The *Chaoskampf* Myth in the Biblical Tradition

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Three monographs published between 2012 and 2015 are considered here, in particular concerning their treatment of the so-called *Chaoskampf* myth in the Hebrew Bible and in the ancient Near East. The first two, by Gregory Mobley and Bernard Batto, still hold to the traditional Gunkelian approach to this subject and think that the *Chaoskampf* motif of *Enūma elish* is behind Gen. 1 and hence that creation is the result of conflict. While Mobley's view is more ideological and theological, Batto focuses more on the literary and religious aspects of this myth, referring to it as a "Combat Myth." However, as the title of the third monograph shows, Debra Ballentine limits herself to discussing only the conflict myth, mainly that in Ugaritic and Hebrew texts, and avoids the use of the term "chaos." She follows David Tsumura and Rebecca Watson in accepting that there is no connection between these storm images and the creation motif, either in the ancient Near East—except for *Enūma elish*—or in the Bible. Focusing on the *Chaoskampf* mythology and its relationship with the biblical traditions, one can observe sharp differences among the three authors.

Three monographs appearing within four years of each other represent various approaches to the so-called *Chaoskampf* mythology and its relationship with the creation story of the Bible. The first, by Gregory Mobley, gives us a lively prose account of what he calls the "backstories" of the Bible, that is, the reality behind the biblical account. According to him, God did not destroy, but just "barely" subdued, the chaos dragons at the time of creation; hence they are constantly returning to the fore and God must deal with them.

The volume by Bernard F. Batto is a collection of his essays which cover a much wider area of creation motifs than the monographs by Mobley and Ballentine. They deal not only with the *Chaoskampf* mythology but also with subjects such as "Institution of Marriage in Genesis 2," "The Sleeping God," and the "Covenant of Peace." The articles are mostly from the 1980s and 90s, the most recent from 2004, though the undated first chapter is an overview of his earlier articles with a contemporary significance.

The monograph by Debra Scoggins Ballentine is specifically on the theme of the conflict myth and its relationship with the biblical tradition. She begins her book with a discussion of the ideological functions and uses of myths, and clearly distinguishes between the creation motif and the conflict motif in the ancient Near East and biblical traditions, concentrating on the latter motif.

This is a review article of *The Return of the Chaos Monster—And Other Backstories of the Bible*. By Gregory Mobley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. Pp. vi + 241, illus. $42.50; *In the Beginning: Essays on Creation Motifs in the Ancient Near East and the Bible*. By Bernard F. Batto. Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures, vol. 9. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013. Pp. xii + 155. $16 (paper); and *The Conflict Myth and the Biblical Tradition*. By Debra Scoggins Ballentine. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 292. $74.

MOBLEY 2012

Mobley accepts the traditional Gunkelian theory, following Jon D. Levenson (1988), and proceeds to present the *Chaoskampf* as an ideology, established behind the biblical theology. According to him, the entire story relates how God manages the power of chaos, namely the power of evil in the form of the chaos dragon.

Mobley divides the entire biblical story into seven sub-stories, or "backstories":

> 1) God has subdued chaos, just barely. 2) God has given humans an instruction manual for life on planet Earth so they can partner with God in the management of chaos. 3) God has enacted the tough love of moral cause and effect in order to reward fidelity to the instruction manual and to support management of the chaos. 4) God enlists prophets to mediate this dynamic partnership upon which the health of creation depends. 5) Through praise humans release energy that augments God's management of the chaos; through lament humans report on the quality of God's management of the chaos. 6) Here and there, humans catch a glimpse of the divine design for chaos management; living according to these insights is another expression of the partnership. 7) There are times when chaos gains the upper hand and humans in partnership with God can only hope that God is able, as in the beginning, to subdue chaos. (p. 1)

In this way Mobley looks at the entirety of biblical history from the dark side of human reality in terms of a single theme: "how to make meaning from the chaos of experience, the human condition," or, "the dynamic interplay of order and chaos" (pp. 2, 9).

Mobley challenges the traditional view that Genesis 1 describes *creation ex nihilo*. He claims that "the primeval cosmic soup is there from the beginning" and, quoting Levenson (1988: 17), that "the confinement of chaos rather than its elimination is the essence of creation" (p. 20). He further holds that "priestly theologians buried this story of creation through a competition between the Lord and the dragon of chaos below the surface of their measured prose in Genesis 1, but in the less-constrained discourse of biblical poetry the dragon breaks free. A primordial battle between God and a dragon of chaos, called Leviathan or Rahab, is recalled in these psalms that celebrate creation: … Ps. 74:14, 16–17, 89:10–12, Isa. 51:9 . . ." (pp. 16–17).

For him, creation in Genesis 1 is not about making things out of nothing; it is about bringing definition, identity, and differentiation (i.e., "function" in Walton's terminology [2011]) to the amorphous chaos, the *tohu wabohu*, the "wild and waste" (pp. 20–21).

Thus, Mobley's book is a kind of popularization of Levenson's thesis, with a keen postmodern sensitivity toward the stories, and the backstories, applying the methods of intertextuality and noting the resonance of the chaos motif throughout the Christian Bible. This way of reading the Bible is a reflection of the premise of this book "that the Bible is best understood as wholly narrative, with a single theme: the dynamic interplay of order and chaos" (p. 9). This, of course, is the conscious introduction of a kind of cosmic dualism, taking chaos as evil, into the biblical creation story. Karl Barth in his massive *Church Dogmatics* made an effort not to bring this into the biblical doctrine of creation.[1] But he was not really successful, for he recognized a residue of cosmic dualism by accepting two elements of *Chaos*, namely the *tehom*-water and "darkness" in Gen. 1:2, which were *not* created by God.[2]

1. Barth 1960: 289–368 (§50); see Tsumura 2005: 36–57.

2. See the argument by Childs (1962: 34–37). Childs, a pupil of Barth, explains: "The chaos is a reality rejected by God. It forms no part of the creation, but exists nevertheless as a threatening possibility" (p. 43). Mobley's monograph is certainly in line with this traditional understanding of the *chaos* and the *Chaoskampf* myth in the Bible.

However, Mobley's reconstruction of the story simply follows the Gunkelian theory and is mainly based on the fragmentary references to Canaanite mythologies and highly speculative. He totally ignores my criticism of Gunkelian theory in my books (Tsumura 1989 and 2005).[3]

Mobley thus simply repeats the traditional understanding of the *Chaoskampf* myth, which was undoubtedly a divine conflict between two sides. As he says, the Babylonian creation epic "*Enuma Elish* tells the story of how Marduk, a storm god and patron of the city-state Babylon, subdued Mother Ocean in primordial times [line 106] and / then created the orderly world from her body parts [line 137]" (pp. 17–18). Victory over the force of chaos is thus understood as "creation."

Creation, in this framework, is the act of bringing order out of chaos, by defeating the dragon of chaos. However, this pattern is unique among the Mesopotamian cosmogonic myths. Even in *Enūma elish*, the so-called chaos dragon Tiamat is not chaotic from the beginning. In their initial state, before the storm god Marduk came onto the stage, the two watery elements, Apsu and Tiamat, were mingling harmoniously. The fight reflects the natural phenomenon that the sea rages when the storm wind wages "war" against the sea. Thus, the sea goddess Tiamat becomes "chaotic" in the face of the storm god Marduk.

The Gunkelian hypothesis assumes that creation was always brought about as the result of the victory over the chaos dragon as in *Enūma elish*. Hermann Gunkel (1895, 2006) saw the influence of this myth behind Gen. 1:2, Pss. 74, 89, Isa. 51, etc. However, as I have demonstrated (Tsumura 2005, 2007), one should note that among the ancient Near Eastern myths, only *Enūma elish* has the motifs of both conflict and creation, while in Ps. 74 there is no reason why we should see a creation (i.e., "origination") motif in the defeat of the enemies of God, symbolized by Leviathan and dragons.

BATTO 2013

Batto's monograph (2013) is a collection of eight of his papers, the first and last of which had not been published before and serve as "bookends" to the volume. The first essay, "The Ancient Near Eastern Context of the Hebrew Ideas of Creation" gives a concise overview of the various ancient Near Eastern "conceptions of creation" and also describes the "cultural context within which to view biblical conceptions of creation and the Creator in the opening chapters of Genesis" (p. 1) The last piece, "The Malevolent Deity in Mesopotamian Myth," with a section "The Chaos Monster Tradition," deals with "the Mesopotamian manifestation of the eternal human quest for the origin of evil." The previously published articles explore "in novel ways" various creation motifs.

The final chapter was originally presented at the annual meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association in 2006. The first article mentions some more recent articles in its notes, including Oswalt 2009 and Pitard 2013. Virtually all bibliographical references are pre-2000. Thus, though the monograph was published in 2013, he simply follows the Gunkelian tradition and makes no attempt here to deal with recent criticisms of that theory. For that we have to look to his 2013 article (Batto 2013a).

3. Eric M. Vail in his doctoral thesis (2012) deals with both Levenson's position (1988) and mine (2005), as well as with that of Catherine Keller (2003). Suggesting a new *creatio ex nihilo* framework, Vail avoids using the term "chaos" in his discussion of the doctrine of creation, following Tsumura 2005, and says that "any notion of there being anything that pre-exists God's creative activity is being rejected; such a dualism creates more problems than it answers" (2012: 211).

In this article Batto responds in detail to Watson's (2005) criticisms of Gunkel. However, he mentions my work on the subject only once, citing my 2005 book (p. 219 n. 5), saying just "Tsumura similarly rejects Gunkel's hypothesis that the *Chaoskampf* motif of *Enūma elish* lies behind the biblical idea of creation in Genesis . . . Tsumura maintains that Combat Myth motifs are absent in the rest of the Hebrew Bible as well." But although my 1989 book is earlier than Watson's work, Batto simply dismisses my argument without scrutinizing my critical views of 2005 and 2007.

Batto uses the term "the Combat Myth" as the English equivalent of the *Chaoskampf* myth in the context of creation and without any clarification of its meaning, although clearly combat in general does not involve creation. However, in my 2005 monograph as well as in Tsumura 2007 and 2015a, I demonstrate that among ancient Near Eastern myths, the creation motif and the conflict motif coexist only in *Enūma elish*. For example, in the Baal myth of Ugarit, only the motif of conflict exists; there is no creation motif. For another thing, the storm god Baal, the Ugaritic counterpart of Marduk, was never a creator god in Ugaritic mythology.[4] Batto should have responded to my arguments in his article (2013a) for the special volume edited by JoAnn Scurlock and Richard Beal (2013) on Gunkel's *Chaoskampf* hypothesis, even if he did not in his monograph.

Furthermore, Batto deals here with four poetic texts, Pss. 74:13–17, 89:9–13, Job 9:5–10, 26:7–13, which he thinks have the conflict motif *within the context of creation* (p. 231, my italics). He holds that Psalm 74 is "perhaps the most explicit in terms of actual combat terminology." However, I have demonstrated (2015a) that the verb *pārartā* in v. 13 cannot mean 'to separate, divide' but rather 'to break'. Thus the foundation for taking vv. 13–14, which mention a dragon, as having its background in the Mesopotamian *Chaoskampf* myth—where the corpse of Tiamat is split or divided by Marduk to "create" heavens and earth—is lost. In other words, vv.13–14 simply depict the conflict motif *without* the creation motif.

While Batto takes the reference to "God's drying up 'ever-flowing springs' in Ps 74:15" as "probably another reference to the deity's conflict with primordial aquatic foes," "ever-flowing streams" (*nahărôt*) are hardly likely to be Yahweh's foes, and no creation motif can be seen here. It should be noted that the result of the conflict described in vv. 13–14 is depicted as destructive in v. 14b, "you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness" (ESV), whatever its exact meaning might be, and vv. 15–17 depict Yahweh's "organizing" or ordering the created world rather than his activity of "originating." In this sense, Yahweh's activity in Ps. 74 may be compared not with El's creation activity, but with Baal's ordering activity as a warrior-king in Ugaritic mythology. These activities of Yahweh in the entire context of vv. 13–17 are certainly suitable to the image of the God who is the King "from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth" (v. 12).

BALLENTINE 2015

In chapter 1 Ballentine discusses the ideological functions and uses of myth, and in chapter 2 deals with the conflict topos in mythologies such as the Akkadian *Anzu*, *Enūma elish*, and the Ugaritic *Baʿlu Cycle*. Then in chapter 3 (pp. 73–126), she concentrates on the conflict motif both in the Bible and the Ugaritic myth—in sections such as "Victorious Warrior Deities: ʿAnatu, Baʿlu, and Yahweh," "Yahweh's Combat against the Sea/Dragon and Its Relevance for Humans," "Divine Combat within Historiography: Combined Conflict and Exodus Motifs," and "Yahweh versus Human Enemies: Combat with Contemporary 'Dragons'." The next two chapters are fairly short, the first on "Continued Adaptation: The Conflict Motif and

4. See especially Tsumura 2005: 53–57.

the Eschaton," including a discussion on "Jesus/*Christos* as the Divine Warrior," and the next on "The Motif of Yahweh's Authority over the Sea and the Legitimacy of Individuals: Claiming versus Having Power over the Sea." The conclusion of the monograph has the subtitle "Leave 'Chaos' Out of It."

Following my contention that we must distinguish between the conflict motif and the creation motif in the ancient Near Eastern mythologies, Ballentine limits the subject of her monograph to the conflict myth, putting creation aside. So, throughout this study, she "avoid[s] the term 'chaos' as well as *Chaoskampf* except when directly quoting others." As she rightly notes, "'Chaos' is not an accurate characterization of the various enemies featured across articulations of the ancient West Asian conflict topos" (p. 186).

Ballentine makes a distinction between the conflict motif and the creation motif. She appreciates my "critique of former reconstructions of how conflict and creation motifs are related in ancient West Asian traditions." Ballentine's presentation thus supports and complements my arguments. But she thinks that my treatment "overlooks the ideological work that the conflict motif (as distinct from, but often occurring with, the creation motif) accomplishes" (p. 123). However, in my monograph I purposely avoided getting into a theoretical argument concerning the ideological functions and uses of myth.

In her book, Ballentine holds that "authors employed the conflict motif in order to make a statement about the authority of particular preferred deities (Adad, Baʿlu, and Yahweh), particular kings … and to portray disfavored agents and polities (Egypt, …) as destined for defeat, by referencing divine combat with the sea/sea-dragon outside of a full narrative articulation of this combat" (p. 124). Thus her monograph places itself on a surer foundation so that she may go further into a meaningful discussion of the conflict myths in the ancient Near East.

CONCLUSION

I should like to repeat the points that Watson and I have argued persistently: "There is no connection, though, between these sea-storm images and the creation motif, either in the ancient Near Eastern literatures (except *Enūma elish*) or in the Bible" (Tsumura 2005: 195). As for Ps. 74:13–14, which is often said to reflect a *Chaoskampf*, the fact that it has "nothing to do with the creation motif" (Tsumura 2005: 194) is reconfirmed in my 2015a paper, where I demonstrate that the root *prr in v. 13 never means 'to divide, split'. It means 'to break'. Hence, the expression has nothing to do with the motif of the division of the corpse of Tiamat in *Enūma elish*.[5]

In my forthcoming articles (2021a, b, and c), I debate with N. Wyatt, and again demonstrate that the terms "chaos" and *Chaoskampf* are not suitable for describing the biblical phenomena. Rebecca Watson and I have been joined by Mark S. Smith, who has expressed his intention to "follow suit and avoid the translation, 'chaos'" (2010: 234). One should note that even the translators of LXX avoided using the term "chaos" for the Hebrew *tōhû* in Gen. 1:2, while it appears twice in the Minor Prophets to mean 'abyss' or 'valley' (see Tsumura 2012).

The basis of of Gunkel's theory is that the "deep" of Gen. 1:2 is a reflection of the Ti'amat of *Enūma elish*. However, this is impossible. The *təhôm* of Gen. 1 is the purely NW Semitic *thm* meaning 'underground water'; the NW Semitic counterpart of Akk. *ti'āmtu* 'sea' is definitely *ym*, as in Ugaritic, a word that appears for the first time in the Genesis story in v. 10. In other words, NW Semitic *thm* is not a demythologization of the mythological Ti'amat. Furthermore, it is linguistically impossible to take NW Semitic *thm* as a loanword from Akk.

5. This article appeared too late for Ballentine 2015.

Ti'amat, which corresponds in meaning to West Semitic *yām* (see Tsumura 1989: 45–65; 2005: 36–57).

It is now time to rethink the phrase *creatio ex nihilo*, without identifying *nihilo* with "chaos" or the like. The fact that Irenaeus had no intention of introducing *chaos* into theology, though he could have, and the fact that the translators of LXX avoided using the term "chaos" for *tōhû wābōhû* (Gen. 1:2), though again they could have,[6] should not be ignored. The theological term *creatio ex nihilo* must be understood as describing the situation where nothing exists without God's creative activity. In other words, anything that exists, except God himself, exists as the result of God's creative activity. The theological or ideological phrase *creatio ex nihilo* is most reasonably interpreted as a single idiom, the elements of which should not be separated from one another. In other words, the idiom as a whole constitutes a single lexeme, which cannot be divided.

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6. For "chaos" in Hesiod's *Theogony* and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, see Sonik 2013.

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