With *In the Beginning: Essays on Creation Motifs in the Ancient Near East and the Bible*, Eisenbrauns presents a collection of eight essays by Bernard F. Batto, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana. He spent part of his scholarly creativity examining the ancient Near Eastern myths and epics on creation, exploring their creation theologies and the relationship of Mesopotamian, Canaanite, and Biblical creation stories. This volume is based on six pieces previously published in various journals and essay collections framed by two unpublished articles. Here the articles are presented as chapters linked by the topic “the Biblical creation stories and their relationship to ancient Near Eastern myth and epics.” The choice of the articles already conveys Batto’s point of view, which he explains in the very first sentence of the first article: “The Hebrew Bible, at least in its origins, is a product of the ancient Near East” (7). The introductory statement neglects a Hellenistic origin of at least parts of Gen 1–11, which has been demonstrated by several scholars in the last years. However, Batto assumes a first biblical account (“Yahwistic” tenth–eighth century BCE) and a reedition of the creation story by the Priestly writers in the sixth century BCE. He feels vindicated by an impressive number of thematic and motif parallels of the biblical account to ancient Near Eastern creation mythology.
Chapter 1 presents an overview of creation myths and epics in various ancient cultures, including Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Canaanite, and Hebrew literature, in which the main aspects of Batto’s former investigations have a significant influence. After pointing to the relationship of biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature, he outlines the main aspects of Egyptian ideas of creation. In so doing he claims the Heliopolitan cosmology as the foundation of Egyptian creation ideas, on which the interpretation of the Memphite, Hermopolitanian, and Thebeian theology are based. In the Helopolitanian theology Atum is considered to be the primeval creator; all other deities are emanations from him. Creation is an act of self-impregnation whereby life is evoked in complementary pairs. Since the chaotic water (Nun) still exists, a failure of the creator deity would affect the return of the chaotic waters, which would coincide with a destruction of creation. Even if Batto does not discuss this motif in this volume, readers need to observe that the Ugaritic creation myth about the victory of Baal over Tiamat and the need to enforce his kingship regularly appeals to this older idea of the threat of creation by the chaotic waters. I would prefer Batto to follow that motif, especially since he outlines the main differences in divine kingship and sovereignty in chapter 4, showing that the sovereign deity in Mesopotamian creation myths of the second and first millennium BCE relinquish the use of his weapons therefore his dominion is ensured permanently (see 123–24).

After outlining the differences of later Egyptian cosmologies, Batto points to the Egyptian idea of the creation of humankind. In contrast to Semitic ideas, the Egyptians thought of the royal ruler as a divine figure and as a manifestation of the solar deity. His main assignment was to keep the divine order in the universe, “not merely justice and moral order in the land, but also the very order of the physical world” (19). The origin of humankind is explained as the result of tears dropping out of the creator’s eyes (Memphite theology) or as the handcraft of a potter (Elephantine theology). Included in the idea of creation of humankind from its very beginning was the concept of rebellion against the creator by disregarding the divine order. In contrast to the Mesopotamian myths, divine judgment does not appear as a flood but as individual judgment by the transition to the underworld. The only exception from this idea is represented in The Book of the Cow of Heaven, in which the universal human rebellion is answered by a flood. But this story remains unique in Egyptian literature.

Batto then turns to Mesopotamian ideas of creation, first concentrating on Sumerian myths. He outlines two basic motifs of creation in Sumerian literature: the impregnation of Ninhursag by Enki and the marriage between earth (KI) and heaven (AN), by which the earth became fertile. Humankind was created similarly to all animals on earth, but they differed from the primitive forms of life by the process of civilization. At the outset
they were created to serve the deities, which they finally achieved by the process of civilization. Batto especially highlights its meaning for the idea of humankind (27), by which Sumerian literature is distinguished from all other ancient Near Eastern concepts of creation. By turning to the Akkadian interpretation of the Sumerian perception of life circumstances and their origins, Batto highlights the flood motif as represented in the Atrahasis story. In this story the motif of humans as divine laborers is improved by way of the effects of human servanthood on the divine rest. Since all humans are immortal but fertile, the land becomes overpopulated and noisy. These circumstances are answered by a flood by which all humans were to be killed. The result of the flood was mortality. This marks the transition from primeval to the current period. The Gilgamesh story, which is based on the Epic of Atrahasis, expresses the desire of humankind to reverse this process, since the protagonist longs for immortality.

Other than in the Sumerian literature, the creation of heaven and earth is described as a battle against the chaos. Batto addresses the Enuma Elish as the best-known Babylonian creation myth, which was recast by Assyrian theologians to propagandize Ashur’s kingship (36), and the Ugaritic Baal cycle as an example of Canaanite ideas of creation. Both stories serve to glorify the divine patron of the city. Within the combat myth the aspiring deity vanquishes the chaotic water to establish his kingship. Creation is understood as structuring formerly chaotic circumstances. Finally Batto addresses to biblical stories in Gen 1–11. He differentiates between an older Yahwistic source that describes the transition from a primeval period to the current situation and the Priestly account, which he characterizes as a classical creation myth. Batto compares the Yahwistic account with the Epic of Atrahasis and interprets the androgynous origin of humankind as result of God’s need of a substitute laborer. Interpreting the “fall” of humanity, he points out an impressive observation: “The ‘serpent’, a semidivine creature with wings and feet like the seraphs in Isa 6:2, whose function was to guard sacred persons and sacred objects such as the tree of divine wisdom, recognized the fallacy in the deity’s words and advised the man and the woman that wisdom does not bring death but instead a godlike condition. Desiring to be ‘like gods,’ the man and the woman partook of the forbidden fruit” (47). The second biblical account, the Priestly creation story, postulates God as sovereign creator of heaven and earth “to shore up the faith of his fellow Israelites” (49). Today’s humankind is understood as descendant of the righteous flood hero in terms of an everlasting covenant between God and humans. By highlighting the nature of humanity as image of God, the Priestly writer denies Mesopotamian conceptions of the king as divine representative on earth.

In this way Batto emphasizes the uniqueness as well as interlinking aspects of the ancient creation ideas in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine. On the one hand, his opening chapter presents a very good and wide overview of this topic by emphasizing the main

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motifs and positions. On the other hand, the attentive reader anticipates the main lines of argumentation in all other chapters due to their superscriptions. Consequently, I will only outline the topic and main thesis of all other chapters.

Chapter 2 deals with the idea of a paradise as a place of a golden age. Batto refers to the seventeenth-century CE poet John Milton and his interpretation of the biblical creation story in his epic poem “Paradise Lost” by asking whether Gen 2–3 needs to be understood in terms of paradise as the idyllic condition for an ideal co-existence of God and humankind. He emphasizes that the creation of humankind in Gen 2–3 was an act of substitution for labor. In a first step Batto analyzes the Myth of Enki and Ninhursag and Nudimmud’s speech in the epic Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta, in which the nonexistence of goods, creatures, and places is expressed. He shows that this topic does not point to the existence of an ideal world after creation, since the rise of civilization is understood as an improvement of God’s creation under human conditions. Batto further highlights that Gen 2–3 needs to be interpreted in this sense. “The Yahwist’s primeval myth is not about a ‘fall’ at all, but about continuously improved creation” (76). The acquisition of wisdom, the loss of immortality, the confinement of lifetime to an upper limit of 120 years, and the emotional “bonding” (see 81) of the creator to his creatures needs to be understood as an improvement. Only by adding Gen 2–3 to the creation story of Gen 1 and the transformation of the human’s existence from labor to ruler (by Gen 1:26–28) can the garden of Eden be understood as paradise, as later Christian interpreters did.

In chapter 3 Batto refers to the introduction of marriage in Gen 2 and the Epic of Atrahasis. First he points out that marriage is closely related to the creation of humankind as woman and man. In numerous Mesopotamian texts marriage is an expression of human sexual maturity. Genesis 2 differs slightly from the Mesopotamian understanding of wedded life, since the creation of the woman out of the man (or an androgynous being) is an act of separation to two incomplete persons. The companionship of woman and man is a reunification to “a natural community of wholesomeness” (93). As far as that is concerned, one needs to agree with Batto that marriage is the fulfillment of the divine creation.

Chapter 4 investigates the image of God in the Priestly creation account. Batto differs between divine kingship as actual rule of one deity over the others and divine sovereignty, which means “the absolute and universal rule of the chief deity over heaven and earth” (97). Referring to the creation theology of Enuma Elish, he demonstrates that divine sovereignty is a subsidiary metaphor of the creator motif. Rule over heaven and earth in terms of a pacified creation was limited to the creator, since he overcame the prehistoric chaos and established his eternal order. In a second step Batto refers to Assyrian
iconographic sources on which the relationship between the solar god and the king is expressed. He shows that the Assyrian king is understood as the representative of his deity on earth. This is expressed by the congruence in the depiction of deity and king in numerous images. Therefore, the Assyrian king was understood as creator and divine sovereign, while the king’s actions were acts of creation. The campaigns against the enemies were interpreted as the establishment of peace and cosmic order in a chaotic world (110). In the third step of his argument Batto refers to YHWH’s kingship in the Hebrew Bible. To highlight the reinterpretation and further development of this motif by the Priestly writer, he emphasizes the understanding of this motif in older, preexilic biblical texts in terms of YHWH’s rule as universal rule, but limited to Israel, other nations, territories, and the like. However, divine sovereignty over other deities and over heaven and earth is excluded. In that respect, the presentation of YHWH as creator is limited in the Hebrew Bible to texts that originated in exilic and postexilic times. In particular Batto points to Ps 74, Deutero-Isaiah, and the Priestly creation account as sources for the understanding of YHWH as sovereign. In the manner of Enuma Elish, Gen 9 and the placing of the bow in heaven marks the eternal order and peace that was established after the final defeat of the chaotic water (תַּהוּם). Batto interprets תַּהוּם in the sense of Tiamat, as the deity of the chaotic water who was defeated by the creator. In the final step of his argument Batto contrasts the Assyrian image of the king as representative of the sun god and the biblical understanding of humankind as image of YHWH expressed in Gen 1 and Ps 8. He reads the biblical anthropology as an advancement of the royal ideology as presented in the royal psalms, Pss 2, 89, and 110. Finally, the Priestly writer generated the anthropology that governs the Christian interpretation of the relationship of God and humans.

In chapter 5 Batto explains a motif belonging to the metaphor of the divine sovereign. Closely connected to the act of creation are divine rest and sleep, which express the self-awareness of the deity that his rule is invulnerable. Batto demonstrates that rest and sleep are a prerogative of the deities. The temple serves as place for rest and sleep. In Enuma Elish Marduk’s temple Esangila serves as site for rest and sleep not only for him but also for all other deities. In the biblical account Zion becomes the place of God’s rest and sleep (see Ps 132:13–14). Beside a few direct references to the image, the idea of rest and sleep occurs in the reception of the Semitic combat myth, especially expressed by the call “Awake” (see Isa 51:9, Ps 44:24–25), with the aim to appease the chaotic waters and to walk on it. Finally, the image was taken up by the writers of the gospels in the stories of Jesus sleeping in the storm and Jesus walking on the water.

Chapter 6 discusses the origin of the term יִרְדָּן in the exodus account. Batto doubts that it names a second location apart from the Red Sea. First, he points to the well-accepted derivation of יִרְדָּן from Egyptian t=wf(y) “papyrus,” which is used in several Egyptian texts
to name conglomerations of water in the Nile Delta. As Batto shows, the term is not bound to one special location. It is used for several places in the delta where reed grew in large quantity. After investigating the meaning of רָוצָן רַפָא in Num 33, Batto turns to an overview of its meaning in the Hebrew Bible. He shows that it always appears with terms and motifs that belong to older battle myths. Taking into account that רָוצָן means “end,” he concludes that רָוצָן רַפָא describes the end to the sea but that in the context of the Exodus account it always meant the Red Sea as the place of the divine act of the salvation of Israel.

Chapter 7 discusses the origins of the idea of a covenant of peace, which appears within the biblical literature in prophetic (Isa 54:10; Ezek 34:25; 37:26) and Priestly texts (Gen 9:11). For the origins of this idea, Batto refers to the epics of Atrahasis and Gilgamesh, in which the flood motif appears, too. Within the analysis of these texts he points out two basic patterns as belonging to the motif of a covenant of peace. Pattern 1 is the idea of divine regulations for human existence at the end of the flood, and pattern 2 is the motif of placing a sign in heaven, which Batto derives from the Ugaritic text CTA 3. CTA 3 contains another motif of more significant meaning for the biblical idea of eternal peace: the planting of peace in the earth after the defeat of the primeval chaos. This motif appears in late biblical literature and is widespread in early Jewish literature.

Finally, chapter 8 is dedicated to the idea of a malevolent deity in Mesopotamian myths. Investigating numerous Old Babylonian, Neo-Assyrian, and Neo-Babylonian texts, Batto demonstrates that a primary distinction of deities never existed. He outlines various conflicts between deities and humans as well as within the divine world. However, deities cannot be divided into good and bad in terms of their character. In the last third of this chapter Batto turns to the henotheistic circumstances in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian times. The concentration on the adoration of Marduk with respect to Ashur leads to the combination of malevolence and benevolence in the character of one deity. Exploring Ludlul Bel Nemeqi, Batto finally states that the lament of the worried worshiper ends with the same statement as the biblical account of Job: humankind is unable to understand the mystery of divine wisdom.

Batto presents an impressive collection of research on creation motifs within the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible. It is in the nature of things within an essay collection that main topics of his investigations occur repeatedly, such as the creation of humankind as laborers in the Epic of Atrahasis, the transference of this motif to the Yahwistic garden story, the meaning of divine rest and sleep, and so on. As opposed to “classical” essay collections, Batto’s articles are presented as a book in eight chapters. From the perspective of a reader expecting a continuous argumentation within a book, it would have made more sense to present the collection as reprints of separate articles. But this is just a small
critical remark on a fascinating collection of investigation on one of the main topics of biblical literature.