

§ 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

Lecture 12

Examining the Supposed Parallels Between Genesis and Egyptian Myths

Last time we looked at the way in which the notion of myth is understood by scholars of folklore. You'll recall that we said that a myth is a sacred narrative which seeks to ground or anchor present realities in a primordial time. As such the first eleven chapters of Genesis would qualify as mythical. Let me say a couple of things about comments that were made in the discussion last week on which I had a chance to reflect afterwards.

Given the definition of myth that we're using – the folklorist's definition – this is not the same sense that [J. R. R.] Tolkien and [C. S.] Lewis spoke of myth when they said that Christianity or the Gospel is the true myth. They're thinking of the notion of myth as a sort of archetypal idea which is truly embodied in the Christian faith and in the message of the Gospel. But the Gospels themselves – the four Gospels – are not of the genre of myth. They are not traditional sacred narratives which try to anchor present realities in some prehistoric time. Rather, scholars of the Gospels have determined that the genre to which the Gospels belong is ancient biography like the famous *Lives of Greeks and Romans* by Plutarch, and as such the Gospels have a historical interest in giving an accurate historical portrayal of the subject of the biography. So it's important to understand that in the sense in which we're using the word “myth” the Gospels do not belong to that genre. They are not myths. Rather, they are ancient biographies.

In the discussion as well someone asked if I could think of a good example of literary dependence that has been demonstrated since I expressed skepticism about the efforts of many Old Testament scholars to show the dependence of stories of Genesis 1 to 11 in ancient Near Eastern mythology. As I reflected on this at home, it occurred to me that there is one very good example of this, and this would be the *Epic of Gilgamesh* which is an ancient Sumerian-Babylonian poem recounting the exploits of *Gilgamesh*. The *Gilgamesh* story originally did not include a Flood story. The oldest versions of *Gilgamesh* have no Flood story; rather, this is to be found in another ancient epic Mesopotamian poem called *Atrahasis*. What scholars have found is that in the most recent or standard accounts of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the *Atrahasis* Flood story has been incorporated into the *Gilgamesh* epic. Indeed, in some places it's verbatim (repetition) of the *Atrahasis* Flood story. Given the verbatim linguistic parallels as well as the similar context of the Flood story in *Gilgamesh* and in the Flood story in *Atrahasis*, this seems to be a truly genuine parallel between *Gilgamesh* and the *Atrahasis* Flood story. The Flood story in *Gilgamesh* seems to be borrowed from or dependent upon *Atrahasis*. Moreover, since the *Atrahasis* story is older (going back to at least the second millennium BC) whereas the standard version of the *Gilgamesh* story is much more recent, the causal connection between them cannot be from *Gilgamesh* to *Atrahasis*. *Atrahasis* is the older

account. So the causal line would be drawn from *Atrahasis* to *Gilgamesh*. This would seem to be a case in which the criteria that Samuel Sandmel laid out for showing truly parallel texts in context with a causal connection between them that is asymmetric would seem to be pretty convincingly demonstrated. What we also saw that was very interesting is that neither the *Atrahasis* account nor the original Flood story in *Gilgamesh* after *Atrahasis* was incorporated into it included the episode of the release of the birds to see if the land was dry and it was safe to exit the Ark. That gets added to the *Gilgamesh* epic later on and is attested no earlier than about 750 BC. So that raises the question as to where the *Epic of Gilgamesh* got the bird episode which was added then to the Flood story borrowed from *Atrahasis*.

I explained last time that too many Old Testament scholars have succumbed to the affliction of parallelomania, that is to say trying to show that one narrative is dependent upon another by examining details taken out of context, and this results in cherry-picking that can be very misleading in demonstrating alleged independence.

Just this week in my reading I encountered a paradigm example of this sort of cherry-picking. In his book *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and the Bible*, Richard Clifford has this to say about the relationship between the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Genesis 1-11, “Such kaleidoscopic reuse of traditional details may seem strange to modern readers, but ancient authors evidently liked to put familiar objects in new contexts.” Here Clifford actually appears to endorse cherry-picking, that is to say, comparing details of narratives without appeal to their context. He gives as his example certain details in the story of *Gilgamesh*. By way of background, Gilgamesh was a warrior king who was able to defeat every challenger that came against him. The gods made for Gilgamesh a close companion and aide named Enkidu who was originally a hairy wild man that became a bosom friend of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh and Enkidu were, if you will, the Tom Brady and Julian Edelman of Mesopotamian mythology. Clifford draws the following parallel between the *Gilgamesh* story in Genesis:

the naked and animallike Enkidu acquires wisdom from his seven-day dalliance with a prostitute. Afterward she clothes him and leads him to the city of Uruk and its king Gilgamesh.¹

That's the account in *Gilgamesh*. All right, are you ready for this? Here's the parallel with Genesis: “Genesis rearranges these same traditions to describe the institution of marriage!” Now, this is parallelomania, and to my mind constitutes the *reductio ad absurdum* of the cherry-picking methodology.

Miller and Soden are guilty, I fear, of the same sort of cherry-picking, even if not as egregious. Consider their most important claim about the primordial state's being a dark,

¹ pp. 148-9.

watery chaos in both Genesis and the Egyptian myths. Genesis 1:2 says, “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.” This is supposed to resemble the primordial state in Egyptian myths. Now, as I said last week, I’m certainly open to following the evidence where it leads, but I think that Miller and Soden have been very sloppy in drawing these alleged parallels between Genesis 1:2 and Egyptian creation myths. I want to make two points about their claim of parallelism.

First, the two states, when examined in context, are not truly parallel. It’s important to understand that in various Egyptian cosmogonic, or rather theogonic, myths, what’s at stake is an ancient philosophical problem called the One and the Many. That is to say, how does one explain the underlying unity of the world behind the multiplicity that we observe in the world? These Egyptian myths seek to derive multiplicity from a primal monism. In these myths water and darkness symbolize the undifferentiated, primordial state of the unbounded One (with a capital ‘O’) from which all multiplicity emerges. For example, Coffin text 76 contains one of the earliest references to the qualities of the primordial state. Atum, one of the Egyptian gods, is here speaking in the first person and he says, “I am the begetter of repeated millions – out of the Flood, out of the Waters, out of the darkness, out of lostness.” Eric Horhung, an Egyptologist, in his book *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, explains that the Egyptian language had a special negative verb form, one use of which was to describe how things were before creation, when something was not yet. He says the spatial nature of the world is negated. Earth and sky have not yet come into being. Before creation, there were not yet two things. There is “no thing,” that is, no matter. This is an expression of the Egyptian view that before creation there was just undifferentiated unity which could not be divided into two distinct things.

This primordial One is both everything and yet paradoxically also non-existent. Non-existence is one and undifferentiated. The creator God in these myths emerges from the non-existent, which marks the beginning of the process of things’ coming into being by differentiating himself into the plurality of millions of things.² According to Horhung, the non-existent signified, negatively, that which is inchoate, undifferentiated, and unlimited, and, affirmatively, it is that which is absolute or fundamental. In contrast to the non-existent, existent things are clearly defined and are restricted by boundaries and distinctions. The Jewish commentator Nahum Sarna suggests that the reason that water seemed to the ancients the appropriate representation of the primordial state was because of its amorphous nature.

In contrast to this monistic picture, the state of the primitive Earth in Genesis 1:2 is not an undifferentiated unity or chaos (despite the careless statements of many commentators),

² Eric Horhung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, pp. 175-6.

much less is it non-existent. It is just a primeval ocean cloaked in darkness. It is not unbounded or universal but rather it exists on the Earth which is distinct from God. It is covering the land which will eventually emerge from it. It has a surface over which the Spirit of God is moving, and therefore it is bounded. It is not characterless. It's the same water that will eventually fill the seas and in which marine life will thrive. It's the same water that will fall from the sky as rain and nourish the land. It is not unordered or chaotic. It has the typical properties of water with which ancient Israelites would have been familiar, such as liquidity, weight, surface tension, solubility, buoyancy, and potability. The primeval ocean is no more a chaos than is a ravaged desert landscape which the Bible also describes as without form and void. The Hebrew expression is *tohu wabohu*. The only other place besides Genesis 1:2 that this is found in the Bible is Jeremiah 4:23 where it describes the land as the judgment of God has fallen upon it. Reading from Jeremiah 4:20 and following:

Disaster follows hard on disaster,
the whole land is laid waste. . . .
I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.
I looked, and lo, there was no man,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

Jeremiah is here describing a war-torn land as an uninhabitable waste. Similarly, the primeval Earth was an uninhabitable waste. The New Testament scholar David Tsumura has rightly said that the phrase *tohu wabohu* “has nothing to do with primeval chaos.” It simply refers to the Earth as an unproductive and uninhabited place³. Just how wrong-headed it is to see this primeval state as chaos is evident from the Genesis story of the Flood found in Genesis 7:17-24. The Flood returns the Earth to its primeval condition – this desolate waste of water – but it is obviously not (again, despite many commentators careless statements) a state of chaos. The state of the Earth when Noah's Ark was floating on the surface of the waters is not a chaos. The sun and the moon and the stars are still shining above. The boat is floating on the surface of the waters. The waters are filled with marine life and the boat is full of animals and men. The waters cover the mountains

³ David Toshio Tsumura, “Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern Stories of Creation and Flood: An Introduction,” and “The Earth in Genesis 1,” [1989], both in “*I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood*,” pp. 33, 310-28; cf. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, pp. 130-33

which will eventually emerge from beneath the surface of the water and be seen as mountains. This is definitely not chaos.

An ancient Israelite would probably have pictured the state described in Genesis 1:2 to be like a pitch-black night out on the Mediterranean Sea when no moon and stars were visible. This was a condition which seafaring peoples known to Israel (see Genesis 10, for example. In the table of nations, it lists many seafaring peoples with whom Israel was familiar) as well as during the monarchy (see 1 Kings 10:22 concerning Solomon's fleet of ocean-going vessels that sailed out of the Gulf of Aqaba) [would have experienced.] Both these seafaring peoples and the Israeli sailors would themselves have been familiar with this condition on a pitch-black night out on the open sea. This state of affairs is wholly unlike the primal monadic condition envisioned in Egyptian mythology. The state in Egyptian mythology is much more akin to the Greek philosopher Plotinus' One, which is beyond being and is the source from which all multiplicity emanates. In fact, the primeval state that is described in Genesis 1:2 much more closely resembles the state which is described in North American Indian creation myths which feature a kind of primeval ocean in darkness than these Egyptian myths. Therefore, I think Miller and Soden have been all too quick and careless in drawing these supposed parallels.

The second point of criticism is that the claim that the primordial darkness and watery deep of Genesis 1:2 show the influence of Egyptian creation stories is rendered uncertain, not merely by the fundamental difference between them, but also by the fact that these same motifs of primordial darkness and water are so widely disseminated in creation myths around the world. According to the biblical scholar K. Numazawa, myths about the world's origin in which the Earth and sky were originally combined as one, whether as water alone or as a featureless substance or as a cosmic egg, "can be found among practically all peoples," being found, for example, even among North American Indian tribes.⁴ According to these myths, a formless substance existed in primordial darkness until its separation from the Earth and sky, which marked then the beginning of the universe. Common to nearly all the myths is the idea of utter darkness before the separation of sky and Earth, when light appeared for the first time. If you're interested in seeing some of these myths, take a look at the multi-volume work edited by Louis Herbert Gray and John Arnott MacCulloch, *The Mythology of All Races*. This is a 13-volume work published between 1916 and 1933. It is somewhat dated now but still useful in giving a survey of the world's mythologies. Scholars who appeal to Egyptian influence upon the Genesis creation account have often failed to consider just how widespread the favorite motif is among the world's peoples. Their inductive sample, in other words, is too small.

⁴ K. Numazawa, "The Cultural-Historical Background of Myths on the Separation of Sky and Earth," in *Sacred Narrative*, p. 185; for Native Americans see Alan Dundes, "Earth-Diver: Creation of the Mythopoeic Male," in *Sacred Narrative*, p. 277.

Myths tap deeply into the human psyche, and so we shouldn't be surprised to find that similar myths exist among unrelated peoples throughout the world. In order to demonstrate a causal connection between myths it will be necessary to exclude the possibility that similar myths arose independently, which is very difficult to do. Minimally, the theorist engaged in comparative studies of Genesis 1-11 needs to widen his comparison class beyond myths which have a possible causal connection with the primeval narratives so as to be sure that an alleged parallel and causal connection really exists rather than simply mere similarity. The need to do this is especially urgent when the similarities are isolated elements in vastly different contexts like monistic Egyptian theogonies.

By way of summary then, the claim that Genesis 1-11 shares with ancient Near Eastern myths a common concern to anchor present realities in a primordial time is not securely grounded by attempts to show dependence of the biblical stories on Babylonian or Egyptian predecessors. The attempt to prove such dependence is fraught with conjecture and uncertainty. Rather, the claim is grounded in the commonality of themes and etiological concerns in the various myths.

The overriding point is that the classification of Genesis 1-11 as belonging to the category of myth is not to be grounded in exploring alleged parallels between the Genesis stories and the Egyptian and Babylonian stories. Rather, it will be grounded in showing that Genesis 1-11 explores similar themes and has similar etiological motifs of anchoring present realities in prehistoric times.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I agree with everything you said. I was going to bring up a notion that happened to me several months ago. I was helping a guy who comes to the Lord again in prison, had gotten out and gotten a job at Napa Parts. He lost it. His wife had been falsely accused by her mother. He was in terrible shape. But the guy had a glow about him. He was trusting in the Lord. I got out of the car, didn't have a coat on, it was cold, and he said, "Don't have a coat?" I said, "I'm just rushing in." So I started talking to him. I helped him out, and he said, "The Lord has blessed me. He took away this job and got me another one." He had an appointment to go get that, but didn't have a way to get there. So I drove him around that day and the next day. Ended up to get him out of debt and everything like that, \$1,000. But he showed me such amazing things. He was saying God showed him . . . he was wondering how Moses could write Genesis. Then he said this, "then I realized he was alive then." I said, "I don't think you mean that. Jesus was alive." "No, no. God is in him. And so God was alive and could tell him what happened in Genesis." And so the narratives – the myths – can be created and would have points of accuracy as God chooses to enlighten people because his Spirit is just like God says if he

drew all his Spirit all flesh would die and so Moses is able to tell you . . . and so it's common to a lot of myths because it's trying to tell us things deeper than we can comprehend.

Dr. Craig: I want to say, with regard to Miller and Soden, that I am really open to the evidence that they would bring forward. I don't see any incompatibility with saying an inspired author (inspired of God) might draw upon motifs from pagan myths and, as you say, express truths thereby. But honestly I'm just not convinced. When I look at these Egyptian myths, these scholars don't seem to understand what's at stake in them. I often wonder what in the world can a philosopher like me bring to this discussion with these Old Testament scholars and Assyriologists. I think this illustrates it. These people, I don't think, have ever heard of the philosophical problem of the One and the Many which occupied ancient philosophers. And I wonder if they've read Plotinus either, because once you are familiar with those you see that what's described in these myths isn't anything like the orderly state that is described in Genesis 1:2 and again after the Flood. So I don't have a problem with saying that an inspired author might draw upon these sorts of things, but I'm just skeptical that this has been demonstrated.

END DISCUSSION

I have asserted that Genesis 1-11 exhibit the same concern with etiology, that is to say trying to anchor present realities in a primordial time, but I haven't actually demonstrated that. I've asserted it, but I've not shown it. So what I want to do when we meet next time is to show that Genesis does share with ancient Near Eastern myths common themes like the creation of the world, the creation of mankind, the universal Flood, and so forth, and that it also exhibits this etiological concern to ground realities that are present to the author of the Pentateuch in the primordial past of the primeval history in Genesis 1-11. That will be our discussion for next time.⁵