

Structural Differences Between Genesis 1–11 and Mesopotamian Mythology

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In my previous piece, where I shared the highlights of my journey through ANE studies, I mentioned that “the differences between Mesopotamian religion and OT religion are *structural*.” This is a profound statement with far-reaching implications. I will now elaborate on what the word “structural” means in this context and then show why it is unnecessary and inappropriate for William Lane Craig to label Genesis 1–11 as “mytho-history.”

The statement can be rephrased as, “The differences between Mesopotamian religion and OT religion are integral to their respective different *structures*.” It helps to see what this statement means by replacing “structures” with “paradigms.” Whether we say “structures” or “paradigms,” it means that the overall difference between OT religion (monotheism) and Mesopotamian religion (polytheism) is not in degree but in kind altogether. But as we shall see, “structures” captures the difference better than “paradigms.”

Consider the difference between OT monotheism and ANE polytheism. Contrary to common assumption, the difference is not in numbers (one God versus many gods) but in kind. The God of the OT is in control of the universe. None of the ANE gods is in control of the universe; it is Fate that is in control. Even if all the gods are merged into one “God,” Fate is still in control of the universe. So unlike the OT God, this polytheistic “one God” is still not in control of the universe—it is of a different kind altogether.

Because Fate is impersonal (cannot speak) and yet is in control, there is a need to practice divination to read into Fate to discover what is in store, and if necessary to manipulate it to circumvent fated misfortune through sorcery—rituals that have intrinsic efficacy, that is, they have (magical) powers in and of themselves. So belief in the intrinsic efficacy of numbers, words, and actions is integral to this belief system (cf. Chinese polytheism—Feng Shui, which combines divination and sorcery into one ritual). Since Fate is impersonal and rituals have intrinsic efficacy, it follows that religious practices can even be immoral or unjust, such as temple prostitution and child sacrifice. However, if a personal (holy) God is in control, there will be no room for such practices.

In OT monotheism, since the personal God speaks, the Israelites are to listen to God through prophecy instead of practicing divination and consequently sorcery. Since God is in control, rituals have no intrinsic efficacy. And it follows that when God allows undeserved (unjust) suffering in the life of a believer, there is room for the believer to complain to God as seen in many of the psalms and in Job. If impersonal Fate were in control, there would be no room for this practice.

So we see that OT monotheism and ANE polytheism are characterized by different sets of beliefs/practices that form coherent structures that embody different paradigms:

OT monotheism: personal God in control/prophecy/rituals have no intrinsic efficacy/complaining to God over unjust suffering.

ANE polytheism: impersonal Fate in control/divination-sorcery/rituals have intrinsic efficacy/immoral or unjust religious practices.

It is inconceivable then how ANE polytheism could have evolved into OT monotheism as assumed in mainstream biblical scholarship. In other words, the OT paradigm could not have developed out of the ANE paradigm—the two paradigms are each embodied in an entirely different structure. A paradigm may evolve into another paradigm within the same structure, but not into a paradigm in another structure. This explains why it is better to say, “The differences between Mesopotamian religion and OT religion are integral to their respective different *structures*” instead of “different *paradigms*.”

To illustrate, OT (Israelite) religion is based on the Mosaic Covenant and is Law-centered (“covenant nomism”) whereas NT (Christian) faith is based on the New Covenant and is Christ-centered. Since the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant are subsequent applications of the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic paradigm has “evolved” into the Christian paradigm. But both paradigms are within the same biblical monotheistic (or theistic) structure, which is absolutely unique. And if a “monotheistic” religion indeed develops out of ANE polytheism by merging all the polytheistic gods into “one God,” it will still be undergirded by a polytheistic structure. But this is clearly not the case with OT religion; it is clear from the prescriptions of the Law and the preaching of the prophets that it is undergirded by a monotheistic structure.

Belief in divine creation of humanity and the practice of offering sacrifices are both found in the OT and in the ANE. These are two prominent “similarities.” But the purpose of divine creation and the purpose of offering sacrifices are different in each case. In the OT, the purpose of creating humanity (in God’s image) is so that they rule over God’s creation; hard labor is a consequence of sin. And the purpose of offering sacrifices is not to meet any need of God but to meet the need of fallen humanity—atonement for sin. In the ANE the purpose for creating humanity is to relieve the gods of hard labor and to meet their needs through the offering of sacrifices to them.

And these differences are structural because they are integral to their respective different structures of belief/practices. In the ANE, sacrifices have intrinsic efficacy, so repentance from sin is not necessary; they only need to have faith in the sacrifices themselves. In the OT, God accepts the sacrifices only when offered in repentance from sin and with faith in Him. All this means even the similarities—belief in divine creation and the practice of offering sacrifices—are themselves integral to their respective different structures. Therefore the “similarities” are merely superficial and incidental.

Recognizing the “structural” differences between the OT and the ANE materials has serious implications for labelling Genesis 1-11 as mytho-history on the basis of “similarities” with Mesopotamian texts. Now William Lane Craig who says there are “myths” in Genesis 1–11 still insists that they are about real people and real events, and thus not false or fictitious. He says they are “myths” because they present real people and real events “figuratively” and not “literally”—there is no need to insist that God literally used mud to make Adam; what matters is that God personally created Adam (in His image) with a body composed of materials found in the earth.

There is hermeneutical basis for saying that, in the context of God’s creation of the (present) heavens and the (present) earth, some real things are described figuratively to present theological truths because human language cannot capture these real things literally. In the context of God’s creation of the new heavens and the new earth, the New Jerusalem—a real thing—is presented figuratively (how else?) as a cube with walls and gates that are actually

not needed so that the audience could understand what the eternal home of God's people is like. We do not expect it to be literally as described in Revelation 21. The New Jerusalem is presented as a dwelling place (a city with walls and gates as in Jerusalem even today) that is the equivalent of the Holy of Holies (a cube) to help us grasp what our eternal home is like—dwelling in the “literal” presence of God as in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle.

The “figurative” aspect of Genesis 1–11 is compared specifically with that of Revelation 21–22 because they are both “figurative” in a specific sense that is different from the usual figurative language we are familiar with. This “figurative” sense is also found in Isaiah 56:1–8, which prophesied that when God's salvation has come and God's righteousness is revealed, the Gentiles (“foreigners”) will also be worshipping God in the Jerusalem Temple. This means Gentiles will become God's people also, for in the OT to “worship God in the Jerusalem Temple” is figuratively synonymous with being God's people. Now God's salvation has come and God's righteousness is revealed in the Gospel (Rom 1:16–17), and Gentiles have indeed become God's people. But they did/do not literally—only “figuratively”—worship God in the Jerusalem Temple.

However, Isaiah's original audience would have taken “worship God in the Jerusalem Temple” literally and not figuratively, and this is precisely how they understood the message intended. For they could not have imagined how one could become God's people without worshipping God in the Jerusalem Temple. So “worship God in the Jerusalem Temple” is a special kind of “figurative” language—it is about real people and real events presented figuratively but to understand what it is really about, it needs to be taken literally. In the same way, we need to read Revelation 21–22 and Genesis 1–11 “literally” like any historical narrative of the Bible (but still give room for the usual figurative language; the serpent in Genesis 3 is still usual figurative language just like “Behold the Lamb of God”).

Hence though Genesis 1–11 is about real people and real events that may or may not be described “figuratively,” we do not distinguish what is “figurative” and what is “literal” in order to understand the “historical” narrative. In fact the genealogies in Genesis treat the narratives in Genesis 1–11 as equally historical as in Genesis 12–50 and, by extension, in Exodus–Esther. This was how premodern believers read Genesis 1–11 and understood the message accordingly. So there is no danger of questioning the historicity of any person or event narrated even in Genesis 1–11. Therefore there is no need for a special name, certainly not “mytho-history,” for this special genre of biblical narrative.

In other words, Craig's apologetic concerns can be taken care of within the monotheistic “structure” of Scripture itself; there is no need to import (especially) the genre of “myth-history” from materials whose polytheistic “structure” is diametrically opposed to that of Scripture. Craig is careful to define “myths” formally to avoid the popular understanding that myths are necessarily false or fictitious. And this is not contrived, for the number one definition of “myth” listed in the *Oxford Dictionary of English* is as follows: “a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.” Hence a “myth” need not be false or fictitious, which are the second and third meanings listed in the *Oxford Dictionary of English*.

For this reason, C. S. Lewis could call the Gospel and the Christian narrative “true myth” or “God's myth” (Christians may still object to this in view of the popular understanding of “myth”). However, it is a different matter for Craig to label—unnecessarily—Genesis 1–11

as “mytho-history” on the basis of the “similarities” with Mesopotamian myths. For besides associating the Genesis account of creation with Mesopotamian creation myth (which is extremely fantastic), it implies that the difference between the two is only in degree (Genesis account is only slightly fantastic), and not in kind. This disregards that the differences between OT religion and Mesopotamian religion are structural and so the “similarities” between Genesis 1–11 and ANE texts are superficial and incidental. This then amounts to questioning the absolute uniqueness and thus divine inspiration of the OT.

Also, even formally, “myths” are basically about *past things* to explain *present reality in this present world*. Now if we say there are myths (even in the sense that they are about real things) in Genesis 1–11, we would also have to say there are myths (about real things) in Revelation 21–22. But these last chapters of Scripture are about *future reality beyond this present world*. Hence even the formal meaning of “myth” does not fit Scripture, which is absolutely unique—it is God’s special revelation.