PLAYING WITH LEVIATHAN: CONSTRUCTING A THEOLOGY OF CHAOS

BENJ FRIED

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Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
School of Rabbinic Studies
Los Angeles, California

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Adviser: Rabbi Dr. Rachel Adler

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Acknowledgments

As I enter the rabbinate, I recognize that I have always been a person with two loves in my life: the world of science and the world of Judaism. Both of these passions of mine have enriched my life, enhanced my spirituality, and inspired my intellectual curiosity. This thesis is a passion project of mine to attempt to bridge the gaps that exist between these two worlds. It is my attempt to create a theology that both resonates with the experience of living in a broken world and makes use of the language of science.

I want to acknowledge those individuals whose work, mentorship, and friendship has enabled me to bring this project to fruition.

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Introduction

On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travellers into the gulf below. This bridge was on the high-road, between Lima and Cuzco and hundreds of persons passed over it every day. It had been woven of osier by the Incas more than a century before and visitors to the city were always led out to see it. It was a mere ladder of thin slats swung out over the gorge, with handrails of dried vine. Horses and coaches and chairs had to go down hundreds of feet below and pass over the narrow torrent on rafts, but no one, not even the Viceroy, not even the Archbishop of Lima, had descended with the baggage rather than cross by the famous bridge of San Luis Rey… The bridge seemed to be among the things that last forever; it was unthinkable that it should break. The moment a Peruvian heard of the accident he signed himself and made a mental calculation as to how recently he had crossed by it and how soon he had intended crossing by it again…

Everyone was very deeply impressed, but only one person did anything about it, and that was Brother Juniper. By a series of coincidences so extraordinary that one almost suspects the presence of some Intention, this little red-haired Franciscan from Northern Italy happened to be in Peru converting the Indians and happened to witness the accident…

Anyone else would have said to himself with secret joy: "Within ten minutes myself…!" But it was another thought that visited Brother Juniper: "Why did this happen to those five?" If there were any plan in the universe at all, if there were any pattern in a human life, surely it could be discovered mysteriously latent in those lives so suddenly cut off. Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan. And on that instant Brother Juniper made the resolve to inquire into the secret lives of those five persons, that moment falling through the air, and to surprise the reason of their taking off.[1]

The opening words of Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize winning novella *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* allude to one of the most intractable theological problems—the presence of chaos in the universe. The chaotic element emerges with the sudden and random collapse of a seemingly indestructible Inca rope bridge, which results in the deaths of five random souls crossing at the time. Though Wilder focuses on the minute details of the events of that day, it is clear that the

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[1] Wilder, Thornton (2003). *The Bridge of San Luis Rey.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 5-8.

collapse of the Bridge of San Luis Rey is a metonymy for all "acts of God"—hurricanes, earthquakes, diseases.

In this story, Brother Juniper represents the theological tenets of traditional religion. Having witnessed the horrific events of that day, he sets off on a quest to prove that this tragedy was not random. In his theology of a God who controls all aspects of the universe, either everything happens for a reason, or there is no God. As such, he views the collapse of the Bridge of San Luis Rey as a perfect opportunity to prove his faith, to prove that God's power and intentionality is absolute. In the face of chaos and tragedy, Brother Juniper's quest therefore attempts to find the underlying order underneath the randomness.

Though most of us would not espouse Brother Juniper's belief or support his extreme methods in proving it, the presence of chaos still threatens and offends many theologies. Many belief systems are rooted in the dogma of reward and punishment, the belief that one's virtue or sinfulness will correspond to divine repayment in kind. When we see the wicked prosper or random acts of nature destroy good people's property or lives, these occurrences simply do not compute. They are data that traditional theological systems cannot accommodate, reconcile, or make sense of. The fact that we call such incidents "acts of God" suggests our extreme discomfort with the thought that some forces of nature simply have no underlying intentionality behind them. Brother Juniper does not even entertain the notion that the collapse of the bridge was a random occurrence and there was no discernable reason why those five individuals happened to be on the bridge at that time. Such a thought would utterly destroy his *Weltanshauung*.

Traditional theodicies do not cope well with chaos. Theodicy, the attempt to find justice in one's theology, is better suited to tackle the problem of evil. Of course, in our post-Holocaust

world, even evil proves impossible to reconcile with a God who is inherently good.[2] Even so,

the problem of evil often proves simpler to explain than chaos, as one can often solve the

cognitive dissonance it creates by pointing to human free will. God gave humanity the ability

and obligation to choose right and wrong, good and evil, so the problem of evil is as much a

problem of humanity as it is a problem of God.

Chaos proves a significantly more challenging problem to reconcile. One cannot simply

blame free will or any kind of intentionality on chaos. No one chooses for an earthquake to

happen or a hurricane to strike.[3] Therefore, to explain the chaotic it seems that there are two

possible solutions. The first solution would be to take Brother Juniper's position and say that

God is responsible for everything and causes all to happen with God's intentionality. The

implication of this position is that the chaotic is not actually chaotic; it is a manifestation of

God's will, and if we do not understand it or see the meaning in it, then that is simply a

manifestation of our limited perspective. Unfortunately for Brother Juniper, this position does

not pan out as he delves deeply into the lives of the five people who perished on the bridge.

There really was no discernable pattern to explain why an omnipotent Being would choose for

them to die, and Brother Juniper's final report is so muddled with nonsensical explanations

that the Church declares it heresy and burns it. To assert the unquestioned goodness and

omnipotence of God simply does not pan out in the lived experience.

The second solution to the problem of the chaotic is to say that it is not the will of God for

some random things to happen. Randomness is merely a part of the fabric of the universe. The

implication of such a metaphysical reality is that God is not a micromanager whose hand drives

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[2] In *After Auschwitz,* Richard Rubenstein asserts the only intellectually honest response to the Holocaust
is to reject God. Elie Wiesel famously lost faith in God after his experiences in the Holocaust.
[3] Ignoring the human influences on these matters that come from hydraulic fracking or the emission of
global warming gasses.

every event from the explosion of stars to the movement of electrons. In some ways, these assumptions mirror the language of Lurianic Kabbalah—the retraction of Godself from the cosmos, the brokenness of the initial cosmological catastrophe imbued in the fabric of creation.

The question that this latter solution to the chaotic raises is no less difficult than the former. If we assume a God whose omnipotence is limited and whose created universe is inherently imbued with chaos, we have to ask why this is the case. Why has God absented Godself from a micromanaging creator role? Why has God created a cosmos in which the forces of randomness frustrate the attempt to ensure justice and just retribution for the righteous and the wicked? What role does chaos actually play in the cosmos? To answer these challenging questions, I believe that we cannot simply create another theodicy. These issues run far deeper than simply thinking about justice and suffering. Understanding chaos means we have to explore its role in creation, evolution, art and aesthetics, and the metaphors we use. As such, making sense of the chaotic means we have to engender an entire theology of creation. Such a theology will not only challenge traditional conceptions of God and creation, but it will audaciously grapple with our attempts to reconcile science with theology. My hope for such a theology is that it will not only cause us to question old dogmas but will go further than any theology has before is placing scientific language as the cornerstone of our understanding of God's role in the creation of the cosmos.

Undertaking such an endeavor raises the question: why look at chaos? Why is this an important project? I believe constructing a theology of chaos is an essential task because one's ability to comprehend the chaotic does not only speak to one's ability to believe in God or hold onto a theology. It speaks to one's ability to comprehend the world around them. Cognitive dissonance not only challenges theology; it threatens one's *Weltanshauung*.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* writes about religion as a cultural system. In his work, Geertz uses a working definition of religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[4] By this definition, religion is a foundational piece to the establishment of a *nomos*, because it provides a systemic way of thinking that helps the individual order the information the world throws at them to create an overall picture of reality. Thus religion shapes our perception of reality. In the Jewish *nomos*, our reality is shaped by the narratives of our tradition—that we are a chosen people who God rescued from slavery to enter into Covenant. Even when the Jews suffered at the hands of oppressors and empires, that suffering was always perceived through the filter of Covenant. As such, the destruction of the 1st and 2nd Temples became a manifestation of Deuteronomistic retribution theology, or the calamity of the 1st Crusade or other acts of anti-Jewish violence became the "birth pangs" of the coming of the messianic age. Through the filter of Covenant, the chaos of the world could be placed into an ordered reality.

The problem with using the filters of religion to make sense of chaos is that they force the individual either to deny the chaotic nature of the random, or the filter and the entire *nomic* narrative surrounding it could fail. Geertz writes that we "depend upon symbols and symbol systems with a dependence so great as to be decisive for [our] cultural viability and, as a result, [our] sensitivity to even the remotest indication that they may prove unable to cope with one

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[4] Geertz, Clifford (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures.* New York: Basic Books, 90.

or another aspect of experience raises within [us] the gravest sort of anxiety."[5] If we

encounter data that does not compute in our symbolic realities, it is not just theology that is

threatened; it is our entire "cultural viability." This is why people can truly adapt themselves

to any reality imaginable with the only exception being a chaotic reality. When events lack not

only interpretations but also interpretability, we cannot cope.[6] It is precisely for this reason

that a theology of chaos is necessary. We need a way of understanding chaos that does not

force us to artificially "tame" it with our cultural and religious lenses to force it to make sense

in our *nomic* narratives. We have to understand chaos on its own terms and then draw

meaning around it. It is my hope that when we rethink our theology of chaos, the encounters

we all have with the chaotic will not shake us to our core and cause us to lose confidence in our

foundational narratives. Rather, I hope that a theology of chaos will enable us to audaciously

hold onto our identities, principles, beliefs, and narratives.

This project seeks to trace the Jewish response to the metaphors and symbols of chaos

through time, ultimately culminating in my theology, informed by contemporary scientific

theory. Chapter 1 looks at the Biblical depictions of chaos, which are products of its

polytheistic Ancient Near Eastern context. I assert in this chapter that the Biblical literature

that deals with the subject of chaos can be sorted into two major categories. The first category

I dub the "mythological" category that portrays chaos as the sea monsters that YHWH has to

contend with at the primordial beginnings of the universe to form the created universe. The

second category I label the "priestly," the sources, mostly found in Leviticus, that view chaos in

terms the people and status' that do not fit into the categories of pure/impure, holy/profane,

kosher/unkosher. Though distinct in genre, both of these textual categories portray the

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[5] Ibid., 99.
[6] Ibid., 100.

chaotic as dangerous, *nomos* threatening menaces that either God or the powerful in society must seek to subdue and eliminate.

Chapter 2 looks at the book of Job as a counter-narrative to the overarching Biblical perspective on chaos. In God's speeches from the whirlwind at the end of the book, God depicts the creation of the cosmos that very distinctly differs from Genesis. In this creation myth, humanity is not the apex of creation; it is the ferocious chaos monsters themselves that provide the climax. God's whirlwind speeches barely mention humanity, as the human *nomos* seems to be of little concern to this God. As such, Job challenges our perspective by rejecting an anthropocentric view of the world, praising the wildness of animals, and glorifying the chaos of the universe. Chaos in Job is an essential piece in the creation and vitality of the cosmos.

Chapter 3 analyzes various rabbinic texts that touch on the subject of the chaotic. In rabbinic theodicy, we see an evolution over time, as later texts allow for counter-narratives and dissenting voices from a purely dogmatic belief in retributive theology. As the texts speak about issues such as dream interpretation, crossing bridges, and reward and punishment, we see voices that are grappling with and acknowledging that chaos is present and perhaps not everything that happens is the will of God.

Chapter 4 moves into the Medieval period and attempts to analyze the metaphors the earliest Jewish philosophers use to describe the creation of the cosmos. Over the course of the Middle Ages, we see an evolution in the philosophers. Though the earlier philosophers embrace a much more traditional view of creation *ex nihilo*, later authorities move away from the notion of a micromanaging creator God. By the time we enter modernity, the language of a

creator God had largely fallen out of favor, as more philosophers describe God as an initiator of a creation process.

Chapter 5 is an exploration of the aesthetics of Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn was quite unique amongst the philosophers of his age, as he ardently asserted the aesthetic value of the ugly. He believed that beautiful portrayals of the discordant have the ability to engender mixed cognitions, which have the ability to engender virtuous qualities in people—empathy, compassion, pity—in the face of the horrifying. Mendelssohn also asserted the value in the sublime. It is in the chaotic, larger-than-life experiences that transcend the beautiful and the ugly that people are most acutely attuned to experience the divine. Mendelssohn's radical assertions about aesthetics again support my thesis of the creative potential in the chaotic.

Chapter 6 is an in-depth exploration of the various Jewish responses to the theory of evolution. Most importantly, I touch on process theology and Brad Artson's attempt to create a theology of creation. Artson's theology provides a tremendous foundation by which we Jews can engender a theology that makes use of the language of science as its core. Artson helps us see evolution as a manifestation of the on-going creative process that is the Process God. While Artson's theology gives us useful language for integrating the worlds of science and religion, his assertion in the teleological argument—the belief that the process of evolution is proven to be meaningful by the products it creates—is dubious.

Chapter 7 is my attempt to critique Artson and engender a theology of my own. I look at the tenets of chaos theory, a mathematical branch that attempts to understand systems that behave in unpredictable, chaotic ways. By using the language of chaos theory, I assert my belief that chaos is fundamentally a creative force. Emergence theory proves that chaos is not just an ingredient in the primordial soup of creation; it is *the* source of creation of everything

from the stars and galaxies to the human brain. As I conclude my theology, I suggest a fundamental change in perspective in the way that we view God, our relationship to the divine, and our understanding of our place in the cosmos.

I believe that Brother Juniper's theological beliefs are unfounded and dangerous. We do not live in a world with a micromanaging God who ordains everything that happens. Such a position is untenable in our lived experience. Even so, I do not believe that a chaotic universe has to cause us grave existential anxiety or undo our entire *Weltanschauung*. I see both the presence of God and the presence of chaos in the Big Bang, in the Super Novae that create stars from their destruction, in the evolution of the wondrous array of species in the world, in the emergence of life itself, and in the wonderful and unfathomable complexity of the human brain. In chaos I find order, beauty, and the divine, and in creating a theology of chaos, I believe that our view of creation becomes that much more tied to scientific reality and ultimate transcendence.

Chapter 1: Two Models of Biblical Chaos Theology

Jon D. Levenson asserts that the basic idea of the creation mythologies in the Hebrew Bible boils down to one word: "mastery."[7] Whether we are speaking of the Genesis creation story, the Song of the Sea, or the various Psalms that reference elements of the ancient creation stories, one theme always runs through them: YHWH's indisputable domination and control over the created universe. This intense focus hints at an underlying anxiety in the ancient Israelites over the forces of chaos that threaten the created order of the world. In fact, this fear of chaos is so fundamental to the theology of the ancient Israelites that it reveals itself not just in the creation mythology and the mythological primordial monsters of Leviathan, Rahab, and Tanin, but also in the rituals and law codes laid out in the Torah. Chaos anxiety underlies the atonement rituals of the high priest, the *Pessach* sacrifice rituals, or in the ritual purity codes of Leviticus.

In this chapter, I will argue that chaos theology and anxiety manifests itself in two genres of Biblical literature: the mythological and the priestly. The mythological chaos texts are largely psalms and poems that possess vestigial narrative and imagery from the *chaoskampf* literature of the Ancient Near East, most notably the Ba'al Cycle and the *Enuma Elish*. These texts portray the conflict of YHWH against the forces of chaos, with YHWH's triumph over the primordial forces setting the stage for the created universe. In contrast, the priestly material views chaos as a threat to be minimized and eliminated through legislating categories such as pure/impure, kosher/not kosher, holy/profane, etc. It makes minimal use of narrative and myth, and instead focuses on defining Israelite identity through ritual and cultural norms.

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[7] Levenson, Jon D. (1988). *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 3.

We see then that these two categories of Biblical literature operate in different ways. The mythological uses the cosmological to explain the anthropological; the priestly uses ritual and law to accomplish the same goal. The mythological uses narrative; the priestly engenders culture. The mythological has ancient roots; the priestly texts were likely finalized in the post-exilic context. Despite these differences, the commonalities between the priestly and the mythological reveal an overall Biblical chaos theology. It is a theology that deeply fears chaos and desires the elimination of messiness and things that do not fit a neat and tidy image of creation or of Israelite society. It is a theology that stems from an anthropological orientation as well as an ethnocentric view of the world. The fear of chaos engenders a highly hierarchical and patriarchal view of God that not only reinforces existing power structures, but it engenders belief in a violent God. As these theologies have heavily influenced the beliefs about God and chaos in Judaism and Christianity, it is apparent that creating theology that transcends patriarchy, violence, and unrelatability will require a different attitude towards chaos.

Chaoskampf **Mythology**

Any understanding of the Biblical chaos mythology would be incomplete without comparisons to the other creation myths of the ancient Near East. The Babylonian myth, the *Enuma Elish*, as well as the Ugaritic Canaanite text, the Ba'al Cycle, share both plot points and a symbolic vocabulary. The beginning of both stories involves the battle of divinities in which a chosen son (Ba'al the son of El, Marduk the son of Ea) defeats a "chaos monster" associated with the sea. In the case of the *Enuma Elish*, the defeated sea goddess Tiamat's body is dismembered and spread out to become the created universe.[8] The symbolic vocabulary demonstrates that creation happens through the violent battle with and defeat of the

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[8] Ibid., 4.

primordial forces of chaos. The god demonstrates mastery by contending with monsters to take the mantle of leadership for himself. After the battles are complete the trope of the *chaoskampf* myth consists of the building a divine abode for the triumphant god and an etiological history of how that god came to be worshipped by the people of a particular locality. The *Enuma Elish*, for example, is thought to have been recited at the *Akitu* festival of the Babylonians—the New Year ritual in which Marduk was enthroned as lord of Babylonia.[9] Thus the violent defeat of chaos not only underlies the creation mythologies of these cultures, but it also ties to the origin story of the *nomos* for their societies.

Beyond the basic plot points and symbolism of these mythologies, the underlying themes reveal more about the ancient Near Eastern view of chaos. J. D. Schloen asserts that these myths possess a fundamental structural distinction between the center of these cultures, the periphery, and beyond the periphery. He writes that the "social 'center' is the 'center of the order of symbols, of values and beliefs, which govern the society.'"[10] In the Ugaritic myth, the physical center consists of the kingdom of *Ras Shamra*—the locus of "administration, or ritual, and of literary activity."[11] Mark S. Smith writes that in these mythologies, deities inhabit the near space, the center of society, but monsters live beyond the periphery.[12] Deities receive sacred mountains or cultic sites, but monsters do not. For example, Ba'al's abode is on Tzaphon, Marduk's kingship is established in Babylonia, and by extension, we might say YHWH's abode is at Mount Sinai.[13] The effect of the focus on the home is to create distinctions.

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[9] Jacobsen, Thorkild. (1978). *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

[10] Schloen, J. D. (1995). "The Patrimonial Household in the Kingdom of Ugarit: A Weberian Analysis of Ancient Near Eastern Society." Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 245.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Smith, Mark S. (2001) *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 28.

[13] Ibid.

The home becomes the center of order, but everything foreign is the source of chaos and threatens that established order. The ultimate sources of disorder beyond the periphery are the chaotic waters and the Underworld. Indeed, at the end of the Ba'al cycle, Ba'al battles the god Mot, dies, and is revived, a true display of mastery of the forces beyond the boundary of Ba'al's *nomos*.

The theme of home extends to the anthropomorphic and animal imagery associated with the various deities in these cultures' pantheons. According to Smith, benevolent deities are portrayed anthropomorphically, but malevolent and chaotic deities are monstrous in nature.[14] Marduk seems to resemble a man in the Enuma Elish, but Tiamat is a sea serpent. Marduk takes on the weapons of a fierce warrior, but Tiamat fights back with the forces of nature. The god Mot reminds Ba'al of his defeat of Leviathan: "You killed Litan, the Fleeing serpent / Annihilated the Twisty Serpent / The Potentate with seven heads,"[15] the chaotic monster neither portrayed as a human or a friendly beast. In the Ba'al myth, the benevolent gods are often associated with friendly, domesticated animals. The title "Bull" is attributed both to El and to Ba'al.[16] The animal imagery thus reinforces the categories of home and foreign, center and periphery.

These thematic elements of the combat mythology of the ancient Near East reveal that within these cultures, a fundamentally ethnocentric, even xenophobic, *Weltanschauung* existed. Although the primary deity of these societies defeats the chaos monsters, chaos persists as the threat from the periphery. The primary deity serves as the source of blessing and protection, but forces from the outside—whether they be foreign peoples, foreign deities, or the forces of

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[14] Smith, 32.

[15] CAT 1.5 | 1-3.

[16] Smith, 32.

nature—are ever-present threats to the *nomos* established by that primary deity. Thus the

combat myth with chaos is both a story of the primordial origins and an on-going hope that the

benevolent deity will rise again when the chaotic forces from the periphery invade the sanctity

of the home.

YHWH and *Chaoskampf*

When speaking of *chaoskampf* in the Bible, no text more thoroughly embodies this combat

mythology than the Song of the Sea. Scholars generally ascribe the Exodus 15 poem to at least

two centuries before the monarchy, making it one of the oldest texts in the Hebrew Bible.[17] As

such, it is also one of the texts that has been least purged of its pagan influences. The poem

portrays YHWH as an *'ish milhamah*, a Man of War, one of the most blatantly anthropomorphic

lines describing God in the Bible (Exod 15:3). In this song, God's triumph over Pharaoh is

described not only by the forces of nature conspiring to destroy his army, but also by the

violent force of God Godself, acting as a Man of War. As such, it is both the *mayim adirim*,

majestic waters and deeps congealing on the enemies (Exod 15:10, 8), as well as the "right

hand, O YHWH, [that] dashes the enemy into pieces" (Exod 15:6). The violent imagery of the

'ish milhamah manifestation of YHWH maps onto the combat mythology of Marduk and Ba'al.

But unlike the Canaanite and Babylonian myths, it is YHWH, and not the enemy, who is able to

use the forces of nature as a weapon to defeat a mortal enemy whose only weapon is a human

army. YHWH "blows His nostrils" and the "waters pile up," and when the winds blow, the seas

cover up the enemy, and they "sink like lead" into the deeps (Exod 15:8, 10). The inversion

that we see here conveys a theological message of YHWH's utter superiority to Pharaoh:

YHWH not only triumphs through might but also through mastery of the chaotic forces,

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[17] Dozeman, Thomas B. (2009) *Exodus.* Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 331.

underscoring the complete incomparability between YHWH and Pharaoh. Though this battle is

between YHWH and a human enemy within the bounds of history, the poem borders on the

mythical. Even the name of the sea itself, the *Yam Suf*, contains hints of both mundane and the

mythological (is it the Sea of Reeds, or the Sea of Infinity?) (Exod 15:4). The symbolic

vocabulary of this poem makes parallels with the Canaanite and Babylonian combat mythology

apparent.

Roughly two-thirds of the way into the Song of the Sea, the subject matter of the text turns

away from combat mythology. The Song turns its attention away from the battle between

YHWH and Pharaoh to describe the way YHWH "led the people that [He] redeemed," guiding

them to His "holy habitation" (Exod 15:13). This unnamed holy habitation exists on *har*

nahalatekha "the mountain of Your inheritance," or some kind of ancestral plot (Exod 15:17).

This mountain contains a sanctuary, which YHWH's own hands established. The focus on

planting YHWH's people at YHWH's holy abode is not the only thematic change in this second

part of the Song of the Sea. Unlike the combat part of the poem, which graphically describes

YHWH's violent triumph over Pharaoh in blatantly anthropomorphic vocabulary, in this

second part of the poem, YHWH does not even have to lift a finger to assert dominance. Indeed,

the mere rumors of YHWH inspire fear in the people of Edom, trembling in the mighty men of

Moab, and terror in the inhabitants of Canaan (Exod 15:15). The *'ish milhamah* in the combat

portion of the poem has become an abstract, non-combative mountain deity.

While one could explain the different portions of the Song of the Sea as reflecting a

coherent whole—a narrative from triumph at the sea to the establishment of YHWH's people

at His mountain—one could also attribute these differences to coming from two fundamentally

different versions of YHWH: the mountain deity and the combat God. These two

manifestations of YHWH can be found throughout the Hebrew Bible. For instance, Habbakuk 3

describes YHWH coming from "Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran," who stands and

causes "the earth to shake; he beholds and causes the nations to tremble" (Hab 3:3, 6).

Habbakuk 3 portrays YHWH as a mountain God whose mastery over the forces of nature

brings the other nations of the world to their knees. In contrast, Psalm 74 tells of YHWH's

mythological triumph over the forces of chaos. YHWH "shattered the heads of the sea

monsters," "crushed the heads of Leviathan," and "dried up the ever-flowing rivers" (Ps 74:13,

14, 15). Instead of making use of the forces of nature to merely intimidate the other nations of

the world, this portrayal of YHWH has Him overcoming the sea and its monsters through direct

violence. Analyzing the ancient origins of YHWH worship can help us understand how the

mountain God and the combat God combined to become the YHWH of the Hebrew Bible.

Both Biblical scholars and Egyptologists accept the view that the name YHWH makes an

early appearance in Egyptian topographical lists from the New Kingdom.[18] Thomas Schneider

refers to a fifteenth century BCE list of places produced under Amenophis III at a Temple in

Soleb and another list compiled by Ramses II at Amara-West. Among the places listed are

lands belonging to Shasu nomads in the southern Transjordan area belonging to Edom. The

Shasu lands are listed as being associated with YHWH, and the Amara-West list identifies the

Shasu place as *sa-'-rir*, thought to be related to the Biblical Seir.[19] What these texts seem to

indicate is that the "Midianite hypothesis" of the origin of YHWH might have archaeological

support. This hypothesis asserts that YHWH was originally the cult deity of a mountainous

tribe to the south of Canaan in the Transjordan area, and this deity's holy abode was a

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[18] Schneider, Thomas (2008). "The First Documented Occurrence of the God Yahweh? (Book of the Dead Princeton 'Roll 5')," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 1 113-20.

[19] Smith, Mark S. (2012) "God in Israel's Bible: Divinity Between the World and Israel, between the Old and the New," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. 74, 6.

mountain dwelling. Of course, this Midianite hypothesis has precedent in the Bible: Moses'

father-in-law Jethro is a Midianite, and the Israelites received their most significant revelation

from YHWH at Mount Sinai—a dessert mountain thought to be in this region. Accordingly, the

Biblical account of Sinai and Jethro "narrativized" ancient traditions of a cult god YHWH before

He came to be associated with the Israelites.[20]

However, relying on these Egyptian place name lists to corroborate the "Midianite

Hypothesis" alone does not suffice. The lists are dated to the 15th century BCE, but our earliest

Biblical texts do not emerge for another 200-300 years, so the gap in time between the

external and the internal evidence for the "Midianite Hypothesis" makes it suspect. However,

the fact that the Egyptian archaeological evidence matches many of the obscure place names in

the earliest Biblical references suggests that we also cannot completely disregard this external

evidence. The Song of Devorah, another ancient Biblical song that sings of God's dominion,

makes mention of Seir and Edom: "YHWH: when You went forth out of Seir, when You

marched out of the fields of Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens also dropped" (Judges 5:4).

Deuteronomy 33, the blessing of Moses, mentions God marching forth from Seir as well,

paralleling it with the more familiar mountain of Sinai: "YHWH came from Sinai, and rose from

Seir unto them; He shined forth from Mount Paran… His right hand was a fiery law unto them"

(Deut 33:2). The prayer of Habbakuk, yet another text that portrays YHWH's marching forth as

causing the earth to quake, pestilence to go forth, and mountains to crumble, mentions YHWH

as marching out of Teman and Paran, two other lands associated with these Southern regions

(Hab 3:3).

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[20] Ibid., 8.

Put all together, it seems that the mountain God has its origins in the cultic worship of these southern mountain regions. This version portrays YHWH as the God who marches forth from the mountains, making use of the forces of nature to destroy the enemy and cow it into submission. These texts tend not to describe YHWH in anthropomorphic and violent terms; the mountain deity YHWH does not destroy with the weapons of man but rather through His voice or His marching out. Furthermore, the chaos to be subdued and controlled is not the sea, monsters, or the forces of nature; it is the enemy nations of the land that threaten YHWH's people.

The second origin of YHWH, that of combat deity, may reveal not the origin of YHWH per say, but rather the way that El/Elohim came into the Biblical vocabulary of names of God. This connection between the pagan mythologies and the theology of the Hebrew Bible is apparent simply by the fact that El is both a name for God in the Bible and the deity who fathers Ba'al in the Ugaritic myth. Mark Smith explores this connection etymologically, which yields surprising and somewhat controversial answers.[21] The Biblical Hebrew word for God *'el* has cognates in Akkadian (*ilu*) and Ugaritic (*'il*). Smith asserts that the term derives from the root word *'y/wl*, meaning "to be pre-eminent or strong." That is to say, the name El, and by extension Eloha and Elohim, comes from the root word not for god, but rather for strength, army, and force. Thus the vestiges of combat mythology do not simply come through in the brief narratives in songs and poetry; they come through in one of the most common names of God itself, the name implying that God is the force or pre-eminent power that can drive back the forces of chaos.

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[21] Smith, 7.

Like many of the ancient Near Eastern myths, some of the texts that reference the combat God in the Bible not only speak of a primordial past, but also link those myths to the history of Israel. Psalm 89 begins with some of the familiar references to God's dominion over the chaotic forces of the sea. *'Atah moshel b'gei'ot hayam*, "You rule over the proud sea, when the waves rise, You still them" (Ps 89:10). Though the seas rise up in pride and waves, crash, the mastery of God overcomes those forces. Then the poem then references the monsters of the sea: "You crushed Rahab, slaying him; with the strength of Your arm, You scattered Your enemies" (Ps 89:11). The Psalmist describes this primordial event with vivid and violent imagery. The Psalm is portraying a world, not where the mastery of God is assumed, but a world where God has enemies that rise against Him, that He has to battle, crush, defeat, and scatter to assume the throne of glory. After discussing these issues of primordial history, the text moves into the story of the Israelites, describing how God chose David as His servant, anointing him with oil. This chosenness implies a sacred relationship, as God promises to "beat to pieces his adversaries before him, and smite those that hate him" and "set his hand on the sea, his right hand over the rivers" (Ps 89:24, 27). The promises of God extend protection to David's seed against the forces of chaos that exist in history (the adversaries and those who hate him), and over the primordial forces of chaos (the seas and rivers). The Psalm concludes with a hope for the eschaton in which God will "remember [His] former mercies" (Ps 89:50). The Psalm, referring to a time when the Covenant of David is broken and profaned and when the enemies of Israel have prospered, wants that mythological combat God to come back, triumph over chaos once and for all to set things straight. He asks: "How long, O YHWH, will You hide Yourself forever? How long shall Your wrath burn like fire?" (Ps 89:47). Psalm 89 thus demonstrates that the vestigial image of the combat God functions in a similar way as it

does in the Ugaritic and Babylonian myths. Unlike the mountain God version of YHWH, the combat God is one that contends with chaos in the form of monsters, and from the primordial battle, establishes the world and the *nomos* of the Israelites. That *nomos*, the Davidic Covenant, serves as a manifestation of YHWH's mastery in history and hope that YHWH will reassert His mastery to destroy chaos in the future.

While the Biblical texts that portray this combat mythology provide tantalizing parallels to the creation mythologies of the ancient Near East, it is important to note the ways in which the Bible represents a true innovation from these pagan texts. The most important difference to note is that the Biblical texts, even those that speak of chaos monsters or divine assemblies, are not polytheistic texts. While it would be an anachronism to say that they are strictly monotheistic, the most one could accuse these myths of being is henotheistic or monalatrous, that is to say, believing in one God while acknowledging the existence of others, and perhaps serving them as well. This is an important distinction, because it helps us uncover the true boundary of what constitutes polytheism. In the *Enuma Elish* and the Ba'al Cycle, for example, the gods Marduk and Ba'al are subject to a set of norms and rules, which they must master. They fight Tiamat and Yam, respectively, and vie with them as equals. It is only when they have triumphed over the foe that they can assume mastery of their *nomos*. YHWH, on the other hand, is never subjected to the norms and rules of a system. Yes, YHWH contends with the sea and the monsters therein, but there is never any indication in the Bible that YHWH is not in control of the process. As such, YHWH is not subject to any rules; YHWH makes the rules, and that is the key innovation of the Hebrew Bible that leads it away from polytheism.

The second innovation that the Hebrew Bible provides, as a whole, is that YHWH is not a stationary God enthroned on His mountain or holy sanctuary. YHWH is the God that moves

with the people as they travel through the wilderness. YHWH does come forth from Sinai and

Seir, but YHWH is also unbounded by those places, dwelling among the people in the *mishkan*

or on a cloud of fire. The pagan texts generally provide the etiology for how their chief god

came to be associated with the place of his holy abode. The innovation of the traveling God in

the Hebrew Bible suggests that because YHWH is not bounded by space, YHWH has the dual

identity of being both the particular God of the Israelites, but also the God of the whole world.

This mixture of the portrayal of YHWH as the particular God of Israel and the God of the

whole world suggests that many of these texts originate in very early sources but are

completed or redacted late, perhaps even after the Babylonian exile. This raises the question

of why would the redactor of these Biblical texts would retain vestiges of the old *chaoskampf*

mythology, particularly if they represent theological contradictions to the belief system in

which the texts were finished. One major reason for this retention of the combat God imagery

could relate back to the persistent phobia of chaos inherent in the Israelite people. Of course

chaos would seem scary to a small hill country surrounded by enemies on all sides. The

prospect of the outsider invading and destroying the Israelite *nomos* was not only a relentless

threat, but an actualized reality when both the Northern and Southern kingdoms eventually

fell to foreign kingdoms. To represent God as a mountain deity who goes forth and cows the

enemy in fear or the *'ish milhamah* who battles and defeats enemies would have provided

comfort and psychological security to a people constantly in fear of the enemy and of chaos

itself.

Chaos, Dirt, and Purity: the Priestly Innovation

The creation story of Genesis 1 stands apart from the other Biblical creation accounts in its

lack of the dramatics of combat. The act of creation happens simply through speech; God says,

"Let there be light," and there is light (Gen 1:3). Each day of creation adheres to a basic pattern: God speaks, the object of God's speech comes into being, God declares that new creation "good," and the day concludes. Though debates have raged for centuries about the nature of this creation, the reference to the *tohu vavohu*, formless void, and the waters of the deep in Genesis 1:2 indicates that the Genesis creation story is not *creatio ex nihilo*.[22] Indeed, primordial chaos existed before creation, but it is not something to battle or show mastery. Even when the sea monster Tannin is mentioned in 1:21, God does not battle or strive with it. It is simply one more of the creatures that God created. Thus, God's mastery in Genesis 1 is already assumed; the act of creation is not an act of violence, but rather an act of inviting the chaos become a part of the created order. And how does God achieve this? Through the creation of distinctions: light/dark, day/night, sky/ocean, sea/land, sun/moon, humans/animals, male/female. God overcomes chaos, and creation comes into existence through the definitions of categories.

In fact, it is the definition of categories that occupies much of the attention of the Priestly writer of the Torah, the writer whom scholars credit with the creation account of Genesis 1.[23] For example, the entirety of Leviticus 11 delineates the laws of what is clean and unclean to eat. All animals must have a cloven foot and chew their cud (11:3-4), and fish must have scales and fins (11:10). After almost 50 verses of distinguishing between kosher and unkosher, the Torah concludes the chapter with the simple exhortation *l'havdil bein hatame' u'vein hatahor*, to distinguish between the impure and the pure (11:47). The question that inevitably arises when discussing matters of *kashrut* is where the impulse to distinguish between kosher and unkosher comes from.

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[22] Levenson, 4.

[23] Friedman, Richard Elliot (1987). *Who Wrote the Bible?* New York: HarperCollins, 246.

Mary Douglass asserts that traditional interpretations tend to fall into two categories. Either the rules of *kashrut* are arbitrary, set up to engender discipline or perhaps serve as allegory, or the rules stem from the impulse towards the hygienic, a desire to avoid eating foods that are unsafe.[24] Analyzing the text itself, however, reveals that the reason for these complicated laws of *kashrut* might actually stem from an anxiety over categorization. For instance, the laws of consumption of seafood require that things eaten from the sea have fins and scales. That is to say, they must fit under the category of "fish." Shellfish, which share more biological characteristics with insects than they do with fish fall into an ambiguous category, and it is because of that ambiguity, that transcending of categories, that they are deemed unclean and unfit for consumption. We see then that in the Priestly mindset, chaos comes from the liminal, the things that defy categorization and therefore threaten to destroy those categories.

This anxiety over the liminal underlies many of the other regulations of purity and impurity in Leviticus. The extensive gory descriptions of the skin disease *tzara'at* in Leviticus 13-14 lay out an entire process by which a person can be categorized by the priest as needing to be quarantined outside the community. As much as the disease itself causes anxiety for the Priestly writer, so does the liminal state of the person who has been cured of his disease and must be reincorporated into the community. This person must not only cleanse himself and his clothes, but must undergo extensive examination by the priest, make a sacrifice of two male lambs, one ewe, three-fifths an *ephah* of flour, mixed with olive oil, and a *log* of oil (Lev 14:10). The expensive ritual eliminates chaos by allowing a smooth transition from impure to pure, maintaining the strict social order and categorizations. This same anxiety of broken categories

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[24] Douglass, Mary (2002). *Purity and Danger.* London: Routledge Classics, 54-56.

is also reflected in the regulations of a woman's purity within her menstrual cycle, when she gives birth, and when a man spills his seed. All these individuals have gone through a change in their bodies that is out of the "ordinary," causing them to occupy a space of liminality. The rituals they undergo to reincorporate themselves into their marriages and resume normal sexual activity effectively eliminate the chaos that their former ambiguous status creates and navigate them back into society.

The Priestly writer's intense anxiety over the liminal raises the question of what makes the ambiguous so threatening. To understand this, we have to understand the fear that causes religious authority figures to construct such regulations around impurity. When we think of dirt, the concept raises the same fretfulness as chaos does, because it offends against order. Though dirt is not considered dirty when it is outside, when it comes inside, it is out of place because it has disrupted the unity of the experience of "insideness."[25] The flip side of this statement is that "dirty" only exists when there is a system that it can disturb. Dirt is not dirty in isolation, because dirt is merely the by-product of "ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements."[26] We see then that the classification of things as "clean" or "dirty" is not really about hygiene and one might even say, it's not really about purity; it is about asserting control over one's space and society by eliminating chaos.

We see then that creating a system for classifying things as "dirty" and "clean" is really about the creation of a *nomos*. Douglass argues that culture is the "public, standardized values of a community" that mediates that community's experience for an individual. Culture

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[25] Douglass, 2-3.
[26] Ibid., 44.

provides the categories through which ideas and values are "tidily ordered."[27] It is the filter

through which people can determine what fits in, what makes sense, what is possible. Through

the categories that culture engenders, order is maintained, and the things that are not possible

or do not make sense, can be eliminated. From this definition of culture, we discover two

things. The first is that the creation of categories of "clean" and "dirty" is really an act of self-

definition—a meta-category of defining Israelite versus non-Israelite, both inwardly and

outwardly. As long as identity is absent, dirt does not exist. The laws of Leviticus, in a sense,

are the Priestly writer's attempts to set apart Israel as a holy nation. Through observing these

laws and practices of purity, diet, and sexuality, Israel engenders its identity and culture by

determining what is acceptable and possible. The second discovery is that the categorization

of dirty and clean underlies the entire societal order. A society needs a culture and the

categories of possible, acceptable and pure, because a society that does not exist with these

binary categories would sink into anarchy and chaos. Laws tell us what kind of behavior is

legal or "dirty" and illegal. Cultural norms tell us what is "acceptable" and what is "offensive."

Thus, the liminal is so threatening to the Priestly writer, because it not only defies

categorization, but it threatens to topple the binaries that keep the system that fends off the

forces of chaos functional.

   We see this theology of binaries in the creation myth of Genesis 1. The entire chapter, after

all, functions as a creation story of binaries—light/dark, heavens/earth, sea/land, etc. The

portrayal of God against the rest of creation also creates a binary of divinity and non-divinity.

In the Psalms that describe God as contending with the sea monsters of chaos, we see a whole

host of divinities. Though YHWH is always the undisputed preeminent God to which all others

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[27] Ibid., 48.

are subservient, there are still divine councils and other creatures or monsters. Not in Genesis

1. The only divine entity is God; all other creatures and beings are created by God. Yam is not

even embodied as a chaotic force; it is simply the sea that gets its boundaries defined in the

process of differentiation. The *tohu vavohu* is also non-threatening; it is just the raw material

that God forms the cosmos out of. The liminal category of subservient divinity is utterly

eliminated in favor of a binary theology. Chaos, then, is excised from the narrative of creation

itself, though it persists in the legal material as the forces that threaten to topple this theology

of binaries.

When we think about the context in which the Priestly writer compiled these materials, we

begin to understand why this new conception of chaos was necessary. The Priestly source of

the Bible utilizes a non-narrative genre that focuses on the minutia of legal categories. At the

top of the totem pole in this legal system are the priests themselves, who become the ultimate

arbiters of *tame'* and *tahor*. In a sense, the Priestly writer has created a system complicated

enough such that the priests would hold onto power, because they are the center of the system

itself. The other piece to this picture is that most Biblical scholars will date the compilation of

the P source to the post-exilic period.[28] This means that the Priestly writer was attempting to

create a *nomos* in a time when Israel itself had no body politic. In the context of exile

everything is chaotic. All the assumptions that people had taken for granted about the

hegemony of YHWH and the societal order maintained by the king in Jerusalem were dashed.

Moreover, with the wealthy ruling class sent into exile, the boundaries of Israelite identity

were violated. In a context where the Israelite *nomos* has been destroyed and in which

ambiguity is running amok, it is entirely understandable that a theology of binaries would

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[28] See for example Blenkinsopp, J., (1992), *The Pentateuch. An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*, (Yale University Press, New Haven), 4-11.

emerge in this period. Recreating a system of *tame'* or *tahor*, kosher or unkosher, God or non-divine allows you assert control over your environment and to utterly eliminate the chaos of ambiguity. When your people have gone into exile, you do not want a theological system in which God has to demonstrate mastery over the divine forces of chaos. You want a theology that makes God the uncontested, incomparable and solo God of the universe.

Synthesizing the Two Models of Chaos

This paper has demonstrated two of the main models of chaos that exist in the Hebrew Bible. The first are the texts that contain vestiges of the pagan ancient Near Eastern myths, which view chaos as a force that YHWH must overcome through combat and struggle to demonstrate His mastery over creation. The second model, the Priestly model, does not have God struggle with chaos, but rather views chaos as the "dirt" that renders the system of culture and significance messy and must be eliminated lest it threaten the *nomos.* These two models create a very different theological system and portray God in very different ways. And yet, there is a tremendous amount of overlap between these two views of chaos.

Firstly, both models view chaos as a profoundly disturbing and threatening force. The warrior God portrayal of YHWH needs to demonstrate His mastery, because otherwise the chaos of the sea monsters threatens to undo creation and send it back to the primordial abyss. Similarly, the anxiety over ambiguity that threatens the system reveals a larger fear that chaos could topple society itself. In both cases, chaos is the force that must be controlled, contained, and to whatever extent possible, eliminated.

Secondly, both models of chaos reveal an ethnocentric worldview. Many texts portray YHWH marching out to subdue and conquer the other nations of the world. As such, the other nations represent the chaotic threat that looms against the mastery of YHWH over the world.

Indeed, these texts emphasize the cultic, particularistic face of YHWH far more than the YHWH who is God of the entire world. Similarly, the Priestly writer's focus on legislating purity and impurity reveals an anxiety over the maintenance of Israelite identity over and against that of foreigners. The fear of losing the distinctiveness of Israel is both a fear of a *nomos* lost and a fear of the chaos that emerges from a world with no boundaries. As such, both of these models of chaos engender an "us versus them" mentality that reinforces Israelite identity.

Given the profound similarities between these two models of chaos, perhaps it can be said that they represent two sides of a similar coin. The worldview and theological assumptions behind them are shared and the main difference comes from their genre. The mythological texts use narrative to construct a national history, while the priestly sources engender identity through legislation and ritual surrounding cultural norms.

Thus, these two types of Biblical chaos literature provide us with a fairly cohesive view of normative Biblical chaos theology. This view of chaos as the enemy of creation and the established *nomos* has evolved very little over the course of history. The metaphor of an enthroned King God or a Warrior God has been so overused throughout history that they have become reified metaphors. Chaos is still the enemy, the thing that we seek to limit and control. When we encounter the chaotic, be it in the form of earthquakes and hurricanes or disease and unexplained death, we often question God's providence in the world. The presence of chaos undermines traditional theology, making it difficult to both hold onto one's understanding of the cosmos and acknowledge one's suffering. Furthermore, the anxiety over the liminal and the ill-defined has persisted into modernity. The continued presence of homophobia, transphobia, and anxiety over those who do not fit into a gendered, religious, or racial box demonstrates that our culture still does not do well with people who do not fit into certain

categories. The Feminist Revolution, the Sexual Revolution, the movement for queer rights, and the Civil Rights Movement all sparked vehement backlash because of the perceived "threat" they posed to the wider *nomos*. In essence, our attitudes towards chaos can have the negative effect of trapping us in a parochial theology and reactionary politics.

These theologies of chaos also have profoundly troubling implications underlying them. These constructions of God based in the Combat Myth and the Priestly theologies portray a profoundly violent theology. Feminist theologians, in particular, find the combat God to be both theologically limiting and disturbing. Catherine Madsen writes:

> "The violent God is not an image of our aspirations; he is an image of what happens when we fail. The Bible is not a blueprint for the ideal relationship between God and humanity, but a profound psychological portrait of a relationship that has been wretched from the start."[29]

Describing YHWH as an *'ish milhamah* necessarily includes the *'ish*, portraying a God that fits into a patriarchal system that brutalizes and subjugates women (remember that the goddess Tiamat is eviscerated by Marduk). Madsen asserts that this violent portrayal of God even renders Him unworshipable, as "God is more like [King] Lear than perhaps any invisible and worshipful creature has the right to be, not least in his misogynist invective and need for praise."[30] If God is the violent destroyer or chaos, then it stands to reason that God can visit the same violence upon humanity. The prophet Jeremiah, who God called at the tender age of nine for the first time, describes God as raping him (Jer. 20:7). Job also imagines God as violently and perniciously persecuting him. Even the Priestly sources, which eliminate God's violence against chaos, still allow violence to seep into their system of purity and impurity. The Priestly intolerance towards ambiguity and the way it ostracizes and quarantines people

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[29] Madsen, Catherine (2001), "Notes on God's Violence," *Cross Currents,* (51, 2), 247.
[30] Ibid., 231.

deemed "unclean" commits social violence against those who do not fit the cultural category of acceptable in the form of quarantine and banishment. A society that copes with difference through ostracism and sees identity-bending as an existential threat has the potential to perpetrate unthinkable atrocities.

As such, the shortcomings of these theologies leave one to ponder whether a belief system that pits God against chaos can ever be one that creates an accessible, non-patriarchal, and non-violent God. Ultimately, it is a third model, a model that describes a God that does not destroy chaos, but rather makes use of it or even desires it, that can provide the foundation for a more relatable God.

Chapter 2: Job and Leviathan: A Biblical Counter-Narrative

Much of the wisdom tradition in the Bible constructs its theology around extremely conservative traditional beliefs. This underlying dogma demanded "total, single-minded submission to One Deity, the national God Yahweh."[31] With the emergence of Deuteronomy in the 7th century BCE came a New Wisdom whose theological core is the Deuteronomic theodicy—the belief in reward and punishment and Torah piety. New Wisdom was focused on "the study of holy text and the observance of covenantal commandments."[32] Thus emerged a belief system in which the suffering and chaos that the nation experienced could be attributed to the breaking of covenantal obligations. The problem of suffering could make sense, as one could attribute blame for it to the sufferer. Indeed, the Book of Proverbs opens with this theology, as it declares, "The beginning of wisdom is fear of YHWH" (Prov. 1:7).

Such a New Wisdom theology does not account for the presence of chaos in the world. In fact, the presence of unexplained, random, or meaningless occurrences would fundamentally undermine a Deuteronomistic mindset. After all, chaos simply does not compute in a theology that deifies cause-and-effect, or rather, discusses God as if God were the embodiment of cause-and-effect.[33] We can also see that the Deuteronomistic New Wisdom view of chaos is a natural evolution from many older theologies in the Bible that have their root in the mythologies of the surrounding cultures in the Ancient Near East. Such mythologies make use of the *chaoskampf* genre—a literature that portrays God as a warrior who battles against the forces of chaos and

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[31] Geller, Steven A. (2002). "Nature's Answer: The Meaning of the Book of Job in Its Biblical Context," in Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, *Judaism and Ecology: Created World and Real World.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 111.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

becomes victorious by defeating them and establishing the human *nomos*. In the Song of the Sea, God is described as the *'ish milhamah*, the "Man of War," who destroys the Egyptians, terrifies the enemies of Israel, controls the forces of chaos represented by the Sea of Reeds, and in doing so, establishes a holy abode and land of inheritance for His beloved people. Psalm 89 links the establishment of the Israelite *nomos* to a primordial battle with the sea monsters in which the chaos monsters are brutalized and killed by God. In many of these Biblical texts, as God is exalted as the establisher of order, chaos becomes the defeated yet ever present enemy that threatens to undermine creation and the integrity of the Israelite people. We see that both the *chaoskampf* mythology and Deuteronomistic New Wisdom create a binary way of perceiving God and chaos. God is the establisher of order and embodiment of cause-and-effect; chaos is the dominated threat that God effectively banishes from the created world or unleashes against those that "deserve" punishment.

This binary way of conceiving of God and chaos is problematic both in its implications about God and in its relevance to our lives. To conceive of God as the violent warrior champion confines us to a mode of thinking of God that relies on the reified metaphors of an anachronistic patriarchal culture. Such theologies reinforce hierarchies, as their suspicions of the chaotic "other" (those outside the predominant culture) allow cultures that believe in them to commit horrific social violence against those that do not fit into the strictly ordered paradigm of their societies. Thus, the violent God risks becoming either irrelevant to modern society or a theological conception that impedes progress by engendering reactionary or regressive politics. The other problem with such a theology of chaos is that it is easily undermined by the lived experience. After all, the Deuteronomistic theology was in a state of crisis with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. With the seemingly

inviolable house of God reduced to rubble and Israel's sovereignty lost, people would suddenly see the insufficiencies or the outright contradictions of the New Wisdom theology. Similarly, in our own lives, if a person believes in a God who defeats and crushes chaos, when that person experiences the chaotic—the freak accident, the unexplainable disease, the natural disaster— such events could cause that person cognitive dissonance. To deal with the paradox between one's held theology and reality, that person could sink into a deeply masochistic theodicy, examining himself for a transgression that in reality has little to do with his suffering. Or that person's entire faith could come crashing down, as he declares that no God whose providence exists in the world could possibly allow such chaos and devastation. Either way, the traditional theologies of chaos derived from New Wisdom Theology fail us, and we must look to other ways of understanding God and the cosmos.

One book of the Bible, the Book of Job, challenges New Wisdom theodicy and creates a radically different view of God and creation. Instead of portraying God as the God of history or the God of philosophy, Job, and in particular the concluding whirlwind speeches, hearkens to Old Wisdom literature that envisions God within the forces of nature. Through reading key passages and contrasting them with *chaoskampf* creation mythology and Deuteronomistic New Wisdom, I will construct an alternative theology of chaos in which it is not the enemy of God and creation, but rather the ultimate fulfillment of creation.

Job is perhaps the most radical book of the Bible in its willingness to completely disregard and even mock the New Wisdom paradigm. Despite the common conception of the "Patient Job," the Job reflected in the poetic sections of the book is anything but patient. From the moment that Job opens his mouth in Chapter 3 until God speaks to him out of the whirlwind, Job not only complains of the injustice of his suffering, but he also illustrates the audacity of a

man in rebellion by demanding that God answer for Godself. When Job's friends confront him with traditional retribution theology, Job defiantly asserts his innocence. His suffering is undeserved. Though he does not have the imagination to transcend retributive theology, his innocence proves that either the system has been corrupted or the Judge has made a mistake.

In the midst of these conversations about suffering and justice lies a related conversation about the role of chaos in the universe. The chaos monsters Rahab, Behemoth, and Leviathan make numerous appearances throughout the book, most notably in YHWH's speeches out of the whirlwind. When Job mentions the chaos monsters, he hearkens back to the ancient Canaanite theology in which Leviathan and Rahab are the enemies that YHWH has defeated in the primordial past to make room for the created world. Holding onto these ancient mythologies creates cognitive dissonance for him, as his suffering in the present seems to partake in the chaotic. Ironically, although Job defiantly denies the accusations his friends make against him and refuses to repent, it is clear that Job is actually holding onto many of the same theological assumptions that they do.

It is only with God's speeches about Behemoth and Leviathan that we break out of these New Wisdom and *chaoskampf* beliefs. One could interpret these speeches as suggesting that from God's perspective, the chaos monsters are neither defeated, nor are they God's enemies. In fact, they seem to represent critical, if not desirable, pieces in the picture of creation. Job's demands for God to embody perfect justice are rendered inconsequential, as the perspective of the text shifts away from an anthropocentric view of the world to a perspective that holds the entirety of the cosmos. As such, in my reading of Job, YHWH's speeches present a radical alternative model of the cosmos, a counter narrative to New Wisdom, Deuteronomistic

retributive theology, and ancient *chaoskampf* mythology. Such a narrative can construct a necessary, relevant, post-modern theology.

Job's Place in the Biblical Canon

Contextualizing Job in the Biblical world is both a challenging task and one that is necessary to understand whether the theology contained therein is a precursor or a reaction to the major traumas of Biblical history and New Wisdom literature. The language and style of Job do very little to help clarify when we can date its authorship. The archaic grammatical features and unique vocabulary (very high frequency of *hapax legomenon*) could point to either a very early or a late dating to Job. Those who support an early dating point to the fact that Job does not reference any aspect of the Israelite Covenant with YHWH, and the place names mentioned in the book are not located in Israel but rather in lands to the east. The obscure names of Job and his friends could easily be construed as non-Hebrew (other than Elihu, who seems to be a later insertion).[34] The lack of reference to the Israelite ethnic history has led some scholars to date the Joban myth to the patriarchal era.[35]

The preponderance of scholars, however, will date the composition of Job to between the 7th century and the 4th century BCE. These Biblical scholars cluster their dates to three main times: during the reign of Hezekiah in the 7th century BCE, during the Babylonian exile in the mid-6th century BCE, or well into the Second Temple Era.[36] Given the similarities in style between Job and Deutero-Isaiah, it seems likely that Job is the product of the exilic or post-exilic period.[37] For example, the poetic laments of Job show striking similarities in style and

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[34] Wilcox, J, (1989). *The Bitterness of Job: A Philosophical Reading*. Ann Arbbor: The University of Michigan Press, 7.

[35] Hartley, J. (1988). *The Book of Job.* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 17.

[36] Ibid., 18.

[37] Clines, D., (1989). *Word Biblical Commentary 17: Job.* Dallas: Word Books, 8.

content with the emotional outpourings of the prophet Jeremiah and the book of Lamentations. Furthermore, the cosmopolitan nature of the wisdom literature genre and the numerous loan words contained in Job further support a late dating.[38] The earliest external mention of Job in the Bible comes in the book of Ezekiel (another exilic prophet), in which Job is mentioned alongside other ancient characters Noah and Danel (Ezek. 14:14, 20). It seems then that it is most likely that Job is a book of exilic origin that hearkens to a mythic character in the Israelite folklore.

   A late dating of Job, then, indicates that when Job references Leviathan and Rahab, he, and by extension the author, are recalling an old cosmology. Therefore, I believe that the writer of Job makes the title character and his friends straw men, holding onto an old conception of creation and chaos that God ultimately dismantles. According to Stephen Geller, the poetic writer of Job places the New Wisdom theology directly into the mouths of Eliphaz and the other friends as a way of demonstrating its limitations.[39] If the writer lived in the post-Exilic context, having seen the Israelite *nomos* destroyed by the Babylonians, it stands to reason that the old mythologies about God would not make sense. If the Temple is destroyed and the Davidic Covenant seemingly voided, it makes little sense to speak of the warrior God triumphing over enemies, having destroyed the forces of chaos at creation. A new vision of who God is and what He can do in history was needed in this new context. I believe that an exilic dating of Job suggests that the book attempts to nuance outdated notions of God and describe God and chaos in ways that speak to the reality that the Israelites were living in.

Chaos in Job's Complaints

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Geller, 110.

As Job complains of his suffering and rebuffs his friends' false comfort, he expounds on his

theology of God and creation, which are failing him in his time of spiritual crisis. In the midst

of the laments comes periodic hymns of praise, such as the latter half of chapter 26.

> **7** He stretched out Mount Zaphon over the chaos,
>   and hangs the earth over nothing.
> **8** He binds up the waters in His thick clouds;
>   yet the clouds never burst beneath them.
> **9** He covers the face of His throne,
>   and blankets it with His clouds.
> **10** He placed a boundary upon the surface of the waters,
>   to mark the borders of light and darkness.
> **11** The pillars of heaven tremble
>   and are dumbfounded at His rebuke.
> **12** With his power he quiets Yamm,
>   and by His cunning He pierces Rahab.
> **13** By His breath netted the seas;
>   His hand hath pierced the elusive serpent.
> **14** Lo, these are but glimpses of His ways;
>   Vague rumors we have heard of him!
>   But the thunder of His mighty deeds who can grasp? Job 26:7-14[40]

In recalling creation, Job uses vocabulary reminiscent of Genesis 1 and the Psalms that contain

chaoskampf creation language. Job portrays a creation in which the *tohu* and the *b'li-mah*, the

primordial chaos and the nothingness of pre-creation are conquered by creating over them. It

is the stretching of Mount Zaphon, perhaps a location name of God's holy abode, that stakes a

claim on the cosmos and subdues the chaos into the netherworld below creation. After

establishing the created world over the primordial soup, God's next task involves delimiting

boundaries of chaos. "He binds up the waters in His thick clouds," and He has decreed "a

boundary on the face of the waters" (Job 26:8, 10). In limiting the waters and the seas to a

particular place, God establishes authority and in so doing, protects God's fledgling creation.

Interestingly, verse 10 parallels the creation of a boundary for the waters with the delimiting

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[40] The translations in this chapter are my own. They are aided by Raymond P. Scheindlin and Robert
Alter's translations of the book of Job.

of the borders of light and darkness. In other words, containing the sea and its monsters is not just about keeping the chaos at bay; it is also related to maintaining the integrity of light and dark—the first act of creation. To not contain the chaos in the netherworld is to allow for the un-creation of the cosmos. The process concludes in violence as the previously disembodied chaos becomes manifest in the monster Rahab (26:12). Though the monstrous emerges, Job's God's completes the establishment of God's authority and creation: "His hand has pierced the elusive serpent" (Job 26:13). Just as Tiamat is pierced and dismembered in the *Enuma Elish*, the metaphysical rape and evisceration of the chaos monsters in Job's myth makes way for creation. The conclusion of this violence is serenity in the heavens, for chaos has not only been built on and contained, but it has also been eliminated.

Having constructed such a dogmatic theology, Job faces a cognitive dissonance that not only challenges his conception of justice, but it threatens to destroy the very foundations of the universe. Job's laments reveal two routes that the character takes to explain his unjust suffering: mistaken identity (chapter 7) and apocalypse (chapter 3). The mistaken identity excuse has Job pondering if some kind of error was made, whether his sufferings were intended for another. As an example, in chapter 7, Job ponders philosophically on the meaninglessness of life. He likens his life to that of a day laborer, who toils all day, desperately seeking night for relief from his arduous tedium, and then cannot find rest and repose at night, as his torments keep him up, tossing and turning (Job 7:1-4). He at once asserts the tedium of life and, paradoxically, that his days pass "swifter than a shuttle, and spent without hope" (Job 7:6). Just as he laments the human condition, he suddenly changes the topic from the universal to the personal, asking God rhetorically *hayam 'ani, 'im-Tanin; ki tasim 'alai mishmor*, "am I the sea, or the sea monster, that You should set a watch over me" (Job 7:12)? In other words, Job

declares to God that the only way he can make sense of his punishment is if he were the chaotic

enemy. Although Job's question is rhetorical, it reveals that in his attempts to deal with his

cognitive dissonance, Job cannot escape dredging up the same old theological paradigms that

his friends throw in his face. Yet this question reveals a theology even more violent than

retributive theology. If Job suffers, it is not only because God is punishing a sin, it is because

God is at war with him in the same way that God is at war with Rahab and Leviathan. This

belief system is deeply masochistic, because in a metaphysical way, Job asserts that God is

battling against him, and although he decries the injustice of it, he does not have the

imaginative capacity to think of his suffering in a different way.

In other texts, Job makes use of the language of apocalypse to give voice to his suffering.

When Job first cries out in agony in Chapter 3, he does so in a way that models the un-creation

of the universe.

2 And Job spoke up, and said:
3 Blot out the day I was born!
   And the night wherein it was announced: 'A male has been conceived.'
4 Let that day be darkness;
   Let God have no concern for it,
   Let no light shine upon it.
5 Let darkness and gloom claim it for their own;
   Let rain clouds rest upon it;
   May what blackens the day terrify it.
6 May black carry off that night;
   May it not join the days of the year;
   Let it not be counted in any of its months.
7 Lo, let that night be barren;
   Let no joy come in it.
8 Let those who curse the day damn it,
   Those ready to rouse Leviathan.
9 Let the twilight stars go dark;
   May it hope for light, but find none;
   Neither let it behold the glimmerings of the morning;
10 Because it did not close my mother's womb,
   Nor hid trouble from mine eyes. Job 3:2-10

Just as in chapter 7, Job makes use of the language of day and night; however, in this instance, he links day and night with creation language. Job not only expresses the desire that he were never born, but he wishes the entire day of his birth were blotted out of existence. This passage is notable for the unusual features in its poetics. In verse 3, when Job intensifies the verse in the A' section of the verse, he actually goes back in time; instead of just wanting his birth to be blotted from existence, he wants his very conception to have never happened. Job furthermore undermines the poetic structure in many of these verses, as they take on a tripartite structure. The chaos that Job wants to swallow up the day of his birth expresses itself in the chaos of the overflowing verses. Job calls for the light, the first of God's creations, to be snuffed out, a clear mark of the un-creation that occurs in the apocalypse. The theme persists throughout the chapter, as Job calls for the "stars of twilight" to be darkened, that those who search for light find none, and that the dawn bring no sun (Job 3:9). In Job's cries, we see a man whose pain is making him experience the unmaking of his world. Indeed, in the words of cultural critic Elaine Scarry, "pain unmakes the universe."[41] That is to say, the world of signification around a person experiencing pain drops away, as the pain he experiences demands to be felt to the exclusion of anything else. The world disappears around him, as he falls into a black hole he cannot escape from. In other words, the agony of Job fits in with his theology of chaos, a theology that suggests that such undeserved suffering is emblematic of a world in which the primordial monsters of chaos have overthrown any notion of justice and overcome the forces that have bound them. Leviathan and Behemoth have been let loose and are now free to engage in the un-creation of the cosmos. For Job the experience of personal pain is the unmaking of the universe.

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[41] Scarry, Elaine (1987). The Body in Pain, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 30.

Job thus embodies the normative view of God and chaos. Job's God creates the world by conquering the chaotic, stretching the firmament over the primordial soup, and violently overcoming the monsters that threaten God's creation. Such a theology creates a problem for Job's unexplainable suffering, and the two theologies he alternates between are contradictory. In one version, God is the overzealous dictator, stamping out the chaotic, even at the expense of the innocent Job. In the other version, the dam has broken in creation, and God is powerless to prevent the chaotic from destroying the universe. In either case, as much as Job is rebelling against God and his friends, he cannot escape the theological box of his normative belief system.

YHWH out of the Whirlwind

Perhaps the most surprising feature of Job is the fact that his demands for an answer, his subpoenas for God to appear in cosmological court of justice, do not go unanswered. YHWH answers Job in two speeches *min ha's'arah*, "from the whirlwind" (Job 38:1). That YHWH speaks with the sound and fury of the storm conveys that these concluding sermons are not the quiet, personal communication from God that we see with Moses or Abraham; they constitute a fully-fledged theophany. The association of destructive forces of nature with a theophany is a common trope in the Bible. When the Israelites receive the Torah at Sinai, there were "thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount" (Exod 19:16). The prayer of Habbakuk speaks of God coming from the mountains of Teman, declaring that when God stands, He shakes the earth and causes the nations of the earth to tremble (Hab 3:6). Similar imagery appears in the Song of Dvora and the Song of Moses—the mountain God who shakes the earth and cows the enemies into submission.

While Job's theophany shares many characteristics with these other Biblical theophanies, a couple of traits make it stand apart from them. First, elsewhere in the Bible, YHWH's arrival is an aggressive, proactive appearance in which God goes out to defeat enemies or uses God's awesomeness to get Israel to enter the Covenant. In Job, YHWH is reacting to Job's demands that God show Godself and give an answer. Second, and perhaps most tellingly, elsewhere in the Bible, YHWH's theophanies usually involve God coming forth from His holy abode, whether it be Sinai or Seir. In Job, YHWH's whirlwind seems to come out of nowhere to meet Job in the desert planes of the east. As such, the Job theophany does not represent a God coming out to conquer those that disturb God's *nomos*; it is God appearing in the midst of the forces of chaos themselves.

Perhaps the theophany that has the most overlap with that of Job comes in 1 Kings 19, when God appears to the prophet Elijah at Sinai. Like Job, the 1 Kings text does not involve combat, nor does God appear before an audience of a nation. Though the 1 Kings narrative does take place at Horeb, YHWH asks Elijah multiple times what he is doing there, suggesting that YHWH actually does not want the prophet to seek God out at the traditional mountain of God. Like Job, the appearance of God coincides with the occurrence of fantastic natural events. Elijah witnesses a great wind "rent the mountains" and break "stones into pieces," an earthquake, and a great fire (1 Kings 19:11-12). Yet each time the text speaks of one of these forces of nature, it tells us that YHWH was not in it. YHWH was only found in the *kol d'mamah dakah*, the "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12). While the Job theophany keeps YHWH associated with the storm, the Deuteronomistic writer disassociates YHWH from the forces of nature. As such, it seems that the major difference in these two theophanies is that the Deuteronomist attempts to scrub YHWH of the ancient Near Eastern mythological baggage and any kind of

anthropomorphism, but Job hearkens back to it. The question then becomes what the Joban author accomplishes in alluding to this ancient imagery.

The way that Job distinguishes itself from the imagery in the Ugaritic texts conveys a different conception of God and chaos in the Biblical text. In the Ba'al Cycle, the traditional locus of Ba'al's theophany is in the westerly storm cloud, and El appears to humans through dreams. Yet in Job 38:1, God appears in a dust cloud of a storm, a whirlwind, which Mark S. Smith associates with the desiccating wind of the eastern desert, a symbol more closely linked with the god Mot, the god of Death and the Underworld.[42] Thus, in portraying YHWH as coming from the whirlwind, Job depicts a God that "rules not only the domesticated human sphere but also realms undomesticated, even unknown by humans; therefore, the divine cannot be controlled or tamed by human expectations."[43] This is not the God we encounter in the other texts who operates within the community center, establishes a *nomos*, and defends it from the chaos that comes from the periphery.

Job may want God to send Leviathan and the forces of chaos outside the realms of the created world, but this God of the whirlwind might actually be a God found *within* the forces of chaos themselves.

YHWH the Midwife

The speeches that YHWH makes from the whirlwind lend themselves to multiple interpretations because of their rich and convoluted symbolic vocabulary. Perhaps most puzzling is the fact that the whirlwind speeches are elicited from Job's accusations of God's injustice, and yet they do not seem to respond to that question at all. Commonly, YHWH's response is interpreted to be an act of cosmic bullying to put Job in his place and cause him to

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[42] Smith, Mark S. (2001) *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 38.
[43] Ibid., 38-39.

retract the accusation. Robert Alter writes that God ignores Job's plea for justice and

"sarcastically asks Job how good he is at hurling lightning bolts, making the sun rise and set,

cause the rain to fall, fixing limits to the breakers of the sea."[44] The tone of YHWH's speeches

does suggest that God is outraged by the accusations Job makes against Him. However, in Job's

and God's portrayals of creation, it seems that God might not be bullying Job so much as God is

trying to correct Job's theological misconceptions. In so doing, God's speeches radically alter

Job's (and the reader's) understanding of chaos' role in creation.

The speeches begin with God calling Job out, asking: "Who is it that darkens council by

words without knowledge" (Job 38:2). While Job makes bold claims about God's actions

during the process of creation, most notably God's dominance over and destruction of

Leviathan and Rahab, God snaps back, asking how he can make any assertions about justice, let

alone creation, without first hand knowledge of the events themselves. While God's

descriptions of fastening the foundations and establishing the cornerstones of the earth do

match Job's praise hymn in chapter 26, four verses make use of imagery that challenges the

chaoskampf theology Job uses:

> **8** Who shut up the doors of the sea
>   When it burst forth from the womb?
> **9** When I made a cloud its clothes,
>   Fog its swaddling band?
> **10** I set limits upon it;
>   Locked it with a bar and doors.
> **11** And I said: "Till here you may come and no more;
>   Here will cease the pride of your waves." Job 38:8-11

At first glance, these lines seem to conform to the other texts that portray God's dominion over

the sea; they describe a process by which the sea is contained and delimited, much like Genesis

1. However, the language in this passage does not portray a warrior God triumphing over the

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[44] Alter, R. (1985). *The Art of Biblical Poetry.* New York: Basic Books, 86.

sea or a majestic God ruling over it. The sea comes into being as a birth "[issuing] from the womb" into the created world. This verse conveys that when God takes the actions of "shutting the sea" that comes bursting forth, God is acting as a midwife, coaxing the primordial womb to give birth and receiving the newborn into a crib. God then renders the newborn a "garment" and sets rules over it, as a parent would, to set it in its proper place. The imagery of these verses invites a subversive, even radical reading of the text, as they expand the symbolic vocabulary we have for creation. The patriarchal warrior subduer is replaced with feminine symbols—midwife, dresser, boundary setter, mother. We not only get a different image of God, but the image of chaos is changed as well. It is not the enemy that must be victimized to violence; it is the newborn baby who must be cared for and given a holding space to play and explore. By changing the act of creation from a battle to a birth, we open the possibility for a non-combative, non-oppositional, non-binary cosmos.

After discussions of the primordial creation, YHWH's speech turns its attention to the natural world.

1 Do you know the season when the mountain goats give birth?
    Or watch for the calving of the gazelle?
2 Can you count the months till they come to term?
    Or know the season when they give birth?
3 When they crouch, and their young burst forth;
    Their young they push out into the world?
4 Their young thrive, and grow up in the wild;
    They go forth, and return not again.
5 Who sent free the wild ass,
    Loosened his reigns?
6 Whose home I have made the wilderness,
    Whose abode is the salt flats.
7 He mocks the bustling city,
    Never hearing the driver's shout.
8 He pastures in the range of mountains,
    Searching after any green.
9 Would the wild-ox want to serve you?

> Spend the night by your serving trough?
> **10** Can you tie him to a furrow with a rope,
> So that he harrows the valleys behind you?
> **11** Can you rely on his great strength,
> And leave your labor to him?
> **12** Can you trust him to bring in your seed,
> and gather the corn of your threshing-floor?
> **13** The wing of the ostrich beats joyously;
> but are her pinions and feathers like the kindly stork's? Job 39:1-13

This passage emphasizes that YHWH's role as the "midwife" persists beyond the primordial beginnings, as YHWH still has to be involved in the birthing processes of nature. YHWH asks Job rhetorically about whether he knows the intimate details of the wild goat's mating and birthing process, suggesting that such information is both unknowable to him and of vital importance to understand the "work" of a God. Indeed, it seems in this passage that God's focus is precisely on the creatures who are deemed "wild;" the world of Job and his friends having faded away into the background. These themes persist when God then asks whether Job could contain the wild ass, the wild ox, the ostrich, the horse, and the hawk. Their chaotic nature is precisely what is tied up with their majesty, as God praises the wild ass who rejects the city, the undomesticated nature of the wild-ox, the beating wings of the ostrich, the leaping and snorting horse. The wildness of these animals is not a quality to squash, as one might expect in a combative view of creation that focuses on the establishment of the human *nomos*. YHWH speaks of these wild animals with the pride of a parent.

The praise for the wildness of these creatures stands in contrast to the theology of much of the rest of the Bible, which holds an anthropocentric view of the universe. Genesis 1, for example, portrays the six days of creation as leading up to and culminating in the creation of man and woman, the only of God's creations made *b'tzelmo*. The *chaoskampf* mythology further supports this viewpoint, in which YHWH defeats the chaos monsters, so that God can

establish God's holy abode and make way for the creation of the Israelite *nomos*. The creation mythology in YHWH's speeches in Job, however, barely mentions humanity. Job might have the perspective that the wild ox should be pressed into servitude to a farmer, or that the donkey should want to serve a person in the city, or that the ostrich should behave like a domesticated bird. But God rejects this human perspective. God reminds Job of a greater point of view—the creatures of the world are not created to serve humanity. They have a wild existence that has value unto itself. We might say that this is a metaphor for Job's relationship with God. Job's only understanding of God's work relates to how it applies to his own life, just as a human's only understanding of the wild ox is how the animal can serve humanity. God, however, emphasizes that such a limited anthropocentric perspective cannot encapsulate the true majesty of God. God cannot provide Job justice, just as the wild ox would not choose to abdicate its wildness to serve a farmer.

The fascinating thing about this creation narrative is that it moves from primordial origins to discussion of the wild animals and then concludes with Behemoth and Leviathan. Creation does not culminate with the creation of humanity; its climax is with the embodiments of wildness themselves. As such, Job's questions about justice are rendered totally meaningless, as the expectation of justice operating within the human *nomos* is irrelevant, as that *nomos* is nowhere on the radar in the story of creation. How can YHWH occupy Himself with human suffering if He has to ensure the continued fertility and viability of the wildness of nature? The work of a God extends far beyond the human realm, and so what YHWH's speeches offer us is a broader perspective of the universe—a universe in which the human *nomos* is just one part of a vast array of creations. The speech thus asks us to consider whether our limited perspective allows us to judge and condemn chaos as anti-creation.

We might want to be comforted by the *'ish milhamah* God that destroys chaos, but we have to consider the way that this image limits our understanding of creation in disturbing ways. These speeches not only offer us new and radical vocabulary, but in fact, the more accurate metaphor actually may be that of God as the midwife bringing forth creation—majestic creatures, chaos, and all—from the primordial womb into being.

YHWH Throws the Gauntlet

The closest YHWH comes to answering Job's ultimate question of justice comes in the second speech from the whirlwind in which God challenges Job to place himself in the perspective of a God.

> **6** Then YHWH answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said:
> **7** Arm your waist like a fighter;
> 　　I will inquire of you, and you will inform me.
> **8** Would you void my justice?
> 　　Make me guilty so that you can be right?
> **9** If you have an arm like a god,
> 　　And can thunder with a voice like his:
> **10** Deck yourself now with majesty and eminence,
> 　　Array yourself with glory and grandeur.
> **11** Scatter your raging wrath;
> 　　Look upon every one that is proud, and bring him low.
> **12** Look on every one that is proud, and humble him;
> 　　And crush the wicked where they stand. Job 40:6-12

As God challenges Job to "deck [himself] now with majesty and excellency," it seems that God is miffed that Job would seek to justify himself by condemning God. Two times in this speech, God essentially asks Job why he seeks to prove himself right by putting God in the wrong. With these words, God rejects the binary mindset that underlies the retributive theology of Job and his friends. With such a mindset, Job comes to the conclusion that either God is right, and Job has sinned, or Job is right, and God has wronged him. When God asks this question, God rejects the notion that the scope of justice can be so simple. Indeed, it seems as though God is actually

alarmed that Job even holds onto the concept of a God that metes out justice. It might seem a

desirable result that Job would "look on everyone that is proud, and bring him low; and tread

down the wicked in their place," for, it would ensure justice and eliminate unearned suffering

(Job 40:12). Unfortunately, ensuring justice and eliminating chaos would have unintentional

side effects, causing "disastrous results" from Job's attempt at creation.[45]

It is in the Behemoth and Leviathan sections of YHWH's speeches that we see why a God

who ensures justice by defeating chaos would be disastrous.

> **15** Look now Behemoth, whom I made with you;
>   He eats grass like cattle.
> **16** Look at his loins! What power!
>   The brute strength in his belly muscles!
> **17** He stretches his tail like a cedar;
>   The sinews of his thighs twine together.
> **18** His bones are as pipes of brass;
>   His limbs are like iron bars.
> **19** He is the first of God's works;
>   Only his maker can draw the sword to him.
> **20** The hills offer their yield to him,
>   Where all the beasts of the field play.
> **21** Under the lotus-trees he lies,
>   In the covert of the reeds and fens.
> **22** The lotus-trees shade him;
>   The willows of the brook surround him.
> **23** Behold, he swallows rivers with ease;
>   Untroubled though the Jordan rushes to his mouth. Job 40:15-23

We can detect in this speech a tremendous amount of pride. YHWH exclaims at the

tremendous power of Behemoth, his belly muscles, the power of his loins, the strength of his

bones. YHWH emphasizes the awe and wonder owed to Behemoth by describing him as *reishit*,

the "first of God's works." While we might think of the terrible results of a monster who can

swallow rivers, YHWH seems unperturbed by such a notion. Given the overall tone of this

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[45] Wilson, J. V. (1975), "A Return to the Problems of Behemoth and Leviathan," *Vestus Testamentum,* (XXV, 1), 6.

Behemoth description, the wildness of Behemoth is not something to be feared or destroyed; it

is a source of pride. As such, YHWH uses the magnificence of Behemoth as evidence that Job's

desire to quash chaos and ensure justice is a misguided path.

YHWH will take a similar path with Leviathan, perhaps an even more fearsome creature

with even more theological baggage than Behemoth. Even so, YHWH's challenge to Job to

capture and domesticate Leviathan reveals a deity that is uninterested in actually controlling

the chaos monster.

> **25** Could you draw out leviathan with a fish-hook?
>   Or bind his tongue with a cord?
> **26** Can you put a ring through his nose?
>   Or pierce his jaw with a hook?
> **27** Would he beg you for mercy?
>   Speak gentle words to you?
> **28** Will he make a treaty with you,
>   That you should take him as an eternal slave?
> **29** Will you play with him like a bird?
>   Leash him for your young ladies?
> **30** Will the fishermen trade in him?
>   Will he be divided among the merchants?
> **31** Can you fill his skin with barbed irons?
>   Get his head into a fish-net?
> **32** Lay your hand upon him;
>   You will never think of war again. Job 40:25-32

Unlike the Behemoth text, in which Job is the co-creator of the earth monster with God, in the

Leviathan verses, Job is portrayed as the "Hero-god" who must defeat Leviathan.[46] As such,

YHWH's sarcastic challenge takes Job back to the primordial struggle over Leviathan. God asks

Job whether he can capture Leviathan with a hook and pierce his nose with a ring (Job 40:25-

26). The nose ring was a common way that farmers would assert authority over steer, making

them easy to guide with a hook. As such, in YHWH's speech, YHWH depicts a theology that

resembles what Job portrays in his speeches: a God who defeats the chaos monsters, and

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[46] Ibid., 10.

neutralizes the danger they possess. Yet the sarcasm of God in this speech suggests either that if Job were cloaked in majesty, he would not be able to capture Leviathan, or if he could, it would not be a desirable outcome for the cosmos. Thus, in Wilson's reading, the image of a "Hero-god" is a farce—an impossible dream of a naïve man who wants a chaos-free world guided by justice. The message of God's challenge to Job is that it is not the business of a god to eliminate chaos, but rather to celebrate its power. Doing so would fundamentally disturb the totality of God's creation. Behemoth must be strong and vital, and Leviathan is not meant to be captured.

Leviathan: The Glory of God's Creation

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the whirlwind speeches is not just that God declares that Leviathan cannot or should not be defeated, but also that God's fascination with the terrifying sea creature conveys that God does not *want* to capture Leviathan.

> **1** Look: all hope of him is delusion—
>   Even to look at him is to bend over!
> **2** Is he not terrible when aroused?
>   Who then can stand before Me?...
> **10** His sneezings flash lightning;
>   His eyes are like the glimmerings of dawn.
> **11** Burning torches pour forth from his mouth,
>   And sparks of fire leap forth.
> **12** His nostrils smoke,
>   Like a boiling cauldron on brushwood.
> **13** His breath kindles coals,
>   And flames emit from his mouth...
> **17** When he rears up, the gods cower;
>   As he crashes down, they cringe.
> **18** Any who tries to overtake him wit a sword will fail;
>   Nor spear, nor dart, nor lance.
> **19** He regards iron as straw,
>   Brass as rotten wood.
> **20** No arrow cannot make him flee;
>   Flingstones he turns to chaff...
> **23** He makes the deep to boil like a pot;

> He turns the sea into soup.
> **24** His wake is a glistening path;
> He makes the deep seem hoary.
> **25** He has no match on earth,
> Made as he without fear.
> **26** He sees all that is haughty;
> He is king over all the proud beasts. Job 41:1-2, 10-13, 17-20, 23-26

One could easily read pride in YHWH's descriptions of the smoke emitted from his nostrils, his heart as firm as stone, and the terror felt by the mighty who encounter him (Job 41:12, 16, 17). The text evokes both terror and wonder as it tells of Leviathan making "the deep boil like a pot… the sea like a seething mixture" (Job 41:23). The text concludes by triumphantly declaring: "Upon the earth, there is none like him; who is made to be fearless. He looks at all high things; He is king over all the proud beasts" (Job 41:25-26). Leviathan is not just one of God's creations; he is the "king" over God's creations, the glory of creation.

Ilana Pardes points out that this Leviathan speech provides both a contrast to the creation mythologies of Genesis 1 and to the ones that Job constructs.[47] When Job begins his chain of curses on the day of his birth in chapter 3, he lists Leviathan as one of the conspirators to bring on the death he so desires. Robert Alter writes, "Job wanted to reduce time to nothing and contract space to the small, dark compass of the locked womb."[48] For Job, Leviathan was among the forces that would bring on darkness and anti-creation.

God's poem directly foils this cosmology. Instead of ending in the wasteland of nothingness, it begins with it and then moves across eons, concluding in the glorious creation of nature teeming with life. "If Job in Chapter 3 craves for the twilight stars to remain dark and wishes away the triumphant cry on the night of conception, here the morning stars sing together and

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[47] Pardes, I. (2007), "Job's Leviathan: Between Melville and Alter," *Proof Texts,* (27, 2), 234-5.
[48] Alter, 97.

all the sons of God shout for joy, celebrating the completion of creation."[49] God's speech from the whirlwind is a celebration of creation, an affirmation of life. And how does it conclude? With none other than Leviathan himself! Unlike Genesis 1, which climaxes with the creation of humanity, in these poems, humanity is of secondary importance, completely on the sideline. It is Leviathan who takes center stage, the terrible, yet awesome final stroke in God's affirmation of creation. Humanity, then, is invited "to contemplate its terrific energies and fierce beauties, which are ultimately beyond human ken, ungraspable, as is the shining wake Leviathan leaves behind."[50]

Is it any wonder, then, that God does not destroy and perhaps does not even conquer Leviathan? In this cosmology, the raging, chaotic sea monster is the very thing that God celebrates in the created world. In this reading of the text, chaos is not something to defeat; it is something to celebrate as the embodiment of the creative power that exists in our universe.

Conclusion: Generating an Alternative Theology of Chaos

I believe the whirlwind speeches are among the most radical texts in the Bible because they audaciously construct a new conception of the cosmos. The God I read in these speeches is a profoundly non-violent God, who does not destroy or kill the chaos monsters to establish the divine and human *nomos*. This God does not even seem concerned with boxing out the opposing forces in the universe to garner praise and establish kingship. The God of Job is a God profoundly concerned with the creation itself—its vibrancy, its vitality, its virility, and even its ferocity. As such, Behemoth and Leviathan transform from the enemies of creation in Job's theology into vital components of God's creation. Thus, the theology that God describes completely contradicts that of Job. Job wants God to take the chaos monsters out of his *nomos*

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[49] Pardes, 234.
[50] Ibid., 235.

and send them back into the netherworld where they belong, but God tells Job that the neat boxes of the created world and the chaotic world simply do not exist. The chaotic and the created go hand in hand.

Perhaps the most radical aspect of the whirlwind speeches is their anti-anthropocentric orientation. By making Behemoth and Leviathan the climactic focal points of the creation mythology, YHWH not only turns Genesis 1 on its head, but God also calls into question the centrality of the Covenant, the direct relationship between God and Israel. If humanity is not the pinnacle of God's creation, then how could Covenant be a meaningful phenomenon in the grand scheme of the universe? Is a God so preoccupied with nature and Leviathan a God that would also mete out divine justice or a God who cares about observance of the *mitzvot*? While these questions seem bleak, they also hint at an important aspect of existence. When one gazes at pictures taken from the Hubble Space Telescope such as the Pillars of Creation, the Crab Nebula, or far-flung galaxies and black holes, he connects himself with a glorious and incredibly chaotic magnificence that has absolutely nothing to do with humanity. We are an insignificant species that has existed for tens of thousands of years on a pebble of a planet orbiting a dwarf star in the context of a universe that has existed fifteen billion years and stretches distances so large that they are unimaginable. Comprehending these facts makes one feel awe at his tininess in the midst of the chaos and the glory.

And yet, the book of Job does not end with Leviathan. The prose narrative picks back up in the final chapter, and just after God has scolded Job and told him that the universe does not run according to his limited conceptions of justice, God not only doubly restores everything that Job lost, but He also tells him that he was right all along. After God systematically takes apart

Job's theology, the story ends in the restoration of it; justice prevails. How, then, can we reconcile the prose and the poetic portions of Job?

I believe that the book of Job does not create a systematic theology so much as it challenges previously held dogma about God, the nature of justice, and chaos. The redactor of Job was likely living in the context of exile, in a time when the Israelite *nomos* has been destroyed and the old dogmas simply cannot seem feasible anymore. How can a person hold onto a notion of a God who holds a Covenantal relationship with a nation whose temple and capitol have been sacked and destroyed? Job provides a powerful answer, not because it is comforting, but rather because it is accurate. It is accurate to the experience of suffering, and it is accurate in its inability to give easy answers.

The other powerful aspect of Job is that even while it is challenging us with a non-anthropocentric theology, it never tells us to give up on Covenant or holding God accountable for injustice and suffering. On the contrary, it is not Job who receives the final rebuke at the end of the book; it is Eliphaz and his friends. God tells Job's "comforters" that God is angry with them because they have "not spoken of Me rightly, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7). The interesting thing about the verse is that the preposition *'eilai*, if translated literally reads not "spoken of me," but rather "spoken *to* me." In other words, Eliphaz and his friends do wrong in the eyes of God for speaking about God, rattling off old dogma, without ever speaking to God. Job, on the other hand, is confronted with cognitive dissonance between his dogma and his reality, but instead of retreating into that dogma or disengaging from God, he holds onto his integrity by engaging with God.[51]

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[51] This interpretation was taught to me by Dr. Tamara Eskenazi.

What Job teaches us, then, is that in order for us to hold onto our integrity and form a realistic theology of chaos, we have to widen our perspective. We must hold onto our belief in Covenant and a God of justice. Believing in our relationship with God can represent a force in our lives that anchors us in the midst of the chaos. But we must also try to do the impossible task of seeing the universe from a wider perspective than our own and understand our cosmic smallness. And just maybe when we can transcend our egotistical nature and perspective, we will see the paradox of chaos and creation, of terror and beauty, of Leviathan and ultimate magnificence.

Chapter 3: The Rabbis and Chaos: The Radical Lurking in the Dogmatic

For the rabbis of *Chazal*, chaos was not only a theological issue to sort through on a theoretical level; it was also a day-to-day reality. The rabbinic era brought political and sociological upheaval to the land of Judea that forced the rabbis to reform and remake Judaism fundamentally simply to enable its survival. The Jewish War, which began as a Sectarian revolt in 66 CE, resulted in the destruction of the Jewish *nomos*, symbolized by the fall of the Second Temple. The Messianic hope of redemption and a return to Jewish self-rule was crushed 70 years later, as the Bar Kochba Revolt not only resulted in a ban on Jews returning to their beloved Jerusalem, but also resulted in the brutal martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva, one of the most prominent leaders in the budding rabbinic community. As Christianity rose to prominence, the Jews of Palestine experienced horrific persecution with the result of most Jews leaving their historical homeland and going east to Babylonia. By the time of the completion of the Babylonian Talmud, the Jewish community would largely be a community in *galut*. Even beyond these historical highlights, the rabbis lived in a chaotic world—a world in which their authority was marginal at best, a world in which the Jew was othered, and a world that was constantly changing and unstable.

The inevitable result of living in such a context is cognitive dissonance. Though the rabbis had an understanding of the world derived in scripture—an understanding that placed the Jews as the chosen people of God with a promised land and a promised status—the reality looked much different. Not only would questions of theodicy arise, but also questions about how chaos plays into God's providence in the world. Does merit determine one's fate? If not

all suffering is deserved, how do we make sense of it? How do we interpret the unknown or the un-interpretable?

Ultimately, deriving a systematic theology from the rabbinic corpus is impossible given its multi-vocal nature. However, taken as a whole, rabbinic text shows an evolution in its attitudes and theologies of chaos over time. Particularly in older rabbinic texts, the rabbis hearken back to old mythologies and traditional beliefs about the chaotic. Deuteronomistic retributive theology is a starting point for many rabbinic theodicies, even as they hint at its limitations. The combat God mythology, which portrays the chaos monsters as the enemies of creation that God subdues and in the world to come, destroys, reemerges in rabbinic texts.

However, in this chapter, I will demonstrate that rabbinic texts open up new ways of thinking about chaos. Some texts, particularly in the *Bavli* and other late rabbinic sources, show a willingness to challenge, reinterpret, and even rebel against traditional dogmatism. Some voices acknowledge when their theologies break down in the face of reality—that sometimes punishment is random and unearned or that chastisement is not the embodiment of God's love. Sometimes texts imply that the best approach to chaos is not to interpret it at all. In other texts chaos is not just the monster to conquer or the primordial state to eliminate, but rather the tool that God uses for the sake of creation. Ultimately, the evolution that the rabbinic theology of suffering and chaos undergoes embodies the attempt to move from the idealized world into the functional world of realism.

The Evolution of Rabbinic Theodicy

The issue of suffering in rabbinic literature commonly raises the question of whether a traditional theological model can withstand a chaotic reality. A retributive model assumes that suffering is a form of punishment for sin or for not fulfilling the *mitzvoth*, whereas the merit

that one earns through good deeds and adherence to the *mitzvoth* should protect one from suffering. If suffering befalls people randomly and indiscriminately, this model falls apart and questions of God's providence in the world emerge for the rabbis. The rabbinic texts tend to show an evolution over time with the earliest texts monolithically espousing a traditional view and later texts offering a wider array of opinions, some of which rebel against such theology.

The *Mishnah*, the first of the compiled rabbinic texts, possesses the most traditionally retributive theology as it deals sparsely and not very deeply with the topic of suffering. The *Mishnah*, in fact, is not interested in dealing with the messy, chaotic nature of reality, as it is a text that constructs a Utopian world.[52] We can see this orientation in the composition of some of the tractates. For example, the vast majority of tractate *Yoma* describes the intricate preparation of the High Priest for the Day of Atonement sacrificial ritual and the choreography of the *avodah* service itself. Only one chapter at the end deals with the post-Temple reality that the Day of Atonement would eventually have to take on. Tractate *Pesakhim* similarly focuses almost entirely on the Paschal sacrificial ritual and only briefly on the Passover Seder. This feature of the *Mishnah* leads Jacob Neusner to describe it as an ahistorical text; it is a depiction of the world redeemed from *galut*.[53] As such, the world the *Mishnah* constructs does not take the chaotic into account; the traditional retributive system is fully functional.

Consequently, we see the assumption of reward and punishment in many places in the *Mishnah*. *Qiddushin* 4:14, for example, hearkens back to the Eden story to establish this system:

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[52] Kraemer, David. (1995). *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature.* New York: Oxford University Press, 54.

[53] Neusner, Jacob. (1981) *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 235.

> R. Shimeon b. Eleazar says: Have you seen in your days an animal or fowl who has a craft? Yet they are sustained without pain. And were they not created except to serve me! But I was created to serve my maker! Doesn't it follow that I should be sustained without pain? But I did evil and ruined my livelihood.

Shimeon b. Elezar's question relies on *kal va'homer*: if animals only serve humanity, but humanity serves God, then surely it is even more important to spare humanity from suffering. However, due to the sins of the speaker, the comparison breaks down, and humanity is condemned to suffer. While the *mishnah's* theology seems to derive from Genesis, since Shimeon recalls that animals were created to serve humans (Gen 1:26), humans were created to serve God, and the sin recalls Genesis 3, this is not a text that follows a theology of Original Sin. The speaker does not say that Adam and Eve sinned, but rather that he sinned, in the first person singular. Thus this *mishnah* suggests that "justice is applied directly, not derivatively, to future generations." Reward and punishment are completely explainable and contained within the individual.[54]

The final *mishnah* in the first chapter of *Qiddushin* outlines the systematic nature of the reward and punishment scheme:

> Anyone who performs one *mitzvah*, it is good with him and his days are lengthened and he inherits the land. But anyone who does not perform one *mitzvah*, it is not good with him and his days are not lengthened and he does not inherit the land.[55]

Now it seems preposterous that the performance of one single *mitzvah* would give someone such a reward, and multiple ways of reconciling this have emerged. Talmudic sages interpret this to mean a person whose transgressions and merit are evenly balanced can tip the scales with one *mitzvah*. David Halivni, interpreting from the *Yerushalmi*, believes this to be a single

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[54] Kraemer, 55.
[55] M. Qid. 1:10.

mitzvah that a person does habitually. In any event, this *mishnah* establishes a firm correlation

between merit and reward or sin and punishment.[56]

The *Mishnah* supports this theological framework even in horrific and seemingly

undeserved circumstances. *Mishnah Shabbat* attempts to place the fate of mothers who die in

childbirth into the framework of reward and punishment:

> For three sins women die in childbirth: because they are not cautious in their
> observance in *niddah*, *hallah*, and in the lighting of the Shabbat candle.[57]

Though the *mishnah* neither explains the reasoning behind this punishment nor justifies the

extreme disparity between the punishment and the sin, this text seems to have two

motivations behind it. The first motivation seems to be to intimidate women into scrupulous

observance. These three *mitzvoth*, commonly thought of as the only positive, time bound

mitzvoth women observe traditionally, are also commandments that are performed outside

men's purview. In other words, men have to accept a woman's word that she has performed

these *mitzvoth*, an uncomfortable state of affairs for them. Thus this *mishnah* uses divine

intervention to insert their male rabbinic authority over the women's domain. Secondly, this

mishnah demonstrates a need to defend the traditional reward punishment theology. Such a

horrible and chaotic consequence of childbirth is nearly impossible to incorporate into

traditional theology, so the text has to invent a reason behind it to prevent chaos from

destroying its theological system. Of course the reason is both vague and dubious—it does not

even say she transgressed the commandments, just that she was sloppy in upholding them.

Yet it is reason enough and as a result, the *mishnah* upholds the merit system of suffering.

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[56] Kraemer, 59.

[57] M. Shab 2:6.

As we look at later rabbinic texts, in particular some *halakhic midrashim*, the picture of reward and punishment gets nuanced significantly, though the overall paradigm still persists. One such example comes from the *Mekhilta* in a commentary on *parashat BaHodesh*.[58]

> R. Aqiba says, 'With me… you shall not make…" (Exod 20:20)—[this teaches] that you should not conduct yourselves with respect to me as others conduct themselves with respect to those [gods] they fear. For when good comes upon them, they honor their gods…but when suffering comes upon them they curse their gods… But you, if I bring upon you good, give thanks [and if] I bring upon you suffering, give thanks. And thus does David say, 'I raise the cup of deliverance and invoke the name of the Lord" (Ps 116:13) [and, at the same time,] "I come upon trouble and sorrow and I invoke the name of the Lord (ibid., 3-4)… And moreover [it teaches] that a person should be happier with suffering than with good, for even if a person experiences good all of his days, he is not forgiven for his sins. And what causes his sins to be forgiven? Suffering. R. Eleazar b. Jacob says, "Behold, He says, 'do not reject the discipline of the Lord….' For what reason? 'For whom the Lord loves, He rebukes [as the father the son whom he favors]' (Prov 3:11-12). You say: come and see, what caused this child to be pleasing to his father? Suffering. R. Meir says, "'the Lord your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son' (Deut. 8:5)…. Not according to your deeds have I brought suffering upon you.

In commenting on Exodus 20:20, Rabbi Akiva states that Israel must not conduct themselves as the other nations do. This means that while other nations bless their gods when they receive reward and curse their gods when they receive punishment, Israel must bless God both when it receives reward and punishment. The proof texts he uses come from Psalms, which the rabbis place in the mouth of David. In the Psalm, David praises God in times of deliverance and in times of hardship, proving that praise must not be conditional. A further proof text from Job 1 has Job praising God after the first round of his afflictions. After the text proves that suffering must not remove praise from one's lips, it makes the further assertion that suffering has a theological purpose. Two reasons are offered for such a radical assertion: the expiation of sins and the nature of the God-Israel relationship. The text says that it is only through suffering that sins are forgiven, which suggests that a life without suffering is somehow

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[58] Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, BaHodesh par. 10. Translation found in Kraemer, 81-82.

incomplete. Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Meir take the other route by saying that the discipline of

God is a reflection of God's relationship with Israel. Eleazar asserts that it is through suffering

that Israel is made into a pleasing people, just as a son is only pleasing if his parent disciplined

him. Meir asserts that suffering supports the metaphor of God's relationship to Israel being

like a parent's love for a child.

The next portion of this discussion is a series of four rabbinic aphorisms about suffering, all

of which assert that suffering is precious.[59]

> R. Jonathan says, "precious are sufferings, for just as the covenant is established by
> virtue of the land, so too is the covenant established by virtue of suffering." R. Shimeon
> b. Yohai says, "precious are sufferings, for three good gifts did God give to Israel, and the
> nations of the world covet them, and they were not given except by means of sufferings.
> And what are they? Torah, the Land of Israel, and the World-to-Come… R. Nehemiah
> says, "precious are sufferings, for just as sacrifices [cause God to] pardon, so too do
> sufferings…. And not only so, but sufferings [cause God to pardon more than sacrifices.
> For what reason? Because sacrifices are with [one's] property, but sufferings are with
> one's body."

These aphorisms take the theology in the previous section a step further. Not only are

sufferings a symbol of a parent-child relationship, but they are also a manifestation of the very

essence of the God-Israel relationship: the Covenant. As such, the sufferer not only feels

connected to God through his suffering, but he hearkens back to the theology of chosenness as

he suffers. The final aphorism makes explicit how the theology of expiation happens. In

Nehemiah's theology, the suffering actually serves the same function as the *chatat*, the sin

offering, but instead of the animal being sacrificed to God, one metaphorically puts one's body

on the alter and sacrifices himself to God through his suffering. In the post-Temple world in

which people were struggling to find ways to connect to God without the daily sacrificial

system, suffering becomes the route through which the human-God relationship is concretized.

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[59] Ibid.

This theology is then made explicit as the passage ends with a scene in which Rabbi Eleazar falls ill and four of his friends come to visit him. Three of the rabbis praise Rabbi Eleazar, but Rabbi Akiva states simply "Precious are sufferings." Rabbi Eleazar then indicates he prefers Rabbi Akiva's position.[60] This scene suggests that when the rabbis encountered personal suffering, even in the midst of their pain, this theology of pain was a helpful one. Interestingly, it is Akiva, the rabbi who is later martyred by the Roman Empire, who espouses this theory of *yissurim*.

The *Mekhilta* passage represents a significant innovation in the conception of suffering from what we saw in the *Mishnah*. This text espouses the theology of *yissurim shel ahavah*, the conception that suffering can be interpreted as a manifestation of God's love. This passage conflates a theology in which God is the loving, yet strict, parent with the sacrificial system. What is revolutionary about the concept of *yissurim shel ahavah* is that there is not always the indication that this suffering maps onto the reward or punishment system that a believer in retribution would expect. Unlike in the *Mishnah*, where suffering is the direct punishment for one's sins, these texts do not speak about sin, other than the vague promise that *yissurim* can achieve atonement. Though the sinner and the saint receive the same fate, they are interpreted in different ways.

These paradigms of suffering appears in several places in the Talmud, and in each circumstance the *yissurim* serve as a means by which the rabbis can achieve atonement for a wrong they committed. For instance Nahum of Gamzo, a teacher of Rabbi Akiva was stopped by the side of a road by a beggar who asked for *tzedakkah*. Nahum told him he would give on his way back from his destination, but when he passed by him the second time, the beggar had

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[60] Ibid.

died. When he saw what happened he cried out: "May these eyes that saw you and did not

give to you be blinded, may these hands that did not stretch forth to give to you be cut off. May

the legs which did not hurry to help you be broken." In the end, all these things came to pass.[61]

Matthew B. Schwartz sees *yissurim* less as a drive to escape divine wrath by self-

punishment "than an attempt to shoulder the burden of earthly toil and trial as a path to truly

righteous living."[62] We see from the Nahum story a desire to make right through suffering

what he had done wrong in order to get himself back on the *derekh*. Schwartz points out that

various typologies of motivations can exist for these *yissurim* including personal challenges or

tests to achieve a higher spirituality, a desire to increase one's reward in the world to come,

personal atonement, or *yissurim* that are visited upon the leaders of a community.[63] There are

two notable aspects of these *yissurim*. The first is that the concept allows us to avoid

penetrating into the motives of God for punishment and to interpret suffering on a very

practical level, thereby preventing righteous suffering from toppling one's theological system.

The second notable aspect of *yissurim* is that although they happen to those whom God loves,

there is still a "measure for measure" quality to them. The rabbi who ignored the beggar is

blinded. The reward for punishment is an equal benefit to the suffering in the world to come.

So although *yissurim* allow one to transcend a retributive mindset to make room for righteous

suffering, this theology still makes no room for randomness or chaos.

When we compare the *Mekhilta* text to a similar text in the *Bavli*, it becomes clear that the

later rabbinic texts make room for voices that point out the inadequacies of the *yissurim*

theology. The *Bavli* engages in an extensive discussion of *yissurim* in *Berakhot* 5a-b when

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[61] Taanit 21a.

[62] Schwartz, Matthew B. (1983). "The Meaning of Suffering: A Talmudic Response to Theodicy," *Judaism.* 446.

[63] Ibid., 447.

Rabbi Shimeon b. Laqish asserts that Torah study separates one from suffering. The discussion that follows attempts both to define what counts as *yissurim shel ahavah* and in what contexts one can say they operate. The first section of this *sugya* reads similarly as the *Mekhilta* discussion. Rava says that a suffering comes upon a person, then he must search his deeds for a sin that he has committed. But if there were no sins to find and if he has not neglected Torah study, then the text says that he must attribute his suffering to *yissurim shel ahavah*.[64] The theology espoused in this section is familiar; the paradigm assumes retributive theology, and for all circumstances that do not fit the mold, one can attribute to *yissurim*. Even the proof text the *Bavli* uses ("For whom the Lord loves, he rebukes," Prov. 3:12) is the same as the *Mekhilta* passage.

The next section in the *Bavli* adds a polemical level to this theology absent in the Mekhilta.

Rava said R. Sehora said R. Huna said: "Anyone whom the Holy One, blessed be He desires, He afflicts with suffering, for it says, 'And the one whom the Lord desires, He crushes with illness' (Isa. 53:10)." Is it possible [that this is the case] even if he does not accept them willingly? Scripture says, 'if he made himself an offering for guilt' (ibid.)— [meaning] just as an offering is [offered] willingly, so too suffering [must be accepted] willingly. And if he accepted them willingly what is his reward? 'He might see offspring and have a long life' (ibid.).[65]

This passage attempts to prove both that *yissurim* are a way that God interacts with those He loves and that a reward comes to those who undergo chastisement. The interesting thing about this passage is that the proof texts come from Isaiah 53, the famous "suffering servant" passage. The suffering servant text is one of the most commonly used passages in Christianity to justify the suffering of Jesus as a manifestation of God's love. This text, however, rebukes this supercessionist interpretation by using the text itself to prove that it could not possibly apply to Jesus, as the one suffering is rewarded with long life and offspring. Thus, we see a

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[64] B. Berakhot 5a.
[65] B. Berakhot 5a, translation in Kraemer, 190.

different motivation behind this text in the *Bavli* than in the *Mekhilta*. While the *Mekhilta* is a

theological exercise, the *Bavli* seems to be using the *yissurim* theology as much for polemic as it

does for theory.

This passage also goes a step further than the *Mekhilta* passage in interpreting the sufferer

of *yissurim* as a *korban*. The *Mekhilta* sets up the metaphor by saying that the sacrifice and the

yissurim cleanse the individual of sins and by pointing out that they operate in a similar way

theologically. The *Bavli*, however, asserts that in order for these sufferings to be considered

yissurim shel ahavah, the sufferer must metaphorically offer himself up to God as a sacrifice.

This is not just an analogy; it forces the individual to take an active role in his suffering—to

accept God's punishment with love and view the punishment as God's love. Subsequent

positions in the *sugya* add that *yissurim shel ahavah* cannot come from neglect of prayer or

neglect of Torah.[66] In other words, the *Bavli* complicates what we can label as *yissurim shel

ahavah*. The *Mekhilta* does not limit what can count as *yissurim*, as it seems that any suffering

by the righteous can qualify. The *Bavli*, on the other hand, not only says that the suffering must

be accepted, but it cannot contribute to a breakdown in communication between the individual

and God.[67] In placing these restrictions, the *Bavli* seems to open a door that the *Mekhilta* does

not: the possibility for useless suffering.

This possibility for useless suffering is made explicit in the next two sections of this *sugya*

in which the rabbis confront their own suffering in a concrete way. The text begins with a

similar passage that appears in the *Mekhilta* that describes the three gifts God gives Israel

through suffering: Torah, the land of Israel, and the World-to-Come. After going through proof

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Kraemer, 192.

texts for each of these, the *sugya* diverges into an exploration of what counts as *yissurim shel ahavah*.

> A Tanna taught before R. Yohanan: Anyone who engages in Torah or deeds of lovingkindness or buries his children, all his sins are forgiven him. R. Yohanan said to him: "It is fine with Torah and deeds of lovingkindness… But burying one's children where is this from?" That elder taught in the name of R. Shimeon b. Yohai: "it is derived by a scriptural equation of 'iniquity and 'iniquity;' it is written here 'Iniquity is expiated by loyalty and faithfulness' and it is written there 'but visit the iniquity of the fathers upon their children' (Jer. 32:18)." R. Yohanan said: "Sores and children are not suffering of love… And are children not? How is this to be imagined? If you say that [we are talking about a case where] he had them and they died, did not R. Yohanan say "this is the bone of my tenth son!" Rather, this is where he did not have them and this is where he had them and they died.[68]

The biographical information about Rabbi Yohanan is not immaterial to this passage, as he is commenting about whether burying a dead child counts as *yissurim shel ahavah* as someone who had to do so for ten of his sons. The *Tanna* brings a saying that three things cleanse one of sin, and one could even imagine this could be an attempt by the Tanna to bring Yohanan comfort in his grief. Yohanan can find scriptural support for Torah study and acts of lovingkindness, but he refuses to do so for the loss of one's children. That an anonymous elder brings such an obvious text to prove that the loss of a child cleanses one of sin suggests that it is not the case that Yohanan could not find the scriptural support himself, but rather that he was categorically opposed to labeling his horrific suffering as a manifestation of God's love. It might achieve cleansing of sins, but Yohanan refuses to accept the suffering upon himself as *yissurim* require. Indeed, the proof the text uses to disprove Yohanan's assertion that sores and children are not *yissurim shel ahavah* suggests that Yohanan and the *Stammaim* are at complete disagreement about this matter. The text, wanting to disprove Yohanan, surprisingly does not use a proof text to prove that losing children counts as *yissurim shel ahavah*. Rather, it

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[68] B. Berakhot 5a-b, translation found in Kraemer, 193-4.

uses Yohanan's own practice of carrying the bone of his tenth son, a proof, which would seemingly support Yohanan's position that his suffering cannot count as *yissurim shel ahavah*![69] It seems that the *Stammaim* and Yohanan are not only in disagreement here, but also that Yohanan is in complete rebellion against the traditionalism the *Stammaim* are seeking to uphold.

The rabbinic sick bed narratives that follow support such a reading.

> R. Hiyya b. Abba became ill. R. Yohanan went to him. He said to him: "Is suffering dear to you?" He said to him: "Neither it nor its reward." He said to him: "Give me your hand." He game him his hand and raised him. R. Yohanan became ill. R. Hanina went in to him. He said to him: "Is suffering dear to you?" He said to him: "Neither it nor its reward." He said to him: "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and raised him. And why? Let R. Yohanan raise himself! They say: "One who is imprisoned does not release himself from prison." R. Eleazar became ill. R. Yohanan went to him. He saw that he was lying in a dark room. R. Yohanan uncovered his arm and a light fell over the room and he saw that R. Eleazar was crying. He said to him: "Why are you crying?... If it is because of children, this is the bone of my tenth son." He said to him: "I am crying on account of this beauty that will rot in the earth." He said to him: "For this you should surely cry." And the two of them cried together. He said to him: "Is suffering dear to you?" He said to him: "Neither it nor its reward." He said to him: "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and raised him.[70]

This passage establishes a pattern repeated three times: the rabbi falls ill, his friend visits him and asks if his suffering is precious (ie. whether he has accepted the *yissurim shel ahavah*), the rabbi declines the *yissurim*, and the visitor takes the hand of the ill and lifts him up. This passage seems to negate every aspect of the analogous passage in the *Mekhilta*. In the *Mekhilta* passage, the visiting rabbis offer praise to Rabbi Eleazar; in the *Berakhot* passage, the rabbis act in a more pastoral way, asking questions to see how the ill rabbi is responding to his pain. In the *Mekhilta*, the concept of *yissurim* provides Rabbi Eleazar with comfort. In *Berakhot*, the rabbis routinely reject *yissurim*; it is the holding of hands and the "lifting" of the sick person

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[69] Kraemer, 195.

[70] B. Berakhot 5b, translation in Kraemer, 196.

that brings him comfort. In sum the *Mekhilta* passage places a theological purpose around suffering, but *Berakhot* rebels against this theology, indicating that when the rabbis experience suffering themselves, they see the reality of useless suffering.

The question that this text raises is if these rabbis challenge the validity of *yissurim shel ahavah* as a workable theological framework, what do they replace it with? Ruhama Weiss writes that the *Berakhot* text's protagonists seem to be part of a "small group, nearly secret, known as the 'Underground against Suffering.'" She imagines that the question of "are your sufferings precious to you" to act as a password of sorts into the club.[71] Rabbi Yohanan, the orphan who lost 10 children, seems to have served as the leader of this group. His habit of carrying the bone of his child almost gives him credibility in the arena of suffering. If anyone questioned whether he could possibly understand his suffering, the bone serves as physical proof that he is well acquainted with suffering.[72] This group appears to have rebelled against traditional theologies of suffering, as the assertion "neither suffering nor its rewards" not only protests against suffering and the *yissurim* framework, but it protests "the Sovereign of the sufferings."[73] While the notion of a secret society seems a bit fanciful, these texts provide a theological framework that the predominant rabbinic beliefs do not allow—they acknowledge the pain of suffering. They make room for suffering that does not make sense, that cannot be redeemed, that is useless. By not saying that suffering is retribution or it can be viewed as love, these texts actually allow suffering to be seen as bad. Instead of saying that the sufferer deserves it or has to reinterpret it as a sign of God's love, these texts stand with the sufferer.

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[71] Weiss, Ruhama (2011). "Neither Suffering nor Its Rewards: A Story about Intimacy and Dealing with Suffering and Death," in *Midrash and Medicine: Healing Body and Soul in the Jewish Interpretive Tradition.* Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 108.

[72] Ibid., 111.

[73] Ibid., 113.

They replace a theology of *yissurim* with a practical theology of "place your hand in mine."
Ruhama Weiss writes: "The hand is a metaphor for our actions… Our hands may symbolize
giving help or withholding help."[74] In each story, the hand is the means through which comfort
comes to the ill. In the third story, the uncovering of Rabbi Yohanan's hand brings light into
the darkened house, a beautiful metaphor for healing. What these stories seem to suggest is
that in a chaotic world where suffering cannot be explained and cannot be reinterpreted for
good, the way to respond is with the hand—by reaching out to those who suffer and to be a
healing presence for them.

Another story in the *Bavli* that rebels against traditional retributive theology deals even
more directly with the issue of chaos. In the story of Miriam in *Hagigah* overturns the strongly
held belief that death happens at one's appointed time. In the story Rabbi Bibi ben Abbaye
witnesses an interaction between the Angel of Death and his messenger who goes to fetch him
the souls of those destined to die. In the exchange the Angel of Death requests that the
messenger bring him Miriam the Hairdresser. Unfortunately the messenger mishears him and
instead brings him Miriam the raiser of children. The Angel of Death is upset by the mistake
his messenger made but decides to let it stand and let the wrong Miriam remain among the
dead. When he asks the messenger why he was able to fetch the wrong person, the messenger
says that he had an opening with this Miriam because as she was shoveling hot coals in an oven,
she placed the shovel on her knee and burned herself. Rabbi Bibi then speaks out and
demands to know why the Angel of Death has the authority to do this. The Angel responds that
"there are those who find their end without judgment," overturning the theology that everyone
has an appointed time to die. This bleak story ends with a small *nachemta* in which Rabbi Bibi

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[74] Ibid., 120.

asks what will happen to the years of which Miriam the Hairdresser was robbed, to which the

Angel of Death responds that if a student of sages forgives others, then her years will be added

to his.[75]

The straightforward nature of this story belies the radical theology contained within. It

plainly says that premature death exists, that sometimes those who have no judgment

rendered against them and have not reached their allotted time perish. The Angel of Death and

his messenger have developed an imperfect system for harvesting souls in which "human"

error easily disrupts the overarching plan.[76] In fact, this system does not involve God at all.

God is not a character in the story, and God exerts no control over the process. The fact that

this system involves imperfect characters with an imperfect methodology allows chaos to have

a significant role. Miriam the raiser of children was not slated for death at that moment, but

the "serendipitous" coincidence of the messenger's error with the chaos of her burn allowed

for the sentence without the judgment to take hold. In other words, chaos not only exists in

the realm of life and death, but it overturns any intentionality behind it. The text provides a

"*nachemta*" by giving Miriam's stolen years to a rabbi, rendering the woman in the text

disposable and replaceable and instrumentalizing her for the sake of the men in the story.

Even with this "*nachemta*," this passage throws the reward and punishment theology out the

window. A passage in tractate Shabbat supports this view, as it declares emphatically that

"there is death without sin and suffering without transgression."[77]

Thus the evolution we see through the rabbinic canon is one of growing complexity.

Though retributive theology servers as the default in rabbinic text, the *Bavli* gives voice to

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[75] B. Hagigah 4b-5a.

[76] Kraemer, 202-4.

[77] B. Shabbat 55a-b.

opinions that declare not all suffering is earned, and not even the theological fix of *yissurim* can hold water. These minority voices acknowledge the chaotic nature of the universe. As Yohanan and the sick rabbis reject the application of the *yissurim* theology to their suffering, they do not seem to offer an answer grounded in theology, but rather an answer grounded in the healing power (perhaps even in the rabbinic imagination, miraculous power) of presence. This practical approach suggests that in the face of the unexplainable and in the face of illness and useless suffering, the approach we must take is a pastoral one. When we encounter the downtrodden, we must seek to be the hands that lift up.

The Perils of Crossing Rivers[78]

Another text from the *Bavli* that makes room for views outside the mainstream speaks about the peril of crossing a bridge. The prospect of a bridge collapsing and causing its crosser to fall and drown represented a tangible and regular encounter between the rabbis and the forces of chaos. The question they would have to deal with is the familiar question of whether merit has an effect on a person's fate, or whether a bridge collapsing is a random act with no rhyme or reason. Living in a reality in which those who fall victim to random "acts of God" would force the rabbis to deploy a kind of Janusian thinking[79] to make sense of a paradoxical reality.

The discussion begins with the *mishnah* that describes the reasons for a woman's death in childhood from tractate Shabbat, described above.[80] The *Gemara* seems to be disturbed by the same questions that we are, namely, why do these three sins lead to death in childbirth?

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[78] The text and preparation thereof in this section is derived from the unpublished work of Dr. Rachel Adler.

[79] Janusian thinking is the kind of thinking that enables one to make sense of paradox by accepting two contradictory positions. See for example Derm Barrett's *The Paradox Process.*

[80] M. Shabbat 2:6.

> What is the reason for *niddah*? Said R. Isaac: "She transgressed through the chambers of her womb, therefore she is punished through the chambers of her womb." That is right of *niddah*, but what can be said of *hallah* and the kindling of lights? As a certain Galilean lectured before R. Hisda: "The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: 'I put a *rebi'ith* of blood I you; therefore I commanded you concerning blood.' I designated you the first; wherefore I commanded you concerning the first. The soul, which I placed in you, is called a lamp, wherefore I commanded you concerning the lamp. If you fulfill them, 'tis well; but if not, I will take your souls."[81]

The connection with *niddah* is the easiest to make, as Rabbi Isaac declares that since she transgressed through the chambers of her womb, so is she punished through them. Rabbi Isaac thus makes use of a common rabbinical interpretive technique of "measure for measure." The upshot of this is again to eliminate the chaos from the system; because her sin related to her womb, then naturally the punishment would relate to the womb as well. Interpreting the *Mishnah* in this way allows for the horrific punishment to at least make sense in the mind of the rabbis. The connection between Shabbat candles and *hallah* is a bit harder to make. The Galilean informs us that because God considers Israel to be first among nations, therefore the first offering of *hallah* must be made. Similarly, the soul is considered a lamp, and therefore the Shabbat lamp must be kindled. Though these rabbinic gymnastics make sense, they do not make the connection between the sin and the punishment as neatly. The next line of questioning delves deeper into why this exact punishment occurs.

The next question that the *Gemara* tackles is why childbirth is the time when these punishments occur. What follows are a series of proverbs that seek to explain the phenomena. For instance, Rava said, "When the ox is fallen, sharpen the knife." The implication here is that when the ox has placed himself in a perilous condition in which he cannot defend himself, that is the time to render judgment on him. On the other hand, Rav Hisda says: "Leave the

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[81] B. Shabbat 31b-32a. Translation provided by Soncino, http://www.halakhah.com/pdf/moed/Shabbath.pdf

drunkard alone: he will fall of himself."[82] Hisda likens the woman giving birth to a drunkard

who cannot stand on his own. In other words, in Hisda's imagination, every woman giving

birth would die, and it is only through divine intervention that she is saved. Each aphorism

puts a slightly different spin, but the commonality between them is that one's sins are

reckoned with at times when chaos enters. Instead of saying that this is a time where the

chaotic enters the picture, the rabbis state that the fate of the woman makes sense, that she

deservers her punishment. The rabbis thus hold tightly to their retributive theology, at the

expense of these women.

When the discussion turns to the matter of when men's sins are reckoned on them, the text

gets squeamish in its attitude towards retributive theology.

> And when are men examined? Said Resh Lakish: "When they pass over a bridge…" Rav
> would not cross a bridge where a heathen was sitting; said he, "Lest judgment be visited
> upon him, and I be seized together with him." Samuel would cross a bridge only when a
> heathen was upon it, saying, "Satan has no power over two nations [simultaneously]." R.
> Jannai examined [the bridge] and then crossed over. R. Jannai [acted] upon his views
> for he said, "A man should never stand in a place of danger and say that a miracle will be
> wrought for him, lest it is not. And if a miracle is wrought for him, it is deducted from
> his merits… R. Zera would not go out among the palm-trees on a day of the strong south
> wind.[83]

Even though the text assumes that women's suffering maps onto their sinfulness, when the

discussion shifts to men and bridge crossing, various minority opinions pop up that do not

assume that safety maps onto merit; these opinions admit that other forces are at play. For

instance, Rav states that he would not cross a bridge where a heathen was sitting. This

position nuances the picture, because one's merit is not the only piece of the puzzle; someone

else's sins can now cause the bridge to collapse, the virtuous individual becoming a casualty of

another's fate. A chaotic element has been introduced to the system, as one now has to not

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[82] B. Shabbat 32a.
[83] Ibid.

only think about one's own actions, but also consider the merit of his fellow travelers as he enters a liminal space. Further opinions undermine the retributive theology espoused by this *sugya*. Rabbi Jannai would examine the bridge before he crossed it. When asked about this position, he said that one must never enter a perilous space if he can avoid it. To rely on a miracle based on one's merit is not safe, because that miracle might not come. Furthermore, Rabbi Zera would not go out amongst the palm trees on a windy day. Thus, these minority opinions acknowledge that people must account for the presence of chaos in a system. A virtuous person should never put himself in the midst of danger and rely on a miracle from God. Even the saint must examine the bridge and make sure that it will not go out while crossing it.

Of course, it must be mentioned that in no way do these texts suggest the predominant view of the rabbis was not a retributive model. These opinions are minority opinions in a much longer *sugya* that largely upholds reward and punishment. However, these voices suggest that some acknowledged this system is not perfect. Sometimes the innocent will drown—either because of they are the casualty of another's fate or because the expected miracle simply did not come. These voices thus recognize the reality of chaos and advocate for pragmatism even as they hold onto traditional beliefs about God's providence in the world.

Rabbinic Reconstructions of Old Mythologies

The rabbinic discussions of suffering and chaos so far reveal that in the context of an overwhelmingly traditional framework, voices of dissent nuance the picture. The same applies to the rabbinic constructions of chaos in the realm of creation mythology. While many texts uphold a strictly traditional combat God theology, others portray a very different role of the chaotic in the universe.

When rabbinic texts describe the acts of creation, they do not follow the Priestly impulse to scrub the mythology of its pagan influences; rather they fully embrace the stories of the sea monsters and God's triumph over the sea. Umberto Cassuto asserts that while the Biblical writers often hid or white-washed these stories from Biblical texts for their resemblance to heathen mythology, the rabbis felt no such misgivings, since paganism was no longer a danger to Judaism.[84] As the rabbis re-embraced these old stories, they by and large took on a familiar theology in which God serves as the controller, conqueror, and eliminator of the chaotic monsters in the universe to make way for the created world.

In *Bavli Hagiga*, Resh Lakish says that the sea continued to expand until *HaKadosh Baruch Hu'* rebuked it and caused it to dry up.[85] This simple retelling of the creation of the sea implies that from the moment of its creation there was a wild element that would have to be contained by God lest it run out of control. In *Pirke De-Rabbi Eliezer*, the waters again become wild and turbulent and begin to cover the world until God rebukes them by placing them under the soles of His feet. God then measures the waters with a palm and contains them with the sand so that they do not rise against the earth again.[86] Interestingly this text anthropomorphizes God into a carpenter figure with body parts to describe the method of subduing. In other texts, it is the seas themselves that are anthropomorphized. *Bava Batra* mentions a figure *Sar Shel Yam*, the Prince of the Sea. When God wanted to create the world, God asks the Prince of the Sea to swallow up the waters to make room for the land. The Prince of the Sea refuses to do so, whereupon God stomps on him and slays him. Rabbi Isaac then makes the link between the

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[84] Cassuto, Umberto. (1964). *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis.* Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 39.

[85] B. Hagiga 12a.

[86] Pirke De-Rabbi Eliezer, V.

Prince of the Sea and the sea monster Rahav who God crushes and slays in the Tanakh.[87] In

this instance, the personified Prince of the Sea, the sea as wild element, rises in rebellion

against God. God is forced to destroy the rebellious prince to make room for the created world.

In each of these portrayals of the sea, the sea is the mythological force of chaos that God

subdues and conquers for the sake of creation, reiterating themes found in the combat myth

texts of the Bible.

The rabbis describe God's controlling of Leviathan and Behemoth in similar terms as the

conquering of the sea. In the *Bavli*, the discussion of Leviathan begins with a parable in which

Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua were traveling on a ship. Rabbi Joshua shudders and trembles

and tells Rabbi Eliezer that he saw a "great light in the sea."[88] Rabbi Eliezer informs him that

this must have been Leviathan, suggesting the rabbis not only believed that Leviathan was a

creature of the primordial past, but also that he was a contemporary monster in the depths of

the sea who appears to unfortunate seafarers. Later on in the *sugya*, Rav Dimi says that when

Leviathan becomes hungry he emits a fiery breath that causes the deeps to boil over.[89] These

descriptions, which have their origins in the book of Job, suggest that Leviathan occupied a

similar space in the rabbinic imagination that the Loch Ness Monster or Moby-Dick occupy in

contemporary literature.

The *Bavli* and other texts add details to Leviathan's biography missing in the Biblical

corpus. The *Bava Batra* text informs us that when God created Leviathan, God actually created

two—male and female. However, God soon realized that if they actually mated, they would

destroy the world, so God castrated the male and killed the female. Similarly, when God

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[87] B. Bava Batra 74b.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid, 75a.

created Behemoth, male and female were created until God realized that should they mate, the world would be destroyed. Therefore God castrated the male and sterilized (or "cooled") the female.[90] In comparison to the sea, whose haughtiness and wild nature does not allow for the creation of the world, Leviathan represents a threat to the world for its potential fecundity. If Leviathan or Behemoth proliferated, they would fill up the entire world and prevent the creation of the other creatures. As such, the traditional chaos monsters in this passage represent unrestrained creation, the power of unbounded fruitfulness. The theological implication is that God serves as the bounder and the restrictor of creation, but that the creative powers in this paradigm come from chaos itself.

These texts also add to the Leviathan mythology by describing the role that the monster will play in the eschatological future. The *Bava Batra* text continues by informing us that God, in "the time to come" will make a banquet out of the flesh of Leviathan for the scholars of Israel. Interestingly, the text uses Job 40:30 as its source text for this *se'udat Leviathan,* a text which sarcastically asks whether the hands of fisherman will make a feast of him. What is impossible for the fisherman to accomplish in present time will be God's triumph in the future to come. Leviathan will no longer be the terror of the deep, the chaos monster of the sea, but will finally be fished up and fed to Israel. The final triumph of the sea complete. The *sugya* continues by telling us that in this eschatological future, God will make the skin of Leviathan into a *sukkah* for the righteous to dwell in. Once again, Job 40:30 serves as the source material, the *sugya* punning off the word *yakhru* to make it applicable to the establishment of a *sukkah*.[91]

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[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.

This *se'udat Leviathan* is a concept that appears numerous times in rabbinic literature and is a major component of the rabbinic imagination surrounding *'Olam Haba'*.[92] This theology at first glance seems to reflect traditional combat God mythology. The chaos monster, subdued in order to allow for the creation of the world, is finally and decisively defeated and destroyed to bring the ultimate perfection of the end of times. Chaos is eliminated and destroyed as the universe enters into eschatological completion. And yet, the focus of these messianic longings is not on the cosmological, but rather on the anthropological. The completeness of the end of times manifests itself in feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless. This suggests that the ultimate evil that the rabbis want to overthrow is not so much the cosmological chaos embodied in the sea, but rather the mundane evils of poverty. It is almost poetic that the chaos monster himself is the one who nourishes the scholars of Israel and provides shelter in the *sukkah*, suggesting that even defeated and killed, Leviathan has a role in creating the perfection of the messianic age.

Beyond the theology that these texts construct around the chaos monsters in the Bible, they also make interesting and contradictory statements about chaos itself. The term most commonly associated with chaos is *tohu vavohu* "formless and void" or "chaos and desolation." It is the primordial state of the universe before creation, and the Bible uses the term twice (Gen 1:2 and Jer 4:23), both times referring to the prehistoric soup. The rabbinic *midrash* that deals with *tohu vavohu* seems to tackle the question of what exactly this chaotic state actually was and what role it has in the formation of the universe. Is it the mess that God has to conquer, rectify, and undo in order to create, or is it somehow involved in the creation itself. The rabbinic sources are mixed on this question.

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[92] Midrash Tanchuma 1:26:14, 3:3:7, Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 6:1, Pesikta Rabbati 16:1, among others.

Bereshit Rabba 10:2, for example, compares the creation of the world to a tub with beautiful bas-reliefs engraved on the sides. The text comments that the engravings could not be seen while the tub was filled with water, but when the plug was removed and the water emptied out, then the artistry would be revealed. Similarly, when the *tohu vavohu* was in the universe, the work of heaven and earth could not be seen, but when God eliminated the chaos, then creation could be manifest.[93] Thus this text imagines God almost as a sculptor who chisels away at the refuse in order to reveal the treasure within. Chaos is the obscurer, the muck that has to be removed from the true creation. Thus this text supports the view of chaos as the anti-creation, the preexisting element to be eliminated for the sake of creation.

Other texts portray a very different role for this *tohu vavohu*. An example of this comes in tractate *Hagigah* in an extended section that discusses *ma'aseh b'reishit*. The *Mishnah* declares that one must not speculate about four things: what is before (the creation of the universe), what is after (at the end of days), what is above (in the heavens), and what is below (the earth).[94] Naturally after such a prohibition in the *Mishnah*, the *Gemara* speculates precisely on the acts of creation. In this discussion, Rabbi Judah attributes to Rav the assertion that God created 10 things on the first day of creation: heavens and earth, *tohu, vohu*, light and darkness, wind and water, and day and night.[95] The proof text for each of these items is the description of the first day in Genesis 1, as each of them is listed as playing a part in Gen 1:1-5. Thus in this picture of creation, *tohu* and *vohu* are not the muck that God removes to make way for creation; they are amongst the created items themselves. Rabbi Judah points suggests a theology in which the formless chaos of the primordial existence is not so much a starting state

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[93] Bereshit Rabba 10:2
[94] M. Hagigah 2:1
[95] B. Hagigah 12a.

that has to be conquered and changed, but rather as a key ingredient in the recipe of creation itself.

We find a similar position in another text in *Bereshit Rabba*. In this text, a philosopher asserts to Rabban Gamliel if God was such a great artist, then God must have had great materials to assist Him in creation. When Gamliel is asked what these materials were, he lists *tohu*, *vohu*, darkness, water, wind, and the deep. In order to prove that *tohu* and *vohu* are connected in Scripture to creation, Gamliel cites the Isaiah passage: "I make peace and create evil" (Isa 45:7).[96] This *Bereshit Rabba* text makes explicit something that the *Hagigah* text alludes to: the theology that God uses chaos as a tool in creation. It is not simply the case that God created formless void on the first day, but that this creation is also the tool that the artist must use to make the universe. The Isaiah text further suggests that God, the Creator of both peace and evil, cannot simply eliminate the bad or the chaotic from the universe. The chaotic has to remain in the recipe of creation in order for the good to be created as well.

Perhaps the most radical rabbinic text in this genre comes from a discussion about God's laughter at the beginning of tractate *Avodah Zarah*. The *Bavli* discusses the circumstances in which idol worshippers will be welcomed into the community of Israel and veers into a discourse on when God laughs. The conversation begins with the circumstance in which the idol worshippers would come and ask for the Torah so that they could obey it. They would go into *sukkot* and observe the harvest holiday, but when the solstice heat would oppress them, they would trample their *sukkot* and leave. It is then that God would laugh.[97] Rabbi Isaac then asserts that only on "that day," that is to say, the day in which the idol worshippers offer themselves as proselytes, will God laugh. In the next section, the *sugya* continues by asserting

[96] Bereshit Rabba 1:9.
[97] B. Avodah Zarah 3a-3b.

that since the destruction of the Temple, God does not laugh.[98]   The *sugya* thus conveys both a bitterness at the political position of the Jews and a triumphalism of Jewish chosenness, suggesting that while the content of the *sugya* is God's laughter, its purpose is more political than theological. God's laughter is either the mockery of the enemy or the triumphant exclamation that will come in the eschatological future.

In the midst of this discussion of laughter and the status of prospective proselytes comes a fascinating discussion on God's personal schedule. The Talmud questions whether there will only be God's laughter on "that day," the messianic times.   In response, Rabbi Judah lists God's daily schedule. Of the twelve hours of the day, the first three God studies Torah, the second three God sits between judgment and mercy, the third quarter of the day God feeds the world, and the last three hours of the day, God plays with Leviathan. Now, Rabbi Nahman ben Isaac says that while God plays with the creatures of the world, he does not laugh at them.[99] Still, the image of a God who "plays" is intriguing. The word *m'sahek* is associated with sexuality, as when Isaac "plays" with his wife Rebekkah in Genesis 26:8. It appears also in Exodus 32:6 in which the Israelites are "dancing" or "reveling" in front of the Golden Calf. Though in this instance the word could possess a sexual connotation, a more precise meaning would be an anarchic joy. Laughter and play possess a wild, anarchic quality to them, and to label them as "play" seems to both euphemize them and place them into a more controlled context that has rules and norms. To play with Leviathan is both to engage in the fruitful, sexual, wild activities of the chaos monster and also to place that wildness in a more controlled setting. Play also has a childlike creativity association. A child who plays at once derives pleasure from the plaything and the playmate, but also uses that play to understand the world and construct

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[98] Ibid. 3b.
[99] Ibid.

worlds of the imagination. This text thus asks us to expand our understanding of God and the act of creation itself.

We often conceive of God in very adult terms: the judger of the world, the artist or carpenter of creation, etc. Might we also think of God in child-like terms as well? Might creation have an aspect of play in it? That is to say, while some aspects of creation are the planned work of one who labors to remove chaos from the system, other parts of creation are more playful—they do not adhere to a play and chaos is an integral part of their unfolding. In the text itself, God occupies different roles in each of the segments of the day, which suggests that holding onto one understanding of God only gives us a fraction of the bigger picture. The feeder and the judger occupy equal parts of the schedule as the "player."

The rabbinic corpus thus uses mixed metaphors as it comments on and expands upon the cosmological mythology of the Bible. Certainly the combat God image occupies much of the rabbinic imagination, as God is the rebuker of the sea and the destroyer of the Prince of the Sea. But these texts do not operate with a systemic theology in these matters. Leviathan is both the menu item in the messianic era as well as God's playmate. *Tohu Vavohu* is both the muck that has to be eliminated to make room for creation as well as an ingredient in the creation itself. Thus rabbinic texts show elements of innovation in the sea of traditionalism.

The Chaos of Dreams

Rabbinic attitudes towards the chaotic not only come out in their construction of mythology. They also manifest themselves in areas that partake in unexplainable phenomena, and one such example is the dream book found in *Bavli Berakhot*. Dreams certainly partake in the chaotic, as they are manifestations of the subconscious that we have no control over. Dreams can cause a person to see disturbing or deeply upsetting visions. It is in the

subconscious that people can be haunted by things they wish to suppress or truths they do not want to see. For the rabbis, who lived long before Freud's theories of the subconscious, dreams must have been particularly disturbing and chaotic. If they assumed that dreams came from God, then they could be particularly upsetting, because the dreams are messages that they did not necessarily know how to interpret. Are they prophecy, predictions of the future? Do they contain information about our ethical or moral state? Or are they messages that we simply should not and cannot interpret?

In the Greco-Roman world, dream interpreters received mixed reviews. On the one hand, they were respected and popular in many circles, often found in marketplaces. On the other hand, many viewed them as charlatans or vagrants preying on the uninformed. Artemidorus, a 2nd century diviner, and Synesius, a Platonist who converted to Christianity, among others made attempts to professionalize the field of dream interpretation by creating dream books.[100] In the land of Babylonia, the profession of dream interpreter fell to the Magi, who were summoned because "they were deemed to have the power to neutralize the demonic power of evils dreams." They could interpret dreams, or simply make them "dissolve."[101] Thus the need for people to make sense of this chaos was apparent by how common these diviners of the subconscious were.

For their part, the rabbis, particularly those coming out of Babylonia, demonstrated skepticism or even disdain for the profession of dream interpretation.[102] This sentiment plays into a common rabbinic trope: centralizing authority under their purview. Instead of their

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[100] Kalmin, Richard. (1994). *Sages, Stories, and Editors in Rabbinic Babylonia.* Providence, RI: Brown Jewish Studies, 78.

[101] Kalmin, Richard. (2010) "Talmudic Attitudes Toward Dream Interpreters: Preliminary Thoughts on their Iranian Cultural Context," *The Talmud in its Iranian Context.* J.C.B Mohr, 85.

[102] Ibid., 87.

people going to pagan diviners or non-rabbinic Jewish interpreters, the rabbis wanted their

people to go to them to ease their concerns about their dreams. However, the interpretations

that the rabbis would give their people have distinct characteristics that both distinguish them

from professional dream interpreters as well as give us hints about their attitudes towards the

chaotic. The dream book has many aphorisms that the rabbis would say about dreams, and I

believe that two of these aphorisms contain centralizing themes in the dream book.

The first of these aphorisms comes from Rav Hisda who says that an uninterpreted dream

is like an unopened letter.[103] This aphorism is interesting, because it assumes that dreams are,

indeed, a message that one can gleam information from, but that this information is not

accessible without a level of interpretation. These texts assume that dreams are prophetic,

though they were only minor prophecies, partaking in only 1/60 part of prophecy.[104] As such,

while the texts concede that dreams have predictive power, one cannot simply read a dream

and from that come to an accurate prediction. It is not direct prophecy; it only partakes of

prophecy, and therefore requires a key or guide to get to the message.

One of the key features of the rabbinic dream book is that it concerns itself entirely with

one kind of dream: a symbolic dream. The symbolic dream has both manifest and latent

content, and while the texts use the manifest content in the dream to guide their interpretation,

it is only the latent content that interests them.[105] So when a person sees wheat or a monkey

or a turnip in a dream, that does not mean that these things will be in his future, but rather,

they are symbols or portents for other things. This interpretive technique thus creates a level

of abstraction between the manifest content of the dream and the purported significance of the

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[103] B. Berakhot 55a.

[104] Alexander, Phillip S. (1995) "Bavli Berakhot 55a-57b: The Talmudic Dreambook in Context," *Journal of Jewish Studies.* 46, 237.

[105] Ibid., 238.

dream. The dream book uses this ability to abstract content to neutralize some of the most upsetting visions that can come from the subconscious. For example, the text says that a man who dreams of having intercourse with his mother may expect to obtain deep understanding, deriving this interpretation from the verse in Proverbs, "Yea, you shall call understanding Mother" (Proverbs 2:3).[106] While a psychoanalyst would delve into the manifest content of such a dream, the rabbis, who deal in the symbolic, are not tied to the content. One's mother need not be taken any more literally than wheat, a turnip, or a monkey.[107]

By declaring that dreams are like an unopened letter, the *sugya* effectively creates a defense mechanism against the upsetting visions that come from the chaotic subconscious. While not denying that dreams contain significant content, perhaps even prophecy, the text inserts a level of abstraction that takes the meaning of a dream away from its explicit content. This accomplishes two things. First, it prevents explicitly bad overt content from actually signifying its *peshat*. Indeed, the same Rav Hisda who compares uninterpreted dreams to unopened letters says that a bad dream and a good dream are never wholly fulfilled, and in another aphorism even says that bad dreams portend good. He further says that oftentimes the feelings that a good or bad dream elicits in the dreamer are fulfillment enough, and that the actual content does not have to come true.[108] Second, it allows the dream message to remain an unopened letter if the individual does not want to know what it means.

Indeed, the rabbis actually create liturgical ritual in order to allow a bad dream to remain uninterpreted. The text instructs a person who has had a bad dream that he feels needs to be interpreted to go before three rabbis. The dreamer declares before the rabbis that he actually

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[106] B. Berakhot 57a.

[107] Ibid., 239.

[108] B. Berakhot 55a.

had a good dream, and then the rabbis declare that God should "turn" the dream into good.

Then playing off the word "turn," the rabbis cite seven verses in which God turned something

bad into something good. For instance, God turned the curse of Balaam into a blessing, or God

turns mourning into rejoicing in Psalm 30.[109] The text mentions another ritual for a person

who has a dream but does not remember its content. This person is instructed to go in front of

the priests to receive the Priestly Benediction with open hands and to recite:

> "Sovereign of the Universe, I am Yours and my dreams are Yours. I have dreamt a dream
> and I do not know what it is. Whether I have dreamt about myself or my companions have
> dreamt about me, or I have dreamt about others, if they are good dreams, confirm them and
> reinforce them… and if they require a remedy, heal them…"

The congregation then recites "Amen."[110] What is striking about this ritual is that it resembles

the ritual of *Birkat Ha-Gomel*, the prayer one recites having survived a dangerous situation.

One recites the formula in community, and that community has a scripted response, and like

benching Gomel, it is a prayer that one recites after a troubling encounter with the chaotic. In

both of these rituals, the text's approach is to give the Jew a way of blunting the potential for

evil in the dream without actually having to interpret the dream. The ritual takes care of the

prophecy, but neither the rabbis nor the dreamer reveals the content of the dream or makes

any attempt to understand it. Thus, the dream book, both by assuming the symbolic nature of

dreams and by creating ritual to "dissolve" bad dreams, allows for the letter to remain

unopened. It seems that sometimes the best approach to chaos is to not attempt to understand

it.

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[109] B. Berakhot 55b.
[110] Ibid.

The second aphorism that guides dream interpretation is a related one: "All dreams follow the mouth."[111] The implication of this aphorism is that the meaning behind the dream comes from the way that one interprets the dream; the fulfillment of the dream comes from what one believes about it. This principle is illustrated by a brief passage in which the emperor of Rome and the King of Persia come before the rabbis and say to them: "You Jews profess to be very clever. Tell me what I shall see in my dream." The rabbis then predict that they will see the other empire conquering them and forcing them into slave labor, and naturally, the rabbis' predictions come true.[112] These stories suggest that the rabbis knew of the power of suggestion, that often when we believe something will happen it becomes self-fulfilling, which perhaps underlies their belief that outcomes are activated by the act of interpretation. Phillip Alexander suggests that the rabbis believed that a dream text was similar to a scriptural text that has an "enormous electrical charge" that can be released in a number of ways, which necessitates the rabbis' role as dream interpreters.[113]

When the rabbis do engage in symbolic dream interpretation, they by and large take the aphorism that the dream proceeds from the mouth seriously and make every effort to interpret it positively. For example, Rav Hanan says that three kinds of dream symbols signify peace: a river, a pot, and a bird. Sometimes the text gives the dreamer the opportunity to make a good meaning for himself. Rabbi Joshua b. Levi says that if one dreams of a river he should rise early and say, "Behold, I will extend peace like a river" before another has the opportunity to tell him that he will be troubled like a river.[114] In this instance, the dreamer can claim the interpretation he wants for himself, lest another give him the bad interpretation.

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[111] Ibid.

[112] B. Berakhot 56a.

[113] Alexander, 236.

[114] B. Berakhot 56b.

From these texts it is clear that the interpretation not only gives the dream its significance, but it seems to serve the prophetic role more than the dream itself.

Indeed, the extended narrative of Bar Hedya both confirms this practice and seems to serve as a polemic against non-rabbinic dream interpreters. Rava and Abaye both had dreams and would go to Bar Hedya for their interpretations. Abaye would pay Bar Hedya, but Rava would not, so Bar Hedya gave Abaye a favorable interpretation and Rava an unfavorable interpretation based on the same dream. Horrible things happened to Rava including the destruction of his prosperity and the death of his wife. Eventually the corruption is uncovered and Rava gets revenge on both Bar Hedya and Abaye by cursing them, which results in their death.[115] The whole incident seems to accomplish two things. First it serves as a polemic against dream interpretation. As previously noted, the text takes a two-pronged strategy for dealing with dream interpretation: either obviate the need to interpret the dream or give a generically positive interpretation. Bar Hedya not only feels free to interpret dreams negatively, but does so in a corrupt way to benefit himself. Secondly, the narrative further illustrates the principle that the fulfillment of a dream follows from the way it is interpreted.

In the end, I believe that these two aphorisms give us important insights into the strategy that rabbis use to deal with the chaotic. Like dreams, chaos challenges us because it is either impossible to make sense of or is not inherently meaningful at all. Like dreams, people have little to no control over chaos. What the dream book teaches us is that when we are dealing with the chaotic, people do have power, but that power rests entirely with how they interpret it. Bad dreams are inevitable, and diseases or natural disasters hit us indiscriminately. How we interpret things, however, is a way that we can empower ourselves when the bizarre,

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[115] B. Berakhot 56a.

chaotic, or unmeaningful befall us. A dream might not have meaning in and of itself, but the way I choose to react to it has an influence over my psychology and my actions. A cancer diagnosis is not inherently meaningful, because it is never useful to ask "Why me?" The way a person reacts to that diagnosis, however, is meaningful, whether they fall into despair or use it to find greater meaning in their lives. In that regard, the interpretation really does "proceed from the mouth." Furthermore, choosing to not open the letter allows someone not to drive himself to distraction by trying to find meaning when there might not be any to be found. In any event, the rabbis' dream book demonstrates both humility at the limits of our understanding of the chaotic and *chutzpadikh* in terms of our ability to empower ourselves to come away with a positive interpretation.

Conclusion

While the rabbinic corpus does not create systematic theology and I have barely scratched the surface of texts that deal with matters of suffering, mythology, and chaos, there are some distinct patterns we see in this literature. The theological default of the rabbis clearly rests in the Biblical tradition. The most prevalent underlying assumption is that God's providence in the world operates on a merit system in which sinners are punished and the righteous prosper. The mythology of the combat God and the chaos monsters who are subdued and defeated functions as a cosmology and an eschatological hope.

And yet the voices of the skeptical or the realists complicate and nuance the picture considerably. While God has neutered and restricted Leviathan, he is not totally tamed, and he is still a force of destruction. The primordial chaos is both the tool of creation and the destructive force that threatens that creation. When confronted with the useless suffering of mourning a dead child or the pain of illness, there are voices in the text that reject the

theological system that makes sense of suffering. They neither find God in the chastisement nor do they believe that their suffering is deserved. When the retributive system breaks down with the acknowledgement that useless suffering exists or that a flimsy bridge will still break with a saint on it, many rabbis give voice to those who suffer and indicate a need for pragmatism in the midst of traditionalism.

So what can we learn from these rabbinic texts? Overall, I believe that these texts demonstrate a few practical approaches to how we can respond to chaos. First, when traditional theology fails in the face of useless suffering, the situation calls for a pastoral, relational approach. Sometimes people can fit their suffering into a theological framework that works for them. Sometimes suffering is beyond such approaches. When the latter is the case, we have to stop offering theology lessons, and instead be the hands that can lift people out of the dark with our presence and our compassion. Second, even though chaos exists in the system, there are ways of accommodating its presence or even using that chaos constructively. In the Dream Book, we find two methods of dealing with chaos. We can choose to leave the letter unopened; we can experience chaos and simply choose not to interpret it. This strategy is a powerful method, because when we experience suffering, oftentimes, placing that suffering into a dubious theological context is neither cogent nor helpful. If we eschew the route of interpretation, then we can focus simply on lamenting our pain, which opens the possibility of a totally different, and perhaps helpful, relationship with God. This is particularly useful when pain is acute in the first stages of grief and sorrow. It is not useful to interpret or give theology lessons in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy.

And yet, often the path of non-interpretation can only last so long. We then turn to the second strategy. When determining meaning is necessary, dream book uses interpretation to

empower ourselves to make a personal meaning out of a chaotic situation. Though we cannot say that chaos has inherent meaning in it, we can construct meaning for ourselves out of it, since the dream will follow the mouth of the interpreter. In other words, reframing a tragedy in an effort to make personal meaning has the potential for healing in it. Without reframing, the human imagination will often construct harmful meanings behind a tragedy. With a retributive mindset, we often blame ourselves for the pain that befalls us, which can cause us to get stuck in that pain. To reframe is to empower us to transcend traditional mindsets and natural propensities in order to stop blaming ourselves for the chaotic and to find true healing. This method of interpretation therefore allows us to be proactive responders to chaos instead of reactive victims of the chaotic. In this way the destructiveness of Leviathan can be our partner in the creation of ultimate meaning.

Chapter 4: Medieval Philosophy and Metaphor: Exploring Chaos and Creation

The Jewish Middle Ages brought two different yet complimentary innovations to theology. The first of these was the growth of mysticism. Though *Kabbalah* has ancient roots in the form of *Merkavah* mysticism, it is with the emergence of the *Zohar* in the 13th century that the *Kabbalistic* system reached its full expression.[116] Isaac Luria's cosmological origin story took that system and historicized it into the mythos of the Jewish people.[117] The growth of Jewish mysticism changed the way that these Jews related to God. Performing the *mitzvoth* was no longer done because God commanded them; the *mitzvoth* became the route by which a person gained intimacy with God. As such, the growth of mysticism not only coincided with the desire for messianic redemption, but it also revealed that the Middle Ages brought an intense desire to *know* God. The intricate metaphysical systems and the meditative practice the *Kabbalists* developed to tap into them betray this aspiration to understand the moral and physical structure of the universe.

The other innovation of this era was the emergence of Jewish philosophy. Prominent Jews like Saadya Gaon reacted to the Muslim Kalam movement by seeking to place the Jewish tradition into a metaphysical system. They ask questions about the nature of creation, the existence of free will, and the physical structure of the universe, and while they cite scripture in their proofs, it is through the process of reason and deduction that they come to their conclusions. These philosophers fundamentally changed Judaism,

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[116] Scholem, Gershom and Melila Hellner-Eshed (2007). "Zohar". *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 21. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 647–664.

[117] Scholem, Gershom. (1955), *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd edition, London: Thames & Hudson, 285-6.

because the image of the moral person was no longer just the individual who engages in *imitatio dei* by performing the commandments.[118] For the philosophers, who viewed the human capacity to reason as the path towards connection with God, the moral ideal became the one who uses the mind to contemplate and understand the universe. In so doing, this individual engenders love for God.

As engagement of the mind became the moral ideal for the Jewish philosophers, it became necessary to reconcile the Jewish tradition with the world of science and metaphysics as they understood it. The problem that emerged as people began to delve intp philosophy was that they either abandoned their traditional faith or they abandoned their philosophical pursuits because of the cognitive dissonance that they caused. Abraham Ibn Daud was distressed at the fact that "when someone is just beginning his study of the sciences, he is perplexed about what he knows from the point of view of the traditional knowledge," and his work sought to "acquaint [one] with many points of Science which have built on the principles of religion."[119] Ibn Daud expresses the desire for science and religion to overlap, for the two to reinforce each other, and for the philosopher to engage in both pursuits without dissonance. Maimonides took this project even further. The Rambam views science and philosophy as an essential part of human perfection. Science not only advances the mind, but is also a deeply spiritual endeavor, leading one to the "inner habitation of the King."[120] He also famously asserted that when science

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[118] Sirat, Colette (1985). *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3-4.

[119] *Emunah Ramah.* The Hebrew translation by Solomon ben Labi published by S. Weil, Das Buch *Emunah Ramah.* With a German translation. Frankford-am-Main, 1982, 2-4.

[120] *Guide to the Perplexed*, 3.51.

contradicts Scripture, it is Scripture that must be reinterpreted to fit the dicta of science.[121]

Thus it is with the philosophers of the Middle Ages that the act of writing theology with the language of science has its origins.

Though the Medieval philosophers and the mystics do not share theologies or methods, they ultimately possess a shared motivation: the connection with God. In both cases, knowledge of the universe is an essential part of fostering that connection to God. As the philosophers developed new models and understandings of God and the world, they helped us see the chaotic differently from the *chaoskampf*-based Biblical mythologies. As models of creation evolved from creation *ex nihilo* to Aristotelian models and ultimately to Spinoza's conception of an unfolding God, chaos gained a significant role in the image of creation. Through negative theology, the philosophers gave us the vocabulary to transcend metaphors of God that reify particularly patriarchal visions of the divine. As the philosophers engaged in the debate about free will, they portrayed a universe in which not only natural occurrences but even human actions partake in the chaotic. We see then that it is through the development of Jewish philosophical metaphysics that we begin to get the first glimmers of a chaos theology that sees the chaotic as partaking in the creative.

Identifying Metaphor

Perhaps the most significant factor that prevents people from transcending a *chaoskampf* vision of God is the fact that the metaphors involved in such a theology are so easily reified. The process of reification happens when an abstract concept or idea is thought of in a particular way with such consistency that the fallacy of its concreteness takes hold. Alfred North Whitehead wrote about the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" in

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[121] GP 2.24.

a discussion on the spatial and temporal locations of objects. He asserts that one cannot ascribe a simple location in time or space to an object because that object must be abstracted by locating it in relation to other objects and places in the universe.[122] This fallacy of misplaced concreteness also creeps into the way we conceive of God. Part of the salience of the images of God we get in *chaoskampf* texts—God as a "man of war," God as a king, etc.—is that these metaphors fit seamlessly into a patriarchal worldview. When your only point of reference is a *nomos* in which men have the dominant societal roles and kings and emperors are top of the hierarchy then it can be easy to default into conceiving of the ineffable, inconceivable God as concretely embodying a King.

Compounding the problem of anthropomorphism and reified metaphors is the fact that they are supported by a tremendous amount of Biblical baggage. For example, in Genesis 3, we hear of God "walking" in the Garden of Eden (3:8), God reveals God's back to Moses in Exodus 33 (v. 23), and the Song of the Sea describes the actions of the right hand of God (Exod. 15:6). These Biblical texts seem to assume a concreteness of God, almost as though the divine actually has a body.

Rabbinic texts have a mixed record on the concreteness of God. Some texts, particularly those that delve in mysticism, speak of God in abstract and highly metaphorical terms. For instance, the Medieval *piyyut* Shir HaKavod, conveys the paradox of the intense, almost sexual, desire of the speaker to know God and the fact that God is completely unknowable. The only way one can get a glimpse of the divine is to speak of the *kavod* of God, the

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[122] Whitehead, Alfred North (1925) [1919]. *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

imminent presence of God, but which is ultimately not God Godself.[123] Other rabbinic

sources seem to have a much more concrete vision of God. For example, in a *midrashic* text,

Rabbi Ishmael describes the instances in which the five fingers of God make an appearance

in the Torah: to instruct Noah how to build the ark, to punish the Egyptians with the

plagues, to write the *luchot habrit*, to instruct Moses how to save the souls of the Israelites,

and to raise the children of Israel above the children of Esau.[124] Thus, it seems that some of

the literature that came out of the first millennium of the Common Era wrote of God in

metaphorical terms, while other texts attributed concreteness to the divine.[125]

The issue of God's concreteness became a hot topic with the emergence of Jewish

philosophy, as texts with an anthropomorphic God became embarrassments for Jewish

sages. As theology and philosophy became indistinct entities in Islamic culture in the

seventh and eighth century, it became apparent that the majority of Jews found themselves

in a religious atmosphere in which the majority of people believed that God had no body

and that belief in an anthropomorphized God was heresy.[126] The first Jewish scholar to

claim such a theology was Saadya Gaon in his Book of Beliefs. The Gaon basis his assertion

on the Talmudic assumption that the Torah spoke "the language of human beings."[127] That

is to say, the Torah speaks anthropomorphically in order to convey "heavenly matters" to

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[123] Hoffman, Lawrence, A. (2007). *My People's Prayerbook, Vol. 10 Shabbat Morning and Shacharit and Musaf.* Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 180-181.

[124] *Midrash Hagadol to Genesis* M. Margaliot (ed.), Mosad Harav Kook, Jerusalem 1967, 159. A parallel in Pirkei R. Eliezer 48, D. Luria (ed.), Warsaw 1852, 116a.

[125] Bar-Ilan, M. (1993), 'The Hand of God: A Chapter in Rabbinic Anthropomorphism', G. Sed-Rajna (ed.), *Rashi 1040-1990: Hommage a Ephraim E. Urbach, Congres europeen des Etudes juives,* Paris: CERF, 321-335.

[126] Ibid.

[127] B. Berakhot 31b.

ordinary folk in a manner that they could understand.[128] As such, the Gaon opens the

possibility that even Scripture might not always be taken literally, that the words of Torah

might simply be an abstraction of a deeper truth. Maimonides would take this concept and

create an entire theological hermeneutic.

In the Guide to the Perplexed, Maimonides' proof of the existence of God implies an

infiniteness and oneness that completely prevents one from assigning attributes to God. He

writes:

> There is no oneness at all except in believing that there is one simple essence in
> which there is no complexity or multiplicity of notions, but one notion only; so that
> from whatever angle you regard it and from whatever point of view you consider it,
> you will find that it is one, not divided in any way and by any cause into two
> notions.[129]

To imply such oneness in God means that there can be no pluralities of essential attributes.

Even to say that God is "all knowing" or "all powerful" introduces a plurality into God,

because it limits God. The same is true when one says that God is composed of matter or

form; it limits God, places a plurality onto God, and therefore cannot "be tolerated."

Furthermore, to say that God is a composite of attributes would imply that there was an

entity *a priori* to God that combined those attributes, which defies the notion of a singular

God.[130] The other problem with attributing qualities to God is that they necessarily create

comparisons between God and humanity. To say that God is "wise" or "powerful" is to

imply that God partakes in the qualities of humanity, which is also blasphemous.[131]

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[128] M. Bar-Ilan.

[129] GP 1.51.

[130] "Maimonides," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* 6/13/2013,
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/maimonides/#GodViaNeg

[131] GP 1.56.

To solve the problem of attribution, Maimonides appealed to the implementation of a theology of negation. This negative theology might have one say "God is not lacking in power" as opposed to "God is powerful."[132] Of course, one might argue that the implementation of a double negative simply turns it into a positive. However, Maimonides did not believe the use of negation was simply a backdoor to positive attribution. For Maimonides, to say "God is powerful" means both that God does not lack in power, and that God does not possess power in a way that is comparable to anything in the human experience.[133] Despite the stringent nature of this negative theology, even negation fails in Maimonides' opinion. He points out that all verbal expression fails us as we describe God, and negation simply distances us from error as we "travel along the path towards recognizing God's transcendence."[134] Indeed, Maimonides writes, "When you make an affirmation ascribing another thing to Him, you become more remote from Him."[135]

Maimonides' negative theology is an important innovation in theological language because it points out the significant limitations of metaphors. He is right to assert that affirmative ascription distances a person from God, because in ascribing a quality to the divine, you attempt to concretize the ineffable. However, one could also accuse Maimonides of overreacting to the problem of reification. In attempting to scrub theological language of metaphor, the Rambam not only delves into a language game that is inconsistent (even the language of closeness and remoteness from God is a metaphor), but also kills playfulness and creativity within language. Maimonides famously hated *piyyutim* for their reliance on metaphorical language, casting away incredible aesthetic beauty,

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[132] GP 1.58.
[133] "Maimonides," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*
[134] Ibid.
[135] GP 1.59.

rhetorical excellence, and evocative spiritual content because of his discomfort with metaphor. Thus the insistence on invalidating metaphor and scrubbing it out of language deadens spirituality.

The other problem that the Rambam does not account for is the fact that metaphor is completely unavoidable in language. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's work *The Metaphors We Live By* points out that everyday language is filled with metaphors that we do not even notice. One example of this that they outline in their work is the way that the language we use to describe arguments comes from war imagery. Expressions such as "that argument is indefensible," "I attacked the weak point of his argument," "he shot down my argument" abound.[136] Lakoff and Johnson assert that these metaphors, though they are not identified as metaphors commonly, are so powerful that they shape the way we actually think of these concepts. They assert that one could conceivably think of argument in a different way that does not involve winning or losing. One might think that the argument is an end unto itself. But because our language causes us to think of argument as war, we are left with the baggage of this metaphor that completely shapes our perception of argument.[137] Thus, we see that negative theology inevitably fails because language is too laden with metaphor to scrub it of anything non-literal.

While Maimonides identified a significant theological problem in terms of the issue of reification, his solution is also untenable. The question that we have to respond to is not how do we remove metaphor from our language, but rather how do we use metaphor in a responsible way so that we do not fall into the trap of reification? In his essay "Metaphor

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[136] Lakoff, George & Mark Johnson (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1-15.
[137] Ibid.

and Transcendence," Karsten Harries attempts to answer this question. The problem for theologians is encapsulated in a quotation from Paul Valery, who defines poetry as "an effort by one man to create an artificial and ideal order by means of a material of vulgar origin."[138] The theologian seeks to describe the divine, but must do so with the language of human beings. Thus, the poet is continually striving after an ideal state and can never get there.[139] How does one deal with such a conundrum? Harries asserts that one can start by moving away from an Aristotelian conception of metaphor.

Harries contrasts the Aristotelian definition of metaphor with a conception that has emerged from modern poets. The Aristotelian claim of metaphor is that a metaphor implies similarities between dissimilar objects. As such, the function of metaphor is to point out a hidden connection, a collusion of images. Harries asserts that recent discussions of poetry have focused on metaphors not as tools to point out hidden connections but as methods of creating something new. Rather than colluding images, it functions as a collision of images.[140] Another dichotomy that emerges is the concept of unity and self-sufficiency. According to Aristotle, the poem should be a cohesive whole, its imagery self-sufficient and autotelic. The problem with such a conception of poetry is that what metaphor names may transcend human understanding, preventing the object that the metaphor maps onto from being captured by language. As such, the metaphor fails to be self-sufficient, as it cannot fully grasp the complexity of that which it attempts to describe.[141]

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[138] Valery, Paul (1961). "Pure Poetry," *The Art of Poetry,* trans. Denise Folliot. 192.

[139] Harries, Karsten (1978). "Metaphor and Transcendence," *On Metaphor,* ed. Sheldon Sachs. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 76.

[140] Ibid., 71.

[141] Ibid., 72.

Rather than bemoan metaphor's incapability to be autotelic and self-sufficient, perhaps embracing its incompleteness is the answer that we are looking for as we construct theology. This means that as we use metaphorical language, we have to make sure that the language we use is not self-sufficient, mapping onto the fallacy of a concretized idea. This means that as we describe God, we cannot use metaphor to map A onto B. Rather, the metaphor should be more of a grasping towards a *telos* that transcends understanding. This means that we not only have to approach our imagery with a tremendous amount of humility, but we must also jump from image to image, lest we get stuck on one and reify it.

As we consider the responsible use of language, it strikes me how thoroughly irresponsibly the metaphors around chaos and creation have been utilized in our tradition. Catherine Keller, the process theologian, asserts that the creation stories in the Biblical canon have created an *ex nihilo* doctrine, which has mutated into a perverse orthodoxy.[142] It is an orthodoxy that has turned everything chaotic into the dark, scary underbelly of creation. An orthodoxy which has deemed it necessary to kill, dismember, and mutilate the primordial mother for the establishment of the patriarchal *nomos*. An orthodoxy that seeks to minimize or blot out the depths of the deeps, rather than acknowledge the fact that the chaos therein is the precise source of creation. Rather than reify such conceptions of creation, I suggest that we use the warnings of Maimonides and the concept of responsible use of language to create new images, open possibilities, and conceive of new ways of seeing creation. Creating new imagery will only assist us in being able to jump from image to image and prevent the fallacy of concreteness from setting in. Such an approach to our

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[142] Keller, Catherine (2003). *Face of the Deep: a Theology of Becoming.* London: Routledge, 10.

theology will not only change the way that we see the chaotic, but has the potential to draw us closer, and not distance ourselves, from the transcendent Holy One.

The Metaphysics of Creation

As the Jews incorporated the tenets of reason and philosophy into their theology, the nature of the creation of the world became one of the most significant arenas of debate. While most philosophers were unwilling to call into question the veracity of the Biblical account of creation, they differed in their interpretation of it as it applied to the vision of creation they could derive from reason. The metaphysics of the likes of Plato and Aristotle also loomed heavily on the emerging theology of creation. As such, Maimonides, in the *Guide to the Perplexed* identified three major opinions about the creation and eternity of the world, which more or less correspond to the positions that can be found in Medieval Jewish philosophy. The first opinion is the position that he identifies with the Law of Moses: creation *ex nihilo*, that God created the universe from nothingness. The second opinion, which Maimonides identifies with Plato, is that God did not create the world from nothingness, but rather from a primordial matter, co-eternal with Godself. Finally, the opinion of Aristotle is that God and the world are co-eternal, and while God is the eternal cause of the world, which arises from God, God did not create the world, or exert change on it.[143]

These questions of the nature of creation might seem esoteric, but they speak directly to a theology of chaos. The paradigm that Maimonides creates is one that has a spectrum of God's control on the universe. For these theologians the issue of control is intimately linked to ownership and power. If creation happened according to the Biblical opinion,

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[143] Sirat, 188-189.

then God had full control and was completely without peer in the primordial nothingness. On the other hand, if creation happened according to the Aristotelian model, God might be the eternal cause of the universe, but ultimately, God exerts no influence or change on the world; the natural process unfold on their own. Post-moderns might link such a notion to God's radical transcendence or Gnosticism, and a scientist might say that such a notion was ultimately chaotic. As the Middle Ages progressed, the theologies espoused by the Jewish philosophers tended to evolve towards a portrayal of the creation of the universe involving less and less direct control by God.

Saadya Gaon holds closest to the traditional Biblical position, sharing the sensibilities of the Mutazillite theologians and speaking to the questions that the Muslim philosophers of his time were grappling with. As such, the Gaon staunchly defends an *ex nihilo* notion of creation, detailing the proofs in great detail in the *Book of Beliefs*.[144] For Saadya Gaon, the finite nature of creation implies that it has an origin and an end, and thus it had to have had an ultimate creator. Secondly, the Gaon sees the unity of creation as a sign of a designer. The fact that things fit together means that there was intentionality behind the creation of the universe; things could not have simply been created chaotically because there is an underlying beauty of design in the fabric of the world.[145] The role of chaos in the Gaon's portrayal of creation is minimal to non-existent. As the Gaon proves the notion of a creator, he turns special attention to the *ex nihilo* part, as it is essential to prove the ultimate unity of God. The oneness of God is perhaps the central tenet of Saadya Gaon's theology, so saying the world was created *ex nihilo* serves to put a fence around God. For the Gaon, to

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[144] "Saadya," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* 5/6/2003, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/saadya/
[145] Saadya Gaon. *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs.* Trans. Alexander Altman (2002). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 51-58.

imply that primordial matter existed from which God created is to say that this matter

created itself. Such a notion infringes on the concept of a singular God, because the

primordial matter creates multiplicity.[146] Thus, for Saadya Gaon, creation *ex nihilo* is

necessary for God to be God; in his theology, there is no room for messiness or chaos, as

such notions violate the concept of God.

The Aristotelians do not use the creation of the universe as an essential proof of God.

Abraham Ibn Daud, for example, does not even describe a creator God, as he makes use of

the Aristotelian "unmoved mover" conception of the Divine. He proves the existence of God

by the assertion that all movement has to be caused by some mover and that no such thing

as an infinite series of movement exists. As such, the primordial mover of the cosmos has

to exist. Secondly, since no infinite series of causes exists, Ibn Daud asserts that there must

be a "necessary being," who is "sufficient" to cause the universe.[147] Ibn Daud in his

Aristotelian orientation seems to be of the camp that says that God is not the creator, just

the mover. Other forces than God are responsible for the molding and shaping of the

cosmos once it has been originated.

However, Ibn Daud is not willing to go to the logical conclusion of his metaphysics. The

logical conclusion of abandoning the concept of a creator God is to say that creation

happens instead through a process of emanation: God begins the initial process as the

unmoved mover, and creation proceeds from the unfolding of the processes begun by this

notion (a beautifully chaotic model!). Ibn Daud, however, sharply criticizes the concept of

emanation, saying that it has no logical proof, and is made up entirely. He portrays it as an

easy answer to the problem of how the multiplicity of creation proceeds from the oneness

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[146] Ibid., 58-62.

[147] Sirat, 146.

of God that simply holds no water.[148] To explain this paradox Ibn Daud presents the theory

of "intermediaries." These intermediaries are secondary substances or heavenly

intelligences that serve as the connection between God and the world. His proof for such a

concept comes from his attempt to prove the Active Intellect. He reasons that the human

intellect passes from potentiality (the thoughts inside our heads) into actuality (through

the body, which acts in conjunction with the mind). Thus, it is these intermediaries that

take the potentiality from God and make it into an actuality. They place the objects within

the universe into motion, and therefore are responsible for the multiplicity within the

universe. Thus it seems that it is these intermediaries, which are connected to the heavenly

intelligence but not directly of God, that serve a creator role. Ibn Daud departs from the

emanation theory, which states that heavenly beings come from the Active Intellect and

continue to emanate lower and lower beings until the physical universe is actualized from

this emanation flow.[149] Ibn Daud, it seems, is not willing to remove God so much from the

process and give over the creation role to the emanating process. In his view, there is a

much simpler hierarchy: from the Active Intellect, to the secondary heavenly agents, to the

concretized universe. Ibn Daud, among the first of the Jewish Aristotelians, provides an

important innovation to the way we conceive of creation, because he moves away from a

micromanaging God creator and begins conceiving that some other process is responsible

for the multiplicity of creation. However, he seems to feel discomfort at the ultimate

implications that such a theology entails—that control and mastery might not ultimately

belong to God. As such, he does not accept the logical conclusion of his theology: a sort of

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[148] *HaEmunah HaRamah* W 67; S 159b.

[149] "Abraham Ibn Daud," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* 2/23/2015,
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abraham-daud/#CosInt

libertarian universe in which a chaotic emanation process is the ultimate shaper of the cosmos.

Similar to Ibn Daud, Maimonides demonstrates an inability to fully commit to one of his models of creation, merely indicating that both a created and uncreated model of origins are within the realm of possibility and within the scope of Scripture. In the *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides off hand rejects the Kalam philosophy that proves with certainty the created nature of the world. Maimonides writes that there is no way to prove through reason one way or the other that the world is created.[150] The Rambam says that he believes in creation but sees no proof to substantiate his belief. As such, he focuses in the Guide on the three origin positions (Moses, Plato, and Aristotle). Ultimately, scholars are divided as to which way Maimonides ultimately orients himself, suggesting that his belief never fully is committed to proof.[151]

For example, though often associated with the Aristotelians, Maimonides suggests that the common proofs against a created universe might not be sound. The common refutation for an *ex nihilo* creation is the chicken and egg proof: the chicken always comes from the egg which comes from a chicken, so there is nothing that exists that can spring up from nothing. The other common proof against creation is the assertion of God's perfection. If God is perfect, why would God create something new, such as bring the world into being? In the Guide, Maimonides asserts that while it is true that nothing comes into being on its

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[150] GP 1.71-3.

[151] Harvey, Warren Z., (1981). "A Third Approach to Maimonides' Cosmology Prophetology Puzzle,"*Harvard Theological Review*, 74: 287–301.
Davies, Daniel, (2011). *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides'* Guide for the Perplexed, New York: Oxford University Press.
Hyman, Arthur, 1988. "Maimonides on Creation and Emanation," in J. F. Whippel (ed.), *Studies in Medieval Philosophy*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 45–61.

own, the same might not apply to ultimate origins. He writes that it might be the case that the way an entity develops might be totally different from its ultimate origin and that it is presumptuous to extrapolate from the lived experience onto the primordial past.[152] Furthermore, Maimonides asserts that for a perfect being, willing a thing into being need not imply change to that being.[153]

Maimonides further critiques the Medieval Aristotelian cosmology for its account of how complexity emerges from the simple oneness of God.[154] Similar to Ibn Daud, the Aristotelians assert that since the only thing that emerges from God can be one and simple, heavenly intelligences emerge from God, which then give rise to duality and multiplicity, eventually turning into the created universe. Maimonides criticizes this portrayal saying that if God is truly one and simple, there is no way that anything in a causal sequence coming from God can possess multiplicity. Even a sequence that possesses thousands of members could not give rise to the complexity of the heavens.[155] Like Ibn Daud, Maimonides has trouble with the Aristotelian cosmology because of its problematic account of how complexity evolves from oneness. As such, he opens the possibility for a created universe, even as he does not believe it is or can be proven. That both Maimonides and Ibn Daud trip themselves up over the issue of complexity suggest an inability to accept fully the role of the chaotic in creation. The first hints of a more unified theology will come several centuries later from the iconoclast Spinoza.

Spinoza goes even further than Ibn Daud in explaining the paradox of the multiplicity of the universe emerging from the one unified God by constructing a theology. In his work

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[152] GP 2.17.
[153] GP 2.18.
[154] For example, see the philosophy of Alfarabi or Avicenna.
[155] GP 2.22.

The Ethics, Spinoza critiques classical Jewish philosophies of God and outlines his audacious theological view. Spinoza argues for an abstract and impersonal God, a radical view in his time. Part One of The Ethics asserts that God is infinite, containing an infinite number of attributes. Therefore, God is the unique substance of the universe. That is to say, God is the one substance of the universe; everything is God. To prove this assertion, Spinoza does so in three steps. First, he establishes that no two different substances can share an attribute or essence. Then he establishes that there is a substance (God) possessing an infinite number of attributes. Since that substance possesses infinite attributes, then it follows that that substance is the all—the singular, indivisible substance of the universe.[156] Thus, Spinoza solves the issue of multiplicity by saying that the multiplicity of creation is contained within a larger oneness of the all. The many is contained within the One.

Of course, such a theology raises the question of just exactly what Spinoza means by all being contained within God. Is he a pantheist, asserting that everything is God? Or perhaps a panentheist who believes that God underlies and interpolates everything? Or maybe this impersonal God is simply a cover for atheism. In Proposition XVI of Part I, Spinoza shifts his language to speak of God not as an underlying substance of all things, but as the universal and imminent cause of all things, suggesting that while his initial language appears to be pantheist, in reality, he is closer to a panentheist. He writes: "From the necessity of the divine nature must follow an infinite number of things in infinite ways."[157] Thus, Spinoza's God is not a creator who crafted the universe from an act of free will. He writes that from God's infinite power "all things have necessarily flowed" or followed just

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[156] The Ethics, Part One.
[157] The Ethics, Part One, Prop. XVI.

as the three angles of a triangle will always add to 180 degrees.[158] As such, Spinoza's

conception of creation makes use of the language of the emanation theorists.

He contends that there are differences in the way that things depend on God. Some

things depend directly on the nature or attributes of God—the "universal and eternal"

qualities of the world (perhaps the laws of physics). More particular and individualistic

things are more removed causally from God.[159] Thus the creation of the world is not

analogous to an architect planning out and executing a blueprint. Creation proceeds from

God's nature directly causing the universal properties of the cosmos and then the particular

aspects of that creation coming into being by flowing from the process begun by the

universal causation. Thus multiplicity proceeds from and is contained within the one.

While Spinoza makes use of the language of emanation theorists, he does not take their

theology to its logical conclusion, as he is an ardent determinist.[160] Spinoza believes that

the order of things is completely determined, that the universe could not be anything other

than it is in its current state. The difference we see between Spinoza and those that came

earlier is Spinoza's willingness to remove much of the direct causation and determinism

from God Godself.[161] As such, Spinoza goes further than Ibn Daud and Maimonides in

removing control, power and mastery from God, but he does not take that final logical step

in portraying a role for chaos in the formation of the world. Of course, in our post-modern

context in which we have the model of the Big Bang as our understanding of creation, the

notion of determinism can hardly fit into our world. We know that the universe formed

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[158] Ip17s1.

[159] "Baruch Spinoza," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* 7/4/2016,
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza/#Ethi

[160] The Ethics, Proposition VII.

[161] "Baruch Spinoza," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*

from a hot primordial soup of particles and heat—a chaotic explosion that eventually cooled and coalesced into creation. Suggesting determinism guided this process simply does not work with the science. However, despite the scientific limitations of the metaphors that Spinoza or Ibn Daud use in their conception of creation, we must note that because of their philosophy, Judaism broke out of a reified metaphor of a micro-managing creator God. Thus Ibn Daud and Spinoza form the bridge from the Middle Ages into Modernity. The language of an unmoved mover God, or the God that begins an emanating process of creation, is language that can be seen as a predecessor to the metaphors that the Process theologians use. It is these metaphors that will eventually incorporate chaos into the unfolding process of creation.

Conclusion

As we think about constructing a viable theology of chaos, two things become apparent. The first is that we have to figure out a responsible way to channel the divine through metaphor. The Judaism of antiquity often boxed God into the metaphor of a male warrior deity whose raison d'être was to create the world to establish the Israelite *nomos* by the evisceration, rape, and murder of chaos. These images are so pervasive in Bible and in many rabbinic texts that they are certainly reified. Saadya Gaon and Maimonides began the process of deconstructing these reified images by not only pointing out that the ineffable, transcendent God could not be contained in any image humanity could come up with, but by also asserting that such images run the risk of distancing ourselves further from God's presence. While pointing out the limitations of metaphor was an important bridge away from the conceptions of chaos that come from pagan origins, Maimonides ultimately did not go far enough. Even if we remove imagery from our God language, we do not transform

God away from the baggage of *chaoskampf*. In order to construct a post-modern chaos theology, we have to go further than Maimonides and rebuild imagery around God. The rebuilding must be done with a plethora of images, so that no one of them gets reified, and we must have the awareness that language theorists have brought us about the limitations and opportunities of metaphor.

The problem with reified metaphors is not just the way that they box us into a particular conception of God and come with all kinds of political and patriarchal baggage but also they are not particularly fresh or powerful. Metaphor should not only attempt to be descriptive, but it should also, in the words of Dr. Rachel Adler, pack an emotional wallop. Metaphor should scandalize, make us feel uneasy, and open the reader up to new meanings. Because we are talking about God and the chaotic, we have to use multiple images, because we have to be humble enough to realize that we are not mapping from A to B. We are using a known image to grope our way into the deep unknown of the transcendent. This is what a responsible use of metaphor looks like.

Perhaps the most salient metaphors we speak about in constructing a chaos theology are the metaphors we use for creation. Again, the Jewish Middle Ages represent something of a bridge to us. They began the process of moving away from a reified image of a micromanaging creator God who meticulously forms the world through an act of Divine will. With the Jewish exposure to Aristotelian ideas, the notion of such a creator God fell out of favor, and God became less and less of an active creator, and more of a libertarian initiator of a process of creation. However, even Spinoza never felt fully comfortable completely removing God's control and ownership of creation from the picture. Conceptions of determinism and divine agents made their way past the Middle Ages, even

as the creator God fell out of favor. It is only in modernity and the invention of truly radical

theologies such as Process Theory that we get an image of God that truly makes room for

the chaotic in Jewish creation metaphors.

Thus, the Jewish Middle Ages represent something of an incomplete theological

revolution that would have to be completed in Modernity. However, even as these

philosophers were unable to fully transcend a number of orthodoxies, they represent a

significant turning point in Jewish thought history.   They might not concern themselves

with matters that contemporary scientists consider meaningful. What they viewed as

"scientific" is more accurately portrayed as metaphysical realities. However, the methods

they developed in using the intellect to contemplate the divine and asserting that the

scientific and the religious have an overlap are of vital significance to us in the

contemporary world. And ultimately, it is the theological and philosophical vocabulary that

these individuals created that has enabled us to transform how we might view the chaotic.

Chapter 5: Aesthetics and Chaos: Finding the Creative in the Ugly

To see that there is an intimate relationship between the ugly and the chaotic one need look no further than the May 29, 1913 Paris performance of Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring."[162] What started as a ballet composed by the celebrated Russian composer devolved into a brawl and eventually riots in the streets of Paris. The chaos began with the high-pitched bassoon's opening notes and escalated as the music turned into a frenzied, frenetic and jagged composition. Now widely regarded as a momentous work of modernism, in its time, the piece was a revolutionary work that rejected the ordered and harmonious nature of traditional musical composition. As the orchestra takes over the piece, it introduced uncomfortable chords—dissonant chords—that leave the audience unsettled and filled with anxiety. The ballet dancers contribute to the dissonance by performing violent and rapid movements, eschewing the traditional grace and subtlety of the medium. The dancing and the music left the audience so disturbed that two factions in the audience began fighting, the orchestra found itself under siege, and angry audience members began throwing vegetables on stage. In the end, people were injured and others were arrested.[163] Such behavior from the symphony-going Parisian society is downright shocking and raises the question that still remains somewhat a mystery: how could the music evoke such a response?

Though "The Rite of Spring" is a piece of surpassing beauty, its ability to incite violence and chaos is at least partially due to its aesthetic choices. The disharmony and dissonance that serve as a major theme of the piece partake in "the ugly." By ugly, I mean the discordant, the

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[162] This interpretation was inspired by the Senior Sermon of Rabbi Dan Utley.

[163] Toor, Amar. "100 Years Ago Today 'The Rite of Spring' Incited a Riot in a Paris Theatre," *The Verge.* 5/29/2013, http://www.theverge.com/2013/5/29/4375736/igor-stravinsky-rite-of-spring-100-anniversary-paris-riot

out of place, the unsettling. A dissonant chord is a chord that has one of its notes off by a half-step, and it is that deviation from the expected and the harmonious that leaves the listener desperately wanting that note to be resolved. Lack of resolution thus leaves the listener with feelings of tension, anticipation, and ultimately, feelings of ugliness. For an audience not used to a more jazzy, dissonant aesthetic, this piece must have felt jarring and grating, and it is ultimately this aesthetic that engendered rage within them. Thus the "ugliness" in the music created chaos within the audience that spilled out into the streets.

The connection between the ugly and the chaotic also comes through in the visual arts. A painting from Franz Marc, also from 1913, entitled "Fate of the Animals" makes the connection between ugliness, chaos, and the apocalyptic. The painting is a flurry of color that abstractly paints the animals of the world with dashes of red, green, and blue. The liveliness and vibrancy of life comes through in the left two-thirds of the painting. However, the colors swiftly dissolve into a deadened brown in the rightmost third of the painting. The death and destruction that comes through in this portion of the painting would tragically foretell the annihilation of tens of thousands of souls, including the artist's, in the horrid trenches of WWI. The browns on the painting not only portray the chaos of death, but they seem to warn of the possibility of apocalypse.[164] With the environmental collapse, wartime destruction, and the invention of genocide in modernity, it seems that Marc's painting is all too prescient. Aesthetically, it is of note that the chaotic comes through in the ugly. The dissolution of color conveys almost a Biblical return to the primordial *tohu vavohu*, a time of undifferentiation, undefinition, and nothingness. The ugly, the discordant, the disharmonious, and the chaotic all converge to a single aesthetic orientation.

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[164] Kleiner, Fred S., et. al. (2001) *Gardner's Art Through the Ages, 11th Ed.* Thompson Wadworth, 1010-1.

Traditional Aesthetics in Judaism

The aesthetic not only correlates with the harmonious versus the chaotic, but in traditional views, it also maps onto moral virtue and one's ability to connect to the divine. The Bible is replete with examples of its most celebrated heroes possessing aesthetically pleasing appearances. The baby Moses is described as "beautiful" and it is this beauty that inspires his mother to save him from the Jewish male genocide imposed by Pharaoh (Exod. 2:2). King David, the exemplar of Israelite kings, is described as "ruddy and handsome" (1 Sam. 17:42). Furthermore, it is not the ruddy and hairy Esau that God chooses to continue the covenant with; it is the tent-dwelling, feminine Jacob (Gen. 25, 27). The aesthetically pleasing almost seems to serve as a mark of favor with God or a special connection to the divine. Similarly, the aesthetically displeasing is also emblematic of one's loss of status in community and spiritual distance. The regulations in Leviticus surrounding the quarantine of individuals with the skin disease *tzara'at* or women in their menstrual period or people with bodily discharges reveal not only a desire to maintain a ritually pure community but also a profound discomfort with the aesthetically displeasing aspects of the human body. These people not only must remove themselves from normal sexual intercourse with spouses or interactions with the community, but they are incapable of maintaining a relationship with God, as they are unable to be in the presence of the *mishkan* or participate in the ritual thereof.

The connection of beauty to morality and spirituality is a common thread in much of Jewish thought. For example, there are many instances in rabbinic literature that recognize the concept of *hiddur mitzvah*, the beautification of the performance of *mitzvoth* through music, lyrical poetry, or aesthetically pleasing foods and artwork, as an essential component of the

performance of Jewish life.[165] Such texts suggest that beauty has the power to amplify ritual

observance and connect a person to God in a more concrete way. Medieval Jewish

philosophers related artistic or somatic pleasure to the moral good. Maimonides takes a

utilitarian stance on beauty; for him, "somatic health" represents a noble aim because it serves

as a prerequisite for spiritual health.[166] The five senses could prepare the mind for the life of

philosophy, the true way in which one engenders virtue, according to the Rambam.[167]

Similarly, the Spanish philosopher Profiat Duran believed that proper text study of beautified

texts prepares the body and mind to contemplate God.[168] Duran and Maimonides seem to

conceive of the beautiful as an aid on the path towards mental preparedness to philosophy.

For others, the beautiful serves an aspirational role. Herman Cohen, following Kant and his

assertion that beauty represents the "actualization of the ideal… the asymptotic embodiment

of human, rational, ethical values," projects this concept into Jewish terms by declaring "art

depicts the messiah"—one's perception of the world as it ought to be.[169] The beautiful is not

only the gateway towards contemplation of God, but it is also a catalyst towards redemption.

The Problem

The connection between beauty, harmony, the divine, and redemption being established in

the sources above, the question that remains is what aesthetic value, if any, does the chaotic,

the discordant, and the ugly have for us? If the beautiful brings us closer to God and closer to

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[165] For example, see Rabbi Ishmael's comment on Exod 15:2 in Midrash Mechilta, Shirata, chapter 3, ed. Lauterbach, p. 25.

[166] Bland, Kalman B. (1993). "Medieval Jewish Aesthetics: Maimonides, Body, and Scripture in Profiat Duran," *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 54, 4, 538.

[167] Ibid., 541.

[168] Ibid., 555.

[169] Schwarzschild, Steven (1987), "Aesthetics," *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought: Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs*, ed. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr. The Free Press, New York, 5.

moral virtue, then one might assume that the ugly and chaotic distances one from the divine and impedes one from developing morality within oneself. A couple of problems exist with such a view of aesthetics. Firstly, if one wishes to pursue a path of intimacy with God with such a philosophy, then one would naturally seek to remove oneself from the chaotic and ugly aspects of life. Such an individual would close himself off from the rest of the world—filled with its poverty, hunger, and disease—to achieve such a goal. As such, the single-minded pursuit of the beautiful risks creating spiritual hermits who do not engage in the issues that demand our focus for the sake of justice. Secondly, to devalue the ugly risks the racism and social Darwinism that comes with the pursuit of a singular standard of beauty. Thus, to be engaged with the world in a socially responsible way requires that we not only accept the presence of the ugly, the chaotic, and the discordant in our lives, but that we also find aesthetic value in it.

The aesthetics of Moses Mendelssohn break from traditional views of the ugly through the novel concept of mixed cognition, an idea that led to an aesthetic of the ugly and discordant. It is this philosophy that made Mendelssohn not only identify the potential value one can find in the ugly or the chaotic and ineffable, but actually led him to assert that such mixed cognitive events were actually preferable in terms of their aesthetic quality. Mendelssohn's aesthetics give us a useful vocabulary as we attempt to construct a theology of chaos, as he not only identifies the way that chaos can inspire virtue, he helps us see the ways that the chaotic might also help us find ways to connect to God.

Mendelssohn's Context

Mendelssohn's aesthetics largely responds to the work of Alexander Baumgarten, who wrote a seminal essay in the field "*Aesthetika*" in 1750.[170] The field of aesthetics began in earnest with the British School from philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Anthony Ashley Cooper, and William Hogarth.[171] Aesthetics for these philosophers was closely tied to the development of political theory. The British schools by the eighteenth century identified the Beautiful and the Good as distinct though related objects. They believed that the Beautiful could be beneficial to the individual, leading him to "moral refinement, sharpened taste, and expansion in the exercise of freedom."[172] In contrast, the Ugly became a "*molestrum*," a thing to protect society from, as well as an entity that defined the boundaries of beauty and intimated the dangers of immorality.[173] In other words, for the British schools, contemplation of the Beautiful engenders virtue and morality, as it imprints the norms and ideals of the *nomos* onto the soul. The ugly causes the individual to feel revulsion and guides him back to the moral and the good. The Beautiful was caught up in the intersection between inner harmony and external forms in nature and art. Ugliness "was construed in terms of discord and disorder and therefore exemplified the potential, if not the realization, of the immoral."[174] We can see that such conceptions of the Beautiful would see it as a pragmatic entity, which could be used to create morality and maintain political order. The beautiful created good citizens.

The German school took a lot of the innovations of the aesthetics of the British schools and applied it to Lutheranism. They united the concept of beauty with holiness, mixing

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[170] Hochman, Leah (2014). *The Ugliness of Moses Mendelssohn: Aesthetics, Religion, and Morality in the Eighteenth Century.* New York: Routledge, 32.

[171] Ibid., 33.

[172] Ibid., 34.

[173] Ibid.

[174] Ibid., 35.

Pietism and rationalism in its construction of morality.[175] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz

asserted that beauty "was not only reflected by but also resided in moral knowledge,

behavior, and education."[176] He writes that it is virtue itself that should bring one pleasure

and vice should be repugnant, not merely that the Beautiful is reflective of morality.[177] As

such, for Leibniz, beauty is the mechanism by which one pursues the Good and connects

with God. He says this because he views pleasure as the act of perception. By refining

one's taste, an individual engages in *imitatio dei*, as God also determines what perfection in

this world is. Ugliness, on the other hand, distances the individual from God, because the

displeasure and shock that it provokes "stunts moral refinement and actively reverses the

effects of prior education."[178] It is on this metaphysical theodicy that Baumgarten

"transformed the implicit equivalence between knowledge and moral authority into a full

aesthetic system."[179] He writes that "aesthetic intuition bridges the gulf between the

individual and the universal, the concrete and the abstract; its 'truth' is found within

concrete qualities."[180] Baumgarten thus understood the Beautiful as an aspect of God.[181]

Common themes abound between the British political morality and the German focus

on the holy, which fills in the philosophical context in which Mendelssohn developed his

aesthetics. It is a context that believed that the Beautiful engenders the Good to such an

extent that the two could be equated. That which is aesthetically pleasing not only

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[175] Ibid., 39.

[176] Ibid.

[177] Leibniz, "Remarks on the Three Volumes Entitled *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, …* 1711." *Philosophical Papers,* 1024.

[178] Hochman, 40.

[179] Guyer, Paul (1993). *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 131.

[180] Coplestone. *A History of Philosophy.* 117.

[181] Hochman, 42.

connects one to God, but it also connects one to the beautiful morals and norms of behavior within a society. The ugly, on the other hand, is universally a destructive force. It causes revulsion within the individual, disrupting the connection to God. It is reflective of immorality and behavior that threatens the *nomos*. The only good it serves is to indicate the boundary between the acceptable and the unacceptable. As such, Mendelssohn was operating in a philosophical world that equated order with good and chaos with immorality and destruction.

Mixed Sentiments

Mendelssohn sharply criticized the dogmatism of these philosophies that associated imperfection so strongly with negativity. He wrote in his 1757 essay "On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences" that "representation by art can be sensuously perfect even if the object of the representation is neither good nor beautiful."[182] To locate the aesthetic value of art that portrayed the ugly or disturbing he came up with the theory of "mixed sentiments."[183] An example of how this theory operates comes from a question that Mendelssohn posed about why an artist would choose to paint a ship sinking in a storm instead of a ship sailing peacefully in the ocean. After all, the sinking ship is a scene of tremendous horror and pain—a portrayal of the chaotic. He writes that painting the "ugly" in this instance allows the artist to engage the viewer in mixed sentiments. Yes, there is the pain and horror that the painting evokes, but also tremendous amount of pity and compassion engendered in the viewer.[184] The representation of the ugly thus creates

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[182] "Ueber die Hauptgrundsätze der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften" *Jub A.* 1:431. Trans. Daniel Dahlstrom (1997).

[183] "Rhapsodie oder Zusätze zu den Briefen über die Empfindungen." (1771) *JubA*, 1:394-5 PW, 141-42.

[184] Hochman, 45.

something beautiful inside the viewer because of the mixed sentiments it engenders. Therefore, in Mendelssohn's view, the "ugly" has aesthetic value.

In fact, ugliness not only has aesthetic value for Mendelssohn, but in many ways, he prefers it to the objectively "Beautiful." When the act of representation of the ugly serves as the mediator between the artist and the observer, there is a certain pleasure that is evoked by the representation, even if it is of something disturbing or disconcerting. In fact, the greater the difference between the "deficiency of the object" and the "perfection of the mixed sentiment. In Mendelssohn's view, these mental acrobatics have a positive 'moral influence' on the observer."[185] Mendelssohn writes that these mixed sentiments have the ability to "[penetrate] deeper into the mind and [appear] to sustain themselves longer" than simply observing the beautiful.[186] The picture of the pristine lake is beautiful but will not leave an imprint on the mind, but the mental acuity required to appreciate the picture of the shipwreck does leave a lasting effect on the observer. Similarly, mixed sentiments create a more powerful moral aesthetic because they "afford the observer greater psychological and intellectual achievement through the increase in mental exercise." The only requirement for the positive effects of mixed sentiments and the encounter with the ugly is that the observer is able to allow these sentiments to become beautified by the contemplation of the representation of the ugly.[187] Even witnessing something morally ugly that engenders disgust or disapproval has positive aesthetic value. Just as one feels this disgust, they also connect themselves to moral beauty, as they are able to distinguish the ugliness they observe with the ideal of morality. Thus for Mendelssohn "the abnormal,

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[185] Ibid., 46.
[186] "Rhapsodie." *JubA*. 1:396, 143.
[187] Hochman, 46.

misshapen, and imperfect subjects of all types of artwork participate in the perfectionist aesthetic as much as beautiful objects or more."[188]

The Sublime

Beyond the Beautiful and the Ugly, Mendelssohn describes a third category of the aesthetic, a category that transcends the other two: the sublime. The sublime operates when objects become too enormous or overpowering to be either beautiful or ugly. The previous categories simply break down, because the sublime is too great to be comprehended by the senses.[189] In the encounter with the sublime, Mendelssohn writes,

> "These senses...begin to ramble in an effort to comprehend the boundaries and end up losing themselves in what is enormous. The result... is initially a trembling or shudder that comes over us and then something similar to dizziness that often forces us to divert our eyes from the object."[190]

The Sinai experience comes to mind when considering the experience of the sublime. The mountain smokes as the presence of God fills the encampment. The people have to keep a distance from the mountain, and are in fact so overwhelmed that they beg Moses to receive the revelation, because they fear the experience will kill them. The scrambling of the senses that Mendelssohn describes also happens, as the Israelites experience synesthesia— seeing the thunder on the mountain.[191] Indeed, to call the Sinai experience an encounter with the sublime is most apt, as Mendelssohn describes God as "the most sublime being."[192]

So what makes an experience sublime? For Mendelssohn, the beautiful and the ugly represent the presence or absence of order. The beautiful is the harmonious, and the ugly is the discordant. The sublime, on the other hand is the "very event of disarray—a

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[188] Ibid., 49.

[189] Ibid., 50.

[190] "Ueber das Ethabane und Naïve," *JubA*. 1:456. *PW*, 193.

[191] All this is described in Exodus 19.

[192] "Ueber das Ethabane und Naïve," *JubA*. 1:456. *PW*, 193

disharmonious, 'enormous,' 'repugnant' occurrence that cannot be corralled within the contemplative gaze."[193] It is an information overload. While such an overwhelming experience might be thought to be incredibly disturbing or painful, its aesthetic value is enormous because the terror of the sublime leads to the most direct contemplation of God imaginable.[194] Indeed, after the terror of Sinai comes revelation. Out of the chaos of the sublime comes the ultimate order of the Ten Commandments and the Covenant. That sublime moment, therefore, is responsible for the most intimate experience of God in Jewish mythological history. The sublime is able to accomplish this intimacy because of its ability to connect one to "original formlessness."[195] It is in this formlessness that we can contemplate the perfection of God, because the perfection of the divine has to transcend all perfection—that is the Beautiful—that we can comprehend.

Mendelssohn's aesthetics thus provide us with a new way to consider chaos. In his theory of mixed sentiments, Mendelssohn breaks from his philosophical context by pointing out that the discordant and the disordered has aesthetic value. Even when the chaotic inspires disgust or discomfort within the observer, those mixed sentiments can connect the individual to the Beautiful and the Perfect because of the mental processes that the person goes through when he observes the chaotic. Indeed, it is these mental exercises that have the ability to connect one to morality and even to God. For Mendelssohn, it was seeing the aesthetic value of the ugly that helped him formulate a defense of Judaism. Enlightenment theologians associated Judaism with the ugly for its rigid legalism and irrationality. For Mendelssohn to say that there is aesthetic value in the ugly is to say that

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[193] Hochman, 51.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Hochman, 52.

Judaism, even in its legalism, has the capacity to connect the individual with morality and with the divine, and might even be preferable that way.[196]

Mendelssohn's view of the sublime further emphasizes the value that he finds in the chaotic. After all it is in the uncontrollable experience when our senses fail to grasp the enormity of the sublime that we most thoroughly connect ourselves to God. The experience of the divine is both ineffable and uncontainable, the definition of chaos. Furthermore, it is in the sublime and in the chaotic that creative potential exists. After all, revelation happens in the sublime, and when we emerge out of it, we receive the Torah. Thus, when Mendelssohn contemplates the enormity of the sea, he no longer sees the chaotic sea monsters of antiquity; he sees the potential for ultimate inspiration.

Conclusion

The power of Mendelssohn's aesthetics not only lies in the revolutionary potential it had to transform theology, but also in its very concrete and practical implications. When considering the aesthetic value of the ugly, one image that comes to mind is the June 8, 1972 photograph taken by Nick Ut of villagers fleeing from a South Vietnamese napalm attack on Trang Bang.[197] The infamous photograph portrays the chaos of the destruction and is most notable for the little girl running naked from the attack, her clothes having burned off from the napalm. The picture is horrifying, but its aesthetic effect hits on precisely what Mendelssohn alludes to. When one sees the picture, one is filled with disgust and horror but also with compassion, pity, and sadness. It portrays the ugliest of things imaginable, but the honesty and realness with which it portrays it makes it

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[196] Hochman, 32.

[197] Burge, Kathleen (February 14, 2013). "Girl in famous Vietnam photo talks about forgiveness". *Boston Globe*. Retrieved 8/18/2014.

aesthetically excellent. Furthermore, its capacity to engender a virtuous end is beyond dispute. The picture made waves across the US as its graphic nature shocked Americans and forced them to look at the horror of the war their country was waging in Vietnam. Reports showed that it elicited responses all the way up to President Nixon, and many believe that the picture itself contributed to the end of the war.[198]

Of course, there is a limit to the potential for the chaotic and the ugly to achieve a virtuous aesthetic end. While the ugly and the horrific might engender the positive results of mixed sentiments in people, they also have the potential to traumatize or cause post-traumatic stress disorder. For instance, the African-American community does not need to witness more videos of officers beating or killing members of their community. Even if such images might raise awareness of a persistent societal problem and engender empathy and outrage in white Americans, the pain and trauma are too raw and persistent to provide any aesthetic value for some in the African-American community. The footage of the Twin Towers falling in the aftermath of 9/11 that the media replayed on the news over and over again traumatized children, having to witness and rewitness the horror. The power of the ugly to harm requires that mass producers of images and video use caution and sensitivity.

However, the aesthetic qualities of the ugly and the sublime cannot be ignored by our society. The changes undergoing the world today—the growing wealth and income inequality, the technological revolution, political and ideological polarization—have proven to be forces that contribute to a decline in our ability to empathize. These forces have enabled a disturbing level of individualization in which people socialize and associate only with those contained within their distinct socio-economic, racial, or ideological bubbles. It

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[198] "Nixon, The A-Bomb, And Napalm". *CBS News*. 2/28/2002.

is only in our ability to confront the chaotic, the discordant, and the ugly that we break out of these forces and can create within ourselves the capacity to empathize and reach those beyond our harmonious worlds. The ugly can shock us out of complacency or inspire pity and *chesed* that we need to reach beyond ourselves. Furthermore, if we content ourselves with the familiar and harmonious, we risk numbing ourselves to the presence of God. Oftentimes fostering the connection with God requires the radical amazement one encounters in the enormous, the thunderous, and the disturbing. As such, a practical social ethics and relational theology requires us to not only show a willingness to encounter the ugly, but also a willingness to find the divine in the ugly and sublime.

Chapter 6: Evolution, Chaos, and Creation: Tracing a Theology of Becoming

Perhaps the modern scientific innovation that has most challenged traditional theologies is the theory of evolution. As is well known, the theory has its origins in the observations of Charles Darwin of species of finches in the Galapagos, which led to the publishing of *The Origin of Species* in 1859. Darwin presented two main propositions. First, he suggested that the diverse species of the world all diverged from common ancestors through a gradual process. Secondly, he wrote that the mechanism for species modifications happens through a process of natural selection in which the members of a species with favorable traits survive and reproduce at higher rates, allowing those favorable traits to become amplified in the gene pool.[199] While Darwin's based his proposals on speculation from his empirical observations, Gregor Mendel's work several decades later on genetics would provide the mechanism behind evolution. Genetic changes and mutations have proven to be responsible for changes at the macro-organism level, and when these changes are passed down from generation to generation, the gene pool can transform, leading to species divergence. Evolutionary theory has tremendous support in the fossil record and genetic analysis and is generally accepted as scientific fact.

However, evolution has also proved a very difficult concept to incorporate into a Jewish framework. The reasons for this aversion to evolution are multifold. Through absolutely no fault of Darwin, evolution came to be superimposed on the world of social sciences at a time when racial theory was emerging. The resulting social Darwinism came to be used as

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[199] Slifkin, Natan (2006). *The Challenge of Creation: Judaism's Encounter with Science, Cosmology, and Evolution.* New York: Zoo Torah, 244.

justification not just for the evil that the Nazis perpetuated but also for the popular emergence of the field of eugenics.[200]   The philosophy of eugenics, rooted in racism, xenophobia, and classism, is responsible for the forced sterilization of thousands of people of color and others containing traits deemed "undesirable."[201] Of course, it should be pointed out that the theory itself has nothing to do with the way that it has been used and manipulated by others. Even so, given the historical baggage of associated with these distortions of evolution, it is easy to see why some in the Jewish world would spurn the theory.   The theological implications of evolution are also troubling to those who hold traditional beliefs. This dissonance comes down to two main problems.

The first issue is that evolution contradicts the Biblical account of creation. The theory of common descent is predicated on the emergence of species unfolding over the course of hundreds of millions, if not billions, of years. Indeed, the fossil record shows the emergence of bacterial cellular life happened between 3.9 and 2.5 billion years ago.[202] Human beings emerged roughly 250,000 years ago in Africa, though they did not colonize other continents and replace Neanderthals until 50,000 years ago.[203] Clearly such a biological timeline does violence to the carefully preserved Biblical timeline, which places the creation of the world to be roughly 6000 years ago (although there are some non-literalist *midrashim* that are not bound by such a time frame). Furthermore, the timeline within Genesis 1 no longer makes sense, as creation unfolded over billions of years, not on a compact time scale of a single week.

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[200] Ibid., 249.

[201] For a thorough documentation of the history of eugenics, see Stephen J. Gould's *The Measure of Men.*

[202] Woese, Carl; Gogarten, J. Peter (1999). "When did eukaryotic cells (cells with nuclei and other internal organelles) first evolve? What do we know about how they evolved from earlier life-forms?". *Scientific American*. Stuttgart: Georg von Holtzbrinck Publishing Group.

[203] Brown, Frank; Fleagle, John; McDougall, Ian (2005). "The Oldest Homo sapiens" (Press release). Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah.

More significant an issue than the deviance from the literal word of the Torah, however, is the implication that evolution has on the nature of creation and God's role therein. Genesis portrays God as a creator and fashioner; when God has designs to make something, God speaks it into being fully created. Thus, the Biblical account does not view God as a libertarian who initiates creation and then leaves it alone; the Biblical God is intimately involved in formation. Evolution, however, contradicts such a theology. Evolution's mechanism—genetic mutation leading to organism change—is a chaotic process. It involves random change and variation, not a careful, methodical, and intentional creator exerting its will on the process. Thus from the evolutionary standpoint, creation does not involve a creator; it involves a chaotic unfolding of a process set into motion by God. The implications of such a process also speak to the relationship between God and humanity. In Genesis, the emergence of humanity is the loving climax of God's creative work, in which God not only forms male and female, but God also endows them with the likeness of the divine, *tzelem Elohim*. Humanity's place within the universe is thus established by being the culminating event of creation as well as possessing a special relationship with God. The theory of evolution threatens to unravel this theology of humanity, as humanity simply becomes an evolved ape. Not only does it divest God of involvement in the process of human origins, but it also suggests that humanity might not be the culminating creative event, as species even more advanced could evolve from us.[204] Thus, Jewish skepticism of evolution reveals both a desire for humans to occupy a special role in the cosmos as well as a profound discomfort with chaos determining the path of creation.

Historically, Jewish reactions to evolution have been both varied and surprising. The nineteenth century saw a great deal of hostility towards evolution coming from the liberal and

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[204] Slifkin, 250.

Reform world from figures such as Abraham Geiger and Isaac Meyer Wise.[205] Eliyahu

Benamozegh, an Italian Kabbalist and rabbi, asserted that evolution would not contradict the

Torah as long as one views God as having guided the process.[206] [207] Naftali Levi, a Polish

Orthodox scholar, actually embraced evolution, saying that Darwin's work greatly enhanced

the Torah in his work "The Generations of Man."[208] Of course, early Reform opposition to

evolution would change decisively, and many in the Orthodox world would express skepticism

and hostility to Darwinism.

    To deal with the challenge of evolution, Jewish theologians have taken a number of

different paths. Those in the Orthodox and Haredi world who utterly reject evolution use

creationist methods to discredit the science. They embody a movement in Orthodoxy away

from the rationalism of Maimonides and the Medieval philosophers towards the more

arational faith found in mysticism. A small group in the Orthodox world actually attempts to

reconcile their theology with evolution, the most prominent of these being Rav Kook.[209]

Ironically, these theologians would actually use the language and metaphors of mysticism to

reinterpret creation and the Torah in light of the science. Others, like Rabbi Natan Slifkin,

make a concerted effort to reconcile the randomness of evolution with the belief in a God who

exerts control on the universe and construct a "theistic Darwinism." Liberal theologians in

search of a theology that they could reconcile with science did not satisfy themselves by simply

reframing evolution with the language of mysticism. Rather, theologians like Brad Artson and

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[205] Swetlitz, Marc (1999). "American Jewish responses to Darwin and evolutionary theory, 1860-1890," in *Disseminating Darwinism.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 209-245.

[206] *Em LeMikra* (Legorn 1863), commentary to Deuteronomy 22:10, 87a-88b.

[207] Faur, Jose (1997). "The Hebrew Species Concept and the Origin of Evolution: R. Benamozegh's Response to Darwin," *La Ressegna Mensile di Israel.* 63, 3, 42-66.

[208] Liskin, 242.

[209] See Rav Kook's essay "On Evolution," for example.

Art Green, made use of the language of the process thinkers to reframe Judaism and their faith in God in the language of science. The resulting theology transformed God from a creator into the process of creation itself, an unfolding and chaotic event in which creation evolves, never fully a finished product.

Evolution Skeptics

Jewish skeptics of evolution have taken a variety of approaches toward the theory from questioning the scientific method to pointing out the dogma held by those who accept the theory of evolution. One of the most ardent science skeptics was none other than Rabbi Menachem Schneersohn, the last Lubavitcher Rebbe. He speaks directly about evolution in a letter he wrote to a student who was questioning his faith in the face of the difficulty of reconciling his scientific ideas with the Torah. This letter was subsequently printed in *A Science and Torah Reader*, published by the National Conference of Synagogue Youth. Schneersohn questions the validity of science, declaring that, "Science formulates and deals with theories and hypotheses, while the Torah deals with absolute truths. These are two different disciplines where 'reconciliation' is entirely out of place."[210] What is most astonishing about this letter is that Schneersohn breaks with centuries' long tradition of Jewish philosophers and theologians attempting to achieve "reconciliation" between the worlds of science and faith. With reconciliation no longer the objective, Schneersohn thus chooses the world of Torah, which he views as dealing with absolute truths, and therefore, must discredit the world of science.

He does so through the familiar methods of both questioning the validity of the scientific method as well as the evidence evolutionary scientists use to prove their theories. One such

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[210] Carmell, Aryeh and Cyril Domb (1976). *Challenge: Torah views on science and its problems.* Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 143.

tactic involves the bifurcation of empirically based science from theory-driven science. He writes, "We must distinguish between empirical or experimental science dealing with, and confined to, describing and classifying observable phenomena, and speculative 'science,'… that cannot be duplicated in the laboratory."[211] In creating such a distinction, Schneersohn casts aspersions over anything that scientists cannot reproduce or which requires the use of extrapolation from current circumstances to prove. Indeed, he questions the validity of radioisotope dating that scientists commonly use to determine the antiquity of a fossil sample. Furthermore, he says that since the atmospheric and other ambient conditions of the world 5000 years ago are unknown to us since we cannot project backwards from present conditions, we cannot conclusively say that the fossils in the earth are more than a few thousand years old or even preclude that it was God who put them there.[212] Schneersohn's tactics both ignore the sound science that underlies what he calls "theories of extrapolation" and fails to produce a cogent or coherent alternative theory. However, Schneersohn's goal never was to create a systematic theology that this student of his could follow. His goal was simply to obscure the science enough so that he could bring this boy back to the fold and observe *mitzvoth*.

The other line of attack against evolutionary theory is one which asserts that it requires as much dogmatism and faith as religious interpretations of creation. Harry Marcell, a leading British member of the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists explains such a theory in his essay "Evolution—theory or faith." He cites the fact that the fossil record is incomplete, lacking many intermediary forms, to fully explain the emergence of new species. For instance, the mammalian innovations of live birth, lactation feeding of young, and warm bloodedness are so radically different from their evolutionary predecessors that, in his view, they could not be

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[211] Ibid., 144.
[212] Ibid., 145-6.

explained by simple mutation.[213] As such, because there are so many facts in the world that

either conflict with evolutionary theory or are not easily explained by evolutionary theory,

Marcell asserts that it is pseudoscience.[214] Marcell goes on to explain why a scientific view of

creation is incomplete. He states that scientific theory can only and must reveal "design

without a designer," and that scientific theory will only ever answer the question of how

creation happened, but not why. The theological statement "God created" is not a scientific

statement, and science will never confirm or deny it.[215] As such, while science seeks to

understand mechanisms and processes, it is not suitable for philosophy building. Even if we

understand "how," we cannot determine ethics or morality from that. Marcell thus attacks the

core evidence behind evolutionary theory, and much like Schneersohn, he asserts that the

scientific world and the Jewish world speak to entirely different content areas.

Others were not content to allow science and religion to exist in separate areas. Morris

Goldman, an Orthodox parasitologist writing in the *Torah and Science Reader* for the National

Conference of Synagogue Youth in 1971, asserts that Darwinian thinking is incompatible with

Judaism. He says that the heart of evolution—that living things change from one form to

another as a result of accidental events—goes against Genesis, in which the Divine power

causes the plants and animals to appear on earth in a sequential manner.[216] His objective, then,

was to demonstrate the uncertainty of the evolution presented in many science textbooks so as

to make the creation story of Genesis the only viable alternative. He writes that the

uncertainty involved in the emergence of humanity means that the evolutionary hypothesis

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[213] Ibid., 189-90.
[214] Ibid. 194-5.
[215] Ibid., 195-7.
[216] Ibid., 217-8.

that humanity evolved by a random mechanism from apes rests on flimsy evidence. Therefore, to believe thusly involves a level of dogmatism, as it is not verifiable fact.[217]

Another common way of rejecting evolution, intelligent design, has not seen significant support in the Jewish world, but its underlying assumptions resemble the kinds of issues that Schneersohn, Marcell, and Goldman raise. Intelligent Design (ID) is a movement that criticizes Darwinian evolution because of its reliance on naturalism—the belief that everything is explicable by natural processes. William Dembski, one of the primary figures in the ID movement writes that "ID begins with the observation that intelligent causes can do things which undirected natural causes cannot. Undirected natural causes can place scrabble pieces on a board, but cannot arrange the pieces as meaningful words or sentences."[218] One of the assertions of ID is that complex organisms possess "irreducible complexity;" that is to say that systems have to work with each other in such a way that they could not possibly have emerged from chance alone.[219]

Rabbi Natan Slifkin objects to ID as being theologically problematic. He writes that it is ironic that proponents of ID do not feel the need to assign God a role in the movement of planets, or in history, or in any other subject that we teach in schools. Only in the emergence of species do the ID supporters feel a need to impose God's hand on the process. As such, ID effectively amounts to theological gerrymandering of the sciences; naturalism is fine in cosmology or chemistry or physics, but it cannot function in biology.[220] The other problem with ID and the theories proposed by evolutionary skeptics is the fact that they are so allergic to the concept of chaos being involved in creation. They ignore the fact that chaos has the

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[217] Ibid., 232.
[218] Dembski, William (1998). "The Intelligent Design Movement," in *Cosmic Pursuit.*
[219] Slifkin, 287.
[220] Ibid., 288-9.

power to be incredibly creative (as I will demonstrate in the following chapter). Furthermore, scientists have actually devised a theory to not only explain the creative power of chaos but also to explain the seemingly incomplete fossil record: the theory of punctuated equilibrium. This theory asserts that evolution does not happen by smooth and gradual transition. Change in species and species divergence for the most part happens rapidly in short spurts, with the vast majority of the time containing little to no change.

The other problem with the evolutionary skeptics is the fact that seeking to undermine generally accepted scientific theory goes against Jewish precedent. Maimonides asserted that when Torah and science conflict, it is Torah that has to be reinterpreted in light of the innovations of science. Saadya Gaon and many other Jewish philosophers sought the reconciliation of the natural sciences with Jewish theology, and Jews for centuries have continued to follow this line of thinking. Now, to be fair, the rationalist wing of Judaism had been on decline for a couple of centuries as the Hassidic and Haredi worlds embraced a more Kabbalistic orientation. Even so, for Jews to suddenly reject the Maimonidian rationalism with such ferocity and fear with the emergence of Darwinism both goes against precedence and it shows a remarkable lack of creativity and ingenuity in engendering a Jewish theology. It is not the lack of reconciliation that we should seek when science proves challenging to our theology. Science should inspire us to continually evolve our theology, just as our understanding of the universe evolves.

Orthodox Reconciliation with Darwinism

While the creationist voice has been the strongest in the Haredi community, there are voices that not only embrace science, but also use mystical language to reach that conclusion. The most prominent of these voices belongs to Avraham Yitzchak Kook. Rav Kook, in his

famous essay "On Evolution" applied the concept of spiritual gradualism to the development of species in the world. In *Orot HaKodesh*, he writes that a "well-ordered and well-articulated unified outlook" of the world must be propagated.[221] Unlike the voices above, Rav Kook desires a view of science that reconciles it with the world of the spirit. Indeed, he says that the "essential need of the hour is… an educational effort to propagate the broader view, the grander and more refined conception" of the world.[222] He writes that the incorporation of evolution into his worldview is not a challenge, despite the fact that Darwinism has caused such upheaval in the religious world. Rav Kook asserts that "for the select, hard-thinking few who have always seen a gradual, evolutionary development in the world's most intimate spiritual essence… it is not difficult to apply, by analogy, the same principle to the physical development of the visible world."[223] With this assertion, Rav Kook does something quite revolutionary. Instead of mysticism acting as a way of obfuscating rationalism, Rav Kook uses the mystical theory of emanation as a metaphor for phenomena in the physical world. If we can think of God's interactions with the world as an evolving, pouring forth of the divine, then why would we lock ourselves into thinking of God as a micromanaging creator in the physical world in its fully manifest form?

Surprisingly, the concept of a seemingly chaotic process does not faze Rav Kook, as even in evolution does Kook see the fingerprint of the divine. By looking at the end result of evolution he does not buy into the God-denial that might emerge from the mechanism. He writes, "Evolution itself, moving upwards coordinately and undeviatingly from the lowest to the highest, demonstrates most clearly a pre-vision from afar—a preset purpose for all

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[221] Kook, Avraham Yitzchak. *Orot HaKodsh*, 559.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid.

existence."[224] For Rav Kook, the evolutionary process is not one devoid of meaning and purpose. Because it goes from lower forms to higher forms, there is a progression that occurs in evolution. Thus for Kook, evolution has not just a physical developmental result; it has a moral purpose. Indeed, Kook sees evolution as a physical manifestation of the fact that "spiritual perfection is... seen to be in the center of all existence."[225]

Rav Kook thus demonstrates a keen ability to use the facts of science as evidence for his vision of the metaphysical, spiritual realities of the soul. However, one must question how he maneuvers around the clear ways that evolution contradicts the plain sense of the Torah. In responding to the difficulty that the common descent of humanity from apes and chimpanzees came about, Kook writes that "nothing is easier" than reconciling this with the Torah. "Everyone knows that here, if anywhere, is the realm of parable, allegory and allusion. In these most profound matters people are willing to accept that the true meaning lies on the mystical plane, far above what is apparent to the superficial eye."[226] Thus Rav Kook frees himself from the *peshat* meaning of the Torah by allowing for the eternal truth therein to be located not in the simple meaning, but rather in the mystical and hidden meaning behind the words. In this way, the Kabbalistic mysticism of Rav Kook's theology is not the impediment to rationalism; it is the very tool by which Rav Kook is able to achieve ultimate reconciliation.

Incorporating evolutionary thought into a Kabbalistic Judaism is aided by the mystical notion of the creation, destruction, and recreation of the world. Rabbi Israel Lipschitz discusses this notion as he proves that the Torah does not preclude the notion of an earth that is billions of years old. He cites a passage from Sanhedrin 97a that states that the world will

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[224] Ibid., 565.
[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid., 559.

exist for 6000 years and then cease to exist for 1000 years, embodying a *sh'mita* for the cosmos.[227] The Kabbalists, quoted by R. Bahya, extend this statement to suggest that this cosmic *sh'mita* process occurs seven times, with each cycle amplifying and perfecting the world in a further evolution from the last. After this process has completed its seventh time, the 49,000-year, God's creation is crowned by a "Great Jubilee." The Kabbalists further assert that the world is currently in the fourth cycle, with three creations and destructions having happened already.[228] Lipschitz further states that the geology of the earth proves this four-fold creation of the world, as geologists have discovered four distinct layers of sedentary rock formations in the earth. Lipschitz believes that these four strata of rock and fossils prove the Torah, or at least the esoteric, mystical interpretation thereof to be correct.[229] While this interpretation is both factually incorrect and misconstrues the fossil and geological evidence to fit the text, it is notable for a couple of reasons. First, this text suggests a flexibility of interpretation, rooted in mysticism, that allows for the age of the earth to not be the literal number one calculates from the Torah. Lipschitz acknowledges a hidden meaning beneath the *peshat* of the Torah to hold the literal truth. Secondly, Lipschitz suggests that through the creation cycles that the earth has gone through, an evolution of sorts happens, as God's creation inches closer towards perfection. The chaos of destruction and the power of recreation, which we might say represent evolution on a metaphorical level, are the tools by which God's glory is fully manifest.

Rabbi E. Dessler in his essay "The Inner Meaning of Creation" allows for an even further deviation from the plane sense of the text. Dessler writes that the "Torah speaks as if in human

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[227] Carmell, 132.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Ibid., 133.

language," which is to say "It speaks to us in accordance with our own perceptions of matter and our own concepts of space and time."[230] He further asserts that the Torah has to present to us what is "essentially spiritual in a material guise."[231] Therefore, we understand a day as consisting of hours and minutes, because that is our human understanding of space and time. Because of our human perspective and our human understanding of time, the Torah has to spell out creation as having taken place over the course of six days. However, Dessler argues that the six days of creation are not six days according to our human understanding. Rather, the six days are a concretization of the six *sephirot*, with Shabbat representing the *Shechinah*. Thus, Dessler escapes the problems of an ancient earth by asserting that "creation, by definition, is outside our world and outside our frame of thought… the act of creation is necessarily non-temporal: "above time."[232] Dessler enters a pattern of Kabbalistic thinkers using mysticism as a way of reconciling faith with science by placing the truths of the world into the esoteric world that the plain text of the Torah only hints towards.

Perhaps the person who has most thoroughly and systematically reconciled science with Torah in the Orthodox world is Rabbi Natan Slifkin. Slifkin, the famous "zoo rabbi," attempts to combine the disciplines of zoology, science, and Torah. His book *The Challenge of Creation: Judaism's Encounter with Science, Cosmology, and Evolution* is an audacious attempt to demonstrate that evolution and Torah do not have to conflict. To prove this, he goes through every aspect of evolution that seems problematic to traditional faith—the issue of common ancestry, the role of the Creator, the role of randomness, etc.—and provides rabbinic and modern commentaries that open the possibility for a non-literal approach to Biblical

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[230] Ibid., 138.
[231] Ibid., 139.
[232] Ibid., 140.

cosmology. In this work, Slifkin advocates for a theistic Darwinian evolution—a conception of evolution in which the randomness of the evolutionary process is precisely where the role of God comes in. He writes that while it is easier to explain God's involvement in the world in terms of a micromanaging creator whose daily involvement in the world is unquestioned, perhaps God's design of the world can be "a simple matter of designing laws of nature which produce the world that He wanted."[233] He further asserts that while we can use science to understand the functioning and the operating of the world, science does not preclude us from perceiving the hand of the divine in the ultimate design of the cosmos.[234] While Slifkin's writing is absolutely steeped in Torah and rabbinic commentary, and he earnestly writes his work aimed at a Torah-centered Orthodox audience, his work has had little influence. Spooked by his willingness to entertain Darwinian evolution, the Haredi authorities have placed a ban on Slifkin's works and excommunicated him from the community.[235] Of course, this is to be expected. Even Rav Kook's ideas about evolution are largely ignored or censored within the Haredi world, so these attempts to achieve reconciliation mostly fall on deaf ears.

The works of people like Rav Kook and Natan Slifkin are revolutionary in their willingness to incorporate the troubling theory of evolution into their Judaism. They demonstrate theological creativity and an ability to say that the deep truths of the Torah do not have to come from the *peshat*. However, in many ways, these approaches to evolution leave much to be desired. The biggest issue with them is that they function as attempts to demonstrate the evolution does not conflict with the Torah. That is to say that they use rabbinic gymnastics to either find a precedent in the tradition that points to an alternative explanation to the Torah,

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[233] Slifkin, 281.

[234] Ibid.

[235] Lesher, Michael (2014). *Sexual Abuse, Shonda and Concealment in Orthodox Jewish Communities*. McFarland. 136–14.

or they use the language of mysticism to create an esoteric meaning behind the Torah that can be consistent with the science. While this technique is good for quashing cognitive dissonance with the Torah, it does not actually create a theology of evolution. That is to say, it attempts to reconcile Torah with science by using the language of Torah. It does not, however, create a new theology incorporating the wondrous discoveries of science into our worldview. Furthermore, Slifkin and Rav Kook never fully deal with the issue of randomness and chaos in evolution, instead saying that God's hand largely guides the process along. I believe that a fully-fledged and satisfying theology of evolution needs to honor the randomness, nastiness, and chaotic nature of the process of evolution, without simply saying that the magnificent results of the process are proof of God's hand in it. Thus, a theology that truly reconciles science with Judaism would be most powerful if it has the flexibility to change our understanding of God and God's role in the cosmos.

Process Thought

Brad Artson and his process theology achieve something that very few modern attempts to reconcile science and religion accomplish: it represents a theology that sees science and evolution not as things to be explained but rather as the very language we can use to describe God and creation. It is this orientation vis-à-vis the interface between science and religion that make Artson's work stand out as uniquely relevant to the scientifically oriented Jew. Introducing his approach, Artson cites the American scholar Ian Barbour as clarifying the ways that a theology could potentially orient itself with science.[236] The first way is to see the worlds of science and religions as being in conflict with each other. This is a contrarian view of either/or; either the dicta of biology, chemistry, and physics contain truth, or the revealed

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[236] Artson, Brad (2016). *Renewing the Process of Creation: A Jewish Integration of Science and Spirit.* Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 4.

word of God possesses eternal truth[237]. This view, which resembles the Schneersohn

orientation, is wholly unsatisfying for those who do not want their theology to box them into

rejecting science or who do not feel satisfied with the implications of reductionist naturalism.

The second type of relationship that can exist between science and religion is that of

disciplinary independence. People who subscribe to this view believe that science and religion

speak about non-overlapping areas, so the attempt to reconcile them is a moot point. Science

can tell us how the universe functions, but it cannot give us a clue as to the meaning behind it.

Science can tell us what we can do, but it cannot provide us with the moral framework to

determine whether we should do it. While the disciplinary independence model seems to quell

the conflict between religion and science, the problem with it is that it does not hold

universally true. Religion does make claims about creation, which means that there is overlap

between the two disciplines.[238] As such, simply asserting that science and religion speak about

different topics avoids the most important and challenging areas of cognitive dissonance.

The third type of relationship that Ian Barbour outlines is that of dialogue. In this type of

relationship, the two disciplines, science and religion, each maintain their own integrity and

independence, but they engage in mutually beneficial conversation. In such a relationship,

science can provide information about the areas that religion describes, and religion could

provide a moral framework by which science can guide its actions. In such an approach

"science becomes… a corrective to religious superstition, or of a religious slippage toward

excessive gullibility, and religion forces science to engage in the living and ethical qualities of

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[237] Barbour, Ian (1997). *Religion and Sceince: Historical and Contemporary Issues.* San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 77-106.
[238] Ibid.

the cosmos that it attempts to study."[239] The benefits of such a relationship are profound. We certainly need the moral framework of religion to quell the potential for science to create innovations that destroy the environment or perpetuate unspeakable violence. We also need science to make our religious ideals relevant and grounded. However, this relationship still stops short of providing a theology that is truly workable with what we know of our universe.

To accomplish that, we have to achieve the fourth level of relationship: that of integration. Integration holds that we live in a single world, and that at a certain point our minds have to be unified into a single worldview. Our religious selves and our scientific selves should not be divided; we should be able to exist as a single, unified person. Of course, there is only so far we can go with integration. There are limits to what science can tell us about creation, because at a certain point, the tools of science break down. The laws of physics break down as we approach within fractions of seconds to the Big Bang; we might be able to map neural connections but we don't know all the secrets of the brain. Even with our incomplete picture of the universe, it behooves us to allow for religion and science to "play productively with each other, and each to become… part of each other's story."[240] Ultimately as we seek to create a unified view of the universe, we can begin to contemplate the oneness of the universe and the divine force that animates it. Thus, Artson's theology is powerful because it is a comprehensive attempt at integration, and through this integration, he engenders a theology of creation.

Process thought is a theology originated by individuals such as Alfred North Whitehead, Henri Bergson, and William James and has influenced others like Mordecai Kaplan and Catharine Keller who have attempted to create a "speculative synthesis, a metaphysics, that

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[239] Artson, 5.
[240] Artson, 6.

integrates the latest scientific findings with deep-seated ethical and spiritual needs."[241] The

most radical aspect of this theology is that it has mostly eliminated the concept of a personal

God who is a Being. Rather "the world and God are expressions of continuous, dynamic

relational change. We label that process as creativity."[242] Therefore, instead of thinking of God

as an eternal, unchanging Being separate and apart from the created universe, process thought

transforms God into a relational process of change that evolves with the changing of the

cosmos. But it is not just God who is a process, for "we and the world are not solid substances,

but rather recurrent patterns of energy, occasions that change with each new instantiation."[243]

Indeed, no part of God's creation is fixed and solid, as the world, us, and God are created and

recreated in each moment. The process of creation and recreation happens through decision.

At a quantum level, it is the "decision" of the electron to come into being and behave in a

certain way. At the human level, the decision is the process by which we make ethical and

moral choices and through those decisions, shape and recreate our world. According to

process thought, God is "the One who makes this relating possible, who creates the openness of

a future of real novelty and the variety of its possibilities."[244] God meets us at the moment of

decision and through the relationality of that encounter, God, the world, and the self are

changed and recreated. In other worlds, we and God are partners in the on-going creation and

revelation of the cosmos. Process thought "recognizes that every aspect of the world is both

self-determining and impacted by other self-determining aspects."[245] As Whitehead writes:

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[241] Ibid., xiii.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid., xiv.
[245] Ibid., xv.

"The many become one, and are increased by one."[246] When we think of God and cosmos as a

relational and evolving process, suddenly the oneness of the all comes together—science and

religion, human and universe, God and the world.

Process thought clearly does not subscribe to a theology of a creator God who makes the

world fully formed. The question that such a belief raises is what ways does God manifest

Godself in the creation of the cosmos if we believe in a God-process. For his part, Artson cites

the unfathomable serendipity of the laws of physics as a sign of God's fingerprint on creation.

Paul Davies writes that we can see that "the universe is neither a random gas nor a crystal, but

a menagerie of coherent, organized, and interacting systems forming a hierarchy of structure…

The laws of nature thus bestow on the universe a powerful creativity."[247] Davies suggests that

the sheer magnitude of the serendipity of the numbers that construct the laws of physics

means that there is no randomness in the system. All this suggests a divine influence that has

used the laws of physics as a holding space for the spontaneity of creation. Artson writes that

the particular physical constraints of the universe are "so statistically improbable as to beckon

beyond randomness toward intentionality," and it is this intentionality that has enabled the

unlikely emergence of nature's complexity and diversity.[248] The constraints that Artson cites

are the value of the strength of the electrical forces that hold atoms together, the value of the

force that holds atomic nuclei together, the cosmic value of the amount of matter in the

universe, the antigravity force that allows for the expansion of the universe, and the number of

special dimensions. If any of those values were even the tiniest bit different than what they are,

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[246] Whitehead, Alfred North (1978). *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology,* corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: Free Press, 21.
[247] Paul Davies in Gregersen, Niel Henrik (2003). *From Complexity to Life: On the Emergence of Life and Meaning.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.
[248] Artson, 28.

the universe could not exist.[249] Despite the seeming chaos and randomness in the universe, it

is clear that had it existed in any other way than it does, there would be no stars, galaxies,

protons, or life. Canadian philosopher John A. Leslie writes, "Physicists and cosmologists have

been accumulating much evidence that the observed universe is 'fine tuned for producing

life.'"[250]

The constraints of the universe and their extreme precision give process thinkers the proof

of a divine imprint on creation without having a creator God. Artson's theology thus rests on a

teleological argument that he calls the "strong anthropic argument." John Wheeler called this a

participatory anthropic principle, which portrays the universe as a "self-excited system

brought into being by 'self-reference.' The universe gives birth to communicating participators.

Communicating participators give meaning to the universe."[251] The long shot of life emerging

in this system suggests that in this process-cosmos, there was intentionality behind it.

"Divinity, in this understanding, is pervasive and constantly luring creation to blossom into

emergent complexity."[252]

Seeing the divine imprint on the laws of physics, which create a holding space for creation,

the question becomes how does the complexity of creation come into being. Artson explains

this through emergence theory. Emergence theory, which is a manifestation of chaos theory,

attempts to explain the ways that the complicated can emerge from the simple. This theory is

a rejection of reductionism, which says that the whole can be explained by its parts.[253]

Emergence theory tells us that with each new level of complexity, "unanticipated novelties

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[249] Ibid., 28-9.

[250] Leslie, John (1998). "The Anthropic Principle Today," in *Modern Cosmology & Philosophy,* ed. John Leslie. New York: Prometheus Books, 290.

[251] Artson, 160, footnote 7.

[252] Ibid., 30.

[253] Ibid., 33.

emerge that cannot be reduced to the qualities of their components."[254] For example, one

cannot understand chemistry with only knowledge of physics, and one cannot understand

biology with only knowledge of chemistry. Though biology's foundation is chemistry, and

chemistry's foundation is physics, as the sciences grow more complex, there are new variables

and factors that emerge that cannot be accounted for when you break down the science to its

component parts. You might be able to explain a neuron firing through chemistry, but

chemistry will never be able to explain an emotion.

As such, we see that emergence theory tells us that the process of creation happens not

through the moment of the Big Bang, or a single moment of God's influence. Creation happens

as the process-cosmos goes through its evolution. Because of the complexity that emerges in

creation as it happens, Artson demonstrates that it is only through the chaos that comes from

such complexity that we experience creation. In other words, for Artson, creation, with all its

chaos, dynamism, and relationality, is the process of God's revelation.[255] God did not create the

universe; God is creating the universe. And as God co-creates the universe along with

humanity, the forces of nature, and the ever-growing complexity and chaos as God's partners,

we receive more and more of God's revelation.

As Artson describes the process of creation as God's revelation, we begin to see how he

integrates evolution into his theology. Artson contrasts his view of creation with two opposing

perspectives. The first of these is that of the religious fundamentalists who say that nothing

happens without God's intentionality; God is a micromanaging creator. The other view is that

of the scientific reductionists, who say that say that all creation is explained by the simple

application of the laws of nature. Scientific reductionists would insist that everything is

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[254] Ibid., 32.
[255] Ibid., 76.

"random, unpredictable, and the expression of an evolutionary process, so that there is randomness without purpose."[256] Artson takes a third path, which he characterizes by "dynamism, relationship, and openness."[257] That is to say, while creation occurs through the dynamism of natural processes, it is not meaningless. Indeed, if it were totally chaotic, we would not see the relationships that emerge from it. The Big Bang led to the creation of hydrogen and helium, which led to the formation of stars, which led to the creation of our solar system, which led to the formation of a rocky planet 93 million miles away from the sun. On that planet, hydrogen and oxygen atoms combined to make water, and with the carbon that came to our planet on comets, life emerged. As that life grew and evolved, we eventually ended up with a creature, *homo sapian*, whose brain could develop self-awareness and an ability to contemplate the cosmos. According to Artson, this is not random. Everything involved in the 15 billion year process to make this a possibility is interrelated. Thus, Artson sees the process of evolution as connected to the process of creation of the universe. It is not a random and chaotic event; it is part of the cascading fountain of life. "Life cascades—from the stardust and supernovae that are our heritage, whose elements compose our blood, bones, skin, and brains… All of the cosmos is our mother/father; we are the descendants and the cousins of the galaxies."[258] Because evolution is just a further manifestation of the cascading fountain of creation, it becomes a mechanism within the God-process of furthering God's revelation. We thus see that Artson weaves the language of science into poetry to describe God and the cosmos.

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[256] Ibid., 46.
[257] Ibid.
[258] Ibid., 48.

Artson not only makes sense of evolution by relating it to the cascading fountain of life, but he also relates evolution to the dynamism and interrelatedness of everything to the God-process. In his view, the process of change via evolution happens through a three-fold mechanism. The first of these mechanisms is the chaos within the system—the random change that happens through genetic mutation. Through these changes, the system can be driven forward, as new variety and diversity in species emerges. The second mechanism is that of natural selection. As changes emerge, some of those changes will be more suitable for the environment than others, and those that survive at higher rates will propagate more, thus changing the genetic pool. The third mechanism is that of deliberate choice. Genetic changes in the gene pool can occur by the way that individuals in a species select a mate, with some features deemed more attractive than others.[259] While Artson acknowledges the randomness involved in the system, that randomness does not unravel his theological perspective. Indeed, because the mechanism of evolution, with all its chaos, is the producer of the vast varieties of life in the world, there is a profound way in which all life is connected to each other. There is dynamism between the process and the individual, in which the process produces the individual, and the choices that the individual makes not only influence the evolutionary gene pool, but also influence the creation process itself.[260] Furthermore, the fact that all life comes from this process means that all life is connected to Artson's conception of the God-process, even though Artson's God is not a micromanaging creator. We share almost all our DNA with life as distant as plants, so we can see that the divine fingerprint exists on all life, even when its ultimate shaper and former was the evolution process.

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[259] Ibid., 19.
[260] Ibid., 20.

One weakness in Artson's view of evolution is the fact that he assigns so much meaning to the end product of evolution—the diversity of species and the innovations of the human brain. In his view, these are manifestations of the fact that this process is not random; it is an on-going evolution, a further outpouring of the fountain of life. Evolutionary biologists, however, do not see these innovations of evolution, as wondrous as they are, to be inherently meaningful. Indeed, the things that we derive meaning in—eros, language, emotions, etc.—are what evolutionary biologists believe to be "spandrels." A spandrel is a triangular space in medieval architecture that artists would often decorate and beautify. While they are merely a by-product of the architecture, the fact that artists have made use of them in such wondrous ways leads to the false assumption that they were put in the building for the sake of the art. In reality they are a by-product of the building. Similarly, the structures and the cognitive innovations of evolution might seem to have meaning—a teleological purpose which must have led the evolutionary forces to create the gene pool for such an innovation—but in reality, these innovations are random by-products of evolution. Artson argues that it might be the case that human consciousness or love or language might be a random by-product of evolution, but in a dynamic relational process-driven universe, that does not matter. The random things that pop up in the gene pool might turn out to be more than random as we make meaning out of them and use them for criteria for selecting mates. In other words, in Artson's theology, everything is a spandrel and nothing is.[261]

Artson's theology gives us a powerful vocabulary for constructing a scientifically aware theology. In conceiving of God not as a creator Being, but as a process, Artson makes God an imminent force that is dynamically involved in the ever-becoming nature of the cosmos.

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[261] Ibid., 24-5.

Evolution is not a challenge to the place of God in the universe, it is an extension of *ma'aseh bereshit*. In a process-cosmos, creation never ceases, because the universe is constantly unfolding. And with that unfolding, God's revelation becomes manifest for us to see and experience. As compelling as this work is, I believe that it is an incomplete picture of the way that chaos functions in the universe. Artson does cite chaos theory and uses the vocabulary of emergence theory to describe the way that the universe and life itself evolves from simple to complex. However, Artson's use of the teleological argument behind evolution places a tremendous amount of meaning in what is a truly random and chaotic process.

While Artson believes that chaos theory fits into his process thought, he is not willing to allow for the chaotic to truly be chaotic. One could argue from this position that the emergence of human consciousness and the human brain from the process of evolution proves the teleology of the evolutionary mechanism. While it is true that the odds of the universe forming at all are miniscule and the emergence of humanity from the evolutionary gene pool is astounding and poetic, I believe that Artson looks too closely at the results of evolution for proof of the process' inherent meaning, and he does not look closely enough at the process itself. What if the process of evolution truly was a chaotic process? What if the emergence of stars, galaxies, and the solar system was completely random? What if the entirety of creation itself, though sparked by the God-process of Artson's theology, was driven completely by the forces of chaos? I believe that this is more or less how creation functions. So in a sense engendering a creation theology, as Artson desires, really means that we have to create a theology of chaos.

Conclusion

Our ability to reconcile science with the world of religion directly impacts the way that we view the role of chaos in the world. The theory of evolution precludes us from conceiving of God as the God of Genesis—a chaos-eliminating creator of the fully formed world. The naturalist position of attributing all creation to the simple processes of nature also does not fully satisfy, as it does not give us a moral picture of why the universe exists and it does not fully explain where we come from. Artson's theology threads the needle between the two positions, as the process-God he imagines is one whose creation is manifest through the act of becoming. Chaos is indeed part of Artson's creation process just as God's imminence is also part of the cosmos becoming.

The question that Artson's theology leaves us with is what happens to this understanding of the cosmos if we fully acknowledge the chaotic nature of its unfolding. The teleological argument that Artson uses to ascribe meaning to be process of evolution is troublesome to me as it can veer into the tautological. We know that evolution is meaningful because it produces meaning in the magnificence of the diversity of species and human consciousness. But what if we were to take the spandrel argument seriously? What if all the things we find meaning in the world—art, poetry, emotions, love—were just by-products of a chaotic process? With such a view, we can still hold that the God-process, however chaotic, is meaningful. But we have to acknowledge that any meaning we ascribe to it is the meaning that we construct around it. Such a view does not preclude the presence of a God-process in the cosmos, but it simply seeks to incorporate God-consciousness into a fully-fledged chaos theory. That will be my goal in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Constructing a Theology of Chaos

In the beginning, life was blind… A few hundred million years passed, and then, one day, there was a microscopic copying error in the DNA of a bacterium. This mutation gave that microbe a protein molecule that absorbed sunlight… Mutations continued to occur at random, as they always do with any population of living things. Another mutation caused a dark bacterium to flee intense light… Those bacteria that could tell light from dark had a decisive advantage over the ones that couldn't. Why? Because the daytime brought harsh ultraviolet light that damages DNA. The sensitive bacteria fled the intense light to safely exchange their DNA in the dark. They survived in greater numbers than the bacteria that stayed at the surface. Over time those light sensitive proteins became concentrated in a pigment spot on the more advanced one-celled organism. This made it possible to find the light—an overwhelming advantage for an organism that harvests sunlight to make food. Here's a flatworm's eye view of the world. This multi-celled organism evolved a dimple in the pigment spot. The bowel shaped depression allowed the animal to distinguish light from shadow, to crudely make out objects in its vicinity—including those to eat, and those that might eat it. A tremendous advantage. Later, things became a little clearer. The dimple deepened and evolved into a socket with a small opening. Over thousands of generations, natural selection was slowly sculpting the eye. The opening contracted to a pinhole covered by a protective, transparent membrane. Only a little light could enter the tiny hole, but it was enough to paint a dim image on the sensitive inner surface of the eye. This sharpened the focus. A larger opening would have let in more light to make a brighter image, but one that was out of focus. This development launched the visual equivalent of an arms race. The competition needed to keep up to survive. But then, a splendid new feature of the eye evolved: a lens that provided both brightness and sharp focus. In the eyes of primitive fish the transparent gel near the pinhole formed into a lens. At the same time, the pinhole enlarged to let in more and more light. Fish could now see in high depth, both close up and far away… The complexity of the human eye poses no challenge to evolution by natural selection. In fact the eye and all of biology makes no sense without evolution… Accepting our kinship with all life on earth is not just solid science, in my opinion, it's also a soaring spiritual experience.[262]

One of the common criticisms of the theory of evolution that creationists cite is the complexity of the human eye. How could such an exquisite, detailed, and well-designed organ have been the product of a chaotic, disorderly process such as evolution? Surely the complexity of the eye proves that a creator/designer is responsible for the complexity we see in nature. In telling

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[262] "Some of the Things That Molecules Do," *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey.* Written by Ann Druyan and Steven Soter, directed by Brannon Braga, Bill Pope, and Ann Druyan, Cosmos Studios, 2014.

the story of the evolution of the eye, Neil deGrasse Tyson demonstrates the way that natural

selection not only favors creatures with an evolutionary advantage, but he makes the case for

how exquisite complexity emerges from simple creatures and structures. The bacteria that

have light sensitivity survive in greater numbers, which leads to the development of

pigmented light sensors. Over the course of hundreds of millions of years these pigmented

sensors develop structure and shape to include a socket, a lens, and the retina. Slowly,

evolution proves to be the sculptor of life, proving that all life is connected through the

unfolding process that is creation. In the theology of Brad Artson, this unfolding process is

none other than the Divine Process itself.

Artson asserts that this process is not just a random one, but one that is endowed with

meaning. This teleological argument asserts that we can see the divine imprint on this process

by virtue of its complexity; the evolution of the human eye is proof of the divine constantly

luring creation to unfold, develop, improve and complicate.[263] We can see echoes of this

theory in the way that deGrasse Tyson views the evolution of the eye. Though he does not use

the theological language of Artson, we can see traces of the teleological argument in his

description of the story of the eye. The process itself led smoothly to the growing complexity

of life—step by step, evolution pushed towards the perfection of vision. Light and dark

became shadows and objects, which turned into focused images.

The problem with the teleological argument is that while the process of evolution might

seem to be a smooth process of unfolding complexity, the reality is that it is a process that is

completely and thoroughly chaotic. While looking at the evolutionary process on a

macroscopic level evolution appears to be a process driven by a "lure" that leads the simple

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[263] Artson, Brad (2016). *Renewing the Process of Creation: A Jewish Integration of Science and Spirit.*
Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 33.

towards the complex, if we look at the molecular level, we see that it is anything but that. It is a process that is random with no inevitable destination and no guarantee that complexity will actually emerge from simplicity. In fact deGrasse Tyson asserts later that the eye has, in fact, become a less functional organ since the amphibians left the sea and walked on land. Imperfections in the structure of the eye make it difficult to distinguish objects very close to it or to make out subtleties in the dark the way fish can.[264] In the face of such randomness involved in the emergence of life, the teleological argument is difficult to reconcile to scientific reality.

So if we reject the teleological argument that endows the process of evolution with meaning, how then do we incorporate evolution, or indeed chaos itself, into a theology? In order to do so, the first task of this chapter will be to explore what exactly chaos is. This will involve exploring the concepts fundamental to chaos theory, a branch of mathematics that seeks to understand phenomena that linear reductionism fails to explain. Chaos theorists assert that chaos is not just the breakdown of order or a descent into nothingness. In a plethora of situations, order actually emerges from chaotic systems. As such, I will argue that looking at the science proves that chaotic systems are the crucibles of creation. If we assume that creation is divine, we must then assert that chaos is not just an ever-present feature of the universe or a design flaw within it, chaos is the creative force with which God engenders the cosmos.

The Limits of Reductionism

The scientific method, the process by which we make sense of the universe around us, has proven to be a powerful tool to make sense of complicated systems. By giving us a process to

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[264] "Some of the Things Molecules Do."

test hypotheses, reproduce results, and construct theories through experimentation, the scientific method led humanity out of the Dark Ages, for with science, we did not need to rely on superstition or false knowledge to describe the unknown. With the right insight and theory, we could actually figure out the phenomena that puzzle us. At the heart of the scientific method is the epistemological method of reductionism. Reductionism teaches us that in order to understand a complicated system, one merely needs to break down that system into its components and figure out how the pieces fit together.[265] For example, a clock is a complicated system with a lot of moving parts inside of it. However, if I take the clock apart, analyze the pieces, and then put them back together, I will have a complete understanding of how that clock works. Though the human body is a far more complex system, I can get a functional understanding of how it works by learning about the organs of the body and the relationships between them.

Implicit in the assumptions surrounding reductionism is that there is a "point-for-point correspondence" between the parts of the system and the whole. That is to say, because the whole is not greater than the sum of the parts, when you know the starting point of a system, you can figure out the end point of the system. In mathematics, these kinds of systems are simple, linear functions. If $f(x) = y$, then I can know that $f(x + 1) = y + 1$ without having to crunch through the numbers, because in a reductive system, the results are completely predictable. Furthermore, in linear systems that cohere to reductive principles, if I know the end point of a system, I can work backwards to figure out the starting position. Additionally, if in a simple system, I find that there is variability in the system, that is to say, my predictions do not match the observed reality, then that means the instrument that I am using to measure the

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[265] Artson, 33.

system—my eyes, my microscope, my telescope, etc.—is simply not precise enough. If I improve my instruments, then the variability in a simple system will disappear.[266]

The assumptions of reductionism hold fairly well for certain fields of science where precision and exactness are not of the utmost importance. In sociology, I can make fairly accurate assumptions about how a group of people will behave under certain conditions without knowing the motivations of each individual person. Macroeconomics operates in the same way. If the economy is healthy, the stock market booming, and unemployment is low, I can say that the GDP will probably go up, and consumer spending will rise. Furthermore, reductionism has been vital in discovering medicines and curing disease, as breaking down diseases into the antigen that causes them has enabled scientists to know how to fight them.

The problem with reductionism is that once we are no longer dealing with simple, linear systems, the assumptions underlying it prove to be untenable. The most significant problem that reductionism poses is that the assumption of a point-for-point correspondence between component parts and final product breaks down with truly complex systems. For example, human beings are very closely related to chimpanzees. We are so closely related to our chimp brethren that we share 98% of our DNA. If we were strict reductionists, we would assume that because there is only a 2% difference between chimp DNA and human DNA then that would correspond to only a 2% difference in human and chimp body structure and mental capacity. That is clearly not the case. So the assumption that there is a point-for-point, linear correspondence between genetic material—the building blocks of life—and the final organism does not hold water.

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[266] Sapolsky, Robert. (2008) "Chaos and the Limits of Reductionism," Human Behavioral Biology. Stanford University, Stanford, CA. May, 2008, Lecture.

This reductionist assumption of linear correspondence often breaks down because the component pieces of a system do not add up to the whole. When one looks at the research of David Hubel and Torstein Weisel, one understands how systems are often far greater than the sum of their parts. Hubel and Weisel earned the Nobel Prize for their research on sensory processing, most famously on vision in cats. In their work on vision, Hubel and Weisel discovered that the brain processes the visual input from the eyes in multiple stages. The first, simple stage is a group of neurons that simply fire up when light hits a certain part of the retina, like a grid. If light hit one point in the eye, a certain neuron would fire, and if light hit the part of the eye right next to it, the neuron next to the first one would fire. Thus, this experiment demonstrated a point for point map between the eye and the brain. Information from a certain cell in the retina would go directly to one neuron in the brain. These neurons "know" exactly one thing—a dot of light. So far, this seems to fit nicely into the reductionist paradigm—there is a one-to-one correspondence between retina and the visual cortex in the brain.[267]

Hubel and Weisel then looked at the next level of visual processing in the brain. They discovered that when a beam of light hit the eye and aroused a succession of adjacent "I-know-dots-of-light" neurons, a single neuron in the second layer of processing would fire up. They hypothesized that this second type of neuron "knows" one thing—a line at a particular angle. Thus, Hubel and Weisel discovered that visual processing happens in stages. From the individual dots of light, the brain then links them together to figure out lines and shapes.[268] So far in the first two layers of visual processing, the reductionist mentality still works. We can

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[267] Goldstein, E. Bruce. (2010). *Sensation and Perception* (8th ed.). Wadsworth, 73-79.
[268] Ibid.

still do one-by-one cause and effect in a linear system. From the eye we go to dots and from

dots we go to lines.

The problem with this model is that eventually it has to break down. The human brain is

able to process a lot more visual information than lines and dots. We can identify and

recognize objects and people with incredible specificity. Going off of Hubel and Weisel's

research, we might assume that there were further hierarchies of neurons that could take this

basic information—dots then lines—and process it further and further until there were

neurons that "knew" very specific things. Jerry Lettvin, a cognitive scientist out of MIT,

believed that Hubel and Weisel's work was asinine. He coined the term "Grandmother neurons"

to describe the neurons he believed Hubel and Weisel's work implied would be at the top of

the hierarchy of visual processing. Grandmother neurons, in his view, would be neurons that

are so specific that they could recognize the face of your grandmother. The problem that

Lettvin knew Hubel and Weisel would run into was that Grandmother neurons do not exist.

There are simply not enough neurons in the human brain for one neuron to "know" something

as specific as the face of your Grandmother.[269] While Hubel and Weisel identified the first two

layers of visual processing as being dominated by neurons that "know" one thing, the vast

majority of the brain does not function this way. Thus we see the problem of insufficient parts

that reductionist thinking runs into with complex systems. There are not enough neurons in

the brain for the linear, reductionist model to make sense.

Another illustration of the problem of insufficient parts comes from the human genome

itself. Recent work in sequencing the human genome has revealed that there are between

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[269] Sapolsky.

19,000-20,000 genes that code for proteins.[270] This number surprised scientists, who for years

have been revising down the number of genes they believed to be in the genome (originally

they believed it could be as many as 100,000).[271] Twenty thousand might seem like a large

number, but if we think about the complexity of the human circulatory system, with all its

arteries, veins, and capillaries that have to branch out at just the right place, or if we think

about the complexity of the pulmonary system, or if we consider the thousands of types of cells

in the immune system, we realize that there are simply not enough genes in the genome to

explain it all. The complexity of the human body belies the reductionist assumptions because

the component pieces simply do not add up to the finished product. The whole is far greater

than its parts.[272] The human genome and the complexity of visual processing in the brain are

just two of many examples in nature of the failures of reductionism to explain the world we

live in. Linearity does not exist in much of nature, and oftentimes we cannot use simple

mathematic equations to predict an end result. Thus, when the whole exceeds the sum of its

parts, we have to use different scientific assumptions to understand complexity. This is the

definition of chaos.

Non-Linear Chaos

When the reductionist assumptions fail us, the systems we seek to understand no longer

adhere to linear regressions. In linear regressions, small changes in initial states of functions

do not lead to significant changes in the final states of those systems. So, we can pretty much

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[270] Ezkurdia, Iakes; Juan, David; Rodriguez, Jose Manuel; Frankish, Adam; Diekhans, Mark; Harrow, Jennifer; Vazquez, Jesus; Valencia, Alfonso; Tress, Michael L. (2014-11-15). "Multiple evidence strands suggest that there may be as few as 19,000 human protein-coding genes". *Human Molecular Genetics*. **23** (22): 5866–5878.

[271] International Human Genome Sequencing Consortium (2004). "Finishing the euchromatic sequence of the human genome". *Nature*. 431 (7011): 931–45

[272] Sapolsky.

predict what f(x + 1) will be if we already know the result of f(x). When we introduce

complexity into these mathematical systems, however, small changes in the initial state will

produce drastic changes in the end result. In these non-linear, chaotic systems, we might know

that f(x) = y, but even if we put in f(x + 0.00000000000001), we are going to get a completely

different answer than y that we will not be able to predict. Now, these chaotic systems are still

completely deterministic, just like the simple, linear systems are. The only difference between

them is that they are extremely sensitive to initial conditions, which makes them unpredictable

unless you go through the steps of going from point A to point B.[273]

Edward Lorenz, a mathematician and meteorologist, discovered this phenomenon as he

was developing computer programs that could predict the weather. Lorenz ran the weather

computer simulation and got his results. However, when he decided to run the program a

second time, the results he got were drastically different than the first time. This completely

baffled Lorenz; he was running the same program with the same data set, so the results should

have been the same. He discovered later that when he input the data set the second time, he

had inadvertently rounded off the numbers. In the first run-through, the computer stored

numbers to the sixth decimal places, but in the second trial, Lorenz stopped after the

thousandths place. Now, the difference between .506127 and .506 is miniscule, and in a non-

chaotic system, those differences would have disappeared. But in a chaotic system, that tiny

difference was enough to produce wildly different results.[274] This phenomenon has popularly

been coined the "butterfly effect," the belief that the flap of the butterfly's wings will produce

enough of a change in the air pressure to have downstream effects that alter the weather

halfway around the world. The butterfly effect actually bears out in real life. Predicting the

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[273] Sapolsky.

[274] Gleick, James (1987). *Chaos: Making a New Science.* New York: Penguin, 16-7.

weather is a very tricky business, because the systems involved are chaotic ones; small changes in initial states cause wide divergence. This is why meteorologists cannot predict the weather with any kind of accuracy more than a few days in advance. Until we actually go through the process of living through the weather, we do not know for sure what will happen.

The reason why the butterfly effect is important for people constructing a creation theology is that much of creation, particularly evolution, happens through these same non-linear chaotic systems. When people hear about how evolution works—a mutation in DNA leads to a change in a protein, which can change the organism—they often believe that evolution is a slow and steady process. One mutation leads to a small change, and over time enough mutations accumulate, and the species diverges. Such a conception of evolution fits the reductionist paradigm as well as the theological language of the emanation theorists and the process theologians. Through the emergent process of evolution, the creation of God unfolds and emerges. The problem with this conception of evolution is that the vast majority of evolution does not happen in this slow, methodical way. Most evolution happens through punctuated equilibrium—long periods of little change interrupted by isolated episodes of rapid speciation.[275] This theory of how evolution works is more or less consistent with what we find in the fossil record.[276] The question that punctuated equilibrium raises is why does evolution occur in such a non-linear, chaotic fashion?

There are two ways we might answer this question. The first way might be to look at external factors. Sometimes ecosystems undergo rapid changes to their environments. A heating spell or the sudden onset of an ice age or the emergence of a new chemical compound

[275] Gould, Stephen Jay, & Eldredge, Niles (1977). "Punctuated equilibria: the tempo and mode of evolution reconsidered." *Paleobiology* **3** (2): 115-151, 145.

[276] Campbell, N.A. (1990) *Biology.* Redwood City, CA: Benjamin Cummings Publishing Company, 450–451, 487–490, 499–501.

in the environment would qualify as such change events. These rapid changes to the ecosystem would naturally put a tremendous amount of pressure on living systems to adapt rapidly to the changes or perish. As such, when an ecosystem is stressed by a sudden change, evolution happens at a significantly faster clip as species have to scramble to come up with adaptations. Thus, the linear, gradual model of evolution would break down in the midst of a chaotic event.

Perhaps the most significant factor that leads to punctuated equilibrium is when we find the chaos that exists within the evolutionary mechanism. The old way of thinking about genes was that a single gene coded for a single protein, which did one particular thing for a cell. This falls under the old reductionist one-for-one mentality. But as we have come to see, we cannot assume a linear, one-for-one correspondence between gene, protein, and expression. So how do we explain how the complexity of human beings emerges from fewer than 20,000 genes?

Consider the fact that over 90% of DNA is junk DNA, that is, it does not code for any proteins. We might ask what it's doing in our genomes if it's useless. Scientists have recently discovered that this "junk" DNA is actually important. The reason for this is that our cells use proteins called transcription factors to control when our genes turn on and when they turn off. The way that transcription factors work is that they bind to the "junk" DNA near coding genes and sit there, preventing the DNA from opening up and getting transcribed and eventually expressed in the cell. These transcription factors are sensitive to the environment, so when the proper signal comes to the cell, the transcription factors will unbind themselves from the DNA, allowing for the gene they were protecting to be expressed.[277] The important thing to

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[277] Latchman, DS (1997). "Transcription factors: an overview". *The International Journal of Biochemistry & Cell Biology*. 29 (12): 1305–12.

know about transcription factors is that there are only so many different varieties of them that exist in our genome, so multiple genes are controlled by a single type of transcription factor.

Imagine that you have a certain transcription factor that controls a dozen different genes that produce proteins that have all kinds of different functions in different kinds of cells around the body. Now imagine that this transcription factor gets mutated so that it no longer works. All of the sudden, we are no longer talking about one mutated gene affecting the expression of one type of protein. We are talking about one gene getting mutated, which has downstream effects that change the way that dozens of proteins are expressing themselves. This is the butterfly effect in genetics. One change in one protein can change everything about an organism.[278] Evolution is an initial conditions sensitive system.

Artson and the process theologians are correct to portray evolution as the well-spring of creation. Through evolution new species are formed, and we might say that this is the way that the emergent God-process comes into being. But to use evolution in a teleological argument and say that it is an inherently meaningful process ignores the fact that the creation that happens through the evolution process comes entirely through the randomness of chaotic systems. The end result of evolution might look like the crowned glory of exquisite speciation and the manifestation of the magnificence of the God-process having unfolded into the complexity of the human brain. But the process that got to that end product was driven by the unpredictability of insignificant changes in divergent systems leading to drastic changes downstream. Furthermore, saying that evolution is a meaningful process has rather untenable implications. After all, mutations to select proteins in the genome lead to horrors of Tay-Sachs disease or Cystic fibrosis. The ability for the HIV virus to rapidly evolve in the human body is

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[278] Sapolsky.

precisely what enables it to escape the defenses of the immune system and eventually destroy it. Yes, evolution is the well-spring of life, but we cannot say that it is meaningful in and of itself. It is the definition of chaos.

Divergence Leads to Convergence

While the chaotic appears to lead to unpredictable divergence, it is also true that chaotic systems partake in creation because of their tendency to lead to convergence. Edward Lorenz discovered the tendency in many non-linear equations' trajectories to merge into set orbits or spirals.[279] Though the equations are chaotic, they do not diverge into randomness and disorder; they converge into a coherent picture. He coined the term "strange attractor" to describe this phenomenon. Though these strange attractors are described in the theoretical world of mathematics, the implications of them exist all over nature.

If we consider ants, we see how true it is that attractors really exist in chaotic systems to produce order. If you observe a single, isolated ant, you will see that it has no idea what to do. It wanders this way and that with no conception of what it should be doing; its behavior makes no sense. The reason for this is that a single, isolated ant does not have the bigger picture of how to construct an ant colony; the pieces required for something as complex as that simply do not exist in one ant. The same would be true if you observed 10, 20, or 100 ants. But when the number grows large enough, and we have thousands of ants together, something happens that is completely impossible with small numbers of ants: they organize into a society. They build the infrastructure for an ant colony, they regulate the temperature inside it, they even keep aphids and milk them for food.[280] When enough collectivity exists in this system, the process

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[279] Gleick, 140.

[280] Sapolsky, Robert (2008). "Emergence, Complexity, and Other Antidotes to Reductionism," Human Behavioral Biology. Stanford University, Stanford, CA. May, 2008, Lecture.

of self-organization begins. Now, the behavior of the individual ants demonstrates that it is not the case that they know what they are doing, or know that they are a small piece in a larger puzzle in the construction of society. Such a reductionist view of them does not match reality; the ant colony is a chaotic system. And yet, despite its chaotic nature, the "strange attractor" that exists in this non-linear system creates order.

This kind of "swarm intelligence" is one manifestation of a phenomenon in chaos theory called emergent complexity. Emergence theory is the direct opponent of reductionism. It tells us that "at each new level of complexity, unanticipated novelties emerge that cannot be reduced to the qualities of their components." Emergence theory describes why, even though biology is a scientific field with a foundation in chemistry, you cannot use chemistry to adequately describe biological phenomena.[281] Thus, emergence theory is the answer as to why the whole is often greater than the sum of its parts. In the case of the ants, we cannot explain the complexity of the ant colony by looking at the individual ants. But when the ants come together in the thousands, an emergent, complex reality takes shape that we can only describe by watching the process of its construction take place.

One question that arises from emergence theory is how precisely do these emergent systems take shape? It seems illogical when you have a system with a lot of different moving parts in it that order could emerge from the chaos. It turns out that when a centralized guiding force is absent from a chaotic system, forces of attraction and repulsion are often enough to create order. Robert Sapolsky uses the metaphor of an urban setting to explain this. When businesses are trying to figure out where to set up shop in a new city, they take into account where other businesses are operating. In essence, these are attractive and repulsive forces.

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[281] Artson, 32-34.

For instance, a store might want to open a business near other stores, because it would likely result in increased foot traffic, so there is an attractive force there. On the other hand, a Chinese restaurant probably does not want to open when there is another Chinese restaurant nearby, so that is a repulsive force. Take all these moving parts together, and the outline of a commercial center takes shape, with clusters of shops and restaurants that space themselves apart far enough. In the midst of a chaotic system without a centralized authority, order and predictability emerge.[282]

The development of an urban center is a metaphor for how the developing brain, a highly chaotic and emergent system, takes shape. That the brain is an emergent system is easily demonstrated by observing fetal neurons individually dispersed in a Petrie dish. These neurons, initially completely unconnected to each other slowly create neural networks. If they are observed three days later, the neurons are no longer individual cells, but rather densely populated clusters with many connections between the members of those networks with fewer long-range connections to more distant clusters. In other words, the attractive and repulsive forces that are endemic to neural axons and dendrites make it possible for a complex network to emerge from simple components. The brain, with its billions of neurons and the exquisite specificity and numerousness of its structures, is a self-assembling network.[283] As we see from the construction of ant colonies and the development of the brain, it is not only the case that complexity emerges from the chaotic, but order and predictability come from those same non-linear, divergent systems.

Chaos Is Creative

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[282] Sapolsky, "Emergence."
[283] Ibid.

In order to drive home the importance of chaos, it is worth considering one more time what it is that makes us human. Remember that there is only a 2% difference in the genetic code between chimpanzees and humans. So what is actually in that 2%? When we look, it turns out that the differences are not what we would expect. There are some changes in the genes relating to body hair, the immune system, and the reproductive system. The differences involved in the genetic coding for the brain are minimal—we have more or less the same neurons as chimps do. They have the same structure; they operate the same way. But, in true Butterfly Effect fashion, there is one difference that has changed the entire species and the entire course of history. That difference is in the genes that control how many times neurons in the developing brain will divide. If your neurons are programmed to divide more times, then the number of neurons in your brain increases exponentially each time they divide. In other words, the only meaningful innovation that the human genome represents—that small butterfly effect that gave way to human consciousness—is that we have more brain cells. And with a larger quantity of neurons to work with, the emergent complexity that develops in the human brain is that much more nuanced, detailed, specialized, and refined.[284] We are who we are because of the forces of chaotic systems. Chaos gave rise to our creation.

This point is key, because it belies the traditional theologies that we have surrounding chaos. In Genesis, chaos—the *tohu vavohu*—is depicted as a watery, wasteland of nothingness. It is God, the creator and shaper of the world, who takes that nothingness and molds it into complexity.[285] Similarly, in Biblical texts such as Job that portray chaos as sea dragons or

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[284] Ibid.
[285] See Gen 1.

monsters, they seem to represent a dangerous force that threatens to undo the complexity of the created universe and reduce it back to the watery nothingness of primordial existence.[286]

When we look at chaotic systems, we see that such a portrayal of chaos is not true. Emergence theory shows us that chaos is not the breakdown of complexity; chaos is the creation of complexity. Chaos itself, rather than a succession of lures or the intervention of a Creator God, has brought the universe to its current realized form. The chaotic eruption of stars is the driving force behind the creation of the Sun and the formation of the Solar System. It is Emergence theory that explains how molecules could self-assemble into complex compounds, which eventually formed into life as we know it. It is the Butterfly Effect of those tiny changes and mutations that lead to rapid advancements that we see in the punctuated equilibrium of the story of evolution. And it is both emergence theory and the Butterfly Effect that explain the development of the most complex, developed, and magnificent creation of all—the human brain. If we are to speak of a process God and construct a theology of creation, then we have to see that the most important tool within that process is chaos itself. We cannot create the distinction between God and chaos between ordered universe and chaos because they are completely overlapping.

Constructing a Theology of Chaos

If I have accomplished one thing, it has been to demonstrate the fact that chaos is creative, and that a creation theology has to not only take into account the chaotic, but must make it a key aspect of the emergence of complexity. The question that this raises is how do we think about God in this creation theology? What does it mean to interact with God, and what is our

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[286] For example, see Job 40-41.

relationship with God? And in a theology of chaos, where does one ground ethics and

morality?

In constructing a chaos theology, I believe it is important to consider two Biblical

paradigms as metaphors for how we approach constructing a relationship with God.[287] These

paradigms correspond to two construction projects that the Israelites engaged in to build a

dwelling place for God: the Temple and the *mishkan*. The Temple, of course, refers to the

magnificent construction erected by King Solomon to serve as the house of God. The Temple

centralized the worship rituals of the Israelites to Jerusalem, and the book of Deuteronomy

repeatedly tells us that the Israelites must congregate to the Judahite capital to offer sacrifices,

particularly on the pilgrimage festivals. In constructing the Temple, the Israelites constructed

a stationary and finished *nomos* through which to commune with the divine. The structure of

the Temple itself would serve as the symbol of God's relationship with that *nomos*, as the

Davidic Covenant established eternal Israelite dominion over the land of Israel and God as the

permanent inhabitant of God's dwelling place in Jerusalem.[288]

The mentality that surrounds the Temple *nomos* is a mentality that is inherently fearful and

skeptical of chaos. It is a mentality that seeks to banish the chaotic beyond the border and

protect the *nomos* from any threat. The Temple that serves as the symbol of the guarantee of

Israelite sovereignty in the land of Israel is a symbol that inherently creates an "us versus them"

mentality. The structure is a metaphor for cultural triumphalism, and its destruction

represents the onslaught of chaos that destroys a *nomos*. Indeed, the Babylonian exile and the

destruction of the Temple not only represented a foreign invasion into Judahite sovereignty, it

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[287] The two paradigms I set up here were inspired by a sermon delivered by Rabbi Janet Marder on Erev
Yom Kippur 2016 entitled "Sanctuary." http://betham.org/sermon/sanctuary
[288] See 2 Samuel 7.

represented the voiding of the voiding of everything the Israelites thought they knew about their God. The chaos of exile symbolizes ethnic and cultural apocalypse. In short, Temple mentality sees *nomos* as permanent, fixed, and enduring, and when that proves to be illusory, it has no capacity to adapt to a new reality, as it sees chaos as inherently destructive.

The other Biblical paradigm, the *mishkan*, is in many ways the opposite of Temple mentality. The *mishkan*, or tabernacle, is the portable sanctuary that God commands the Israelites to construct in the wilderness in the book of Exodus. The construction of the Tabernacle is described multiple times in the book of Exodus with exquisite detail, and the structure requires objects as exotic and precious as lapis lazuli, dolphin skin, and fine cloth. Although this *mishkan* is a portable and temporary abode for the divine, it is still made with the finest components with the utmost of care. Furthermore, the *mishkan* comes together with materials provided entirely by the community given solely by the generosity of their hearts.[289] The *mishkan* serves as the central focal point for the Israelite community to organize camp around in the *midbar*. Each night when the Israelites set up camp, they reconstitute the Tabernacle, and each day when they leave camp, they deconstruct it, so they can move it. And in the center of it all lies the Ark of the Covenant, with the two sets of tablets of the 10 Commandments resting within it.

The implications of the *mishkan* mentality are critical towards establishing a chaos theology. The Tabernacle is the dwelling place for God while the Israelites are in the desert. This is the environment in which they are vulnerable because chaos is all around them. They have not established a *nomos*; they encamp in the wilderness. The environment is unpredictable—sometimes there are enemies to be reckoned with, sometimes the food is

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[289] See Exodus 25-40.

scarce. The *mishkan* mentality is a mentality based in reality, because it acknowledges that we truly live in the midst of the chaotic; the temple mentality often proves to be illusory.

The important thing to recognize is that although the *midbar* is a place of extreme uncertainty, it is also a place of incredible creativity. The Tabernacle, in its constant assembly and reassembly, is a project that is never truly finished. Each night, the Israelites have to recreate their camp society and the temporary dwelling place of the Divine. The Tabernacle is not only an unfinished endeavor, it is also one that never gets rooted in place. The poles of the *mishkan* ensure that it will always be portable, meaning that it is a "temple" that is always moving forward. This conception of a divine relationship is one that relevant and necessary. A temple mentality is stagnant and dead of creativity, because it is stationary and complete. A *mishkan* mentality acknowledges that creation truly is an ongoing process in the midst of the chaos that changes and evolves as it moves forward. Furthermore, the *mishkan* paradigm is one that engenders tremendous intimacy with God. Instead of God dwelling in the stationary temple, far away from the majority of the Israelites, it is precisely for the purpose of dwelling amongst the people that God desires the *mishkan* to be built in the first place. In the place of chaos and uncertainty, God is closest to God's people. In the wilderness, the relationship between God and the people is most alive.

The Ark of the Covenant and its contents are another relevant detail for understanding the *mishkan* paradigm. Contained within the Ark of the Covenant are the two sets of tablets with the 10 Commandments inscribed on them. The first set was broken by Moses when the Israelites were worshipping the Golden Calf. The second set was carved by both God and Moses as a symbol of the renewed relationship. One might expect that the broken tablets would be discarded, since a whole set was obtained, and yet the broken set remains in the very

heart of the *mishkan*. This detail truly underscores the relevance of the *mishkan* paradigm. At the heart of God's most intimate dwelling place with the people rests symbols of both brokenness and wholeness. These are both symbolic of the brokenness and wholeness that one experiences in the wilderness, in the place of true creativity and true chaos, and the brokenness and wholeness that one finds in a relationship with the Divine. It is a relationship that is constantly changing and evolving with the unfolding of life in the *midbar*, meaning that it, too, partakes in the chaos therein. The Ark of the Covenant thus serves as a poignant metaphor for how we experience God.

Of course, the question that couching our relationship in terms of these two paradigms raises is where does commandedness come from? From whence can we derive an ethics if we acknowledge the centrality of the chaotic in our vision of universe? If we are not establishing the *nomos* involved in the Temple paradigm, then what exactly do we ground ourselves in out in the *midbar*?

I believe that in the absence of a truly set, established, and completed *nomos*, the one thing that we can ground ourselves in, as we seek to live out a *mishkan* paradigm, is in the *mishkan* itself and the camp society around it. As we see above, the *mishkan* paradigm is a constantly creating and renewing paradigm. However, that creativeness that we find out in the chaotic wilderness is entirely dependent on the camp community stepping up and engaging in the task of creation. When the Tabernacle is being constructed, it was the generosity of heart in the Israelite camp that provided more than enough materials for the initial construction. Moreover, there are very specific roles within the camp as to who constructs the Tabernacle, who takes it apart, who carries the various pieces, and who takes care of the Ark of the Covenant. In other words, the task of bringing the presence of God into the *mishkan*

community belongs to the members of that society. While this might not look like the strict

commandedness we might find in a *halachic* positivist, I believe that this insight into the

construction of the *mishkan* conveys that there is an ethical obligation, even without a fully

completed *nomos*, to engage in the process of bringing God into our midst. Artson and the

Process thinkers would consider this the moment of decision in which the person encounters

the Process God and carries God's work forward through his decisions. We are obligated to be

constructors of *mishkanot*, because that is the way that we ensure the continued creative

potential within the chaotic world. Just as we learn that the flap of the butterfly's wings has

the potential to shape the world, so too do we know that we have a role to play, and though it

might be small, it could be all the difference.

   The other source of "commandedness" we find in the *mishkan* paradigm is within the camp

society itself. As we see from the Temple paradigm, the direction that one places one's gaze

and energy is towards the Divine within the Temple. One's eyes gaze towards the Holy of

Holies, away from the community. In the *mishkan* paradigm, the camp is constructed in a way

that places the Tabernacle in the center and all the tribes surrounding it in a circle. In other

words, as the individual gazes towards the center and towards the Holy of Holies, one also

gazes at his neighboring tribe across the way. The attention of the people goes towards the

center, and their eyes are forced to look at each other. As one gazes at another, one finds

another source of commandedness. Emmanuel Levinas believed that the ethical could be

derived not from any kind of rational source, but rather simply from the human face. He

writes: "The face is signification, and signification without context... To the contrary, the face

is meaning by itself... In this sense the face is not 'seen.' It is what cannot become a content...

it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond."[290] Levinas thus sees the face as containing meaning

without content. In fact, it is precisely because it lacks content, lacks information, that the face

is able to lead someone to a revelatory experience. Levinas' ethics portrays this moment of

relationality with another human face as the equivalent of a mini-Sinai experience—a moment

outside of time in which the One entered Covenantal relationship with Israel. This pre-rational

moment of encounter with another's face is just like that, and the content of that Covenant is

radical responsibility to that other person. By constructing a camp where we are forced to

gaze at another, we effectively create commandedness, and so a mishkan mentality inherently

forces us to feel responsible for our community. In a paradigm that forces us to experience

God in both brokenness and wholeness and to commune with God in a place of chaos, such

commandedness is both relevant and necessary.

Conclusion: Living Out the *Mishkan* Paradigm

Our world is a chaotic place, and there is no way of getting around this fact. Our very

creation comes from an inherently chaotic origin. We also experience chaos in the day to day,

whether it be the car accident, the unexplainable disease, the blizzard or hurricane. Chaos has

the power to both create utter destruction and to engender order and creation. The question

we have to answer is how do we live our lives in a universe that operates in this way.

We can live with a Temple mentality. We can live in such a way that we seek to constantly

fight against the chaos and remove ourselves from it. We can view chaos as anti-creation, as

the downfall of society, and we can try to hole ourselves up within the metaphorical borders to

keep the bad stuff out. The problem with this mentality is that when the chaotic inevitably

happens and our metaphorical temples fall, we are left hapless to reconstruct our lives. We

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[290] Levinas, Emmanuel. Ethics and Infinity, (*trans. By Richard A. Cohen.*), 150-151.

build so many temples around us—the temples of our health, the temples of our relationships, the temples of our livelihood. And when those temples collapse to disease, death, downturn, or depression, we risk losing our relationship with God in the process. When a temple falls, all we experience is loss, and we are often left lost, feeling abandoned by the Eternal.

But if we live our lives in *mishkan* mentality, I believe that the chaos of the world will not prove to be our undoing. We all experience loss in our lives, and as we embark on our journey from birth, we pile loss on top of loss to the very end. But if we view our lives as a *mishkan*, we remember that the process of creation and recreation never ends. We might live in the place of chaos, but we do not give into it, because we always have the capability of picking up the poles of the Tabernacle, marching forward, and building again. Viktor Frankl, the renowned psychologist and Holocaust survival, wrote that though we ultimately have little control over what happens to us and everything can be taken away from us, we have the power to construct meaning from our experiences, and from that meaning, we can survive.[291]

In the place of chaos, we always have the power to rebuild our *mishkan*. We always have the power to create and recreate. We always have the power to invite God to dwell with us in the place of chaos. And we always have the power to build, support, and cherish community. All this together teaches us that in the place of chaos and brokenness, we can always create our wholeness.

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[291] Frankl, Viktor E. (2006). *Man's Search for Meaning.* Boston: Beacon Press, 36.

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