
When the Gods were Born: Greek Cosmogonies and the Near East by
Carolina López-Ruiz

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In a famous lecture, ‘The Crisis of Comparative Literature’, delivered
in 1958, René Wellek assessed the state of his discipline as follows:

Van Tieghem, his precursors and followers... have accumu-
lated an enormous mass of parallels, similarities and some-
times identities, but they have rarely asked what these rela-
tionships are supposed to show except possibly the fact of one
writer’s knowledge and reading of another writer. [[Wellek
1963](#), 285]

Some 50 years later, Wellek’s statement reads like a disconcertingly
accurate assessment of current work on ancient Greek and Near East-
ern literature: there are now several publications listing ‘parallels’¹
but scholars have so far struggled to frame this material in a helpful
way. Questions of ‘one writer’s knowledge and reading of another
writer’ continue to dominate the field and divert attention from the
urgent methodological issues raised by the comparative study of an-
cient texts.

López-Ruiz’s book proposes to tackle the impasse and to ‘recon-
figure the old question of Greece’s “debts” to the East’ [47]. After an
introduction which reviews current approaches to comparative study
and specifies the author’s own focus on Cilicia, southeast Anatolia,
and Syro-Palestine as contexts for cultural exchange [1–22], chapter 1
looks at different ways in which narratives travelled between the Lev-
ant and Greece, from commerce to storytelling within families [23–
47]. Chapter 2 focuses on the Hesiodic line about the tree and the
rock [*Theog.* 35] and its affiliations in Levantine literatures from the

¹ Most notably [Burkert 1992](#), [West 1997](#).

Baal Cycle of the second millennium BC to Ibn Ishaq's biography of the Prophet Mohammed [48–83]. Chapter 3 looks at the relationship between Greek and Near Eastern succession myths, including Hesiod's *Theogony*, the *Phoenician History* of Philo of Byblos, the Hebrew Bible, the Hurro-Hittite *Kumarbi Cycle*, and the Babylonian *Enūma eliš* [84–129]. Particularly noteworthy is the author's inclusion of Ugaritic deity lists [101–104]. Chapter 4 turns the spotlight on Orphic theogonies and related Levantine traditions, chiefly the Derveni cosmogony but also Eudemus, Hieronymus, Pherecydes of Syrus, Mochus, the Sidonian cosmogony quoted in Eudemus, and Philo of Byblos [130–170]. Chapter 5 offers a concluding discussion of cosmogonic poets and their role in processes of cultural transfer [171–212]. An appendix [205–210] revisits the motif of tree and rock already discussed in chapter 2. The book ends with an index of passages [285–287] and an unusually full general index [288–302].

There is much in López-Ruiz's work that is genuinely helpful. The introduction in particular ought to become prescribed reading for anybody interested in the subject: López-Ruiz rightly questions lingering notions of a distinctive 'Indo-European' cosmogonic tradition [11–13] and rejects the label 'Near Eastern' as a catch-all with little heuristic value [17]. As a way out of the Hellenocentrism which encourages the undifferentiated use of the term 'Near East', she recommends, sensibly, that comparisons should be culturally specific: thus, we should not compare Greek cosmogonies and 'Near Eastern' ones but Greek and Egyptian traditions, Greek and Levantine traditions, and so on. López-Ruiz is equally convincing when she considers existing models of cultural transfer such as diffusion, borrowing, and colonization; or when she warns against the dangers of the still popular "‘inventory’ method" of literary comparison [21]. Many of these caveats have been expressed before [e.g., in Haubold 2002] but they have rarely been formulated as coherently as they are here.

Chapter 1 tackles head-on some of the most cherished scholarly myths invoked to explain the practicalities of cultural exchange. One of the targets here is the native 'informant', a figure often thought to have enabled the adoption of the alphabet on the part of the Greeks [31–34]. López-Ruiz rightly points out the 'colonial resonances' of that concept (her term) and shrewdly asks,

Why not assume that the “informed” (presumably a Greek) and the “informant” (presumably a Semite) were one and the same person? [33]

Why not, indeed? López-Ruiz’s preferred model of sustained hybridity [44–47] will be familiar to archaeologists but may still come as a surprise to some scholars of classical philology who tend to regard language differences as a genuine obstacle to communication. López-Ruiz is not afraid to contemplate widespread bilingualism, even within families [36–37], and to move beyond conventional, but ultimately misleading, distinctions between ‘Greek’ and ‘Semitic’ identities more generally.² Even apparently innocuous categories such as ‘foreign’ require careful interrogation: is a person, object or story actually experienced as coming from elsewhere? Or is it merely experienced as new? Has it perhaps become fully assimilated, so that its origins are no longer relevant? [45] In this connection, López-Ruiz asks whether there was an orientalizing revolution at all in the archaic period. Her answer is nuanced. On the one hand, she rightly questions the assumption that influence should only have run from East to West: ‘close interaction over the course of more than a thousand years cannot be a one-way process’ [38]. However, she also concedes that

the stream of cultural transformation toward the end of the so-called Dark Ages, and especially during the eighth-seventh centuries (the ‘orientalizing period’), ran more strongly from the Levant toward the West. [43]

Here as already in the introduction, López-Ruiz advocates moving from a vague notion of ‘Near Eastern influence’ to a much more focused model of contact in and around the northern Levant. In defense of that choice, she adduces some familiar arguments, e.g., on pressure from Assyria and Babylon [44], and for once we sense that the discussion may not do full justice to the complexities of the issue. But overall, the chapter makes an excellent case for the Levant and the Phoenicians as conduits for cultural exchange and effectively introduces many of the salient issues when thinking about cultural contact in the first-millennium Mediterranean.

² For early Greek identities, see especially [Hall 2002](#).

Chapters 2–5 aim to put into practice the principles laid down in the introduction and chapter 1. Unfortunately, they do not quite live up to the promise of the methodological material. With comparative study, more perhaps than other fields of literary interpretation, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. As many critics have pointed out, we need to know what difference the arduous work of comparison makes to our appreciation of the texts involved. López-Ruiz herself defines her task as that of turning ‘our “tabular” and encyclopedic knowledge of Greek and Near Eastern “parallels” into cultural interpretation’ [14]. The emphasis on *cultural* interpretation as opposed to *textual* analysis is perhaps telling: for while López-Ruiz is indeed a careful student of ancient culture, she is often less patient with texts. That is a pity in a discussion of ancient cosmogonies, which do indeed require ‘cultural analysis’, but which must also be appreciated as texts. The problems start in chapter 2, which on an uncharitable reading does precisely what López-Ruiz herself tells us we should not do: it plucks a single line of Greek poetry out of context and goes on a spree of parallels in non-Greek texts. Readers of Hesiod will balk at the claim that line 35 holds ‘the key’ to the poem of the *Theogony* [78–80]. The author adduces an impressive range of comparative materials, from cosmogonic epic to the Hebrew Bible, Platonic philosophy, the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, the Qurʾan and early Islamic biography; but ultimately this approach is too sweeping to offer a genuinely helpful interpretation. López-Ruiz seems to pay tribute here to what we might call the ‘detective’ approach to cultural comparison. The promise of solving longstanding problems in Greek literature with the help of parallels elsewhere has an obvious appeal in a field that still needs to defend its very right to exist. Yet, the temptation, it seems to me, should be resisted: in the specific case of López-Ruiz’s argument, focusing so insistently on one enigmatic line results in some strained claims and jars with the author’s healthy intuition, expressed with refreshing clarity in the introduction, that meaningful comparative study is precisely not a matter of micro-level coincidences, however plausible or important they might seem.

Chapter 3 is more satisfactory in this regard, building on the broader foundations of shared thematic structures: a narrative of divine succession is now well understood to form the backbone of several ancient cosmogonic traditions, including Hesiod’s *Theogony*.

But here too we must beware of pitfalls. López-Ruiz sets out the evidence in a helpful table [88] and proceeds to argue for a privileged connection between the Greek and Levantine traditions. Her prize exhibit is the role of Kronos in Hesiod and of El in the *Baal Cycle* [115–125]: both gods are said to occupy an ‘ambiguous position’ in their respective ‘mythology’ [122] in that they are old but still important. The vagueness of this claim points to a problem with the argument: Kronos may have been an ongoing concern in Greek ritual and ‘mythology’ more generally, but in the *Theogony* he is much less active after his defeat than El is in the Ugaritic texts. López-Ruiz resorts to sliding uneasily between Hesiod’s *Theogony* as the main point of comparison and a more nebulous ‘Greek mythology’. Inevitably perhaps, some telling details get lost along the way. For example, López-Ruiz correctly points out that Kronos features in the myth of ages in the *Works and Days* [117–118] but later concludes that he

is linked in the *Theogony* and elsewhere [*sic*] with heroic ancestors through the myth of the Five Races, and through his association with the Isles of the Blessed and with the gloomier Tartaros and the Underworld in general. [125]

Similar sleights of hand help along the enterprising chapter 4 on Orphic traditions, which deals with some of the most difficult material that classicists are ever likely to encounter. Here too one would have liked to see a more nuanced treatment of some of the texts under discussion, e.g., on the sleeping/intoxicated Kronos [164–167]. Chapter 5 would also need some qualification. López-Ruiz claims that

the *Theogony*’s sheer success . . . must be credited to a degree of innovation and originality in how Hesiod recast . . . traditional themes. [177]

Innovation and originality are problematic categories in the context of early Greek epic, as is now well understood. More generally, it is hazardous to speculate about the reasons behind the ‘success’ of a text whose original performance context is unknown and whose fortunes fluctuated over the centuries [see, e.g., [Boys-Stones and Haubold 2010](#)]. Later on in the chapter, López-Ruiz takes Empedocles and other charismatic figures to exemplify the more general claim that Greek theogonic poets tend to be represented ‘as wandering figures’ [191]. If that is indeed a general rule, then Hesiod looks

like the obvious exception: it would be interesting to know what López-Ruiz thinks of his more locally grounded authorial *persona* of the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*.

In conclusion, López-Ruiz has written a welcome book which repays careful study. The introduction and chapter 1 are refreshingly unblinkered and make several excellent points about the comparative study of ancient literatures: they will be of particular use to anyone approaching the subject for the first time. The readings of chapters 2–5 are more problematic: López-Ruiz has brought together a wealth of fascinating and often difficult materials, but her analyses are not always as nuanced as they might have been. Nevertheless, her chapters open many new avenues for research and thus succeed in keeping one of the most pressing issues of current classical scholarship on the intellectual agenda.

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