

# The genesis account of creation: myth or reality

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I always do recall, while reading through the first few pages of the Bible, (i. e. the book of Genesis), how highly impressed I was as a child, to see how the world began and how God put everything in place but then kept pondering; who was there with God taking a record of events while he was creating? Once upon a time, I asked my Christian Religious Studies teacher in School and he stood there dumbfounded unable to give any response. During my Catechism days, I was made to understand I must believe everything that the bible contains as true without doubting.

However the more I tried to understand the creation narratives, the more questions generated within me. Was the world actually created just as the book of Genesis tells us? Did the same God, who created man last on the sixth day in Chapter One, come back again in Chapter Two to create the same man first before other things? In fact, considering the recent advancements in science and the claims by evolutionists today about the origin of the world, can we say that these creation narratives amount to mere myths?

According to the Anchor Bible Dictionary, prior to the period of the Enlightenment, the question of whether or not the Bible contained any myths at all was not so pronounced. In fact, it was as from the 18th century that people started wondering if the Old Testament stories such as the creation narratives could possibly count as myths. This was basically fuelled by the various movements which came up to stress that the basis for anything to be considered true was its historical verifiability. Hence, the debate about myths in the Bible was initially a question of its truth and falsity.

For instance, when the Bible speaks of events which took place prior to when the world itself began (when no man could have possibly existed to take a record of them), a successful attempt to show that they are actually myths translates to saying they are simply products of human imagination. And if this is the case, it follows then that the entire Bible itself rests on a questionable foundation. Hence over the years, several scholars have invested a great deal of time and effort on this quest. Before we proceed, it is important to bear in mind that at the heart of this debate lies the meaning and conception of the term myth.

What is myth? And what constitutes a myth? What is Myth? Etymologically, the English word myth comes from the Greek mythos. In early Greek mythos meant “ word, speech, design”; it was more or less synonymous with epos (“ word, speech, message”), and close in meaning to logos (“ account, talk”); myth is narration, tale-telling. Gradually it came to be used as a technical term for an entertaining tale, the truth of which was uncertain or unwarranted. From the time of Plato onward, mythos then became a contrasting term for logos (i. e. the rational, responsible account).

To this day, whenever the word myth is used, there is an underlining tendency to consider that which it refers to as superstition. As B. Batto observes, “ the derogation of myth as pagan superstition and therefore false and incompatible with Christian dogma remained the characteristic Christian attitude until the modern period – and is still the prevalent in some circles. ”

Initial Conclusion – No Myths in the Bible Based on the above, it becomes clear that with this understanding of the term myth, the Bible contains no

myths since it has no pagan superstitions incompatible with Christian dogma.

Now it becomes easy to see how stories as such as the Enuma Elish, Altrahasis or even the various African traditional stories of creation, etc could best be described as myths. In line with this, the word myth came to be defined as “ stories about the gods” (a definition which was popularised by the Grimm Brothers) thereby distinguishing the Bible narratives out as non-myths. Since the Bible is essentially monotheistic it cannot possibly contain any myth as myths essentially refer to stories about several gods.

Following this same principle, in his Introduction To The Old Testament, Wermer H. Schmidt, goes further to explain that the Old Testament based on its conception of God “ uses the language of myth in giving expression to its faith and it in fact borrows from surrounding cultures a number of mythical motifs and bits of mythical stories... but it does not itself develop any myths. ” In other words, the Genesis accounts of creation for instance only borrowed certain mythical motifs from those of the Ancient Near East but do not in themselves constitute any myth. The Evolution of Meaning and the Possibility of Myth in the Bible From the foregoing, it appears our case has been solved already.

Just as we have shown, the meaning of the term myth gradually evolved from its simple understanding as a ‘ narration’ to later take a negative connotation as ‘ false tale. ’ At this point it was very easy to distinguish what could count as true (believable) and what should be dumped as myth

(entertainment). However the trouble began when the term myth came to be positively re-defined with time.

The Italian philosopher Vico posited “ that myth came from within man’s own deepest inner nature; using the imagination rather than reason the first men gave true – even if non-rational and pre-scientific – answers to the original human dilemmas. German scholar David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74) working principally on the New Testament using the theory of Euphemism reached quite shocking conclusions that bulk of the O. T and N. T narratives such as the birth and conception of Jesus were not historically true, even if as mythical materials they did offer a deeper kind of human truth. His book *Life of Jesus* (1835), though had immediately rendered him famous eventually, led to the end of his academic career as many couldn’t accept his opinions.

Nonetheless with a growing body of research and findings in Biblical archaeology which seemed to support Strauss, there arose some tension towards the end of the 19th Century with regard to the continued denial of myths in the Bible. Scholars after Strauss such as Hermann Gunkel, insisted that myths are stories about the gods and that “ for a story of the gods at least two gods are essential” but since OT “ from its beginning tended toward monotheism,” the Bible contains no complete myths.

With time, scholars outside the realm of biblical studies dismissed this definition of myth “ as inadequate, overly narrow, and apologetic. ” In other words, as the meaning of myth gradually evolved from the negative to the positive conception of myth as deep truth, (that is “ the profound symbolisation of realities which transcend human capacity to comprehend

and express in ordinary language but which are profoundly true and paradigmatic for authentic life”), scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) now propelled by the historico-critical method soon began to associate the term myth with certain key biblical mysteries.

For Bultmann, the term myth assumed a much broader definition as “ one of the ways in which any culture objectifies and symbolizes its entire worldview. ” With such a broad understanding of myth, it was impossible to deny that much biblical narrative is inherently mythological. In this regard G. H. Davies in 1956 defined myth as “ a way of thinking and imagining about the divine ” and not necessarily about the gods such that myth can also occur in monotheistic religions.

Following this trend of thought, John L. McKenzie SJ in his Dictionary of the Bible (1976), came to the conclusion that “ when we compare the thought processes of the OT with the processes of Semitic myth, we observe that the OT rejects all elements which are out of character with the God whom they knew. But what they knew of God could be expressed only through symbolic form and concrete cosmic event, and the relations of God with the world and with man were perceived and expressed through the same patterns and processes which elsewhere we call mythical. ”

In this same line of thought came more recent scholars such as B. S. Childs as well as F. M. Cross. Today scholars believe that “ in Israel, no less than in Ancient Near East generally, mythopoeism (myth-making) constituted one of the basic modes of speculation about the origin of the world and the place of human kind. ”

Reflecting personally on the above, I have come to realise that the debate about myth in the Bible, (a debate which had initially being sparked off by those movements who claimed that the basis of truth is historical verifiability) over the years now became a debate about the meaning of the word myth.

As such, scholars delved into the issue over the years failing to realise that those who began the debate had in mind a conception that whatever fails the test of historical verification is untrue and as such should be considered as a myth. Scholars jumped into the debate without first realising the mistake of these movements. Historical verifiability is not the only criterion for truth.

If for instance as at when I was born, nobody took records of my birth and it so happened that all my entire generation, my parents my siblings and everybody around me then suddenly died, the fact that I have no historical poof of my birth does not mean I wasn't born at all. Hence the real error wasn't about the definition of the term myth but the misconception that whatever is pre-history is false. No wonder, as long as myth remained in its original conception as false tale, the Bible was free of myths but the moment the definition of myth shifted into the more positive light as deep truths, the same Bible suddenly became full of myths.

What we should bear in mind is that when this debate began the concept of myth was basically negative. (Recall that from Plato, myth was seen as a contrast for logos). And as long as the debate continues, the definition ought to remain the same. Even to this day, as long as we continue to regard the

word myth as a false narrative, then the Bible contains no myths; the Genesis accounts of creation are not myths but pure realities, truths – although not historical, not scientific, not mathematical, but theological.