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Essays on Conceptions of Origins

Edited by

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Introduction

This volume is based on papers read and discussed at a workshop held in 2000 at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. That meeting, organized by David Shulman, Guy Stroumsa, and myself, aimed to investigate in some detail the conceptions presented within several major cultures regarding the beginnings of the world, of humanity, and of social organization. The framework of the discussion was deliberately formulated in general terms, leaving a broad scope for diverse interpretations of the subject at hand, according to individual taste and scholarly preoccupation. If the volume that has emerged from this series of reflections is not entirely homogeneous, it will be found, so we hope, to be lively and in some ways unexpected.

The volume contains discussions of some of the major civilizations of antiquity and of the early modern world, but there is no attempt to cover all or even most of them. The choice of those represented may appear arbitrary, depending as it did on the availability of scholars and on considerations such as the potential for a fruitful exchange of ideas (from which point of view the workshop indeed proved highly successful). Included are papers on ancient Mesopotamia, ancient Greece, ancient India, ancient Iran, and classical China, as well as on early Christianity and on late medieval and early modern Spain. Unfortunately, we were unable to include in the volume an interesting paper presented at the workshop on early Islamic conceptions of creation.

The points of departure for the papers dealing with creation and world origins are ancient Mesopotamia (Peter Machinist), Iran (Shaul Shaked) and China (Andrew Plaks). Those dealing with the origins of humanity are concerned with Iran (Albert de Jong) and early Christianity (Guy Stroumsa). Two papers focus on written language. One of these deals with the chronologically inverted “back to the origins” formulation of events used in some ancient Mesopotamian

texts (Nathan Wasserman). The other discusses South Indian narratives that establish an intimate connection between the origins of two foundational elements of culture: poetry and grammar (David Shulman). A final important group of papers treats of social cohesion and group identity, in ancient Chinese and early modern Western texts (Yuri Pines and Gideon Shelach), and in ancient Greece (Margalit Finkelberg).

Nathan Wasserman's article deals with the rhetorical device *hysteron-proteron* as used in Old Babylonian literary texts. To this device of recounting events in reverse order the author contrasts another, in which a hankering is expressed in the form of a sequence of events leading back to one's origins. Another set of contrasts introduced into the discussion is that of iconicity and markedness, as both stylistic devices and rhetorical tools. In the ancient Mesopotamian mind, the author asserts, time and space permeate each other. The flow of time – a non-existent concept in the ancient Babylonian world – is addressed, so to speak, by looking at the past and advancing backwards into the future.

In the article by Peter Machinist we follow an attempt to reconstruct what lies behind the principal Mesopotamian mythical stories of origins. This reconstruction shows that the myth of origins has a depth and subtlety not entirely suspected before. The Babylonian story of creation as it has come down to us consists, so we learn, of several different stories and traditions that served the redactors and scribes as raw material, from which the various different versions were derived. The concern with order or its lack—that is to say, with pre-creation chaos—is prominent in all of these stories. Machinist's elaborate discussion of the possible relationships between the different elaborations of the ancient stories makes fascinating reading, even if the details of the reconstruction cannot be proven.

Margalit Finkelberg devotes her paper to the perceptions of Greek origins in the fragmentary survivals of Greek literature that seem to pertain to the early ages in Greece. In the eighth century BCE, she concludes, there was a felt need to formulate a common platform for the unity of the Hellenes out of a reality of heterogeneous population groups. It was this that led to the myth of the Heroic Age becoming the foundation of the new Greek civilization.

David Shulman presents a perception of the world as essentially consisting of well formulated and correctly wrought poetry. The material of his paper is culled from South Indian literature, but the core idea, in different formulations, can be identified in earlier Sanskrit literature. In the different versions of the stories he discusses, the manifestation of a book of grammar, or, in a wider sense, a book of rules of poetics, makes it possible to create a solid foundation for existence. However, there is also a hint, in this corpus of discourses about poetry, grammar, and the world, that rules alone are insufficient to create great poetry.

Zoroastrianism presents a greater variety of positions than might be expected at the outset. Albert de Jong discusses a range of attitudes expressed in the Zoroastrian writings toward other religious revelations. He classifies the Zoroastrian attitudes as conforming to two broad types, the one a more restricted view of humanity that essentially incorporates members of the Zoroastrian community itself, the other a broader view encompassing the whole of humanity. Both views seem to coexist and to generate some of the stories of origins and of religious heroism and early revelation that fill the pages of the Zoroastrian books, or those which have survived. My own contribution moves along somewhat similar lines in discussing different perceptions of cosmic origins as defining religious groups, both Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian, in Iran.

In his discussion of early Christian reflections on the stories of Adam and of Paradise, Guy Stroumsa shows the tortuous paths that Christian thinkers had to take in attempting to place human origins and eschatological expectations in their proper position *vis à vis* the cardinal Christian event of the advent of Jesus. Stroumsa's paper offers a fine analysis of the shifts in the sense and meanings of Paradise.

A different type of genesis is at the basis of Sabine MacCormack's study of the Spanish historians of late medieval and early modern times. In their descriptions of the Roman conquest of the Iberian peninsula and of life under Roman rule, and later of the resistance to the Islamic conquest and the creation of an empire of their own, these writers probed their identity by asking at what point the population of Spain could begin to be called Spanish.

In Andrew Plaks's discussion of early Chinese texts, we not only hear about Chinese points of view but also are treated to a survey of pronouncements on cosmic origins from Greek, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources. Despite the seemingly enormous gulf between the modes of expression and the basic positions of these diverse sources, there is some evidence of a similar endeavour to find a formulation that might reconcile the idea of a single-act, volitional coming-into-being of the universe with the notion of endless regression back into the past; the idea of a teleology of creation as against a multifarious evolution. It is hardly necessary to point out that there is no single solution that remains without large intellectual puzzles.

The comparative approach displayed by Yuri Pines and Gideon Shelach embraces, on the one hand, the Chinese thinkers of the *Zhanguo* period, that of the 'Warring States' (fifth–third centuries BCE), and, on the other, the political and social thinkers of the nineteenth century in Europe and North America. The theme is that of the need and justification for the existence of a state, and in some respects there are indeed striking similarities in the responses of the two sets of writings, despite the considerable distance, in terms of cultural milieu, living conditions, and chronology, between the two sets of comparanda. There are of course also important divergences, which the authors point out. In some of these, one may find that older western traditions display layers of thinking more similar to the classical Chinese positions than those of the modern western ones discussed by the authors. For example, the Chinese thinkers' emphasis on the role of sages as political leaders seems to resemble the interest in philosopher rulers displayed by the Platonic school, which had a strong following especially in the Islamic Middle Ages.

The discussion of origins, not surprisingly, reveals itself as a statement of identity and purpose. Through discourse concerning questions such as where things come from, or whence we originate, groups define their borders, point out those who are excluded, and formulate how they wish to interpret, for example, their mode of linguistic expression, their social structure, or the seemingly objective fact of their being human.

It is a pleasure to express our deep appreciation for the help received from various quarters in organizing the workshop and in producing this volume. The physical surroundings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities proved to be, as always, congenial, and the staff of the Academy did their best to make the meeting pleasant, fruitful, and memorable.

This book has benefited enormously from the skillful and loving care lavished on it by Deborah Greniman, the Israel Academy's English language editor, who has seen it through the press. The Academy's Publications Committee approved the book for inclusion among the Academy's publications. We thank its members and especially its Chair, Professor Hayim Tadmor, for making this publication possible.

Shaul Shaked