars have long noted that the biblical descriptions of creation have numerous similarities with other ancient Near Eastern creation myths. In fact, many scholars would acknowledge the resemblances listed above, but few attribute any significance to these parallels. Scholars have rather chosen to emphasize the uniqueness of the Bible's views of creation, focusing on how it differs from other ancient Near Eastern literature. Until recently, the predominant view of biblical scholars has been that the Israelites appropriated the alien creation myths and metaphors of their Near Eastern neighbors, but in so doing, they transformed this material in a profound way.

The close similarities between the biblical and other ancient Near Eastern creation myths were first analyzed by Hermann Gunkel. He argued that the numerous biblical passages that allude to God's defeat of the sea-dragon or separation of the waters, especially Genesis 1, have their origin in the *Chaoskampf* – best exemplified by Marduk's battle and victory over Tiamat in the *Enuma Elish*. This myth was borrowed by the Israelites and transferred to Yahweh, the God of Israel, but in the process this conflict was stripped of most of its mythological and polytheistic character. According to Gunkel, early adaptations of the conflict myth have survived in a number of poetic fragments in the Bible (Pss 74:13–14; 89:9–10; Isa 51:9–10). These fragments, attesting to an early poetic recension, still exhibit some mythological flavor, but by the time of the myth's final reworking in Genesis 1, Gunkel maintained that it had been completely “Judaicized.”

Because Gunkel intended to demonstrate Israel's dependency on Babylonian mythology for its understanding of creation, he placed emphasis on the similarities between the biblical creation myths and the *Enuma Elish*. Although Gunkel could not ignore the Bible's differences with the *Enuma Elish*, and so characterized Genesis 1 as a more profound presentation of creation, he valued the Bible's Babylonian heritage. As he himself pointed out, "one does no honor to his parents by thinking poorly of his ancestors" (47). The scholars that have followed Gunkel, however, have not shared his respect for the ancient Near Eastern creation myths. Building on Gunkel's own observations, they have typically argued that the biblical creation myths and metaphors were foreign imports that had to be sanitized so that they could be acceptably employed in the presentation of the biblical faith. In contrast to Gunkel, these scholars have tended to emphasize the differences between the biblical and other ancient Near Eastern creation myths in order to demonstrate the superiority of the biblical faith.

For example, Walther Eichrodt devoted a chapter in his influential *Theology of the Old Testament* to "Cosmology and Creation" in which he argued extensively for the distinctive character of the Israelite belief in creation (1967: 93–117). According to Eichrodt, the central distinction between the Israelite view of creation and the Babylonian view of creation, as preserved in the *Enuma Elish*, concerns the relationship of the deity to nature:

Whereas Israel's covenant God makes himself known in personal and moral action, and can therefore be experienced as spiritual personality independent of Nature, the Babylonian conception of God remains bogged down in naturalism. The Babylonian epic of the origin of the universe is an explicit Nature myth, in which natural forces are personified and made to play an active part. Hence the gods are not eternal, but emerge like everything else from the chaotic primordial matter. By the same token there is also no possibility of overcoming polytheism and its religious fragmentation; the diversity of Nature has obscured the uniqueness of the Creator. Hence the creating deity must remain a Demiurge, with quasi-human features, fashioning whatever material is available (1967: 116).

In contrast to the Babylonian cosmology, Eichrodt emphasized that the Bible states that God is completely autonomous from the natural world; the creation is rather dependent upon God and so is subject to the will of the creator. Because the God of the Bible acts independently on the creation, Eichrodt maintained that the creation is "from the very first integrated into a spiritual process in which each individual event acquires its value from the overall meaning of the whole; that is to say, into history" (1967: 100–1). In other words, the *Enuma Elish* simply describes in dramatic fashion the order and cycles of the natural world, whereas the biblical creation accounts (Eichrodt denied that they were myths!) present God's first actions in the historical drama of salvation.

The famous Israeli scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann similarly argued for a distinction between the biblical and non-biblical creation myths by focusing on the character of the gods of each. According to him, the ancient Near Eastern gods were the personal embodiments of the seminal forces of nature – gods of the sky, of the sun, of the earth, of the river, of the sea, of the storm, of the vegetation. The gods had their origin in the

primordial matter of the cosmos and emerged from this matter through procreation. Thus, the gods were born from the same substance that formed the natural world, eliminating all boundaries between them and their creation (21–40). The God proclaimed by the Bible, however, is vastly different.

The basic idea of Israelite religion is that God is supreme over all. There is no realm above or beside him to limit his absolute sovereignty. He is utterly distinct from, and other than, the world; he is subject to no laws, no compulsions, or powers that transcend him. He is, in short, non-mythological (60).

The implication of Kaufmann's assessment, of course, is that the biblical creation accounts are different in their essential character from the ancient Near Eastern creation myths.

The most prominent and prolific interpreter of creation in the Bible from the previous generation was Bernhard Anderson. Like the scholars who preceded him, Anderson was concerned to describe the uniqueness of the Israelite view of creation. In his influential book entitled *Creation Versus Chaos*, popular with both scholarly and general audiences, he argued that the uniqueness of creation in the Bible can be attributed to Israel's exclusive emphasis on God's activity in human history. Unlike the creation myths of the ancient Near East, and the *Enuma Elish* in particular, that served to express the human condition within the recurrent cycles of nature, creation in the biblical tradition was historicized.

Anderson argued that the ancient Near Eastern cultures interpreted the rhythms of nature according to a cosmic drama that was structured on the pattern: creation, lapse, restoration. In the beginning the creator-god defeated the powers of chaos and established order. But the powers of chaos were not eliminated; they were merely confined within certain boundaries. Consequently, these chaotic powers were able eventually to break through the boundaries and to reassert their dominance over the creation. Order reverted to confusion. The creator-god continually had to do battle with chaos, renewing creation with each victory. In nature this drama was manifest in the changing of the seasons, from the fertility of the agricultural season to the sterility of the hot, dry summer. In the religious practices of the people, this drama was reenacted each year at the New Year festival by reciting the creation myth. Each year Marduk defeated Tiamat again in order to reestablish the created order. This New Year festival, according to Anderson, was the means by which the ancients remained in harmony with the rhythms of nature. "Each year man, along with the cosmos, falls away from reality and must be purified and reborn. But at the turn of the New Year the victory over chaos is won again and the world is renewed" (1987: 29). With the securing of nature at the New Year, human life and peace were also secured.

The Israelites, in contrast, recited a historical drama. According to Anderson, Israel did not experience the reality of God in the natural cycles but in historical events. "Israel came to know the reality of God in the realm of the profane, the secular, the historical. And the consequence of this 'knowledge of God' . . . was that the realm of nature, which ancient people regarded as sacred, was desacralized, or emptied of divinity" (1987: 31). Rather than celebrate the establishment of the natural order, the Israelites chose to remember and celebrate events which happened at a definite place and time. Although they too were dependent upon the rhythms of nature for survival, they "broke with paganism, and its

mythical view of reality, at the crucial point: nature is not the realm of the divine. The God Israel worships is the Lord of nature, but he is not the soul of nature” (1987: 32). Thus Anderson claimed that Israel’s idea of creation was transformed from a mythical event to a historical event, and the creation stories themselves attest to this. They are inseparably bound to the historical narratives which follow them. Set in the form of historical accounts, their primary purpose is to describe the beginning of a historical process that God is directing toward its fulfillment.

From this brief, representative survey it should be clear that previous scholarship attributed little significance to the Bible’s creation myths and metaphors. Although these metaphors and myths appear to resemble their Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Canaanite counterparts, numerous scholars have argued that these similarities are superficial because the Israelites demythologized them, stripping them of much of their cosmogonic meaning, and employed them in historical contexts. One scholar even argued that these metaphors do not refer to creation in any meaningful sense. They were merely convenient figures of speech, borrowed from neighboring cultures, that Israel used to illustrate Yahweh’s saving activity, but Israel never felt any religious reality behind them (McCarthy, 1967). More recent scholarship, however, has rejected these conclusions by challenging their basic assumptions.

The common devaluation of the Bible’s creation metaphors and myths has been based on two assumptions: First, in contrast to the nature gods of the other ancient Near Eastern cultures, the God of Israel acts in history; and second, the biblical literature has a historical rather than a mythological character. But these assumptions cannot be sustained by a close examination of the evidence. In other words, one cannot account for the differences between the Israelite and neighboring cultures according to the distinction between history and nature.

Although many of the gods of the ancient Near Eastern cultures were associated with some phenomenon of the natural world,<sup>1</sup> it is doubtful that all were identified completely with the natural phenomenon. In reference to the Mesopotamian cultures, Thorkild Jacobsen insisted that the gods were not simply the personification of nature:

It is not correct to say that each phenomenon was a person; we must say that there was a will and a personality in each phenomenon – in it and yet somehow behind it, for the single concrete phenomenon did not completely

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<sup>1</sup> Two gods from the Canaanite religion of Ugarit, the chief god El and the divine craftsman Kothar-wa-Hasis, cannot be equated with any element of the natural world. Although El is frequently called “Bull,” there is no evidence to suggest that he was ever equated with the bull. Rather, this title was used metaphorically to describe the nobility and virility of El. He is the creator and father of gods and humans; he is wise, just, and compassionate. The attributes and functions of both El and Kothar-wa-Hasis are derived from human society, not from the phenomena of nature (Hillers, 1985: 262-63). They could be characterized more accurately as gods of history rather than as gods of nature. Moreover, in the Ugaritic myths El acts in history, in human affairs, in much the same way as Yahweh acts in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis. Like Yahweh, El promises the childless protagonist an offspring, appears in dreams, guides him in his acquisition of a wife, and heals him of sickness (Parker; Cross, 1973: 177-83).

circumscribe and exhaust the will and personality associated with it (1946: 131).<sup>2</sup>

The object or phenomenon of nature was perceived to be a manifestation of the divine presence, a theophany, but the deity itself remained transcendent and independent of its representation (Jacobsen, 1970: 320–21).

Some of the ancient Near Eastern gods were embodiments of the elements of nature, but many like the God of Israel transcended the natural world. It is simply incorrect to assume that the biblical creation myths and metaphors must be different from their ancient Near Eastern counterparts because the Bible's creator-god remains distinct from the creation. From this perspective, Yahweh is no different from El, Baal, Marduk, Enki, Nintur, Atum, Ptah, or Khnum. Moreover, recent studies have demonstrated that Israel's Near Eastern neighbors also believed that their gods acted in human history (Albrektson; Gnuse, 1989). It cannot be argued that the God of Israel alone acts in human history, or that Israel's view of creation is unique because Yahweh does act in history. The assumption that the Bible presents a god of history in contrast to the nature gods of Israel's neighbors is unsubstantiated.

The character of the biblical literature, whether it is mythological or historical, is largely an issue of definition and perspective. Some scholars have defined myth in such a way that its presence in the Bible is precluded. This type of definition, however, is unhelpful for it obscures the similarities that the Bible shares with other literature. Similarly, the distinction between myth and history, as these terms have been employed by biblical scholars, tends to distort the character of each. Myth and history are often interrelated in that myth can be set in historical guise and history can have a mythic dimension (Roberts). Myth and history do not prove to be valid criteria for distinguishing between the biblical and non-biblical literature of the ancient Near East.

### Interpreting Creation in the Bible

In light of the discussion in the previous section, how should we interpret creation in the Bible? First, we cannot ignore or minimize the similarities between the biblical creation myths and metaphors and their Near Eastern counterparts. The cross-cultural model of creation that we reconstructed in the previous chapter suggests a significant degree of cultural continuity among the various ancient Near Eastern cultures. Each culture's views of creation were based on the same basic conception of reality. Moreover, the correspondence

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<sup>2</sup> This distinction between the deity and its natural representation is further clarified by Jacobsen's discussion of the relationship between the god and its cult statue (1987a). To the ancients the god and its cult statue, or natural representation, were two different and distinct things. While the deity was one, its representations were many. This distinction is even represented in the text of which uses one expression to refer to the sun-god Shamash and another to refer to the god's natural representation, the sun. Although elsewhere in the literature a god and his representation appear to be equated, this should be explained in terms of transubstantiation. Through ritual "the statue mystically becomes what it represents, the god, without, however, in any way limiting the god, who remains transcendent" (1987a: 22). The cult statue, or its natural representation, was considered to be a theophany of the deity.

of the Bible's creation metaphors to this creation model suggests that there was a cultural continuity between Israel and its neighbors.

The traditional scholarly explanation for the similarities between Israel's and its neighbors' creation metaphors has been that Israel borrowed from or was influenced by the alien ideas of its neighbors. However, this explanation in itself is inadequate, for it does not elucidate the mechanism by which the Israelites borrowed or were influenced. Recent studies on the origin of the Israelites, on the other hand, emphasize the cultural affinities they shared with the inhabitants of the eastern Mediterranean, indicating that they were probably indigenous to the region themselves, making such borrowing or influence unnecessary (see the survey by Gnuse [1991] and the synthesis by Coote). An alternative explanation for these similarities is offered by the creation model. This common creation model suggests that the Israelites shared a similar conception of reality, rooted in basic experiences of the human body and the earth, as their ancient Near Eastern neighbors. Indeed, the Israelites were part of the larger ancient Near Eastern cultural milieu in that they shared similar understandings of the world with their neighbors. The differences between the Bible and other Near Eastern literature can only be understood from within the context of their similarities. These differences reflect the cultural particularities of each people, not extensively different and unrelated cultures.

Second, we must take seriously the metaphorical character of the biblical references to creation. They should not simply be dismissed as convenient figures of speech or hollow tropes, as if they were historicized "useful fictions." They are not mere illustrations. As metaphors, they were used to convey significant analogies, and we must interpret them as such in order to understand their meanings.

As outlined in the Introduction, von Rad observed that Israel's belief in creation was expressed as an independent doctrine in the Bible only in a few late wisdom texts that exhibit Egyptian influence (1984a). His observation that Israel's belief in creation rarely occurs as an independent doctrine remains valid, though many of his conclusions derived from this observation – namely, that Israel's belief in creation was a late development, subordinate to the doctrine of salvation – can no longer be accepted.<sup>3</sup> But this observation is not surprising; there were few creation myths in the ancient Near East in which the creation of the world was considered for its own sake. Most creation myths served political, cultic, or etiological purposes; they were used to justify the exaltation of a certain deity or temple, or to explain the present state of affairs. The *Enuma Elish*, for example, was primarily concerned with the elevation of Babylon and its cult of Marduk over the older Mesopotamian cities and cults. Similarly, most of the Egyptian creation myths were employed for some cultic or ritual function. The Israelites also repeatedly used creation

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<sup>3</sup> Delbert Hillers refuted von Rad's contention that the biblical doctrine of creation has Egyptian antecedents (1978). W. F. Albright and his students have demonstrated that the name of Israel's God, Yahweh, itself refers to the creation. Grammatically, the name is a causative verb that literally means "he who brings into existence," or "he who creates" (1978: 168-72; Cross, 1973: 60-75). It is no longer possible to claim with von Rad that the doctrine of creation was a late development in the religion of Israel (Anderson, 1987: 51-52). Von Rad's thesis that Israel's belief in creation was subordinate to its belief in salvation has also been challenged (Harner; Ludwig), and will be dealt with further in this chapter.

metaphors in extraneous (i.e., non-creation) contexts, but in so doing, they did not devalue creation or strip the metaphors of their metaphorical character. Rather, they used creation metaphors to ascribe cosmological significance to the new contexts – to place the extraneous material within the context of God’s activity in creation. The lack of an *independent* doctrine of creation in the Bible has no bearing on the *significance* that the Israelites placed on creation.

Rather than presenting creation for its own sake,<sup>4</sup> the biblical authors regularly employed creation metaphors in order to put their subject matter within the context of God’s activity in creation. The use of these metaphors indicates that there is some analogy between creation and the subject matter to which the metaphors relate. The subject of most of the passages containing creation metaphors is either the human condition – the status of humankind in relation to God – or God’s activity in the redemption of Israel. By using creation metaphors to express these subjects, the biblical authors have presented the human condition and redemption *in terms of* God’s activity in creation. In other words, humankind’s status in relation to God and God’s activity in redemption are analogous to his relationship to and activity in creation. Creation in the Bible therefore serves as a paradigm or model of the human condition and of redemption.

### Creation as the Paradigm of the Human Condition

Like their Near Eastern counterparts, the Bible’s creation metaphors also tend to separate out into two distinct traditions: One tradition follows the internal perspective of the creation model and uses metaphors connected to birth and plant growth, whereas the other tradition follows the external perspective and uses metaphors related to order and differentiation. Whereas God’s redemption of Israel is expressed with metaphors reflective of both the internal and the external perspective of the model, the human condition is expressed only by metaphors reflective of the internal perspective. The Bible uses metaphors connected with human birth and plant growth to describe the status of humans in relation to God: Humans are utterly dependent upon the creator who brings both infants from the womb and plants from the earth.

#### *Metaphors of the Birth Process*

Human dependency upon God is illustrated in several narrative tales that describe God’s power over the womb. God closes the womb of Rachel (Gen 30:2), but opens the womb of Leah (Gen 29:31–35). In due time, God opens Rachel’s womb as well (Gen 30:22). Similarly, God had closed the womb of Hannah, but opens her womb after hearing her petition (1 Sam 1). God closes the wombs of the women in the house of Abimelech because Abimelech had taken Sarah as a wife (Gen 20:18). God causes both Sarah and Rebekah to conceive after having been barren (Gen 21:2; 25:21). Although none of these passages describe creation itself, they all employ the creation metaphor of God working in the womb – by opening or closing the womb – in order to emphasize the human condition. All of these tales illustrate that God, the creator, is in control of human reproduction, and

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<sup>4</sup> Those passages which might be considered an exception – Psalms 8; 19:1-6; 33:6-9; 104; 136:4-9 – refer to the creation in order to praise God. God’s acts of creation demonstrate God’s majesty and supremacy over the earth.

thus humans are dependent upon God for their very being. Humans are only creatures whom the creator has brought into existence.

In addition to controlling the opening of the womb, numerous biblical passages describe God actively working in the womb by forming the fetus. The call of Jeremiah attests to this:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

(Jeremiah 1:5)

Not only Jeremiah's existence, but also his profession is attributed to God's activity in the womb. By juxtaposing Jeremiah's call to prophesy with God's activity in the womb, the text emphasizes Jeremiah's dependency on God. Just as Jeremiah had no role in his birth, so also he had no choice in being a prophet. Jeremiah's life and destiny are in God's control. As a result, when Jeremiah is tormented by the burden of his profession, he curses the day of his birth: It would have been better to have been killed in the womb so that his mother would have been his grave than to come forth from the womb to spend his days in shame (Jer 20:13–18). Similarly, the anonymous prophet of the exile known as Second Isaiah<sup>5</sup> likens the servant to one who was destined while still a fetus in the womb:

<sup>1</sup>The LORD called me before I was born,  
while I was in my mother's womb he named me. . .  
<sup>5</sup>And now the LORD says,  
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,  
to bring Jacob back to him,  
and that Israel might be gathered to him. . .

(Isaiah 49:1, 5)

Like Jeremiah, the servant's mission has been directed by God from birth, and God's claim on the servant is that God created the servant by forming him in the womb.

One of the Bible's most profound statements on the human condition is in the dialogues of the book of Job. In this context, Job questions why God has caused his sufferings, but at the same time, Job recognizes his absolute dependency on God:

<sup>8</sup>Your hand fashioned and made me;  
and now you turn and destroy me.  
<sup>9</sup>Remember that you fashioned me like clay;  
and will you turn me to dust again?  
<sup>10</sup>Did you not pour me out like milk  
and curdle me like cheese?

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<sup>5</sup> Second Isaiah, or Deutero-Isaiah, is the name given to the anonymous prophet that scholars believe is responsible for writing Isaiah 40-55. Unlike Isaiah of Jerusalem whose oracles are set in Jerusalem and reflect the political circumstances of the eighth century, Second Isaiah's oracles are set in Babylon and reflect the political circumstances of the sixth century.

<sup>11</sup>You clothed me with skin and flesh,  
and knit me together with bones and sinews.

(Job 10:8–11)

Job confesses that he is the handiwork of God. Note that God's activity in the womb is compared to the work of a potter. This metaphor is based on the analogous relationship between the human body and the earth that is illustrated in the creation model. The earth, when it is personified, serves as a womb in which the fetus gestates. The task of a potter in shaping and fashioning clay is thus analogous to the growth and development of the fetus within the womb. This passage from Job, however, does not describe God's creation of humankind, but rather God's activity in the birth of the single human Job. Unlike the creation of humans in *Atrahasis* or *Enki and Ninmah*, Job was not born out of the earth but from a human womb. Nevertheless, this creation metaphor is employed in order to give cosmological significance to Job's human condition. By highlighting how God shaped Job in the womb from the material of the earth, this creation metaphor further emphasizes the fragile nature of human existence and human dependency on God.

Humans are like a clay vessel fashioned by a potter. If the potter chooses, the vessel can be smashed into the dust from which it came. Job concludes, then, that he has no recourse against God. How can the vessel challenge its maker? Such human impotence finally leads Job to question the value of life:

<sup>18</sup>Why did you bring me forth from the womb?  
Would that I had died before any eye had seen me,  
<sup>19</sup>and were as though I had not been,  
carried from the womb to the grave.

(Job 10:18–19)

If God can act indiscriminately, then surely human life is worthless, for humans as the creation of God are subject to the creator's every whim.

At the end of the book of Job (chaps. 38–42), Yahweh addresses Job out of a whirlwind. But God does not defend his actions with regard to Job, nor does God answer Job's challenge concerning why he suffers. Rather, God questions Job on the matters of creation. Job had presumed to understand the nature of the created order. He had presumed that God's actions were unjustified, that God placed no purpose in Job's sufferings. But Job as part of the creation is incapable of understanding the purposes of the creator. With every question about the creation Job finds himself unable to respond until at last he confesses:

<sup>2</sup>I know that you can do all things,  
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. . .  
<sup>3</sup>Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me which I did not know.

(Job 42:2–3)

Not only are the human creatures unable to challenge the creator, the speeches of Yahweh further claim that humans are also incapable of comprehending God's purposes for creation.

In contrast to human ignorance of God's ways, God is intimately familiar with humans. The psalmist proclaims:

<sup>2</sup>You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.  
<sup>3</sup>You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.

(Psalm 139:2–3)

God knows the depths of human thought and the intent of human actions. Moreover, the psalmist claims that humans remain continually under God's watchful presence; they are unable to escape from God. What accounts for God's encompassing knowledge and presence? God is the creator! Because God created humans, nothing they think or do is beyond God's grasp.

<sup>13</sup>For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
<sup>14</sup>I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.  
<sup>15</sup>My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

(Psalm 139:13–15)

God is intimately familiar with humans because God formed them in their mothers' wombs. The creation metaphor of God working in the womb serves to root this feature of the human condition in the creation itself. The cosmological significance of the human condition is further emphasized by the connection between the mother's womb and the depths of the earth. Through this analogy – reflecting the microcosm/macrocosm relationship between the human body and the earth – the psalmist implies that God's activity in the human womb is a replication of God's activity in creating humans from the womb of the earth.

Humans, being what they are, try to escape their human condition by throwing off their dependency on God. The prophets of Israel continually condemn the people for following their own ways rather than the ways of God. One particular oracle of judgment that is important for our purposes again connects the human condition with God's activity in creation:

<sup>15</sup>Ha! You who hide a plan too deep for the LORD,  
whose deeds are in the dark,  
and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"  
<sup>16</sup>You turn things upside down!  
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay?  
Shall the thing made say of its maker,  
"He did not make me";

or the thing formed say of the one who formed it,  
“He has no understanding”?

(Isaiah 29:15–16)

The prophet Isaiah mocks human attempts to act autonomously, to live in opposition to God’s desires. Such behavior is compared to the absurdity of confusing the creator with the creation. Because God has created humans, they are dependent upon him.

The metaphor of a potter fashioning clay is also taken up by the prophet Jeremiah in order to condemn the people’s rebellion against their creator, but in this passage the metaphor has been fully abstracted from its original creation context.

<sup>3</sup>I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel.  
<sup>4</sup>The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. <sup>5</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>6</sup>Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as the potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. . . <sup>11</sup>Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

(Jeremiah 18:3–6, 11)

Like a potter who shapes a vessel in any way that seems desirable, Yahweh can act however he chooses on the world scene. Implicit in this metaphor is the relationship between the creator and its creation. The people of Israel, and humans in general, are merely the creation of God, and thus are dependent upon the creator.

Another oracle, addressed to the people of Judah who were exiled in Babylon, elucidates the analogous relationship between the work of a potter, the birth process, and God’s activity in creation:

<sup>9</sup>Woe to you who strive with your Maker,  
earthen vessels with the potter!  
Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, “What are you making”?  
or “Your work has no handles”?  
<sup>10</sup>Woe to anyone who says to a father, “What are you begetting?”  
or to a woman, “With what are you in labor?”  
<sup>11</sup>Thus says the LORD,  
the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker:  
Will you question me about my children,  
or command me concerning the work of my hands?  
<sup>12</sup>I made the earth,  
and created humankind upon it;  
it was my hands that stretched out the heavens,  
and I commanded all their host.

(Isaiah 45:9–12)

Second Isaiah had proclaimed that God was about to save the people in exile by the hand of Cyrus, king of the Persian empire (Isa 45:1–7).<sup>5</sup> But the people evidently did not accept this message. Perhaps they doubted God’s power to effect change in history; perhaps they doubted God’s choice of Cyrus to inaugurate the change. In any case, the people deny God the ability to act in the creation. Therefore, the prophet rebukes the people. Using explicit parental metaphors, Second Isaiah proclaims that Yahweh is the creator, humans are merely the creation. How dare they call God’s power into question! As the creator, God can shape human affairs and history according to God’s own purposes. In fact, God’s control over creation will be demonstrated by Cyrus’s liberation of the exiles for no other purpose than God’s desire (Isa 45:13).

All of the previous examples use creation metaphors to describe God working in the womb. Other biblical metaphors following the internal perspective of the creation model present God as both a midwife and mother. In Psalm 22, for example, the psalmist refers to God as a midwife. This Psalm is an individual lament in which the psalmist bemoans his plight. He is surrounded and tormented by enemies, and feels abandoned by God: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1). But rather than reject God, the psalmist recognizes his dependency upon God, and thus employs the metaphor of a midwife in order to recall God’s prior protection and so plead for God’s present help:

<sup>9</sup>Yet it was you who took me from the womb;  
    you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.  
<sup>10</sup>On you I was cast from my birth,  
    and since my mother bore me, you have been my God.  
<sup>11</sup>Do not be far from me,  
    for trouble is near  
    and there is no one to help.

(Psalm 22:9–11)

God’s activity in creation is comparable to Nintu-Mami’s role in the *Atrahasis* myth. God serves as a midwife to deliver humans from the womb of the earth. In this psalm, however, this creation metaphor is put in the context of the psalmist’s own birth in order to root his vulnerable plight in the human condition. Just as a newborn is dependent upon a midwife to bring it from the womb so that it might live, so also the psalmist is dependent upon God for deliverance.

Psalm 22 also employs a maternal metaphor for God. Verse 9 describes how the psalmist was taken from the womb by God and placed on his mother’s breasts. But in verse 10 it is on God that the psalmist is placed. The poetry implies that God is the mother from whose womb the psalmist was born (Trible, 1978: 60–61). This passage implies that the psalmist is also dependent upon God like a child on its mother.

Elsewhere, God is explicitly described as the mother who gave birth to the people of Israel. In Deuteronomy 32 the history of Israel is reviewed, both God’s actions on behalf of Israel and Israel’s repeated rejection of God. This review culminates in an indictment in which Israel’s apostasy is compared to a child who forgets its mother:

You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you;

you forgot the God who gave you birth.

(Deuteronomy 32:18)

In a strikingly different context, Moses rebukes God for neglecting to care for the people of Israel as a mother should care for her child:

<sup>11</sup>Moses said to the LORD, “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? <sup>12</sup>Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?”

(Numbers 11:11–12)

In both of these passages, the relationship between God and the people of Israel is compared to a mother and her child. This dependent relationship requires certain responsibilities from both sides. Israel, the creation of God, should be faithful to God just as a child is naturally drawn to its mother. Conversely, God as the creator and mother of Israel has the responsibility of providing for Israel’s basic needs. The creator has an obligation toward the creation.

God’s care for the creation is the flip side of the human condition. Because humans are the creation of God, they are ultimately dependent upon God for their existence, and so God must nourish, comfort, and protect them. In this tradition, Second Isaiah compares God’s love and care for his people to a mother’s care for the child of her womb. The people of Judah had been exiled to Babylon, and as a result, they questioned God’s care for them. Had God abandoned them? To these people the anonymous prophet offers a message of hope:

Can a woman forget her nursing child  
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?  
Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.

(Isaiah 49:15)

Because God had given birth to Israel, God could not abandon them. Despite the present circumstances, God will show compassion on the people. Note that Second Isaiah acknowledges the imperfection of this creation metaphor. Human mothers might in fact abandon their children, but God’s compassion for his offspring far surpasses the compassion of human mothers. God will never abandon his people.

Similarly, God is described not only as the one who bore the people of Israel from the womb, but also the one who carries them throughout their life:

<sup>3</sup>Listen to me, O house of Jacob,  
all the remnant of the house of Israel,  
who have been borne by me from your birth,  
carried from the womb;  
<sup>4</sup>even to you old age I am he,

even when you turn gray I will carry you.  
I have made, and I will bear;  
I will carry and will save.

(Isaiah 46:3–4)

As the creator, God is responsible for the creation, and so carries his people like a mother carries her child. But unlike a mother, God continues to carry his people even into old age.

### *Agricultural Metaphors*

The birth of an infant from its mother's womb is analogous to the sprouting of vegetation from the earth. According to the creation model, these two processes have a microcosm/macrocosm relationship, demonstrated by the several ancient Near Eastern references to humans sprouting from the earth or being fashioned from clay. This relationship also occurs in the Bible. Psalm 139, for example, compares the mother's womb with the depths of the earth. The frequent references to God fashioning humans from clay stem from the same basic analogy between the earth and the womb. This metaphorical relationship between humans and plants is also used to emphasize the final product of growth rather than the initial germination or the process of growth. Humans are thus compared with grass, various sorts of trees, and vines (Frymer-Kensky, 1987b).

In the Bible grass serves as a dominant metaphor for expressing the fragility and impermanence of the human condition. Just as grass quickly withers and is easily destroyed, so humans are powerless in the presence of God.

<sup>5</sup>You sweep them away; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning;  
<sup>6</sup>in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.

(Psalm 90:5–6)

Humans are impermanent like grass; they are here today but gone tomorrow.

<sup>15</sup>As for mortals, their days are like grass;  
they flourish like a flower of the field;  
<sup>16</sup>for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
and its place knows it no more.

(Psalm 103:15–16)

Moreover, grass serves as an appropriate metaphor to contrast the impermanence of humankind with the permanence of God:

<sup>6</sup>All people are grass  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.  
<sup>7</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.  
<sup>8</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades;

but the word of our God will stand forever.

(Isaiah 40:6–8)

In contrast to grass, trees may be used as metaphors to describe whether or not people are faithful to their creator. Those who avoid sin and delight in the law of God are compared to a healthy, fruitful tree:

They are like trees  
planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in its season,  
and their leaves do not wither.

(Psalm 1:3)

Similarly, those who trust in God are blessed:

They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.  
It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

(Jeremiah 17:8)

However, those who do not trust in God, those who have rejected the ways of God and have followed their own desire, are cursed.

They shall be like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see when relief comes.  
They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land.

(Jeremiah 17:6)

Each of these metaphors serves as a paradigm of the human condition, illustrating human dependency upon God. Humans are like trees that are dependent upon God who provides water and nutrients for growth. If humans follow the ways of God, they will be luxuriant and fruitful, resilient even to drought. But if humans reject God, they also reject their creator. Thus God will withhold from them the basic necessities of life. They will be like a shrub in the desert without water, bearing little foliage.

As the creator, God plants humans in the ground and nurtures their growth. But if the human-plant does not produce or is displeasing to God, the creator has the prerogative to uproot the plant. This relationship between the plant and the one who plants it thus became a fitting metaphor to describe God's relationship to Israel.

<sup>16</sup>The LORD once called you, "A green olive tree, fair with goodly fruit" but with the roar of a great tempest he will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed. <sup>17</sup>The LORD of hosts, who planted you, has pronounced evil

against you, because of the evil that the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done, provoking me to anger by making offerings to Baal.

(Jeremiah 11:16–17)

God planted Israel and it grew into a lush olive tree. But Israel turned away from God to follow Baal; Israel rejected the creator that planted and nurtured it. As a result, God will destroy Israel by burning the tree to the ground.

A similar use of the plant metaphor is found in the “Song of the Vineyard.” In this song Israel is compared to a vine that God planted with the hope that it would produce sweet grapes for wine:

<sup>1</sup>My beloved had a vineyard  
on a very fertile hill.  
<sup>2</sup>He dug it and cleared it of stones,  
and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,  
and hewed out a wine vat in it;  
he expected it to yield grapes,  
but it yielded wild grapes.

(Isaiah 5:1–2)

God, as the creator who had planted Israel, had done all that could be expected from a good farmer. God started with fertile soil and planted the best vines. God worked the field so that the vines’ roots would be unencumbered. Nevertheless, the vines did not produce good fruit; Israel did not remain faithful to its creator. Consequently, God will destroy his vineyard. If it cannot produce the good fruit for which it was planted, it is good for nothing.

<sup>5</sup>And now I will tell you  
what I will do to my vineyard.  
I will remove its hedge,  
and it shall be devoured;  
I will break down its wall,  
and it shall be trampled down.  
<sup>6</sup>I will make it a waste;  
it shall not be pruned or hoed,  
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;  
I will also command the clouds  
that they rain no rain upon it.

(Isaiah 5:5–6)

Regardless of the extraneous context in which it is employed, each of the creation metaphors discussed above serves as a paradigm of the human condition. The status of humankind in relation to God is presented in terms of God’s relationship to the creation. Because God is the creator and humans are the creation, humans are utterly dependent upon God. Each of the metaphors emphasizes this dependency as the basic characteristic of the human condition: Humans are like vessels in relation to God the potter; humans are

dependent upon God who fashioned them in the womb, or gave birth to them; and humans are like plants that are dependent upon the creator that planted them. Moreover, each of these metaphors is based on a culturally shared perception of reality that can be explained in terms of our reconstructed ancient Near Eastern creation model.

### Creation as the Paradigm of Redemption

The biblical creation myths and metaphors are also employed as paradigms of God's activity in the redemption of Israel.<sup>6</sup> In the same way that God created the world and humankind, God will redeem the people of Israel. Redemption is likened to a new creation. The metaphors used to describe God's redemption of Israel can be explained in terms of both the internal and the external perspective of the creation model. According to the internal perspective, God is a mother or midwife who is about to give birth to a redeemed Israel from the womb. God's redeeming activity is also described in terms of God planting the people in the land. From the external perspective, God is presented as a warrior who battles against the chaos that threatens to undermine the created order. In both cases creation myths and metaphors are employed in order to give cosmological significance to God's redemption of Israel.

#### *Agricultural Metaphors*

Second Isaiah compares Israel's redemption to plants that sprout from the earth:

Shower, O heavens, from above,  
and let the skies rain down righteousness;  
let the earth open, that salvation may spring up,  
and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also;  
I the LORD have created it.

(Isaiah 45:8)

God has created a fertile earth that produces vegetation when the heavens shower upon it. In the same way God's creative activity produces salvation for his people.

Other prophets also use agricultural metaphors to liken God's redemption of Israel to a new creation. Amos compares Israel to a new plant:

I will plant them upon their land  
and they shall never again be plucked up  
out of the land that I have given them,  
says the LORD your God.

(Amos 9:15)

Similarly, Jeremiah compares Israel to a plant: "I will rejoice in doing good to them, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul" (Jer 32:41). In a

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<sup>6</sup> Redemption in ancient Israel was concrete and corporate rather than spiritual and individualistic. It entailed primarily God's deliverance of Israel from the oppression of its enemies and, as we will see in a later chapter, the restoration of Israel's despoiled land.

different course, Jeremiah likens the people of Israel and Judah to a land that God is going to replant:

<sup>27</sup>The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. <sup>28</sup>And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD.

(Jeremiah 31:27–28)

The Babylonians, at God's direction, had devastated the land of Israel. The people and their livestock had been slaughtered. But in coming days God will redeem Israel by bringing new life to it like a newly planted field, sowing it with seed to produce humans and animals.

Because Israel had sinned against God, the prophets had announced the coming of God's judgment. As discussed in the previous section, Israel was compared to a plant or tree that God would burn to the ground (Jer 11:16–17) or devastate (Isa 5:5–6). However, when God redeems his people, they are compared to a well-rooted tree that produces abundant fruit:

In days to come Jacob shall take root,  
Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots,  
and fill the whole world with fruit.

(Isaiah 27:6)

In the context of this oracle God's role in the redemption of Israel is described only in terms of a keeper and guard of a vineyard (Isa 27:2–3). In a similar oracle, God's redeeming activity is compared to elements of the creation itself. God will be the dew and the shade of a tree so that the normally short-lived flowers of the lily (Zohary: 176), likened to Israel, can blossom and flourish:

<sup>5</sup>I will be like the dew to Israel;  
he shall blossom like the lily,  
he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon.  
<sup>6</sup>His shoots shall spread out;  
his beauty shall be like the olive tree,  
and his fragrance like that of Lebanon.  
<sup>7</sup>They shall again live beneath my shadow,  
they shall flourish as a garden;  
they shall blossom like the vine,  
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

(Hosea 14:5–7)

In a salvation oracle by Second Isaiah Israel's redemption is again compared to the sprouting of a plant, but this redemption is placed in the context of God's creation of Israel in the womb:

<sup>2</sup>Thus says the LORD who made you,

who formed you in the womb and will help you:  
Do not fear, O Jacob my servant,  
Jeshurun whom I have chosen.  
<sup>3</sup>For I will pour water on the thirsty land,  
and streams on the dry ground;  
I will pour my spirit upon your descendants,  
and my blessing on your offspring.  
<sup>4</sup>They shall spring up like a green tamarisk,  
like willows by flowing streams.

(Isaiah 44:2–4)

This text further demonstrates the microcosm/macrocosm relationship between the human body and the earth. Moreover, it explicitly demonstrates that creation serves as a paradigm of redemption. God created Israel by forming it in the womb (microcosm). In the same way, God will redeem Israel by causing it to germinate out of the earth (macrocosm). God will cause Israel to sprout up from the womb of the earth by supplying the water necessary for germination.

#### *Metaphors from the Birth Process*

God is described as a midwife who redeems Israel by delivering it from the womb of its mother. In Isaiah 66 Zion is presented as the mother who will swiftly bear a redeemed Israel with Yahweh's aid:

<sup>7</sup>Before she was in labor  
she gave birth;  
before her pain came upon her  
she delivered a son.  
<sup>8</sup>Who has heard such a thing?  
Who has seen such things?  
Shall a land be born in one day?  
Shall a nation be delivered in one moment?  
Yet as soon as Zion was in labor  
she delivered her children.  
<sup>9</sup>Shall I open the womb and not deliver?  
says the LORD;  
shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb?  
says your God.

(Isaiah 66:7–9)

The poet in this text uses maternal metaphors to emphasize the certainty and the suddenness of God's redemption of Israel. Just as no one expects a woman to deliver a baby before she goes into labor, so Israel's redemption will be sudden and unexpected when Zion gives birth to Israel without labor. Israel's redemption is also certain just as it is certain that a pregnant woman will deliver her child – once the birth process begins, it cannot be stopped. In this passage the personified Zion is the mother of Israel. But Zion is also the dwelling place of

God, and serves as a symbol of God's presence. Thus in a following verse, Yahweh takes on the role of Israel's mother:

As a mother comforts her child,  
so I will comfort you;  
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

(Isaiah 66:13)

As in Psalm 22, quoted above, God's role in redemption shifts from the midwife who delivers Israel out of the womb to the comforting mother who raises and nurtures him.

Second Isaiah compares God to a woman in labor in order to emphasize the imminence of God's redemption of Israel:

For a long time I have held my peace,  
I have kept still and restrained myself;  
now I will cry out like a woman in labor,  
I will gasp and pant.

(Isaiah 42:14)

During the people's suffering in exile, God had been silent. But now God's role in Israel's situation is about to change. God's silence is compared to a woman's pregnancy. For nine months a woman waits for the fetus within her to develop, but when it develops and she goes into labor, the child must be born. Just as a woman who is in labor will soon and inevitably deliver the child, so God is about to save his people. God is about to give birth to a redeemed people; the redemption of Israel is likened to a new creation.

### *Metaphors of Conflict*

In the verses surrounding the metaphor of God giving birth in Isaiah 42:14, creation metaphors reflective of the external perspective of the creation model are employed to accentuate further the cosmological significance of God's redemption of Israel:

<sup>13</sup>The LORD goes forth like a soldier  
like a warrior he stirs up his fury;  
he cries out, he shouts aloud,  
he shows himself mighty against his foes. . .  
<sup>15</sup>I will dry up mountains and hills,  
and dry up all their herbage;  
I will turn the rivers into coastlands,  
and dry up the pools.<sup>7</sup>  
<sup>16</sup>I will lead the blind  
by a road they do not know,  
by paths they have not known  
I will guide them.

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<sup>7</sup> The translation of the NRSV has been altered slightly in this verse to follow the interpretation of Clifford (1984b: 95).

I will turn the darkness before them into light,  
the rough places into level ground.

(Isaiah 42:13, 15–16)

This juxtaposition between metaphors from the internal and the external perspectives of the creation model demonstrates that both of these types of metaphors have their unity in the single perception of reality that is elucidated by the creation model. Nevertheless, these metaphors tend to remain distinct as in this passage.

Most of the biblical metaphors that are reflective of the external perspective of the creation model make up what has frequently been termed the conflict myth – the struggle between order and chaos. Although this myth varies in detail in each of its extant expressions, certain themes unambiguously signal its presence. Of primary importance is the battle between the deity and some antagonist. The basis of the external perspective of creation is the establishment of order, differentiation, and boundaries in the world. However, the antagonist – usually a personified element of the world such as the sea, drought, plague, pestilence, darkness, or death itself – poses a threat to the order of the world. This personified monster seeks to dismantle the boundaries of light and darkness, life and death; it disregards the differentiation between the seasons, between land and water, between nature and culture. The deity must defeat this monster in order to create the world. Through the deity's victory, the chaotic element is confined within specified boundaries. The monster's power against humankind and the earth is limited. The world is securely ordered.

In the biblical literature the most complete form of the conflict myth includes a challenge to Yahweh's kingship over creation, Yahweh's march into battle as the divine warrior, the convulsions of the natural world in conjunction with Yahweh's theophany, God's defeat of the enemy, Yahweh's victorious procession to his mountain sanctuary, God's enthronement, a banquet celebration, and finally Yahweh's creation and bestowal of peace on the earth (Cross, 1973: 91–111, 156–63; Hanson: 300–15). But often only a few of these motifs are employed. In the previously quoted passage from Isaiah 42, for example, God goes forth to battle against his enemies, the representatives of chaos (v. 13). The following verse (v. 15) then describes God's securing of the created order by confining chaos within fixed limits. The sea which had overcome the land is forced back into its proper location with the result that the hill country and its vegetation becomes dry again and suitable for habitation. Similarly, pools of water in the land will be dried up so that the land can be used for agriculture or pasturage. The reference to God turning rivers into coastlands fits into this same motif: God will confine the waters to the edge of the coastland.

In verse 16 the theme of the passage shifts from God's activity in creation to God's activity in redemption, but these themes are integrated in such a way that creation again serves as a paradigm of redemption. Specifically, God's redemption of Israel is incorporated into the conflict myth as an aspect of God's cosmogonic activity. God, who defeated his foes and so secured the land from the threatening sea, will lead his people in a victory procession from exile to the newly created land. God's people are blind because they have failed to see and comprehend God's activity in the world. Nevertheless, God will secure their redemption by removing all obstacles that stand in their way. The darkness that

characterizes their blindness will be turned to light. The rough terrain that would hinder their journey will be turned into level ground.

In the Bible's use of the conflict myth God's redemption of Israel is set explicitly within the context of God's activity of creation. In each case, God's redeeming work is described as a new creation, a new battle against chaos. Before we can proceed to illustrate God's cosmogonic activity, an important caveat must be made. In God's battle against chaos, whatever form it might take, God defeats but does not annihilate chaos. God merely confines or restricts chaos to fixed bounds. Chaos remains a latent element within the creation, ready to break its fetters and wreak havoc on the creation (Day: 88; Levenson, 1988: 3–50). Consequently, the Israelites, or their ancient Near Eastern neighbors for that matter, did not perceive the world as a static creation – created once at the beginning of time. The creation is repeatedly being threatened by chaotic forces, and so God, as its creator, must repeatedly fight in new cosmogonic battles. In the history of Israel, the people's enemies were identified with chaos. All of Israel's enemies were considered God's enemies, and so also a threat to God's kingship over creation. It is for this reason that the conflict myth served as an appropriate metaphor for describing God's redemption of Israel. By redeeming Israel from its enemies, God was defeating the powers of chaos and restoring order to the world (Hiebert, 1992b: 877). Each act of redemption was considered a new creation.

The classic biblical example of creation, presented with the metaphors of the conflict myth, that serves as a paradigm of redemption is the “Song of the Sea” in Exodus 15:1–18. This is an archaic poem celebrating Yahweh's victory over Pharaoh and his army at the sea. Uncharacteristic of the Near Eastern conflict myth (as in the *Enuma Elish* or the *Baal* myth), but typical of the Bible's presentation of this myth, chaos is symbolized by a historical foe, the king of Egypt (compare Fretheim's interpretation of the role played by Pharaoh in the Exodus narratives [1991a]). The sea, which is ordinarily the symbol of chaos par excellence, in this poem serves primarily as the setting of the conflict. This observation has led numerous scholars to conclude that the Near Eastern conflict myth was historicized by Israel, stripped of its cosmological significance. These scholars claim that the myth was transformed from a myth of cosmic creation to an account of God's creation of a historical people (Anderson, 1984b: 4–5; 1987 [1967]: 37–38).

This interpretation of the “Song of the Sea” is problematic. As discussed earlier in this chapter, such an interpretation fails to reckon with the metaphorical character of the language. Cosmic metaphors are applied to an historical account in order to attribute cosmic meaning to the historic events. It does not diminish their cosmic character (Fretheim, 1991b: 357). Specifically, the cosmic metaphors in Exodus 15:1–18 place God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt at the sea within the context of God's activity in creation. Israel's redemption is compared to a new creation. God engages in a cosmogonic battle against the enemy, Pharaoh, that poses a threat to the created order. The result of God's victory is a redeemed people in an ordered world, secured from the threat of chaos (Fretheim, 1991b: 358–59).

Most of the elements of the conflict myth are present in the “Song of the Sea.” The song begins with the adoration of God who has triumphed over Pharaoh and his army, the symbols of chaos. Like chaos which threatens the order of the world, Pharaoh and his

policies have threatened the existence of God's people. Therefore, God acts to secure the integrity of the creation, to redeem his people from the clutches of chaos. God marches out against Pharaoh like a warrior:

- <sup>3</sup>The LORD is a warrior;  
the LORD is his name.  
<sup>4</sup>Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea;  
his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea.  
<sup>5</sup>The floods covered them;  
they went down into the depths like a stone.

(Exodus 15:3–5)

In this passage God's actions are described in terms of casting the enemy into the sea. In the following verses God's actions are more specifically associated with those of a storm-god, like Marduk or Baal:

- <sup>8</sup>At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up,  
the floods stood up in a heap;  
the deeps foamed in the heart of the sea.<sup>8</sup>  
<sup>9</sup>The enemy said, "I will pursue, I will overtake,  
I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.  
I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them."  
<sup>10</sup>You blew with your wind, the sea covered them;  
they sank like lead in the mighty waters. . .  
<sup>12</sup>You stretched out your right hand,  
the earth swallowed them.

(Exodus 15:8–10, 12)

The picture described in these verses is that of a storm-god who stirs up the sea so that it capsizes the boat on which the Egyptians are crossing. This is the characteristic language of the conflict myth in which the divine warrior uses the thunderstorm to defeat chaos. The result is that the Egyptians sink to the bottom of the sea and drown; they disappear into the sea as if they were swallowed by the earth.

That the conflict myth has not simply been historicized should be clear from the manner by which God defeats the Egyptian army. God does not destroy the Egyptians by historical means, nor does God act exclusively in *human* history. Rather, God acts in creation and marshals the creation in the cosmogonic battle. The creation itself, through the form of a violent storm at sea, is used to defeat the threat to the created order. In this manner God demonstrates his kingship and supremacy over creation, and so redeems his people.

Other elements of the conflict myth in the "Song of the Sea" include the procession of the people to Yahweh's mountain sanctuary and the manifestation of God's kingship:

- <sup>13</sup>In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;

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<sup>8</sup> The translation of the NRSV has been altered to reflect the interpretation of Cross (1973: 128-29). There is no substantial evidence to support the traditional reading of "congeal."

you guided them by your strength to your holy abode. . .

<sup>17</sup>You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession,  
the place, O LORD, that you made your abode,  
the sanctuary, O LORD, that your hands have established.

<sup>18</sup>The LORD will reign forever and ever.

(Exodus 15:13, 17–18)

Scholars dispute whether the sanctuary in this song is an early tribal sanctuary, such as Gilgal, or Solomon's temple itself on Mount Zion. In any case, these references give further evidence for interpreting this song in light of the creation myth. God's acts of redemption for his people – their deliverance from the control of the Egyptians, and guidance to and establishment in the promised land – typically viewed as “historical” acts, are presented according to the paradigm of creation. These events are thus given cosmological significance. Israel's redemption is part of God's new act of creation.

It has long been an axiom of biblical theology that the exodus experience, God's redemption of Israel at the sea, forms the core of the biblical faith. Although some scholars have begun to challenge this belief, its influence on later biblical thought is unquestionable. In particular, God's cosmogonic victory over the Egyptians at the sea became the archetype for all of God's battles against Israel's enemies. Whenever the Israelites were oppressed by the more powerful nations around them, they looked for God to fight in a new cosmogonic battle on their behalf just as God had fought against the Egyptians. God's activity in creation, as portrayed by the conflict myth, served as the paradigm of God's repeated acts of redemption for Israel, and God's victory at the sea was the preeminent example of this cosmogonic activity. Even in the “Song of the Sea” God's defeat of Israel's future enemies is foreshadowed:

<sup>14</sup>The peoples heard, they trembled;  
pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia.  
<sup>15</sup>Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed;  
trembling seized the leaders of Moab;  
all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away.  
<sup>16</sup>Terror and dread fell upon them;  
by the might of your arm, they became still as stone  
until your people, O LORD, passed by,  
until the people whom you acquired passed by.

(Exodus 15: 14–16)

The message of the song is clear: Just as God defeated Pharaoh and his army at the sea, God conquered all Israel's enemies in the battles of conquest, and so also God will defeat all of Israel's future enemies. All of these battles are modeled on God's victory over chaos in the primordial battle of creation.

In the “Song of the Sea” God's victory in the cosmogonic battle is celebrated by the Israelites as a present reality. God had defeated chaos so that the created order remained secure. But this was rarely the situation for the people of Israel. Frequently the world was not stable; God's victory over chaos was not evident. God needed to be summoned to act as

the creator rather than to be praised. In Psalm 74, for example, reference to God's prior activity in creation serves as a subtle reproach for God's failure to redeem his people from their present sufferings (Levenson, 1988: 23–25). This psalm is a national lament, probably written in response to the destruction of Jerusalem at the hand of the Babylonians in 587 BCE, though some scholars suggest a postexilic date. In any case, the psalmist repeatedly questions the lack of God's redeeming action on behalf of his afflicted people:

<sup>1</sup>O God, why do you cast us off forever?  
    Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?  
<sup>2</sup>Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago,  
    which you redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage.  
    Remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell.

(Psalm 74:1–2)

God had redeemed his people in the past. Although not explicit, the psalmist refers to God's redemption of the people at the sea where God defeated chaos and so redeemed Israel to be his people. But now God is silent, failing to act on behalf of his people and even on behalf of his own name:

<sup>10</sup>How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?  
    Is the enemy to revile your name forever?  
<sup>11</sup>Why do you hold back your hand;  
    why do you keep your hand in your bosom?

(Psalm 74:10–11)

Into the midst of this psalm, the psalmist inserts a short hymn that describes God's activity in creation:

<sup>12</sup>Yet God my King is from of old,  
    working salvation in the earth.  
<sup>13</sup>You divided the sea by your might;  
    you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.  
<sup>14</sup>You crushed the heads of Leviathan;  
    you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.  
<sup>15</sup>You cut openings for springs and torrents;  
    you dried up ever-flowing streams.  
<sup>16</sup>Yours is the day, yours also the night;  
    you established the luminaries and the sun.  
<sup>17</sup>You have fixed all the bounds of the earth;  
    you made summer and winter.

(Psalm 74:12–17)

United in this hymn are the themes of divine kingship, defeat of the sea dragon, and world ordering – all elements of the conflict myth. God is proclaimed to be the creator, the one who defeated chaos and established the bounds of the earth. But Israel's affliction at the hand of the nations indicates that chaos is loose in the world; the dragon has broken its fetters and escaped. As the creator, God must again fight in a cosmogonic battle. Chaos

must again be defeated and bound. Consequently, the psalmist calls on God to act as the creator by redeeming Israel:

<sup>22</sup>Rise up, O God, plead your cause;  
remember how the impious scoff at you all day long.  
<sup>23</sup>Do not forget the clamor of your foes,  
the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually.

(Psalm 74:22–23)

According to this psalm, God's activity in creation is not only the paradigm of God's redemption of Israel, it is also the basis by which God can redeem and the reason for which God should redeem.

In the oracles of Second Isaiah the prophet of the exile similarly summons Yahweh to redeem his people from their oppressors just as he subdued the dragon in the battle of creation long ago:

<sup>9</sup>Awake, awake, put on strength,  
O arm of the LORD!  
Awake, as in days of old,  
the generations of long ago!  
<sup>10</sup>Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces,  
who pierced the dragon?  
Was it not you who dried up the sea,  
the waters of the great deep;  
who made the depths of the sea a way  
for the redeemed to cross over?  
<sup>11</sup>So the ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

(Isaiah 51:9–11)

Sleep is characteristic of creator gods (Batto, 1987b). After they defeat the chaos monsters and secure the order of creation, they enjoy the divine prerogative of rest. However, for the people of Judah who were suffering in exile, world order did not appear to be secure. Chaos had been unleashed and was assaulting them from every corner. God had no right to slumber while chaos raged over the earth. God must be aroused from sleep in order to defeat the dragon as in the days of old.

The oracle in Isaiah 51 attests to several integrally connected dimensions of God's creation and redemption. At one level God defeated the chaos dragon, here named Rahab, in the primordial battle of creation. According to the second level of the oracle God delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians at the sea. God's drying up the sea and making a way in its depths was a replication of God's primordial victory over Rahab. Finally, the oracle announces that God's people will participate in a new exodus, a new creation, as they

return to their land. God's activity in creation, the exodus, and the people's future redemption is viewed according to a single paradigm: God's defeat of chaos. Some scholars, following von Rad, have used this passage to demonstrate the historical character of creation (Harrelson: 248–52; Stuhlmüller), but this interpretation neglects the significance of the creation metaphors. God's redemption rather is given a cosmological character as a new creation. God's activity in creation served as the paradigm by which Israel was redeemed from bondage at the exodus, and in the same way God will redeem his people from exile.

Our interpretation of this passage is supported by the following oracle in Second Isaiah. In this passage God addresses the people with a message of hope. Because Yahweh is the creator, the people do not need to fear human oppressors.

<sup>12</sup>I, I am he who comforts you;  
    why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die,  
    a human being who fades like grass?  
<sup>13</sup>You have forgotten the LORD, your Maker,  
    who stretched out the heavens  
    and laid the foundations of the earth.

(Isaiah 51:12–13)

Yahweh the creator has not slumbered from his tasks. The people have simply forgotten that Yahweh is the creator and that Yahweh is in control of human affairs and able to redeem them from their oppression.

One final text that illustrates how God's activity in creation serves as the paradigm of redemption is found in Psalm 77. This psalm is a personal lament in which the psalmist questions God's character and his intention to redeem:

<sup>7</sup>Will the Lord spurn forever,  
    and never again be favorable?  
<sup>8</sup>Has his steadfast love ceased forever?  
    Are his promises at an end for all time?  
<sup>9</sup>Has God forgotten to be gracious?  
    Has he in anger shut up his compassion?

(Psalm 77:7–9)

In the midst of despair, however, the psalmist finds hope in God's previous deeds on behalf of his people:

<sup>14</sup>You are the God who works wonders;  
    you have displayed your might among the peoples.  
<sup>15</sup>With your strong arm you redeemed your people,  
    the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

(Psalm 77:14–15)

Because God had marvelously redeemed his people in the past, the psalmist hopes that he too will be redeemed from his affliction.

But what had God done to inspire such hope in the psalmist? How had God redeemed his people? In historical terms, God's redemption of Israel had come to be known as the exodus, but the psalmist presents this prior act of redemption in the language of creation:

- <sup>16</sup>When the waters saw you, O God,  
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;  
the very deep trembled.
- <sup>17</sup>The clouds poured out water;  
the skies thundered;  
your arrows flashed on every side.
- <sup>18</sup>The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;  
your lightnings lit up the world;  
the earth trembled and shook.
- <sup>19</sup>Your way was through the sea,  
your path, through the mighty waters;  
yet your footprints were unseen.
- <sup>20</sup>You led your people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

(Psalm 77:16–20)

In the “Song of the Sea” the sea serves as the setting for God’s battle against Pharaoh and his army. Yahweh employs the sea as a weapon, but does not fight against it. But according to this hymn, Yahweh’s battle is against the sea itself. In the tradition of Baal and Marduk, Yahweh fights against the waters, the symbol of chaos (May), as a divine warrior in the cosmogonic battle, employing all the typical weapons of the storm-god – rain, lightning, thunder, and wind. Unlike Baal and Marduk’s victory, however, God’s victory over the sea results not in the construction or the ordering of the cosmos, but in the redemption of his people. The waters are made to recede so that Yahweh can lead his people to his holy abode unimpeded. The historical referent of this creation language does not serve to devalue or historicize creation. Rather, it places God’s historical act of redemption at the exodus within a cosmological context. Creation is the paradigm of redemption. God was able to redeem his people in the past because he was and continues to be the creator. Consequently, there is hope for the psalmist that God will also redeem him.

### Creation and Ancient Israel’s Worldview

Metaphors are rooted in culture; they are based on a culturally shared perception of reality. This is also true for the creation metaphors of the Bible. Moreover, the frequently illustrated correspondence between these metaphors and our reconstructed creation model suggests that the biblical writers shared with their ancient Near Eastern neighbors a single, yet complex, perception of reality that was rooted in fundamental experiences of the human body and the earth. Whether the Israelites could or did conceive of creation differently is not at issue. We have used the creation model only to elucidate the explicit creation metaphors in the biblical text. A model is simply a conceptual map, a heuristic tool, for organizing diverse data into a meaningful pattern (Carney: 1–11). In particular, the creation model enables us to understand the interrelationship of the various biblical creation metaphors, and in turn the

culturally shared perception of reality on which they are based. But it does not preclude the possibility that the Israelites also thought of creation in vastly different terms. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that the creation model can explain the wide variety of biblical creation metaphors according to a single frame of reference.

In the previous chapter I argued that creation myths and metaphors provide the key for elucidating the worldview and values of the biblical writers. Because these myths and metaphors focus on the basic domains of reality – God, humans, and the natural world (the assumptions of the Classification universal) – and their interrelationship (the assumptions of the Relationship universal), they make explicit what is otherwise assumed by the biblical writers. In particular, they disclose the fundamental assumptions of the ancient Israelites’ worldview. Therefore, the creation model itself, by detailing the interrelationship of these basic domains of reality, also serves as a model for elucidating ancient Israel’s worldview.

The Classification scheme of ancient Israel’s worldview is diagrammed in figure 7. The primary differentiation in the world is between God the creator and the creation. God creates the inhabitable world, yet remains distinct from it. The creation itself is secondarily divided between humans and nature. This differentiation, however, should not obscure the essential unity of the creation. Humans and nature are of the same substance.

According to the creation model, a focal assumption of the Relationship universal is the correlation between humans and the natural world. Although humans are part of nature, created along with the rest of the natural world, they are also distinct from nature, singled out as different in kind. We refer to this distinction as culture, the ability of humans to create their own, artificial environment that is superimposed on the natural world (Niebuhr: 29–39). The biblical writers, as we will discuss in Chapter Five, attributed this distinction to the human character: They were created to be distinct from the rest of the natural world. Nevertheless, the Israelite worldview is not defined in terms of a radical dichotomy between nature and culture. The creation model entails a neutral type of relationship between humans and nature. Because the human body has a microcosm/macrocosm relationship to the earth, the relationship between humans and the natural world is characterized by harmony. Despite their cultural attempts to transcend it, humans are integrally connected to the natural world.

The other focal assumption of the Relationship universal that can be discerned from the creation model concerns the interrelationship between God and the creation. As the creator, God acts on and transforms the creation. The creation is dependent upon God, who in turn is responsible for the creation. The Relationship assumption finds expression in the Bible’s particular use of creation metaphors. By employing these metaphors in extraneous contexts, the biblical writers emphasize humankind’s and, by extension, nature’s dependency upon God. Both humans and nature are God’s creation and are thus dependent upon God’s care. Similarly, when the creation is corrupted by human or natural agents, humankind and the natural world are dependent upon God for redemption through a

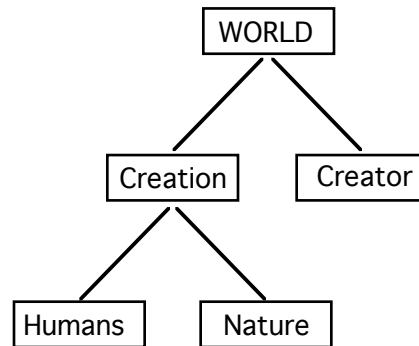


Figure 7. Domains of Israel’s Worldview

new act of creation (this latter point will be take up in detail in Chapter Six). From the human perspective, this assumption can be characterized as a negative type relationship, but a positive type of relationship from God’s perspective. Humans, and nature, are subordinate to God, and God is dominant over creation.

The main Relationship assumptions of ancient Israel’s worldview, which are outlined above, can be diagrammed as in figure 8. The assumptions divide the world primarily between God the creator and the creation. These primary domains are arranged vertically to illustrate the hierarchical (positive-negative) relationship between God and the creation. The creation itself is divided secondarily between humans and the rest of the natural world, which are arranged horizontally to illustrate the harmonious (neutral) relationship between them.

The double-arrow lines in the diagram illustrate the assumptions of Causality. The only causal assumption that is embedded in the creation model itself is that God is a causal agent in the creation. Nevertheless, we can make a few preliminary remarks concerning the other lines of causality in anticipation of our discussion in the following chapters. Just as God is a causal agent in relation to the creation, humans are causal agents in relation to the rest of the natural world. Nature as such is not a causal agent. But because of the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, human agency produces ramifications in nature that affect humans. Human causal agency in nature is thus reciprocal. Finally, all of creation serves as a causal agent in relation to God. Although creation is subordinate to God, creation, through the agency of humans, can produce change in God.

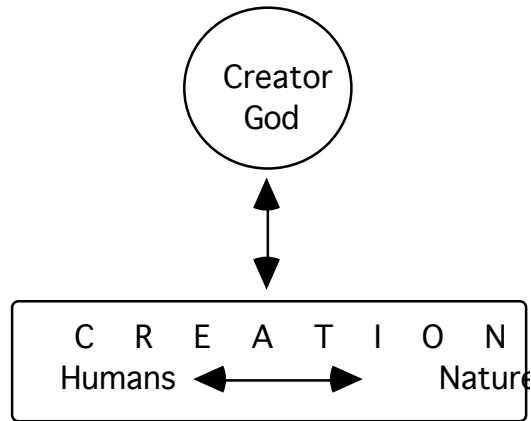


Figure 8. The Basic Israelite Worldview

The worldview that we have deduced from the creation model represents the “plain vanilla” worldview of the ancient Israelites. It incorporates only their most basic assumptions of reality that were expressed in their creation metaphors. Because it is derived from the cross-cultural model of creation, it represents by implication a worldview that the Israelites shared with their Near Eastern neighbors. This worldview does not reflect, however, the many complexities of the real world in which they lived. For example, it does not take into account the fundamental distinction between ingroups and outgroups which pervades the Classification assumptions of collectivist societies such as ancient Israel. Nor does it take into account the diverse segments of Israelite society. These aspects of their worldview remain to be investigated. Nevertheless, this basic worldview can serve as the foundation on which to build.