Chaos and New Creation

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Genesis and Revelation: Urzeit and Endzeit

My title alludes to Hermann Gunkel’s pioneering work Schöpfung und Chaos.1 Gunkel argues that in the biblical account, beginning and end, Urzeit and Endzeit, correspond exactly, and can be understood when they are seen as developing out of Babylonian mythology. Thus in Genesis 1, the pre-creation state of chaos is overcome by God, on the pattern of Marduk’s conflict with and victory over Tiamat, just as in Revelation 12, the same Babylonian combat myth allows us to understand the battle that the dragon wages against the pregnant woman, and the way he is overcome.2 The underlying mythology (at least for Genesis and related traditions in the Hebrew Bible) is now more plausibly derived from Canaanite traditions, especially relating to Baal’s victory over Yam (the sea, or sea-monster);3 but the basic thrust of Gunkel’s argument is still retained.

In fact, however, Genesis 1 can more plausibly be understood as creation out of a dark, empty waste than as creation out of chaos (or a victory over the forces of chaos).4 The key terms tohu and bohu in Gen 1:2 are best taken, etymologically, as denoting emptiness, void, or waste, and not “chaos,”5 despite their often being taken to signify this. Along with this, the waters in 1:6–10 are in no sense presented as threatening, chaotic deeps that have to be overcome before creation can take place. It is certainly the case that in a number of places later in the Hebrew Bible, the waters or oceans are portrayed as hostile and threatening, and have to be overcome by Yahweh; but there is no specific connection made or implied in the context with the divine act of creation.6

5 Cf. Tsumura, Creation, 9–34.
6 Thus Tsumura, Creation, 143–95; for arguments for the opposite view, cf. Day, Conflict.
Hence it is very much less than clear that the account of the creation in Genesis 1 reflects an Ancient Near Eastern myth of a struggle with primeval, hostile forces. It needs also to be noted that the separation of the upper from the lower waters is obviously important, but that it is not at all the most important aspect of the account of creation in 1:1–2, 4a. This whole passage has been very carefully constructed, and that is especially so of the days of creation: thus days 1–3 and 4–6 correspond, and in that specific order, to each other.7 It is, then, the creation of light, on days 1 and 4, that is given supreme importance as far as the whole work of creation is concerned.

What Genesis 1 depicts, therefore, is that from there being a formless, empty waste, God brings into being the world as he intends it to be: fully good and perfect, a true Paradise. If, however, the divine act of creation is not to be seen in terms of a struggle with, and overcoming of, the forces of chaos (especially the threatening, primeval waters), and the chaos-monster, then Gunkel’s correlation of Urzeit and Endzeit in the sense of Genesis 1 being set in relation to Revelation 12, and the overthrow of the dragon, cannot be sustained. Nevertheless, it is still worth exploring the relationship between Urzeit and Endzeit. Thus although Genesis 1 should not be seen as describing creation out of an original chaos, I would argue that nevertheless it is still possible to see cosmic chaos as very clearly portrayed within the Hebrew Bible: that is, the threat of the utter destruction of the cosmic, created order, and the undoing and overwhelming of creation itself. And this can provide us with an important perspective for when we come to consider Revelation, and return to the questions of Urzeit and Endzeit, and of creation and chaos.

The most famous instance of such a threat to the whole created order—that of the Flood (Genesis 6–9)—does indeed involve the unleashing of the waters separated off at creation. But in fact what is threatened is uncreation and annihilation, not chaos as such.8 Certainly very real, and powerful, portrayals and threats of utter destruction and chaos are found in the Hebrew Bible, but these have no reference whatever to any threat from seas, oceans or waters of any kind: thus, above all, Jeremiah 4:23–26 and Isaiah 24, but also Joel 1–2;

7 Cf., more generally, B.W. Anderson, Creation versus Chaos: The Reinterpretation of Mythical Symbolism in the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 179–95; he recognizes the special importance of light being set at the very start, although he sees the creation of living beings on the sixth day as the climax of the account.