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

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In his luminous study of the Egyptian background of the Joseph Smith papyri, Hugh Nibley notes that the creation story constitutes a focal point in Egyptian religious literature and in the temple ritual.¹ The most notable among these is, perhaps, “the oldest Egyptian text of all, the Shabako story of the Creation,” which appears to have been the script of “a drama in which certain key scenes were presented by actors, while the story as a whole was recited and explained to the temple audience by a lector-priest,” referred to in this instance as a “Theaterdirektor” by the Egyptologist Kurt Sethe, who studied the Shabako Stone extensively.² This phenomenon was not, however, restricted to the Egyptians among the peoples of the pre-Christian Near East.³ A similar liturgical use of the creation story, often in conjunction with temple worship, was made in Mesopotamia, Persia, and in Israel of the Second Temple period.

The *zāgmuk* or *akītu* (New Year’s) festival figures as the central cultic event in the Mesopotamian religious calendar. It constituted “the confluence of every current of religious thought, the expression of every shade of religious feeling”

among the Babylonians and Assyrians.⁴ The *akītu* festival served to reestablish the proper pattern of nature, with order prevailing over chaos, and to reaffirm the gods, the king, and his subjects in their respective roles in the cosmic order. Reflections of the festival are to be found as early as the third millennium B.C. in the yearly rites of the Sumerian city-states of Ur and Erech, but no extensive evidence exists for its celebration until the time of the Late Assyrian and Late Babylonian kingdoms (750–612 B.C. and 650–539 B.C. respectively).⁵ Among the documents recovered from this late period are priestly liturgical commentaries, “order of service” manuals prepared to guide the priest in the proper performance of the lengthy and complex rituals of the *akītu* festival, which lasted through the first twelve days of Nisan, the first month of the Babylonian calendar.⁶ On the fourth of Nisan, in the temple of Marduk (the temple serving as a symbol of the ordered cosmos in the ancient Near East), the priest was instructed to read the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation myth, which recounts the victory of Marduk over the powers of chaos personalized in Apsu and Tiamat and his creation of the world, and concludes with a hymn extolling the kingship of Marduk.⁸ In the later stages of the festival the victory of Marduk over Tiamat was ritually reenacted.⁹

Among the ancient Persians the ritual recitation of the birth of the gods was customary on sacrificial occasions. Herodotus reports in his *Histories* that after the one who was offering sacrifice had cut the animal victim into pieces and had boiled them, he spread them “on the softest grass.”¹⁰ Thereupon a Magian, the Persian priest whose presence was obligatory at such sacrifices, chanted the account of the birth of the gods (*theogoniēn*) “as the Persian tradition relates it.”¹¹



Figure 23. This bas-relief is believed to represent Marduk holding three-pronged thunderbolts in each hand, fighting the chaos monster, Tiamat.

It has been suggested that the creation account of Genesis 1:1–2:4 was used in the temple liturgy of Israel at the New Year's Festival before the Babylonian exile, when the enthronement of the Lord was celebrated, and possibly on other occasions as well.¹² The didactic-liturgical nature of the creation account itself, with its constant refrains, "and God saw that it was good,"¹³ "and the evening and the morning were the first day,"¹⁴ etc., strengthens the case for its ritual use.¹⁵ Although this hypothesis is attractive, in the absence of "order of service" manuals (such as those found in Mesopotamia) or of descriptions of the Israelite rituals from external sources (such as Herodotus's description of the Persian sacrifices), it must remain tentative.¹⁶

Whereas we lack internal and external sources that

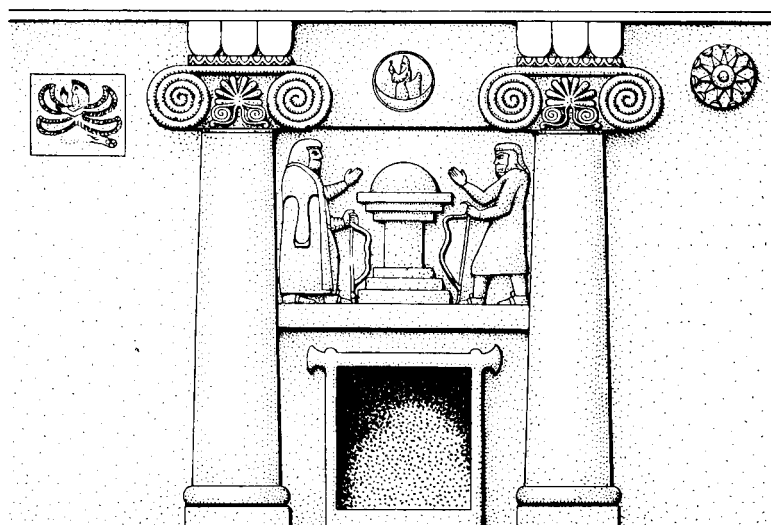


Figure 24. From this royal tomb in Kurdistan (c. A.D. 350), we see a typical Persian sacrificial altar. The men each carry a bow symbolic of royalty and wear white face masks to protect the sacred fire from contamination, as do the modern Parsis in India. The enthroned god moves in a lunar boat within the circle of the sun in a relief above the altar, while a four-winged seraph moves before him on the left and an unusual eleven-pointed star follows on the right.

concern the liturgical use of the creation account in pre-Exilic Israel, we have both for the Second Temple Period. In the Mishnaic tractate *Ta'anit* (committed to writing, along with the rest of the Mishnah, by Judah the Prince ca. A.D. 200, but probably representing far older traditions), various items of information and instruction are given regarding the temple duties of the twenty-four courses of laymen (*anshē ma'amad*), priests, and Levites (mentioned in 1 Chronicles 24). The laymen are given the responsibility of reading sections of the Genesis creation account while the priests and Levites perform the sacrifices.¹⁷ The laymen belonging to the

course currently serving in the temple who had not been able to go up to Jerusalem were charged with the duty of reading the creation account in their own towns.¹⁸ Theophrastus may be referring to the same practice in his *De Pietate* when he remarks that the Jews "now sacrifice victims according to their old mode of sacrifice. . . . They do it fasting on the intervening days."¹⁹ During the whole time, being philosophers by race, they converse with each other about the deity and at nighttime they make observations of the stars, gazing at them and calling upon God" (a possible allusion to a recital of the creation account).²⁰ Even in modern Judaism the Genesis creation account is accorded an honored place in the liturgy, being read *in toto* on Simḥat Torah (the final day of the Feast of Tabernacles) and in part (Genesis 2:1–3) on Friday evening, twice during the service and once at *kiddush*, when the Sabbath is solemnly blessed following six days of labor.²¹

These brief remarks have been confined to the use of the creation account as liturgy in the ancient Near East. However, it is a phenomenon far more widespread than that, as the researches of Mircea Eliade amply illustrate.²² Ritual repetition of the past is not restricted to the recitation of the creation account. As just two examples, the Christian ordinances of baptism and the sacrament both involve a ritual recollection of the death and resurrection of Christ. The apostle Paul makes explicit this connection when he writes in 1 Corinthians 11:26, "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come." Based upon the individual's worthy participation—and Paul warns in the strongest terms possible against unworthily participating in the sacrament of the Lord's supper: "Whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood

of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:27)—these ordinances have a saving value ("that they may always have his Spirit to be with them"—Moroni 4:3; D&C 20:77; see Moroni 5:2; D&C 20:79).²³

Clearly, the primal creative acts (and hence their recitation or reenactment) were viewed by the peoples of the ancient Near East and a host of others as possessing a dynamic (even sacramental) and not a static quality. "What happened in the beginning," writes Raffaele Pettazzoni, "has an exemplary and defining value for what is happening today and what will happen in the future."²⁴ By becoming a participant in the victory of the forces of order in the creation through reciting or reenacting the creation, the individual or community also becomes a participant in the fruits of that victory.

Notes

1. See Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 129–32.

2. Ibid., 131; cf. Kurt Sethe, *Das "Denkmal memphitischer Theologie": Der Schabakostein des Britischen Museums* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1928), 17.

3. Nibley has also noted, in *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 257–58, 260–61, 264, 275, the probable ritual use of the creation account in the Qumran community and the liturgical use of the early Christian *Odes of Solomon* and *Pistis Sophia*, each of which contains extended references to the creation. These documents will not be considered in this study.

4. KG, 319.

5. See *ibid.*

6. See W. G. Lambert, "Myth and Ritual as Conceived by the Babylonians," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 13 (1968): 106.

7. L. R. Fisher, "The Creation at Ugarit and in the Old Testament," *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965): 320: "The temple is symbolic of the ordered cosmos and at the same time makes it possible to maintain order." Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 17: "The very conception of the temple as the *imago mundi*, the idea that the sanctuary reproduces the universe in its essence, passed into the religious architecture of Christian Europe."

8. See F. Thureau-Dangin, *Rituel accadiens* (Paris: Leroux, 1921), 136, lines 279–84. Lambert, "Myth and Ritual," 107, points out that a recently studied Babylonian liturgical commentary also calls for the reading of the *Enuma Elish* on the fourth of Kislimu, and suggests that it may have been read on the fourth of each month.

9. The date for this rite is variously given in the sources as the eighth, tenth, and eleventh of Nisan (Lambert, "Myth and Ritual," 107; see also W. G. Lambert, "The Great Battle of the Mesopotamian Religious Year: The Conflict in the Akitu House," *Iraq* 25 [1963]: 189–90).

10. Herodotus, *Histories* I, 132, tr. A. D. Godley, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1960), 1:173.

11. *Ibid.*

12. See E. O. James, *Creation and Cosmogony: A Historical and Comparative Inquiry* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 29.

13. See William F. Albright, "The Refrain 'and God saw *kî tōh*,'" in *Melanges Bibliques redigés en l'honneur de André Robert* (Paris: Bloud and Gay, n. d.), 22–26.

14. Loren R. Fisher, "An Ugaritic Ritual and Genesis 1:1–5," *Ugaritica* 6 (1969): 197–205, notes that a recently published cultic text from Ugarit ends each section with the refrain "day one," "day two," etc., in a manner strikingly similar to the language of the Genesis creation account.

15. See Ariele Toeg, "Genesis 1 and the Sabbath" (in Hebrew), *Bet Miqra* 50 (1972): 290. Moshe Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple Building, and the Enthronement of the Lord" (in Hebrew), *Bet Miqra* 69 (1977): 188–89, points out the striking parallels in the language and structure between the Genesis creation account and the account of the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus 39–40 and suggests that there was an intimate relationship between the creation and the temple (which, as we have noted above, is symbolic of the ordered cosmos) in the mind of the Hebrews. Similarly, Peter J. Kearney, "Creation and Liturgy: the P Redaction of Ex 25–40," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89 (1977): 375–78, analyzes the close structural relationship between the Genesis creation record and Exodus 25–31, which contains the divine instructions for the erection of the desert tabernacle and the establishment of the cult.

16. Similarly, there are some striking resemblances in the cult and mythology of the Hittites, Ugaritians, and Babylonians. However, the absence of any clear indication of the liturgical use of a creation myth among the Hittites and people of Ugarit during their festivals (where

evidence exists for the Babylonians' use of it) must make us cautious against including them among those who do.

17. M *Ta'anit* 4:2–3.

18. M *Ta'anit* 4:2.

19. This may refer to the practice, recorded in M *Ta'anit* 4:3, of the laymen (*anshē ma'amad*) fasting on certain days during their week of service.

20. Theophrastus, *De Pietate*, apud Porphyrius, *De Abstinencia* II, 26; quoted in Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974), 8.

21. See Toeg, "Genesis 1 and the Sabbath," 293.

22. See *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 28–34.

23. See S. G. F. Brandon, "Ritual Perpetuation of the Past," *Numen* 6 (1959): 112–29, for further examples from other religions.

24. *Essays on the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1954), 256.