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The ancient Near Eastern combat myth, perhaps best known in its Babylonian vesture as Enuma Elish, was widely diffused throughout the ancient Near East and Egypt, and from there made its way into the Bible, on occasion as nearly full-blown myth but more commonly in truncated mythemes or in mythic allusions. Gregory Mobley seizes upon this phenomenon to put forth a thesis that the chaos myth forms the backdrop, or "backstory," against which the whole of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament, in Christian terminology) was written, as well as portions of the New Testament, the book of Revelation in particular. Mobley argues that the chaos monster that the Creator defeated in the beginning in order to bring about a well-ordered world was not in fact totally vanquished. Rather, it remains under control in a subdued form but always ready, given an opportunity, to lash forth against its divinely imposed confines and once again threaten the divine order. Such an opportunity is provided by human sin, which acts as a trigger allowing the chaos monster to rear its ugly head(s) again, often in the guise of earthly tyrants or other evil persons—hence the title of Mobley’s book, The Return of the Chaos Monsters.

Both the title and the introduction lead the reader to expect that the theme of chaos will be the central focus of each chapter of the book, showing how chaos manifests itself in each of the seven “genres” that constitute the Hebrew Bible: (1) creation, (2) the rest of the Torah, (3) the Former Prophets, (4) the Latter Prophets, (5) Psalms, (6) wisdom, and (7) apocalyptic. In Mobley’s exposition, however, the chaos motif figures explicitly only in
chapters 1, 6, and 7. In chapters 2–5 the focus is upon “management” of the divine order in the world and how humans either aid or hinder this divine order.

Chapter 1 is the nucleus of the book. The Babylonian creation myth Enuma Elish is presented as a story of how the storm god Marduk subdued chaotic Tiamat and her eleven allied monsters—but “just barely.” They remain on the periphery of the story, ready to rise again if given the chance. Mobley rightly sees this story, or something like it, as the backstory of creation in Gen 1, as well as of other biblical passages that allude to creation as an unstable or unfinished business: Leviathan in Job 3, the reversal of creation in Jer 4, the languishing of the land because of moral lapses in Hos 4, the withering of the whole of creation because of transgression in Isa 24, and the shaking of the mountains in Ps 46, among others. These are universal stories about the persistence of evil; that is, an initial victory by the Deity is followed by the subsequent return of the monster(s). Such narratives undoubtedly were composed in the face of crises such as the Assyrian overrunning of Israel and the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. Moreover, they have their counterparts in, for example, Greek tragedy and Melville’s Moby Dick. In the end, however, there is always hope.

To continue this discussion of chaos as the backstory of biblical narratives, one must skip ahead to the last two chapters. In what I consider perhaps the best section in the book (ch. 6), Mobley examines the wisdom genre as providing an exquisite divine plan for the whole of cosmic order. Indeed, the universal themes of wisdom literature “serve as antidotes to the poisonously parochial pieties of many other parts of Scripture” (111). Wisdom is optimistic that God’s design (‘esy), his blueprint, is at work in our world. Even pessimistic Qoheleth believes that there is a divine plan, even though we humans are prevented from discerning it because we are enveloped in hebel (mist/vapor, i.e., fleeting puffs of insight)—a theme upon which Job seizes and expands. In Job’s despair of understanding God’s plan in the presence of overwhelming suffering, he challenges the Creator to defend himself. God’s response is to invoke the reality of a grand design in creation, affirming at the same time that even the presence of the chaos monsters (Leviathan and Behemoth) has a place in the divine plan and are not out of control, even if humans are inadequate to comprehend its significance.

In the last chapter Mobley comes full circle to confront the return of chaos as it makes its most virulent appearance in the Bible within apocalyptic literature: in Daniel for the Tanak, in Revelation for the New Testament. Apocalyptic was born in desperate times, “times when chaos gains the upper hand and humans in partnership with God can only hope that God is able, as in the beginning, to subdue chaos” (127). Cosmic battles rage between angelic princes, battles that spill over onto earth. In a bold move to undo the divine order, wicked humans conspire with the Great Red Dragon (known as Satan or by
another alias) to inflict untold suffering upon the faithful. In such dire times, firm faith is required to support the seemingly fragile work of Providence in re-creating the divine order.

If the struggle against chaos constitutes the bookends for this volume, chapters 2–5 in between are devoted to a different though not unrelated theme: a partnership between the Creator and the people Israel, articulated in the covenant, for properly managing creation. In chapter 2 Mobley argues that keeping torah was understood as a means for maintaining the created order. Through multiple narratives in the Former Prophets (ch. 3), one discerns a backstory of moral causality, or “poetic justice,” namely, “that God administers justice on the basis of moral cause and effect, rewarding virtue and punishing vice” (49); such a backstory is well illustrated by the examples of Rahab being rewarded for her helping the Israelite spies (Josh 2 and 6) and Lord Bezek having his thumbs and big toes cut off just as he had previously done to others (Judg 1:4–7).

Chapter 4, the backstory of the Latter Prophets, is an exquisite exposition about the management of divine anger: when humans sin and God threatens punishment, a prophet intervenes to mediate between the community and the Deity, calling on each to turn (šub) and change. Mobley adduces numerous examples from the Prophets of God’s rage and subsequent calming (nhm); these are rendered even more meaningful when viewed within a kabbalistic framework. This inspiring chapter could well stand alone, and indeed it is only peripherally linked to the larger thesis of the book.

The backstory of the Psalms (ch. 5) is that “praise releases the love-energy inside us that belongs to God” (109). One can expand this backstory still further, all the way back to sacrifices offered to the gods in the ancient world. Similarly, Israel’s offerings of praise perform an essential service of satisfying God’s hunger “for relationship, and this is verbalized through praise song and lament” (105). One looks in vain, however, for any exposition of the thesis headlined at the top of the chapter: “Through praise humans release energy that augments God’s management of chaos; through lament humans report on the quality of God’s management of chaos” (97).

Theological students and sophisticated lay audiences will find here a remarkably good, interesting, and informative read. The prose is lively, chocked full of well-turned phrases and catchy statements. Concepts are vividly depicted with extrabiblical illustrations from both ancient and modern literature. Biblical issues are often presented in new and attractive light. Mobley’s background as preacher and teacher are everywhere evident, as is also his commitment to promoting Jewish-Christian dialogue.
Despite numerous gems of insight, however, scholars will likely be disappointed because of the superficial manner in which most themes are treated, as illustrated by the proffered primary backstory. Mobley correctly sees the chaos myth, or combat myth, as underlying the creation narrative in Gen 1. Nevertheless, he precludes actual mythic thinking on the part of the biblical author, despite the fact that the Priestly creation account actually retains more of the mythic tradition of Enuma Elish than is generally allowed.¹ More problematic still, Mobley posits that a theme of chaos management behind nearly all biblical narrative. By Mobley’s own practice, however, the backstories he adduces for much of the Hebrew Bible have little to do with chaos or chaos monsters. Even the Yahwistic creation narrative in Genesis seems to be more akin to the creation typology found in the Mesopotamian Atrahasis myth rather than to the combat-myth typology of Enuma Elish. At very least, one should acknowledge the multiple typologies in ancient Near Eastern creation stories from which biblical authors drew.²

An important lesson from this volume, however, is the importance of understanding how extensively biblical writers employed storytelling and narrative in crafting their theology. The story of Rahab, for example, is shown to be replete with literary techniques such as character development, foreshadowing and closure, the use of euphemisms, puns, and double entendres, and more. In this slender volume Mobley has served up a tantalizing sampling of backstories to various biblical narratives, which leaves the reader hungering now for a full-course meal.

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². See, for example, R. J. Clifford, Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible, CBQMS 26 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1994).