Etiological Motifs in Genesis 1-11

To step back a moment and review where we've been, we're examining the interpretation of the creation stories of Genesis as being Jewish monotheistic myths. You will remember that we were using the folklorist's definition of myth as given by Alan Dundes – a traditional sacred narrative that seeks to ground present day realities in primordial events.

I've argued that we should not attempt to demonstrate that these Genesis narratives are Jewish creation myths on the basis of their similarities to other ancient Near Eastern myths. We saw that the biblical stories are quite different from the Babylonian and Egyptian creation myths, and that the attempt to prove some sort of dependence between the biblical accounts and the Babylonian and Egyptian accounts is fraught with conjecture and uncertainty. Rather, the claim that Genesis 1-11 shares with ancient Near Eastern myths a common literary type or genre is to be grounded in the commonality of themes and etiological motifs that are found in various myths. You'll remember we defined etiology as concern to show that present-day events or realities are to be explained by grounding them in prehistoric realities and events. Genesis 1-11 shares with myths in general and with ancient Near Eastern myths in particular the grand etiological themes of the origin of the world, the origin of mankind, the origin of certain natural phenomena, the origin of various cultural practices, and the origin of the prevailing religious practice of the day.

Of these different etiological themes, the great Assyriologist S. N. Kramer has said, "The most significant myths of a given culture

are usually the cosmogonic, or creation myths."[1] Genesis 1 is obviously an etiological account of the origin of the world through God's creative activity. As such, it is spectacularly different from the cosmic etiologies of Israel's neighbors. In contrast to the Babylonian and Egyptian myths, there is neither theogony (that is to say, an account of the origin of the gods) nor is there any trace of theomachy (which is warfare or conflict between the gods that gives birth to the world as we know it). Rather, according to Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." All of physical reality is brought into being by an unoriginate and transcendent Deity. Over the ensuing six days, the world is filled out by God's effortless creation of day and night, of the sky with the waters above and the waters below, of dry land and seas, of vegetation, of the heavenly luminaries, of marine life and birds, of terrestrial animals, and finally of man. Genesis 2:4 sums it up, "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them." The creation narrative grounds the world with its familiar creatures and phenomena in the primordial creative work of God.

In Genesis 2 we have an etiological account of the origin of humanity that supplements the brief notice of mankind's creation in chapter 1.26-27. In Genesis 1:27 it says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Contrary to earlier scholarly assertions that what we have here in Genesis 2 is a different creation account which differs from the creation story in Genesis 1, the Old Testament commentator Claus Westermann has rightly

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[1] Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievements in the Third Millennium B.C.*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 30.

differentiated between myths of the origin of the world (which would be cosmogonic myths) and myths of the origin of mankind (what we might call anthropic myths).

The latter type of myth – the origin of humanity – is plentiful in the ancient Near East, and they are distinct from cosmogonic accounts. For example, humans are often treated as later creations of the gods, almost as after-thoughts for the purpose of delivering the minor deities from the back-breaking labor of digging ditches and irrigation canals. So, for example, in the *Atrahasis Epic* we read that the minor deities are said to have labored for thousands of years before finally rebelling against their overseers, which necessitated the creation of man to take over their labors. Similarly, in the *Enuma Elish,* which we talked about last time, the god Marduk does not create man until much later than his creation of the cosmos from the severed corpse of Tiamat. That Genesis 2 is not a cosmogony is evident from the fact that it contains no description of God's creation of cosmic features like the sun, the moon, and the stars. Rather, it seeks to relate God's creation of humanity.

So Genesis 2 is not a different cosmogonic or creation myth distinct from chapter 1. Rather, it is a different sort of story which seeks to explain the origin of humanity. The story in Genesis 2 is therefore best understood, I think, as the Pentateuchal author's attempt to supplement the brief notice of mankind's creation in Genesis 1:26-27. Whereas in Genesis 1 we are given a panoramic view of creation, in Genesis 2 we have a focused account of the creation of humanity on day 6 as mentioned in Genesis 1.

Some scholars have suggested reading the account of man's creation in Genesis 2 sequentially or diachronically compared to Genesis 1 rather than synchronically or simultaneous or at the same time – the proposal is that Genesis 2 should be read to describe a much later event than the creation of humanity in Genesis 1:26-27. But I think that this diachronic interpretation is less plausible than the synchronic view. The motivation for adopting a sequential interpretation of Genesis 2 is to allow for the existence of a considerable lapse of time between the creation of the original humans in Genesis 1 and the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 and thus the growth of a large human population that existed outside the Garden of Eden. So on the sequential interpretation, the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 simply represents a special creation of Adam and Eve, even though there were people unnumbered outside the Garden. This motivation looks to me suspiciously concordist. It seems to arise from concerns about paleoanthropology and population genetics, and so it wants to read into the narrative a considerable lapse of time and a large human population. But there's very little if anything in the text itself which would lead us to think that the events of Genesis 1 and 2 are not identical, much less that they are separated by eons of time.

On the contrary, let me share three reasons for thinking that what is described in Genesis 2 is the original creation of humanity, not some later creation of a special pair.

1. The purpose of the primeval narratives of Genesis 1-11 is to portray God's universal plan for and dealings with humanity. Scholars have often asked themselves, why doesn't the Pentateuch

just begin with the call of Abraham in Genesis 12 and the founding of the nation of Israel? Why all this prehistoric stuff prior to the call of Abraham and the constitution of the nation of Israel? Commentators seem pretty widely agreed that the reason for prefixing this prehistoric narrative to the patriarchal narratives is the universalizing interest of the author. The Pentateuchal author wants to show that God's original plan was to bless all of mankind and that this aim has not been abandoned. It still remains ultimately in mind through the election of Israel, which is now going to be God's means of fulfilling his original intent. And that's why God says to Abraham, "Through you all the nations of the world shall be blessed," not just his select people of Israel. Old Testament scholar L. A. Turner rightly says, "Remove these elements, and the coherence of the book as a whole disappears."[2] God wasn't especially preoccupied with just the offspring of one specially created human couple to the neglect of everybody else – a sort of pre-Israelite form of election, if you will. Rather, he was concerned with all of mankind.

2. The second reason for thinking that Genesis 2 is the original creation of mankind is that a comparison of the story of the creation of man in Genesis 2 with other ancient Near Eastern creation myths show that such stories share an etiological interest in telling about how mankind in general came to exist. For example, in the *Atrahasis Epic*, in response to the complaints of the lower deities about their burdensome labors, the mother goddess decides to create man to take over the chores for these

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[2] *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), s.v. "Genesis," by L. A. Turner, p. 353.

minor gods. These stories seek to answer the question of human origins in general – why does mankind exist? And the answer is that human beings were created basically as slave labor for the gods. When you read Genesis 2 against this backdrop, you find Genesis 2 has a very similar etiological interest. It also wants to explain why mankind exists, but it gives obviously a very, very different sort of answer.

3. The third reason for thinking that Genesis 2 is about the creation of mankind is that the account in Genesis 2 when read at face value seems to be about human origins. The author employs the typical ancient Mesopotamian etiological formula that we've seen before: "when ____ was not yet, then ____." And you fill in the blanks with what you want to describe. Genesis 2:5-7 describes the creation of the earth prior to God's creation of man in these words:

> when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

Notice that the author states explicitly that *there was no man* to do the work of human agriculture until God created man. The word *adam* is the generic Hebrew word for man. It is not used as a proper name until 4.1. So there was no man – no *adam* – to till the Earth before God created the first man. Moreover, notice that

woman doesn't appear until her creation in Genesis 2:22 when God puts Adam to sleep and creates a woman out of his side. Among all of the animals that God forms and brings to Adam, Genesis 2:20 says “there was not found a helper fit for him.” God therefore creates a woman and presents her to the man. Here we have in detail, I think, what Genesis 1:27 says in summary: “male and female he created them.” Prior to the creation there simply was no man and no woman. Notice, too, the name that is later given by the man to his wife which is said to mean “the mother of all living” (that's in Genesis 3:20). He calls Eve the mother of all living. That is at face value an affirmation of her and the man's universal progenitorship of all of mankind – she's the mother of all living persons.

So for these reasons the story of man's creation in Genesis 2 is not plausibly intended by the Pentateuchal author to be a sequential account distinct from and later than the creation of man in Genesis 1:26-27. Rather, it is a more focused or detailed rendition of that same event.

In the closing comment of the story, etiology comes explicitly to the fore. Genesis 2:24 says, “Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.” Notice here the man and the woman have now become man and wife. Marriage is thus God's plan for man and woman and is grounded in the primordial creation of man and woman as his helper. The marriage relationship is then the proper sphere for human sexual activity. This etiological note, I think, confirms that the author takes his story to be universal in scope. Marriage is not plausibly

taken to be merely God's special provision for this specially-created couple. Rather, it is his intention for all of humanity.

We've looked at etiological motifs concerning creation and concerning humanity. Etiological motifs concerning natural phenomena are also evident in Genesis 1-11. Such motifs are especially obvious in the account of Genesis 3 of the primordial couple's disobedience to God as a result of their seduction by the serpent in the Garden. In the punishments pronounced by God upon the serpent, the man, and the woman, etiological motifs abound. Let me read to you from Genesis 3:14-19.

> The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” To the woman he said, “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

In this account of God's judgment, the serpent's slithering on the ground is clearly said to be the consequence of God's judgment for its seduction of the couple. That's why snakes crawl on their bellies on the ground. Similarly, however we interpret the woman's subjection to her husband, the explanation for the terrible pain that women experience in childbirth is attributed to the first woman's disobedience. Finally, the toil of farming is attributed to the fact that the land is cursed because of the man's disobedience. Thus, these natural phenomena with which later Israelites would have been all too familiar are explained in terms of our primordial parents' fall into sin.

While the story in Genesis 3 does not offer an etiology for evil as such (the deceitful serpent simply shows up in the Garden opposing God), still it does offer an etiology for human misery as the result of sin. In the ensuing narrative climaxing in the Flood story, we have what Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad has called "an increase in sin to avalanche proportions"[3] as man devolves from bad to worse until, according to Genesis 6:5, God sees that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Though the story of the Fall does not contemplate the later dogma of original sin (that is to say, the dogma according to which the sin and guilt of Adam are imputed to every member of his posterity – you don't find that in Genesis 3, that comes from Romans 5), still it does portray the disobedience of the first couple as the flood gate through which sin entered into the paradise created for them by God, leading to their expulsion from the

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[3] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1972), p. 152

Garden to eke out a life from the cursed soil cut off from the tree of life and thus doomed to death.

Let me go on to the final point, and that is that among the most important and obvious etiological motifs in Genesis 1-11 are those related to the establishment of religious practice in Israel. The creation story ends with God's resting from his work on the seventh day. Genesis 2:2-3 says,

> And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation.

The Pentateuchal author is explicit about Sabbath observance being grounded in the pattern set by God and his hallowing and blessing the seventh day. In Exodus 20:8-11 we read,

> Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, . . . for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

Similarly, Exodus 31:15-17:

> Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. It is a

> sign for ever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.

I think probably no other etiological motif in Genesis 1-11 is so powerfully attested as the grounding of Sabbath observance in God's own observance of the seventh day as a day of rest in the story of the world's creation.

In summary, it's evident that Genesis 1-11 are brimming with etiological motifs concerning the origin of the world, the origin of mankind, the origin of certain natural phenomena, the origin of cultural practices, and the origin of the prevailing religious practice. Even if attempts to show that direct borrowing of Genesis 1-11 from ancient Near Eastern myths are fraught with conjecture and uncertainty, as I think they are, still I don't think it can be plausibly denied that these chapters treat many of the same themes as ancient Near Eastern myths and that they seek to ground present realities in the events of the primordial past. Therefore, they should be classified as myths as the folklorist understands it.