

Liturgy and Cosmogony:
The Ritual Use of Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East

Stephen D. Ricks

In his luminous study of the Egyptian background of the Joseph Smith papyri, Hugh Nibley notes that the creation story constitutes a focal point in Egyptian religious literature and in the temple ritual.¹ This phenomenon was not, however, restricted to the Egyptians among the peoples of the pre-Christian Near East.² A similar liturgical use of the creation story, often in conjunction with temple worship, was made in Mesopotamia, Persia, and in Israel of the Second Temple period.

The zagmuk or akitu (New Year's) festival figures as the central cultic event in the Mesopotamian religious calendar. It constituted "the confluence of every current of religious thought, the expression of every shade of religious feeling" among the Babylonians and Assyrians.³ The akitu festival served to reestablish the proper pattern of nature, with order prevailing over chaos, and to reaffirm the gods, the king, and his subjects in their respective roles in the cosmic order. Reflections of the festival are to be found as early as the third millennium B.C. in the yearly rites of the Sumerian city-states of Ur and Erech, but no extensive evidence exists for its celebration until the time of the Late Assyrian and Late Babylonian kingdoms (750-612 B.C. and 650-539 B.C. respectively).⁴ Among the documents recovered from this late period are priestly liturgical commentaries, "order of service" manuals prepared to guide the priest in the proper performance of the lengthy and complex rituals of the akitu festival, which lasted through the first twelve days of Nisan, the first month of the Babylonian calendar.⁵ On the fourth of Nisan, in the temple of Marduk, (the temple serving as a symbol of the ordered cosmos in

the ancient Near East)⁶ the priest was instructed to read the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation myth which recounts the victory of Marduk over the powers of chaos personalized in Apsu and Tiamat, his creation of the world, and concludes with a hymn extolling the kingship of Marduk.⁷ In the later stages of the festival the victory of Marduk over Tiamat was ritually reenacted.⁸

Among the ancient Persians the ritual recitation of the birth of the gods was customary on sacrificial occasions. Herodotus reports in his Histories that after the one who was offering sacrifice had cut the animal victim into pieces and had boiled them, he spread them "on the softest grass."⁹ Thereupon a Magian, the Persian priest whose presence was obligatory at such sacrifices, chanted the account of the birth of the gods (theogoniēn) "as the Persian tradition relates it."¹⁰

It has been suggested that the creation account of Genesis (1:1-2:4a) was used in the temple liturgy of Israel before the Babylonian exile at the New Year's Festival, when the enthronement of the Lord was celebrated, and possibly on other occasions as well.¹¹ The didactic-liturgical nature of the creation account itself, with its constant refrain, "and God saw that it was good,"¹² "and the evening and the morning were the first day,"¹³ etc., strengthen the case for its ritual use.¹⁴ Although this hypothesis is attractive, in the absence of "order of service" manuals (such as those found in Mesopotamia) or of descriptions of the Israelite rituals from external sources (such as Herodotus' description of the Persian sacrifices), it must remain tentative.¹⁵

Whereas we lack internal and external sources concerning the

liturgical use of the creation account in pre-Exilic Israel, we have both for the Second Temple Period. In the Mishnaic tractate Ta'anit (committed to writing, along with the rest of the Mishnah, by Judah the Prince c. 200 A.D., but probably representing far older traditions), where various items of information and instruction are given regarding the temple duties of the twenty-four courses of laymen (anshē ma'amad), priests, and Levites (mentioned in 1 Chronicles 24), the laymen are given the responsibility of reading sections of the Genesis creation account while the priests and Levites perform the sacrifices.¹⁶ The laymen belonging to the course currently serving in the temple who had not been able to go up to Jerusalem were charged with the duty of reading the creation account in their own towns.¹⁷ Theophrastus may be referring to the same practice in his De Pietate when he remarks that the Jews "now sacrifice victims according to their old mode of sacrifice...they do it fasting on the intervening days."¹⁸ During the whole time, being philosophers by race, they converse with each other about the deity and at nighttime they make observations of the stars, gazing at them and calling upon God" (a possible allusion to a recital of the creation account).¹⁹ Even in modern Judaism the Genesis creation account is accorded an honored place in the liturgy, being read in toto on Simhat Torah (the final day of the Feast of Tabernacles) and in part (Genesis 2:1-3) on Friday evening, twice during the service and once at kiddush, when the Sabbath is solemnly blessed following six days of labor.²⁰

These brief remarks have been confined to the use of the creation account as liturgy in the ancient Near East. However, it is a phenomenon

far more widespread than that, as the researches of Mircea Eliade amply illustrate.²¹ Clearly, the primal creative acts (and hence their recitation or reenactment) were viewed by the peoples of the Ancient Near East and a host of others as possessing a dynamic and not a static quality. "What happened in the beginning," writes Raffaele Pettazzoni, "has an exemplary and defining value for what is happening today and what will happen in the future."²² By becoming a participant in the the victory of the forces of order and in the creation through reciting or reenacting it, the individual or community also becomes a participant in the fruits of that victory.

1. Hugh Nibley, The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1975), p. 131.
2. Nibley has also noted (ibid., pp. 257, 258, 260, 261, 264, 275) the probable ritual use of the creation account in the Qumran community and the liturgical use of the early Christian Odes of Solomon and Pistis Sophia, each of which contains extended references to the creation. These documents will not be considered in this study.
3. Henri Frankfort, Kingship and the Gods (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 319.
4. Ibid.
5. W. G. Lambert, "Myth and Ritual as Conceived by the Babylonians," Journal of Semitic Studies 13(1968), p. 106.
6. L. R. Fisher, "The Creation at Ugarit and in the Old Testament," Vetus Testamentum 15 (1965), p. 320: "The temple is symbolic of the ordered cosmos and at the same time makes it possible to maintain order." Cf. Mircea Eliade, Cosmos and History (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), p. 17: "The very conception of the temple as the imago mundi, the idea that the sanctuary reproduces the universe in its essence, passed into the religious architecture of Christian Europe."
7. F. Thureau-Dangin, Rituel Accadien (Paris: E. Leroux, 1921), p. 136, ll. 279-284. W. G. Lambert, "Myth and Ritual as Conceived by the Babylonians," p. 107, points out that a recently studied Babylonian liturgical commentary also calls for the reading of the Enuma Elish on the fourth of Kislimu, and suggests that it may have been read on the fourth of each month.
8. The date for this rite is variously given in the sources as the eighth, tenth, and eleventh of Nisan, ibid. See also W. G. Lambert, "The Great Battle of the Mesopotamian Religious Year. The Conflict in the Akitu House," Iraq 25 (1963), pp. 189-190.
9. Herodotus Histories 1:132, trans. A. D. Godley Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1960) vol. 1, p. 173.
10. Ibid.
11. E. O. James, Creation and Cosmogony: A Historical and Comparative Inquiry (Leiden: Brill, 1969), p. 29.
12. William F. Albright, "The Refrain 'and God saw ki tob'," in Melanges Bibliques rediges en l'honneur de Andre Robert (Paris: Bloud and Gay, n.d.), pp. 22-26.

13. Loren R. Fisher, "An Ugaritic Ritual and Genesis 1:1-5," Ugaritica 6 (1969), pp. 197-205, notes that a recently published cultic text from Ugarit ends each section with the refrain "day one," "Day two," etc., in a manner strikingly similar to the language of the Genesis creation account.
14. Arieh Toeg, "Genesis 1 and the Sabbath," (Hebrew) Bet Miqra 50 (1972), p. 290. Moshe Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple Building, and the Enthronement of the Lord," (Hebrew) Bet Miqra 69 (1977), pp. 188-89, points out the striking parallels in language and structure between the Genesis creation account and the account of the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus 39-40, and suggests that there was an intimate relationship between the creation and the temple (which, as we have noted above, is symbolic of the ordered cosmos) in the mind of the Hebrews. Similarly, Peter J. Kearney, "Creation and Liturgy: the P Redaction of Ex 25-40," Zeitschrift fuer die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 89 (1977), pp. 375-378, analyzes the close structural relationship between the Genesis creation record and Exodus 25-31, which contains the divine instructions for the erection of the desert tabernacle and the establishment of the cult.
15. Similarly, there are some striking resemblances in the cult and mythology of the Hittites, Ugaritians, and Babylonians. However, the absence of any clear indication of the liturgical use of a creation myth among the Hittites and people of Ugarit during their festivals (where evidence exists for the Babylonians' use of it) must make us cautious against including them among those who do.
16. Ta'anit 4:2-3.
17. Ta'anit 4:2.
18. This may refer to the practice, recorded in Ta'anit 4:3 of the laymen (anshe ma'amad) fasting on certain days during their week of service.
19. Theophrastus De Pietate, apud Porphyrius De Abstinencia 2:26, quoted in Menahem Stern, Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974), p. 8.
20. Arieh Toeg, "Genesis and the Sabbath," p. 293.
21. Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 28-34.
22. Raffaele Pettazzoni, Essays on the History of Religions (Leiden: Brill, 1954), p. 256. Ritual repetition of the past is not, however, restricted to the recitation of the creation account. The Christian

ordinances of baptism and the sacrament both involve a ritual recollection of the death and resurrection of Christ. The apostle Paul makes explicit this connection when he writes in 1 Corinthians 11:26, "For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come." Based upon the individual's worthy participation (and Paul warns in the strongest terms possible against unworthily participating in the sacrament of the Lord's supper: "whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord," 1 Corinthians 11:27); these ordinances have a saving value ("that they may always have his Spirit to be with them."). See S. G. F. Brandon; "Ritual Perpetuation of the Past," Numen 6 (1959), pp. 112-129, for further examples from other religions.