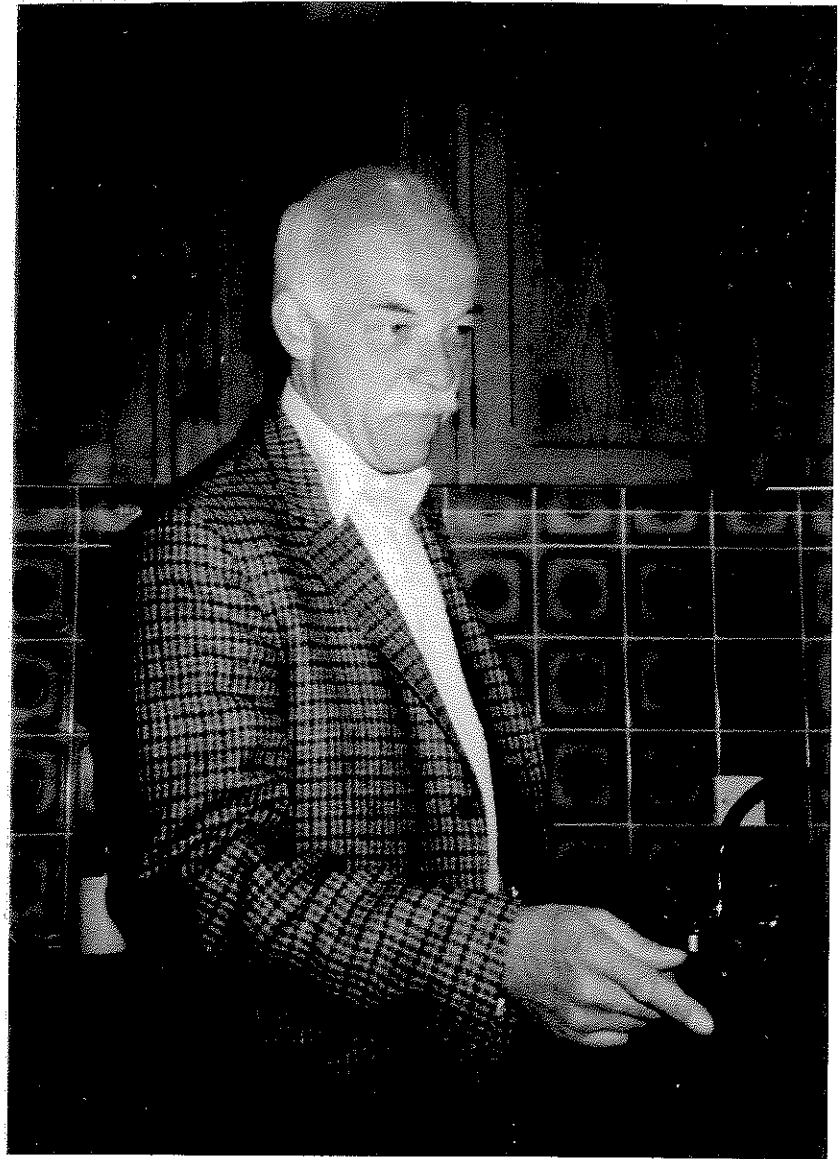


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In Memoriam

John Edward Wansbrough
February 19, 1928–June 10, 2002
(photo: David Eisenberg)

IMAGINING CREATION

Edited by

Markham J. Geller and Mineke Schipper

with an introduction by

Mary Douglas



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FOREWORD

Markham Geller and Mineke Schipper

The present volume is based upon an unusual conference, held at University College London, on 26th March 2003, entitled 'Creation Stories', chaired by Prof. Mary Douglas. The conference was sponsored by the Institute of Jewish Studies at University College, and the success of the conference was such that the Netherlands Research Organisation (NWO) agreed to sponsor three additional international conferences on related themes in mythology.¹ The original idea of the conference was conceived at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Study (NIAS) in Wassenaar, as a result of long discussions between the editors over inter-cultural approaches to the Humanities. Coming from different disciplines, Assyriology and Comparative Literature respectively, the editors' starting point was that creation stories should be treated comparatively, beginning with the best-known stories from the Near East (the Bible and Mesopotamia), widening the circle to include Egypt, then taking in India (Sanskrit) and the Arab world, and finally widening the horizons even further to include Africa and Europe. The idea was to consider both written and oral traditions.

There are many key questions which people feel the urge to address when speculating about creation and creation stories. Are the stories somehow related through cross-cultural contacts and mutual influences? If so, were the influences entirely in one direction? Alternatively, did such stories develop independently?

Such questions usually relate to the biblical creation story, how much the Bible may have been influenced by other cultures, e.g. Mesopotamia or Egypt, and conversely how much the Bible influenced other creation stories elsewhere, e.g. Arabic or European and African stories. People are often inclined to believe that their own story is central or 'true', and in general in the West the Genesis creation story is the best

¹ Theory (Leiden, December 2003), Gender and Myth (SOAS, London, December 2004), Myth in the Verbal and Visual Arts (Leiden, December 2005).