

## The Poetics of Beginnings in Eastern Mediterranean Cosmogonies

Carolina López-Ruiz (The Ohio State)

The following is a selection of the opening lines of preserved cosmogonic texts from diverse eastern Mediterranean cultures: Mesopotamian, Israelite, (Hurrian-) Hittite, Greek and Roman-Phoenician. My presentation will focus on the way in which these (known or unknown) authors approached the difficult task of committing to fixed words the beginning of the universe; how to start a narrative that conveys *the* start? A close reading of these and other more fragmentary beginnings will track shared cultural and literary categories while also highlighting profound theological and philosophical differences.

### *Enuma Elish* (Mesopotamian Creation epic): Tablet I

When on high the heaven had not been named,  
Firm ground below had not been called by name,  
When primordial Apsu, their begetter,  
And Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,  
Their waters mingled as a single body,  
No reed hut had sprung forth, no marshland had appeared,  
None of the gods had been brought into being,  
And none bore a name, and no destinies determined—  
Then it was that the gods were formed in the midst of heaven ....  
(Translation by S. Dalley)

### Biblical creation story

**Genesis 1.** In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. **2** And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. **3** And God said, let there be light: and there was light. **4** And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. **5** And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

**6** And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. **7** And God made the firmament, and divided the waters, which were under the firmament from the waters, which were above the firmament: and it was so. **8** And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

**9** And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so (...)

### Genesis 2

**1** And the heaven and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. **2** And on the seventh day God finished his work, which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work, which he had made. **3** And God blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it: because that in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made.

**4** These are the generations of the heaven and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven. **5** And no plant of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet sprung up: for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground; **6** but there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground. **7** And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. **8** And the Lord God planted a garden eastward, in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. **9** And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

### Hittite “Kingship in Heaven” / Kumarbi Myth

Alalu was sitting on the throne, and weighty Anu, the foremost of the gods, was standing before him. He was bowing down at his (Alalu’s) feet, and was placing in his hand the drinking cups. (...) And Anu took his (Alalu’s) seat on the throne. Anu was sitting on his throne, and weighty Kumarbi was giving him drink. (Kumarbi) was bowing down at his feet and placing in his hand the drinking cups. For a mere nine years, Anu remained king in heaven. In the ninth year Anu gave battle against Kumarbi. Kumarbi, Alalu’s offspring, gave battle against Anu. Anu can no longer withstand Kumarbi’s eyes. Anu wriggled loose from his (Kumarbi’s) hands and fled. He set out for the sky. (But) Kumarbi rushes after him, seized Anu by the feet/legs, and dragged him down from the sky. (Kumarbi) bit his (Anu’s) loins, and his “manhood” united with Kumarbi’s insides like bronze....  
(translation by H. Hoffner).

### Hesiod’s *Theogony*

- Let us begin to sing of the Helikonian Muses,  
who hold high and sacred Helikon;  
around a dark-violet spring, with tender feet,  
they dance, and around the altar of the very powerful son of Kronos;  
(5) after washing their delicate skin in the spring of Parmessos  
or of the Horse or of sacred Olmeios,  
at the highest point of Helikon they performed choral dances,  
beautiful, lovely ones, and they rolled down with their feet.  
Starting to move from there, covered in much mist,  
(10) at night they moved uttering a very beautiful voice,  
celebrating Zeus, aegis-bearing, and Lady Hera  
(...)  
(21) and the holy family of the other ever-existing immortals.  
The ones who once taught Hesiod beautiful song  
as he was tending his sheep at the foot of sacred Helikon.  
This speech the goddesses addressed to me first,  
(25) the Olympian Muses, daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus:

- Rustic shepherds, base dishonor, stomachs alone,  
 we know how to tell many false things that are like truths,  
 and we know, whenever we want, how to sing out truths.  
 So they said, the accurate-speaking daughters of mighty Zeus,
- (30) and they gave me a branch of flourishing laurel for a scepter  
 after plucking it, an admirable one; then they inspired in me divine  
 voice, so that I could celebrate the things to come and those past,  
 and they ordered me to sing hymns to the family of the happy ever-existing ones,  
 but to sing to them always first and last.
- (35) But what do I care about these things concerning a tree or a stone?  
 Hey, you! Let us begin with the Muses, who singing hymns  
 to father Zeus cheer up his great heart inside Olympus,  
 recounting the present, the things to come, and those past...  
 (...)
- Rejoice, daughters of Zeus, and give me a lovely song;  
 (105) celebrate the holy family of the ever-existing immortals,  
 who were born of Earth and starry Heaven,  
 and of dark Night, those whom salty Pontos nourished.  
 Tell how at first the gods and the earth came into being,  
 and the rivers and infinite sea, raging with waves,
- (110) and the shining stars and wide Heaven up there,  
 (...)
- (125) From Chaos Erebus and black Night were generated,  
 and from Night in turn Aether and Day came forth,  
 whom she bore becoming pregnant from her intimate union with Erebus.

**Philon of Byblos' *Phoenician History* (Quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea)**

(1) He posits as the source of all things a dark and windy air or a gust of dark air and a foul and nether chaos. These things were limitless and, for a long eon, had no boundary. He says, "But when the wind conceived an erotic desire for its own sources and a mixing together took place, that intertwining was called Desire. And this was the source for the creation of all things. It itself was not aware of its own creation. And from his entwining with the wind Mot came into being. (2) Some say that this is mud, others the putrifaction of the liquid mixture. (...)

(14) (...) Around this time there lived a certain Elioun, also called Most High, and a woman named Berouth, who settled in the area of Byblos. (15) From them was born Terrestrial Native, whom they later called Ouranos and after him, on account of his surpassing beauty, the element up above us was named Heaven. A sister was born to him from the parents mentioned above, who was named Earth. (...) (16) Ouranos succeeded to his father's rule and married his sister Earth, and begat from her four children, Elos, who is also Kronos, Baitylos, Dagon, who is also Grain, and Atlas. And with other wives Ouranos produced numerous offspring. Hence Earth was grieved and rebuked Ouranos in jealousy. As a result, they separated from each other ....