

Musings on the Use of Myth in Genesis

The mystery of the Mesopotamian setting of Genesis

It is remarkable not only that Genesis 1-11 appears to borrow (or, less provocatively, use material in common with) Mesopotamian mythological texts, but also that it appears almost to mine the seam to exhaustion. Not only do chapters 2-9 appear to follow the general outline, and some of the detail, of the Atrahasis myth and its variants, but the genealogy of chapter 5 has close parallels to the pre-flood portion of the Sumerian king lists. Furthermore, there are some similarities, including the etymology of the name, with *Adapa and the Food of Life*.

What is even more remarkable is that, though much of the literary purpose and most of the theology of these apparent sources has been radically transformed, the geographical setting has been retained, or rather restated in equally clear geographic terms. For the Mesopotamian myths are closely linked to the city states where they originated, and this is not surprising because their mythic purpose is very much to explain the origin of those cities, their kings, their way of life and their gods. Even a complex and cosmological creation myth like *Enuma elish* has to do with Marduk, the patron-god of Babylon, and his founding of the temple there as his home.

In Genesis, in contrast, the equivalent cosmological account of chapter 1 has no geographical referents at all – it is universal and general in scope¹. Yet when geography enters the story in chapter 2, it is a specific location in eastern Mesopotamia that is the site of the garden². Various cities are named in the following chapters, and Noah's ark comes to rest on Mt Ararat (another strange difference from the Sumerian myths, but still closely related to Mesopotamia). Subsequently Shinar becomes the focus; the city of Babel is there (whichever actual city it refers to) and the nations spread out identifiably from it. Even the root "En" in two names (Enoch, Enosh) was a title for the early Sumerian kings.

This is even stranger when one considers that Genesis is not simply a retelling of these myths, but their incorporation into the history of Israel, and how they came to be in Egypt, before the rest of the Torah brings them at last to Canaan, the land of promise. One might, or would, have expected the final author of this chronicle to stress the origins of Israel-in-Canaan, since the land was so central to the passions and hopes of the nation from the time the nation was founded until, even, the present day.

We shall return to the question of Abraham and his origins later, but it is hard to imagine that any author from Moses down to Ezra would not have been tempted to start the story, at the earliest, with Abraham in Canaan. Genesis 1 could easily have been written with the creation of Israel's progenitors, such as Abraham, as its focus rather than mankind in general. The garden could felicitously be set on Mount Moriah, where Abraham was later to be asked to sacrifice Isaac and where God's sole temple would be set. The flood story could easily be rewritten to have Noah dwelling in Canaan and landing his ark on Mount Hermon.

¹ Walton in *The Lost World of Genesis One* demonstrates this is for theological reasons. The Hebrew God has the whole world as his temple.

² And there is a good case for saying that this geography corresponds to 2nd or 3rd millennium BC topography.

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Given scholarship's general appraisal of the Torah as being written to serve nationalistic interests even at the expense of truth, it is problematic that the author of Genesis did *not* make such changes to the ancient myths.

The *sitz in lieben* of Genesis does not appear to begin to solve this. If Moses was the author, than his orientation and education was Egyptian, not Mesopotamian. If Abraham was remembered at the time of the Exodus it was as an ancestor half a millennium before, and his birthplace was less important than Yahweh's promise of his own land. In most of the period of the monarchy, Mesopotamian powers were a threat or a current enemy, and there would have been a vested interest in suppressing any idea of their having a stake in Israel's territory. The same is true during the Babylonian exile, which in any case was a relatively short period for such a massive literary project as the Torah. Some have theorised that the Persian Cyrus required the Jews to weave the disparate writings of the northern and southern kingdoms into one, in order to recognise their religion, thus forming the basis of the Torah³. With such an arduous task, would the scribes have taken time to recast so elaborately myths they found in their place of exile, especially so soon after their liberation from the hated Babylonians? It is even less likely that they would draw attention to such origins in post-exilic Jerusalem, when Babylon was remembered as the power that God used to destroy the covenant.

There would appear to be only one obvious explanation for the heavy dependance of Genesis on Mesopotamian literature: that there was indeed a historic Abraham, and that he brought with him to Canaan written versions of these stories, with a clear idea that they embodied his own origins and, theologically, the origin of the covenant God had made with him.⁴ Any such documents would hardly have been preserved if they did not, even in their original form, have something of importance to say to the developing people of Israel.

Myths may not always be what they seem

Identifying genres is fun and of some use, provided it is remembered that a genre may sometimes be taken and used for a different purpose from the usual one. Indeed a genre may be used because it is the least bad fit for a new literary purpose.

As an example of the first, take the Mesopotamian Flood myths. The Atrahasis story is a classic myth, in that it deals with the reasons for the gods to create mankind, and the reasons for some human problems today (the gods' remedy for human overpopulation and "noise", which may well be a metaphor for moral corruption). But when the tale is taken up in *The Gilgamesh Epic*, which is not a myth but an epic poem about a semi-legendary king and his quest for eternal life, the flood story is no

³ I cannot help but point out the inherent impossibility of the kind of documentary stitching required by any variation of the Graf-Wellhausen documentary theory, with verses or parts of verses being taken and interwoven from separate sources. If it is hard to envisage the Evangelists working with two or three 30 foot long gospel-scrolls on their knees to edit the synoptic gospels, it is no easier in the Persian Empire and with four basic documents, whether using scrolls or cuneiform tablets. The ancient world contains no recorded examples of such a process, so why is it considered likely for the Pentateuch?

⁴ Oral sources can surely be ruled out, on the grounds that stories circulating for anything from 400 to 1000 years in the Israelite community would finally bear no more resemblance to their sources than *La Morte d'Arthur* does to the post-Roman origins of the Arthurian myth. At the very least the geography would soon have been forgotten and local locations substituted.

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longer used as a myth. Instead, a meeting with Atrahasis is one of the adventures of Gilgamesh, the ancient sage retelling the flood story to show, in the end, that Gilgamesh cannot obtain eternal life from him.

An example of the second might be the four Gospels, which in reality comprise a unique sub-variety of classical biography. They employ many conventions from biography, such as often sacrificing chronology to thematic concerns, proverbial sayings and an emphasis on the “good death” of the subject. But in aiming to embody theological teaching, engender faith and show Jesus to be the Messiah promised in Scripture, they diverge so much from the genre that it is misleading simply to call them “biographies of Jesus.”

Genesis, taken together with the rest of the Pentateuch, is in a unique ANE genre of its own; a national foundation history with the overarching theme of the outworking of God’s call to Abraham. Genesis takes the action from the creation to the arrival of the firstfruits of the promise, Jacob and his sons, in Egypt, where the nation’s deliverance and establishment will take place in the next book, Exodus.

Chapters 1-11 form the prologue to this story, and though including mythical material actually themselves comprise the first part of the history. There is linear movement from the creation of the world, down the generations from Adam, to the appearance of Abram. They are not simply stand-alone pieces of Israelite literature, as the Babylonian sources are, but are incorporated as part of the ordered history of Israel.

This inevitably raises the question of their significance within this history. Few histories feel it necessary to include the beginning of the world. The most obvious answer is the one that Biblical theology would give today: that they provide not only the provenance of Abram, but the reason for his call by Yahweh.

It appears there are three elements within the chapters with clear mythic function. Chapter 1, the creation, explains the world we know and our relationship to the one true God who made it. Chapters 2-3 seem, although separate, to follow immediately on and view the same events from the human standpoint. In doing so they explain the origin of sin, human death and suffering in the world (or strictly, in a region of eastern Mesopotamia, though Adam and Eve’s apparent solitude inevitably invoke a universal dimension). Finally the Flood serves much the same function as it does in Babylonian myth, illustrating divine judgement on humans.

The lesser elements in the story; Cain and his line, Seth’s genealogy, the Nephilim story, Noah’s sin, the table of nations, and the tower of Babel, are of diverse genres. But they all serve the same historic function as the main elements: cataloguing the increase of sin, its spread across the world, and the continuance of the line from Adam that caused the mess but produces a potential saviour in Abram.

Abram provides a historic fulfilment of the promise in Genesis 3.15, and the 11 chapters provide a majestic fanfare for the universal purpose of Abraham’s call in 12.1-2, and therefore of Israel’s priestly function to the world. It all forms a unit.

Thus the Mesopotamian mythic elements in Genesis are functioning as far more than myth alone. They are a necessary part of the purpose of the book in teaching the

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historical purpose of Abraham's call and hence Israel's purpose. Put in another way, the salvation events of the Exodus are made necessary by the historical events of chapters 1-11.

Myth and history

The original Mesopotamian Flood accounts are mythic in genre and intent. However, it has been pointed out that in no version of the myth is the Flood strictly necessary to explain anything in the world around us. The Flood teaches divine wrath, but only in terms of a specific historical, or pseudo-historical, event. In Atrahasis it leads to the imposition of reduced fertility – but that could have been described in the Flood's absence. In Genesis it leads to a covenant avoiding the need for another Flood by imposing individual accountability for human bloodshed. But this could have been imposed even if no deluge had occurred.

The fact is that the Mesopotamians regarded the Flood as an event that actually occurred. In the ancient Sumerian version Ziusudra the Sumerian king is the equivalent of Noah, and he also appears on the king lists as the last before the flood. His father or relative, Shuruppak, is the purported author of a book of wisdom sayings to Ziusudra, on a tablet dated to around 2,500BC. Shuruppak's namesake city has been shown archaeologically to have suffered one of the greatest recorded Mesopotamian river floods around 2,900 BC, just 400 years before this text.

There really seems no reason to deny historical, legendary or mythical memories of such an actual flood. Ashurbanipal prided himself on collecting records from before the flood in his library, though they were, he said, uninteresting. This was a literate society, obsessed with record keeping. If we still have records and celebrate customs about the Gunpowder Plot over 400 years ago, why should a major flood not also be remembered? Why should genealogies of genuine rulers not survive intact that long?⁵

The only question is why, in a land where flooding is not rare, a single localised inundation came to be accorded such pivotal importance throughout Mesopotamian history. Truth to tell, however, the Flood seems to have been remembered not just because of its great extent, but because it ended the time of the first period "after the kingship descended from heaven", which may correspond to what we now call the *Jemdet Nasr Period*. This began with the founding of the city of Eridu in around 3400BC, which certainly does correspond with the earliest city so far discovered in the world, and the start of the bronze age, with the invention of the plough, the wheel, the sail – and writing.

Although there is no doubt that life went on in places unaffected by the flood, and the area itself soon recovered, perhaps the destruction of the first civilisation was consciously perceived as having symbolic importance in the relationship between man and gods. Harold Macmillan famously said that what knocks governments off course are, "Events, dear boy, events." The same must surely be true of civilisations.

⁵ I shared my medical training with a direct descendant of Guido Fawkes, and it would be absurd to discount her ancestry and say that Fawkes was unhistorical.

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That, at least to me, makes more sense than the complete loss of this first literate culture from local memory and the substitution of completely imaginary people and circumstances.

An excursus on mythical lifespans

One reason the first kings on the Sumerian lists are regarded as fictitious is the absurdly long reigns – in tens of thousands of years – they are given. This is compounded by the names in the Seth genealogy, which seems in some ways to parallel it, which are also absurdly high, but to a much lesser degree than those of the Sumerian lists.

Biblical literalists deal with these on the basis of Adam's primaeval vigour, whilst skeptics deal with them on the basis of imaginative exaggeration. Yet in the case of Genesis, it is hard to account for the delay of centuries before these patriarchs procreate at all. Things are not helped by different figures in the Septuagint translation, which may well reflect an older textual tradition than the Massoretic text our Bibles follow. They're still massive numbers though.

A number of writers have suggested that both sets of ages may have suffered from translation between different numerical systems. For example John Walton⁶ shows that misreading the semitic decimal system total of the Genesis patriarchal ages as a Sumerian sexagesimal number gives the inflated figure found in the king lists. He suggests that perhaps this implies the source of the Genesis table was used by the Sumerians (since the reverse does not work).

Robert M Best⁷ has similarly proposed an elaborate, but intriguing, process in which Sumerian scribes misread not the Bible account but documents from the pre-flood period, which had been written in one of several decimal systems in use in Mesopotamia before the sexagesimal system was developed. This would account for the numbers in the Sumerian king lists. But he suggests too that the original compilers of Genesis (represented in the Septuagint textual tradition) were also confronted by the original archaic decimal form of the list and made a similar mistranslation. In effect, they dropped a decimal point and so inflated the numbers tenfold. Best makes another small adjustment as described in the footnote link, to arrive at ages for the genealogy that are very normal both in terms of their longevity and the age at which they produced children.

If something like this is the truth (or simply if we attribute realistic longevity to the patriarchs), and if we accept the Flood date as that of 2900BC, then we arrive with Adam coming into the world around 3113BC, just 213 years before the Flood, and during the period of the Sumerian antediluvian kings.

This has interesting implications for the hypothesis I have previously proposed on Adam's role as the spiritual progenitor of mankind⁸. If, as I will suggest, God's

⁶ John H Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context*, Grand Rapids, Regency, 1989, pp127-131

⁷ <http://www.flood-myth.com/images/PDF/Genesis5Analysis.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.jongarvey.co.uk/download/pdf/AdamMRCA.pdf>

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intention in the Flood was the destruction of Adam's line, it is quite realistic to suggest that this would have, after 2 centuries, numbered only in the low hundreds, living in a restricted area.

Abraham's stake in the Mesopotamian literature

Abraham, both on the Bible's chronology and the most likely historical setting for someone of his description, was born in Ur around 1800BC⁹. Though it is easy to think of him and his small family wandering through Canaan with a flock of sheep, he was, of course, "No ordinary bloke". He was rich, well-connected, met Egyptian royalty socially and was powerful enough to field an army in the battle of Genesis 14. He was the kind of semitic leader who changed the power balance in his native Mesopotamia in that period.

He also had a reason for leaving Ur, and though we know he went in obedience to Yahweh's call we may surmise that it may also have been because his revolutionary religious views were not welcome in the traditional religious setting of his homeland.

I have suggested elsewhere that Adam was the first man to be called into covenant with Yahweh. Quite apart from his theological importance, he too was "no ordinary bloke." At the least his son Cain founded a city, and Enoch was a priest-king, as was Seth's son Enosh, and his descendant the other Enoch, who "walked with God." If there is truly a link with a Sumerian king list based on fact, then there were close ties between Adam's line and the antediluvian kings. Indeed, Adam may have been the founder of that kingship. Perhaps there was truth in the Sumerians' belief that the kingship had descended from heaven with the first king of Eridu.

What would have been the relationship between Adam's line, the local population's religion and the worship of Yahweh? The Bible says that Abel worshipped God rightly, and his brother Cain wrongly. Men began to call on the name of Yahweh in the time of Seth, but we are not told which men, or how many. Enoch, decades later, walked with God. Maybe all Adam's line worshipped God too, as the distinction from Cain's line may suggest. But maybe they went after false gods, and their names are recorded not for their faith but simply for their bloodline to Noah.

But let us suppose that Noah, that preacher of righteousness, had descendants who kept the light of Yahweh's worship alive. Or alternatively, let us suggest that Abram as well as being called by God, had family records or access to other cuneiform documents that told of the origin of the covenant with Adam, and that with Noah. Clay tablets, as we know from Ur itself, can last a long time, and maybe there was even a Yahwistic scribal tradition that had kept intact memories of the original course of events, from their point of view, before the flood for over a thousand years. If such things existed in Abram's family it was rich and old enough to have archives, and the education to read them (or employ scribes to do so).

⁹ Yet another buttress for the reliability of Genesis, for whatever date we give for the book, no reliable history existed on which to base Abraham's background, and surely no oral tradition could have survived that long (500-1400 years) without far more damage than we see. Early documents surely underlie the text.

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Abram, then, would be consciously aware of preserving a tradition parallel to, but theologically distinct from, the official pagan records of the same events. We need not even suppose that Noah was the only survivor of the flood (the myths seem to suggest other survivors) as long as he was the only survivor from Adam's descendants, on whom in God's purpose the Flood was sent.

Abram would set out for Canaan not only with the covenant promise for the future, but with the tradition of past covenants going back to the first true man, man in relationship to God.

Caveat

These thoughts are provisional, and only one thing is certain about them: that no significant historical or archaeological evidence will be found to confirm them, though of course it is not quite impossible that time might confirm early sources for Genesis. This account is, of course, accommodationist in nature. But it is not improper to look for possible answers to the question of how Mesopotamian texts came to be incorporated, inexactly, in the sacred text of a nation with roots in Egypt and bad experience of Mesopotamia. In the context of my Adam hypothesis it is also important to see how such an Adam could fit into the real world of ANE history, how to account for the Flood story, and so on.

[The Hump of the Camel](#)