

# A critique: genesis 1-11 essay sample



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The article I have chosen for this critique assignment is “ Genesis 1-11” written by J. Rogerson. He made it known clearly to his readers at the beginning of his article that the article aims to deal with separate questions: (a) How did the presumed Israelite readers of Genesis chapters 1-11 understand these passages? (b) What do we mean when we classify Genesis 1-11 or parts thereof as myths or mythical? These are the two goals the article aims to achieve. In order to do this, the author of the article divides the article into 16 sections, with each of which focusing on a particular issue which is either problematic or controversial. Some issues touch on broader areas (e. g. One Creation Story or two?) whereas some others are concerned with the life events of particular characters in Genesis (e. g. Cain and Abel). All these issues/topics, whether broad or narrow in appearance, do have a wide scope of theological implications.

In the first section of the article, the author explains that the Israelite readers can understand Genesis 1-11 because the stories in chapters 1-11 were compiled from ancient traditions about origins which the Israelite shared with other ancient Near Eastern neighbours whose folk tale motifs enable the Israelite readers to believe in the contents of Genesis 1-11. Regarding the question of ‘ myths’, the author claims that he is convinced by Müller’s approach to myth: the narratives of Genesis 1-11 are more or less the same as their similar traditions from the ancient Near East, even if the latter are polytheistic and the former is monotheistic. Section 2 tells us that Genesis 1: 1, “ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”, is probably a summary statement of what God had done, and the words in verse 2 “ darkness” and “ without form” suggest something sinister about the

unformed earth which was chaotic. Section 3 of the article tries to distinguish between 'Creation by Word' and 'Creation by deed'.

An example of the former is 'Let there be light' and an example of the latter is 'He also made the stars'. Section 4 tells us that the 'good' in 'God saw that it was good' which recurs in Genesis 1 means 'good for achieving its purpose'. The author says in spite of the subsequent curse and flood, the creation is still good in that it provides the order and stability in which the life given by God can be lived out. Section 5 mentions that the process of creation described in Genesis 1 involve distinguishing, setting boundaries and assigning positions. For instance, light is distinguished from darkness, the firmament sets a boundary between the upper and lower waters, and birds are assigned to the heavens. The author further points out that if creation implies order, then that order is not restricted solely to the non-human world; it must include human relationships; otherwise, the creation would be immoral. The author, in section 6, contends that Genesis 1 is a creation story while Genesis 2 is an origins story in such a way the Genesis 1 relates the formation and ordering of the universe and Genesis 2 presumes the existence of the earth and describes how it was populated and ordered.

Section 7 reports that Genesis 1: 1-4 and 2: 4-3: 24 may come from different sources. One reason is that they use different names for God. The central problem is that Genesis 3 tells us that Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden so as not to let them eat the fruit of the tree of life, not because they disobeyed God's command to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now the question is: 'Was there one tree or two?' In Section 8, the author tells us that a parallel to Genesis 3 is found in ancient literature,

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which is Ezekiel 28: 11-19. In both passages, the sinful characters were punished by expulsion. The author of this article concludes that in the formation of Genesis 3: 1-24, the writer of Genesis used a story similar to that in Ezekiel 28: 11-19 to maintain a narrative unity. Section 9, entitled ‘Cain and Abel’, points to the possibility of Genesis 4: 1-16 being deliberately composed to refer back to Genesis 3: 1-21. An example of difficulty in understanding chapter 4 is that Cain says to God in verse 14 that he would be killed by anyone who finds him wandering on the earth, but there were only three people on earth at that time.

The author believes that Cain, like his parents, is a type — he represents human beings who violate the kinship bonds. Section 10 mentions several problems which again suggest that the writer of Genesis might have gained access to more than one source when writing up the contents of Genesis. For example, a spotted problem is that the order of the generations in 4: 17-21 is different from that in 5: 1-28. Another striking thing are the great ages attained by Adam’s descendants. This, to many readers of Genesis, would presumably be inconceivable! So, this is something that would support the view that some contents of Genesis 1-11 are, perhaps, myths. Also, what is the main implication of ‘did not die but was “taken” by God’ in the case of Enoch as reported in Genesis 5: 24? Was it mythical? In section 11, the author thinks that Genesis 6: 1-4 is a strange passage because it says the sons of God married the beautiful daughters of men, which makes many readers puzzled about who the ‘sons of God’ were. The author believes that this passage implies a confusion of boundaries, with divine beings possibly inter-marrying with human beings. Section 12 tells us that the two stories of

the Flood seem to have mingled together to form a single narrative as there exists some conflicting contents, for instance, between Genesis 6 and 7— in chapter 6, Noah is asked to bring pairs of everything into the ark whereas in chapter 7, he is asked to bring seven pairs of clean and one pair of unclean animals into the ark.

Section 13 reports a problem: why didn't Noah curse Ham, whose wrongdoing is described in Genesis 9: 22, but Ham's son called Canaan?

Section 14 goes on to proclaim that Genesis is composed of two types of narrative, namely the P narrative and the J narrative, each of which performs a different function. The formulaic material lists out the descendants of Noah and describes how they spread all over the earth while the narrative element informs Israelite readers about the origins of the people familiar to them.

Section 15 points out a clear contradiction: Genesis 11: 1 tells us that the whole earth shared one language whereas chapter 10 implies that each nation had its own language. Again, the author observed the presence of boundaries violation in the story of the Tower of Babel. Finally, section 16 confirms that any attempts to date elements of Genesis 1-11 are at best plausible rather than probable.

Both the positive and the negative criticism will entail some discussions of the literary contexts and features in relation to the author's interpretation of Genesis 1-11. In fact, the Summary Section above has mentioned some of these issues. First of all, the general strengths of the article lie in: (a) its clear-cut format which divides the article into 16 distinct sections with each of them presenting one or more problems spotted throughout the texts in Genesis 1-11; (b) the author's decision to state the goal of the article clearly

in simple English right at the beginning of the article; (c) the author's attempt to provide a quick, simple answer to Question 1 (the first goal of the article) in section 1 of his article before moving onto the next task which is much more complicated.

Digging deeper into the strengths of the article, one can realise that the author has succeeded in: (d) getting across his important message to the readers that the similar ancient traditions shared between the Israelite and their Near Eastern neighbours did enhance Israel's understanding of the passages in Genesis 1-11; (e) illustrating quite convincingly with examples that the writer of Genesis has probably used different sources during the process of writing up Genesis 1-11 (e. g. Genesis 10 is composed of 2 types of narrative); (g) highlighting the existence of parallels (e. g. Genesis 3 being 'similar' to Ezekiel 28: 11-19 with both passages mentioning expulsion as a punishment and the activity of the guardian cherub). These parallels further reveal the 'divine wisdom' behind the writing pen of the author of Genesis because inter-scripture and inter-testamental echoing would be impossible without divine involvement; (h) pointing out some far-reaching theological implications which should be learnt by Christians of different generations (e. g. the story of Noah's drunkenness and Canaan's curse reminds us that the human race after the flood was not perfect ).