Cosmos, Chaos, and Politics: Biblical Creation Patterns in Secular Contexts

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THE CONCEPTUAL LINK BETWEEN THE STATE AND THE COSMOS has been explored many times by scholars over the last several decades. Mircea Eliade gave us his reflections in his book *The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History*, which, although I feel he oversteps the evidence a bit, remains a thought-provoking study. Mormonism's Hugh Nibley also discusses this phenomenon in his article "The Heirocentric State." The idea behind these and other studies is that cosmos is a state of being that is reflected in the vitality of the political state. Moreover, the state and the state of creation are a unity, set in opposition to those realms beyond the control of the state. Areas that are outside the influence of the state were often considered to be realms of disorder, of chaos, in a word, wilderness. Creation stories were frequently used to legitimize the cults and governments of ancient states.[1] The best-known example from the ancient Near East is perhaps the Babylonian epic of creation, the *Enuma Elish.* Its final form was used to promote the Babylonian god Marduk and his city and was probably adapted from Assyrian versions that sought to promote the god Assur.[2]

The book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible also legitimizes the late Israelite cult. Along the way it attempts to answer several large questions and innumerable smaller ones. It is the story of the creation of a covenant people and their migration from the land of their forebears to the land of Egypt. One might ask why the Torah begins with the story of creation, especially when this creation does not immediately result in the formation of what we would consider a political or secular state. Certainly it promotes the God of Israel to the exclusion of all other gods. The careful

1. See Robert B. Coote and David Robert Ord, *In the Beginning: Creation and the Priestly History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

2. A. George, "Sennacherib and the Tablet of Destinies," *Iraq* 48 (1986): 133-46.

avoidance of words that could even be mistaken for the names of Canaanite sun and moon deities is proof enough of that. This is why our text reads "greater light" and "lesser light" rather than sun or moon, because in the original Hebrew those words are orthographically indistinguishable from the astral gods Shamshu and Yarih.

What I find interesting about the act of creation in the Hebrew Bible is that while other civilizations allegedly considered cosmos an outgrowth or result of their good government, in the Bible there are occasions when a political entity is the result of creation, and its fall a dismantling of creation. Creation is the way you push the reset button on civilization—it is how you start over. I would like to cite a couple of examples to illustrate this point.

The story of Noah and the Flood rests upon the assumption that once society has deteriorated beyond a certain point, the only option remaining is to start afresh. As such, it contains a thinly-veiled creation story. The story recalls details in the first few chapters of Genesis in a way that is intended to associate the two events in the reader's mind. The earth is filled with violence, so God warns Noah to build his ark. Seven days—a number calculated to recall the creation story a few chapters earlier—before the floods begin, God gives Noah his final notice, then floods the earth, covering it with the wind-swept Tehom or primordial abyss. During this time the ark carries the seed of living creatures until it comes to rest. The passengers emerge, new covenants are made that are almost, but not quite, like the ones made in the Garden of Eden. Humans are blessed to be fruitful and multiply. Finally, Noah plants a vine, and after he partakes of the fruit of his labors, when he comes to his senses he finds he is naked. Thereafter, one of his sons is cursed. The parallels are not exact, but they are enough to make the point.

One other item is worthy of mention: the role of the ark itself. Certain features of this part of the story make it clear that the ark has a very important—and hitherto overlooked—creative symbolism; namely it functions as a uterine symbol. The time spent by the ark upon the waters, from the beginning of the rain (Gen. 7:11-12) to the time when Noah realizes that the flood is truly over (8:10-12) is 277 days. Scholars and interpreters have struggled for centuries to understand the character of this odd calendar with many varied and imaginative solutions proposed.[3]

3. A representative sample of the literature on this subject includes the following: Lloyd M. Barré, "The Riddle of the Flood Chronology," *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament* 41 (1988): 3-20; Gerhard Larsson, "Chronological Parallels Between the Creation and the Flood," *Vetus Testamentum*, 1977, 490-92; Jack P. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Leiden: E. J. Brill), 1968; Jack P. Lewis, "Noah and the Flood in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Traditions," *Biblical Archaeologist* 47:244-39; Niels Peter Lemche, "The Chronology in the Story of the Flood," *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament* 18 (1980): 52-62; F. H. Cryer, "The Interrelationships of Gen. 5, 32; 11, 10-11 and the Chronology of the Flood," *Biblica* 66 (1985): 241-61; and N. A. Mundhenk, "The Dates of the Flood," *Bible Translator* 45 (1994), 2:207-13.

However, they have all failed to explain this time period to the satisfaction of all because the basis of the interval is not calendrical, but biological. This time period, 277 days, works out in the Flood's chronology to nine months and one week, almost precisely the period of human gestation. More interestingly, the waters reach their height at 150 days (7:24, 8:24), which also corresponds to the point at which the waters of the uterus swell to their maximum point of expansion. Other parallels can be cited.[4]

To return to the subject at hand, creation resets the cycle of civilization, or provides a convenient metaphor for the establishment of a political entity. The larger context of the act of creation in the Hebrew Bible does not admit the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* simply because creative themes appear so frequently when something is being re-made or made out of something else.

Many other allusions to the Creation in the Old Testament do not use the solemn imagery of Genesis.[5] These references show a god who vigorously opposes the forces of chaos and sometimes violently imposes his will on it in order to form the cosmos. One example is Psalms 74:13-15:

> It was You who drove back the sea with Your might,
> who smashed the heads of the monsters on the waters;
> it was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan,
> who left him as food for the denizens of the desert;
> it was You who released springs and torrents,
> who made mighty rivers run dry ...

The first thing that strikes the reader is the difference in the tone of this passage compared to the austere quality of the Genesis account. God violently subdues the personified forces of chaos in his creation of the earth. This poetic idiom is unmistakably derived from the mythologies of surrounding peoples, and a few of these myths, notably the Babylonian epic of creation and the Ugaritic Baal and Yamm story, are known to us today.[6]

This passage is notable for its defiant language, given the context. This psalm describes the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, probably

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4. These findings will appear sometime in the next year or so in an article by Anne Kilmer, whom I was privileged to assist on this project.

5. The following is a partial list of passages in the Old Testament, outside of Genesis, which refer to the Creation: Isa. 30:7; 40:22; 42:5; 44:24; 45:7,12,18; 48:13; 51:9-11; Jer. 5:22; Ezk. 29:3-5; 32:2-5; Hab. 3:8-11; Job 7:11-12; 9:8-13; 26:12-13; 38:4-26; 41:1-26; Ps. 74:12-17; 77:16-19; 93:3-4; 104:2-35.

6. J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay, *Psalms 51-100*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 128-29.

by the Babylonians.[7] The writer uses poetic imagery associated with non-Israelite gods to express the superiority of his God, even though the nations of these foreign gods have left the temple looted and burned, Israel defeated, and her armies annihilated. The psalm becomes a kind of polemic; the creation that foreign gods have done in distant history, God has done in actual history.[8]

The idea of rescue by God comes as the psalmist recollects the creative deeds of God in the primordial time, and yet some commentators feel that it is the nation of Israel whose creation is being recounted. There are references to events surrounding the exodus from Egypt, which is considered to be the moment of Israel's creation as a national entity. Some of these events are the releasing of springs and torrents—the water miraculously provided in the desert, the successful subduing of the sea as the crossing of the Red (or Reed) Sea, and the drying up of the "mighty rivers," which is often interpreted as pertaining to the crossing of the Jordan. These themes are certainly tied in with the creation of the universe, since in verse 16 God sets up the heavenly bodies and arranges the seasons and years. E. J. Kissane writes, "It is difficult to decide whether the Psalmist is speaking in the literal sense of the conquest of the powers of Chaos, which was the prelude to the work of creation, or of the wonders of the Exodus, described figuratively as a renewal of the conquest of Chaos."[9] Given the context of the psalm, centering as it does on a time of national catastrophe, I believe the psalmist is referring to the Exodus in terms of the creation of the world, combining them to enrich the meaning of both.[10]

In my final example of cosmos and politics, I refer to the prophet Jeremiah, who wrote at a time in which he foresaw the utter destruction of the Jewish state at the hands of foreign powers. One of his most interesting and vivid statements on this subject is found in chapter 4, verses 23-26a. Here he describes in cosmic language the results of the besiegers who will come from foreign lands and surround her capital:

> I looked on the earth, and lo, it was an empty wasteland;
> and to the heavens, and they had no light.

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7. This psalm was written on the occasion of the destruction or seizure of the temple at Jerusalem. Both the desecration during the Maccabean revolt and the capture by the Babylonians have been suggested, but it is more likely to have been the latter. See J. Kissane, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. 2 (Dublin, Ire.: Richview Press, 1954), 9-10, for a brief discussion of the dating and the events surrounding this psalm.

8. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London, Eng.: Inter-Varsity, 1975), 268.

9. Kissane, *Book of Psalms*, 15.

10. Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 519-20; see also H. J. Kraus, *Psalmen*, vol. 1, Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1961), 517.

> I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro.
> I looked, and lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the air had fled.
> I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins ...[11]

Note that he begins by viewing the earth as waste and void. This phrase is *tohu wa-bohu* in Hebrew, the same phrase used to describe the chaotic earth in Genesis 1. He then describes the heavens with no light, unsteady landmasses, and the lack of flora and fauna. His statement responds point by point to the Genesis creation pattern. In the coming destruction of Judah, the cosmos will be systematically undone. As it was assembled, so shall it be disassembled.

Cosmos, Politics, and Apocalypse

The situation today is equally interesting, if only because of its direct relevance to our own place in the cosmos. Modernism has given way to Postmodernism. Lacking a useful definition of Postmodernism, I will employ one suggested to me by a colleague. Modernism was a child of the Enlightenment, which was, according to Descartes, to make man the master and possessor of nature. Postmodernism is the realization that this was not such a bright idea.[12] One of the most intriguing things I have seen in recent years is the increasing dialogue between religious scholars and those who are concerned about the degradation of the environment. The subdiscipline of ecotheology is becoming common fare at conferences and seminars. A recent issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Vol. 65 [1997], 2) is almost completely devoted to environmental and related issues.

The roots of this discussion go back to a seminal article published in *Science* magazine by historian Lynn White.[13] White argued energetically that the roots of the environmental crisis lay in basic Judeo-Christian attitudes stemming from the command to subdue the earth and establish dominion over it. White also claimed that Christianity taught that nature was corrupt and crass, largely based on its interpretation of the creation story in Genesis, and this led to a harsh attitude towards nature.

During the years since the publication of White's article, many reli-

11. See Jer. 4:23-26 and Job 3:3-13: "A Recovered Use of the Creation Pattern," *VT* 21 (1971): 151-67. See also David Noel Freedman, "The Structure of Job 3," *Biblica* 49 (1968): 503-507; and Eric W. Hesse and Isaac Kikawada, "Johah and Genesis 1-11," *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* (Tokyo: Mamamoto Shoten, 1984), 3-19.

12. Karl Sandberg, personal communication, 10 Oct. 1997.

13. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207.

gious scholars and historians have contested and refuted portions of his argument. In a large, detailed study of the text of Genesis 1:28, Jeremy Cohen has shown convincingly that ancient and medieval interpreters of this verse "never construed the divine call to master the earth and rule over its animal population as permission to interfere with the workings of nature—selfishly to exploit the environment or to undermine its pristine integrity."[14] On the other hand, beginning with early Modernism in Western Europe, the attitude of reverence towards nature began to be replaced by a view that nature was something to be understood and exploited. The new scientific techniques and instruments allowed people both to understand and exploit nature in previously unimagined ways.[15] This trend continued, and accelerated rapidly, as the Industrial Revolution gained momentum. Throughout this period, Genesis was invoked to provide scriptural support for the exploitation of resources and the profits that resulted. The words of Genesis are clearly behind the claim of the Illinois editor Horace Greely during the nineteenth century: "God has given the earth to those who will subdue and cultivate it, and it is vain to struggle against his righteous decree."[16]

The weakening of White's thesis has not stopped the growth of ecotheology. Other, more informed and thoughtful critics have taken his place. One of the most popular and articulate is Daniel Quinn, whose novels *Ishmael*, *The Story of B*, *Providence*, and *My Ishmael* present a devastating and thought-provoking reassessment of our culture's view of the world and the religious components that make up that view. At the same time, the growing seriousness of the environmental crisis has prompted some remarkable work in religious studies, many of them involving a serious reevaluation of previous work. Historian Harold Coward cites Paul Tillich's correlational method of theology (which is about as far from LDS correlation as is possible to get, in my opinion)—namely, that in response to the current challenges and questions posed by the human condition,

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14. Jeremy Cohen, *Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It: The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 309.

15. Carolyn Merchant's study of this trend in Western thought lays much of the blame at the feet of Francis Bacon. She writes: "Disorderly, active nature was soon forced to submit to the questions and experimental techniques of the new science. Francis Bacon (1561-1626), a celebrated 'father of modern science,' transformed tendencies already extant in his own society into a total program advocating the control of nature for human benefit. Melding together a new philosophy based on natural magic as a technique for manipulating nature, the technologies of mining and metallurgy, the emerging concept of progress and a patriarchal structure of family and state, Bacon fashioned a new ethic of sanctioning the exploitation of nature." Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1990), 164-65. My thanks to Dan Wotherspoon for bringing this study to my attention.

16. Quoted in Norman Graebner, *Manifest Destiny* (New York, 1968).

theology takes these new questions and thoroughly searches its sources of revelation and tradition for fresh, new answers.[17] The search for answers regarding the environment has yielded much fruit, but Genesis in the context of the environmental debate is still imperfectly understood. Moreover, I think that the Mormon perspective can add something to the discussion.

First, we must understand that in ancient thinking Creation and Chaos have distinct characteristics and roles. Creation happens when different basic elements are divided and ordered in such a way as to function in the service of life and fertility. When any one of those elements, for example, water, gets out of control, things revert to Chaos as in the Flood. The essence of Creation involved establishing boundaries, putting things in their places, and setting up zones of separation—firmaments, if you will. The creative paradigm insists that each component of the universe must remain within a specific boundary and act in a specific way (cf. D&C 77:3; 93:30; Moses 3:9). The ocean and the land were separate, as were the earth and sky. Animals bred with their own kind, as did plants. Time was also differentiated. One part of the year was for planting, another for harvesting. Light was kept apart from darkness, and each performed its function in turn. Creation was that state which came about when each part of the whole functioned in its own realm and did not exceed the limits defined for it during the creative process. The primary characteristic of a cosmos is the ability to support life. The fundamental understanding of biblical cosmology is that we live in a world of limits.

By contrast, Chaos knows no limits, no boundaries. When there are no limits, there is total homogeneity. Primordial elements mix indiscriminately. The result is monotonous sameness and lifelessness. If you want a good intuitive understanding of Chaos, contemplate a large empty parking lot, preferably on a cloudy, moonless night.

At the root of any discussion of the environmental crisis is the reality that the earth is a finite place. In this context it is vital that we examine an important idea in Mormon creation theology and ritual, that of the "measure of creation," a phrase we hear from time to time without carefully considering what it means. In an effort to better understand this phrase, I examined the use of the word "measure" as it appears in the Doctrine and Covenants, the only scripture where this concept occurs besides the LDS temple ceremony. Virtually without exception, measure is used as a noun, not a verb. Specifically, it denotes a boundary or limit of some kind, as when God promises to bless someone without measure, i.e., without limit. This brings new significance to the phrase "measure of cre-

17. Harold Coward, "New Theology on Population, Consumption, and Ecology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65 (1997), 2:261f.

ation" since limits are integral to the fabric of creation.

Because we live in a finite world, it follows that the ability of a species to reproduce is also limited. This invites us to ask whether humanity's special place in creation exempts us from any limits on our reproduction. A look at Doctrine and Covenants 49:16-17 yields insight into this question. This is a crucial passage which discusses marriage and childbearing. According to this section, marriage and the resulting childbearing are designated to take place that the world "might be filled with the measure of man, according to his creation before the world was made." Since measure in the Doctrine and Covenants is a noun referring to a limit, the phrase "measure of man" in this context tells us plainly that there is a pre-determined limit to our reproduction, just as with every other species. The measure of its creation allotted to any one species, man included, is that limit within which that species ought to propagate. As with any other part of the cosmos, if we exceed or circumvent the limits defining the cosmos, we invoke chaos.

Some would respond that this is at odds with our role to be fruitful and multiply as outlined in Genesis. The phrase "be fruitful and multiply occurs" no less than eight times in Genesis, usually in the context of important covenants made with the Patriarchs. Do we not violate divine commandment if we intentionally reduce our fertility? The language of the Pentateuch is usually deliberate in its choice of words, so this bears further scrutiny. A more careful look at the phrase "be fruitful and multiply" does not support the interpretation that humans are to reproduce as much as possible. There are two main problems with this understanding. First, in each case where "be fruitful and multiply" appears in Genesis, it is a blessing, not a commandment. The parallel verse in the Pearl of Great Price also agrees and calls this pronouncement a blessing (see Gen. 1:22; 1:28; 8:17; 9:1; 9:7; 35:11). Second, when a person or group multiplies in the Hebrew Bible, it is consistently attributed to the action of God, not man (Moses 2:28). For example, God tells Abraham, "I will multiply thee exceedingly ..."

This raises yet another question: why a blessing and not a commandment? Is this distinction important? Obviously it is, or the text would not be so consistent on this point. Another way to explore this problem is to ask what the purpose of this blessing is. In Genesis, it appears in the context of forming or renewing a covenant. Anciently, covenant formulae frequently included the stipulation of blessings for compliance and curses for violations. The blessing of expanded progeny for living up to the terms of God's covenant is also implied in other passages outside Genesis, where the terms "fruitful" and "increase" occur in close proximity to each other in the context of covenant or related issues. If your people were thriving, it was a sign of God's approval and constancy. In

Jeremiah 3:16 the prophet expresses the hope that the ark will be replaced as a physical symbol of the covenant by a fruitful, numerous people (see Gen. 3:16; 17:2; 17:20; 22:17; 26:24; Ex. 32:13; Lev. 26:9; Deut. 1:10; among others).

Today increasing world population numbers can no longer be viewed as a sign of divine favor. Our ability to manipulate the reproduction process, as well as the near-universality of population increase, make this unrealistic. Instead, our new understanding and control require us to acknowledge and assume the responsibility this control brings with it. The "measure of man" in Doctrine and Covenants 49 forms the basis of a question that is being debated in many circles concerned with environmental issues. That question is how many of us can the earth support? Mormons learn in the temple ceremony that all forms of life have a "measure of their creation," that is, a portion of the biosphere that is theirs to fill wherein they can find joy. A partial description of the "measure of man" is that sphere within which human activity will not significantly interfere with other species while they fill the divinely ordained measure of their creation. An important test is to ask whether the capacity of a given area to support life is enhanced or degraded by adding more people, especially if those people come from a culture that, like mainstream America, encourages excessive levels of resource consumption.

Let us return to the issue of blessings in general. From a theological standpoint, usually God decides when and how to bestow blessings. We have to decide how we are going to handle them. I think this is why all blessings have a way of being mixed. There is a bias towards consumerism in our modern—and Mormon—view of blessings. The accumulation of blessings, or more precisely, the stereotyped outward manifestations of blessedness have a corrupting effect that the Book of Mormon warns against time and again. But today we see that not only does material consumption and consumerism increase the social differential between the haves and have nots, it is actually threatening the ability of our world to sustain life. Our blessedness is bringing about chaos on a cosmic scale.

Creation is an important theme in Mormonism. Mormon scripture is top-heavy with creation theology. We have no less than four major accounts of the Creation in our tradition; Genesis, the Book of Abraham, the Book of Moses, and the temple ceremony. Maybe I am jumping to conclusions, but I see a pattern here. I should also note that these creation stories are not scientific accounts as many among us think. Instead, what they give us is a basis for understanding our place in this world. They are not scientific; they are theological.

What is the relevance of creation stories today? They do not legitimize our state; the state assumes its own legitimacy in other ways. We are less concerned with the creation of covenant people. My observation is

that humanity is barely concerned with preserving those few covenants it still remembers. This takes me back to the link between the cosmos and the state, a link that has been forgotten in the West for centuries until the last few decades. Both cosmos and state are where we live. Although Genesis discusses the Creation in the context of creating a covenant people, the cosmic covenants made in Genesis are not restricted to the house of Israel. They were made with humankind and are thus relevant to all of us. Those covenants represent our stewardship; a chance to experience in microcosm the business of nurturing worlds.