

## § 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

### Lecture 19

#### 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 factors or 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. "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."<sup>1</sup> 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 these 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 the world beside one another and then live with them."<sup>3</sup> 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)

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, "Egypt," p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, pp. 12,56.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

permitted “an astonishingly rich variety of possibilities” in the representation of a deity.<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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 complementary not conflicting.”<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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 . . .”<sup>8</sup> I think that is exactly right, and given its metaphorical and representational imagery, myth is a special case. Hornung concludes,

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<sup>4</sup> Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> *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.

. . . 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 motions of the stars across the heavens, and the motion 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 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

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 258.

(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.<sup>10</sup>

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.

So when it comes to the Genesis account of creation, I think little needs to be said. With the modern misinterpretation of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian cosmo-geography exposed, the main prop for interpreting the so-called firmament in Genesis 1 (in Hebrew, this is called *rakia* translated from the Latin as “firmament”) as a literal solid dome falls away. Genesis 1 tells us virtually nothing about the nature of the *rakia* nor whether the word is being used figuratively or literally. The key to the meaning of *rakia* as used in Genesis 1 comes in verse 8 where it says, “God called the *rakia* heaven (*shamayim*).” *Shamayim* is the Hebrew word for the heavens or for the skies. Thus *rakia* denotes the sky, or expressing the notion of breadth, the skies. That's what *rakia* denotes. The ancient Hebrews could not possibly have thought that the sky is a solid dome in which the sun, moon, and stars are embedded for these heavenly luminaries were observed to be in motion – to move through the sky – and that's why Genesis 1 says they are useful to mark seasons and days and years. Birds fly, Genesis 1 says in verse 20, across the face of the *rakia*, and in the skies, Deuteronomy 4:17.

Benjamin Smith, who sits among us this morning (there he is!), has probably given I think the best characterization of the denotation of *rakia* as, “the whole sky.” All that can be seen above the Earth from the surface. That's what the *rakia* denotes – the whole sky; all that can be seen above the Earth from the surface. What that suggests is that the *rakia* is simply a phenomenal reality – something that you see. As John Walton very nicely puts it, there is a *rakia* and it is blue. It's just the sky! I think that not only does the metaphorical and the figurative language of Ancient Near Eastern myths support a non-literal reading of such myths, but their plasticity and flexibility also indicate that they are not best interpreted literalistically.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I wonder if you could comment on the fact that you're talking about Mesopotamian and the Egyptian gods and how they have bodies of animals and stuff like that, as opposed to the Greeks who really have a human appearance and how that reflected what their sense of life was. How that contrasted with both because the Israelites came from Egypt, but most of the Old Testament is in Greek, and that's how we understand it. Can you comment on how that meshed?

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<sup>10</sup> 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.

*Dr. Craig:* Are you asking about the influence of Ancient Near Eastern myths on the Greeks?

*Student:* Yes. Right. Or how their sense of life and art . . .

*Dr. Craig:* I think that although there may well have been an influence of Ancient Near Eastern myths upon Greek mythology, this is still very poorly understood. The earliest attested myths in Greek are from Homer (*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* around 700 BC) and from Hesiod, his *Theogony* which describes the origin of the myths. These Greek gods and goddesses, as you indicate, are very humanoid in their description. They're like people. And they often are associated with different forces or powers of nature, like the sea and the wind and things of that sort. They are not relevant to our study in terms of their having an influence, I think, on biblical stories because they're later and they're further afield. So while they may be interesting in terms of comparative models, I think that Mesopotamia and Egypt are far more relevant to the biblical backgrounds.

*Student:* A quick question about this method of interpreting ancient writings. It's clear, or at least I'm under the impression that, some of the phenomena that were witnessed by the ancients were, in fact, described by a literal reading of their mythology, like earthquakes for instance. Turtles shifting or whoever is holding it on their shoulders has to move. Things like that. Number one: is earthquakes and things that they may have believed more of a literal genesis for it? Is that addressed in the literature?

*Dr. Craig:* If I understand your question correctly, you are raising an issue that is a huge interpretive question that has pitted some of the greatest Assyriologists against each other, and I'm thinking here of Thorkild Jacobsen, for example, and Stanley Kramer. Jacobsen holds to the view that these Ancient Near Eastern myths are basically allegorical; that they are really personifications of the powers and the entities of nature. So, for example, when the *Enuma Elish* says that Apsu and Tiamat mingled their waters to give birth to these other two gods, he takes that as the mingling of salt water and fresh water such as the Mesopotamians observed in the Persian Gulf when the freshwater of the Tigris and Euphrates flowed into the salt water of the Gulf. The two gods that are produced by Apsu and Tiamat he thinks are symbols of the silt that is deposited in the Persian Gulf at the mouth of these two rivers. So on Jacobsen's view, in a sense gods don't really exist. They're just sort of literary personifications of forces and powers and things of nature. If you were to do an ontological inventory of everything that exists, you would not need to include in addition to the physical things of nature these gods as well because they're mere personifications of those forces. Kramer, by contrast, really took Jacobsen to the woodshed on this and said this is a complete misrepresentation of the Ancient Near Eastern thinking. He said that they believed that the gods were literal, humanoid entities invisible, mysterious, who were behind the forces of nature and manifested in nature. So

when you see the water, you're not looking at Tiamat, but Tiamat is the goddess who was behind the sea. This view would explain why the Babylonians were so obsessed with divination. Divination was a huge and lucrative industry in ancient Babylon. Over half of the cuneiform texts that were discovered at Ashurbanipal's palace in the late 1800s are divinatory texts, and of them most of those are astrological texts, though some of them also concerned what is called extispicy which is examining the liver and entrails of birds and animals to divine portents from the gods. So the practice of divination seems to support the view that there really are gods behind these forces, and by reading these portents of nature we can discern the will of the gods and perhaps what's going to happen in terms of good or bad fortune. I, as a layperson, wouldn't presume to try to adjudicate this debate. When I've asked other Old Testament scholars about it, the reaction I get is a sort of blank stare. So I don't know which of these is correct, but what I would say is that on either view the myths aren't meant to be taken literalistically. Clearly on Jacobsen's view they're not literal because they're about natural phenomena. Gods are just personifications of the forces of nature. But even on Kramer's view, even though the gods really exist we don't have a clue what they're like because they're invisible. So these various images and descriptions and so forth again are just figurative language for describing these beings that control our destinies. So on either interpretation, I think, it's very plausible to think that these stories were not necessarily taken to be literal. Having said that, as I mentioned in conversation last week, of course some people probably did take them literally. No doubt many people believed them in a very literal sort of sense. But what I'm suggesting is that they don't need to be taken that way. It could very well be the case that these are metaphorical and figurative speech, and the metaphoricalness, the plasticity, and flexibility, I think, supports such a reading.

*Student:* I need a little GPS here of where we are. I am prepared to agree that the Ancient Near East Mesopotamian and Egyptian myths are not literal. I'm a little confused by the application to Hebrews. And the idea of the firmament – that it wasn't true.

*Dr. Craig:* Let me ask you. What about that point? I kind of already gotten ahead of myself on the *rakia* in saying here's an application to Genesis. It's clear that the Mesopotamians and Egyptians didn't take the sky to be a solid dome, so why should we think the Hebrews took the *rakia* to be solid? That would be an example of seeing in Genesis metaphorical or figurative speech. What's your reaction to that?

*Student:* My reaction to that is – there was nobody around at that time. So it was God that provided some imagery of that. If Hebrew scholars happened to take it as, well it was a solid dome and they were wrong, then okay they were wrong.

*Dr. Craig:* And by “Hebrew scholar” do you mean the author of Genesis?

*Student:* The author of Genesis is God.

*Dr. Craig:* I meant the human one who wrote it down. Is he the Hebrew scholar you are talking about, or are you talking about later people?

*Student:* I'm talking about later people.

*Dr. Craig:* OK, that's good to understand. Because I wouldn't want to go so far as to what you said at first if we think that Hebrew scholars include the author of Genesis.

*Student:* Oh, no, no. Remember, that chapter could not be written by anyone because they weren't around. It had to be revelation from God that said "This is what it was."

*Dr. Craig:* So the question is: did God use imagery that didn't need to be taken literally in providing this revelation to the Hebrews?

*Student:* I don't know. I think the imagery is fine if it's, as you said last week which I really like, if it is clearly not true. If it is clearly . . .

*Dr. Craig:* OK, wait. Let's be careful. I didn't say not true. I've tried to be very careful about this – to distinguish between literal truth and figurative truth. You mean not literally true.

*Student:* If it is clearly metaphorical, then we take it as metaphorical, and I really love that test. Let's look at it and say, "Is it clearly metaphorical, or could this be true?"

*Dr. Craig:* Again, literally!

*Student:* Literally true. I'm sorry. Could this be something that is literal? I get mixed up with calling things myths and applying it to Hebrews.

*Dr. Craig:* OK, well, at least you're open so far to the possibility of thinking that the so-called firmament, or the *rakia*, is not a solid dome in which the stars are engraved.

*Student:* Absolutely. I think that our interpretation with the firmament being a solid dome could be a misinterpretation of that word. Yes.

*Dr. Craig:* OK. Good. Thanks.

*Student:* Concerning the question: Did God have to use metaphorical language to talk to us to give us understanding and truth? I would say definitely yes because right now could God give the ultimate reality of our future being in his very presence? The unapproachable light? To do so literally may put us there, and we're not ready. So he must deal metaphorically to set the truth that we see.

*Dr. Craig:* OK, now I have not taken so strong a position as you did. Notice your position was: it *must* be that way. Because, after all, Genesis is not intended to be just for modern people but for shepherds and herdsmen and illiterate peoples and so forth who wouldn't understand it if God were to give a manual on general theory of relativity and the expansion of the universe. So of course this is revealed in figurative and pictorial ways. I

find that persuasive. I think that we want this to be a narrative that ministers to people of all times and ages and cultures and education. I remember in my debate with Lawrence Krauss in Australia, one of the objections he proposed to Christianity was why didn't God reveal calculus to Moses? I thought, "What is the matter with this man? It's so stupid to even think that that's a good objection." God was revealing to Moses what they needed to know to do his will and to find salvation. Giving them the calculus would have been next to worthless.

*Student:* Just a comment. We need to make a distinction between something that's symbolic and something that's general in nature. Because Genesis was intended to be accurate for all ages and times. Scientifics and sophistications. The nature of it is general, and so I think that's more the issue than it being symbolic.

*Dr. Craig:* I'll let you have the last word on that. Let me just say I'm not necessarily saying these narratives are symbolic or allegorical where you have a kind of one-to-one correspondence between a symbol and what it represents. But I'm saying it's figurative; it's metaphorical. And that's not necessarily symbolic in the sense of allegory.

## **END DISCUSSION**

All right. What we'll do next time is to make this all-important transition of trying to apply this generic analysis to Genesis.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Total Running Time: 36:06 (Copyright © 2019 William Lane Craig)