

ASTRONOMY 9: HISTORY OF COSMOLOGY
Handout #6

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Origin Myths: The Middle East and Europe

I. Egyptian Cosmology

- Socio-political role of cosmological myth
 - A) *Theology from Memphis* (c. 3000 BCE)
 - Pharaoh Menes unites Upper and Lower Egypt
 - Provincial creator deity Ptah of the new capital, Memphis
 - Establishes superiority over older Atum (Heliopolis)
- Creation through power of speech
 - A) *Theology from Memphis*
 - Words are literally the raw material
 - Creation is directed by the divine heart
- Male fertility as the agent of creation
 - A) *History of the Creation of Gods and the World* (\approx 2400 BCE; hieroglyphics!)
 - Atum arises from primal water/chaos to create order
 - Intercourse with his own shadow (feminine), masturbation
 - Mouth as womb
 - Spits out gods, man and woman, plants and animals

II. Mesopotamian Cosmology

- A) Babylon: *Enuma Elish* (c. 1900 BCE)
 - Probable Sumerian influence; strong influence on Bible
 - Also has political purpose: Marduk (local deity) becomes national supreme Being
 - Beginning: no earth, height, depth, name
 - Apsu (ocean, male) / Tiamat (primal waters, female) create secondary gods:
 - Lahmu / Lahamu (silt / slime)
 - Anshar / Kishar (horizons of sky / earth)
 - Anu / Ea (heaven, authority / earth waters, wisdom, irrigation)
 - Divine discord leads Apsu to attempt infanticide, but Ea kills him with words and begets powerful Marduk
 - Tiamat makes 11 monsters to take revenge
 - Marduk alone is brave enough to defeat her
 - Creates Universe and Time from Tiamat's body
 - Demands position of supreme power as his reward
 - Takes Babylon as home
 - Man created almost as an afterthought: from a slain god (Kingu, instigator of rebellion)

III. Biblical Cosmology

- Two dramatically different creation accounts
- Pervasive influence on Western society
 - A) *Genesis 1-2:3* (c. 400 BCE)
 - “Priestly” (P) school: god-centered, austere, remote
 - Creation of six “days”
 - * 1) Void, waters \Rightarrow heaven/earth, day/night
 - * 2) Land/sea, plants
 - * 3) Stars, sun/moon \Rightarrow time
 - * 4) Sea animals
 - * 5) Land animals, humans (M/F coequal) with “dominion over every living thing”

- * 6) Finishing up
- * 7) Rest (ritual only comes later)
- B) *Genesis 2:4-23* (c. 900 BCE)
 - Older “J” author: anthropocentric, provincial Yahweh
 - Origin is arid earth, not water
 - Order of creation is very different
 - Man first from dry dust
 - Then the Garden (paradise), rivers, forbidden knowledge (good/evil), animals (named by man)
 - Woman from rib, derivative and dependent but necessary for completeness
- C) Creation through speech
 1. *Psalms 33: 6-15* (\approx 600 BCE)
 - Power of the “Word” as literal creative agent
 - Deity as ultimate ruler, judge, commander-in-chief
- D) Deity as ultimate ground of being
 1. *Job 38, 42*
 - Dependent creation (man) cannot question its ordained fate
 - Being takes primacy over justice
 2. *John 1:1-18*
 - Primacy of speech
 - Jesus as the “Word” in physical form

IV. Zoroastrian Myth (Zarathustra b. 590 BCE, Iran)

- Power of numerology and astrology
- Battle of good (Ohrmazd) vs. evil (Ahriman)
 - A) *Speaking of the World*
 - All is change, existence cannot be eternal
 - Creator as “Infinite Time”
 - Ohrmazd creates finite time (12,000 years) and 12 Zodiacal signs
 - B) *Mixing of the Bounteous and Destructive Spirits*
 - Sky, water, earth, etc. created as perfect (static) forms
 - Zorvan (Time) creates motion
 - Allows evil to surface, battle rages on
 - C) *Answer of the Spirit of Wisdom*
 - Origin of evil: Ahriman’s self-sodomy (\Rightarrow demons, lies)
 - Numerology and astrology: 12 (good, zodiac, months/year, 1000s of years of time) and 7 (evil, number of “planets”, days/week)

V. Gnostic

- Physical world as evil realm: light trapped in impure matter
- *Gnosis*: saving knowledge of the true nature
- Man’s only hope is to escape the material world
- Desire return to realm of light/wisdom/spirit
 - A) *Poimandres* (c. 100 AD)
 - Soul is immortal, but trapped in evil, mortal matter
 - “Cause of death is love”
 - Original entrapment due to attraction to divine reflection in Earth’s waters.
 - B) *Creation According to Mani* (215–275 AD)
 - Evil darkness tries to mingle with light
 - Primal man defeated by darkness
 - Living Spirit and Messenger launch rescue missions
 - Adam and Eve created by evil in order to maintain his control(!)
 - Jesus sent to reveal gnosis
 - Adam laments separation from the light/wisdom

VI. Islamic (Mohammed, 570–632 AD, Mecca)

A) *Koran, Sura XVI*

- Allah as the only god, all others insignificant
- Man created from moist germ along with elements of nature

VII. Celtic Cosmology

- Heaven (father) and Earth (mother) united, too close
- No room for children, so one kills Heaven
- Skull \Rightarrow firmament, blood \Rightarrow seas
- Good/bright/upper gods vx. dark/evil/lower Titans
- Titan as lord of darkness and death, but also creator of life!

VIII. Ancient Greece and Rome

- Gods as personifications of natural elements or human traits

A) Pelasgian

- Eurynome (mother/wife) rises from Chaos, divides sea/sky
- North wind as agent of fertilization(!)
- Snake Ophion (son/husband) lays Cosmic Egg \Rightarrow all creation
- Ophion takes all credit and is banished to underworld
- Creates 7 planetary powers and first man (Pelagus)

B) Hesiod: *Theogony*

- Gods of earth, underworld, and Eros are born of Chaos
- Earth (female) gives rise to heaven (male), as an equal
- Plethora of other gods created by the few
- Uranus hates own children and hides them
- One (Kronos) takes revenge by castration
- Kronos eats all his children (prophecy says one will succeed him), but Zeus escapes
- Zeus wages great battles, controls Olympus, fosters male dominance

C) Hesiod: *Five Ages of Man*

- Olympian gods create regressive levels of man
 - 1) Gold: Perfect mortal men
 - 2) Silver: Lesser race, huge babies for 100 years then brief life; hidden away after dishonoring gods
 - 3) Bronze: warlike, strong, self-destructive
 - 4) Heros, demi-gods: sent to edge of the earth
 - 5) Iron: current age, suffering and death
- Ultimate fate: immortality, destruction by Zeus

D) Ovid: *Metamorphoses*

- Primal Chaos shaped into creation by god or nature (origin not specified)
- Man created by god or earth
- Only animal which can face up to heaven