

§ 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

Lecture 11

An Assessment of the Monotheistic Hebrew Myth Interpretation

Today we want to turn to an assessment of what I'm calling the monotheistic Hebrew myth interpretation of Genesis 1. You'll remember we concluded last time by saying that the question raised by Soden and Miller's book is whether or not Genesis belongs to the literary genre of myth as do the Egyptian creation myths. The difference between them would lie not in their literary genre but rather in their theology. In contrast to the polytheistic Egyptian myths, on this view Genesis is a monotheistic Hebrew myth.

What might we say by way of assessment of this view? The exploration of this question requires us to say a word about the nature or the character of myth. The biblical scholar J. W. Rogerson observes that today the range of meaning of the word "myth" is so broad that he says "the word can hardly be wrongly used!"¹ For example, on April 4 of 2019, I saw a Reuters news headline that read, "Major study debunks myth that moderate drinking can be healthy." Here is the popular understanding of the word "myth" to mean a falsehood. This leads the eminent folklorist Alan Dundes to exclaim, "Nothing infuriates a folklorist more than to hear a colleague from the anthropology or literature department use the word *myth* to refer to anything from an erroneous statement to an archetypal theme."² Rather, ever since the groundbreaking work of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (the famous Brothers Grimm whom you know from their study of fairy tales) there are three types of narrative which are studied by students of folklore, namely: myths, folktales (we often call them fairy tales but they're not all really about fairies), and legends.

Folktales are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are regarded as fiction. The events that they relate may or may not have happened. They are not to be taken seriously as dogma or as history. They usually recount the adventures of animal or human characters and may be set at any time in any place. A good example of a folktale would be the story of "Little Red Riding Hood" or "Hansel and Gretel."

In contrast to this, legends are set in a time that is less remote than the myths. In legends, the world was pretty much then as it is today. They are more often secular than sacred, and their principal characters are merely human beings. A good example of legends would be the stories of "Robin Hood" which have some basis in history but now have accumulated stories about that historical person that are not regarded as historically reliable.

¹ J. W. Rogerson, "Slippery Words: Myth," in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 66.

² See Alan Dundes' introductory comments to William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives," in *Sacred Narrative*, p. 5.

Finally, according to Dundes, myths are sacred narratives which explain how the world and man came to be in their present form. Since this is so important, let me repeat that characterization: myths are sacred narratives which explain how the world and man came to be in their present form. Some features of this disarmingly simple characterization deserve comment. First, notice on this definition that a myth is a linguistic composition, either oral or literary. In contrast to common parlance then, specialists do not take the word “myth” to be synonymous with falsehood. Neither do they use the word “myth” in the popular sense to refer to some sort of idea such as “the myth of the noble savage” or “the myth of the self-made man.” Rather, a myth is a thing composed of words. It's a linguistic composition. Secondly, it is a narrative. That is to say, it's a story which will involve characters and a plot line. A myth describes a sequence of events. Thirdly, it's a sacred narrative. That is to say, it has religious significance in the culture in which it is embraced. That implies that it will have something to do with deity as one of its principal figures. It will be stories about God or gods. Fourth, it is assumed that it is a traditional narrative, one that's handed down over the generations. It's not a recent free composition. Accordingly, we could improve Dundes' characterization by making this assumption explicit: a myth is a traditional, sacred narrative. Finally, a myth seeks to explain present realities by anchoring them in the past, understood to mean the pre-historical past. The origin of the world and of mankind are just two examples of such present realities, and the list could be extended. This key feature of myths is called by specialists “etiology.” It comes from the Greek word *aitia* which means “cause.” Myths are characterized by etiological motifs where some present reality (a natural feature of the world, or a religious practice, or mankind, or something of that sort) will be explained by tracing its origins back to this prehistoric age. This presence of etiological motifs is a key earmark of myths.

START DISCUSSION

Student: One thing I've always misunderstood when it came to myths was I always took it as fiction, like these stories never happened. Just recently I learned that's not really the case. With that being said, I was always confused on what the purpose of a myth was for. What is the purpose of the writings, or why the Egyptians would use such stories?

Dr. Craig: That is the perfect question to ask! And the answer is the purpose is etiological. It is to ground present realities in a culture in these prehistoric roots. That is the function that myths play. So, for example, in John Collins' recent book *Reading Genesis Well*, Collins would not say that the genre of Genesis 1-11 is myth. He would say the genre is prose narrative. But he would say their function is myth. Their function as myths in Israelite culture to ground present realities in the prehistoric past, in the primeval history of Genesis 1-11.

Student: One of the things that I was thinking about while we were talking about this differentiation of myth is the work that the authors that were a part of the Inklings did in terms of rehabilitating the concept of myth.

Dr. Craig: Can you explain to the class who the Inklings were?

Student. The Inklings were the unofficial group of writers in Oxford England that were composed of people like C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Dorothy Sayers, and other like-minded Christian lovers of mythology and fairy tales and things like that. I wanted to read a quote from J. R. R. Tolkien that I was thinking about that I just pulled up where in a letter to his son he said, *Of course, I do not mean that the Gospels tell what is only a fairy story, but what I do mean very strongly is that they do tell a fairy story – the greatest. Man the storyteller would have to be redeemed in a manner consonant with his nature by a moving story. But since the author of it is the supreme artist and the author of reality, this one was also made to be true on the primary plane.* So basically Tolkien and Lewis' thinking – and this was one of the things that led Lewis to become a Christian – was that this was basically God's writing of this story – what's going on throughout the Bible but mainly in the Gospels – is the bringing forth into reality what all myths wanted. We created these myths because this is what we wanted all along – this kind of redeeming story. The supreme artist, God, brought into reality a true myth. So Lewis called it the true myth.

Dr. Craig: Thank you. In the quotation you read it was, I think, evident (or should have been evident to you) is that what Tolkien was calling fairy stories or fairy tales was really myth, whereas I've tried to differentiate between these according to current folktale studies.

Student: When he says fairy tale he means like a legendary story, myth. Any of those terms, they're basically using them to say the consciousness of storytelling in people which is mythopoeic in nature.

Dr. Craig: OK, thank you.

Student: Wouldn't it still have to be admitted though that even if you believed a myth there would still have to be some element of it that is not literally true?

Dr. Craig: That's a future question that we will need to explore, won't we? First we want to ask what is the genre, and then we'll ask how do societies understand their myths? Do they take them as literal truth or figuratively? It's clear they believe them. They think they embody deep truths, but then that's a further question that needs to be explored.

Student: I wonder if there is crossover between these, or are they distinct from each other? Maybe I am misusing "legend" here but is there perhaps a point where a legendary figure (think of Moses, let's say) who is an actual historical figure but he is so famous or

revered that perhaps things that aren't true about him might come into being and that he becomes an archetype for things to come and thus enters the realm of myth?

Dr. Craig: This is much discussed among theorists of myth. Many of the ancient Greek philosophers thought that the gods or heroes in these myths were actually historical persons at one point in the past who, as you say, have become in a sense mythosized, and they really were at one time historical. I think, if my memory serves me right, that that's called "euhemerism." But that's a view that is largely discarded today. The line between legends (which are about purely human persons) and myths would be fairly clean cut. The closest to being on the boundary would be the stories of heroes like Hercules and other Greek heroes who were part man-part human (have a divine father and a human mother). Sometimes it's disputed as to whether or not we should call these heroic tales "myths." But they are usually classed as myths because they still involve the gods as principal figures in the stories.

Student: I'm confused. I think saying that myths could be true does a disservice to our use of the word "myths." Could I say that evolution is a myth?

Dr. Craig: This is a really interesting question because I have seen certain people say that evolution is a kind of contemporary myth that seeks to ground present realities (like the life forms we see today and ourselves) in the primordial prehistoric past. So it actually functions as a sort of myth. But that would be the sense, again, of an archetypal idea. Remember that I've talked about the myth of the noble savage or the myth of the self-made man. That's not a myth in the sense that the folklorist is using it where he's talking about literary compositions. But in that archetypal sense, I think that a good case could be made that it serves as a sort of modern equivalent of a myth.

Student: It's old enough. I'm old. I remember it when I was young and was taught to me when I was young. So it's got to be an ancient myth. *[laughter]*

END DISCUSSION

To recap, myths are sacred narratives which seek to explain how the world and man came to be in their present form. So understood, Genesis 1-11 clearly meet these criteria, I think. The primeval history of Genesis 1-11 is a traditional, sacred narrative which seeks to anchor present realities to the Pentateuchal author such as the world, mankind, natural phenomena, cultural practices and prevailing religious practices, in a primordial time. So on this definition Genesis 1-11 would belong to the literary type of myth.

Now, the claim here is *not* that Genesis 1-11 are derived from ancient Near Eastern myths. After the discovery and the publication of the Babylonian myths in the late 19th century, many Old Testament scholars went overboard in assessing their relevance to the Genesis account. There arose among Old Testament scholars the pan-Babylonian school

that claimed that not only Genesis but even Greek mythology was derived from Babylonian myths. Today, however, few scholars defend the claim that Genesis 1-11 is based on pagan myths. The one exception would be the flood story in the neo-Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh. The Gilgamesh Epic evolved over thousands of years, but in the most recent recensions (the neo-Babylonian recension) the Epic of Gilgamesh contains a flood story that includes an episode about the survivor of the flood releasing successively several birds to see if the dry land had appeared and it was safe to exit the boat. But even here direct dependence of Genesis on the Epic of Gilgamesh is very difficult to prove because the episode about the birds was added later to the Gilgamesh story, being attested no earlier than 750 BC. 750 BC is the earliest we have of the episode of the birds included in the flood story in Gilgamesh. That may be after the biblical traditions arose. The biblical traditions could well be earlier than that.

Far too many Old Testament scholars fell prey to what the New Testament scholar Samuel Sandmel called “parallelomania.”³ Samuel Sandmel, in a very famous article “Parallelomania,” observed that in order to establish the dependence claims that these critics wanted to make they would need to establish three subsidiary claims. First, they would have to prove that the texts really are parallel – that there is a genuine parallel between the biblical text and these texts. Secondly, they would have to show that the parallels are to be explained by a causal connection between the texts – that the texts are causally linked. Thirdly, they would need to show that the causal connection is asymmetrical – that is to say, that the causal influence ran in only one direction (in this case, from the Babylonian texts to the biblical text). Doing this is extraordinarily difficult.

Focusing on isolated similarities between texts courts the danger of cherry-picking. To give an illustration of cherry-picking, we all know about the terrible disaster that occurred when an airliner on its way from Massachusetts to New York crashed into one of New York's tallest buildings between the 77th and the 85th floors shortly after 9:00 a.m. setting it on fire and resulting in the loss of everyone on board and many office workers. The terrorist attacks of 9/11? No! Rather, the crash of a B-25 into the Empire State Building on July 28, 1945.⁴ By cherry-picking details one can create the illusion of parallelism when in fact none actually exists.

I think that Miller and Soden are guilty of just this sort of cherry-picking. Consider their most important claim about the primordial states being a dark watery chaos in both Genesis and the Egyptian myths. How is the primordial state described in the first chapter of Genesis? Genesis 1:2 states, “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.”

³ Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81/1 (1962): 1-13.

⁴ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1945_Empire_State_Building_B-25_crash. I am indebted to Michael Licona for this example.

This is alleged to resemble the primordial state in Egyptian myths. I am certainly open to following the evidence to where it leads, but I must say that I think Miller and Soden have been very sloppy in drawing alleged parallels between Genesis 1:2 and Egyptian creation myths.

START DISCUSSION

Student: If the flood predated the Tower of Babel, right?

Dr. Craig: Do you mean in the narrative?

Student: Yes. I'm wondering how the Egyptians would have a story of the flood? This isn't really a fully fleshed out question but the Egyptians had a story of the flood separate, and even the Babylonians have a story of the flood. If they were not cultures at that time . . .? Noah and his family were the only survivors of the flood – the worldwide flood.

Dr. Craig: I'm not sure I understand the question.

Student: How are these separate narratives that the Egyptians have of a flood . . .

Dr. Craig: The Babylonians you mean.

Student: Sorry, the Babylonians in this case. How did the Babylonians have a narrative of the same flood if they were not the Babylonians yet, if that makes sense?

Dr. Craig: OK, you're asking a historical question whereas I'm asking a literary question. What we're asking is: is there a literary dependence of the Genesis account of the flood on these Babylonian flood stories? That's a literary story. That's a totally different question from asking where did the Babylonians get this story? You could say they just made it up – it's just a myth that they invented to explain present realities in their society, and this got copied by other cultures including the Israelite culture. Or you could say, as some do, that this is traced back to a memory of a very ancient flood event that was then subsequently handed down and remembered in Babylonian tradition and perhaps independently in biblical tradition. As I say, the closest resemblance of the biblical story to the Babylonian story is this episode about the birds being released to find the dry land. That doesn't appear in the original Epic of Gilgamesh. Indeed, the original Epic has no flood story at all. The flood story gets incorporated later, and then the bird episode gets incorporated even later. It's attested no earlier than 750 BC. Well, by that time it may well be that this story was already present in ancient Israel and maybe wasn't derived from these Babylonian narratives. So at this point we're not asking the historical question; we're just asking a literary question. And I'm just informing you that the wide majority opinion today is that there is no literary dependence of Genesis 1-11 on these pagan myths with the possible exception of this flood story in the Epic of Gilgamesh. What that would mean is that the creation account in Genesis 1 (which is our focus) is independent of Babylonian and Egyptian myths of creation.

Student: You talked about the three criteria that are necessary to show dependence. Could you give an example of two documents that do meet those criteria?

Dr. Craig: Oh my! Well, let's just think about the flood story and the episode of the birds. The claim here would be that these stories are indeed parallel. In the biblical story, Noah releases first a raven and then he releases one dove three successive times. So they're two birds – first the raven and then the dove three times. In the Babylonian story, Utnapishtim, the Noah equivalent, releases three birds. He releases a dove and then a swallow and then a raven last. So you've got similarities there but differences as well, don't you? So the similarities have led many scholars to say it looks like there's some kind of dependence here – that there's some kind of relation. The second factor would be that there's a causal connection between them – not just that they're similar, but that there's a causal connection. Here many scholars would say that they are so similar – the idea that there's a flood, there's a boat, there's a survivor of the flood who releases birds to find the dry land – these are so close that there needs to be some kind of causal connection between these. This couldn't just be by accident. And then the third factor would be that it's one way. And that's very difficult to show. How do you know that these are not independent narratives from some earlier tradition that arose independently of each other? Or, how do you know for sure that the biblical account didn't influence the Babylonian story? That might seem to be absurd except when you think that during the reign of Solomon around 950 BC you have a very significant cultural power in Israel that had trade with Mesopotamia, had ocean-going vessels, and had cultural influence. It's not impossible that some Babylonian scribe or merchant heard the story from Israelite traditions and incorporated it into the Gilgamesh account rather late in its evolution. That would just be an illustration of the difficulty and how one might go about trying to show literary dependence. Sandmel's point was that too often scholars seem to be afflicted with this parallelomania where they draw these parallels without really showing these three features of the narratives.

Student: I was just wondering if there were any specific details in the Genesis account, in Genesis 1 and 2, that would defy the parallelomania that seemed to be strangely absent from people who say that they closely resemble these mythologies? Something like creation *ex nihilo* or something?

Dr. Craig: The fact that there's an absence of deities is perhaps the most striking. You don't have any theogony. You don't have any primordial combat between the gods. It's a monotheistic story with a transcendent God that is completely sovereign and differentiated from nature. In that sense it's very, very different. Now Miller and Soden recognized these differences, but they say, *But look at the similarity between the dark watery chaos that features in both of these myths.* Now to bring us back on track, that's

what I want to challenge. I don't think that they have analyzed the situation carefully enough to show that these elements of the story really are parallel.

Student: There are two things that I wanted to seek your opinion. The first is that the Chinese ancient history actually combined the historical and literary together because as they try to document what's important they draw pictures. And those pictures become the meaning of their literature in form of character. So there may not be literature talking about the Genesis story, but the character itself reveals the Genesis story in many, many facts. The reason why they put a woman in front of the two trees – that is greediness. Or the revelation before two trees, that's revelation. All kind of things like this they compose and embed it in Chinese character.

Dr. Craig: If I might interrupt, while I understand that's the case with Chinese, that's not the same with Hebrew. Hebrew isn't a pictorial language. There the characters are not pictures of things as in Chinese.

Student: Right. The second thing is that after the Tower of Babel different cultures emerged. We can think of Noah's three sons and himself. They started different branches of people. And that down the line the grandchildren – the offspring – start to ask to trace what happened in the ancient time and there are at least four different interpretations. But then they all are consolidated to some kind of impression that is passed down through the line. So we can say that that's how each person recorded the detail in a little different way and yet they all kind of have the large same phenomena.

Dr. Craig: This is addressing the historical question that was raised earlier. I'm going to just leave that aside at least for now because that's not germane to the question that we're asking at this time. So we'll just leave that aside.

END DISCUSSION

What we'll do next time is I want to suggest two reasons as to why we should be skeptical about Miller and Soden's claim that there are significant parallels between Genesis 1 and these Egyptian creation myths so as to show some sort of causal connection between them. That will be next week.⁵