

The Role of Chaos in the Old Testament Creation Narrative
by Matthew Clendineng

Index

- 2.....**Introduction**
- 4.....**The Purpose Behind the Genesis Creation Story**
 - 7.....Mythology and Ritual
- 9.....**Genesis 1-9 in Comparison to Other Creation Mythologies**
 - 10.....Major Stories
 - 12.....Minor Stories
 - 13.....Common Ancestry
 - 14.....Commonalities and Discontinuities
- 15.....**Interpreting Genesis 1-9**
 - 15.....Genesis 1:1
 - 16.....Genesis 1:2
 - 17.....Genesis 1:3-2:3
 - 18.....Genesis 2-3
 - 18.....Genesis – Preflood
 - 19.....Genesis – Flood
 - 20.....Other Old Testament Creation Accounts
- 20.....**Creation *Ex Nihilo* vs. Creation out of Initial Chaos**
 - 20.....*Creatio Ex Nihilo*
 - 21.....Creation out of initial chaos
 - 22.....Difficulties
 - 23.....The Issues of Theodicy and Sin
- 24.....**Discerning Between Real and Metaphorical Entities**
 - 25.....Were Adam and Eve real people?
 - 25.....Adam and Eve as a Literal Account
 - 26.....Adam and Eve as Metaphors or Literary Inventions
 - 26.....Adam and Eve as Neolithic man
 - 27.....The Serpent
 - 28.....The Satan
 - 29.....The Chaos Monsters
- 30.....**A Christian Conception of Sin**
 - 30.....The Nature of Evil and Sin in a Chaotic World
- 32.....**Works Cited and Consulted**

First off, nothing. No light, no time, no substance, no matter. Second off, God starts it all up and WHAP! Stuff everywhere! The cosmos in chaos: no shape, no form, no function— just darkness ... total. And floating above it all, God's Holy Spirit, ready to play. Day one: Then God's voice booms out, 'Lights!' and, from nowhere, light floods the skies and 'night' is swept off the scene. (Lacey 2004, 1)

In this way, Rob Lacey, in his bible paraphrase, retells the account of creation in Genesis 1:1-3. Hidden within its theatric presentation, Lacey tells a story consistent with the most common contemporary understanding of Biblical creation. This understanding is that God created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, the basic matter of existence and then began to form that matter into the universe, the earth, and eventually human life.

An understanding of creation plays an important role in an individual's understanding of Christianity. How God created the universe reveals something about that Creator. The purpose behind God's creating act reveals something about the purpose of mankind. An understanding of human origins reveals something about human destiny. For these reasons, and many more, humanity (both inside and outside of the Judeo-Christian heritage) have speculated about the origins of humanity and the universe for all of recorded history.

Over the last eighty years (and perhaps longer) the majority of Christian children have been taught that before God created there was only God. Then God created substance out of nothing. Then God formed that substance into the creation which that child experiences around them. God formed this creation over seven days culminating in the creation of Adam and Eve, who lived in a special place with no sin or death.

Adam and Eve eventually disobeyed God and brought sin and death into the world. Mankind continued to disobey God until God was so fed up that it was decided to destroy the world. However, a guy named Noah was faithful to God, so God told Noah to build an ark and he and his family would be saved from God's destruction. Noah and his family were the only survivors of a world-wide flood. They worshipped God and began to repopulate the earth.

As a child, this story makes perfect sense, but as that child grows older it can become harder for him or her to reconcile this story with the creation they experience. The toddler begins to wonder where all the water came from and where it went. The child begins to wonder how a snake could talk. The adolescent begins to wonder who Adam and Eve's children and Noah's grandchildren married. The teen begins to wonder how the theory of evolution fits into this story. The adult begins to wonder how a perfect God could mess up in making a perfect creation.

Ultimately that grownup child, who once believed whole-heartedly, comes to the conclusion that if God created everything, then God must have created evil; how can a perfect God create evil? For many, this is the point where their faith breaks and they flee from the beliefs they were taught as a child.

Surely there is a better way to understand the Genesis account of creation. The purpose of this paper is to begin exploring a path toward that better way. This paper will examine the purpose behind the recording of the creation account. It will explore the culture in which this account was written so that it might be understood as the original readers would have understood the account. The paper will then attempt to interpret the Genesis creation account against this cultural backdrop with a focus on the presence of chaos. Given that interpretation, it will explore the possibility of Adam and Eve, the serpent, the Satan and the Old Testament Chaos monsters as

real or metaphorical entities. The paper will then conclude with a brief examination of the implications of the explored chaos-creation relationship for a Christian conception of sin.

The Purpose Behind the Genesis Creation Story

The first key in understanding the creation account presented in the first nine chapters of Genesis is to understand the purpose behind the book's creation. Why was the book of Genesis written down? Even a strict inspirationalist who believes God dictated the words of Genesis to Moses will admit that there must have been a purpose behind the recording of this account.

The purpose of Genesis was not to reveal the nature of events but to reveal the nature of God. In order to support this claim it is necessary to look briefly at the nature of written history.

To a modern ear the word 'history' means a science of exploring the past. Modern man expects those who record history to do so objectively, recording events exactly as they occurred without a great deal of conjecture or speculation.

To the ancient Greeks, history had a different meaning. "The ancient Greek historian defined evidence as that which seemed vividly realistic, so vividly realistic as to seem self-evident to the human mind." (Noll 2001, 59) Historians, in the Greek context, were not as concerned with what actually happened, nor were they concerned with being objective. Rather, the Greek historians were concerned with recording events as they logically must have happened.

A modern historian desires to demonstrate that his or her hypothesis makes best sense of all available data...The ancient historian made a decision about the reality of the past, narrated that version, and put down his pen. (Noll 2001, 62)

These Greek historians were not being deceitful when they invented details; rather they were telling the truth the best way they knew how.

There are three distinct kinds of truth that a historian can record: truth which corresponds to a real past, truth which is a genuine experience of human nature, and truth which is a logically coherent system of thought. (Noll 2001, 68) Modern historians tend to focus on the first kind of truth and generally believe that they can achieve a recording of this truth. The Greek historians focused on the second two forms of truth.

The question which must be asked when exploring the creation accounts of Genesis is, what kind of truth is being recorded? If the Genesis creation account is truth in the modern sense, truth which corresponds to a real past, then the Genesis creation accounts are very straightforward and must be read literally. If, however, these accounts are true in one of the other two senses, (as this paper contends) then we must begin exploring the Genesis creation story not as the revelation of events, but as the revelation of the nature of God.

There are many reasons for exploring the cosmogony presented in Genesis as a revelation of God rather than a revelation of science. The most important of these is that Creation is not the main focus of the book of Genesis. Certainly creation plays a key role in this book of origins, but the main focus is the sovereignty of God. The creation account exists to establish this sovereignty and illustrate it in a very powerful way.

Walton in his commentary on Genesis suggests that it is inappropriate to separate creation, nature and history. The three are really one string bound together by God to demonstrate God's sovereignty.

God alone is sovereign. The acts of creation should not be isolated from nature and history. The three merge together and blend into a seamless continuum. This continuum is a demonstration of God's independent, autonomous position as the sole and ultimate source of power and knowledge in the cosmos. (Walton 2001, 49)

This point is driven home as one explores the nation of Israel more deeply. As Anderson points out, "The axis of Israel's faith was not cosmology (space) but history (time). (Anderson 2005, 118)

The nation of Israel, from which the Genesis creation account stemmed, did not focus on the cosmological aspects of this account; rather the focus was on the history. There was a time when God created, and at that time God choose two people to culminate the creation: Adam and Eve. The focus is on the history and the relationships, not on the cosmos and scientific laws.

It is modern man who has shifted the focus away from history and relationships and toward science and 'truth'. Christians have shifted the focus because they have felt threatened by Darwinism, comparative religionists who seek to reduce their religion to one of many from the Ancient Near East, and Literary Critics who wish to point out perceived inconsistencies. Modern Christians have felt the need to absolutely defend creation as a 'fact' so as not to lose a part of their faith.

Ironically, by focusing on proving the cosmology, Christians have largely missed the point of the creation narrative. In this way Christians, themselves, have worked to limit the sovereignty of God by attempting to prove the science behind this account of creation. These

Christians have limited the scope of the creation narrative to a revelation of events, rather than a revelation of the all-powerful nature of God.

God has always been in control of nature, creation, and history. Israel believed that God was present and active in each of these areas, and the continuation of nature, creation and history was dependent upon God's presence. "they believed that people could water crops all they wanted, but they would not grow unless God so ordained...nothing in the earthly realm happened independently of the heavenly realm." (Walton 2001, 50)

For Israel the forces of nature were subjects of God, just as much as each and every person was a subject of God. Yahweh, the God of Israel was not dependent upon history, nature, or creation; Yahweh was sovereign over all.

Mythology and Ritual

The ancient world did have a branch of knowledge upon which would have been placed an importance equivalent to the importance modern man places on science. This branch of knowledge was mythology. Understanding mythology allowed a person in the ancient Near East to understand how the culture must act in order to get the best results from the land, the animals, and nature. Mythology was the science of the ancient Near East.

To this end, an understanding of ancient near east mythology is necessary for a proper understanding of how Israel would have read the Genesis creation narrative. The readers would have been very familiar with other nations' mythologies and they would have understood how the various rituals of these other nations led to better land production, greater fertility, and favorable weather. Furthermore, "The mythological literature of the ancient Near East is

relevant to all of Genesis because it provides an understanding of how people thought about deity in the ancient world.” (Walton 2001, 27)

There are themes which run throughout the various mythological systems of the ancient Near East. These themes or, mythologem, have an implicit conceptual consistency. (Mills 2003, 6) This consistency was most likely brought about by the interplay of the various mythologies that would occur when different cultures met in trade or conflict.

Myths reflect some aspect of reality and are, at the very least, “a part of the community’s traditional self-understanding.” (Mills 2003, 4) Therefore a given mythology will eventually lead a culture to develop rituals. A ritual seeks to shape the cosmic events of which mythology speaks. Ritual “is the means by which the community seeks to exercise some measure of control over those same cosmic events.” (Mills 2003, 2)

It is appropriate to speak of the Genesis narrative as a mythology. It is a way of understanding the Deity of Israel; Yahweh. Calling the creation narrative a mythology in no way calls into question its truth (in any of the meanings of that term). Rather, calling the Genesis creation narrative a mythology allows for it to be studied along side other works to which would have naturally been compared to it by its original audience.

Summing up the Purpose

The Genesis creation account is not a modern scientific account of creation, rather it is an account which seeks to reveal the nature of God; its concern is theological truth not scientific truth. Galileo wrote in *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina*, 1616 “the Bible teaches us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go.” (Berry 2006, 517)

- 8 -

Copyright ©2009 Matthew Clendineng

This article may be downloaded for personal use only. Any other use requires prior permission of the author.

The creation account sets the beginning point for Christianity. It starts in chaos, in the wilderness, with sin. Eventually the Bible will end with God's victory over chaos, in a holy civilization, endowed with salvation. The narrative begins to establish a case for God's mastery and sovereignty over all things. This mastery will eventually lead to the salvation of all mankind:

Salvation shows God's mastery over the chaos that came about because of sin.

Eventually all chaos will be subdued as God establishes his kingdom forever and the forces of chaos are finally destroyed, not just balanced, limited, or contained.

This is the story of eschatology. (Walton 2001, 724)

Genesis 1-9 in Comparison to Other Creation Mythologies

We have established that the Genesis account of creation is not the only creation mythology which existed in the ancient Near East. There are many other mythologies which could be learned and explored. Two major mythologies will be discussed in this paper and three stories of lesser relevance will also be mentioned.

Many Christians have tried to make the claim that the Genesis creation narrative must have been first and then other narratives were written based on the Genesis story. This seems to be an unjustifiable theory. There is beyond sufficient evidence to suggest that both the *Enuma Elish* story and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* existed before the Genesis account was recorded.

It also seems plausible that certain aspects of the Genesis account may have been written in response to foreign creation narratives. There seem to be places where allusions are made to

foreign deities in an attempt to, almost, emasculate them. Exploring these subtleties helps a reader understand more about what is being revealed about the nature of God.

One mythologem that this paper will explore in depth is the theme of chaos within the different creation accounts. “Throughout the Ancient Near East there was a conception of a primary watery emptiness and darkness, with creation as a divine act *ex nihilo* and humans made for the service of gods.” (Berry 2006, 517) Over and over in creation mythologies there are battles with chaos itself, and with monsters which represent chaos. These battles will be explored in depth.

Major Stories

The two major creation narratives which compare to the Genesis Creation narrative are the *Enuma Elish* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The breadth of these accounts will not be recorded here, rather we will focus on a few salient facts (for further detail see Walton, Waltke, or Mills).

In the *Enuma Elish* story the god Marduk kills Tiamat, a sea God, and uses her corpse to create the cosmos. Marduk then becomes the supreme god in the heavens. Man is eventually created in order to do the work of the younger gods. (Walton 2001, 29)

The sea is one of the main representations of chaos in the ancient world; for Marduk to defeat Tiamat, a sea god, is a representation of chaos being defeated. It is interesting also that this initial chaos is formed into a creation: the earth, stars, plants, animals, and eventually man. A similar theme can be read to occur in Genesis.

Another similarity to the Genesis account is the linguistic nature of its opening sentences. “both the *Enuma elish* and Genesis 1:2-3 begin with circumstantial clauses followed by the

main account of creation.” (Waltke 1975, 328) It is possible that the Genesis creation account was following a cultural norm in introducing it’s story.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the account of Gilgamesh vainly searching for immortality. Along the way Gilgamesh’s companion Enkidu is created by the gods, together they defeat Huwawa, a chaos monster, and Enkidu is killed by the gods who created him. After Enkidu’s death Gilgamesh mourns profusely and seeks out Utnapishtim, a Noah type character who attained immortality through a flood. Gilgamesh can not receive immortality in this way, but he learns of a plant of life growing at the bottom of the sea. Gilgamesh finds this plant, but before he can eat it a serpent devours it. Gilgamesh accepts that he will eventually die and returns home. (Walton 2001, 28)

There are numerous allusions to the battle against chaos in the Gilgamesh epic. There is the battle with Huwawa, Utnapishtim and the flood, the plant of life in the sea, and the serpent. However another metaphor for chaos in this story is death itself.

“His refusal to accept the certainty of his own death is part of a larger pattern – the refusal to accept the reality of the chaotic. By now accepting the inevitability of his own death, Gilgamesh also accepts the fact that the chaotic is a part of his own history.” (Mills 2003, 46)

Death may represent three stages in Gilgamesh’s spiritual development. First, he defies death (chaos) by fighting Huwawa, then he denies it in his excessive grief for Enkidu, then Gilgamesh accepts it as inevitable and an inseparable part of life.

Minor Stories

There are at least three minor stories which also share features with the Genesis creation story. Some may have been written previous to or after the writing of Genesis.

In the “Tale of Adapa,” Adapa misses out on immortality by refusing to eat food from the gods that turns out to be the “food of life.” (Walton 2001, 28) This is one of many accounts with includes a food which seems to give immortality.

In the “Atrahasis Epic,” the lower deities tire of their work and create humans. However, the gods find the noise of the humans overwhelming and send plagues and eventually a flood to destroy them. Atrahasis, King of Shuruprak, learns of the coming flood and builds a boat to save himself and a few of his subjects. (Walton 2001, 28) This story has obvious parallels to the flood story in Genesis.

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus chooses to leave the known and experience the chaos of crossing the sea in order to return home. In all previous narratives the hero has aspired to be more than human and this aspiration has led him into conflict with chaos. In the *Odyssey* the mortality of Odysseus is not an issue. Rather, Odysseus’s conflict with chaos (the sea) is a necessary consequence of striving to be human. (Mills 2003, 126)

Common ancestry

The nation of Israel shared an ancestry with Canaan. They came from that land and returned to that land. Israel shared much of their culture with the peoples of Canaan. It seems entirely plausible that they would share literary structures and themes.

- 12 -

Copyright ©2009 Matthew Clendineng

This article may be downloaded for personal use only. Any other use requires prior permission of the author.

“continuity of literary structure comes as no surprise, for Israel belonged physically to the peoples of the ancient Near East. Her language was Canaanite and her literary compositions, in their physical outward form, conformed to the literary conventions of her age.” (Waltke 1975, 329)

Due to their proximity to the cultures of Canaan it also seems that Israel wrote some of her literature in response to those competing cultures. Psalms 24:2 reads:

for he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the waters. (NIV)

God founded the earth upon the ‘seas’ (*yammim*), and established it upon the ‘river’ (*neharoth*). This echoes the myth of divine victory over the powers of chaos, specifically named Sea (*Yam*) and River (*Nahar*) in Canaanite mythological texts. (Anderson 2005, 79)

It seems likely that not only did Israel borrow literary structure from her neighbors, but also wrote some of her literature with an eye to snubbing foreign deities. By pluralizing sea and river, the poet has taken away the power of the foreign God and contributed it to Yahweh.

However, as Waltke writes, “No umbilical cord attached the faith of Moses and his successors with the other religions of the ancient Near East.” (Waltke 1975, 330) The religion of Israel seems to be a unique religion in the ancient Near East. While it may have borrowed literary structure and written in response to other mythological/religious systems, it was not

derived from them. The one God, Yahweh, is absolutely different from the gods of the other nations.

Commonalities and Discontinuities

The main thread that links the Genesis creation stories to other ancient Near East mythologies is the focus on chaos. Yahweh divides the waters of chaos. Marduk divides Tiamat, who represents chaos. The main difference is that for Yahweh there was no battle, Yahweh had absolute control over the powers of chaos. Marduk had to earn his power by defeating Tiamat. (Greenstein 2001, 6)

The main difference between Genesis and the other creation accounts is the Monotheistic God of the Bible. All the other accounts involve battle between deities who personified nature. Yahweh is not a nature deity; Yahweh has absolutely sovereignty over nature. “Yahweh, the God of Israel, did not consist of the forces of nature but stood majestically transcendent above them.” (Waltke 1975, 332)

Because God is sovereign, God is not subject to constraints, such as chaos, as the other deities are. God does not have appease other gods, or thwart their plans. Yahweh works calmly to craft the creation. There is no danger of Yahweh being defeated by chaos or any other force. Therefore, chaos becomes a tool for God; something to be used to help create. (Mills 2003, 149)

Perhaps the best example of God using chaos as one of God’s tools is when the Israelites are making their exodus from Egypt. God stops the chaos of the water at the Reed Sea and allows Israel to cross. Then God uses the chaos of the waters to destroy the Egyptian army.

God is not subject to chaos. It is the nature of God to have dominion over all forces.
God is Sovereign over all.

Interpreting Genesis 1-9

Genesis 1:1

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Genesis 1:1 (NIV)

Many scholars seem to agree that “the beginning” in Genesis 1:1 should be read as a summary statement or introduction to that which follows. Both Waltke and Rooker, who in their interpretation of Genesis 1:1-3 agree on very little, agree on this one issue. (Waltke 1975, 226; Rooker 1992, 321) Nothing is actually being created in this verse; rather it is a literary summary similar to that found in the *Enuma Elish*.

The other term that must be made note of is the term created (*bara*). This term is only found in the Bible with God as its subject, therefore it seems safe to assume that *bara* must be a characteristically divine act. (Walton 2001, 70) It is also important to note that *bara* does not suggest manufacturing but rather the planning and implementing of a design.

This opens up an interesting question: did matter exist before creation? If manufacturing is not the meaning of *bara* then it seems quite possible for there to have been preexisting matter. We have said previously that the point of Genesis is not to establish science, but the nature of God. For this reason Genesis is not clear on the preexistence of matter. The book’s concern is not the existence of matter but the fixing of destinies. (Walton 2001, 71)

Genesis 1:2

“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” Genesis 1:2 (NIV)

If verse 1 truly is a summary statement, then there is not way to understand verse 2 other than as preexistent material. The seas of chaos that existed before “the beginning”. If this is a proper reading, then God’s creation in Genesis is an act of bringing order to chaos; it is an act of bringing form to the formless and substance to the empty.

As we discovered earlier, other ancient Near East gods demonstrated their power by defeating chaos or holding it at bay. Yahweh’s power is such that there is no need to defeat or hold it at bay; rather Yahweh creates out of it. As we have previously said, chaos is Yahweh’s tool for creation. (Walton 2001, 72)

This chaos is not God’s perfect creation and it may not be the ultimate will of God to allow chaos to exist.

it is significant that in the new and perfect cosmos to come there will be no sea (Rev 2:1) and in the new Jerusalem associated with I there will be no darkness (Rev 21:25). This revelation about the new cosmos suggests that the deep and darkness in verse 2 are less than desirable and were not called into existence by the God of order and goodness. (Waltke 1975, 221)

Genesis 1:3-2:3

It seems that 1:1 is an introductory statement that sets up the story of creation and 1:2 is the situation prior to creation. The verses that follow, 1:3-2:3, is the actual creation process. Waltke divides this creation process into three steps: 1:3-31 is the narrative of creation, 2:1 is the concluding summary statement, and 2:2-3 is an epilogue that establishes the Sabbath rest. (Waltke 1975, 228)

The establishment of the Sabbath seems to be the climax of the creation account. The pattern of the days seems to build up to the Sabbath day and coronate it as the highest of the days; a day which belongs to Yahweh.

This is the best way to interpret the significance of the days of creation. To assign them with scientific significance would be antithetical to the intent of the text. The purpose of the creation account is to reveal the nature of God not to reveal events. The text regarding the days of creation reveals that God is seeking to establish a day that belongs to God; a holy day. To interpret the days as 24 hours, or periods of time, or dispensations, or even a literary framework is to miss the big picture.

“In the ancient Near East one of the major objectives of the gods as they became involved in creative activity was to create a resting place for themselves.” (Walton 2001, 150) This seems to have been God’s aim in the garden of Eden. It seems to have been God’s aim with the establishment of the Sabbath. It was certainly God’s aim in forming the ark of the covenant in Israel’s later history.

Genesis 2-3

The second and third chapters of Genesis create a series of transitions from nonfunctional to functional conditions. First, there is not food so God provides food. Then there is no means of reproduction so God provides woman. Then humanity disobeys God so God drives them out of the garden. (Walton 2001, 179-180)

When man is inline with God's order he is provided blessings (food and reproduction), when man is out of line with God's order he receives punishment (banishment from the garden). "One of the most important lessons humanity must learn...is that God is God and humans are not." (Greenstein 2001, 8) God is the one who creates order and allows that order to flourish. Man must operate within God's created order or he will be banished outside of God's order into chaos.

Genesis – Preflood

Because man has chosen to live outside of God's order, he has moved into a world of disorder and chaos; a world of sin apart from God. The chaos and disorder of this world is a nonfunctional condition which God eventually seeks to correct.

God's intention was to create a world of order; to push back chaos and create a world that was "good." Mankind chose to live outside of God's order and so lived in a place of chaos; a place which was a corruption of God's order.

Ultimately this disorder led to an episode where the sons of God began to reproduce with the daughters of humans (Genesis 6:1-4). This seems to be the final vestige of disorder that God would allow within his creation.

Man was choosing to act like God and attempt to create order for themselves. The sons of God had disturbed the natural order of human procreation and threatened to create a breed of Gods. For these reasons God chose to send the creation back into chaos and destruction, and ultimately, to recreate the creation.

Genesis – Flood

So often we misplace the focus of the flood narrative. The point is not that Noah was holy, or that it was unfair to wipe out all the animals; rather, the focus of the narrative is God. (Walton 2001, 333) Noah is almost silent. God is the one who performs most of the actions and speaks most of the dialogue. Noah is merely a foil to accomplish God's work.

The flood is a return to the chaos that existed in 1:2. God uses this chaos to reshape the creation and create order in places that had been chaotic before the flood. This is a form of discipline upon God's creation. It is not the unrestrained violence of a God abusing his creation, it is the discipline of a parent toward his or her child.

“When God unleashes the chaos of the deluge as punishment for the chaos of society's violence, his action is likewise distinguished by control and responsibility. God has the responsibility of caring for his creation. That cannot be discharged by simply letting sin run amok.” (Walton 2001, 336)

This theme of discipline and recreation will be important for all of Israel's history. When Israel falls away from God's order they are punished by being forced into chaos. The great example of this in later Israel is the Exile. (Walton 2001, 337)

Other Old Testament Creation Accounts

There are other creation accounts in the Bible: Psalm 104, Job 38:4-11, Proverbs 8:22-31, Isaiah 45:7. (Waltke 1976, 35-40) These accounts will not be addressed here, but each of them offers a picture of God. Each of them is a revelation of some aspect of the character and nature of Yahweh.

Creation *Ex Nihilo* vs. Creation out of Initial Chaos

Creatio ex Nihilo

It has been church tradition from the third century on that God created the world *ex Nihilo*, that is, out of nothing. The church has held the belief that when God created the universe God first created the chaos and then formed it into the creation.

An analogy is occasionally made between the creation of the world and the creation of the nation of Israel as both being *ex nihilo*. (Anderson 2005, 37) God, in his freedom created the world, God in his freedom created Israel and the covenant.

However, just as there were forefathers to those who would receive the covenant, there may very well have been matter before God formed the universe. The preexistence of matter in

no way diminishes God's creative activity. And to insist that God created *ex nihilo* is to place the emphasis on the wrong aspect of creation.

It is interesting that in early Israelite poetry, Yahweh's creative aspect is seldom stressed. Examples of this are the "Song of Deborah" (Judges 5), the "Song of Moses" (Deuteronomy 32), and the "Song of the Sea" (Exodus 15:1-18). (Anderson 2005, 49)

Several texts outside of Genesis are used to support the idea of *Creatio ex Nihilo*. These texts include Romans 4:17, Hebrews 11:3, and 2 Macabees 7:28. (Bonting 1999, 324) However there is another possibility that explains these texts just as well.

Creation out of initial chaos

Rather than focus on what was or was not existent prior to God's creation it is far more critical that we accept that God is the creator of all things, "recognizing that nowhere are we told the mechanism he used in creating. Indeed Heb. 11:3 is explicit that it is *by faith* that 'we understand that the universe was formed at God's command.'" (Berry 2006, 520) God commanded creation to happen and it happened. That is what we learn about God in the Genesis creation.

Taking the text for what it is and being as faithful as possible it seems most likely that something existed before God commanded creation into being. In 1:2 this existence took the form of watery chaos, in 2:5-6 it seems that this existence took the form of a lifeless desert. (Bonting 1999, 323)

It seems most likely that God created out of an initial preexistent chaos. This view is not completely heretical. It was held by Fathers Justin (c. 150) and Clement of Alexandria (c. 200). And it is certainly not unusual in nonbiblical creation accounts. (Bonting 1999, 324)

The conquest of God over chaos would have been a very important part of the creation narrative for early Israel. This mythologem was taken up by later Israelite writers:

“Israelite prophets and poets appropriated the old chaos imagery in order to portray the continuing creative and redemptive work of God. The struggle between creation and chaos is one which goes on in the realm of history, and this historical struggle continues from the first day to the last day.” (Anderson 2005, 132)

An important point to remember is that God did not destroy chaos in during creation, rather he ordered it. God also did not order all chaos, as there is chaos left in our world. (Bonting 1999, 326)

Difficulties

The one major objection to the idea of creation out of chaos is that it could raise the specter of dualism. However, this only occurs if we assume that a demi-god created the original chaos. (Bonting 1999, 326) Rather, the origin of the chaos is left to mystery. The author of Genesis did not see fit to explain its origins therefore it was not an important part of revealing God’s nature.

The mystery of the origin of chaos would be similar to the mystery of the singularity of the Big Bang before Planck time. Where did the initial mass come from and how did it act are two unanswerable questions.

The Issues of Theodicy and Sin

One of the corners Christians have painted themselves into is that if God created everything then God must have created evil and sin. Any number of answers has been postulated to address this issue within the paradigm of a universe created *ex Nihilo*. However, in a universe created out of chaos there is a very simple answer. Evil and sin are one of the inherent states of the chaos which God ordered.

The cosmos, which continually moves between the poles of chaos and order, is permanently at critical crossroads. The scientist perceives this in the unpredictability and accidentalness of cosmic and biological evolution. The theologian concludes that the created universe is forever in need of the support of the Creator's will" (Bonting 1999, 327)

Evil was not created but is an inherent element of chaos. Evil (and sin by association) is, therefore, that which is opposed to God's order. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God they moved outside of God's order into a world of chaos and sin.

Mankind further sins by attempting to do what God did not; order the remaining chaos. In the attempt to create order, mankind is trying to become a god. This is absolutely opposed to God's order.

How then did chaos affect Jesus? Jesus did not seek to become a god (for he was God) nor did he attempt to move outside of God's order, therefore Jesus avoided evil and sin.

In Revelation 21:1 there is a new heaven and a new earth and there is no longer any sea. (Bonting 1999, 328) This is a vision of God completely removing chaos from the creation and creating a place where mankind cannot remove themselves from God.

“The corruption of the cosmos that plagues humanity does not testify to his inability to harness chaos or to any inadequacy in his person or power. God demonstrates his grace that instead of resolving the chaos of sin through judgment and destruction, he chose a path of reconciliation and restoration” (Walton 2001, 66)

Discerning Between Real and Metaphorical Entities

One of the main points of this paper has been that the purpose of the Genesis creation account was not to reveal the nature of events, but to reveal the nature of God. How then should we address the persons and creatures addressed in these events? Are Adam and Eve real people? Did the serpent really talk? Is the serpent Satan or a chaos monster such as the Leviathan? We shall spend a few moments addressing these questions.

Were Adam and Eve real people?

When considering the nature of Adam and Eve there are three potential views: they are metaphors or literary inventions, they were literal people as described, or they were two Neolithic persons.

Adam and Eve as a Literal Account

A very common view among evangelical Christians is that Adam and Eve were real people that existed approximately six thousand years ago. These two people were the first two humans, they were created by God, and all of humanity comes from them.

The problem with this view of Adam and Eve is that it does not seem to fit very well with a scientific understanding of the earth. The earth appears to be roughly 4.5 billion years old. If man was created 6000 years ago then there is a long time for the first part of God's creation to become complete.

The view of Adam and Eve as the literal foreparents of all people also is problematic for those that hold an evolutionary point of view. Humans are believed to have come to their current evolution 200,000 years ago.

If we hold to the premise of this paper, then it is not necessary to believe in a literal Adam and Eve, rather it is necessary to understand what their presence in the story revealed about God. However, this premise in and of itself is not enough to discount the possibility of their literal existence.

Adam and Eve as Metaphors or Literary Inventions

There is a connection between the terms Adam and Land (*adama*). This may be mere wordplay on the part of the writer of Genesis, or there may be a connection between the two. In the Genesis account the land is commanded to produce vegetation. In the same way man is commanded to procreate.

While man is made out of the ground he is given dominion over the ground. When man disobeys, God curses the ground as punishment. Cain is cursed to wander and not farm the ground after he stained the ground with Abel's blood. The unrighteous actions of humanity over the first 6 chapters of Genesis create alienation between humanity and the ground.

Noah is presented as the one who will bring relief through the recreating act of flooding the ground; washing it clean. After the flood God promises never again to curse the ground and there is a return to fertility. (Alexander 2002, 129-139)

Also, the Hebrew word *Adam* is a generic term for man or mankind. (Anderson 2005, 86) Does all of this suggest that Adam is a literary figure that is to represent all the peoples of the earth? Then what metaphor is Eve trying to share?

Adam may be a type character, but it seems likely that he and Eve are based on something more than mere metaphor.

Adam and Eve as Neolithic man

Adam, as described in Genesis, could have been a Neolithic farmer. This farmer cared for a garden and raised his children in or near that garden. If this was true, then Adam would

have lived ten to twenty thousand years ago, and would not have been the genetic progenitor of the human race.

However, God may have come to Adam, in much the same way God later came to Abraham, and allowed Adam to become the spiritual ancestor of all human-kind. “The Bible distinguishes humankind from all other animals as being in the ‘image’ of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Theologians are united in agreeing that this likeness is not anatomical or genetical.” (Berry 2006, 520)

If this is the case, then the result of their disobedience from God would be their spiritual death, and their punishment was being forced out into a world without God after having been in a world with God.

The Serpent

The Serpent who convinces Adam and Eve to disobey God in chapter 3 is commonly thought to be Satan. However, this view is anachronistic and could not be what the author intended. A conception of Satan, as the force evil in conflict with God, did not exist until many centuries later.

It is far easier to say what the serpent in chapter 3 is not than what it is. It is not chaos, as it is called one of God’s creations. It is not the healer which Moses lifted up to heal Israel, it is not Satan. (Anderson 2005, 155) The serpent is described as being one of the creations of Yahweh, although it is distinguished as being more cunning (which was not considered a bad thing in Jewish philosophy). This shrewdness is contrasted against the humans nakedness through wordplay. (Walton 2001, 203)

If we do not know what the serpent is, or where it came from, then that must not be the point of the story. The author is not trying to reveal something about the nature of the serpent; rather the author is revealing something about the nature of God, and also (in this case) the nature of mankind. The emphasis falls on man's freedom to choose. (Anderson 2005, 156)

The emphasis of this story is man's freedom to choose, but special focus is placed on the fact that the snake is crafty and the humans are naked. After the humans have made their choice they realize they are naked and cover themselves. This is an example of humans attempting to create order where God had not intended order to be created. The initial act of disobedience led to the further sin of trying to be a god.

The Satan

The concept of Satan or the Devil is fleshed out in the New Testament. On the whole, one manifestation of the anti-God is a foreign concept to the Old Testament writers. The Hebrew word *satan* is generally used to mean adversary. In this sense, an angel with the role of accuser acted against Job and tempted him to sin against God. There is no hint in the Old Testament that the serpent of Genesis was either the Satan of the New Testament or *satan* of the book of Job. (Walton 2001, 209)

In addressing the New Testament concept of Satan it is important to note that the Devil is a "parasite on man's freedom." (Anderson 2005, 165) Satan is unable to do anything apart from the human exercise of free-will.

The Chaos Monsters

There are several Old Testament references to God's conflict with a chaos monster. This monster is usually a dragon or sea monster referred to as Rahab (Job 9:13; 26:12; Ps 87:4; 89:10; Isa 30:7; 51:9) or Leviathan (Job 3:8; 41:1; Ps 74:14; 104:26; Isa 27:1). (Waltke 1975, 32)

A similar creature is listed as being a part of creation. The *tanninim* of 1:21 is a great sea monster. "The term *tannin* is one of the names of the sea monster that represents the primeval chaos... it is cognate with the Ugaritic *tunnanu*, a sea god vanquished by Baal and Anath." (Greenstein 2001, 15)

Throughout the ancient Near East creation stories there is a mythologem of a repressive monster restraining creation which is eventually defeated by the hero. (Waltke 1975, 33) It is interesting to note that in the biblical account of creation the sea monster did not have to be defeated by God, rather it is a part of Yahweh's creation and as such is subject to God. This would be read by the ancient Near East reader as the idea that, "Yahweh will triumph over all His enemies in the establishment of His rule of righteousness." (Waltke 1975, 36)

A Christian Conception of Sin

As Christians we derive much of our understanding of evil and sin from the creation stories of Genesis. From Augustine's concept of original sin, to Jesus being viewed as the second Adam. However, much of our understanding of sin has been created while looking at the creation narrative in a questionable paradigm.

There is a vast difference in the theology drawn out of the creation narrative when it is looked at ontologically as opposed to when it is looked at through the lens of the culture into which it was written.

We probably approach a better theology when our beginning question is not “what really happened?” but rather, “how does this reveal God? How would it have revealed God to its original reader?”

The Nature of Evil and Sin in a Chaotic World

If creation is viewed as God forming order out of chaos, then evil becomes a nature of that still remaining chaos. Sin comes when a human either rejects the order which God created or attempts to become God and create order.

When the Bible says that all have sinned that is true. Each person has at some point rejected the order which God created and tried to impose order upon the world around him or her. A professor once suggested that sin is our attempt at self-salvation. This idea fits perfectly in the idea of evil and sin flowing out of the chaos in the world.

Jesus was victorious over sin because, as God, he had no need to become God and even when tempted he refused to reject God’s order. Hebrews 2:14-15 reads:

Because God’s children are human beings “made of flesh and blood” Jesus also became flesh and blood by being born in human form. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of death. Only in this

way could he deliver those who have lived all their lives as slaves to the fear of dying. (NLT)

Jesus entry into the world allowed humanity to once again live within the order that God had created.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Alexander, T.D. 2002. *From Paradise to the Promised Land*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Anderson, Bernhard W. 2005. *Creation Versus Chaos*. Fortress Press, 1987. Reprint, Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers (page references are to the reprint edition).
- Berry, R.J. 2006. *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*. Edited by W.C. Campbell-Jack and Gavin McGrath. *Origins, Theories of*. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Bonting, Sjoerd L. 1999. Chaos Theology: A New Approach To The Science-Theology Dialogue. *Zygon*. Vol. 34, No. 2 (June): 323-332.
- Greenstein, E. L. "Presenting Genesis 1, Constructively and Destructively." *Prooftexts* 21:1 (2001):1-22.
- Lacey, Rob. 2004. *the word on the street*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Mills, Donald H. 2003. *The Hero and the Sea*. Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc.
- Noll, K. L. 2001. *Canaan and Israel in Antiquity: An Introduction*. London: Sheffield, 2001.
- Rooker, Mark. 1992. Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or Re-Creation?: Part 1. *Bibliotheca sacra*. 149 (Jl-S): 316-323.
- 1992. Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or Re-Creation?: Part 2. *Bibliotheca sacra*. 149 (O-D): 411-27.
- Waltke, Bruce K. 1975. Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3: Part 1. *Bibliotheca sacra*. 132 (Ja-Mr): 25-36.
- 1975. Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3: Part 2. *Bibliotheca sacra*. 132 (Ap-Je): 136-144.
- 1975. Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3: Part 3. *Bibliotheca sacra*. 132 (Jl-S): 216-228.
- 1975. Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3: Part 4. *Bibliotheca sacra*. 132 (O-D): 327-342.
- 1976. Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3: Part 5. *Bibliotheca sacra*. 133 (Ja-Mr): 28-41.
- Walton, John H. 2001. *Genesis*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.