

# Chaos (cosmogony)

**Chaos** (Ancient Greek: χάος, romanized: *khaos*) refers to the void state preceding the creation of the universe or cosmos in the Greek creation myths, or to the initial "gap" created by the original separation of heaven and earth.<sup>[1][2][3]</sup>

## Contents

**Etymology**

**Greco-Roman tradition**

***Chaoskampf***

**Biblical tradition**

**Alchemy and Hermeticism**

**Modern usage**

**See also**

**Notes**

**References**

## Etymology

Greek χάος means "emptiness, vast void, chasm,<sup>[4]</sup> abyss", from the verb χαίνω, "gape, be wide open, etc.", from Proto-Indo-European \*ǵʰeh₂n-,<sup>[5]</sup> cognate to Old English *geanian*, "to gape", whence English *yawn*.<sup>[6]</sup>

It may also mean space, the expanse of air, the nether abyss or infinite darkness.<sup>[7]</sup> Pherecydes of Syros (fl. 6th century BC) interprets *chaos* as water, like something formless which can be differentiated.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Greco-Roman tradition

Hesiod and the Pre-Socratics use the Greek term in the context of cosmogony. Hesiod's Chaos has been interpreted as either "the gaping void above the Earth created when Earth and Sky are separated from their primordial unity" or "the gaping space below the Earth on which Earth rests".<sup>[9]</sup>



*Chaos* by George Frederic Watts

In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Chaos was the first thing to exist: "at first Chaos came to be" (or was)<sup>[10]</sup> but next (possibly out of Chaos) came Gaia, Tartarus and Eros (elsewhere the son of Aphrodite).<sup>[11]</sup> Unambiguously "born" from Chaos were Erebus and Nyx.<sup>[12]</sup> For Hesiod, Chaos, like Tartarus, though personified enough to have borne children, was also a place, far away, underground and "gloomy", beyond which lived the Titans.<sup>[13]</sup> And, like the earth, the ocean, and the upper air, it was also capable of being affected by Zeus' thunderbolts.<sup>[14]</sup>

Passages in Hesiod's *Theogony* suggest that Chaos was located below Earth but above Tartarus.<sup>[15]</sup> Primal Chaos was sometimes said to be the true foundation of reality, particularly by philosophers such as Heraclitus.

The notion of the temporal infinity was familiar to the Greek mind from remote antiquity in the religious conception of immortality.<sup>[16]</sup> This idea of the divine as an origin influenced the first Greek philosophers.<sup>[17]</sup> The main object of the first efforts to explain the world remained the description of its growth, from a beginning. They believed that the world arose out from a primal unity, and that this substance was the permanent base of all its being. Anaximander claims that the origin is apeiron (the unlimited), a divine and perpetual substance less definite than the common elements. Everything is generated from apeiron, and must return there according to necessity.<sup>[18]</sup> A conception of the nature of the world was that the earth below its surface stretches down indefinitely and has its roots on or above Tartarus, the lower part of the underworld.<sup>[19]</sup> In a phrase of Xenophanes, "The upper limit of the earth borders on air, near our feet. The lower limit reaches down to the "apeiron" (i.e. the unlimited)."<sup>[19]</sup> The sources and limits of the earth, the sea, the sky, Tartarus, and all things are located in a great windy-gap, which seems to be infinite, and is a later specification of "chaos".<sup>[19][20]</sup>

In Aristophanes's comedy *Birds*, first there was Chaos, Night, Erebus, and Tartarus, from Night came Eros, and from Eros and Chaos came the race of birds.<sup>[21]</sup>

At the beginning there was only Chaos, Night, dark Erebus, and deep Tartarus. Earth, the air and heaven had no existence. Firstly, blackwinged Night laid a germless egg in the bosom of the infinite deeps of Erebus, and from this, after the revolution of long ages, sprang the graceful Eros with his glittering golden wings, swift as the whirlwinds of the tempest. He mated in deep Tartarus with dark Chaos, winged like himself, and thus hatched forth our race, which was the first to see the light. That of the Immortals did not exist until Eros had brought together all the ingredients of the world, and from their marriage Heaven, Ocean, Earth and the imperishable race of blessed gods sprang into being. Thus our origin is very much older than that of the dwellers in Olympus. We [birds] are the offspring of Eros; there are a thousand proofs to show it. We have wings and we lend assistance to lovers. How many handsome youths, who had sworn to remain insensible, have opened their thighs because of our power and have yielded themselves to their lovers when almost at the end of their youth, being led away by the gift of a quail, a waterfowl, a goose, or a cock.

In Plato's *Timaeus*, the main work of Platonic cosmology, the concept of chaos finds its equivalent in the Greek expression *chôra*, which is interpreted, for instance, as shapeless space (*chôra*) in which material traces (*ichnê*) of the elements are in disordered motion (*Timaeus* 53a–b). However, the Platonic *chôra* is not a variation of the atomistic interpretation of the origin of the world, as is made clear by Plato's statement that the most appropriate definition of the *chôra* is "a receptacle of all becoming – its wetnurse, as it were" (*Timaeus* 49a), notabene a receptacle for the creative act of the demiurge, the world-maker.<sup>[22]</sup>

Aristotle, in the context of his investigation of the concept of space in physics, "problematizes the interpretation of Hesiod's chaos as 'void' or 'place without anything in it' (*Physics* IV 1 208b27–209a2 [...]). Aristotle understands chaos as something that exists independently of bodies and without which no perceptible bodies can exist. 'Chaos' is thus brought within the framework of an explicitly physical investigation. It has now outgrown the mythological understanding to a great extent and, in Aristotle's work, serves above all to challenge the atomists who assert the existence of empty space."<sup>[23]</sup>

For Ovid, (43 BC – 17/18 AD), in his *Metamorphoses*, Chaos was an unformed mass, where all the elements were jumbled up together in a "shapeless heap".<sup>[24]</sup>

*Ante mare et terras et quod tegit omnia caelum  
unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe,  
quem dixere chaos: rudis indigestaque moles  
nec quicquam nisi pondus iners congestaque eodem  
non bene iunctarum discordia semina rerum.*

*Before the ocean and the earth appeared— before the skies had overspread them all—  
the face of Nature in a vast expanse was naught but Chaos uniformly waste.  
It was a rude and undeveloped mass, that nothing made except a ponderous weight;  
and all discordant elements confused, were there congested in a shapeless heap. [25]*

According to Hyginus: "From Mist (*Caligine*) came Chaos. From Chaos and Mist, came Night (*Nox*), Day (*Dies*), Darkness (*Erebus*), and Ether (*Aether*)."<sup>[26]</sup> An Orphic tradition apparently had Chaos as the son of Chronus and Ananke.<sup>[27]</sup>

Fifth-century Orphic cosmogony had a "Womb of Darkness" in which the Wind lay a Cosmic Egg whence Eros was hatched, who set the universe in motion.

## ***Chaoskampf***

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The motif of *Chaoskampf* (German: ['ka:ʊs,kampf]; lit. struggle against chaos) is ubiquitous in myth and legend, depicting a battle of a culture hero deity with a *chaos monster*, often in the shape of a serpent or dragon. The same term has also been extended to parallel concepts in the Middle East and North Africa, such as the abstract conflict of ideas in the Egyptian duality of Maat and Isfet or the battle of Horus and Set.<sup>[28]</sup>

The origins of the *Chaoskampf* myth is believed to lie in the Proto-Indo-European religion, the descendants of which almost all feature some variation of the story of a storm god fighting a sea serpent representing the clash between the forces of order and chaos. Early work by German academics such as Gunkel and Bousset in comparative mythology popularized translating the mythological sea serpent as a "dragon".

## **Biblical tradition**

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*Chaos* by Wenceslaus Hollar (1607–1677).

*Chaos* has been linked with the term *abyss/tohu wa-bohu* of Genesis 1:2. The term may refer to a state of non-being prior to creation<sup>[29][30]</sup> or to a formless state. In the Book of Genesis, the spirit of God is moving upon the face of the waters, displacing the earlier state of the universe which is likened to a "watery chaos" upon which there is *choshek* (which translated from the Hebrew is darkness/confusion).<sup>[16][31]</sup>

The Septuagint makes no use of  $\chi\acute{\alpha}\omicron\varsigma$  in the context of creation, instead using the term for  $\kappa\iota\omicron\varsigma$ , "cleft, gorge, chasm", in Micah 1:6 and Zacharia 14:4.<sup>[32]</sup> The Vulgate, however, renders the  $\chi\acute{\alpha}\omicron\mu\alpha$   $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\alpha$  or "great gulf" between heaven and hell in Luke 16:26 as *chaos magnum*.

This model of a primordial state of matter has been opposed by the Church Fathers from the 2nd century, who posited a creation ex nihilo by an omnipotent God.<sup>[33]</sup>

In modern biblical studies, the term *chaos* is commonly used in the context of the Torah and their cognate narratives in Ancient Near Eastern mythology more generally. Parallels between the Hebrew Genesis and the Babylonian Enuma Elish were established by Hermann Gunkel in 1910.<sup>[34]</sup> Besides Genesis, other books of the Old Testament, especially a number of Psalms, some passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah and the Book of Job are relevant.<sup>[35][36][37]</sup>

## Alchemy and Hermeticism

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The Greco-Roman tradition of *Prima Materia*, notably including the 5th and 6th century Orphic cosmogony, was merged with biblical notions (*Tehom*) in Christianity and inherited by alchemy and Renaissance magic.

The cosmic egg of Orphism was taken as the raw material for the alchemical magnum opus in early Greek alchemy. The first stage of the process of producing the philosopher's stone, i.e., nigredo, was identified with chaos. Because of association with the Genesis creation narrative, where "the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2), Chaos was further identified with the classical element of Water.

Ramon Llull (1232–1315) wrote a *Liber Chaos*, in which he identifies Chaos as the primal form or matter created by God. Swiss alchemist Paracelsus (1493–1541) uses *chaos* synonymously with "classical element" (because the primeval chaos is imagined as a formless congestion of all elements). Paracelsus thus identifies Earth as "the chaos of the *gnomi*", i.e., the element of the gnomes, through which these spirits move unobstructed as fish do through water, or birds through air.<sup>[38]</sup> An alchemical treatise by Heinrich Khunrath, printed in Frankfurt in 1708, was entitled *Chaos*.<sup>[39]</sup> The 1708 introduction states that the treatise was written in 1597 in Magdeburg, in the author's 23rd year of practicing alchemy.<sup>[40]</sup> The treatise purports to quote Paracelsus on the point that "The light of the soul, by the will of the Triune God, made all earthly things appear from the primal Chaos."<sup>[41]</sup> Martin Ruland the Younger, in his 1612 *Lexicon Alchemiae*, states, "A crude mixture of matter or another name for *Materia Prima* is *Chaos*, as it is in the Beginning."

The term *gas* in chemistry was coined by Dutch chemist Jan Baptist van Helmont in the 17th century directly based on the Paracelsian notion of chaos. The *g* in *gas* is due to the Dutch pronunciation of this letter as a spirant, also employed to pronounce Greek  $\chi$ .<sup>[42]</sup>

## Modern usage

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The term *chaos* has been adopted in modern comparative mythology and religious studies as referring to the primordial state before creation, strictly combining two separate notions of primordial waters or a primordial darkness from which a new order emerges and a primordial state as a merging of opposites, such as heaven and earth, which must be separated by a creator deity in an act of cosmogony.<sup>[43]</sup> In both cases, chaos referring to a notion of a primordial state contains the cosmos *in potentia* but needs to be formed by a demiurge before the world can begin its existence.

Use of *chaos* in the derived sense of "complete disorder or confusion" first appears in Elizabethan Early Modern English, originally implying satirical exaggeration.<sup>[44]</sup> "Chaos" in the well-defined sense of chaotic complex system is in turn derived from this usage.



*Magnum Chaos*, wood-inlay by Giovan Francesco Capoferri at the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore in Bergamo, based on a design by Lorenzo Lotto.

"Chaos magic" as a branch of contemporary occultism is a product of the 1970s.

## See also

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- *Ex nihilo*
- Ginnungagap
- Greek primordial deities
- *How to Kill a Dragon*
- Hundun
- The Void
- Tiamat
- Tohu wa-bohu
- Ymir

## Notes

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1. Euripides Fr.484, Diodorus DK68,B5,1, Apollonius Rhodius I,49
2. Kirk, Raven & Schofield 2003, p. 42
3. Kirk, Raven & Schofield 2003, p. 44
4. West, p. 192 line 116 **Χάος**, "best translated Chasm"; English *chasm* is a loan from Greek **χάσμα**, which is root-cognate with **χάος**. Most, p. 13, translates **Χάος** as "Chasm", and notes: (n. 7): "Usually translated as 'Chaos'; but that suggests to us, misleadingly, a jumble of disordered matter, whereas Hesiod's term indicates instead a gap or opening".
5. R. S. P. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, Brill, 2009, pp. 1614 and 1616–7.
6. "chaos" ([http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=chaos&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=chaos&allowed_in_frame=0)). Online Etymology Dictionary.
7. Lidell-Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon* chaos (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Dxa%2Fos1>)
8. Kirk, Raven & Schofield 2003, p. 57
9. Richard F. Moorton, Jr. (2001). "Hesiod as Precursor to the Presocratic Philosophers: A Voegelinian View" (<https://web.archive.org/web/20081211142040/http://www.artsci.lsu.edu/voegelin/EVS/Panel42001.htm>). Archived from the original (<http://www.artsci.lsu.edu/voegelin/EVS/Panel42001.htm>) on 2008-12-11. Retrieved 2008-12-04.
10. Gantz (1996, p. 3) says "the Greek will allow both".
11. According to Gantz (1996, p. 4): "With regard to all three of these figures—Gaia, Tartaros, and Eros—we should note that Hesiod does not say they arose *from* (as opposed to *after*) Chaos, although this is often assumed." For example, Morford, p. 57, makes these three descendants of Chaos saying they came "presumably out of Chaos, just as Hesiod actually states that 'from Chaos' came Erebus and dark Night". Tripp, p. 159, says simply that Gaia, Tartarus and Eros came "out of Chaos, or together with it". Caldwell, p. 33 n. 116–122, however interprets Hesiod as saying that Chaos, Gaia, Tartarus, and Eros all "are spontaneously generated without source or cause". Later writers commonly make Eros the son of Aphrodite and Ares, though several other parentages are also given, Gantz (1996, pp. 4–5)
12. Gantz (1996, p. 4); Hesiod, 123 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hes.+Th.+123>).
13. Hesiod, 814 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hes.+Th.+814>): "And beyond, away from all the gods, live the Titans, beyond gloomy Chaos".
14. Hesiod, 700 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hes.+Th.+700>).

15. Gantz (1996, p. 3); Hesiod, 813–814 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hes.+Th.+813>), 700 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hes.+Th.+700>), 740 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hes.+Th.+740>)
16. Guthrie, W.K.C. (2000). *A History of Greek Philosophy: Volume 1, The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20140103123340/http://books.google.com/books?id=ogUR3V9wbbIC&pg>). Cambridge University Press. pp. 59, 60, 83. ISBN 9780521294201. Archived from the original (<http://www.books.google.com/books?id=ogUR3V9wbbIC&pg>) on 2014-01-03.
17. Nilsson, Vol I, p.743; Jaeger (1952, p. 33)
18. Nilsson, Vol I, p.743; Guthrie (1952, p. 87)
19. Kirk, Raven & Schofield 2003, pp. 9, 10, 20
20. Hesiod, lines 740-765 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0020.tlg001.perseus-eng1:729-766>).
21. Aristophanes 1938, 693–699 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Aristoph.+Birds+693&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0026:chapter=693&highlight=Chaos>); Morford, pp 57–58. Caldwell, p. 2, describes this avian theogony as "comedic parody".
22. Lobenhofer, Stefan (2020): Chaos. In: Kirchhoff, Thomas (ed.): *Online Encyclopedia Philosophy of Nature / Online Lexikon Naturphilosophie* (<https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/oepn>), doi: 10.11588/oepn.2019.0.68092; <https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/oepn/article/view/69709>.
23. Lobenhofer, Stefan (2020): Chaos. In: Kirchhoff, Thomas (ed.): *Online Encyclopedia Philosophy of Nature / Online Lexikon Naturphilosophie* (<https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/oepn>), doi: 10.11588/oepn.2019.0.68092; <https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/oepn/article/view/69709>.
24. Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, 1.5 ff. (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Ov.+Met.+1.5>) translated by Arthur Golding
25. Ovid & More 1922, 1.5ff (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Ov.+Met.+1.5&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0028>).
26. Hyginus. *Fabulae, Preface* (<https://topostext.org/work/206>), translated by Smith and Trzaskoma, p. 95. According to Bremmer (2008, p. 5 (<https://books.google.com/books?id=YTfxZH4QnqgC&pg=PA5>)) who translates *Caligine* as "Darkness": "Hyginus ... started his *Fabulae* with a strange hodgepodge of Greek and Roman cosmogonies and early genealogies. It begins as follows: *Ex Caligine Chaos. Ex Chao et Caligine Nox Dies Erebus Aether* (Praefatio 1). His genealogy looks like a derivation from Hesiod, but it starts with the un-Hesiodic and un-Roman *Caligo*, 'Darkness'. Darkness probably did occur in a cosmogonic poem of Alcman, but it seems only fair to say that it was not prominent in Greek cosmogonies."
27. Ogden 2013, pp. 36–37.
28. Wyatt, Nicolas (2001-12-01). *Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Near East* (<https://books.google.de/books?id=Yz6vAwAAQBAJ&>). A&C Black. pp. 210–211. ISBN 9780567049421.
29. Tsumura, D., *Creation and Destruction. A Reappraisal of the Chaoskampf Theory in the Old Testament* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=qevX11bQRi8C&pg=PA9>), Winona Lake/IN, 1989, 2nd ed. 2005, ISBN 978-1-57506-106-1.
30. C. Westermann, *Genesis, Kapitel 1-11*, (BKAT I/1), Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1974, 3rd ed. 1983.
31. *Genesis 1:2, English translation (New International Version)*(2011): BibleGateway.com (<http://www.biblegateway.com>) Biblica incorporation
32. "Lexicon :: Strong's H1516 - gay" (<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H1516&t=KJV>). [www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org).
33. Gerhard May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts. Die Entstehung der Lehre von der creatio ex nihilo* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=s6nao1QMXscC&pg=PA151>), AKG 48, Berlin / New York, 1978, 151f.
34. H. Gunkel, *Genesis*, HKAT I.1, Göttingen, 1910.

35. Michaela Bauks, *Chaos / Chaostkampf* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20080507084109/http://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/wibilex/das-bibellexikon/details/quelle/WIBI/zeichen/c/referenz/15897/cache/9d97442e21/>), WiBiLex – Das Bibellexikon (2006).
36. Michaela Bauks, *Die Welt am Anfang. Zum Verhältnis von Vorwelt und Weltentstehung in Gen. 1 und in der altorientalischen Literatur* (WMANT 74), Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1997.
37. Michaela Bauks, 'Chaos' als Metapher für die Gefährdung der Weltordnung', in: B. Janowski / B. Ego, *Das biblische Weltbild und seine altorientalischen Kontexte* (FAT 32), Tübingen, 2001, 431-464.
38. De Nymphis etc. Wks. 1658 II. 391
39. Khunrath, Heinrich (1708). *Vom Hylealischen, das ist Pri-materialischen Catholischen oder Allgemeinen Natürlichen Chaos der naturgemässen Alchymiae und Alchymisten: Confessio* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=X1g6AAAACAAJ>).
40. Szulakowska 2000, p. 79.
41. Szulakowska (2000, p. 91), quoting Khunrath (1708, p. 68)
42. "halitum illum Gas vocavi, non longe a Chao veterum secretum." *Ortus Medicinæ*, ed. 1652, p. 59a, cited after the [Oxford English Dictionary](#).
43. Mircea Eliade, article "Chaos" in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3rd ed. vol. 1, Tübingen, 1957, 1640f.
44. Stephen Gosson, *The schoole of abuse, containing a plesaunt inuectiue against poets, pipers, plaiers, iesters and such like caterpillers of a commonwelth* (1579), p. 53 (cited after [OED](#)): "They make their volumes no better than [...] a huge Chaos of foule disorder."

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