

**Hashivenu Forum IV**  
**Origins and Destiny:**  
**Israel, Creation and the Messianic Jewish Canonical Narrative**

(Paul L. Saal)

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The question of origins is one that affects each of us in a very personal and profound way. A person adopted at infancy may always wonder about the nature, personality and outcome of his/her biological parents, recognizing that deeply programmed within their DNA is an operating system and intelligence which may never be fully altered by nurture or life events. The primal importance of origins, however, does not begin with each individual but, rather, is defined for them by the larger societal groups which lend structure and definition to the individual's existence. After all, if an individual life begins in a cipher, to what would it attribute purpose? Therefore, each societal group and religious institution seeks to understand humanity's origin in a manner which gives function and reason to its unique existence. At stake are the paradigms by which they view not only their germination, but their development, their destiny and their primary purpose.

Though Judaism and Christianity share the creation narratives recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, it would be naïve to believe that they also share a fully unified understanding of these same accounts. Though both religions have generally agreed on *creatio ex nihilo*, the doctrine that God produced the physical world out of nothing, encoded within each separate understanding of creation is a germ of each religion's "canonical construal."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Woods and R. Kendall Soulen conceptualize the phrases "canonical construal" and "canonical narrative" respectively. According to Woods, the Bible is more than the sum of all its parts. "It is the new instrument produced by the working together of these parts when they are taken in a certain way, that is according to the canonical construal which has been adopted." C. Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding: An Essay In Theological Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) 109. Soulen defines the canonical narrative as "an interpretive instrument that provides a framework for reading the Christian Bible as a theological and narrative unity," R.K. Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*

From the Jewish perspective, this understanding is observed in the *neo-kabalistic* statement “the end is wedged in the beginning, and the beginning is wedged in the end.” It is, therefore, this encoded understanding which is based on an intertextual reading of the creation account, rather than the latent text which becomes the ‘DNA’ of Christianity and Judaism.

In the Jewish understanding of the narrative, the creation account<sup>2</sup> is viewed as the prologue to Israel’s story. The creation of humanity and the world it occupies forms a background to the call of Israel as a unique and differentiated humanity. The ongoing national distinction of Israel is paramount to the story. In the rabbinic tradition, all of Israel will have a place in the *Olam Habah* (The Age to Come).

Christianity, on the other hand, has read its own inchoate purposes into the first three chapters of Genesis. Redemption of humanity through Yeshua is regarded as the primary historical event, which is anticipated in and through the canonical story from beginning to end. The Church becomes the essential eschatological reality within the transformed ontological structure of the world. Following the resurrection, then, carnal Israel is relegated to a merely pedagogical role and suffers an economic displacement within the

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(Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996) 13. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the two terms interchangeably, though Soulen and Woods differ somewhat in approach.

<sup>2</sup> When I speak of the *creation accounts* in the plural I am referring to the material contained in Genesis 1-11 in the Hebrew scriptures which I understand to form the backdrop to Israel’s story. When I refer to the *creation account* in the singular I am speaking of the text of Genesis 1-2:3 which is almost universally considered the P or Priestly text among critical scholars. Though it is so called for its affinity to the cult of Israel, emphasis has normally been placed upon the putative development of the text and less on the covenantal nature of it, which I believe to be generally under-examined.

Christian schema. In his seminal work *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, R. Kendall Soulen uses three pairs of prominent theologians to show how the Christian canonical narrative is not only constructed to displace Israel as the people of God, but how this feature is sustained throughout the history and vicissitudes of Christian thought.<sup>3</sup>

Even the more highly eschatological of the Christian theological positions fails to articulate a present covenantal purpose for the Jewish people. Traditional dispensationalism and Historical Pre-millennialism have carved out an eschatological place for Israel so as to protect the reputation of God's covenantal fidelity. But neither discipline has adequately described the ongoing cosmic role of Israel as a differentiated humanity and priesthood, since obedience to the God of Israel can only be achieved by absorption into the "new" eschatological reality, the Church. This creates an historical aporia. Israel's eschatological obedience can only be achieved if Israel survives. Since Judaism is the institution which has sustained a recognizable identity for the Jewish people, it is only through disobedience to this "new reality" that eventual obedience can be accomplished. Therefore, the present day Jewish people within this program do not suffer economic displacement, rather are upgraded to a "virtual farm system" for the Church.

The dilemma for Messianic Judaism should be apparent. We are living within an historical impasse between two related yet disparate self-understandings. A wholesale acceptance of the traditional Christian reading would obliterate much of the impetus

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<sup>3</sup> Soulen. The author compares and contrasts Irenaeus and Justin Martyr, Emmanuel Kant and Friedrich Schliermacher, and Karl Rahner and Karl Barth. Each pair represents contemporaries relative to developmental periods of Christian thought.

for ongoing identification with the Jewish people. The traditional Jewish reading, though, is non-Christological, as one would expect. To accept it without addition or augmentation would require Messianic Judaism to abandon its *raison d'être* and likely adopt a more passive messianism. Michael Wyschogrod has described the inherent tension in the Jewish and Christian dialogue as the “encounter of the irresistible force with the immovable object.”<sup>4</sup> Ironically, this statement represents Messianic Judaism’s internal struggle for identity. To date, Messianic Judaism has allowed the Christian canonical narrative to remain its structural framework for interpreting and applying much of its theological assumptions. Yet, it has instinctively adopted normative Jewish life practices as a means of preserving continuity with physical Israel. If Messianic Judaism is to survive and become a multigenerational movement, it must develop a cohesive canonical narrative which will create a more symbiotic relationship between its faith and practice.

It is with this concern in mind that I will share several observations which may affect the Messianic Jewish canonical construal. It is my intention to begin the process of re-imagining these accounts and proposing different ways of envisioning the ripples of creation as they touch the remainder of the biblical texts. It is not my intention to author a full canonical narrative, rather to merely offer a starting point in the process. To develop a truly indigenous canonical narrative, Messianic Judaism must first envision an interwoven story that allows equal room for a contiguous ongoing role for Israel, and a prominent well-developed messianism. Then the story must be retold in a manner that is simple, irreducible and reproducible so as to inculcate the new canonical understanding to the body

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<sup>4</sup> M. Wyschogrod, Christology: “The Immovable Object,” *Religion and Intellectual Life* 3 (1986), 79.

of faith. To do so we must first undertake the arduous task of grappling with the understandings we presently hold and candidly confronting the discrepancies between our faith and practice. The creation narratives and their implications seem, then, to be the logical starting place.

### **Creation, A Prologue to Israel's Story**

The creation accounts are unique to all other Scripture in that they do not claim any human eyewitnesses. Therefore, the original transmissions of these accounts cannot be the product of human memory. As a result, several important questions arise, which must be answered in the process of developing a canonical understanding of the biblical creation story.

1. What can be determined about the origin and manner of transmission of these accounts?
2. What can be discerned regarding the nature and original function of the creation accounts?
3. How should these texts continue to function for us within the canonical narrative line?

Very little is clearly and unambiguously discernible about the authorship of the creation narratives. Jewish tradition ascribes authorship of the entire Torah to Moses. Yeshua and the Apostles appear to confirm this (John 5:46), or at least attribute the centrality of Moses' teaching in the composition, but this idiom of attribution is not alien to either Talmudic thought (Peirke Avot 1:1-3) or the Apostolic Witness (Matthew 23:1). So it is logical to conclude that the creation accounts were most probably intended to be read as anonymous works since all of Torah, inclusive of Genesis, is replete of any explicit encoded authorship. But Torah does give testimony to archival records which were kept early in Israel's history (Ex. 17:14, Num. 21:14), therefore it is not improbable that tribal ancestors maintained similar records dating further back.

Due to similar idiom, the Genesis accounts have often been compared with Near Eastern mythologies such as the *Enuma elish* as a possible explanation for its origination. The majority of conclusions usually drawn, though, are generalizations of limited value, since they tend to focus on external literary characteristics while ignoring the ideological and functional differences of the account. Israel did not develop in a vacuum, yet the biblical literature represents a unique spiritual departure from that of the entire ancient world. Therefore, the existence of the Genesis motifs in any other literature does not detract from the originality, or substance of these accounts, rather it magnifies the functional importance and profundity of these accounts.

These new concepts of creation transcended the entire range of previous religious thought. Biblical creation is non-mythological in that it does not contain any theo-biography. It does not suggest an origin for God, give a history of God, or for that matter even make a statement about the existence of God. The implied eternal pre-existence of the Creator is unprecedented. The Hebraic mind was struck by the majesty of natural phenomena, yet unlike that of its Near Eastern neighbors, did not see God in his creation. This is a clear line of demarcation which is not violated, as was the case in the surrounding pantheistic cultures. Rather, the opening statement of *Breshit* toes that line, and at the outset challenges the foundational assumptions of the surrounding religious cults. The Creator is identified simply by the inclusive plural term for “divine beings” (*elohim*) reminiscent of the Sumerian myths. The use of a singular verb (בָּרָא) with the plural noun (אֱלֹהִים) creates a powerful opening polemic against idolatry. The Creator is presented as a singular unified deity who is in his creative genius greater than all of the pantheons. The

purpose of the creation narratives, then, is to convey statements of faith; that there is but one sovereign God, who is outside the realm of nature, yet his majesty is manifest in all of it. All of creation is completely subservient to the Creator, implanted with an indigenous moral order. Humankind is uniquely endowed by God, giving them infinite worth and sovereignty over the remainder of creation.

Consequently, statements concerning celestial bodies are geo-centric. The primary intention of the creation narratives, it would appear then, is not to describe the process of cosmogony, but to function as a pronouncement to the selective history contained in the Bible. These accounts are pregnant with divine purpose, and inaugurate their working within the incipient human arena and from the perspective of the human author. John Sailhammer explains,

Two dimensions are always at work in shaping such narratives: (1) the course of the historical event itself and (2) the viewpoint of the author who recounts the events. This means that one must not only look at the course of the event in its historical setting, but one must also look for the purpose in recounting the events of the Book of Genesis in historical narrative.<sup>5</sup>

The Hebraic view of history is unique in that it is not an endless repetition of cycles. Rather, it can be described as a linear spiral, with a distinct point of origin winding down to a certain destination. Seasons are distinct rhythms, not blind repetitions. The pre-existence of God in the biblical creation places him outside the constraints of time and space. Therefore the divine command “let there be” is not an incantation but, rather, an expression of the relationship between the sovereign God and the subservient creation within the geo-centric spiral of history. The demarcation of human history is emphasized

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<sup>5</sup> J. Sailhamer, “Exegetical Notes: Genesis 1:1-2:2a,” *Trinity Journal* 5, *New Series* 1 (Spring 1984) 73-82

by the use of the term רֵאשִׁית (beginning). This term in biblical usage marks a starting point for a specific period of duration. The antonym אַחֲרֵית (end) is used to mark closure in biblical Hebrew and Jewish apocalyptic tradition. It would appear then that the author intentionally chose בְּרֵאשִׁית, which only occurs in verse 1 in all of Torah, rather than בְּתוֹכָהּ or בְּרֵאשִׁנָּה (lit. at the first), which are both normally followed by a next or second in a series. There seems to be in the beginning (בְּרֵאשִׁית) of creation, then, an anticipation of the end of days (בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים). From the outset, then, creation envisions its own ultimate consummation.<sup>6</sup>

It should be obvious then, placing emphasis on the interrelationship between Creator, man, and the preparation of the land, that the Torah is not directly concerned with science. The human redactors would not have been concerned with the critical use of empirical data, or analytical experimentation. Divine revelation seems more concerned with phenomena than process. The expressions are more concrete than abstract, more emotional than rational, and more poetic than analytic. On this basis it appears that full reconciliation between science and Scripture is not only improbable but also unnecessary. Though there may be some agreement, even if not contiguous, between the over-arching ordering of the creation accounts and modern scientific findings, it is important to remember that revelation was effectuated through the mind and perceptions of biblical man. Synthetic reconciliation, though, can erroneously assume specific understanding of either the biblical view or the scientific data. Demanding detail historiography of the biblical idiom would obscure and

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<sup>6</sup> J. Sailhammer, Expositors Bible Commentary: Volume 2, Genesis-Numbers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 23

depreciate the true depth of revelation, which focuses on space order and relationship, therefore dulling the ritual drama portrayed in the creation account and throughout Torah.

The function of the creation narratives must be viewed within the framework of the entire Torah. From the faith statements implicit in Genesis 1:1-2:3, we can see a selective unity looking forward to the Mosaic Covenant. Therefore, the focus which appears to be on Creator, man and the land, anticipates the relationships between the God of Israel, the People of Israel, and the Land of Israel.

### **Creation, Shabbat and Israel**

The relationship between the Creator and Israel is encoded in the proleptic nature of the seventh day in the creation account. The narrative account in Genesis 2:2-3 does not mention the Shabbat as a fixed, weekly, or ritual institution. It only cites the Creator's cessation from the work of creating, and the divine blessing and sanctification of the seventh day. In fact the name שַׁבָּת (Shabbat) does not appear in the text, only cognate verbal forms וַיִּשְׁבֹּת (and he rested, desisted from labor) is used. It is the command to observe Shabbat (Exodus 20:11 and Exodus 31:17) which makes the connection explicit between Israel's ritual observance and the creative cessation in Genesis 2. In the otherwise parallel restatements of the divine rest, the commandments use the covenantal designation *YHWH*, affirming that the God of Sinai is the God of Creation. Therefore it can be assumed that the seventh day rest functions within the canon of Torah as a prologue to the

selective history of Israel and to its unique relationship with the God of Israel. This is stated explicitly in Exodus 31:13.

And you, speak to the Children of Israel, saying:  
However: my Sabbaths you are to keep!  
For it is a sign  
between me and you, throughout your generations,  
to know that I YHWH, hallow you.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, this verse focuses sharply on the organic connection between the holiness of the Shabbat, of the seventh day rest from creation, and of Israel. In the creation narrative the Creator pronounces six times upon observation of his work that it is “good”, and upon observing the totality of his work (1:31) he declares in that it is “very good”. Seven declarations of goodness lead to a seventh day rest of holiness. The phrase “And there was evening and there was morning”, which is used as a poetic device to mark the closure of each preceding day, is curiously absent on the seventh day. This absence, coupled with a string of *imperfect conversives* ( וַיִּכְלֹ, וַיִּשְׁבֹּת, וַיְקַדְּשׁ ), suggests an intended continuum between the acts of completing, resting, sanctifying, and some future event. The vast body of work that the Creator completed is very good in its totality, but it is still *chol* (common or secular) only the seventh day, and all it portends is already endowed with *kedushah* (holiness). Though humankind is created in the image of the Divine Creator and given sovereignty over the remainder of the created order, the first man and woman are not instructed in a ritual observance of Shabbat. Only the Children of Israel, who are differentiated by the God of creation and covenant and endowed with *kedushah*, are given the command of Shabbat observance.

The entire creation narrative contains a unique heptadic structure which sets it apart from any other ancient creation story. The entire creation then anticipates the Shabbat and is therefore pregnant with the same covenantal and eschatological possibilities as Shabbat. Christian commentators generally understate the covenantal and priestly orientation of Shabbat when evaluating creation's heptadic structure. John Sailhammer, who astutely recognizes the shaping influence of the human authors in regard to the seven-day scheme, seems to ignore their interest in covenantal ritual.

One of the more obvious elements is the repetition of the phrase 'evening and morning,' which divides the passage into a seven-day scheme. Creation forms a period of one work week concluding with a rest day. Already this simple structural framework is the tilting of the account that betrays the interests of the author – Creation is viewed in terms of man's own work week.<sup>8</sup>

There are really no indicators, though, of a pre-existent seven-day work week for either the implied encoded audience of Torah, the slaves who labored every day without cessation, or in the surrounding culture. Shabbat, as a ritual observance, however, does appear to be taken for granted in both formulations of the Decalogue, which command "Remember the Shabbat day" and "Observe the Shabbat day". Though there is no biblical text which explicitly institutes Shabbat, this kind of presupposition of covenant ritual is somewhat formulaic to Torah and mirrors the introduction of covenant sacrifice and circumcision. Therefore, it may be assumed that Shabbat belongs to the most ancient of Israel's formative traditions, and involves divinely inspired transformation of pre-existing cultus from neighboring cultures.

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<sup>7</sup> All quotations from Torah unless otherwise noted will be taken from *The Schoken Bible: Volume 1 "The Five Books of Moses; A New Translation and Commentary by Everett Fox"* (New York: Schoken, 1995)

<sup>8</sup> Sailhammer, "Exegetical Notes"74

From very early times the seven-day period was used as a basic time unit among people of the Mesopotamian Valley and Sumerian plain. The seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first and twenty-eight days of certain months, corresponding to the four phases of the moon, were regarded as unlucky days. The nineteenth day, being the forty-ninth day following the new moon of the previous month was called a “day of wrath”. One ritual text forbids the king from eating cooked flesh, changing his clothes, offering sacrifice, riding in a chariot or rendering legal decisions. A physician could not heal on these days, nor could a seer give an oracle. The seventh day of the lunar calendar had an especially pernicious character. It was called *Shapattu*, which is described, in various cuneiform texts as a “day of quieting the heart of the god.” Though the meaning of this is not certain, it does seem to indicate a day when ritual was performed with the intention of appeasing the pantheons.<sup>9</sup> Many critical scholars have suggested that the Mesopotamian calendar is the origin of the biblical Shabbat, pointing especially to similarities between the words *shapattu* and Shabbat. Nahum Sarna, a scholar of Near Eastern and Judaic studies, argued against the overstatement of any such comparisons.

It has to be remembered, however, that while the philological association is very feasible, there is no evidence that the Mesopotamian *shapattu* was a day of cessation from labor. Nor was there any connection between the *shapattu* – the full-moon—and the four seventh days. These four special days are never designated *shapattu*. Moreover, the abstentions prescribed for these days did not apply to the entire population, but only to certain classes of people and there is no proof that any general curtailment of business activities was required. If, indeed, the biblical Sabbath does owe anything to ancient Near Eastern culture, it is only to the basic concept of a seven-day unit of time.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> N.M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1972) 20

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

In light of its implied polemic against idolatry, it is not unlikely that the creation narrative is a literary reaction against the Mesopotamian calendar. Avoidance of the nominal form שַׁבָּת (Shabbat) in reference to the seventh day may be intended to exclude any possibility of confusion with *shapattu*, or any observance which had human origin. The three-fold repetition of the phrase “seventh day”(vv2-3) may again be used to emphasize that the day derives its special character solely from the Creator, who chose to bless and sanctify it. The sanctity of Shabbat, by explicit association, is part of the cosmic structure, and since it is the dénouement of the creative order it is quintessentially good and beneficial for mankind. In essence, then, it becomes the exact antithesis of the Mesopotamian heptads which portray evil or ill-fated days, and rituals intended to appease chaotic and morally capricious gods who wreak havoc upon their human victims. Rather, Shabbat enjoins the creative and covenantal purposes of a benevolent God, laying the foundation for a socio-moral structure which would be expressed in the religion of Israel. The universality of creation is expressed in Shabbat in that the privileges of divinely appointed rest are equally extended to the entire family inclusive of women, servants, sojourners and even to the beast of burden and those of the field (Exodus 20:10, 23:12, Deut. 5:14), yet limiting the locus of Shabbat observance within the community of Israel. Shabbat, then, not only transforms beyond recognition any Near Eastern antecedents, but also begins the process of cosmic and carnal transformation of the entire created order, bringing it from *chol* to *kedushah*.

As a ritual institution, then, Shabbat is indelibly linked to creation, which anticipates not only the *kedushah* of the seventh day, but a future state of *kedushah* for the entire world in the *Olam Haba* as well. When Israel obeys the command to observe Shabbat and, by

implication, all of Torah, it serves as a conduit of a covenantal liturgy. I will attempt to demonstrate that this liturgy does more than merely re-enact the creative ordering, but also serves as a catalyst for God's renewed commitment to sustain and complete the creative process.

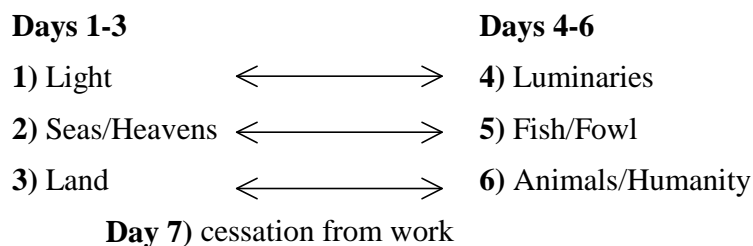
### **From Chaos to Order**

Far more than celebrating the origins of the cosmos, Shabbat celebrates the order of the cosmos. As I have previously recognized, the creation narrative is, itself, a spacial, ordinal and relational liturgy. Outside of the rather oblique assertions that God stands at the beginning of all that comes into existence, the biblical creation narrative barely delves into the ultimate mystery of universal origins. Even the Divine fiat which is traditionally translated "And God said 'Let there be' ... and there was/it was so ..." is popularly misunderstood as an incantation, emphasizing the spontaneity and immediacy of the creative assertion. In that the authoritative decree is followed by **וַיְהִי**, an imperfect verb preceded by a *vav* conversive, a dynamic relationship between the power of God and the continuum of the created function is implied. Therefore, the traditional translation, though idiomatically approachable, fails to fully capture the non-punctiliar nature of the statement. Perhaps a better paraphrase would be "Upon God's decree, ... and so it continues." This would better express the overriding concern which appears to be the endowment of creation with distinctive functions, which are held in fragile balance and harmony by the Creator. Consistent with this understanding, Rashi alludes to the Aggadah to explain the creative activity of day one.

He saw that it was good, and it was not proper for it (the light) and for darkness that they should function in confusion, and so He set for the former its limit in the day, and the latter its limit in the night. He saw (the light) that it was not fitting that the wicked should use it, and so He set it aside for the righteous to use in the future (world) to come.<sup>11</sup>

Rashi is clearly more concerned with the natural and moral ordering of the universe than with its empirical cosmogony.

Embedded within the seven-day scheme is a symmetrical pattern which further emphasizes the encoded harmony of the creative design. On the first three days God performs acts of division and separation which prepare the primordial world for habitation. On day one God separates the light from the darkness (v. 4). On day two He separates the earthly waters from the terrestrial waters (v. 7), and on day three He separates the dry land from the waters under the firmament (v. 9). During the second three days God creates the specific functionaries and life forms which are appropriate to the aforementioned elements of the creative order. On the fourth day of creation God gives function to the luminaries which further concretize the boundaries between light and dark, and night and day (vv. 14-18). On day five the creatures which will occupy the air and sea are created (vv. 20-21), and on day six the animals and humans which will occupy the land (vv. 24-26).<sup>12</sup>



<sup>11</sup> Isaiah A.B. and Sharfman B.: The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary, (Brooklyn: S.S.&R. Publishing Co., 1976) p.4

<sup>12</sup> C.Westermann, Genesis 1-11: A Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 84.

This liturgy of creation implies God's act of separating and ordering that was previously chaotic. The orderly and harmonious world rests upon the basic concepts of separation, division, and distinction. Besides the primary acts of distinguishing light from dark, separating the heavens from the earth and the dry land from the waters, God continues to distinguish man from woman and the ordinary from the sacred. Torah grows from this conceptualization of the cosmic order and mirrors these categories of distinction. *Chol* and *kadash* (secular and sacred) and *tohar* and *tamei* (pure and impure) become the fundamental categories of distinction in the ritual performance of Israel. The divine ordering of creation endows the socio-moral ordering of human existence. For Israel to achieve righteousness, it must do justice to the inherent harmony of creation. When the essential boundaries of Torah are violated, Israel becomes threatened by confusion and even collapse. The world order that God has pronounced "very good" is none the less fragile and highly susceptible to the constant threat of chaos. The formulaic use of proleptic verbal constructs in the creation account implies a continuum or maintenance of the creative activity. This requisite sustenance of creation suggests that God confines rather than eliminates chaos, which is presently postponed for a future time. By virtue of the covenantal liturgy, Israel becomes a "junior partner" with God in the maintenance of the creative order.

Jon Levenson has most prominently described the cosmic battle between chaos and the creative order in his groundbreaking work *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*. Levenson seeks to answer the age-old question, "If God is omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent, why do the innocent suffer and the wicked

prosper?” His response is to first understand chaos as primordial to the biblical creation narrative, and secondly to describe the ongoing confinement of chaos and the temporary lapses as part of the “drama of Divine omnipotence.”<sup>13</sup>

First, although it is now generally recognized that creation ex nihilo, the doctrine that God produced the physical world out of nothing, is not an adequate characterization of creation in the Hebrew Bible, the legacy of this dogmatic or propositional understanding lives on and continues to distort the perceptions of scholars and laypersons alike. In particular, a false finality or definitiveness is ascribed to God’s act of creation, and, consequently, the fragility of the created order and its vulnerability to chaos tend to be played down. Or, to put the point differently, the formidability and resilience of the forces counteracting creation are usually not given their due, so that the drama of God’s exercise of omnipotence is lost, and a static idea of creation then becomes the cornerstone of an overly optimistic understanding of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>14</sup>

I have already stressed that the creation accounts often employ idiom and motifs from the creation liturgies of surrounding pagan cultures to create powerful, dramatic and poetic polemics against idolatry. Again I will reiterate that the observation of the similarities in motif should not detract from the originality or uniqueness of the biblical accounts. On the contrary, to ignore or dismiss the parallels can dull our acuity to the encoded functionality of the narratives. It behooves us, therefore, to examine the notion of conflict inherent in the Near Eastern views of the cosmos and how biblical accounts may interact with them. Since the pagan gods personify nature, ancient mythologies always begin with titanic struggles begin with the predominant powers of nature. This theme of cosmic struggle becomes the underlying motif of the *Enuma Elish* and other creation mythologies. Though *Breshit* makes no explicit reference to any such struggle, the *Enuma Elish* casts curious shadows

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<sup>13</sup> J. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: the Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 14-25

<sup>14</sup> J. Levenson, Preface to paperback edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) xxix

over the biblical story, from which we might infer that the author was informing a world familiar with and affected by this account.

At the beginning of God's creative activity "darkness was over the face of the Ocean" (Genesis 1:2) or how it is most often translated "deep". The Hebrew word used here, *Tehom*, is generally understood to be the philological equivalent of *Tiamat*, the name of the female primordial sea in the *Enuma Elish*. I have chosen to capitalize *Tehom* since it never appears in Torah with a definite article, though in context it has clear definitiveness. This normally implies a proper name. Furthermore several other passages in the Hebrew Bible continue to employ anthropomorphic characterizations to *Tehom* such as "*Tehom* that crouches below..."(Genesis 49:25; Deut. 33:13) and "*Tehom* cried out..." (Habakuk 3:10).

In the *Enuma Elish*, chaos ensues when the subterranean fresh waters personified in *Apsu*, and the saline waters of *Tiamat* mix. From this act emerge new gods who prove so disruptive to *Apsu* that he chooses to annihilate them. One of these gods *Ea* despoils *Apsu* and her son *Marduk* defeats *Tiamat*. *Marduk* then splits the body of *Tiamat* to create the familiar world. *Marduk* affixes a cross member in the heavens and posts guards so that the water might not escape to threaten the victory. Though *Marduk* sets luminaries in the sky only after the defeat of *Tiamat*, *Apsu* had previously exclaimed that he "could find neither relief by day nor repose by night" (*Enuma Elish* 1:38). The distinction between the phenomenon of light and the function of the luminaries is reminiscent of the biblical creation, as is the separation of the waters above and below to form the known world. Chaos ensues with the co-mingling of the masculine (*Apsu*) and feminine (*Tiamat*)

primordial waters. Interestingly *Tehom* (תְּהוֹם) is a masculine grammatical form most frequently employed with a feminine verb or adjective.<sup>15</sup> In itself this is not exclusive to biblical Hebrew, though it is unusual. But, when viewed in the light of the distinguishing of human genders on the sixth day of creation (v. 27), it forms an interesting overture to the terse narrative. Most importantly, it is this primordial Ocean that represents the chaos, which God first confronts when he begins the creative work of ordering.

The existence of primordial chaos would, of course, argue against the creation theology being primarily concerned with *creatio ex nihilo*, as I have previously contended. This traditional view, which has largely fallen into disfavor in scholarly circles, can be supported only if the first verse of *Breshit* is an inclusive statement, overlooking the entirety of creation. This view would read בְּרֵאשִׁית in the absolute state (in the beginning). But many arguments have been made for reading this phrase as a construct, and subordinating verse 2 to it;

At the beginning of God's creating the Heavens and earth,  
When the earth was wild and waste,  
Darkness over the face of the Ocean,  
Rushing-spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters

As a matter of grammar, this view rests principally upon the absence of a definite article with בְּרֵאשִׁית. Though this could be indicative of a construct reading, the fact that בְּרֵאשִׁית appears elsewhere as an absolute in this form (Isaiah 46:10) and that it precedes a finite form (בְּרֵא) , certainly renders the grammar indecisive. I believe, though, that the form and context give greater evidence to the construct reading. The interpretations of medieval Jewish scholars Rashi and Ibn Ezra are often considered against the traditional reading of

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<sup>15</sup> Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 22

the absolute. Rashi, however, opposes the traditional reading, not on a grammatical basis but, rather, upon his understanding of the content. Rashi believed that the heavens (הַשָּׁמַיִם) were created from fire (אֵשׁ) and water (מַיִם).<sup>16</sup> Though he does not clarify his etymology, there does appear to be a traditional transmission of this premise. Since Rashi does not understand “heavens and earth” as a totality, it would follow that the creation of water would have to precede the event recorded in the first verse of this narrative. In accordance with this reasoning בְּרֵאשִׁית would not be in the absolute form, therefore the statement could not be understood, the “very beginning of all things”.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the second verse appears to describe the preparation of the earth for human habitation. It serves as a prologue to the process of ordering, which is the functional creation. Since תָּהוּ וָבֵהוּ describes the primordial state of earth, it would argue against the traditional reading “empty and void” which is often understood as a state of nothingness. In Isaiah 45:18, תָּהוּ is placed in opposition to לְשִׁבְתָּ (to be inhabited) and in Deut. 32:10, it is used as a parallel expression to מִדְבָּר (a desert). In Jeremiah 4:23-26, the phrase is constructed with הִנֵּה (behold) and a conversive, to render a prophetic voice. This is a poetic comparison between the land after the Babylonian exile and its uninhabitable state prior to creation. The general context of Gen. 1:2, then, would suggest that the land was uninhabitable and was covered by water, as evidenced by the creative activity of separating the dry land from the water on the third day. But if this is the case תָּהוּ

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<sup>16</sup> Isaiah A.B. and Sharfman B.: The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary, (Brooklyn: S.S.&R. Publishing Co., 1976) p.2

(*Tehom*), which is used elsewhere (Isaiah 51:10) in poetic parallel with יָם (Sea), must be understood as the primordial Ocean rather than the empty abyss as it is so often construed. It is also worthwhile to note that יָמִים (*Yammim*) is the Hebrew cognate of *Yam*, the ferociously monstrous sea of the Ugaritic cosmogonies. *Yam* is among a number of allusions to watery chaos found in ancient Near Eastern combat mythologies including *Nahar* (River), *Leviathan* (Coiled One), *Rahab* (Arrogant One), and *Tannim* (Dragon).<sup>18</sup>

Despite the motifs, idiom and designations familiar to the combat myths, the biblical account of creation emerges as a unique story. The idea of strife between God and nature in the biblical creation is unthinkable, since God has asserted his mastery over all of creation. To emphasize the point, the word וַיְהִי־כֵן (“and it was so” or “so it continues”) is inserted after each expression of the creative fiat. None of these primordial waters are accorded divine attributes, and there is never any indication that they constitute a challenge to the sovereignty of God. In fact הַתַּנִּינִים הַגְּדֹלִים (the great *tannim*) usually translated great sea-serpents or monsters, are not at all primeval as they are explicitly created on the fifth day. By placing their origin in the midst of the creation account the great *tannim* are pictured at inception as benign. Yet, the specific naming of this mythical combatant evidences a clear knowledge of it and implied polemic against it.

Furthermore, the combat myth has survived within the biblical texts solely as picturesque metaphors. These metaphors are normally employed as literary devices which express

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<sup>17</sup> Sailhammer, *Expositors*, 23

<sup>18</sup> Sarna, 2

human evil and the inevitable punishment of the wicked in terms of a primordial conflict between God and the forces of primeval chaos which are represented by the waters. Isaiah 17:12-14 typifies this application.

Oh, the raging of many nations  
they rage like the raging sea!  
Oh, the uproar of the peoples  
they roar like the roaring of great waters!  
Although the peoples roar like the roar of surging waters,  
when he rebukes them they flee far away,  
driven before the wind like chaff on the hills,  
like tumbleweed before a gale.  
In the evening, sudden terror!  
Before the morning, they are gone!  
This is the portion of those who loot us,  
the lot of those who plunder us.<sup>19</sup>

By extension, human evil appears to be organically connected to primordial chaos. In the Hebrew bible the motifs of the Near Eastern combat myth undergo a radical transformation. The events of pre-history become the biblical pattern of history. The absolute Sovereign over creation has absolute power over chaos and his incursion into human history brings the metaphysical battle into the socio-moral plane which is realized in Torah and the covenants. The historical reality is that God has in this age confined chaos but has not totally eliminated it. Moreover, the pages of the Hebrew bible and the volumes of human history would suggest that the quarantine of chaos has often lapsed. A clear case in point is evidenced by the words of Israel's prophet as he pleads for the reinstatement of Israel's faith and God's intervention during the dark days pronounced in the Babylonian exile.

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<sup>19</sup>The New International Version, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984, will be cited for all biblical references that are not in the Torah unless otherwise noted.

Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength,  
O arm of the LORD;  
Awake, as in days gone by,  
as in generations of old.  
Was it not you who cut *Rahab* to pieces,  
who pierced that monster (*tannim*) through?  
Was it not you who dried up the sea (*Yam*),  
the waters of the great deep (*Tehom*),  
who made a road in the depths of the sea  
so that the redeemed might cross over?  
The ransomed of the LORD will return.  
They will enter Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy will crown their heads.  
Gladness and joy will overtake them,  
and sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isaiah 51:9-11)

As in other passages in the Hebrew bible (Psalm 74:12-17; Job 38:8-11), God's subordination of the forces of chaos are portrayed using the transformed motifs of the combat myths. Here, however, the prophet appeals to God, crying out in the most desperate of terms, to again confine the chaos that has threatened the survival of those who are then labeled the redeemed and the ransomed. How, then, can this be reconciled with a Creator who is omniscient and sovereign over all the created order? Herein lies the great tension of both scripture and life. Though God's unique power to subjugate chaos cannot be questioned, those passages that concede its survival revive the fear that the created order can yet be reversed. This, of course, is impossible so long as God is both vigilant and faithful. But the experience of this world often tries even the faithful, as is witnessed in the words of the desperate prophet. Often the allusions to the combat myths are used to express the absolute mastery of God, such as Psalm 74:12-17, where the God of Israel is pictured as not only defeating the Sea and its monsters, but he totally dismembers Leviathan and then creates the present world. But in Job 40:25-32, Leviathan is portrayed as captured by God and perpetually available for his enjoyment. This statement parallels

the statement of Psalm 104:9 that God has set boundaries which the primordial waters of chaos dare not cross.<sup>20</sup> Jon Levenson further elucidates on this “drama of Divine Omnipotence.”

In each case, the confinement of chaos rather than its elimination is the essence of creation, and the survival of the ordered reality hangs only upon God’s vigilance in ensuring that those cosmic dikes do not fail, that the bars and doors of the Sea’s jail cell do not give way, that the great fish does not slip off his hook. That vigilance is simply a variant of God’s covenantal pledge in Genesis 9 never to flood the world again. Whatever form the warranty takes, it testifies to both the precariousness of life, its absolute dependence upon God, and to the sureness and firmness of life under the protection of the faithful master. The world is not inherently safe; it is inherently unsafe. Only the magisterial intervention of God and His eternal vigilance prevent the cataclysm. Creation endures because God has pledged in an eternal covenant that it shall endure and because he has, also in an eternal covenant, compelled the obeisance of His great adversary. If either covenant (or are they one?) comes undone, creation disappears.<sup>21</sup>

Levenson appropriately refers to this liturgy of cosmic fragility as a “Divine drama.”

Woven into the fabric of creation, yet realized in the covenantal improvisation, is humankind’s labored realization of its creational harmony with God.

### **Cosmos, Relationship and Covenants**

I have attempted to demonstrate that the first creation account emphasizes the demarcations which give meaning to God’s cosmic order. They are envisioned as boundaries which confine chaos and maintain harmony within creation. With the arrival of humanity upon the cosmic stage, the fragility of the created order becomes more pronounced. Humankind exhibits the most nuanced form of distinction as the centerpiece of creation, having likeness or sameness, being “in the image of God”, yet as part of the

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<sup>20</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 14 - 25

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 17

created order, not being equal to God. Only by maintaining this delicate balance will humankind embody the foundational relationship that the Creator intended for the human order.

Internal to human design there are also nuanced distinctions. In Genesis 1:27 humankind is created male (אָר) and female (אִרָּה). Phyllis Bird has contended that these are biological rather than sociological terms, and that the male and the female are distinguished by their sexuality, not by their social status. They are accorded what Bird has called an “ontological equality before God.” Both are created equal in the “image of God” and are included in the creational command to “be fruitful and multiply”. According to Bird, the human relationship is envisioned somewhat differently in Genesis 2. Here humankind is again created with internal distinction, but the differences are now more relational. This time the terms man (אִישׁ) and woman (אִשָּׁה) are sociological rather than biological designations. The woman is taken from the side of man, and man is to leave his parents to be reunited with that which makes him whole. Again the language is poetical, not empirical, but as in Genesis 1 it communicates a unique relationship whereby humanity is represented by a unity of opposites, differentiated but equal parts composing an ordered relational whole for the sake of creational blessing.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> P.A. Bird, “‘Male and Female He Created Them’: Gen.1:27b in the Context of the Priestly account of Creation,” *HTR* 74 (1981) 129-159; “Genesis I-III as a Source for a Contemporary Theology of Sexuality,” *Ex Auditu* 3 (1987), 35-39 both are reprinted in *Missing Persons and Missing Identities, Overtures to Biblical Theology* ( Minneapolis:Fortress,1997).

Almost from the outset of the biblical account, the delicate relationships between God and humanity and that internal to humanity are subverted. Both male and female have violated the boundaries set forth by the Creator, and as a consequence are estranged from God and, therefore, the source of harmony between them. For the man (אָדָם) this is manifest in his separation from the ground (הָאָרֶץ) from which he was taken and upon which he relies for his livelihood (3:17-19). The woman (אִשָּׁה) is estranged from the man (אָדָם) from whom she was created and upon whom she relies for her work of procreation (3:16). The relational equality is severed and the male is portended to rule over the female, an abolition of the distinctive equality intended in the created order. The cosmic rift, which is often mistakenly apprehended in metaphysical terms, enters into the socio-moral structure of the Divine-human and human-human relationships.<sup>23</sup>

If the account of Genesis 3 records a rupture in the cosmic order and a violation of the Divine-human relationship, then the strange mythic account of Genesis 6:1-4 portrays a complete collapse of the celestial and earthly distinctions. Whatever else it intends to convey, by recording the occurrence of sexual intercourse between the “sons of God” and “the daughters of humans” this otherly account effectively obliterates the divine-human boundaries. It also provides a prologue to the flood narrative, setting the stage for God’s reassessment of the creative design. What God saw following the six days of creation he deemed to be “very good ” (1:31). Following ten generations of human violation God saw a world filled with violence and corruption (6:5,12). In the “Divine Drama of

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<sup>23</sup> Samuel E. Balentine, *The Torah’s Vision of Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 98

Omnipotence” the breakdown of the human heart (6:5) also occasions the breaking of the Divine heart. Samuel Ballantine describes this drama:

And though God moves decisively to reverse the plan for relationship with humankind, the change of course fills God with grief and pain. God is “grieved” to the heart an expression that recalls both the anguish of childbirth that God had imposed on the woman and the toil with which man is consigned to work the ground. If the world itself is fragile, susceptible to the best and the worst that the created order brings to it, so in an analogous way, God elects to be open to the fragility of relationship with humankind. The God who presides with ultimate authority over the cosmos is at the same time a God who chooses to be vulnerable to the best and the worst that humankind may bring to the divine-human relationship.<sup>24</sup>

God prepares to reverse the creative process, releasing the boundaries of chaos by unleashing the primordial waters which have been confined above the firmament. But first he selects one man, Noah, who embodies the cosmic justice and ritual purity which the Creator had endowed in primordial creation. According to God’s specifications Noah is to build an ark, a kind of “cosmos in miniature”, which will hold the requisite male and female exemplars of the animal world. Together with Noah, the new Adam, they will be the progenitors of a new creation.

In Genesis 6 the concept of covenant is mentioned for the first time in the Hebrew bible, “I will establish my covenant with you.” It will be further developed in Genesis 9 where the story of God’s re-creation of the world is presented in two sections. In verses 9:1-7 God repeats the blessings of 1:28, including the command to reproduce, which is stated in verse 1 and again in verse 7, an indication that God plans to reinstate the creational order. In verses 9:8-17 God extends His intentions for the cosmic order to include promises never before stated in the creation narratives. Seven times God speaks of a unilateral covenant

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid

with every living creature (9:9,11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17).<sup>25</sup> This heptad is reminiscent of the construction of the creation liturgy in Genesis 1 which envisions an ultimate consummation of the creative activity when chaos will be banished. In verse 16, God states that it is an “everlasting covenant” (בְּרִית עוֹלָם), reiterating the promise (vv. 11, 15) that He will “never again”, as a retributive response, totally release the primordial waters of chaos.<sup>26</sup>

The covenant is unilateral and God’s promise to never undo the creation is not conditioned by human action. God “remembered” (זָכַר) Noah and the animals (8:1), anticipating God’s remembrance of the patriarchs at Horeb (Exodus 2:23) and throughout the experience in the Sinai desert. Before the waters of chaos have receded Noah oddly and spontaneously builds an altar and worships the Redeemer of Creation. Curiously Noah offers clean (טָהוֹר) animals and birds (8:20), though there is not the presence of a priest, nor have the sacrificial instructions for a priest yet been given. Though there has not yet been an explicit institution of purity laws, which are later attributed to the covenant at Sinai, Noah has been able to fulfill God’s demand to choose and domesticate clean animals in heptadic groupings. This act of spontaneous worship, then, foreshadows the Sinai Covenant. While anticipating the eventual consummation of the created order when the threat of chaos will be finally eliminated, this act of worship links the Sinai Covenant back to the covenant of cosmic reinstatement.

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<sup>25</sup> Westermann, 464-468

<sup>26</sup> W. Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 84

The moral covenant of Sinai is conditional upon Israel's obedience, unlike the covenant of re-creation which God had established with Noah. But Torah bridges these two covenants by connecting the "everlasting covenant" (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) with the cosmos (9:16) to the "everlasting covenant" (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) with Avraham (17:7, 13, 19). If the first covenant represented God's commitment to the restoration and continuation of creational harmony within the fragile cosmic order, then the second represents the restoration of the relational harmony between humankind and God and, internal to most basic of human communities, man and woman. The relational covenant is centered in Avraham and Sarah who will be the ancestors of a unique and differentiated humanity, Israel. Though the covenant is announced and executed through Avraham, it is advanced through the vicissitudes and management of family strife. Avraham often seems happily ignorant of the conflicts between Sarah and Hagar regarding social status, and in fact has served to precipitate them by fathering a child by Hagar. The violation of creational harmony is dramatized in the tents of Avraham and Sarah. No longer is the man-woman relationship a unity of equal but opposite partners at work. Sarah becomes the prototype of the post-Eden female. Her subservient role in society has caused her to endure the shame of barrenness, a hyperbolic assertion of the progenerative curse. But it is Avraham and Sarah's willing submission to God's intention for them that precipitate the execution of the covenant in Genesis 17 which is relational in language.

I am God Shaddai.  
Walk in my presence! And be wholehearted!  
I set my covenant between you, and me  
I will make you exceedingly, exceedingly many... (1b-2)  
I establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you,  
throughout their generations as a covenant for the ages,  
to be God to you and to your seed after you. (7)

God's intention is not merely to create a numerous people but to create a covenant between Himself and his people. What is emerging is a new institution that is neither a social nor a political structure, but rather a relational structure. God announces that through this "everlasting covenant" he will bless all who enter into the community of Avraham and Sarah.<sup>27</sup>

In several ways this covenant sharpens and extends the covenant God had initiated with Noah in Genesis 9. The covenant with Noah is cosmic in scope, similarly the promises to Avraham reach out beyond himself. He is told that his progeny will be as numerous as the cosmos (15:5), and that the boundaries of the land they are promised will be more extensive than anywhere else in Torah.<sup>28</sup> Also there is a spirit of inclusiveness that far exceeds the social expectations of the period. The blessings recorded to Sarah and Ishmael extend the effectiveness of the community of covenant beyond the normal gender restrictions, tribal boundaries, and social hierarchies one would expect. The blessing of Sarah (17:15-16) is the first time since the creation narrative that God's blessing is conveyed in and through a woman. Like Avraham, her blessing bestows to her a progeny of nations. But even beyond her husband she is promised that from her progeny will come forth "kings of peoples" (16). Like Sarah, Ishmael, the child of a concubine, becomes the progenitor of noble lineage, "the father of twelve princes"(Genesis 17:20; 25:12-16). From the outset God promises Avraham "I will bless those who bless you." (12:3)<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 262

<sup>28</sup> N. M. Sarna, *The JTS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia, New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 117-118

<sup>29</sup> J.G Janzen, *Genesis 12-50: Abraham and All the Families of the Earth* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993) 52

The inclusiveness of the covenant, though, is somewhat challenged by the male hegemonic sign of the covenant (17:11-12). Though circumcision is eradicable and therefore denotes the irrevocable nature of the covenant, it is only applicable to males and is, therefore, purely patriarchal. On this basis, it has been criticized as being deficient as a sign of an inclusive covenant.<sup>30</sup> The practice of circumcision, however, was common among many ancient Near Eastern cultures. It was practiced as a social rite of passage normally associated with puberty or marriage. But the circumcision of the covenant is to occur on the eighth day, the first renewed day after the full birth or creational week of the child.<sup>31</sup> Here it is used as a covenantal commitment, binding the community of Avraham and Sarah to God, and beginning the transition which will bring about the social, moral and relational restoration to humanity. Circumcision “is to be a sign of” (לְאוֹת בְּרִית) the covenant, reminiscent of the rainbow in Genesis 9:12. Whereas God is solely responsible for the rainbow, since he alone can sustain the fragile harmony of the cosmos, circumcision is a sign which must be performed by Avraham and his progeny. Samuel Ballantine describes the delicate balance between the unconditional decree of God and the conditioned response required by the covenant.

Envisioned is an unconditional commitment on God’s part that is entrusted to the best and the worst the human partner may offer in response. Human partners may “break” the covenant with God, and as a consequence remove themselves from the covenantal relationship. But God does not “break” the covenant, even when it is violated or abandoned by human failure, for God has established it as “everlasting.” Circumcision is the sign that the human community desires to commit itself to God in a relationship of comparable loyalty and intensity. As the everlasting covenant commits God to an unending pursuit of relationship with human kind, so circumcision marks

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<sup>30</sup> H. Eilberg-Schwartz, ed. *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York, 1992)

<sup>31</sup> Westermann 265; Sarna, *Genesis*, 385 - 86

the bodily organ that generated human life with an ineradicable sign of commitment and obedience.<sup>32</sup>

This covenant enlists the community of Avraham and Sarah into a mutual commitment with God, thereby progressing the conceptual development of covenant within Torah. By entering into this unconditional covenant, Avraham and Sarah become harbingers of a renewed humanity which will possess the relational harmony of the creational order, walking in peace with God and self.

### ***Mishkan and World Builders***

Though the covenant is established with Avraham and Sarah, the full restoration of relational harmony is not realized, of course, within their life span or by their most immediate offspring. Not only has fraternal harmony not been restored to all of humanity, but also the relationships internal to the family of Avraham and Sarah still exhibit the fragility of the creational order. Jacob and Esau, Rebecca and Leah, Joseph and his brothers all serve to illustrate both the continued incursion of chaos, and the still veiled image of God in humanity. The story progresses, though, when the God of the patriarchs becomes the God of Sinai.

Though many Christian theological disciplines have noted the unconditional as compared to the conditional nature of the two covenants, most have chosen to ignore the extent of the indelible and organic connection between them. Prior to calling Moses into service, the Torah informs that God “remembered” (יָזָכַר) the covenant with the patriarchs (2:24), a phrase reminiscent of God’s remembrance of Noah (Genesis 8:1). This occurs immediately

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<sup>32</sup> Ballantine, 113

prior to declaring that the only sign the Children of Israel will receive is that “you will serve God on this mountain” (3:12), an allusion to the Sinaitic Covenant. The implication is that the covenant at Sinai is part of the natural progression of the patriarchal covenant. Though the covenants are viewed as progressive revelation by traditional Dispensationalists, bifurcation of the revelatory process allows them to understand the Avrahamic Covenant as perpetual, while considering the Mosaic Covenant temporal. However, if later revelation eradicates the Sinai Covenant, as they believe, then it would follow that it would by economy also eliminate the necessity of the former covenant. Since the covenant with the community of Avraham and Sarah is perpetual, by progressive association so too must the covenant at Sinai be perpetual.

The conditional nature of the Sinaitic Covenant is not related to its resiliency, rather to the effectiveness of Israel’s vocation as proposed by the covenant. Israel is commended by God the responsibility of imaging his holiness in the world.

Speak to the entire community of the Children of Israel and say to them:  
Holy are you to be,  
for holy am I, YHWH your God!” (Lev. 19:2)

From the inception of the covenant, Israel is called to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation”(Exodus 19:6). This expression describes a careful balance of covenantal responsibilities which imitate those of original humanity. In the first two chapters of Genesis, humanity is portrayed as having an essential participation in the creative process. God names the day and the night, the heavens and the land, the seas and the luminaries, thereby determining their essential natures and functions in the cosmic harmony. But man is allowed to participate in the naming process, describing the essential natures of each

animal. Humanity is given the original responsibility of imaging God in this world and is given sovereignty of the earth's resources (1:26-28). In light of God's benevolence, it is understood that the sovereign role requires care for the welfare of its charge. The second divine command to humankind is to till (לַעבְדָּהּ lit. to serve or to worship) the ground (2:15).<sup>33</sup> This command is replicated in God's promised sign to Moses, that he and the Children of Israel would "serve/worship God (אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים) by this mountain" (Ex. 3:24). While the command is very much the same as the first command, it is actualized somewhat differently. Humans image God as kings in the first, but as servants in the second. If Israel is obedient to the commands and ordinances of Torah, they will image God as kings and priests, sovereigns and servants. Worship will be their ritual performance of the primordial intention for triangulated service between God, humanity, and creation. Levenson refers to Israel's dual role as "an aristocracy of humility."<sup>34</sup>

Like the Avrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant requires a committed partnership to work. Failure to keep the latter covenant will not abrogate it, anymore than failure to circumcise abrogates the former covenant. In both cases, though, lack of committed partnership places the functionality of the covenant in abeyance. Although perpetuity of the covenant is not lost due to failure to comply, suspension of the blessings and the temporary lapse of covenantal security do result. By virtue of human participation, this covenant is fragile, as is the rest of the creational order.

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<sup>33</sup> T.E. Fretheim, "Creator, Creature and Co-Creation in Genesis 1-2", *Word and World*, Supplement Series 1, 15

<sup>34</sup> J. D. Levenson, *Sinia and Zion: An Entry into the Hebrew Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 31

In progression, the covenants initiate a complete restoration of the creational order. The covenant with Noah reestablishes the delicate harmony of nature and the covenant with Avraham and Sarah initiates relational harmony between God and humans, and among humanity. But the Mosaic Covenant restores the last and greatest piece of the creational order by reinitiating human sovereignty and service through the image of the Divine. Repeatedly, Torah calls Israel to a life of holiness. The progressive flow of the covenantal restoration of creative order, as it appears in Torah, can be represented by the following chiastic structure.

Man is created in the image of God to be both  
sovereign and servant over the familiar world.

A fragile cosmic harmony is restored  
through the covenant with Noah.

A fragile relational harmony is restored  
through the covenant with Sarah and Avraham.

Israel is constituted as Divine image bearers  
“a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

I have previously established that Shabbat observance, instituted within the Sinai Covenant, binds the holiness of Israel to the seventh day rest of creation. Further allusions to creative scheme can be seen throughout the covenant. The appointed times Israel is to celebrate and observe are constructed around seven day, seven week and seventh month matrixes (Lev.23). Even the arrival at Sinai may suggest the heptadic structure of creation. Exodus 19:1-2 announces that Israel arrives at Sinai “on the third new moon” after the exodus from Egypt. Since the last two weeks of Nissan and four weeks of Iyyar have

passed, Israel arrives on the seventh week.<sup>35</sup> After six weeks of preparation and travel they come to rest where their covenantal journey begins.

Torah clearly envisions the act of covenant-making as re-creative liturgy informed by Israel's knowledge of God's cosmic design. But nowhere is this more pronounced than in the building of the *Mishkan*, which occupies the second half of Exodus. The voluminous material should immediately alert us to the importance of the *Mishkan*. Again the heptadic structure offers a prominent indication of the *Mishkan's* connection to the creational order. After six days of preparation Moses enters the cloud of the divine presence on Sinai (Exodus 24:16). Moses is then given the divine instructions concerning the specifics of the *Mishkan* construction in seven separate speeches, each distinguished by the formulaic introduction "The *YHWH* spoke to Moshe", or "The *YHWH* said to Moshe" (25:1; 30:11; 17; 22; 34; 31:1; 12). The seventh speech culminates with God's instructions for Shabbat observance (31:12-17), punctuated by the divine decree of death for those who violate it. The seventh speech is followed by the account of the Golden Calf and the ensuing chaos. After Moses pleads with God for the people (Ch. 33), the tablets of the covenant are reissued (Ch. 34). The actual building of the *Mishkan* begins in Exodus 35, initiated by a restatement of the Shabbat commands (2-3). The account of the *Mishkan* building continues through Exodus 40, with continual references to the work being done, "as *YHWH* had commanded Moshe". This phrase is most prominent in the last chapter of the account where it is repeated seven times.<sup>36</sup> The heptadic structure is not the only literary

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<sup>35</sup> U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1983), 224

<sup>36</sup> N. M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 213  
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cue that the *Mishkan* belongs to a covenant of re-creation. The narrative recorded in Exodus 25-40 forms an interesting chiasmic picture.

The presence of God appears in a cloud (24:15-18)

The Divine instruction for the building of the *Mishkan* (25-31:11)

Command for Shabbat observance and penalty for violation (31:12-17)

The Golden Calf idolatry and ensuing chaos (ch.32)

Command for Shabbat observance and penalty of violation (35:2-3)

*Mishkan* is built according to the instruction of Moses (35:4-40)

The presence of God appears in the *Mishkan* (40:34-36).

The literary brush paints a vivid picture of the re-creation as represented by the *Mishkan*. Failed reliance upon the Creator allows chaos to ensue and wreak havoc upon the fragile creative order. But Israel then builds the *Mishkan* according to the covenantal design of God. It is also notable that the glory of God, which resided in a cloud outside of Israel's camp, takes residence in the *Mishkan* following its completion. Jon Levenson describes the parallels between the construction of the *Mishkan* and the construction of the world.

The function of these correspondences is to underscore the depiction of the sanctuary as a world, that is, an ordered supportive, and obedient environment, and the depiction of the world as a sanctuary, that is a place in which the reign of God is visible and unchallenged, and his holiness is palpable, unthreatened and pervasive.<sup>37</sup>

The *Mishkan* does more than complete the cosmic design, it effectively reclaims creation intentions from the disruptive forces of chaos and human sin and re-creates the primordial hopes. Since the *Mishkan* is Israel's primary locus of worship, which is the ritual performance of multilateral service between God and humanity, the acts of *Mishkan* building and occupying bind together Israel's vocation with God's re-creational purposes.

He built his sanctuary like the heights,

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<sup>37</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 86

like the earth that he established forever. (Psalm 78:69)

If Shabbat concretizes Torah's proleptic vision of *kedushah* in the *Olam Habah*, then the *Mishkan* concretizes Israel's role as "junior partners" in building the New World.

### **Israel, Sinai and the New Covenant Order**

From the outset my stated purpose was to begin a process by which Messianic Judaism might labor to develop a canonical narrative we could call our own, a canonical narrative which would allow for the ongoing role of Israel and which could be interwoven with a well developed messianism. Due to the scope of this paper and the sheer volume of work necessary to do so, it was never my intention to complete a canonical narrative. I would, though, like to make a few observations concerning the continuity between the narrative flow I have suggested and the Apostolic Writings which may facilitate further thinking in this direction.

I have already stated my belief that the narrative flow of the Hebrew bible adequately implies the perpetuity of the Sinaitic Covenant, that the conditional nature of the covenant applies to the vocational effectiveness of Israel as a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Disobedience, then, does not abrogate the covenant; neither does it relinquish Israel's responsibility to fulfill it. Nor does a surrogate replace carnal Israel. Kefa's active assessment of a predominantly gentile ecclesia as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood and a holy nation" (Kefa 2:9) is an allusion to the inclusiveness of the covenant with Avraham and Sarah which allows even tribal barriers to be semi-permeable yet not eradicable. The Gentile Church, then, may be viewed as an "associate Israel", called to an existence of

mutual blessing and accountability with carnal Israel. In doing so they comprise “one new humanity” which is called to exemplify the creative balance of the first humanity, a unity of opposites, different yet equal. As the individual and personal embodiment of the entire people of Israel, Yeshua calls Israel and, by association, all humanity into an active state of grace, whereby they are to fulfill their responsibility for imaging the sovereignty and service of God in the re-created world. This can only be accomplished if the fragile distinction between Israel and the nations is preserved.

Hebrews is generally considered to be the most Christological of the Apostolic Writings. Filled with images of the *Mishkan*, it is often used as a justification for the abrogation of the Mosaic Covenant. Yet the rhetoric and symbols included in Hebrews provide models both of and for the establishment of the new reality. In the ninth chapter the *Mishkan* conceptualizes the reality of the creative order in Yeshua in a way that makes it apprehensible, so that what is not yet fully grasped is conformed to that which is already established. So the “greater and more perfect *Mishkan* that is not man made” is effectively greater than the “earthly *Mishkan*”, yet the former is incomprehensible without the latter. Still, the greater efficacy of the “heavenly *Mishkan*” need not, in fact must not, nullify the cosmology and significance which stand behind Israel’s priestly covenant. If this should happen, its own descriptive and constructive values would be destroyed. As a sacred ontology it conforms itself to the existent social reality, and the social reality to itself. As Messianic Jews it will be both our theological and practical task to bring the newer revelation of the priestly role into conformity with the ongoing historical reality of the Jewish people.