

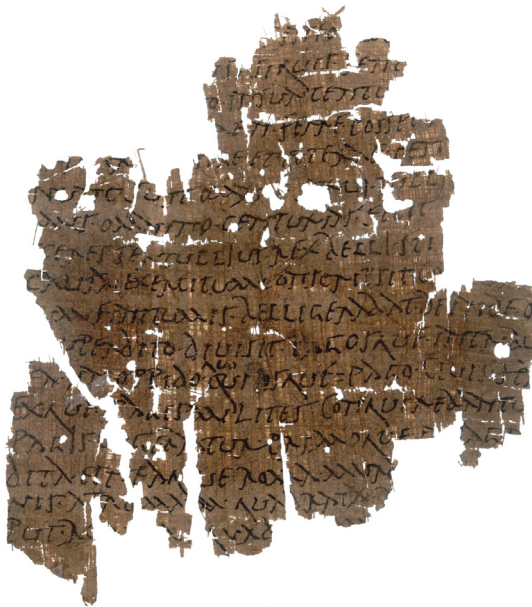
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PAPERS ON ANCIENT LITERATURES: GREECE, ROME AND THE NEAR EAST

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edited by

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TIME & MORTALITY CREATION NARRATIVES IN ANCIENT ISRAEL AND MESOPOTAMIA¹

Jack M. Sasson

I. Origins and Media

Back in the late 1960s there was much intellectual commotion about Marshall McLuhan and his theories regarding the greater impact that a medium has over the written word it carries. The debate, which centred on the slogan ‘The medium is the message’, became very thick and was joined by, among others, historians of ideas and sociologists. Theologians and historians of religions too participated in the discussion because his thesis was also about the waning impact that the printed thought (hence sacred scripture) will have over future generations as they increasingly rely on easily manipulated, graphic-based, media such as television and (albeit not known to McLuhan then) the internet.²

I will not now evaluate McLuhan’s prophetic skills, although they impress me. Rather, I open this discussion on creation narratives in the Bible by focusing on the importance of the medium in shaping issues of importance to our thesis. A responsible overview should include materials from each of the main civilizations (Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan-Phoenicia, Hatti, and Persia); here, however, I will draw comparison principally from Mesopotamian documents, because they are richer in comparative material as well as more readily instructive.³

¹ This contribution rehearses issues and comments presented at two of four lectures at the Advanced Seminar in the Humanities 2006 – 2007, ‘Literature and Culture in the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece, Rome, and the Near East’ that took place at Venice International University in November 2006. I would like to thank the hosts, the faculty as well as the graduate students who made the occasion very memorable.

² (Herbert) Marshall MCLUHAN (1911-80) was hotly discussed a generation ago; see M. MCLUHAN, 1967. Useful overviews are: E. MCLUHAN 1995, CROSBY 1968, ROSENTHAL 1968.

³ There are many handy overviews of creation accounts across the cultures of the Ancient Near East, I mention here a few: CLIFFORD 1994, LONG 1963, ESNOL 1959, HAUSSIG 1965. See also the many fine articles collected, *sub voce*, in BONNEFOY 1981; but they are more easily consulted in the rearrangement by DONIGER 1991.

Media for Creation Narratives

In the Near East of antiquity, writing was committed to a wide variety of material, including stone, wood, clay, skins, and bone. But there was a tendency to gravitate towards one medium in each of the regions, for example clay tablets in Mesopotamia and Hatti, papyrus in Egypt and a combination of both in Canaan. This choice of medium had profound consequences on the forms of the creation accounts that were recorded on it. In Mesopotamia, and especially when writing in Sumerian, scribes preferred keeping the full text of a composition to a single oblong (occasionally cylindrical or prismatic) clay tablet, as large (10 to 15 cms tall) and as minutely inscribed (some almost 200 lines) as necessary. The reasons were tactical; for despite the elaborate systems of storage (in baskets and coffers, in wall niches or shelves), a largely unalphabetic bureaucracy could be mightily challenged to store, locate, or retrieve a work that required a number of tablets. This is not to say that Mesopotamians did not create narratives of *longue haleine*; in fact, such well known narratives as the Akkadian Gilgamesh Epic, Enuma Elish and Atrahasis (the last two rich in creation themes) covered as many as a dozen tablets.⁴

These observations clarify why Mesopotamian theogonies (birth of gods, with congeneric linkage of their manifestation), cosmogonies (creation of the cosmos, with divinely choreographed assignment of components), androgonies and cosmologies (genesis of humanity, with exposition of its bonds to nature) tend to differ so much from each other, whether or not they were written in Sumerian or Semitic Akkadian. It is not just that the Mesopotamians were tolerant of multiple expositions for the same phenomenon (in fact, in a polytheistic world it could not have been otherwise), or that over the many centuries they kept on expanding their mythological repertoire (in fact, they syncretized avidly across cultures), but that a good amount of their inspiration was extemporaneous, analogic and adaptive of previously circulating material, the final form being informed or shaped by the subgenre of the literature in which the scribes were working.⁵

Mesopotamian Creation Narratives

It is also possible to generalize that the cultures of antiquity believed in an earth-centred, purpose-oriented, teleological universe where final causes or forms are

⁴ Some lexical compilations, such as *sig7alan = nabnītu*, a Sumerian-Akkadian 'dictionary', are said to have covered 54 tablets; but they were hardly literary, indulging the Mesopotamian scribes powerful attractions towards lists of all sorts. On these points, see conveniently, CIVIL 1997, 2305-14. HASLAM 2005 is a fine contribution on the issue of media and epics.

⁵ This is why, for all its brilliance, Jan van Dijk's attempt at systematizing Mesopotamian (but in particular Sumerian) cosmography, which draws on materials of differing literary categories, is full of irregularities and seems imposed. Van Dijk contrasts two centres of thoughts, one of which was launched from the city of Nippur, with Enlil as its major god, in which a cosmic marriage of heaven (an) and earth (ki) initiated the series of births that produced gods, terrestrial creatures, and institutions. Rain played a major role as fertilizer. In his opinion, the other centre was in the city of Eridu, with Enki (Ea) as its major deity, and its creation theme exploits fertilization of the soil through subterranean waters. VAN DIJK 1964; 1971; 1976.

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attributed to the divine. For them, understanding why and how an object or organism came to be also explained its function. For this reason, almost every Mesopotamian narrative with creation contents is etiological, that is, it reveals anecdotally origins of something specific, thus giving readers or listeners sharper illustrations about the state or behaviour of the universe and nature. Such revelations may satisfy human curiosity; but more often they permitted human control of a predicament through knowledge of how it came to be, thus forcing the gods to revisit the moments when they created a specific object or phenomenon. To illustrate, let me quote a well-known Akkadian text, often labelled ‘The Worm and the Toothache’:⁶

After Anu created heaven,
Heaven created earth,
Earth created rivers,
Rivers created canals,
Canals created swamps,
Swamps created the worm,
The worm came weeping before Shamash,
His tears flowing before Ea.
What will you give as my food? What will you give as my drink?
I will give you ripe fig and apple.
What good are a ripe fig and an apple for me?
Heave me among the teeth and set me in the jaws, to suck the blood of teeth, to
chew the roots in the jaws.
[Diviner:] Insert the needle and seize the foot (*of the worm, and say,*)
‘Because you said this, worm, Ea should strike you with his mighty hand!’
(This is) *an incantation against toothache; its ritual is second-grade beer... and oil
you will combine; you must recite the incantation three times and place (the
medication) on his tooth.*

Worth noticing is how the document aims to treat toothache holistically, with surgery and medication strengthened by the power of a magic that knows the ‘moral’ defect of a worm (that is, toothache) which, primordially, had refused to accept its divinely ordained fate. You will also notice how the creation sequence has been whittled down to minimal steps; indeed, with a patient full of pain and apprehension waiting, it would not do for a healer to evoke any fuller account of how things began. Because such narratives have a purposely schematized sequence, it would be imprudent on our part to find in these steps an abbreviated version of a fuller creation narrative.

So while we find much lore about beginnings (of heaven and earth, planets, rivers, trees, animals, people, or demons) in Mesopotamian incantations, rituals, disputation texts, as well as in other works which we conveniently label ‘myths’, many of them occupy no more than one tablet, their contents having been shaped to organically fulfil

⁶ The text is frequently translated, but too often without the ‘medical’ instructions at its end. See HEIDEL 1959 and BOTTÉRO 1989, 483-5.

or develop the narrow goals of each individual predicament.⁷ Some of the samplings, of course, can be more developed than others. For example the Sumerian disputation ‘Sheep and Grain’, a debate over the virtues of animal and vegetal products, opens its arguments in a particularly striking way. Describing what was not there first, the narrative soon forges ahead with the creation of sheep and grain. I cite here its opening lines:

When upon the Hill of Heaven and Earth
[The god] An had spawned the divine Godlings,
Since godly Wheat had not been spawned or created with them,
Nor had the yarn of the godly Weaver been fashioned in the Land,
Nor had the loom of the godly Weaver even been pegged out,
For Ewe had not yet appeared, nor were there numerous lambs,
And there was as yet no goat, nor numerous kids,
For Ewe did not drop her twin lambs
And Goat did not drop her triplet kids,
10] The very names of Wheat, the holy blade, and of Ewe
Were yet unknown to the Godlings and the greater Divinities.
There was no wheat-of-thirty-days;
There was no wheat-of-forty-days;
There was no wheat-of-fifty-days,
Nor small wheat, nor mountain wheat, nor wheat of the goodly village;
Also there was no cloth to wear;
The godly Weaver not having been born, no royal cap was worn;
Lord herald, the precious lord, had not been born;
Shakan did not go out to the arid lands.
20] The people of those distant days
Knew not bread to eat,
They knew not cloth to wear;
They went about in the Land with naked limbs
Eating grass with their mouths like sheep,
And drinking water from the ditches.
At that time, at the birthplace of the Gods,
In their home, the Holy Hill, they fashioned Ewe and Wheat.
...
37] Then Enki spoke to Enlil...
Let us now send Ewe and Wheat down from the Holy Hill’ (etc).⁸

⁷ Very useful as a compilation on Mesopotamian myths as well as a breakdown of its motifs and themes is HEIMPEL 1997, 537-64. Particularly useful are figures 1B (Selection of mythological passages outside of myths) and 6 (Creation). See also the good overview in CLIFFORD 1994, 13-98.

⁸ Quoted from VANSTIPHOUT (‘The Disputation between Ewe and Wheat’) 1997, 575-8. The poem can also be read at <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.5.3.2&charenc=j#>>.

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Notice how nothing in this negatively sequenced opening goes beyond reference to the creation of the two antagonists – domesticated plants and domesticated animals – that will soon argue their own superiority. Even the anthropological touch about primordial people (from line 20) merely rehearses human need for, and imitation of, sheep and wheat. Nothing is introduced that will move the text (and the audience) into tangential arguments; no linkage – spatial, temporal, or operational – is made between the world in which the events are rehearsed and the world of the audience. The disputation ends abruptly, with wheat winning the approval of Enki, who receive praises. Had there been space, the debate could have continued indefinitely.

More ambitious in their goal and covering a number of tablets are Atrahasis (3 tablets, known mostly from the seventeenth c. BCE) and Enuma Elish (7 tablets, mostly from the early first millennium BCE, but possibly earlier in inspiration).⁹ Yet even for these masterpieces of cuneiform literature, the acts of creation are controlled by other objectives. Atrahasis explains how infertility, miscarriage, child mortality and birth taboos were divinely ordained so as to limit the human population that would otherwise, as in days of yore, challenge the gods by its proliferation and longevity. A brilliant sequence, itself much inspired by the Sumerian ‘Enki and Ninmah’, describes the creation of human beings and may have circulated independently as a birth incantation.¹⁰ Enuma Elish’s primary goal is to justify the pantheon’s acceptance of the primacy of Marduk over any other god (and hence also the primacy of his city Babylon) because he delivered the gods from destruction (Tablets 2 and 3). In displaying his authority, Marduk shapes the cosmos from the remains of his defeated foe, Tiamat (end of Tablet 4), assigns cosmological roles for gods and creates humans to serve them on earth (first half of Tablet 5). The remaining lines (Tablets 5-7) onomastically develop arguments for the singularity of Marduk.

Because these splendid documents give a particular accent to the origins of the cosmos and of human beings, they have naturally attracted much speculation about their influence on the biblical creation narratives, especially those preserved in the first chapters of Genesis. We shall see, however, that while these Babylonian texts sharpen our awareness of the mythopoeic world in which the early chapters of Genesis evolved, they do not encourage us to discover linkage among them.

Hebrew Historiography

The Hebrew historiographic material that came to be collected and edited into what we now call Hebrew Scripture took the form of a chain of narratives about an enduring but troubled relationship between God and Israel, the folk he had chosen to be a ‘*light to the nations*’. Despite their ardent courtship, God and Israel hardly lived in harmony for long. Their vows, often brutally compromised, required frequent renewals. In the Hebrew Bible, the tale ended abruptly, just as Israel’s was ending yet another exile, this

⁹ Atrahasis and Enuma Elish are frequently translated, for example in FOSTER 1993, 160-85 and 351-402. LAMBERT 2008, 35-9, offers his translation of Enuma Elish. See also BOTTÉRO 1989, 526-64 and 602-79.

¹⁰ See MORAN 48-56, FRYMER-KENSKY 1977, 147-55. A good overview of the issues is in VEENHOF 1990, 177-97.

time in Babylon. But by its own reckoning, the story covered over three millennia and involved dozens of leaders, patriarchs, eponymous ancestors, judges, kings and prophets, each receiving particular attention from God, Scripture's only constant protagonist.

We can only guess about the forms that this biblical corpus took before it began to approximate the compilation we now recognize as the received Hebrew Bible, probably around the mid-millennium before Christ, although a few books (such as Esther, Daniel, Chronicles and most of the Apocrypha) were either not yet created or were evolving from sundry fragments, oral or written. As we progress further back towards the monarchic period (tenth-sixth centuries BCE), many more documents than those we inherited held sacred status; and those that we still have, including such venerable works as Jeremiah and Samuel, circulated in diverse length and versions. While it is certain that in Israel scribes also inscribed letters and mundane documents on ostraca, bones, wooden (waxed or limed) and metal (precious or other-wise) tablets, they also wrote and copied sacred literature on papyrus scrolls, although leather scrolls were also used and eventually came to be preferred.¹¹

Leather scrolls could attain ten metres and still retain their integrity even after multiple handlings. Such scrolls had distinct advantages, not least of which is the capacity to develop a narrative over longer spans. And when it became possible to place a number of such scrolls in a sequence (for the Pentateuch – Five books of Moses – likely late in the monarchic period, hence around the seventh century BCE), the potential for threading a single subject in and out of tangential topics gave that subject a density that it could not duplicate had it been written on single sheets or on clay tablets.

The Hebrews chose to begin recording their past with accounts of creation of the cosmos and of human beings. While this may seem to us unexceptional, it is a fact that even when Greeks and the Romans wrote the vast histories that gave support to their partisan view of events (for example Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Ephorus, Polybius or Livy), they did not begin with creation; at most, they would hark back to the founding of cities. Mesopotamians (and especially the Sumerians), at their most expansive, began with the moments the gods gave kingship to humanity as an organizing principle for their political affairs. In the vast compendium of inherited lore known to us as the Tanakh (essentially equivalent to the Protestant version of the Hebrew Bible), the Hebrews did not hesitate to embed many versions of creations – of the cosmos, of earth and of its occupants – in books as diverse as Job, Isaiah, Ezekiel,

¹¹ The imprint of a seal bearing the name of '*Berakhyahu, son of Neriyaahu, the scribe*', likely Jeremiah's trusted aid, had traces of papyrus attached to it, suggesting that this medium was favored in Israel of the pre-exilic period. Similar findings concern *bullae* from eight-seventh centuries BCE Judah and Samaria. Egypt, as is well known, used and exported papyrus. Unusually, some of these papyri can be made to join into a forty-meter roll (PHarris, used to record temple donations by Ramses III). Sporadically and apparently on very special occasions such as in the account of Thutmosis III's siege of Megiddo, leather could be also be used as a writing medium, its technology having been perfected, already in the late third millennium BCE. On all this, see the convenient article of LEMAIRE 1992, 999-1008; BLACK 1997, 2197-209.

Psalms and Proverbs.¹² But none of the examples found in those books was as tailor-made for the task as each of the two narratives we are about to inspect.

II. The Birth of Time

bĕrē'sīt bārā' 'ēlōhīm 'et haššāmayim vē'ēt hā'āreš, the first verse in Hebrew Scripture, has been the locus of venerable debate, mostly because as vocalized by the Masorites the form *bĕrē'sīt*, demands linkage with the word that follows it, in this case a verbal form *br'* (and not a noun as in Jer. 26:1, 27:1, 28:1, 49:34), thus discouraging an absolute translation such as *In the beginning...*¹³ Moreover, the root *r'sh* on which is constructed *bĕrē'sīt* normally refers to priority in placement (for example, *choicest*, as in *first fruit*) rather than in time, for which a more appropriate adverb would have been *tēhillat*, as in Hosea 1:2, *tēhillat dibber-'ādōnāy bēhōšē^a*, ('when god first spoke through Hosea').¹⁴ For this and many other reasons, the opening verse of Genesis has been increasingly understood as informing that 'At the beginning of God's creating the universe' (*'ēt haššāmayim vē'ēt hā'āreš*, 'heavens and earth' as merismatic poles of one

¹² For a convenient review of the material, see CLIFFORD 1994 and BOTTÉRO 1959, 185-234. The topic itself is commonly discussed in every substantial encyclopedic article on creation legends and is heavily documented in practically every serious Genesis commentary. See, for examples, WESTERMANN 1984, 178-278 and WENHAM 198, 41-91.

¹³ Here are a number of ways Gen 1:1 has been treated:

a – Traditionally (followed in the Vulgate and in the Septuagint) v.1 is deemed to tell the first act of creation, thus implying *creatio ex nihilo*: '1 At the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.² Now the earth was formless and void, with darkness over the deep, and a divine wind sweeping over the waters. ³ Then God said, let there be light. . . '.

b – Rarely invoked is an understanding in which v. 1 is an incipit, a summary for all that follows until 2:4b: '1[At the beginning God created the heaven and the earth] – ²The earth being formless and void, with darkness over the deep, and a divine wind sweeping over the waters – ³ God said, let there be light... '.

c – The medieval Jewish exegete Ibn Ezra (with few followers) made a temporal clause of v.1, with v. 2 becoming now the main clause: '1When at the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, ² the earth was formless and void, with darkness over the deep, and a divine wind sweeping over the waters. ³ God said, let there be light...When at the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, the earth was... '.

d – The medieval Jewish exegete Rashi understood v. 1 as a temporal clause, v. 2 as an inserted explanation, and v. 3 as the main clause: '1When at the beginning God created the heaven and the earth – ² the earth being formless and void, with darkness over the deep, and a divine wind sweeping over the waters – ³ God said, let there be light... '.

This approach is increasingly espoused in modern renderings and adopted in this study. It is worth noting that the Babylonian *Dunnu* theology begins *ina rēš šurrī*, literary, 'at the very beginning ...'; see the rendering of HALLO 1997, 402-4.

¹⁴ Notice how Gen 2:4b, which initiates a series of creation etiologies (see below), opens with the words: *bēyōm 'āšōt 'ādōnāy 'ēlōhīm 'ereš vēšāmayim* ('Upon Lord God's creation of earth and sky'). I grant it that in Gen 1:1 the choice of *bĕrē'sīt* in initial position may have been guided by a desire to duplicate the consonants in *br'*, the second word in the sentence and the first record of God's creativity. There could also be an esoteric reason, for *bĕrē'sīt* contains the first two (*beth-aleph*) and the last three consonants (*reš, shin, taw*) of the Hebrew alphabet, as well as the tenth (*yod*), the last often used as abbreviation for the name of God, *Yhwh*.

unit), earth was a hodge-podge (*tōhû vābōhû*, a farrago, with alliterative or onomatopoeic words, the sum of which is more specific than either of its parts); but there was also darkness (*hōšek*) and water (*tehôm, mayim*) with a mighty (or divine) wind sweeping (*rūaḥ 'ēlōhîm*) above it. In essence, then, four constitutive elements were there when God began to shape our world, none of which had any future on its own.¹⁵ At this point, through sheer will, God creates light from nothing that existed previously (*creatio ex nihilo*), and it too had no future except as contrast with the pre-existing darkness. And in the diurnal oscillation between what there was (evening) and what has come to be (day), there came to be 'one (not first!) day', thus a measure for time.¹⁶

In this first creative impulse, the Hebrew is telling us that God forged a unit for measuring time, a component of the cosmos that was so mysterious that it was practically ignored by ancient near eastern antiquity, becoming a source of speculation for the Greeks (most notably, Plato, in *The Timaeus*, §§ 37c-38b) and a major riddle for St. Augustine.¹⁷ By making the history of his world begin on a unit by which time is reckoned, the Hebrew also neatly skirted a theological argument. Among all of his neighbours, many myths were crafted to explain the birth and the kinship of the gods. In making the crafting of time a cosmological feature of God's own devise, however, the Hebrew could claim that as long as God antedated any mechanism for gauging chronology, for charting what was, what is, and what will come, human beings cannot effectively discuss how God came to be, let alone what was before Him. Credited with the invention of time, Israel's God can then claim, 'Before me no god was formed, nor will be after me' (Isa 43:10-11).

Calibrating Time

Time and its measurement will remain a major focus in Gen 1. An inanimate phase for creative acts occurs during the second day (in which a metallic heaven is made to split the primordial water, thus creating the universe) and on the third day (in which planet Earth is made hospitable by the isolating fertile ground from oceanic waters). The fourth day is crucial to a shift from an inanimate to an animate phase (fifth and sixth days). On it, God surrenders his control of time to his creations, installing the sun and the moon with which living creatures will soon gain measure of the year and the month.

¹⁵ Already in antiquity, it was noticed that these four elements were highly reminiscent of Greek notions regarding the four hylic elements - sea, air, earth, and fire, the last manifested primarily as the brightness in the sky; see STOKES 1967, 477-81. Thus, an anecdote in the Genesis Rabbah tells that 'a philosopher (once) said to Rabban Gamaliel that God found good materials which He used in the creation of the world, 'Tohu, Bohu, darkness, water, wind, and the deep', to which Gamaliel vigorously replied 'Woe to that man! The term creation is explicitly used of them'; quoted from RABINOWITZ 1972, 1063.

¹⁶ *First day* would have been *yôm hāri 'šôn*. That the Hebrew resisted using language that might have made a fine bracket with *bērē'šît* alerts us that something more challenging was at stake.

¹⁷ Such speculation is available already since Pherecydes of Syros (6th BCE) who tells how Chronos (Time), without previous beginning, turned his semen into fire, wind, and water (consult any good classical dictionary, q.v.). The period in which Pherecydes was speculating brings us very close to the conjectured date of the writer of Genesis 1 (generally labeled 'P', for *priestly writer*).

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Henceforth, all life – fish and birds, created on the fifth day; land animals and human beings, created on the sixth – will cycle their lives according to the periodic intervals of dark and light, cold and warm generated by these orbs. For human beings, moreover, these intervals will specifically establish a rhythm for agricultural and cultic set-times.

This exposition on Genesis 1 as a treatise for calibrating time proves that the Hebrew creation differed radically in goal and purpose from other creation narratives known from the ancient worlds. For this reason, the many parallelisms that are made among its verses and those drawn from sundry Mesopotamian (and to a lesser extent, Egyptian) creation narratives prove to be superficial and remarkably inappropriate.¹⁸ For with Gen 1, the Hebrew went beyond charting the cosmos to advancing a very distinctive myth: that the fashioning of the entire cosmos was just preparatory for the selection of Israel as God's favoured nation. To do so, the Hebrew continued to speculate on the invention of units for time-keeping, in this case, offering an explanation for the creation of the last major calendric measure: the week. Having generated all that there was cosmically to be in six days, the Hebrew God is said to have selected the seventh and last day on which to celebrate the cessation (verb: *šbt*) of the creative process. This notice was by no means an afterthought, for it had been anticipated throughout the text of Gen 1, where crucial sentences and words had been couched in sevens or in multiples of seven.¹⁹ However, unlike the year, the month, and the day, each of which had birth in some celestial motion, the week is a very artificial construct; like the hour and the second, the week is based on no recurring stellar or planetary interval.²⁰

Imitatio dei

The Hebrew's interest in the week as a calendric unit was no doubt stimulated by an inherited cultic practice that required of him extraordinary devotions on the last of a seventh-day sequence. We can speculate endlessly on the origin of the Sabbath, the special name Israel has given to its seventh-day consecration; in fact, the Hebrews themselves had slightly contradictory explanations about its origins and goals. In Deut

¹⁸ Invariably, Genesis commentaries and studies of ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies connect Gen 1 with Enuma Elish, mostly on the basis of very accommodatingly displayed comparative outlines on the sequence of creative actions (ultimately dependent on the work of HEIDEL 1959, 129) and on an equation between Hebrew *tehôm* and Akkadian Tiamat. It boggles the mind to offer a scenario in which Hebrew mythographers inspected and adapted a jealously guarded scripture that was invoked during a most sacred festival (*akītu*) in the holiest portions of a Babylonian and Assyrian temple. Furthermore, *tehôm* linguistically could be related to Tiamat only indirectly; and were it an adversary for God (as Tiamat was for Marduk), we would expect to find it associated in creations where the combat metaphor is dominant, not at all a feature in Gen 1. Here and elsewhere *tehôm* is a poetic term for bodies of water and must be treated in the same way as *dgn* and *tyrwš*, poetic words that for the Hebrews no longer evoked neighboring deities. We do almost as much when we use adjectives such as jovial (from Jove) and venereal (from Venus).

¹⁹ On the number seven as a controlling device in the P account of creation, see CASSUTO 1961, 12-5.

²⁰ It must not be thought that the week is one-quarter of a 28-day month, because the periodicity of the moon varies. When measured as successive new moons or successive conjunctions with stars, the cycle takes about twenty-nine and a half days to complete. When measured by successive perigees or nodes, however the cycle can be two days shorter.

5:12-15, the Sabbath was deemed a periodic memorial for God's role in the Exodus and in Exod 20:8-11, it was specifically linked to the cessation of God's work after creation; but the prophet Isaiah, rejecting any insinuation that God needed rest, suggested that the Sabbath was indicative of God's sovereignty over his people (Isa 58:13-14).²¹ Yet, despite occasional and unfruitful attempts at linking it to Near Eastern calendars, as an institution the Sabbath has remained unique to Israel.²² It may, in fact, be the only practice that had no equivalence among Israel's neighbours.²³ By opening the long story of his people on a drama divinely choreographed to display the birth of a consecrated seventh-day that is uniquely Hebraic, the Hebrew editor could have found no way more appropriate to glorify the special link between his people and Yahweh – a rapport that is the principal theme in Hebraic historiography. It is in this sense (and not in its details), that Gen 1 evokes such narratives as the Enuma Elish, which claimed for the Babylonians (in some versions, also for the Assyrians) that their nation was primordially selected for elevation.

III. The Birth of Mortality

A Chain of Etiologies

If Gen 1 gained authority by attributing an institution uniquely Israelite to God's earliest creative urge, Gen 2-3 dealt with a subject that is heavily featured in Mesopotamian literature: the origins of human mortality. In its received Hebrew form, the biblical account attributed to 'J' (a writer who preferred to call his god *Yahweh*) is a catena of nested, densely packed etiologies, each conforming to the style and goal of genres deployed in other Near Eastern (creation) narratives, but cumulatively moving the Hebrew tale from a world inhabited by God to one in which only humans will reside.

The beginning of this etiological anthology occurs either at Gen 2:4, 'These are formation accounts of heaven and earth when they were created...' or at Gen 2:4b, 'When the Lord God made the Universe...'.²⁴ The whole series is anchored in two pairs of brackets. The first centres on divine activities and relies on negatively phrased conditions to depict what had not yet come to be: 'When any shrub of the field had yet to be on earth and when any grass of the field had yet to sprout, for Lord God had not yet allowed rain upon the earth and Earthling was not there to work the ground ... So Lord God shaped the Earthling, dirt from the ground, blowing on his face life-giving

²¹ 'If you restrain your activity during the Sabbath, and avoid doing whatever pleases you on my Holy Day ... then you can seek the Lord's favor. I will place you on top of the world, and will let you savor Jacob's inheritance'.

²² The bibliography on the Sabbath is enormous; but any decent biblical dictionary (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum alten Testament*, or the like), would give ample documentation on the scholarly speculation.

²³ Male circumcision by removal of the entire prepuce on the eighth day from birth and non-iconic worship of Yahweh may be two other exceptional rituals; but variations on their practices exist elsewhere.

²⁴ It is likely that the whole of Gen 2:4 plays Janus, looking backwards to the cosmogony of Gen 1 as well forwards to the androgyny of Gen 3-4; see STORDALEN 1992, 163-77.

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breath ...' (Gen 2:5,7a). This type of phraseology requires of us to be alert to the reversal of these conditions.²⁵ Indeed, the resolution does occur, but not before practically the end of the narrative when, as part of Lord God's assignments of fates, Earthling, shrubs, ground, dirt and face are brought back to the fore (Gen 3:17-20). All that is said to be created (trees, animals, Woman) and all but one of the etiologies that will be generated will be bundled in this first set of brackets.

The second pair of brackets will prove even more generative, and it involves activities that are human centred. Earthling needs a mate ('a helper like him'), and animals are created from which to select it, rehearsing the notion embedded in the above-cited Sumerian 'Sheep and Grain' (lines 20-25) that primordially human beings were hardly distinct from animals. The Earthling, however, displays (unexpected⁷) savvy and does not select her from any of the animals Lord God parades seriatim before him (Gen 3:18-19). There is here a notion of hierarchy, for the Earthling is asked to assign names for the animals, that is to establish their function, just as Lord God establishes (and will soon re-establish) the lot of the Earthling.²⁶ This second set of brackets will not close until Earthling finally recognizes the destiny that will be his mate's, 'The Earthling named his wife Eve, because it was she who was the mother of all the living' (Gen 3:20). How this mate for the Earthling became a vessel for the continuity of humankind is told to us in Gen 3.

Wisdom and Life

In Mesopotamian lore, where demarcation between the divine and the human is rarely fluid, immortality is reserved for the gods.²⁷ Exceptionally, a person can be

²⁵ This negative phraseology is not unknown to creation lore in antiquity. For Egypt, see HORNUNG 1983, 172-84, where non-existence was seen as non-differentiation and unity. The category was also employed in Mesopotamia, where it sets the scene for reversal of the non-existent. Cited above is one example, the Sumerian 'Sheep and Grain'. Well-known too are the opening lines of *Enuma Elish*; but worth noticing that an Assyrian commentary paraphrases the lines in the following way, 'When heaven and earth, were not created, Ashur had [come into being]/ When city and temple came into being, Ashur had come into being' (cited from LAMBERT 1997, 97). The phenomenon is sporadically found as opening to incantations, where reversal of an original condition is a primary goal, and in disputations, where reinforcing the destinies of disputants is a major object. For more on such formulations for non-existence, see my comments in SASSON 2000, 205-20. See also the remarks of MICHALOWSKI 1991, 131-6. Biblical examples of this feature are in Prov 8:22-6 and 2 Esdras (= 4 Ezra) 6:1-5.

²⁶ It is important to note that after Lord God sculpts Woman from one of the Earthling's ribs, Earthling does not set a name (that is, develops functions or goals) for her. He merely makes a falsely etymological (actually a parosonantic) pun on the Woman's origin ('This one shall be called Woman ['iššā], for from man ['iš] was she taken', Gen 2:23). The narrator follows (also falsely) with an institutional explication for marriage (Gen 2:24). Some scholars imagine — as I do not — that there is harvesting here of a Sumerian pun on the formation of the goddess Ninti, 'Lady Life', from the rib of the god Enki, as told in *Enki and Ninhursagga*. For this text, see JACOBSEN 1987, 181-204.

²⁷ This is one of the basic messages of the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic where Siduri, keeper of the divine tavern, tells the distraught hero: 'O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering? /The life that you seek you never will find: /when the gods created mankind, death they dispensed to mankind, /life they kept for themselves' (Gilgamesh Epic, Sippar tablet, III:1-5). Siduri intimates that procreation is the

translated to heaven (Utnapishtim and his wife) and, uniquely, a subversive divinity can be killed, its blood becoming a component in the creation of human beings (*alla*-deities in a Middle Assyrian bilingual; *Qingu* in Enuma Elish; *Aw-ilu* – a pun on *awīlu*, ‘man’; but other readings are also possible – in Atrahasis).²⁸ Legendary kings who achieve divine status (Gilgamesh, for example) become menials in the Netherworld, and historical kings who declare themselves divine (for examples, Šulgi of Ur and Išme-Dagan of Isin), nevertheless die, their memory evoked during rituals for ancestors. When there is reference to magical plants, these heal or at most rejuvenate rather than confer immortality. Thus, in the eleventh tablet of the first millennium version of the Epic named after him, Gilgamesh misses an opportunity for non-death when in a failure of nerves he chooses to test the power of a plant of life first on an older person. This is about all that we know in Mesopotamian lore about plants with such powers, although magical foodstuff (not necessarily arboreal) and beverage (*water of life*) can also promote longevity. Mesopotamian lore has nothing to say about wisdom that is acquired by imparting fruits or plants. Egyptian lore knows of a sycamore from which gods partake long life.

In the Hebrew Bible, a Tree of Life (*‘ēš ḥayyîm*) is mentioned in Proverbs (3:18, 11:30, 13:12, 15:4), but only as metaphor for wisdom. All remaining references to either the Tree of Life (*‘ēš ḥayyîm*) or the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad (*‘ēš ḥadda‘at tōb vārā’*) are found only in our Genesis narrative, from which are derived the passages in Revelation (2:7, 22:2, 14, 19). While we can speculate endlessly on the power of its fruit, its eventual interdiction from access to it (Gen 3:24) argues that it conferred immortality rather than rejuvenation. The plotting of these two trees in Genesis proves especially meaningful to unravelling the drama that unfolded in Paradise.

In Gen 2:9, it is said that Lord God made grow from the ground every tree that was appealing to the sight and good for eating, with the Tree of Life in the centre of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. The Tree of Life is distinguished by its location at the core of garden, with the phrasing in the Hebrew text syntactically detaching this tree from the other trees, and from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad as well. We observe that in reacting to the snake’s exploration of her knowledge of the forbidden fruit, the Woman asserts that, ‘We may eat from the fruits of any tree in the garden; but from the fruits of the tree at the centre of the garden, God said: Do not eat from it; do not even touch it, lest you die’ (Gen 3:2). As rabbis over the centuries did, we too might wonder how the Woman learned about a prohibition made before her own creation as well as speculate on her reasons for expanding on it (Lord God had never warned about touching the fruit); but we nevertheless note that upon the snake’s

vehicle to immortality, ‘Gaze on the child who holds your hand, /let your wife enjoy your repeated embraces’ (III:12-13; see Eccl 9:7-9). Similar sentiments are more elusively expressed by Utnapištim in the Neo-Assyrian (SB version), ‘Man is snapped off like a reed in a canebrake. . . The Annunaki, the great gods [of the Netherworld] held and assembly, /Mammitum, maker of destiny, fixed fates with them: both Death and Life they have established, /but the day of Death they do not disclose’ (X:307, 319-323). I quote these passages from GEORGE 1999, 124 and 86-7.

²⁸ The Middle Assyrian bilingual (KAR 4) is translated in BOTTÉRO 1989, 503-5.

reassurances, the Woman plucked from the tree in the centre of the garden, hence from the Tree of Life and not from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, sharing the fruit with the Earthling standing by her (Gen 3:6). It is true that scholarship, fed on millennia of homiletics in which the fruit partaken was the fruit forbidden, has offered a number of suggestions to associate the sampled fruit with the Tree of Knowledge; but the received (Masoretic) text of the Hebrew Bible (and the versions for that matter) is unequivocal here.²⁹ Moreover, a comparison of the vocabulary used to describe the flora planted by Lord God (Gen 2:9) and the Woman's reflection on the fruit's potential shows them to be very proximate, strongly suggesting that before the Woman (for that matter also the Earthling when asked to select a mate) had taken a single bite from the fruit (Gen 3:6), she displayed a capacity to reason and a potential for discernment that were fairly sophisticated.³⁰ That neither the Earthling nor the Woman died from ingesting the fruit, as Lord God had warned the Earthling (Gen 2:17) in reference to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, makes it fairly certain that the couple broke no injunction.³¹

Death

Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof (Prov 18:21).

After the Woman's dialogue with the snake, it was impossible for the couple not to realize that they had crossed a threshold by eating the fruit of either one of these two trees. For them the consequences were immediate. The verb attached to their new awareness, *pqh* (in the passive stem, Gen 3:7), has *eyes* as subject, in biblical language always applied to heightened consciousness and sensibility. It is taken from the vocabulary of the snake (Gen 3:5), and with it came acceptance of the snake's judgment that the couple had become like God (or gods) in attaining knowledge.³² The two,

²⁹ The issue is replayed in practically every respectable Genesis commentary; see VERMEYLEN 1980, 230-50; SOGGIN 1975, 169-78.

³⁰ Compare Gen 2:9 ...*vayyašmaḥ 'ādōnāy 'ēlōhīm min-hā'ādāmā kol-'ēš neḥmād lēmar'ē vētōb lēma'ākāl*, 'Lord God made grow from the ground every tree that was appealing to the sight and good for eating' with Gen 3:6 ...*vattēre' ha'iššā kī tōb hā'ēš lēma'ākāl vēkī ta'āvā-hū' lā'ēnayim vēneḥmād hā'ēš lēhāškīl...*, 'When the Woman saw how good was the tree for eating and how delightful it was to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable for gaining wisdom...'.

³¹ From time immemorial, readers who imagined that the couple ate from the forbidden tree have had to explain why the couple did not immediately die, as had been predicted. Most blatant as a justification for the couple's survival are translations of Gen 2:17 that give 'the day you eat from it, you are doomed to die' (or the like) for *bēyōm 'ākolkā mimmennū mōt tamūt*, a phrase that is best rendered as instantaneous, 'as soon as you eat from it you will die!'.

³² In speculating on the identity of the snake beyond assigning to it (as does traditional Christian exegesis) satanic quality, it is important to recognize its Promethean role: without its participation, humanity would have had no history. To begin with, the behavior of the snake as an 'astute' creature and its capacity to engage issues subtly shows it to be superior the pair, not at all what one would expect from animals whose distinctiveness was set by Earthling when naming them. Not until it is cursed does it acquire the natural characteristics that turns it into the 'snake' we know. The clues available to us are all in 5:4-5 and they include the snake's knowledge of God's thought, its accurate

therefore, create for themselves clothing, not out of sexual modesty, but to distance themselves from the animals Lord God once offered as the Earthling's potential companion.³³ In fact, in this narrative sexuality must await gender differentiation before coming into play.

But crossing this threshold led to an offense that was of major consequence. The Earthling found it necessary to lie about his new form, 'Having heard the sound of you in the garden, I became afraid for I am naked, so I hid' (Gen 3:10). The lie was pathetic, considering to whom it was addressed; but it was nevertheless not due to an increase in knowledge (let alone wisdom) on the part of the Earthling, but was directly the result of a developing discernment that had been the Earthling's before partaking from either tree when he refused an animal as a potential helper.

For Lord God, the lie, the concealment and the furtive action, made extended inquiry about what really happened unnecessary. The death that was to overtake those who sampled the Tree of Knowledge would never, in any case, have been the result of poison; rather it would have been punishment for conscious disobedience. Consequently, while the pair may not have partaken from the forbidden fruit, they acted as if they believed they had. This act of conscious (albeit false) mutiny is what God could not condone. Assigning blame on each other was further evidence that the two thought themselves guilty, whatever their deed. However, rather than killing them, the pair's ingestion from the Tree of Life had made them immortal just as they were displaying their capacity for discernment, a component of wisdom. In effect, the pair had become divine, as predicted by the snake. God's response to this reality was two-pronged and it is key to His assignment of fates (Gen 3:14-19). Cursed, the serpent's brood is to feed on the putrefied remains of its mortal enemy, the Woman's descendants; their future, as that of all elements in nature, had become interlocked. Woman, not cursed, will find

prediction of what will happen to the pair on partaking from the fruit, and its denial of a punishment (*môt tēmūtūn*) that uses language taken from God's warning in 2:17 rather than from Woman's exposition in 3:3 (*pen-tēmūtūn*). The snake is therefore granted the role Mesopotamians assign Enki, that of making certain that humans fulfill their destiny, even to their occasional detriments. Given the restricted characters in the garden narratives and given Israel's investment in only one God, it would be tempting to identify the two. But I won't.

³³ Before their encounter with the snake, 'The two of them were naked, the Earthling and his wife, but did not embarrass each other' (*vēlō' yitbōšāšū*) (Gen 2:25). For this rendering, see SASSON 1985. In Biblical as in Near Eastern lore, nudity is rarely metaphoric for sexual promiscuity, has little to do with being childlike (Isaiah certainly was not being so when he preached naked, Isa 20:2-3), and never entails guilt. More commonly, being nude reflects lack of respect (as when Ham spies a drunken Noah, Gen 9:20-27, or when priests are warned against exposing themselves at the altar, Exod 20:26), poverty (as in the many references to the virtue of clothing the naked, immaterial of how they got that way), lack of protection (as when bereft of parents or husbands, e.g., Ezek 16:7; might possibly apply to Jesus on the cross), and loss of control of one's personal fate (as in the references to captivity). We should note that in antiquity animals do not cloth themselves; gods and human beings do. We are therefore reminded of a similar need for clothing when, according to the Neo-Assyrian (SB) version of the Gilgamesh Epic, animals reject a human-scented Enkidu. But we must care here not to establish false parallels between Enkidu's assimilation to humanity via the sexual services of Harimtu, a prostitute, and the Earthling acquiring immortality via his Woman's bold sampling from the Tree of Life.

herself drawn into her husband's sexual embrace and will labour to produce his children. Earthling experiences reversals on all conditions that were said not to exist at the dawn of his existence (Gen 2:5, 7a). The soil is cursed, and it will need massive effort to deliver its goodness. Henceforth the Earthling will survive through the sweat on his face rather than through the breath of Lord God that had fanned his face at the moment of his creation. The Earthling is denied the individual immortality that he and his mate had imbibed from the tree of life. Death, as a biological cessation for individuals, has just taken form.

Yet, the immortality that had become the couple's through its daring was by no means withdrawn. Rather, it undergoes transmutation, and what once attained by just two individuals who sampled from the Tree of Life will now be shared by the whole species through birth giving, a gift Lord God had bestowed on the Woman. It is at this point, that the etiology launched when Earthling needed a companion finds completion: Woman earns the name that differentiates her gender from that of her mate: *Eve*, that is, 'Mother of all the living' (Gen 3:20).³⁴ The couple's transfiguration into our ancestors Adam and Eve is now complete.

Lord God takes two more actions, both punitive. Outwardly, they are made to resemble animals, by wearing the skins imposed on them (Gen 3:21).³⁵ Prudently, Lord God blocks access to the Tree of Life, for it must no longer be possible for the multitudes created by the pair to have individual access to immortality. We notice, therefore, that the two themes that have so haunted the Mesopotamians – fear of overpopulation and the obstinacy of human mortality – are given their individual touch in this Hebrew narrative.

IV. The medium and the message

*Fils, apprend comme on me nomme,
Dit l'insecte du ciel bleu,
Les bêtes sont au bon Dieu!
Mais la bêtise est à l'homme.
(V. Hugo, La coccinelle)*

A major argument in this presentation is that the medium used in recording creation narratives has significant impact on the theology of the culture that produced them and on how we assess them today. Whether constructed as complete reports or excerpted from longer accounts, the cosmogonies retrieved from ancient Near Eastern documents reveal modes of creation, divine participants, sequence of events and inventory of

³⁴ The real etymology of the name Eve is not of import to us here.

³⁵ By no means, as is often maintained, a sign of God's solicitude for the punished couple; see ODEN 1987, 92-103. We recall also that a haggard and grief-stricken Gilgamesh wears the skins of animals as he roams the steppes, in effect becoming feral like the newly created Enkidu. In a recently published text, Sargon of Agade is said to clothe his enemy in skin, presumably demonstrating his control over him, see VAN DER MIEROOP 2000, 148 (line 55). Ordinarily, only sandals, belts, and headgears were made of leather; see WAETZOLDT 1980-83, 19.

created objects that are rarely compatible with each other, although they could display scribal preferences for several beloved phrasings. For this reason, most attempts on our part to offer a harmony of regionally shared beliefs from the available creation narratives are doomed to disappoint. Moreover, while significant works such as *Enuma Elish* and *Atrahasis* explore many other themes beyond creation of cosmos, nature, and human beings, their contents never achieve control over the theological or cosmogonic speculation that continues to evolve independently through the millennia.

Israel too did not stop speculating on forms, themes and motifs regarding creation just because it preserved traditions about origins in Gen 1-3. As mentioned above, a number of passages in Job, Psalms, as well as some prophetic and wisdom books include speculations about origins that are often inconsistent with what is found in Gen 1. Moreover, Gen 2-3 are not alone in focusing on the primal creatures and on their ambition for immortality, for we find echoes of distinctive reworking of the theme in Ezekiel's dirge on the king of Tyre (Ezek 28) and in Isaiah's scorn of Helel, son of Šahar (Isa 14:12-20). Yet, because they launched a chronological retelling of God's design for Israel, both Gen 1 (with its rehearsal of the dawn of time) and Gen 2-3 (with its explanation of the human condition) have cast their influence on Hebrew cosmogonic speculation. (Eventually too, their impact on Jewish and Christian eschatology cannot be overestimated.) In the case of Gen 1, we see its major themes replayed or debated within Hebrew Scripture, for example in Isa 45:6-7 or Deut 4:16-19.³⁶ But more stunning is the impact on Hebraic eschatological thinking of God's very first act in behalf of Israel, when he crafted 'one day' as the measure of its chronography. 'I am first, I am the last' Isaiah quotes God to say (Isa 44:6); and so, when prophets tried to imagine the other side of beginnings, namely the end of time, they initiated the unfolding of the apocalyptic era with another 'one day' period, namely the 'Day of the Lord.'

Gen 2-3, too has shaped the course of Hebrew theosophy, with the themes of search for immortality and fusion with the divine playing separately or jointly throughout the Hebrew Bible's spiritual history, but especially so after the exile and restoration of Judah. The drive of human beings to rejoin the company of the divine, in effect to void the need for creating a habitat for the likenesses of God, is set by Hebrew historiographers mostly as prelude to their own beginnings. Gen 6 tells of marriages between sons of God and daughters of men, a blurring of boundaries that contributes to God's decision to flood all living creatures. Gen 11 explains why God selects the ancestor of one future nation, Israel, with whom to establish an eternal covenant when, at Babel, human beings tried to storm heaven atop a mighty tower.³⁷

Increasingly, however, immortality, more precisely the release from mortal conditions, comes to occupy Hebraic thought, whether seen as increased longevity (Isa 65:20), as the resurrection of the dead (for example, Isa 26:19, Ezek 37, or Dan 12:2), as

³⁶ See WEINFELD 1968, 105-32 and FISHBANE 1985, 321-6.

³⁷ In Hebrew Scripture, non-eschatological bodily transfiguration into an eternal state (a form of apotheosis) is intimated about Enoch, Gen 5:24, and Elijah, 2 Kgs 2:11. The reversal, the melding of divine spirit into humans (kenosis) is not featured until late in the Hellenistic period; see Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:5-9).

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translation to an eternal state (for example Dan 12:3), or as the end of death (for example, Isa 25:7).³⁸ In Hellenistic Palestine, in an environment that gave birth to rabbinic Judaism and to Christianity, speculations endlessly rehearsed the time, place, opportunity, and conditions that would allow mortals to grasp what was achieved momentarily by Adam and Eve. Two millennia later, we remain beguiled by the same sources that intrigued them.³⁹

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³⁸ See VAWTER 1972, 158-71. For a fuller description of these concepts, especially after the luxuriant speculations of the Hellenistic period, see NICKELSBURG 1972.

³⁹ The distinguished biologist George Wald once wrote (1973, 19): 'The strange thing is that we have immortality, but in the wrong place. We have it in the germ plasm; we want it in the soma, in the body. We have fallen in love with the body.'

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