

Is the Biblical Primeval History to Be Understood as Literally True?

Last week I promised that I would address the million dollar question today! If Genesis 1-11 belongs to the genre of mytho-history (as I've argued), then the question arises: is the primeval history to be understood as literally true? Although the genealogies show a historical interest on the author's part, we've already seen reason to think that the genealogies should not be interpreted literalistically. Moreover, insofar as these chapters share the genre of myth, the question arises as to whether societies which embrace a myth understand that myth to be literally true. Certainly they understand it to be true, but do they take it to be literally true? It is so important to understand that figurative discourse can be true even if it is false when interpreted literalistically. So, for example, if I come in from the outside and I am soaking wet and I tell you "It's raining cats and dogs outside!" that can be true even if there are not animals falling from the sky. The literalistic interpretation of figurative language is often the source of jokes. I saw a television program once where there is a knock at the door and a man tells his robot, "Robot, go answer the door." And the robot dutifully approaches the door and said, "Yes, door, what was it that you asked?" Obviously something can be figuratively true and yet literally false.

Were the myths of the Ancient Near East intended to be taken as literally true? This question is not easily answered because we do not have direct access to the adherents of ancient myths so as to probe their attitudes toward the myths they embraced. As in the case of the genealogies, we must instead turn to comparative

anthropological studies and to comparative studies of Ancient Near Eastern literature in order to try to find an answer.

Let's first look at comparative anthropological data concerning societies which pass on myths.

In distinguishing between myths and folktales, the folklorist William Bascom points out that quite a number of primitive societies clearly recognize the distinction between what he calls factual and fictional narratives. "Factual and fictional narratives are clearly recognized as separate categories in many [primitive] societies."¹ In an oft-cited article² the anthropologist Raffaele Pettazoni draws upon anthropological data similar to those adduced by Bascom to show that North American Indian tribes "differentiate 'true stories' from 'false stories' in the 'true' stories we have to deal with the holy and the supernatural, while the 'false' ones on the other hand are of profane content," for example, the false ones would include stories about the antics of the trickster and accomplished rogue Coyote – a figure who in Indian tales is very much like Wile E. Coyote in the *Road Runner* cartoons.³ Sometimes these false stories are differentiated from "true tales" as "'funny stories,' mere inventions, having no real substance."⁴ I think it goes without saying that the members of a society which embraces foundational myths would never regard such sacred stories as profane or merely funny. Of course, Pettazoni is right that "myth is not pure fiction;" "it is a 'true story'

William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives," in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 19. See the abundant examples he provides from around the world, pp. 13-24.

² e.g., Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 8-9.

³ Raffaele Pettazoni, "The Truth of Myth," in *Sacred Narrative*, p. 99.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

and not a ‘false’ one.”⁵ But it is a *non sequitur* to infer that it is therefore history because truth comprises much more than history and so cannot simply be equated with it.

The deeper question raised by these anthropologists is what conception(s) of truth is held by these various tribal peoples. The predicate “true” has a wide range of meanings, as is evident in such expressions as “true gold,” “a true friend,” “a true measure,” “the true path,” or “a true statement.” All of these use the truth predicate differently in their meaning. Why should we think that these tribal societies’ conception of truth is the philosopher’s conception of truth as correspondence with reality?

The anthropologist Theodor Gaster says that Pettazoni makes the mistake of conflating truth with efficacy.⁶ Gaster cautions,

Before any general deductions can be drawn, it would seem necessary to determine exactly the meaning and frame of reference of the native terms rendered ‘true’ and ‘false.’ Does ‘true’ mean, in this context, accurate, or historical, or real, or valid, or authenticated? Conversely, does ‘false’ mean untrustworthy, or unhistorical or unreal (fictitious), or futile, or spurious? A story might, for example, be valid functionally—that is, fully serve a ritual purpose—yet be invalid historically, or it might be valid historically, yet futile and inefficacious as a cultic recitation. Again, it might be a genuine tradition, yet in itself fictitious, or, conversely, it might relate an actual, historical fact, yet be a modern product and no genuinely traditional composition. . . .

⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

⁶ Theodor H. Gaster, “Myth and Story,” in *Sacred Narrative*, p. 133.

Obviously, then, until we know precisely what words the primitive employs, and in what sense he employs them, it is precarious to deduce from his distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ stories anything concerning the fundamental ‘truth’ of Myth.⁷

The dichotomy drawn by tribal peoples between true stories and false stories is not sufficient to prove that members of those societies are expected to believe that the myths are literally true.

The fact that myths, while accepted as true and authoritative, are not necessarily to be taken to be literally true is evident from examples of myths which seem to be clearly metaphorical or figurative.

For example, the anthropologist William Doty relates a myth from the Chukchee people of northeastern Siberia. Let me read you a paraphrase of this myth, which I think is surely metaphorical. See if you don’t agree as I read it. Here is how it goes:

The self-created Raven and his wife live together where there are no humans, nor any other living creature. The wife says to Raven that he should try to create the earth. When he protests that he cannot create the earth, she says that she will try to create companions for them. She falls to sleep and her black feathers become human and her talons turn into fingers. Her abdomen enlarges, and before she awakes from sleep she has created three human children.

⁷ Gaster, “Myth and Story,” pp. 133-34. Cf. G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, Sather Classical Lectures 40 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 32, who expresses his suspicion that the native terms translated as “true” have a variety of meanings, none of which quite corresponds with our word, even if it is extended to mean significant, thereby confusing many modern critics, including Pettazzoni.

Raven says, “There, you have created humans! Now I shall go and try to create the earth.” He flies away and asks all the benevolent beings such as the Dawn, Mid-day, and Sunset for advice, but no one gives it. At last he comes to the place where the sky meets the horizon and sees a tent full of men. Raven learns that they have been created from the dust resulting from the friction of the sky meeting the ground. They are to multiply and become the first seed of all the peoples of the earth.

They ask Raven to create the earth for them, and he agrees to try. As he flies, he defecates, and every piece of excrement falls on water, grows quickly, and becomes land. Then he begins to urinate, and where a drop falls, it becomes a lake, and where a jet falls, it becomes a river. Then he defecates a very hard substance, which becomes the mountains and hills.

When the men complain that they need food, Raven flies off and finds many kinds of trees. He takes his hatchet and begins to chop, throwing the chips into the water, which carries them into the sea. The various kinds of woodchips become walruses, seals, whales, polar bears, reindeer, every kind of sea and land creature. He says, “Now you have food!”

But the men still could not multiply, for there were no women yet. However, a Spider-Woman comes and gives birth to four daughters, who grow fast and become women. One of the men takes one woman as a companion. The next day Raven goes to visit them and finds them sleeping separately in opposite corners of the room. Realizing that they will not

multiply, Raven calls a woman to him and treats her to sexual intercourse, which she finds quite pleasant. So she soon teaches the man how to multiply. That is why girls understand earlier than boys how to copulate.⁸

The avian (or bird-like) and human features and activities ascribed to Raven seem to require that this myth was not taken literally. Gods and goddesses are frequently represented in myths as animals. As we shall see, Ancient Near Eastern myths also exhibit this kind of metaphorical nature..

What we've discussed so far is the metaphoricalness, if you will, of myths. I wish there were a better word than that. I looked to see if there is a word called "metaphoricity" but apparently there isn't, but "metaphoricalness" was in the dictionary. That's what we're talking about: the metaphorical nature of some myths.

Let me share two additional anthropological data that suggest that something other than literal truth may be attributed to a society's myths, and these would be the plasticity and the flexibility of myths. Plasticity has to do with the degree of variability of a myth at one time. Flexibility has to do with the degree of variability over time. So plasticity would be a kind of synchronic variability, whereas flexibility will be a diachronic variability. The plasticity of a myth is demonstrated by the variability of contemporaneous oral tellings of it, since that shows that the very tellers of the stories did not take them to have a rigidly fixed form. By contrast, a myth's flexibility is demonstrated by its evolution over time, its mutability and adaptability to new situations and challenges. So plasticity has

⁸ Paraphrased from William G. Doty, *Myth: A Handbook* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2004), pp. 44-5.

to do with the different versions of the story that can be told at the same time; flexibility is the adaptability of the myth over time to changing circumstances.

The social anthropologist Raymond Firth gives a wonderful example of both the plasticity and flexibility of myth from the Tikopian people. Tikopia is an island in the Solomon Islands.⁹ The example concerns two versions of a remarkably flexible myth about the building of their sacred temple. The actual temple was built around 1700 and it was supposed to be modeled on the heavenly temple which is built by God. In the contemporary version of the myth God calls upon men to pass up to him the nails to build the heavenly temple, but they refuse to do so and pass up only coconut husks and fibers and cord. In one version of the story, God, disgusted with them, departs with the nails to the land of the white men, leaving the Tikopians to make do with their inferior construction materials. In another version of the same myth, the model temple is actually being built by God *in England* and he calls down to the Tikopians *in English* for the nails. Failing to understand English, the Tikopians keep handing up these coconut materials to him, until God in disgust banishes them to the island of Tikopia, keeping the iron nails in the land of the white men. Firth reflects that this is clearly an etiological myth designed to explain why the Tikopians have the poor construction materials that they do whereas the white man has iron nails. Here is the interesting part. The knowledge of these iron implements did not come to Tikopia before the arrival of the white man around 1800. Remember the myth goes back to the 1700s. So this feature of the

⁹ Raymond Firth, "The Plasticity of Myth: Cases from Tikopia," in *Sacred Narrative*, pp. 208-12.

story of God's requesting the nails be handed up and the people's refusing to do so must have been a later adaptation of the myth of the construction of the heavenly temple. We see herein not only the flexibility of the original myth, which was able to adapt to the arrival of the white man with his superior construction implements, but we also see its plasticity in the permitted variability in the telling of the story. In either version, despite the different locations and different explanations, it is essentially the same story and both are acceptable in Tikopian society.

Theodor van Baaren cautions that if we ask the members of a society whether their myths have changed, they will typically deny it. "If asked, the answer of the informants as a rule will be that things are as they used to be since immemorial times. This is self-evident, because within their cultural frame this is the only fitting answer."¹⁰ As a result, Westerners sometimes form a misleading view of primitive cultures as static and stagnant. I think for exactly the same reason we have to be cautious about native claims that their myths are absolutely or completely true—what else could they say?

The plasticity and flexibility of myths lend support to the notion that what is at stake in believing a myth is not belief in its literal truth. The different versions of the myth that are believed by contemporaneous members of the society may be logically incompatible with one another; nevertheless, a fundamental religious truth is communicated by the various versions of the myth, so it does not matter which version one relates. One does not bother to correct someone telling a different version of the myth,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 221.

for it, too, expresses that same fundamental truth. If these myths were understood to be literally true, then they could not be changed in response to new challenges in ways that are incompatible with the earlier versions. But if both versions continue to express the same fundamental truth, then they can both be regarded as absolutely true, despite their differences.

Let's now turn to look at the Ancient Near Eastern literary evidence.

As I already mentioned in our discussion of the function of genealogies, contemporary anthropological data will always be of uncertain applicability to the stories told by ancient Israel; rather literary evidence from Ancient Near Eastern mythology will be much more relevant. When we examine the myths of Mesopotamia and Egypt, we find the same use of figurative language, plasticity, and flexibility that is disclosed by the anthropological data that we've just surveyed.

First, it is evident that Ancient Near Eastern myths are often highly metaphorical rather than literal. Consider, for example, the story of Marduk's creation of the world in the epic poem, *Enuma Elish*, which we've examined already in this class. The classicist F. M. Cornford has written with respect to the creation story in the *Enuma Elish*, "No one but a lunatic under the influence of hashish could ever arrive at the theory that they [sc. earth and sky] were originally formed by splitting the body of a dragon in half."¹¹ No ancient Babylonian looking up to the sky expected to see the desiccated body of Tiamat overhead nor did he expect to find the

¹¹ F. M. Cornford, *The Unwritten Philosophy* (Cambridge: 1950), p. 111, cited by Kirk, *Myth*, pp. 14-15.

Tigris and Euphrates rivers originating in Tiamat's eyesockets as the *Enuma Elish* states. These are figurative images, "acts of imagination and fantasy," as the classicist George Kirk puts it. They are not to be taken literally. Similarly, in the story in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's killing the Bull of Heaven (which is the constellation Taurus) – that story could not possibly be literal. In the story, the Bull of Heaven comes down to the city of Uruk and rampages through the city, but Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the Bull by grabbing it by its tail and stabbing it and then butchering it and distributing the meat to the poor people. This is impossible to interpret literally. Not only can a stellar constellation not come down and rampage through the town and be slaughtered and eaten, but if it were (if it did literally happen), then Taurus should no longer be observable shining in the night sky. So the story is clearly, I think, to be interpreted metaphorically.

Similarly, in Egyptian mythology the sky could be depicted variously. For example, as the goddess Nut. The goddess Nut is depicted as arched over the Earth with her hands and feet touching the ground. But, again, no Egyptian looking to the sky expected to see the body of a naked woman arched over him, nor, I think, we can hazard to say, did any caravan ever think that it might come upon Nut's great legs or arms stretching up to the heavens. Again, although Egyptian myths often portray the sun god Re sailing in a boat chockful of other gods and animate tools across the heavens,, nobody looking at the sun thought that he would see such an entourage sailing across the sky. When the sun journeys into the underworld at night and the world reverts to its pre-creation state, this cannot be intended literally. Did no soldiers on nightwatch or farmers rising before dawn ever notice that the world failed to

return to a primordial sea? Sometimes the sun is depicted as undergoing rebirth at night. As sunset it enters into Nut's mouth, and then at sunrise it is birthed through her vagina and rises in the sky. This is clearly metaphorical. Equally and obviously metaphorical is the depiction of the sun as a scarab or as a falcon, since a rolling dung beetle or a falcon were thought to be appropriate images of the sun. The depictions of Egyptian gods and goddesses as having human bodies with animal heads should not be taken as literal pictures of them. Erik Hornung, who is an Egyptologist and has written a fine book on the gods of Egypt, affirms that Egyptian religion lived on the fact that the gods really do exist. But in order to describe this reality it had to speak in "metaphorical and representational images" of the gods. "These images . . . serve to express a content that can perhaps be appropriately expressed only in this way."¹²

Let me wrap it up then. We will next time look at two of the further factors of Ancient Near Eastern myths, their plasticity and flexibility as well as their metaphoricalness. Not only does the metaphorical and figurative language of Ancient Near Eastern myths support a non-literal reading of these myths, but also their plasticity and flexibility also indicate that they are not best interpreted literally.

¹²

Ibid., p. 258; cf. p. 253.