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CHAPTER 1

CHAOS GODS

FRAGMENTS FROM THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Behind and around the religious traditions of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, is a rich and varied world of gods, monsters and monster gods commonly referred to as the ancient Near East. Covering the region from southwest Asia to northeast Africa and from the invention of writing (c. 3000 BCE) to the rise of Hellenism under Alexander the Great (c. 330 BCE), the ancient Near East includes a very broad range of religions, languages and literary traditions, including Egyptian, Vedic, Sumerian, Babylonian, Canaanite, Assyrian, Phoenician, Israelite and Judean. Yet what we know about them comes mostly from piecing together fragments, relics of what for the most part has not survived. Even when reading more or less whole texts, it is clear that the conceptual landscapes reflected in and generated by them are extremely complex and often unfamiliar to western ideas of self, society and world. Indeed, within a single literary history, such as that of ancient Egypt, there is a tremendous amount of diversity from city to city, from subculture to subculture, and from generation to generation. All this is to make clear from the outset that these stories do not fit together into some single integrated "mythological" whole. Nor can

they be reduced to a handful of archetypal struggles and quests. Their gods and monsters are not simply the personae of a god with a thousand faces. Neither are they all surface manifestations of some deep underlying mythological structure that reflects a universal "savage" mind. These sorts of interpretive claims about ancient myths and mythology ultimately deny the particularities of the different stories that are being studied.¹ Yet neither can we deny that the conceptual landscapes reflected in many of these texts are historically related. Clearly there has been a great deal of cultural migration and intermingling among the various traditions of the ancient Near East over the millennia.

TO ORDER AND BACK

One especially common feature among ancient Near Eastern stories of cosmogony (world beginnings) is the motif of *creation out of chaos*. Many ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies envision the world as we know it taking form out of, and sometimes against, a primordial chaos. In some texts, this primordial chaos is imagined as a kind of precosmic soup. In several Egyptian stories, for example, the world begins as a small hill rising out of Nūn, which is the boundless, undifferentiated watery abyss.² Likewise the cosmogony of Genesis 1 begins with "the earth being a formless void, with darkness over the face of the deep and a wind of God sweeping across the waters." The words translated "formless void" (*tohu wabohu*), "deep" (*tehom*), and "the waters" (*hammayim*) combine to suggest an amorphous, watery chaos from which God will speak the world in all its complexity into existence. Later, in Genesis 6–8, God will try to undo the very same creation by opening the floodgates in the heavens above the earth and the deeps beneath it, thereby allowing these primordial chaos waters to return in drowning torrents. In this story world, then, the primordial chaos waters are identified with both creation and destruction, cosmic birth and death: on the one hand, it is the *materia prima*, the original material from which all life emerges; on the other hand, it is the deadly flood, whose violent inbreaking would mean death and the end of a livable world ecology. Already in this double meaning of the primordial chaos waters (as source of, and threat to, creation), we see how

cosmogonic beginnings and apocalyptic endings resemble one another: both take place on the edge of the world as we know it. Both involve a transition between cosmos and chaos, cosmogony being about cosmos *emerging out of* chaos and apocalypse being about cosmos *returning to* chaos in order that a new cosmos may emerge. Both cosmogonic beginnings and apocalyptic endings are visions of the edge of the world.

These days we are familiar with the idea of order emerging out of chaos and returning to it, thanks to chaos and complexity theory. Granted that entropy, the Second Law of Thermodynamics, holds true for the long run of things. Our now middle-aged cosmos is steadily running out of energy and its structures are dissipating into chaos—a concept many of us can understand from personal experience. Yet along this irreversible road to heat death, we keep discovering chance movement in the opposite direction: new complex structures are emerging *out of* chaos.³ Indeed, that is what our livable world is. That is what an ecosystem is. That is what life is. Entropy is not only the end of the world but also its source. Chaos is both deadly and fecund.

Less familiar but nonetheless fascinating to those of us attuned to the sciences of chaos is the idea that primordial chaos might take the form of divinity, or rather divine monstrosity. In many ancient Near Eastern stories, the chaos out of and against which the world is created is personified as a "chaos god" or "chaos monster" who must be defeated by another god in order to create or maintain cosmic order. These monstrous chaos gods are paradoxical representations of radical otherness appearing within the order of things, the otherworldly within the worldly, the primordial within the ordial. They lurk on the thresholds of the known, at the edges of the cosmological map, revealing deep insecurities within a cosmos that trembles in the balance between order and chaos. Indeed, by personifying chaos in the form of a chaos god, these texts suggest that this sense of cosmic insecurity is rooted within divinity itself. Beneath faithful assertions in these stories that the cosmos is hospitable, secure and meaningfully ordered—in a word, *heimlich*—one senses the presence of a lurking *unheimlich* chaos within the divine that at any moment might come flooding back over everything.

CHAOS MOTHER

This is the story of the chaos god Tiamat, primordial mother of all gods, even of the creator god Marduk who kills her in order to form the world out of her corpse. Her story is told in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, one of the fullest and most complex surviving creation stories of the ancient Near East.⁴

The story begins before the creation of earth and heavens, even before the birth of the great Babylonian god Marduk, and even before the birth of his begetter Ea, with the first divine couple, Tiamat and Apsu. The name Apsu, related to the Sumerian Abzu, suggests "watery deep" or "sweet water ocean."⁵ Tiamat means "sea," and in the opening lines of the story she is called Mummu Tiamat, that is, "mother" or "maker" Tiamat. Together they represent a dual personification of the primordial chaos waters out of which all else will be born. In this beginning, very unlike Genesis 1, there is no solitary creator god speaking the world into existence with the opening line "Let there be light." Here it all begins with the intimate intermingling of the primordial pair: as Tiamat and Apsu "mix their waters" together, the "gods were born within them."

But with the birth of this second generation of gods, the honeymoon is over. Almost immediately, the divine children begin troubling their parents, especially their mother Tiamat. So much so, in fact, that Apsu determines to kill them off. Before he can do so, however, the young gods learn of his intention and beat him to the punch: the wise god Ea puts Apsu to sleep with a spell and then kills him, setting up his own dwelling place in Apsu's body. There, "inside pure Apsu," Ea then creates Marduk, who soon gains pre-eminence among the gods. The elder god Anu gives Marduk the four winds, which he uses to stir up Tiamat further.

Upon hearing of Apsu's murder, Tiamat is convinced by those gods still loyal to her to attack Ea and the rival gods who are dwelling in his corpse. Cloaked in radiant, godlike dragons and surrounded by a horned serpent, another dragon, a rabid dog and a number of other animal-human combinations, Tiamat rages out of control. Terrified, the rival gods search for one among them who can face her and her armies. Marduk rises to the occasion, and the other gods, overjoyed, ordain him their champion and king. They send him off to battle and commence getting drunk.

In the battle that ensues, Marduk ultimately defeats Tiamat in a rather gory, even gratuitous face-to-face battle. As they close in on one another, Marduk dispatches a fierce storm wind against her. When she opens her mouth to swallow it, she is unable to close her lips, and the wind begins to distend her like an over-filled balloon. Seizing the opportunity, Marduk shoots an arrow into her belly, and she explodes into two pieces. He then throws down her corpse, tramples her lower part, smashes her skull with his mace, cuts her arteries, and has the North Wind carry the smell of her death "as good news" to his compatriot gods back home in Apsu's corpse.⁶

While the other gods catch the whiff and begin the victory celebration (remember that they have been drinking for some time already), Marduk proceeds to use her body to create the world. He slices her, "like a fish for drying," and makes half of her into a roof for the sky. With the other half he forms the earth. He channels her chaotic primordial waters into springs and rivers, opening the Tigris and Euphrates from her eyes, and making her spittle into clouds. Marduk then turns his attention to other, less ecological and more religious-political matters. He establishes a religious order and rituals devoted to him, and makes Babylon the center of the universe and "home of the great gods." Thus we see how the divine establishment and maintenance of cosmic order are intimately related to the divine establishment and maintenance of political and social order (as microcosmos). Babylon is the *axis mundi*, the center of the universe, the navel of the cosmic body. In fact, there is good evidence that the *Enuma Elish* was used in rituals related to the Babylonian *Akitu* new year festival, which served to reaffirm the divinely ordained and guaranteed order not only of creation but also of Babylon as the center of creation.⁷

Cosmic and political order are established and guaranteed through the overcoming and containment of primordial chaos, here embodied in the figure of Tiamat. The cosmos is imagined as her filleted corpse. On the one hand, the chaos god Tiamat is clearly conceived as a monstrous threat to both cosmic and social-political order, and the survival of the world as well as the survival of the state depend on the creator god Marduk defeating her and keeping her from returning. On the other hand, that which

threatens cosmic and political order is also the source of that order.

The fact that the primordial chaos is personified and monstrosized not only as feminine but as maternal (*Mummu Tiamat*, "Mother Tiamat," mother of the gods and source of all creation) seems to beg for psychoanalysis. Indeed, Tiamat might be considered a prototype of what Barbara Creed has called the "monstrous-feminine" in modern horror.⁸ Tiamat is both *materia prima* and *mater prima*, original matter and original mother, and the story can be read as a story of the birth of her children and their subsequent denial of their—and the world's—original fusion with her. Read from this angle, the story is not only about Babylon's champion god subduing the chaos monster god in order to create a livable world; it is about the creation of the cosmos as a violent denial of its original fusion with and continued (but largely repressed) dependence on the chaos mother.

Notice, moreover, that the one who defeats the chaos monster in this story is also the one who most resembles her. Like Tiamat, Marduk is associated with images of cosmic turbulence: he uses a flood wave "to stir up Tiamat," he wields an "unfaceable" flood weapon, a tempest, a tornado, and a whirlwind. In fact, Marduk's own description is monstrously and awesomely unnatural, defying the imagination. His limbs are said to be "beyond comprehension, impossible to understand, too difficult to perceive," he has four eyes and four ears, and fire blazes forth from his mouth whenever he moves his lips.⁹ Perhaps it takes a chaos monster to kill a chaos monster.

Marduk's defeat of Tiamat in the story may appear to be final. Yet on a deeper level there is a lurking sense that the watery monster of primordial chaos might stir and rage out of control yet again if not continually kept under Marduk's lordly control. Tiamat is killed but might not stay that way. Living on the (undead?) slaughtered body of the chaos god who bore you produces at least a little anxiety. In the ancient world, as in the modern monster tale, it is difficult to keep a good monster down. They have a tendency to reawaken, reassemble their dismembered parts, and return for a sequel. Therefore Marduk is called upon toward the end of the final tablet to keep up the good work of maintaining the order and stability of the cosmos as well as the order and stability of Babylon.

Employing a kind of realized eschatology of "already-but-not-yet," the text calls on Marduk to keep defeating the already defeated Tiamat:

Let him defeat Tiamat, constrict her breath and shorten
her life,
So that for future people, till time grows old,
She shall be far removed, not kept here, distant forever.¹⁰

The desire of those literally living on Tiamat's body to keep her "far removed" and "distant forever" is deeply ironic, and suggests, once again, the *paradox of the monstrous* as the other within. Tiamat, the radically other, the anti-cosmic and anti-Babylonian, is also the most immanent. Her body is the cosmos. Human and divine life come from it and return to it. Here, paradoxically, is an intimacy and immanence that induces horror.

THE CLOUDRIDER AND THE WARRIOR GODDESS

The cosmic horror that looms over the world in the *Enuma Eliš* pervades other ancient Near Eastern stories of monstrous chaos gods as well. In the Sanskrit hymns from the Indian *Rig Veda*, for example, the creator god Indra must slay the chaos demon Vṛtra in order to release its primordial chaos waters as life source, thereby creating and establishing a livable cosmos, the order of which is integrally related to Vedic understanding of social order.¹¹ And in Egyptian tradition, the sun god Re's battle against the dragon-like chaos god Apophis is a daily drama of world re-creation. Apophis is a god of darkness that threatens the sun's coming and going and, therefore, cosmic regularity. He must be confronted by Re at the cosmic threshold moments of dawn and dusk. An eyeless, earless, screaming embodiment of primordial chaos, Apophis stands for the return of the cosmologically repressed.¹²

This sense of cosmic horror is especially pervasive in the cycle of stories about Baal and Anat in Ugaritic narrative poetry, a body of literature closely related to the Hebrew Bible.¹³ The central theme in the Baal-Anat Cycle is *theomachy*, that is, the struggle of various gods within the Ugaritic pantheon for ascendancy under the supreme but rather passive father god, El.¹⁴ The champion in

the story cycle is the cloud-riding rain god Baal ("Lord"), who is often aided in his efforts to be enthroned over the other gods by the independent, wild-spirited warrior goddess Anat.

The first adversary is Prince Yamm (= Hebrew *yam*, "sea"), a divine personification of the primordial chaos waters who is called "beloved of El," and who appears to be favored over Baal by the divine mother Athirat.¹⁵ He is an enemy of Baal and Anat, then, but not of the divine parents. Yamm demands that El hand Baal over to him, and El does, which leads to a battle in which Baal is victorious, thanks to a special weapon which leaps from Baal's hands "like a raptor" and strikes Yamm between the eyes. Yamm collapses and his convulsing body falls to the earth, where Baal dismembers him and is proclaimed king.¹⁶ At another point in the story cycle Anat, too, claims to have slain Yamm. "Surely I fought Yamm, the Beloved of El," she asserts, "Surely I bound Tunnan and destroyed him. / I fought the Twisty Serpent, / The Potentate with Seven Heads."¹⁷ Apparently Yamm has been slain more than once, but keeps coming back for more. It is hard to keep a chaos monster down.

The second adversary is Divine Mot (= Hebrew *mawet*, "death"), also beloved of El. Mot is the voracious god of death and the underworld whose gaping mouth reaches up to heaven and down to hell. Upon hearing of Baal's earlier victory and enthronement, he threatens to rip Baal to pieces and then eat his flanks, innards and forearms. "Surely you will descend into Divine Mot's throat," he vows, "Into the gullet of El's Beloved."¹⁸ In the fight that ensues, Mot kills Baal, taking him "like a lamb in my mouth, like a kid crushed in the chasm of my throat." But then Anat rises in a vengeful rage. She seizes Mot, splits him in two with her sword, grinds him to powder with millstones, and sows him in an open field so that birds devour him.¹⁹ With Mot defeated, Baal is resurrected and returns to the throne, an event that the story associates with the return of life and fertility (perhaps signifying the coming of autumn rains). As the chaos god who threatens cosmic order is overcome, the world ecology is restored. But this is not the end of the story. Later, Mot returns to battle Baal again. After a long, evenly matched struggle, El intervenes on Baal's behalf and Mot surrenders. Thus Baal maintains his throne, at least for the time being. By the end of the cycle, the sense is that Baal's preeminence

and the related well-being of the world ecology are not entirely secure. There is always the possibility of a rematch.

As in the *Enuma Elish*, moreover, both chaos monster slayers, Baal and Anat, are themselves often figures of chaos more than order. Baal brings not only rains but also storms and lightning, which represent cosmic chaos more than they do peace, harmony and fertility. And just before Baal's messengers arrive at Anat's palace, she is depicted battling in the valley between two towns, "the people of the seashore" and "the populace of the sunrise," which may be metaphors for the transition between day and night (i.e., when the sun meets the sea on the horizon). Whether metaphorical or literal, her passion for the chaos of war is striking, as she adorns herself with severed heads and arms and revels in neck-deep gore:

Under her, like balls, are heads,
Above her, like locusts, hands,
Like locusts, heaps of warrior-hands.
She fixes heads to her back,
Fastens hands to her belt.
Knee-deep she gleans in warrior blood,
Neck-deep in the gore of soldiers.²⁰

The "adolescent" warrior goddess Anat is turbulent, chaotic and anomalous. As Neil Walls has made clear, moreover, her liminal identity represents a threat to established patriarchal gender norms. Neither mother nor daughter nor wife, a violent warrior goddess with her own palace, she may have represented "social chaos," eliciting "androcentric fear of uncontrolled women."²¹ Yet in the Baal-Anat Cycle she is also a champion of the chaos battle who is credited with the slaying of a figure whose ascendancy would have been the ultimate ecological catastrophe. Here again, as with Marduk versus Tiamat, it appears that in some sense it takes one to kill one.

NO REST

Baal's and Anat's victories over Yamm and Mot are, like Marduk's victory over Tiamat, entirely inconclusive, and therefore so is Baal's

lordship, and therefore so is the security of the world ecology. Taken collectively, there is in this story cycle a profound and abiding sense of precariousness and insecurity built into the order of things. This insecurity is personified most vividly in the figures of Mot and Yamm, who, like Baal, never seem to stay dead for long. Mot kills Baal. Then Anat kills Mot. Baal comes back to life. Then Mot returns. Mot and Baal battle once more, and Mot surrenders. But for how long? Likewise, the fact that Anat and Baal have each killed Yamm at least once suggests that it is impossible to keep a good chaos monster, or for that matter a good chaos monster killer, down. If Baal can come back, and if Yamm and Mot have been killed more than once, then clearly the battle for ascendancy and stability within the divine family is endless. As J. C. L. Gibson writes, this text "faces up the powers that be with both irony and circumspection, aware of the knife-edge that separates harmony from chaos and life from death."²²

Recall, moreover, that Yamm and Mot are both "beloved of El," and that Yamm is allied with El's divine consort "Athirat of the Sea." Here again, the anti-cosmic, monstrous forces of chaos in this narrative cycle, as in the *Enuma Elish*, are not anti-divinity or "evil" in some dualistic sense. Rather, these chaos monster gods are part of a divinity that is deeply divided within itself about the future viability of the cosmos and of life as humankind knows it. Religion, in this context, is not simply cosmic, as is often asserted by modern theorists of religion. Rather it is a locus for negotiating between the cosmic and the chaotic, which are, paradoxically, both interdependent and mutually exclusive. In these stories, cosmic horror is profoundly theological. The precariousness of the world as a livable abode for humankind is believed to be rooted in a divinity in which creation and chaos are in perpetual and ultimately unresolvable tension with one another.