The Plasticity and Flexibility of ANE Myths

We've been thinking about the question: Are myths to be understood literally to be true? In our examination of anthropological data we saw that there are three properties of myth that contribute to the view that they are not to be interpreted literalistically. One was their metaphoricalness. Another was their plasticity. And the third factor was their flexibility. Their metaphoricalness refers to the figurative nature of the language of myth. The plasticity of myth refers to the different versions of a myth that might be told simultaneously in a culture that differ from one another though they teach the same central truth. And the flexibility of myth is its ability to adapt and change over time in response to new pressures and situations.

When we began to look at the literary evidence of Ancient Near Eastern myths of Israel's neighbors Mesopotamia (that is to say, Babylon and Sumer) and Egypt, we found that they are characterized by this same metaphorical language that the anthropological data suggest.

Not only does the metaphorical and figurative language of Ancient Near Eastern myths support a non-literal reading of such myths, but these myths also exhibit the same sort of plasticity and flexibility that we found in the anthropological data.

In Mesopotamia, we have alternative accounts of Marduk’s creation of the world which are significantly different. I’ve already mentioned the creation narrative in the *Enuma Elish* in which Marduk fashions the world out of the corpse of the dragoness Tiamat. But in a different work – the bilingual Sumero-Babylonian

creation story – there is no such contest. Rather, in this account we read that when all was once sea,

> Marduk constructed a raft on the surface of the waters, he made earth and heaped it up on the raft. That the gods should be settled in a dwelling of their pleasure he created mankind (17-20).

Although this version of the myth also features primordial water and Marduk as the principal creator of the world, this serene creation story is vastly different from the warlike account that is found in the *Enuma Elish*.

We also have varying accounts in Mesopotamia of the creation of humanity out of the blood of slain gods in order to provide workers for the gods. For example, in the *Enuma Elish* the god Qingu is executed for inciting Tiamat's rebellion, and "From his blood he [Ea] created mankind, / on whom he imposed the service of the gods, and set the gods free" (VI.33-34). In the story of creation in another cuneiform text abbreviated KAR 4, two gods Alla and Illa are slaughtered "to grow humanity [with] their blood. Let the labor of the gods become its [humanity's] work assignment" (25-27). In the *Atrahasis Epic* we read that another god Wê-ila was killed, and "From his flesh and blood Nintu mixed clay" (225-26) to fashion man to relieve the gods of their labor. Nintu says to the gods, "I have removed your heavy work, / I have imposed your toil on man" (240-41). In these different versions of the myth of humanity's creation, we find the central truths affirmed that there is a divine constitutive element in man, and the reason for mankind's creation was basically to make slave labor for the gods. So we have different versions that illustrate the same central truths.

It is in Egypt, however, that one finds the greatest plasticity and flexibility of its myths. Egypt has become famous for the variation and flexibility of its myths. John Wilson, who is an Egyptologist, nicely epitomizes Egyptian mythology with this sentence: "The Egyptian accepted various myths and discarded none of them."[1] Over the course of 2,300 years there emerged four major versions of the fundamental myth of origins. Each of these was associated with a cult center in an Egyptian city: Hermopolis, Heliopolis, Thebes, and Memphis. These Egyptian cities were the cult centers for the worship of various deities featured in the various versions of the creation myth. Yet, over these 2,300 years, in Egyptologist John Allen's words, this same story remained "remarkably consistent" throughout its history.[2]

According to that myth, as we've seen, reality is the unfolding of an undifferentiated, primordial, monistic state which was represented by water. Out of these waters emerged a little hill which was identified or associated with the god Atum. Atum is regarded as self-created – he brought himself into existence. Atum in turn creates the other gods by acts of, alternatively, sneezing or spitting or masturbating. The peak of this creation sequence is the sun god Re or Amun-Re (variously called). His manifestation is the sun. Every day this creation cycle is repeated as the sun sets in the evening and then is reborn at dawn.

Wide variations of this fundamental story developed. The Egyptologist Eric Hornung, in his book on the gods of Egypt, comments, "The Egyptians place the tensions and contradictions of

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1 Wilson, "Egypt," p. 50.

2 Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, pp. 12,56.

the world beside one another and then live with them."[3] Egyptian iconography (iconography refers to the pictures, for example, that you find in Egyptian tombs on the walls and ceilings portraying various gods and natural phenomena) permitted "an astonishingly rich variety of possibilities" in the representation of a deity.[4] For example, the goddess Hathor is variously represented as a woman, as a cow, as a woman with a cow's head, and as a cow's head with a human face. In addition she is also represented as a lioness, a snake, a hippopotamus, and a tree nymph. Moreover, "we are not observing a historical development in which one form replaced another; at all periods different ways of depicting the goddess simply existed side-by-side."[5] We should not infer that Egyptians thought that Hathor actually had, for example, a human body and a cow's head. Rather, as Hornung explains, the varying images were meant to express different facets of her character, for example, the maternal tenderness of a cow, or the wildness of a lion, the unpredictability of a snake, and so forth. Such images are not to be taken literally. They are visual metaphors.

I've already alluded to a similar variability in Egyptian representations of the sun and the sky. The sun might be depicted as a boat or as a beetle or as an old man declining in the west or as a falcon. Hornung says, "These concepts were felt to be

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[3] Ibid., p. 97. The best sense I can make of this syncretism that Egyptians postulated in their myths what modern metaphysicians would call mereological fusions of gods. A mereological fusion combines two non-identical objects into a new, third object without blending them together, so that each retains its distinct character as well as identity. So, for example, one's body might be regarded as the mereological fusion of all the cells of the body. A mereological fusion of distinct gods would involve a very permissive principle of comprehension governing what sort of fusions are possible. I suspect that so construing Egyptian religion would, however, be anachronistic and that it is more plausible to interpret the myths non-literally.

[4] Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, p. 110.

[5] Ibid., p. 113.

complementary not conflicting."[6] Similarly, the sky was variously depicted. John Wilson comments,

> We should want to know in our picture whether the sky was supported on posts or was held up by a god; the Egyptian would answer, 'Yes, it is supported by posts or held up by a god--or it rests on walls, or it is a cow, or it is a goddess whose arms and feet touch the earth.' Any one of these pictures would be satisfactory to him, . . . and in a single picture he might show two different supports for the sky: the goddess whose arms and feet reach the earth, and the god who holds up the sky goddess.[7]

The plasticity which allowed contradictory depictions of the sun and sky is a sure indication, I think, of the non-literality of such representations.

Interpreted literalistically, Egyptian mythology is a mare's nest of logical contradictions and metaphysical absurdities. But the problems that belong to a literal interpretation of Egyptian mythology should not lead us to think that the Egyptians were in general irrational. Hornung says, "The fact that in Egyptian thought myth is not considered to be contradictory is not sufficient cause for us to term the thought as a whole 'mythical' or 'mythopoeic'; myth is one mode of discourse among many . . ."[8] I think that is exactly right, and given its metaphorical and representational imagery, myth is a special case. Hornung concludes,

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6 Ibid., p. 49.
7 Ibid., p. 45.
8 Ibid, p. 240.

> I maintain, in opposition to the widespread prejudice against metaphorical and representational images in modern scientific research, that images are among the legitimate systems of signs with which we are provided in order to describe the world.
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> . . . For the Egyptians the gods are powers that explain the world but do not themselves need any elucidation because they convey information in a language which can be understood directly—that of myth.[9]

The language of myth is figurative and therefore need not be taken literalistically.

Unfortunately, many Old Testament scholars today, even those emphasizing the importance of Ancient Near Eastern studies as an interpretive backdrop to the book of Genesis, have been seriously misled by a wooden literalism with respect to the Mesopotamian and Egyptian myths. Perhaps one of the most egregious examples, I think, is the claim that the so-called "cosmic geography" of the Ancient Near East included the idea of the sky (or the heavens) as a solid dome over the Earth, touching its horizon, in which the stars are engraved. This is demonstrably wrong, as Babylonian astronomical texts reveal. The ancient Babylonian astrologers charted meticulously the motion of the stars across the heavens and the motions of the planets with respect to the fixed stars and therefore could not possibly have thought of these as engraved in a solid dome that is touching the Earth. Othmar Keel and Silvia Schroer in their book on Ancient Near Eastern thought conclude that contemporary scholars who construe the ancients' cosmic

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[9] Ibid., 258.

geography literalistically have just failed to understand them. This is what they write:

> People in the ancient Near East did not conceive of the earth as a disk floating on water with the firmament inverted over it like a bell jar, with the stars hanging from it. They knew from observation and experience with handicrafts that the lifting capacity of water is limited and the gigantic vaults generate gigantic problems in terms of their ability to carry dead weight. The textbook images that keep being reprinted of 'the ancient Near Eastern world picture' are based on typical modern misunderstandings that fail to take into account the religious components of ancient Near Eastern conceptions and representations.

Keel and Schroer sum it up:

> The thought, pictorial representations, and language of people of that time were generally symbolic–that is, neither entirely concrete nor purely abstract. A cow that bears a calf or the sky-woman who bears the sphere of the sun are not expressions of naïve, childlike fantasies regarding the origin of the world but philosophical developments of thought that were able to form and formulate more abstract notions (the coming into being of the world) from concrete experiences (cattle, birth, etc.). This kind of representation is not simple realism but reflects an interest in the powers that operate and appear in the concrete world.[10]

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[10] Othmar Keel and Silvia Schroer, *Creation: Biblical Theologies in the Context of the Ancient Near East*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2015), p. 78.

It is sobering to reflect that so many Old Testament scholars claiming to inform us about what the ancients believed about cosmic geography should have so seriously misunderstood the relevant texts.

On the basis of the metaphoricalness, the plasticity, and the flexibility of myths, we've seen from both anthropological studies as well as Ancient Near Eastern literature that myths are not always best interpreted literalistically. What we'll do next time is to make the all-important transition of trying to apply this generic analysis to Genesis.