

✧ ONE ✧

Voices from the Sands

When my hair was half done
I remembered I love you
I forgot my hair
I ran to find you
Now let me finish
I'll only be a minute.

—Egyptian, before 1200 BCE

IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA or in the valley of the Nile, you could look around at a landscape interrupted only by a farmhouse or a town or a temple and imagine that the world continued like that. What would happen if you just walked in a straight line, day after day? If there is an edge, would it be a wall or more like the edge of a table? If a wall, what lies behind it? If a table, what would you see if you looked down? And if you could fly straight up, would you hit something? And finally, in those days everybody knew that the world is full of supernatural beings that you never saw. Is there a domain somewhere on Earth or perhaps up in the sky where these beings spend their time? Unless they are invisible, they have to be somewhere. This chapter is about how people have imagined the layout of the Earth and the regions around it, how the Earth started, and some things that have happened to change it. It is just a beginning; these questions will be looked at from many angles as the story develops.

1.1 THE BIBLICAL UNIVERSE

In the beginning God created the Heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided

2 • Chapter 1

the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.¹

On the third day God separated land from water beneath the firmament and created the vegetable kingdom; on the fourth: Sun, Moon, and stars; on the fifth: birds and fish; on the sixth: animals, a man, and a woman, and on the seventh day he rested.

The mind cries out for more. Why was all this done, and how? The Bible doesn't say. Was the watery waste there to begin with? Some Judaic commentators imagine a wild chaos that had to be tamed by an act of will before the work of creation could begin. Others say no: first there was nothing, then water, then light. We shall return to the question in chapter 5. What is clear is that the watery waste came first, and next came light and the imposition of a plan where there was no plan. Where do we look if we want to see the plan? Look at a forest or a pond. Each is a collection of plants and animals, insects and creatures too small to see. No appearance of order there, but think how they combine to make a living environment. One creature eats another; later it nourishes a third. A bee on the way to its hive leaves a grain of pollen on a flower whose seed will nourish other creatures. Flowers bloom at different times so that bees will be kept busy. The order of the natural world is more apparent in the way it functions than in the way it looks.

When the Bible begins all we see is water, but underneath is a layer of earth. So that this can appear, God creates a great sky-vault known as the firmament. One might have supposed that its purpose, in that barren land, was to raise the celestial waters above the earth, but the Bible says it was to separate water from water. Even in a dry countryside, every inhabited place is near water, flowing on the surface or a few feet down in a well. You may remember that a few generations later, when the Flood came, water spurted out of the ground to augment the rain. The authors of Genesis saw humanity living in a bubble with water above and below. A *midrash*, or comment, says: "Why did he separate them? Because the upper water is a male, whilst the nether water is female, and when they desired to unite they threatened to destroy the world. The water roared up mountains and hurtled down hills, the male in hot pursuit of the female, until the Holy One, blessed be He, rebuked them. . . . Between the

¹ For most of this book, after much reflection, I am using the text of the Oxford Study Bible, entered in the Bibliography as Oxford 1992. Though I miss the cadence of the King James version, its echo is there and the translation is often more exact. But for those who were brought up with them, the stately words in which the King James version brings the universe into being speak with the voice of God, and I use them here and in a few other places.

upper and nether worlds are but three finger breadths, and the vault of the firmament interposes to keep them apart.” We shall see that the bubble has a long history.

The vault is *raqia* in Hebrew; the word often refers to a pot hammered out of copper. Later, when Job’s young neighbor Elihu reproaches him for his protest against God’s injustice, he contrasts God’s greatness with that of any mortal: “Can you as he [did] beat out the vault of the skies, hard as a mirror of cast metal?” Beneath the vault moved the Sun, stars, and angels. How high was it? When Moses took Aaron and seventy elders of Israel to meet with the Lord, they walked up Mount Sinai “and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was, as it were, a pavement of sapphire, clear blue as the very heavens.” There is an inconsistency here, for later the Lord told Moses, “No man shall see me and live.” The conventional explanation is that the seventy elders saw the vault from below. Figure 1.1, from the Regensberg *Pentateuch*, c. 1300, shows Moses receiving the Ten Commandments and handing them to the Elders below. The Lord stands on a vault painted blue. Moses stands on what is perhaps a tree stump and is careful not to look behind him.

Here, then, is a vision of a world that functions with the aid of divine powers. In modern terms it resembles a submarine with windows. From time to time the windows are opened to let water come in and nourish the rivers and soil, and for a few years manna dropped down from Heaven to relieve the Lord’s people as they wandered in the desert. Above the vault was water; perhaps on its shore was the City of God where Ezekiel, seated on a sapphire throne, saw a figure resembling a man who spoke to him and told him to prophesy.²

That is about all we learn about the geography of Heaven from the canonical scriptures, but later writers filled what they must have perceived as a vacuum. The most complete account, and the source of many conventional ideas of Heaven, is the apocryphal Apocalypse of Paul, a Greek text that probably originated in Egypt about the middle of the third century. It takes off from a passage in 2 Corinthians 12 in which Saint Paul says that he once felt he was “caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” Later, his guardian angel shows him the mysteries of Heaven and Hell. After Paul has seen how the souls of the recently dead are sorted out according to their deserts, he is raised to the third and highest heaven. The angel leads him through a gold door above which are inscribed the names of the just—not only their names but their pictures, so that every angel will know them. Paul is greeted by Enoch and Elijah and is shown the premises, but he is forbidden to tell anyone what he has seen or heard.

² Psalm 104 reminds God, “You have . . . laid the beams of your dwelling on the waters.”



Figure 1.1 Moses receives the tablets of the Ten Commandments and hands them to the elders below. From the Regensburg Pentateuch, c. 1300. (Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.)

Then the angel carries Paul down to a place where they stand on top of the firmament. This is paradise, the second heaven. As one might expect, there is a river of milk and honey, and countless trees bear a variety of fruits. A grape arbor contains ten thousand vines, each one supporting ten

thousand thousand bunches and in each of these a thousand single grapes. Paul and the angel walk to the Acherusian Lake, whiter than milk, on which is a golden ship, “and about three thousand angels were singing a hymn before me till I arrived at the City of Christ, all of gold and encircled with twelve walls. . . . And there were twelve gates in the circuit of the city, of great beauty, and four rivers that encircle it.” The river of honey is called Pison, that of milk is Euphrates, that of oil is Gion, and the river of wine is Tigris. On their banks he is greeted by several Patriarchs. Except for Tigris, the names of these rivers are the same as those in Genesis 2:10 given to the four rivers that flow from (and not around) the Garden of Eden. In the center of the city, next to a great altar, stands David, holding a psaltery and harp. He sings “Alleluia!” in a voice that fills the city, and the people respond with an alleluia that shakes its foundations.

The story skips over the first heaven, which I suppose is Eden (we will look for it in the Intermission); then Paul is shown the torments of Hell. This much will do, and we can go back to the scriptural account.

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Below the ground and its surface waters, far down, lay Sheol, where the dead pass their silent existence. Classical Judaism is concerned with the fate of the community of Israel more than with that of individuals, but in about the fourth century BCE the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes tells what the dead may expect: “One and the same fate comes to all, just and unjust alike, good and bad. . . . True, the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing. There is no more reward for them; all memory of them is forgotten.” But Ecclesiastes always takes a gloomy view, and later books of the Bible suggest an afterlife. Perhaps two hundred years after Ecclesiastes, the prophet Daniel foretells the end of the world when the Jews will at last be delivered, and “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life and some to the reproach of eternal abhorrence. The wise leaders will shine like the bright vault of Heaven, and those who have guided the people in the true path will be like the stars for ever and ever.”

It is easy enough to draw diagrams of the cosmos as the Bible describes it, and many have done so, but as one reads the text it is clear that the writers were not thinking in diagrams. The visions are fragmentary, but no one tells us what lies below Sheol or how a city can be poised above the firmament. These are idle questions; they have nothing to do with the story and are not thought about.³ In fact, in the *Mishnah*, a collection of

³ For miscellaneous but well-documented speculations concerning details the Bible leaves out, see Graves and Patai 1964, chapter 3.

teachings of early rabbis, one of the rabbis declares: “Whosoever reflects on four things, it were better for him if he had not come into the world—what is above; what is beneath; what is before, and what is after.”

Compare this sketch of the cosmos with the actuality of Palestine’s stony landscape, and see how much imagination has added to it, all around, above, below. That is the biblical model, but what a model looks like is only part of the story. Much more interesting is how it functions. But before we go further with the miraculous bubble that Genesis describes, we had better look inside some other bubbles that had already formed nearby.

1.2 TALES FROM SUMER AND EGYPT

History starts in Sumer and Egypt; before that we had spearpoints, pots, and silence. History is defined as written, and since about 3300 BCE Sumerian and Egyptian texts have survived: Sumerian on clay tablets marked with a stick and then baked, Egyptian scratched into stone. Sumerian was spoken in what is now southern Iraq, where the Tigris and Euphrates flow into the Persian Gulf, and its speakers were the dominant power there for the next thousand years. The oldest Sumerian writings are receipts and tax records, but after a few centuries came libraries and literature. The Sumerians’ language is unrelated to any other that is known. It was deciphered because when the Akkadians, a new population, arrived, they produced bilingual inscriptions as well as handbooks for translating Sumerian documents into their own Semitic tongue which can be read. Spoken Sumerian died out, but just as ancient Greek survives among us, the richness of Sumerian literature kept the written language alive for another two millennia.

One broken Sumerian tablet, inscribed about 2100 BCE—a thousand years before the earliest parts of the Bible were written—introduces an epic poem with a preface that tells how the world began:

After Heaven had been moved away from Earth,
After Earth had been separated from Heaven,
After the name of man had been fixed . . .

From the Akkadians a couple of centuries later, we learn how the separation took place. In this version, known as the *Enuma elish*, Apsu and Tiamat are lovers; Apsu is the fresh water under the earth, and his consort Tiamat is the stormy and untamed sea. (The watery waste in Genesis is called *ṯhōm*, related to *Tiamat*.) The story begins:

When skies above were not yet named
Nor Earth below pronounced by name,



Figure 1.2 A nest of monsters, possibly representing those born by Tiamat (see Dalley 1989, 237), on a bronze dish found in Nineveh. (From Ball [1899], plate 2.)

Apsu, the first one, their begetter
And maker Tiamat, who bore them all,
Had mixed their waters together,
But had not formed pastures, nor discovered reed-beds;
When yet no gods were manifest,
Nor names pronounced, nor destinies decreed,
Then gods were born within them.

Apsu and Tiamat are fresh and salt water, but they are bodies also, and the sons born of their union are imprisoned inside Tiamat or between the loving parents. After a while, the sons begin to make so much noise that Apsu can't sleep. With the aid of an evil counselor he plots to kill them, but they learn of the plan. There are struggles; Tiamat brings forth an army of dragons and poisonous snakes, perhaps as depicted in figure 1.2. The fighting goes on, and finally Marduk, one of Tiamat's descendants,

organizes an army of gods, defeats Tiamat, and, in the language of Genesis, separates the waters from the waters. The story turns into blood and thunder and Marduk kills his mother. “He divided her monstrous shape and created marvels from it. He sliced her in half like a fish for drying: half of her he put up to roof the sky”; then he puts up constellations corresponding to the great gods, makes the Moon and decrees its changes, and creates various geographical features out of her entrails; the details are not pretty. Finally, he executes the evil counselor, and from his blood he creates humankind so that the gods will no longer have to toil in fields and irrigation ditches to support themselves.

Those first human beings were useful for labor but they were rough and barbarous, almost like animals. Then out of the Persian Gulf crawled a strange creature. It had the body of a fish, but attached to it underneath were the head and feet of a man (fig. 1.3). It announced its name as Oannes and began teaching humans the arts of civilization: writing, mathematics, agriculture, how to build a city, how to make laws. Each night it returned to the water, and after it had finished its mission it was seen no more.

Is it strange to portray the sky as a creature’s body, or half of one? I suspect nobody, if asked, would have said he or she thought that Tiamat’s huge bulk was actually up there. The history of language gives some insight. There is no gender in Sumerian, but in the old Semitic languages, which include Akkadian and the ancestors of modern Hebrew, everything was either masculine or feminine. Proto-Indo-European seems to have had a few words with neuter gender, and its descendants Latin and Greek had more. Modern Greek and German have kept the neuter, but it has dropped from French and Italian and the other Romance languages descended from Latin. English speakers encounter gender as a ridiculous and unnecessary bother, but at the time the ancestral tongues were developing it seems that their speakers regarded everything around them as having some qualities of life and every process as more or less a living process. If this is so, then for them distinctions of gender must have been as essential to talking about a thing as they are for us when we talk about a person. Collectors of the world’s myths find that in many of them, as in the Akkadian story, Earth and Sky are portrayed as living creatures.

A thousand years later, in the eighth century BCE, the Greek poet Hesiod tells a similar tale. It begins with the same ordering of the cosmos: “First Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth.” Mother Earth, Gaia, gives birth to many offspring, including Ouranos the Sky, by whom she later has a trio of violent children, each with fifty heads and a hundred arms. Ouranos hates them and hides them inside their mother, where they cause discomfort that can only be imagined, but with Gaia’s help they escape after one of them, Kronos, manages to castrate Ouranos. This sets off a string of complications that can be read about elsewhere. Three cen-

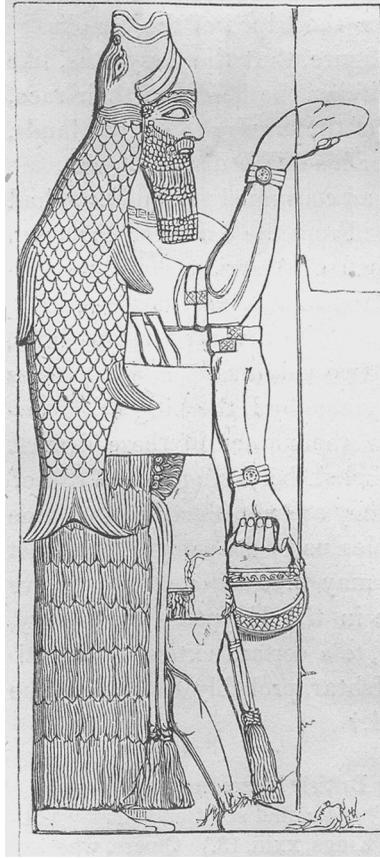


Figure 1.3 Mesopotamian fish-god carved on a wall in Nimrud. (From Layard 1856, 301.)

turies after Hesiod, a fragment from Euripides refers to another version of the story. In a play, *Melanippe* (now lost except for this fragment), a character says that “Sky and Earth were once one and when they were separated they gave birth to all things and brought them forth: trees, birds, beasts, creatures that live in the sea, and the race of men.”

Almost within human memory the same story was told in Polynesia. Here the original pair are named Rangi and Papa. Their embrace produced children who stayed trapped between their motionless bodies and unable to move. “There was darkness from the first division of time to the tenth, to the hundredth, to the thousandth.” Finally the sons resolved to escape. One by one they tried and failed until the last one, Tane-mahuta,

succeeded in prying his parents apart. “It was the fierce thrusting of Tane which tore the Heaven from the Earth, so that they were rent apart, and darkness was made manifest, and so was the light.” When this was done the brothers found a multitude of hidden siblings who then spread out to settle the watery domain that had been revealed. Then, as in the other stories, begin the endless quarrels and fighting which seem to be the way all heroes of mythical antiquity spent their time.

I repeat this myth in different versions because their resemblance seems to me astonishing, and there are still other versions. Can it date back to a time when the human population was are still small, before it spread over the world? If it lasted so long, I suspect it told more than just how the world started; it must have explained something about how it *is*, but that revelation is lost to us now.

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Let’s pack up the remains of Tiamat and bury them kindly. They have done their job, which was to explain the Beginning. Now, what actually is the world? Babylonian prayers and incantations have allowed archaeologists to reconstruct it. There are different forms. Here is one.

Imagine a great stone disk in the sky, perhaps six or seven hundred miles across. On it, in a palace, lives Anu, the chief Babylonian god. There are smaller accommodations for three hundred of the lesser gods known collectively as *igigi*. One tablet says that during the Flood all the gods took refuge up there. From this level, a stairway leads down to a second disk, which is made of a blue stone that may be lapis lazuli. Here live the rest of the *igigi*. The disk below this one is made of a semitransparent stone through which the blue of the upper one can be seen. On its underside are engraved the stars, and there are tracks on which the planets move. I suppose this disk rotates once a day around the point that today is marked by the North Star but was not then. Around the edge of the disk was a wall with gates through which planets enter and leave. The common term for any one of these three disks, or all three together, is *šamû*, a plural form that is an ancestor of the Hebrew *šamayim*, the heavens. (This multiplicity of levels, or perhaps the multiplicity of heavenly spheres that we shall find in chapter 6, may explain what puzzles every child: Why do people say heavens when there is only one?)

Next in order comes the disk on which we live, and by great good luck the Babylonians have left us a map of some of it. It dates from about 900 BCE, when some of the Genesis account had already been written, and it lives in the British Museum (fig. 1.4). It is centered on the region of the Two Rivers, but imagination has expanded it into a circle. It is bounded by a circle of water labeled *marratu*, ocean; later the Greeks called it



Figure 1.4 Mesopotamian world map centered on Babylon, c. 900 BCE, British Museum no. 92687. The circular band is Oceanus. (© Copyright The British Museum, London.)

Oceanus. The horizontal rectangle above the middle is labeled Babylon, and this makes it likely that the two vertical lines represent the banks of the Euphrates, which used to run through the city. The region into which the lines run is labeled “marsh,” which some of it still is today. There seem to have been eight regions beyond *marratu*, indicated here as triangles.

Below the disk we live on are two more, making six in all. The fifth is Apsu, Tiamat's watery husband, and it now belongs to a powerful god named Ea. The sixth and final one is the underworld, home of six hundred gods. It is dry and dusty, and the dead go there. Finally, the six levels are connected by the World Tree, *mesu*, "whose roots reach a hundred leagues to the depths of the underworld, whose crown, in the heavens, leans on the Heaven of [Anu? The name is uncertain]."

I mentioned that there are lands beyond *marratu*. Inscriptions on the map suggest that they are inhabited by strange animals and special people, and one of these places—we don't know which—was visited by Gilgamesh. I digress to say something about him.

The story is told in eleven clay tablets, dating from about 1900 BCE, which identify Gilgamesh as king of Uruk (now Warka, in central Iraq). His name occurs in early king-lists and he may actually have existed, but by the time history catches up with him he has grown into a huge and boisterous man from whose violence no man and from whose lust no woman is safe. In desperation, his subjects beg the gods to create another being equal to Gilgamesh who can restrain him, and from a bit of clay a goddess forms a creature named Enkidu. He has the shape of a man but she puts him down to live with the animals. To bring him into the city the citizens tempt him with a harlot; after he has united with her his animal friends forsake him and he follows her to Uruk. There Enkidu meets Gilgamesh and they wrestle. Gilgamesh finally wins, but they become loving friends and soon go off on an adventure to kill a murderous giant named Humbaba who lives among the cedars of Lebanon. They succeed, but later they antagonize a great goddess, Ishtar. She sends the Bull of Heaven against them, they kill it, and the gods decree that one of them must die. Enkidu dies, but not as heroes die. An injury from the fight with Humbaba slowly drags him down, and Gilgamesh is desolate: not only has he lost his friend, but for the first time he faces his own mortality. One day there will be no more adventures or glory, only age, failing powers, sickness, and finally descent among the strengthless dead.

The Akkadians had a flood legend like the one told in the Bible. Its hero, Utnapishtim, who corresponds to Noah, saved humanity and was rewarded with eternal life in one of the lands beyond the *marratu*. Gilgamesh, desperate, resolves to ask him for the secret of immortality. After a hard journey he reaches an inn at the edge of the water. The innkeeper, a woman named Siduri, tells him that no one has ever crossed over the water, but with her help and that of a supernatural boatman he does so and steps ashore. He finds Utnapishtim and asks his question. Utnapishtim tells him the quest is hopeless:

One day Death comes
For Gilgamesh as for a little man—

No one sees Death
No one sees his face or hears his voice
But cruel Death harvests all mankind.

Nevertheless, as a parting gift he tells Gilgamesh of a plant called Man Becomes Young in Old Age that grows deep under the water, and Gilgamesh manages to gather a bit of it before he starts homeward across the river. As he swims along, a water snake steals the leaves, and then he understands: time will not be cheated, and he must walk the same road as everyone else.

A thousand years later, Homer composed the *Iliad* as the story of ten crucial days toward the end of the Trojan War, and the *Odyssey* is told in a similarly compressed time frame. Aristotle called them both tragedies: they deal with the acts of great men and they inspire pity and fear. The *Gilgamesh* epic is the world's first tragedy.

There are striking parallels between *Gilgamesh* and the Homeric epics. In the *Iliad*, Patroclus is the bosom companion of Achilles as Enkidu is to Gilgamesh. Both Patroclus and Enkidu die, and each tells his friend of the miserable half-life in the land below. In the *Odyssey*, book 11 tells how Odysseus, like Gilgamesh, crosses Oceanus to consult the soul of a wise man, Tiresias, whose intelligence was exempt from death. He is sent there by Circe, the enchantress whose palace serves as an inn. Like Siduri, the innkeeper at the water's edge, she steps out of legends even more remote to help the traveler. Neither woman is explained; hearers are supposed to recognize them. Gilgamesh persuades a boatman to take him across the river. Odysseus has his own boat, but the Greeks also told of a boatman named Charon, to whom the newly dead give a coin to take them across. Homer wove episodes from ancient epics in another language into his poems.

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The Gilgamesh story takes place somewhere on the map (fig. 1.4), which represents, in whole or in part, the fourth disk from the top of the Babylonian cosmos. Egyptian texts sometimes refer to the Mediterranean Sea as the "Great Encircler," which shows how little they knew about it, and perhaps Babylonians also thought of it that way. The image of the world as inhabited land encircled by sea has a long history, and it persisted even after the time of Plato, when people had begun to talk seriously about a sphere.

Homer's Earth is essentially that of the Babylonian map but centered in Greece. In the *Iliad*, he describes a shield made for Achilles by the smith Hephaestus. It is embossed with scenes of war and peace, life as it is and

as it ought to be. The description is long, and last comes Oceanus, “the mighty Ocean River,” which runs around the shield’s edge.

Hesiod, writing at about the same time, describes a simplified version of the Babylonian cosmos. In his *Theogony* he tells how the Olympians defeated the Titans who had risen against them. They were bound in chains and thrown down to misty Tartarus,

as far beneath the earth as heaven is above earth; for so far is it from Earth to Tartarus. For a brazen anvil falling down from heaven nine nights and days would reach the earth upon the tenth: and again, a brazen anvil falling from Earth nine nights and days would reach Tartarus upon the tenth. Round it runs a fence of bronze, and night spreads in triple line all about it . . . while above it grow the roots of the Earth and unfruitful sea.⁴

Thus: a cosmos of three disks (I assume they are disks), far apart and wide enough for the middle one to hold the known world, with separate domains for gods, mankind (living and dead), and immortals who had disturbed the peace. Nothing could be simpler.

The Egyptians had no fixed cosmology or story of creation. Anyone composing a poem or a prayer was free to explain the motion of the Sun or Moon as desired, but the world was generally imagined as a flat region with mountains at each side and bisected by a river; at the four corners, high peaks supported a flat canopy. Each creation story starts with water, personified as a god named Nun. The story as told in Hermopolis tells how a mound of wet earth rose out of this water, perhaps suggested by what happens as the Nile’s flood abates each year. In the water around the mound float deities named after boundlessness, mystery, chaos, darkness, and infinity. The mound is deified as a god whose name varies, and life begins with him. Another story, celebrated at Heliopolis in the third millennium BCE, starts with a solitary god Atun who, sitting on the mound, spills his own semen. From this arise a boy, Shu, and a girl, Tefnut. Tefnut gives birth to Geb and Nut, a loving brother and sister who couple in motionless embrace in the water (here the story becomes the same as the one told in Babylon) until their father, Shu, separates them by force, then raises Nut to form the sky with open air below. In every direction is a watery chaos which, if Shu allowed, would pour in and put an end to the world, but he never lets it happen. Egyptians may have felt as the inhabitants of the polder country in Holland do today: the ocean level is far above their heads. They know that the seawalls that protect them have broken in the past and may break again.

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⁴ Hesiod 1914, 131.