

Bible, Creation & Apocalypse an introduction

Don C. Benjamin
(Arizona State University)



Baal Creating
Ugarit
1700-1300 B.C.E.
Limestone, 142x50 cm
Louvre Museum

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Introduction

Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction explores an anthology of biblical and ancient Near Eastern creation stories and apocalypse stories, whose perspectives on creation and the end time continue to be a major influence in Judaism, Christianity and Islam today.

In the book of Genesis the Hebrews tell their own versions of the creation stories of Babylon, in whose sphere of influence they lived after 587 B.C.E. These traditions include the Stories of the Heavens and the Earth (Gen 1:1–2:4), the Stories of Adam and Eve (Gen 2:4–4:2), the Stories of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:3–5:32), and the Flood Stories (Gen 6:1–11:26). They provide little truly scientific information about the origins of the world or the origins of humanity. Planetary geology, paleontology, and archaeology are modern, not ancient interests.

The Hebrews lacked both the data for and the interest in forging a chain between themselves and early humans. Instead they told creation stories to put human life in their time into perspective. Their creation stories are not reports on the past. They are timeless reflections on human life. They explore questions about life and death. People in every culture raise these questions to orient themselves to the greater world in which they live. Therefore, biblical storytellers set creation stories during the epoch primeval, which does not date events, it qualifies them. Setting the action of a story in the epoch primeval does not explain when something took place, but why things are the way they are in the time when the story itself is told. Only events of universal significance take place in the epoch primeval. Stories set in the epoch primeval are philosophical or theological, not geological or paleontological.

The work of Bernard W. Anderson, Creation Versus Chaos: The Reinterpretation of Mythical Symbolism in the Bible (1967) and Bernard F. Batto, Slaying the Dragon: mythmaking in the biblical tradition (1992) are seminal to the approach taken in Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction. For Anderson creation stories and apocalypse stories mirror one another in form, setting and intention. Both genres allow cultures to transition from an old world to a new world. For Batto ancient Israel, like other cultures in the ancient Near East, was a myth making culture. Like Bertil Albrektson, History and the Gods (1967) Batto challenged the consensus that the Hebrews differed from other cultures of the ancient Near East and celebrated the activity of Yahweh only in history and not in myth. “The Death of the First Born of Israel” (Exod 1:7—13:16), for example, is not a history but a creation story. It does not recount the elusive strategy of lightly armed slaves escaping from overloaded Egyptian chariots through the marshes of the “Reed Sea”, but celebrates the primeval confrontation of Yahweh the creator with the chaos of the Red Sea at the end of the earth.



Stairs to Spring from Late, Great Tel Megiddo Art Resource

Today, apocalypse is a threatening genre that warns the powerful of an impending end-of-the-world battle between God and Satan, after which an elite will govern a one-thousand-year empire in God's name. In the world of the Bible, apocalypse was a consoling genre that promised the powerless that their suffering would end soon, and that in the end good, not evil, would prevail. The apocalypse that threatens describes works like [The Late Great Planet Earth](#) (1979) by Hal Lindsey and the fourteen volumes of [Left Behind](#) (1995-) by Timothy F. LeHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. The apocalypse that consoles better describes works like the [Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl](#) (1929–45), written by a Jewish teenager during the years she and her family spent in hiding from the Gestapo in Amsterdam during World

War II, or the writings of Elie Wiesel (1928–), a Jewish survivor of the Nazi death camps whose works chronicle the suffering and the survival of those years.

Most apocalypse stories in the Bible are consoling. The Book of Daniel, for example, is a consoling apocalypse. It does not call upon the people of Judah to take up arms and attack their enemies, but to renew their faith in Yahweh as the divine patron who delivered them from the Babylonians, from the Medes, and from the Persians, and who, in due time, will deliver them from the Greeks as well. They are not to take up arms and wage war against the Hellenists, but to wait patiently for Yahweh to deliver them.

The apocalypse stories in the book of Daniel are the legacy of seers or “watchers,” who call themselves “the holy ones of the Most High” (Dan 7:15–27). These seers have much in common with the shamans in Siberian cultures, in Native American cultures, and in the cultures along the Amazon River in South America. Their stories are not simply exotic coded messages for tracking the events leading to the destruction of the old world. Seers prepare their followers to pass safely through the crisis of dismantling the old world and entering into the new world. The most important skill that seers teach their followers is the ability to recognize authentic leaders. Apocalypse stories give their audiences a crash course in the discernment of spirits.

Seers develop their apocalypse stories by using the ritual of ecstasy, which allows them to time-travel from the human plane into the divine plane. Some meditate to induce ecstasy (1 Kgs 18:41–46). Some fast (1 Kgs 19:1–8), while others induce ecstasy with music or drumming (Exod 15:20–21; 1 Sam 10:5; 16:14–18; 19:19–24; 2 Kgs 3:15–19). Some dance, some use drugs or lapse into ecstasy following a prolonged illness. Ecstasy refocuses the senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting from the human plane to the divine. Although while in ecstasy, seers appear dead because they cannot see, hear, smell, touch, or taste, they are quite alive. Their senses are simply now trained on the divine plane.

Ecstasy and asceticism make seers aware that the human plane is part of a much larger world. What is happening on the human plane is placed in the larger context of what is happening on the divine plane. For seers the real world is not the human world, but the divine world. Everything that happens on the human plane is a result of something that has happened on the divine plane.

The book of Daniel was told by seers who used their heightened level of awareness to take readings of the crisis of Hellenism, which threatened to destroy the land and children of Judah. Their apocalypse stories are not describing something before it happens, but indicating the significance of events that are happening. The intention of their stories is similar to weather forecasts today. Forecasters want to give their audiences information that will help them recognize atmospheric conditions that will affect them, and therefore be better prepared to enjoy them or survive them. Weather forecasts do not change conditions. They change their audiences. The same is true of apocalypse stories. The fall of old worlds and the rise of new worlds, like the weather, run in recognizable and predictable cycles. Apocalypse stories educate their audiences to recognize changes in cosmic conditions that will affect them, and to prepare to survive this breakdown of the cosmos so that, as pioneers, they are ready to enter the new world soon to be created.

The work of John J. Collins, Apocalyptic Imagination: an introduction to the Jewish matrix of Christianity (1984) and Daniel: a commentary on the Book of Daniel (1993) and Paul D. Hanson, The Dawn of Apocalyptic: the historical and sociological roots of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology (1979) are seminal to the approach taken in Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction. For Collins the apocalypse stories in the Book of Daniel unlike the martyr stories in the Books of the Maccabees does not call the people of Judah to take up arms against the rulers of the Hellenist cultures in Syria-Palestine. Instead these apocalypse stories call on the people of Judah to let Yahweh free them from the empire of Alexander the Great just as Yahweh had freed them from the empire of Egypt. For Hanson apocalypse traditions tutor the few who will survive the destruction of the old world and pioneer the new world. These traditions teach them how to discern good from evil in the chaos of the last days, and how to have hope when evil seems to prevail.

Sample Chapters

Much of what pastors and preachers today teach and preach about creation and apocalypse does not intentionally distort the Bible, but it does serious “under-read” it . Without a disciplined commitment to understand and to appreciate the world of the Bible, the Bible itself simply becomes a trampoline for the topics of a time. Preachers take a few warm up bounces off the canvas to get their sermons underway by citing a verse or two from the Bible and then leap into the air to warn against the evils of their time – as they see them. When they wear out, they hit the canvass again for a new verse or two and then back into the air.

There are evils in our time. Good religious leaders will stand prophetically against such evils, but standing against evil is not the same as letting the Bible guide the faith of a congregation. To be authentically “Bible-based” is to be willing to understand the world of the Bible and its way of struggling to live in that world with faith.

Congregations with authentic Bible-based spiritualities are not living museums. Even

the most conservative people of faith in western industrial cultures today do not want to live in the Roman Empire or the Persian Empire or the Babylonian Empire or in slavery in Egypt. Likewise even the most conservative people of faith today do not want to live in worlds without electricity or running water. A Bible-based spirituality is not clinging to the past and fearing the present.

Congregations that understand their biblical roots are faithful to those roots in living in the present. Navigators cannot only steer by a single star. To know where to go is to know where to start. Bible, Creation and Apocalypse, an introduction takes its readers to the worlds where the faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam begin, not where they end.

“Under-reading” the Bible by using it only to footnote preaching or religious school curriculums truly lacks respect for the importance of the Bible in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Bible ceases to be a source, and becomes superficial. The Bible is not a book of answers it is a tradition of questions – serious questions, important questions, the kind of questions humans face at moments of life and death, -- moments of creation and apocalypse.

Consequently, Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction is not about repeating clichés that God created the world and that it will end soon. Most people, even people without faith, know the world where they live, and the faith traditions in which they were raised or which they have abandoned well enough. What they need now is not to simply review all that, but to enjoy the fresh discovery of how to think about the challenges they face in their lives today. This book is about learning how to listen to the important questions the biblical tradition raises. Biblical criticism does not deprive learners of their faith, or the Bible of its miracles, but instead penetrates the biblical traditions -- reads those traditions deeply.

What endures over time is seldom the answers, but the questions about life and death, about right and wrong, about the divine, about the human, and about the earth. The Bible is a powerful testimony to the consistency with which humans engage God, one another, and the earth. These shared questions demonstrate how human beings have faced troubles before, troubles that they have managed well or have managed badly. The Bible crosses social boundaries and challenges dominant worldviews. The Bible unveils a faith that is larger than cultures and has survived for thousands of years. The Bible is not a textbook in the theology of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or even the American way of life, but an exquisite expression of the questions with which, eventually, every human being must struggle.

The annotations to the chapters below will provide some examples of how Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction reconstructs the questions that the creation and apocalypse traditions of Egypt, Mesopotamia and ancient Israel raise about life and death, about beginnings and ends, about faith and about hope.

- Hymn to Ptah
- Hymn to Atum
- Enuma Elish Stories

- Stories of Gilgamesh
- Stories of Atrahasis
- Stories of Adapa
- Declarations of Innocence
- A Sufferer and a Soul in Egypt
- Laments for Ur
- Hymn to the Aten
- Stories of the Heavens and the Earth (Gen 1:1–2:4)

In the world of the Bible “creating” was not making “something from nothing”, it was putting things in their place. Chaos was not “nothing”. Chaos was flood waters moving things from where they belonged, and darkness making it impossible to see where things were supposed to be. Yahweh was not a magician, but an organizer. Yahweh knew the names of things. When Yahweh calls a name like “Light”!, Light answers and takes its proper place. The world of the Bible did not ask: “Where did things come from?” The world of the Bible asked: “Where do things belong?” The Hebrews were not in awe of making something from nothing. What was awesome was the ordered cosmos where things were in their place, where life was possible, where humans could have a harvest and have a child.

- Stories of Adam and Eve (Gen 2:4-4:2)

Eve is not a fool who throws away all the gifts of Eden for a moment of sensual pleasure. The woman in the “Story of the Man and the Woman as Farmers and Childbearers”(Gen 2:24—4:2) is intelligent, selfless and moral. She knows what Yahweh taught the man about the Tree of the Understanding of Good and Evil. She interprets the tradition in good rabbinical style. If the man and the woman are not going to “eat” from the tree, she tells the snake, then they must “build a fence around it” and not even “touch” the tree. When offered the choice between immortal infertility and mortal fertility, she chooses to lay down her life so that others can live. She is the “mother of All Living.”

- Stories of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:3–5:32)

Cain does not murder Abel, he sacrifices him. The Stories of Adam and Eve are stories about how to have a child. The Stories of Cain and Abel are stories about how to have a harvest. In the world of the Bible fertility is land and

children. Both allow humans to create like their divine patrons. They do not create from nothing. They can only create life by laying down their own lives like Eve, or by laying down the life of another like Cain.

- Flood Stories (Gen 6:1–11:26).
- Death of the First Born of Egypt (Exod 1:7-13:16)
- Creation of the First Born of Israel
- Inauguration of Joshua at Jericho (Josh 5:13-6:27)
- Creation of a New Heavens and a New Earth (Isa 24:1-27:13)
- Creation of a New People from Dry bones (Ezek 37:1-14)
- Dedication of Yahweh-is-Here (Ezek 40:1-48:35)
- Ordination of a Son of Man (Dan 7:1-28)
- New Heavens and New Earth in 7x70 Years (Dan 9:1-27)

Before 1900 biblical studies was theological or confessional, and simply explained the doctrines of particular religious traditions. After 1900 biblical studies became historical-critical, and taught students that the Bible had a time and a place and a message of its own. Bernard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament (1957- present) was one of the best historical-critical introductions to the Bible. When this widely used textbook was first published there was a consensus among teachers that historical criticism was the best method to use with students in introductory classes.

Today many teachers still adopt historical-critical textbooks, but many find the books are still too much history and too little criticism. They are histories of ancient Israel or theologies of the Bible, but not introductions to the Bible that can help students understand how stories were told and laws were made in the world of the Bible. Anderson's opening chapter, for example, offers thirty-four pages of well-balanced and reliable history of the Middle Bronze period without critically discussing a single biblical tradition.

A new consensus is emerging among teachers, but nothing like the consensus for which Anderson first published. Teachers still want their students to understand how the Bible functioned in its own world, without overemphasizing the importance of this community of origin. Nevertheless, they also want their students to recognize how each time and place where the Bible is heard continues to enrich and unfold its meaning. Like my previous work in The Old Testament Story, an introduction (2003) Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction will represent a new generation of biblical studies that integrate what historical

criticism taught with what narrative criticism, social-scientific criticism, and feminist criticism are teaching. Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction is more criticism, less history. It teaches students how to listen to the creation and apocalypse traditions in the Bible, and how to understand the ancient people who crafted these stories.

Since it is the biblical traditions themselves that draw students to study the Bible in the first place, Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction will study the Bible by studying traditions from the Bible. Each chapter begins by providing an understanding of the social world of a biblical tradition reconstructed from anthropology and archaeology with special attention to the narrative dimensions of how the genre is constructed, how its characters are developed and the world-view that the tradition reflects. With this background a reading of the tradition will demonstrate the importance of understanding the world of ancient Israel to understand the Bible, and how such anchored understandings of the Bible are essential to any responsible use of the Bible in the world today.

Competition

Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction would compete with works like Stephen L. Cook, The Apocalyptic Literature (2003).

Unlike its competitors Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction combines a classic reading of the Bible with the ideas and questions from other fields in the humanities and social sciences: religious studies, literary criticism, feminist criticism, anthropology and archaeology. It rescues the stories of creation and apocalypse from confessional interpretations and re-installs them among the great and thoughtful works reflecting some of the most important analyses of human experience on life and death.

Market

Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction is intended for students in departments of religious studies at public and religiously affiliated colleges and universities, as well as for adult learners and general audiences.

Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction would be a suitable textbook for courses like:

University of California at Santa Barbara

David G. White (Ph.D., University of Chicago in South Asian religions) “Creation Myths”

Survey of cosmogonic myths within the world's mythological traditions with special attention to pervasive mythemes, historical connections between cognate traditions, and major scholarly theories relating cosmogony to broader social, psychological, ethical, and theological constructs.

University of Pennsylvania

Robert A. Kraft (Ph.D. Harvard University in Christian Origins) “Varieties of Early Christianity: Apocalyptic”

A primary focus of earliest Christianity was the belief that the expected end-times had in some sense arrived with “Messiah Jesus” and that a “new age” was about to begin (or had already begun). When things didn’t develop exactly as expected, various adjustments were made including projection of a new set of end-times expectations. In this seminar, we will explore the (largely Jewish) backgrounds of early Christian “apocalyptic” orientation (centering on “revealed” information about God’s plans, especially for the future) and the ways in which different early Christian representatives expressed and transmitted (or transformed) their apocalyptic hopes and fears as time went on.

University of Chicago

J. Z. Smith (Ph.D. Yale University in History of Religions) “Ancient Mediterranean Myths and Mythologies”

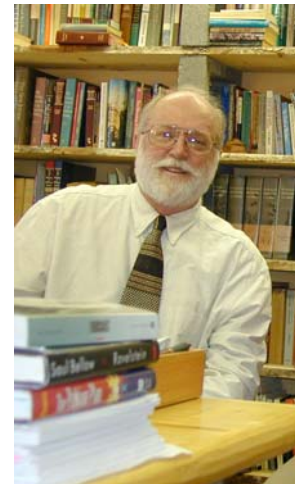
Examines a variety of myths and mythologies from the ancient Mediterranean world, including Canaanite, Israelite, Sumerian, Babylonian, and Greek materials. Besides gaining facility in the close reading of texts, the course inquires as to whether, despite linguistic differences and often antagonistic histories, the ancient Mediterranean world can be usefully imagined as a single, interactive cultural system.

Time Table

Work on Bible, Creation & Apocalypse, an introduction is anticipated to begin in early 2007, and to be completed during the summer of 2008.

About the author

Don C. Benjamin is an avid teacher and writer. Since 1998 he has taught Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in the Department of Religious Studies at Arizona State University (Tempe). He began his teaching career at Rice University in Houston after completing his Ph.D. at the Claremont Graduate University in California with Rolf P. Knierim. His works for the classroom include: Old Testament Story, an introduction (2003) and Social World of Ancient Israel, 1250-587 B.C.E. (1993) with Victor H. Matthews. Old Testament Parallels: laws and stories from the Ancient Near East (1991, 1997, 2006) also with Victor H. Matthews is a best-selling -- readable, portable and affordable companion to the Bible for students in that important first course in biblical studies.



Don C. Benjamin, Ph.D.

Arizona State University
Department of Religious Studies

Mail: 3910 E. Marconi Ave, Phoenix AZ 85032

Phone : 602.906.1826

e-mail : dcben@asu.edu

website : www.doncbenjamin.com