



CREATION AND THE COSMOS

Cosmogonies—stories about how the world began—have been told by almost every culture in the world. They help people define their place in the universe, embedding the specifics of one human culture within a wider, “cosmic” pattern. The Greek word *cosmos* implies order and beauty, as well as universe; to compose a “cosmogony” is to describe how the world came to be a beautiful and well-ordered place. The genre includes some of the earliest texts in all surviving literature. These texts give us an idea of how human beings in premodern civilizations tried to make sense of their world, and how they answered questions that still puzzle scientists, philosophers, poets, and theologians today. Where does the world come from? What is it made of? Is there an order or pattern or purpose in the universe, or do things happen at random? Was there a god or gods who created or arranged the world? How did life on earth begin? How did human beings come into existence? Has there always been evil? If not, how did wickedness and conflict first begin?

These questions are profound, but the answers offered by ancient texts may strike modern readers as “primitive” or naive. Early cosmogonies provide mythical stories, involving divine personifications, instead of scientific theories (such as the big bang) about

the beginnings and composition of the cosmos. But we should take these stories as a provocation to think harder about what “scientific” thinking really is. How are our beliefs about atomic particles different from ancient beliefs about the power of earth and sky? Clearly, the bards and poets who told most of these stories were not interested in conducting verifiable or falsifiable experiments to find out how the world works. In that sense, they were “unscientific.” But it does not follow that they were unsophisticated in their thinking. Even the authors of the earliest surviving texts were already responding in complex ways to a long set of oral and written traditions.

Nor were these stories immediately supplanted by later ways of thinking and writing. Mythological traditions about the origins of the universe inspired the beginnings of science and informed later discussions of philosophy, history, and theology. The work of the early Greek thinkers who are often seen as the first scientists—the “pre-Socratics”—includes some critique of traditional theology and myth: **Xenophanes**, for instance, suggested that **Homer** and **Hesiod** (whose *Theogony* includes the earliest Greek myths about the origins of the gods) are both “impious” in their depiction of the gods committing adultery. The earliest “scientific” or “philosophical” thought still belongs to the tradition of Hesiod, although entities like “water,” “fire,” “air,” and “mind” are substituted for the named deities who appeared in the archaic texts (like Gaia or Uranus). Much later,

A detail from the Hellenistic altar of Pergamon, ca. 164–156 B.C.E., that shows the giant Alcyoneus being forcibly separated from the earth goddess, Gaia, by Athena.

the Roman philosopher-poet Lucretius challenges the idea that we need to imagine divine creators for the (purely material) world, but he makes extensive poetic use of the cosmological tradition even as he rejects it.

This selection includes a range of texts, from the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish* and the archaic Greek *Theogony*, through fragments of Ionian “pre-Socratic” philosophy, and on to the poetry of Lucretius. The continuity of mythical elements across the Babylonian, Greek, and Roman cultures—including the story of divine creation followed by a massive flood—argues that the ancient Mediterranean world had a common heritage.

Ancient cosmogonies do not usually begin with creation *ex nihilo* (“from nothing”). Rather, they present some kind of primeval matter—often personified forms of earth, sky, and water—from which the world took shape; the Akkadian epic *Enuma Elish* begins by imagining a time before the heaven and earth had names, and the text tells a story of progressively more-detailed processes of naming. In several stories, like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the separation of heaven and earth and their ensuing reunion fuel the creation of humankind and the development of civilization. These works also trace the ways that human life has changed since it began. The change may be presented, as in the Hebrew Bible and in the Greek myths of the Golden Age recorded by Hesiod, as a fall from a state of innocence and grace. Alternatively, contemporary culture may be imagined as an improvement on an old, primitive life, as in the Greek myth of Prometheus, who brought fire and technology to helpless humanity. Both these mythical patterns—the idea of decline and the idea of progress—are essential to the way that human beings imagine themselves and their place in the world.

The notion of a whole world is a relatively new one in human history. There is no word for the universe as the languages spoken by the most ancient Mesopotamian peoples (from the sixth millennium B.C.E. onward). Rather, the universe is conceived as a combination of several constituents and designated by terms such as *An-Ki* (“Heaven-Earth”). But even in these cultures, there was a developing notion of what the *Enuma Elish* calls “the entirety of all of everything.” In trying to imagine the whole world, ancient peoples tended, naturally enough, to see their own place as the center and then construct stories about what might lie above, below, and beyond.

Cosmogonies frequently contain a political dimension. Descriptions of the great creator god may, by analogy, praise a human ruler who has an intimate relationship with his divine equivalent. These texts often feature stories of a primeval struggle between different generations of the gods, a “theomachy” (battle of the gods): in several cases, a younger male god (Marduk in the Babylonian stories, Zeus in the Greek myths) manages to destroy, castrate, or enslave the dominant figures of an earlier regime. This kind of story can be seen as the triumph of male power over an earlier time, imagined as matriarchal, as a prototype for how successful human rulers can replace warring factions or oligarchies; or as a mirror of the usual struggles in human families, in which the younger generation always, in the end, takes over from the older. Creation stories may also help establish the centrality of a particular place or culture within the whole world. For instance, by suggesting that the Babylonian deity Marduk played the most important part in the creation of humanity, the Babylonian poem *Enuma Elish* establishes Babylon as the most important culture.



A modern impression made from an Akkadian seal from ca. 2200 B.C.E., depicting the sun god riding a boat with a dragon head—suggesting how the civilized god has defeated and co-opted the forces of chaos (the dragon).

Cosmogonies tend to classify the world in a hierarchical structure. The upper world is the home of gods; the lower world, beneath the earth, is often a place of death, demons, gods, and ancestral spirits. The center of the world—in Egypt, Babylon, Israel, Greece, or Rome—is the most habitable area, suitable for humans; beyond it lie less hospitable lands, as well as the ocean, which most ancient Mediterranean peoples imagined as an endless expanse of water surrounding the whole mass of land. The terms in which people imagined creation, and the gods, varied with the landscape they inhabited. In the largely cloudless desert climate of Egypt, the night sky was particularly clear, and sunrise, along with the disappearance of the stars, was dramatic; in Egyptian texts, the creator god (sometimes presented as the only god that matters—an apparent precursor to monotheistic gods) is closely linked to the sun. In Mesopotamian, Greek, and Hebrew texts, by contrast, we find less emphasis on the sun and more attention paid to the sky in general and especially, to water as the element from which everything comes—and to which things may eventually return. Water is sometimes the source of all life; Apsu, the fresh-water ocean, appears as the “begetter of the gods” in *Enuma Elish*.

The Greek man often known as the first philosopher, *Thales*, theorized that the whole world is made of water. But water—especially salt water—is also a locus for fear of the unknown, of the unpredictable, and of the gods’ wrath. The story of Noah’s flood is paralleled by several other flood myths from the ancient Mediterranean. In *Gilgamesh* (Tablet XI), the earth is conceived as a giant mountain emerging out of the primeval waters. In *Enuma Elish*, the ocean turns into a monster that has to be defeated by Marduk.

Poetic accounts of cosmogony played an important part in literature throughout antiquity: they are not confined to the distant past. From the beginning, composing stories about cosmic creation was intimately related to thinking about human acts of creation. Creation stories are meditations on the act of making, and we should remember that the Greek word for poetry, *poiesis*, primarily means “making.” Often some of the most self-aware works of literature, these stories raise questions about how human and divine agency relate to one another when we make up worlds of the mind. How do stories get shaped into a satisfying and beautiful arrangement? Is there a perfect or only partial analogy between the ordering of the cosmos and the ordering of a literary text?

CANNIBAL SPELL FOR KING UNIS

ca. 2325 B.C.E.

This is one of the earliest surviving long Egyptian texts. It was inscribed inside the pyramid of a dead king, in a place where it could never be read by human eyes after the building in which it was carved was completed. Full of violent imagery, it presents the deceased king as ascending to the sky and taking on the role of the creator god in a perpetual cycle defined by the daily rising of the sun and the corresponding dis-

appearance of the night sky, imagined as the king's devouring of the stars, which are themselves deities and part of his kin group. By consuming the other deities, the king assimilated their magical powers. It has been suggested that the Cannibal Spell was composed to be recited during the sacrifice of a bull or ox before a ritual meal that would have formed part of the king's funeral ceremonies.

Cannibal Spell for King Unis¹

The sky has grown cloudy, the stars obscured; the (sky's) arcs have quaked, the horizons' bones shaken; and those who move have grown still,² having seen Unis apparent and ba as the god who lives on his fathers and feeds on his mothers.

Unis is the lord of jackal-like rapacity, whose (own) mother does not know his identity.³

for Unis's nobility is in the sky and his power in the Akhet,⁴ like Atum,⁵ his father who bore him—and though he bore him, he is more powerful than he;

for Unis's kas⁶ are about him, his guardian forces under his feet, his gods atop him, his uraei⁷ on his brow;

for Unis's lead uraeus is on his forehead, ba when seen and akh⁸ for shooting fire; for Unis's powers are on his torso.

1. Translated by James P. Allen.

2. The heavenly bodies stop moving in their arc at what is happening. Unis has appeared and he has ba-power. Ba is an aspect of the divine and human person and a principle of movement, primarily in the next world, as well as a concept of divine and royal power.

3. Knowing someone's identity or name gives one power over them. Even Unis's mother does not have such power.

4. The horizon, where the sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening. The word is related to *akh* (see below).

5. A creator god, identified as the old form of

the sun god associated with sunset.

6. The principle of vitality handed down the generations in the male line; another aspect of the person. Deities and kings have many kas; human beings have one.

7. Rearing cobras, worn on the forehead by deities and kings, that protect the wearer by spitting fire. (*Uraeus*, below, is the singular form of the word.)

8. Both a word meaning "effective" and the form the deceased takes on in the next world as a transfigured soul. *Akhu* is one of the two words for magical power used in the text (the other is *heka*).

Unis is the sky's bull, with terrorizing in his heart, who lives on the evolution⁹ of every god, who eats their bowels when they have come from the Isle of Flame⁹ with their belly filled with magic.

Unis is an equipped one who has gathered his effectiveness, for Unis has appeared as the great one who has assistants, sitting with his back to Geb.² Unis is the one whose case against him whose identity is hidden² was decided on the day of butchering the senior ones.

Unis is lord of offering, who ties on the leash (of the sacrificial animal), who makes his own presentation of offerings.

Unis is one who eats people and lives on gods, one who has fetchers³ and sends off dispatches.

Grasper of Forelocks in the kettle is the one who lassoes them for Unis; Serpent with Sweeping Head is the one who guards them for him and bars them for him;

Gory All Over is the one who binds them for him; Courser, the lords' knife-bearer, is the one who will slit their throats for Unis and takes out for him what is in their belly—he is the messenger he sends to confront;

Shezmu is the one who will butcher them for Unis and who cooks a meal of them for him on his evening hearthstones.

Unis is the one who eats their magic and swallows their akhs, for their adults are for his morning meal, their middle-sized ones for his evening meal, their little ones for his nighttime snack, their old men and women (fuel) for his ovens;

for the sky's great northerners⁴ are the ones who set fire for him to the cauldrons containing them with the bones of their senior ones;

for those in the sky serve him, while the hearthstones are poked for him with the legs of their women;

for both skies⁵ go around (in service) for him and the two shores serve him. Unis is the most controlling power, who controls the controlling powers;

Unis is the sacred image who is most sacred of sacred images; anyone he finds in his way he will devour.

for Unis's proper place is in front of all the privileged ones in the Akhet. Unis is the god who is senior to the senior ones.

for thousands serve him and hundreds present offering to him;

9. "Evolution," which can also be rendered "manifestation," comprises the various forms that divine or human beings take on during their lifetime.

1. A place of transition in the celestial world.

2. The god of the earth. Unis sets his back to Geb because he has ascended to the sky.

3. Perhaps the principal creator. "Case against" is one of many examples of litigation in the next world. "Senior ones" are the oldest gods.

4. Unis has many assistants in his task of butchery. Five are given descriptive names

in the following passage. The last of them, Shezmu, is a god associated with butchery and punishment.

5. The stars and constellations north of the ecliptic (the apparent path of the sun through the sky during a year) in the night sky, here envisaged as gods.

6. The two parts of the sky, north and south of the ecliptic. The "two shores" are those of the Nile. Both sky and earth are in the king's service.

for he has been given title as the greatest controlling power by Orion,⁷ the gods' father; for Unis has reappeared in the sky and is crowned as lord of the Akhet; for the vertebrae of spines have been broken up for him and he has acquired the gods' hearts; for he has eaten the red and swallowed the raw. Unis will feed on the lungs of the experienced and grow content from living on hearts and their magic as well. Unis will spit out when he licks the emetic parts in the red, for he is replete and their magic is in his belly. Unis's privileges will not be taken from him, for he has swallowed the Perception of every god.⁸ Continuity is the lifetime of Unis, eternity is his limit, in his privilege of "When He Likes He Acts. When He Dislikes He Does Not Act," which is in the Akhet's limits forever continually. For their ba is in Unis's belly and their akhs are with Unis, as the excess of his meal with respect to (that of) the gods, since it was heated for Unis with their bones.⁹ For their ba is with Unis, and (only) their shadows are (still) with their owners; for Unis is in this (state), ever apparent, ever set. Those who do (evil) deeds will not be able to hack up the place of Unis's heart among the living in this world forever continually.

7. The constellation Orion is identified as a senior deity in the Pyramid Texts—texts carved into the walls and sarcophagi of pyramids of the Old Kingdom; in later periods Orion is associated with the god of the dead, Osiris.
8. Unis has consumed the mental capacities

of the gods, and now he can outwit them.
9. Unis's meal consisted of the gods, including their *bas* and *akhs*, and so was in excess of anything they could have.
1. Unis commands this world as well as the celestial world and is perpetually immune to evil.

THE GREAT HYMN TO THE ATEN

ca. 1350 B.C.E.

prominently at the entrance of the tomb of an important official in the new capital city of el-Amarna, this hymn celebrates the sun as creator and sustainer of the world and emphasizes the close connection between the god and his human counterparts, the king (Amenhotep IV) and queen (Nefertiti). The king initiated a religious and political revolution when he exclusively promoted the cult of the sun god. Aten, built a new capital, and changed his name to Akhenaten, which means "He who is effective for Aten." For a decade

or two the old pantheon with numerous gods was neglected in favor of a new, singular creator god. Some scholars have seen the cult of Aten as an early type of monotheism, although this is much debated. The peaceful and lyrical tone of the hymn is at odds with the violence accompanying the changes that Akhenaten introduced, which were rejected within a few years of his death, when Egyptians abandoned the new capital, destroyed the king's monuments, and tried to erase his name from their society's memory.



Akhenaten and his family make an offering to Aten, the sun god.

The Great Hymn to the Aten¹

Adoration of Re-Harakhti-who-rejoices-in-lightland? In-his-name-Shu-who-is-Aten, living forever, the great living Aten who is in jubilee, the lord of all that the Disk encircles, lord of sky, lord of earth, lord of the house-of-Aten² in Akhet-Aten; (and of) the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, who lives by Maat, the Lord of the Two Lands,³ Neferkheprure,⁴ Sole-one-of-Re; the Son of Re who lives by great Maat,⁵ the Lord of Crowns, Akhenaten, great in his lifetime; (and) his beloved great Queen, the Lady of the Two Lands, Nefer-nefru-Aten Nefertiti, who lives in health and youth forever. The Vizier, the Fanbearer on the right of the King, ——— Ay, he says:

Splendid you rise in heaven's lightland,
O living Aten, creator of life!
When you have dawned in eastern lightland,
You fill every land with your beauty?
You are beautiful, great, radiant,
High over every land;
Your rays embrace the lands,
To the limit of all that you made.
Being Re, you reach their limits.
You bend them for the son whom you love;
Though you are far, your rays are on earth,
Though one sees you, your strides are unseen.

When you set in western lightland,⁸
Earth is in darkness as if in death;
One sleeps in chambers, heads covered,
One eye does not see another.
Were they robbed of their goods,
That are under their heads,
People would not remark it.
Every lion comes from its den,
All the serpents bite;
Darkness hovers, earth is silent,
As their maker rests in lightland.

1. Translated by Miriam Lichtheim.
2. The translation uses "lightland" for the Egyptian *akhet*, more often rendered "horizon." In the vision of Akhenaten, lightland was primarily on the east, where the sun rose. The two phrases in italics make up the formal name of Akhenaten's god, generally referred to as "(the) Aten." They are written in cartouches like kings' names.
3. Both the temple of the Aten in Akhet-Aten and the whole city as the god's estate.
4. A standard title of Egyptian kings. The Two Lands are Upper and Lower Egypt.
5. The name Akhenaten took when ascending the throne, before he initiated his revolution.

it means "the perfect one of the manifestations of Re." Nefer-nefru-Aten is a comparable name given exceptionally to Akhenaten's queen, Nefertiti: "the perfect one of the perfection/beauty of Aten."
6. The most typical epithet of Akhenaten, who used the central Egyptian concept of Maat ("truth, order, justice") without clearly distinguishing it from its traditional meanings.
7. "Beauty" also means "presence."
8. Contrary to traditional Egyptian belief, the west, the normal abode of the dead, is seen in purely negative terms, as night and the absence of the god's protection.

Earth brightens when you dawn in lightland,
When you shine as Aten of daytime;
As you dispel the dark,
As you cast your rays,
The Two Lands are in festivity,
Awake they stand on their feet,
You have roused them;
Bodies cleansed, clothed,
Their arms adore your appearance.
The entire land sets out to work,
All beasts browse on their herbs;
Trees, herbs are sprouting,
Birds fly from their nests,
Their wings greeting your *ka*?
All flocks frisk on their feet,
All that fly up and alight.
They live when you dawn for them.
Ships fare north, fare south as well,
Roads lie open when you rise;
The fish in the river dart before you,
Your rays are in the midst of the sea.

Who makes seed grow in women,
Who creates people from sperm,
Who feeds the son in his mother's womb,
Who soothes him to still his tears,
Nurse in the womb,
Giver of breath,
To nourish all that he made.
To nourish all that he made,
When he comes from the womb to breathe,
On the day of his birth,
You open wide his mouth,
You supply his needs,
When the chick in the egg speaks in the shell,
You give him breath within to sustain him;
When you have made him complete,
To break out from the egg,
He comes out from the egg,
To announce his completion,
Walking on his legs he comes from it.

How many are your deeds,
Though hidden from sight,
O Sole God beside whom there is none!
You made the earth as you wished, you alone,
All peoples, herds, and flocks;

9. *Ka* normally means the generative principle transmitted through the generations. Here it seems to mean simply the god's manifestation of himself in the sunrise.

1. This could mean either that no god can be compared with the Aten/Re or that he is the only god.

All upon earth that walk on legs,
 All on high that fly on wings,
 The lands of Khor and Kush,²
 The land of Egypt.
 You set every man in his place,
 You supply their needs;
 Everyone has his food,
 His lifetime is counted.
 Their tongues differ in speech,
 Their characters likewise;
 Their skins are distinct,
 For you distinguished the peoples.

You made Hapy in *dat*,³
 You bring him when you will,
 To nourish the people,
 For you made them for yourself.
 Lord of all who toils for them,
 Lord of all lands who shines for them,
 Aten of daytime, great in glory!
 All distant lands, you make them live,
 You made a heavenly Hapy descend for them;
 He makes waves on the mountains like the sea,
 To drench their fields and their towns.
 How excellent are your ways, O Lord of eternity!
 A Hapy from heaven for foreign peoples,
 And all lands' creatures that walk on legs,
 For Egypt the Hapy who comes from *dat*.

Your rays nurse all fields,
 When you shine they live, they grow for you;
 You made the seasons to foster all that you made,
 Winter to cool them, heat that they taste you.
 You made the far sky to shine therein,
 To behold all that you made;
 You alone, shining in your form of living Aten,
 Risen, radiant, distant, near.
 You made millions of forms from yourself alone,
 Towns, villages, fields, the river's course;
 All eyes observe you upon them,
 For you are the Aten of daytime on high.

2. Syria in the north and Sudan in the south.
 3. Hapy is the inundation of the Nile, essential to life in Egypt; *dat* is Egyptian for "underworld," from which the inundation could be

considered to emerge. Other lands that do not have the inundation must be content with rain as an equivalent from the sky; this is then characterized as another Hapy.

You are in my heart,
 There is no other who knows you,
 Only your son, *Neferkheperre, Sole-one-of-Re*,
 Whom you have taught your ways and your might.
 Those on earth come from your hand as you made them,
 When you have dawned they live,
 When you set they die;
 You yourself are lifetime, one lives by you.
 All eyes are on your beauty until you set,
 All labor ceases when you rest in the west;
 When you rise you stir everyone for the King,
 Every leg is on the move since you founded the earth.
 You rouse them for your son who came from your body,
 The King who lives by Maat, the Lord of the Two Lands,
Neferkheperre, Sole-one-of-Re,
 The Son of Re who lives by Maat, the Lord of crowns,
 Akhenaten, great in his lifetime;⁴
 (And) the great Queen whom he loves, the Lady of the Two Lands,
Nefer-nefru-Aten Nefertiti, living forever.⁵

From The Babylonian Creation Epic (Enuma Elish)

When in light no name was given to heaven,
 When the gods were not named,
 They produced Kingu, destined to be king,
 The first-born of Enki, the god of wisdom,
 And Ninurta, the god of war, the second-born,
 They were mingled with water together.
 When (Marduk) heard of this,
 He was rushing to make war,
 He would tell his tale to his father,
 What he thought of in his heart,
 I shall compact blood, I shall cause death to be,
 I shall make stand a human being.

4. When the gods or their cult images were carried to Babylon, they could stay in churches in other cities.
 5. A broken and obscure passage omitted by the translator.
 6. A special epithet adopted by Akhenaten.

7. In the Akhenaten hymns, the epithet "living forever" is a standard one applied to both kings and queens.