

Examining the Supposed Parallels Between Genesis and Egyptian Myths

Last time we looked at the way in which the notion of myth is understood by scholars of folklore. You'll recall that we said that a myth is a traditional sacred narrative which seeks to ground or anchor present realities in a primordial time. As such the first eleven chapters of Genesis would qualify as mythical.

I explained last time that too many Old Testament scholars have succumbed to the affliction of parallelomania, that is to say trying to show that one narrative is dependent upon another by examining details taken out of context, and this results in cherry-picking that can be very misleading in demonstrating alleged independence.

Miller and Soden are guilty, I fear, of cherry-picking. Consider their most important claim about the primordial state's being a dark, watery chaos in both Genesis and the Egyptian myths.

Genesis 1:2 says, "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." This is supposed to resemble the primordial state in Egyptian myths. Now, as I said last week, I'm certainly open to following the evidence where it leads, but I think that Miller and Soden have been very sloppy in drawing these alleged parallels between Genesis 1:2 and Egyptian creation myths. I want to make two points about their claim of parallelism.

First, the two states, when examined in context, are not truly parallel. It's important to understand that in various Egyptian cosmogonic, or rather theogonic, myths, what's at stake is an ancient philosophical problem called the One and the Many. That is to say, how does one explain the underlying unity of the world

behind the multiplicity that we observe in the world? These Egyptian myths seek to derive multiplicity from a primal monism. In these myths water and darkness symbolize the undifferentiated, primordial state of the unbounded One (with a capital ‘O’) from which all multiplicity emerges. For example, Coffin text 76 contains one of the earliest references to the qualities of the primordial state. Atum, one of the Egyptian gods, is here speaking in the first person and he says, “I am the begetter of repeated millions – out of the Flood, out of the Waters, out of the darkness, out of lostness.” Eric Hornung, an Egyptologist, in his book *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, explains that the Egyptian language had a special negative verb form, one use of which was to describe how things were before creation, when something was not yet. He says the spatial nature of the world is negated. Earth and sky have not yet come into being. Before creation, there were not yet two things. There is “no thing,” that is, no matter. This is an expression of the Egyptian view that before creation there was just undifferentiated unity which could not be divided into two distinct things.

This primordial One is both everything and yet paradoxically also non-existent. Non-existence is one and undifferentiated. The creator God in these myths emerges from the non-existent, which marks the beginning of the process of things’ coming into being by differentiating himself into the plurality of millions of things.¹ According to Hornung, the non-existent signified, negatively, that which is inchoate, undifferentiated, and unlimited, and, affirmatively, it is that which is absolute or fundamental. In

¹ Eric Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, pp. 175-6.

contrast to the non-existent, existent things are clearly defined and are restricted by boundaries and distinctions. The Jewish commentator Nahum Sarna suggests that the reason that water seemed to the ancients the appropriate representation of the primordial state was because of its amorphous nature.

In contrast to this monistic picture, the state of the primitive Earth in Genesis 1:2 is not an undifferentiated unity or chaos (despite the careless statements of many commentators), much less is it non-existent. It is just a primeval ocean cloaked in darkness. It is not unbounded or universal but rather it exists on the Earth, which is distinct from God. It is covering the land which will eventually emerge from it. It has a surface over which the Spirit of God is moving, and therefore it is bounded. It is not characterless. It's the same water that will eventually fill the seas and in which marine life will thrive. It's the same water that will fall from the sky as rain and nourish the land. It is not unordered or chaotic. It has the typical properties of water with which ancient Israelites would have been familiar, such as liquidity, weight, surface tension, solubility, buoyancy, and potability. The primeval ocean is no more a chaos than is a ravaged desert landscape, which the Bible also describes as without form and void. The Hebrew expression is *tohu wabohu*. The only other place besides Genesis 1:2 that this is found in the Bible is Jeremiah 4:23 where it describes the land after the judgment of God has fallen upon it. Reading from Jeremiah 4:20 and following:

Disaster follows hard on disaster,
the whole land is laid waste. . . .

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;

and to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.
I looked, and lo, there was no man,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

Jeremiah is here describing a war-torn land as an uninhabitable waste. Similarly, the primeval Earth was an uninhabitable waste. The New Testament scholar David Tsumura has rightly said that the phrase *tohu wabohu* “has nothing to do with primeval chaos.” It simply refers to the Earth as an unproductive and uninhabited place². Just how wrong-headed it is to see this primeval state as chaos is evident from the Genesis story of the Flood found in Genesis 7:17-24. The Flood returns the Earth to its primeval condition – this desolate waste of water – but it is obviously not (again, despite some commentators’ careless statements) a state of chaos. The state of the Earth when Noah's Ark was floating on the surface of the waters is not a chaos. The sun and the moon and the stars are still shining above. The boat is floating on the surface of the waters. The waters are filled with marine life and the boat is full of animals and men. The waters cover the mountains which will eventually emerge from beneath the surface of the water and be seen as mountains. This is definitely not chaos.

² David Toshio Tsumura, “Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern Stories of Creation and Flood: An Introduction,” and “The Earth in Genesis 1,” [1989], both in “*I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood*,” pp. 33, 310-28; cf. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, pp. 130-33

An ancient Israelite would probably have pictured the state described in Genesis 1:2 to be like a pitch-black night out on the Mediterranean Sea when no moon and stars were visible. This was a condition which seafaring peoples known to Israel (see Genesis 10, for example. In the table of nations, it lists many seafaring peoples with whom Israel was familiar) as well as during the monarchy (see 1 Kings 10:22 concerning Solomon's fleet of ocean-going vessels that sailed out of the Gulf of Aqaba) [would have experienced.] Both these seafaring peoples and the Israeli sailors would themselves have been familiar with this condition on a pitch-black night out on the open sea. This state of affairs is wholly unlike the primal monadic condition envisioned in Egyptian mythology. The state in Egyptian mythology is much more akin to the One of the ancient philosopher Plotinus (who was Egyptian), which is beyond being and is the source from which all multiplicity emanates. In fact, the primeval state that is described in Genesis 1:2 much more closely resembles the state which is described in North American Indian creation myths which feature a kind of primeval ocean in darkness than these Egyptian myths. Therefore, I think Miller and Soden have been all too quick and careless in drawing these supposed parallels.

The second point of criticism is that the claim that the primordial darkness and watery deep of Genesis 1:2 show the influence of Egyptian creation stories is rendered uncertain, not merely by the fundamental difference between them, but also by the fact that these same motifs of primordial darkness and water are so widely disseminated in creation myths around the world. According to the biblical scholar K. Numazawa, myths about the world's origin in which the Earth and sky were originally combined as one, whether

as water alone or as a featureless substance or as a cosmic egg, “can be found among practically all peoples,” being found, for example, even among North American Indian tribes.³ According to these myths, a formless substance existed in primordial darkness until its separation from the Earth and sky, which marked the beginning of the universe. Common to nearly all the myths is the idea of utter darkness before the separation of sky and Earth, when light appeared for the first time. If you're interested in seeing some of these myths, take a look at the multi-volume work edited by Louis Herbert Gray and John Arnott MacCulloch, *The Mythology of All Races*. This is a 13-volume work published between 1916 and 1933. It is somewhat dated now but still useful in giving a survey of the world's mythologies. Scholars who appeal to Egyptian influence upon the Genesis creation account have often failed to consider just how widespread the favorite motif is among the world's peoples. Their inductive sample, in other words, is too small.

Myths tap deeply into the human psyche, and so we shouldn't be surprised to find that similar myths exist among unrelated peoples throughout the world. In order to demonstrate a causal connection between myths it will be necessary to exclude the possibility that similar myths arose independently, which is very difficult to do. Minimally, the theorist engaged in comparative studies of Genesis 1-11 needs to widen his comparison class beyond myths which have a possible causal connection with the primeval narratives so as to be sure that alleged parallels and causal connection really

³ K. Numazawa, “The Cultural-Historical Background of Myths on the Separation of Sky and Earth,” in *Sacred Narrative*, p. 185; for Native Americans see Alan Dundes, “Earth-Diver: Creation of the Mythopoeic Male,” in *Sacred Narrative*, p. 277.

exist rather than simply mere similarity. The need to do this is especially urgent when the similarities are isolated elements in vastly different contexts like monistic Egyptian theogonies.

By way of summary then, the claim that Genesis 1-11 shares with ancient Near Eastern myths a common concern to anchor present realities in a primordial time is not securely grounded by attempts to show dependence of the biblical stories on Babylonian or Egyptian predecessors. The attempt to prove such dependence is fraught with conjecture and uncertainty. Rather, the claim is grounded in the commonality of themes and etiological motifs.

I have asserted that Genesis 1-11 exhibit a concern with etiology, that is to say trying to anchor present realities in a primordial time, but I haven't actually demonstrated that. I've asserted it, but I've not shown it. So what I want to do is to show that Genesis does share with ancient Near Eastern myths common themes like the creation of the world, the creation of mankind, the universal Flood, and so forth, and that it also exhibits this etiological concern to ground realities that are present to the author of the Pentateuch in the primordial past of the primeval history in Genesis 1-11. That will be our discussion for next time.