

The Genre of Mytho-History

Last time we looked at the genealogies in Genesis 1-11 and saw the way in which they serve to provide a chronological framework for the primeval narratives that turn them into a primeval history. But I argued despite the interest in history that these genealogies evince, we shouldn't press them too hard for their literal interpretation. We saw, for example, that in the genealogy in chapter 10 – the so-called Table of Nations – that despite words of “begetting” and “son of” and so forth that these are not actually lines of blood descent but group people on the basis of geography, ethnicity, political considerations, and so forth so that this isn't a literal genealogical table. Moreover, we saw that the artificial symmetry between the antediluvian and the postdiluvian ancestors suggests that this is an artificial construction arranged so as to have ten antediluvian ancestors from Adam to Noah and then ten postdiluvian ancestors from Shem to Abraham. Finally, I argued that the abnormally long lifespans of the antediluvians suggests that these are not to be taken literally but, on the pattern of the fantastic reigns of the ancient Sumerian kings, have some other purpose than to give a literal historical account.

So I think Genesis 1-11 are plausibly to be understood as Hebrew myths with an interest in history. The eminent Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen proposed that we recognize a unique genre of literature which he called “mytho-history.” On the basis of three fragments of different dates, Thorkild Jacobsen was able to assemble an ancient Sumerian story. (Sumer was the Mesopotamian civilization prior to Babylon.) He was able to assemble an ancient Sumerian story which he called the *Eridu*

Genesis. Eridu was a Sumerian city. The *Eridu Genesis* is a story which deals with the creation of man, the institution of kingship and the founding of the first cities, and then the Great Flood. Jacobsen thinks that *Genesis* similarly describes the creation of man and animals, it lists the leading figures after creation, and then narrates the Flood. His reflections on this sort of literature are worth quoting at length. He says, "These three parts . . ." --that is to say, the creation account, the lists of antediluvians, and then the Flood itself -- "These three parts moreover are in both traditions . . ." --that is to say, both in the *Eridu (Sumerian) Genesis* and in the Hebrew *Genesis*--

These three parts, moreover, are in both traditions combined simply by arranging them along a line in time and not according to the most usual device for connecting separate tales or myths: grouping them around a single hero. . . . In the 'Eridu Genesis' moreover the progression is clearly a logical one of cause and effect: the wretched state of natural man touches the motherly heart of Nintur, who has him improve his lot by settling down in cities and building temples; and she gives him a king to lead and organize. As this chain of cause and effect leads from nature to civilization, so a following such chain carries from the early cities and kings over into the story of the flood. The well-organized irrigation works carried out by the cities under the leadership of their kings lead to a greatly increased food supply and that in turn makes man multiply on the earth. The volume of noise these people make keeps Enlil from sleeping and makes him decide to get peace and quiet by sending the flood. Now, this arrangement along a line of time as cause and effect is

striking, for it is very much the way a historian arranges his data, and since the data here are mythological we may assign both traditions to a new and separate genre as mytho-historical accounts.¹

It might be seriously questioned whether the conditions identified by Jacobsen for a narrative's qualifying as even quasi-historical in nature, namely, they arranged causally connected events in chronological order, is really sufficient to indicate a genuine historical interest. By this standard, the myth *Enuma Elish* (which we've discussed in this class; this is the myth of the ascendancy of the god Marduk to a place of supremacy in the Babylonian pantheon) ought to qualify then as mytho-historical since the story of Marduk's conquest of the dragon goddess Tiamat most certainly relates chronologically ordered, causally connected events in time. He builds the world – the heavens and the Earth – out of the carcass of the dragon goddess Tiamat whom he has slain – clearly a chronological chain of cause and effect. But it would be absurd to think that the *Enuma Elish* is therefore some sort of quasi-historical account.

But I think it's important to realize that Jacobsen is talking about an ordering in real time, not merely the fictional time of a myth or fable. The second part of the *Eridu Genesis* is modeled on the Sumerian king lists, and Jacobsen credits the inclusion of this section in the tale to “pure historical interest on the part of the

¹ Thorkild Jacobsen, “The Eridu Genesis,” [1981], in “*I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood*”: *Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura, Sources for Biblical and Theological Studies (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1994), p. 140.

composer.” So it is this interest in genuine chronology that sets the stories apart from pure myth:

This interest in numbers is very curious, for it is characteristic of myths and folk tales that they are not concerned with time for all. . . . No!— interest in numbers of years belongs elsewhere, to the style of chronicles and historiography. In Mesopotamia we find it first in date-lists, lists of reigns, and in the Kinglist, later on in the Chronicles, but to find this chronological list-form combined, as it is here, with simple mythological narrative, is truly unique. . . . The assignment of the tale to a mytho-historical genre is thus further confirmed.

I realize that classifying Genesis 1-11 as mytho-history is doubtless disquieting for many evangelical Christians. But evangelical laymen would probably be surprised at how widely accepted Jacobsen’s classification of Genesis 1-11 as mytho-history is among evangelical Old Testament scholars. The case of Gordon Wenham, who is a highly respected Old Testament commentator, is instructive. Wenham is the author of the commentary *Genesis 1-15* in *The Word* biblical commentary series. Of Jacobsen’s classification of Genesis 1-11 as mytho-history, Wenham remarks, “This is a sensitive analysis of both texts.” That is to say, both the *Eridu Genesis* and the biblical Genesis. “But,” and here comes the caveat, “myth is a loaded term which leads to misunderstanding. That is why I prefer Proto history.” So instead of mytho-history, Genesis 1-11 is proto-history. What is that? Wenham says, “It is Proto in that it describes origins and sets out models of God and his dealings with the human race. It is historical in that it describes

past realities and the lessons that should be drawn from them.”² This is a distinction without a difference. Wenham’s characterization of proto-history aptly describes mytho-history. Wenham says, “The genealogical framework . . . of chapter 4 as well as the introductory formula” – in chapter 2 and verse 4, there he’s referring to that formula (*toledoth* in Hebrew) *these are the generations of* which then will provide a genealogical account – “shows that the editor considers his account proto-historical: as describing real individuals from the primeval past whose actions are significant for all mankind.”³ The narratives put profound theological truths “in vivid and memorable form in an absorbing yet highly symbolic story.”⁴ If we take these stories as straightforward history, Wenham cautions, “we may be forced to conclude that Genesis is trying to relate history but not succeeding, which would be a rather negative conclusion.”⁵ That’s why Wenham prefers proto-history. It’s evident, I think, that there is no material difference between proto-history and mytho-history. Wenham simply declines to use the word “myth” because of the connotations which the word has in popular parlance. (John Collins uses “worldview history,” J. I. Packer calls it “dramatic history,” Tremper Longman calls it “theological history,” John Walton characterizes it as “imagistic history.” All of these are names for the same thing.)

By contrast, Bill Arnold is an evangelical Old Testament scholar at Asbury Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. Arnold has more temerity than Wenham. He opines,

² Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis 1-11 as Proto-history,” p. 87; cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 54.

³ Wenham, “Genesis 1-11 as Proto-history,” p. 117.

⁴ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 55.

⁵ Wenham, “Response to James K. Hoffmeier,” p. 62.

These chapters are no simple history or example of ancient historiography. At most, we may say that mythical themes have been arranged in a forward-moving, linear progression, in what may be considered a historicizing literary form, using genealogies especially, to make history out of myth.⁶

Not that myth has been lost: rather myth is combined with history. Accordingly, Arnold believes, Jacobsen's nomenclature should be adopted:

The Primeval History (Gen. 1-11) addresses the origins of the universe, the creation of humanity, and the first institutions of human civilization. We retain the term 'history' in the title of this first unit of the Bible—the Primeval History—because, on the one hand, it arranges themes along a time continuum using cause and effect and generally uses historical narrative as the literary medium for communication. On the other hand, those themes themselves are the same ones explored elsewhere in the ancient Near East in mythological literature The Primeval History narrates those themes in a way that transforms their meaning and import, and for these reasons we may think of these chapters as a unique literary category, which some have termed 'mytho-historical.'

Although Wenham is doubtless correct that the classification of Genesis 1-11 as mytho-history is prone to misunderstanding, I do not think that we who are scholars should revert to vague euphemisms like "proto-history" that tend to conceal rather than to disclose the literary character of Genesis 1-11. I think we simply

⁶ Bill T. Arnold, "The Genesis Narratives," in *Ancient Israel's History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and Richard S. Hess (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), p. 31.

need to be careful to explain our meaning to laymen in the way that I have tried to do in this class over the last several months.

Let me conclude by summing up.

In sum, the shared themes and interest in etiology of Genesis 1-11 and Ancient Near Eastern myths leads us to think of the primeval history as composed of Hebrew monotheistic myths whose primary purpose is to ground realities present to the Pentateuchal author and important for Israelite society in the primordial past. At the same time, the interstitching of the primeval narratives with genealogies terminating in real people evinces a historical interest on the author's part in persons who once lived and wrought. So it seems to me that the classification of Genesis 1-11 as mytho-history is a plausible genre analysis.

Now, if Genesis 1-11 belongs to the genre of mytho-history then the question arises: Is the primeval history to be understood as literally true? That's the question that we will take up next week.