An Assessment of the Monotheistic Hebrew Myth Interpretation

Today we want to turn to an assessment of what I'm calling the monotheistic Hebrew myth interpretation of Genesis 1. You'll remember we concluded last time by saying that the question raised by Soden and Miller's book is whether or not Genesis belongs to the literary genre of myth, as do the Egyptian creation myths. The difference between them would lie not in their literary genre but rather in their theology. In contrast to the polytheistic Egyptian myths, on this view Genesis is a monotheistic Hebrew myth.

What might we say by way of assessment of this view? The exploration of this question requires us to say a word about the nature or the character of myth. The biblical scholar J. W. Rogerson observes that today the range of meaning of the word "myth" is so broad that, he says, "the word can hardly be wrongly used!"[1] For example, on April 4 of 2019, I saw a Reuters news headline that read, "Major study debunks myth that moderate drinking can be healthy." Here is the popular understanding of the word "myth" to mean a falsehood. This leads the eminent folklorist Alan Dundes to exclaim, "Nothing infuriates a folklorist more than to hear a colleague from the anthropology or literature department use the word *myth* to refer to anything from an erroneous statement to an archetypal theme."[2] Rather, ever since the groundbreaking work of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (the famous Brothers Grimm whom you know from their study of fairy tales) there are three types of narrative which are studied by students of folklore,

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[1] J. W. Rogerson, "Slippery Words: Myth," in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 66.

[2] See Alan Dundes' introductory comments to William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives," in *Sacred Narrative*, p. 5.

namely: myths, legends, and folktales (we often call them fairy tales but they're not all really about fairies).

Folktales are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are regarded as fiction. The events that they relate may or may not have happened. They are not to be taken seriously as dogma or as history. They usually recount the adventures of animal or human characters and may be set at any time in any place. A good example of a folktale would be the stories of “Little Red Riding Hood” or “Hansel and Gretel.”

In contrast to this, legends are set in a remote time that is less remote than the myths. In legends, the world was pretty much then as it is today. They are more often secular than sacred, and their principal characters are merely human beings. A good example of legends would be the stories of “Robin Hood,” which have some basis in history but now have accumulated stories about that historical person that are not regarded as historically reliable.

Finally, according to Dundes, myths are sacred narratives which explain how the world and man came to be in their present form. Since this is so important, let me repeat that characterization: myths are sacred narratives which explain how the world and man came to be in their present form. Some features of this disarmingly simple characterization deserve comment. First, notice on this definition that a myth is a linguistic composition, either oral or literary. In contrast to common parlance then, specialists do not take the word “myth” to be synonymous with falsehood. Neither do they use the word “myth” in the popular sense to refer to some sort of idea such as “the myth of the noble savage” or “the myth of the self-made man.” Rather, a myth is a thing composed of words.

It's a linguistic composition. Secondly, it is a narrative. That is to say, it's a story which will involve characters and a plot line. A myth describes a sequence of events. Thirdly, it's a sacred narrative. That is to say, it has religious significance in the culture in which it is embraced. That implies that it will have something to do with deity as one of its principal figures. It will be stories about God or gods. Fourth, it is assumed that it is a traditional narrative, one that's handed down over the generations. It's not a recent free composition. Accordingly, we could improve Dundes' characterization by making this assumption explicit: a myth is a traditional, sacred narrative. Finally, a myth seeks to explain present realities by anchoring them in the past, understood to mean the pre-historic past. The origin of the world and of mankind are just two examples of such present realities, and the list could be extended. This key feature of myths is called by specialists "etiology." It comes from the Greek word *aitia* which means "cause." Myths are characterized by etiological motifs where some present reality (a natural feature of the world, or a religious practice, or mankind, or something of that sort) will be explained by tracing its origins back to this prehistoric age. This presence of etiological motifs is a key earmark of myths.

To recap, myths are traditional sacred narratives which seek to explain how the world and man came to be in their present form. So understood, Genesis 1-11 clearly meet these criteria, I think. The primeval history of Genesis 1-11 is a traditional, sacred narrative which seeks to anchor realities present to the Pentateuchal author and his audience such as the world, mankind, natural phenomena, cultural practices, and prevailing religious

practices, in a primordial time. So on this definition Genesis 1-11 would belong to the literary type of myth.

Now the claim here is *not* that Genesis 1-11 are derived from ancient Near Eastern myths. After the discovery and the publication of the Babylonian myths in the late 19th century, many Old Testament scholars went overboard in assessing their relevance to the Genesis account. There arose among Old Testament scholars the pan-Babylonian school that claimed that not only Genesis but even Greek mythology was derived from Babylonian myths. Today, however, few scholars defend the claim that Genesis 1-11 is based on pagan myths. The one exception would be the flood story in the neo-Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh. The Gilgamesh Epic evolved over thousands of years, but in the most recent recensions (the neo-Babylonian recension) the Epic of Gilgamesh contains a flood story that includes an episode about the survivor of the flood releasing successively several birds to see if the dry land had appeared and it was safe to exit the boat. But even here direct dependence of Genesis on the Epic of Gilgamesh is very difficult to prove because the episode about the birds was added later to the Gilgamesh story, being attested no earlier than 750 BC. 750 BC is the earliest we have of the episode of the birds included in the flood story in Gilgamesh. That may be after the biblical traditions arose. The biblical traditions could well be earlier than that.

Far too many Old Testament scholars fell prey to what the New Testament scholar Samuel Sandmel called "parallelomania."[3] Samuel Sandmel, in a very famous article "Parallelomania,"

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[3] Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81/1 (1962): 1-13.

observed that in order to establish the dependence claims that these critics wanted to make they would need to establish three subsidiary claims. First, they would have to prove that the texts really are parallel – that there is a genuine parallel between the biblical text and these texts. Secondly, they would have to show that the parallels are to be explained by a causal connection between the texts – that the texts are causally linked. Thirdly, they would need to show that the causal connection is asymmetrical – that is to say, that the causal influence ran in only one direction (in this case, from the Babylonian texts to the biblical text). Doing this is extraordinarily difficult.

Focusing on isolated similarities between texts courts the danger of cherry-picking. To give an illustration of cherry-picking, we all know about the terrible disaster that occurred when an airliner on its way from Massachusetts to New York crashed into one of New York's tallest buildings between the 77th and the 85th floors shortly after 9:00 a.m. setting it on fire and resulting in the loss of everyone on board and many office workers. The terrorist attacks of 9/11? No! Rather, the crash of a B-25 into the Empire State Building on July 28, 1945.[4] By cherry-picking details one can create the illusion of parallelism when in fact none actually exists.

A good example of literary dependence that has been demonstrated would be the *Epic of Gilgamesh,* which is an ancient Sumerian-Babylonian poem recounting the exploits of *Gilgamesh*. The *Gilgamesh* story originally did not include a Flood story. The oldest versions of *Gilgamesh* have no Flood story; rather, this is to be found in another ancient epic Mesopotamian poem called

[4] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1945_Empire_State_Building_B-25_crash. I am indebted to Michael Licona for this example.

Atrahasis. What scholars have found is that in the most recent or standard accounts of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the *Atrahasis* Flood story has been incorporated into the *Gilgamesh* epic. Indeed, in some places it's verbatim (repetition) of the *Atrahasis* Flood story. Given the verbatim linguistic parallels as well as the similar context of the Flood story in *Gilgamesh* and in the Flood story in *Atrahasis*, this seems to be a truly genuine parallel between *Gilgamesh* and the *Atrahasis* Flood story. The Flood story in *Gilgamesh* seems to be borrowed from or dependent upon *Atrahasis*. Moreover, since the *Atrahasis* story is older (going back to at least the second millennium BC) whereas the standard version of the *Gilgamesh* story is much more recent, the causal connection between them cannot be from *Gilgamesh* to *Atrahasis*. *Atrahasis* is the older account. So the causal line would be drawn from *Atrahasis* to *Gilgamesh*. This would seem to be a case in which the criteria that Samuel Sandmel laid out for showing truly parallel texts in context with a causal connection between them that is asymmetric would seem to be pretty convincingly demonstrated. What we also saw that was very interesting is that neither the *Atrahasis* account nor the original Flood story in *Gilgamesh* after *Atrahasis* was incorporated into it included the episode of the release of the birds to see if the land was dry and it was safe to exit the Ark. That gets added to the *Gilgamesh* epic later on and is attested no earlier than about 750 BC. So that raises the question as to where the *Epic of Gilgamesh* got the bird episode which was added then to the Flood story borrowed from *Atrahasis*.

I think that Miller and Soden are guilty of cherry-picking. So what we'll do next time is look at two reasons why we should be skeptical about Miller and Soden’s claim that there are significant

parallels between Genesis 1 and the Egyptian creation myths so as to show some sort of causal connection between them.