

Mything the Point:

The Use of Mythology in Genesis 1-11

Andre van Oudtshoorn

Dean of Academics and Research

Perth Bible College

Abstract

This article proposes that Genesis 1-11 recasts the myths of Israel's neighbours within a new theological historical framework to undermine the underlying world-view which makes myth-making possible. In order for the text to operate as intended the stories in Genesis 1-11 should first be treated as myths. Genesis 1-11, in contrast to the mythological world-view, draws a sharp distinction between God, the world and humanity. This results in the radical secularisation of the world. It exposes humanity as sinful but also creates the possibility for humanity to flourish by fully embracing what it means to be human and not divine. God is shown to be the creator of the universe and the one who is moved by compassion despite his anger at the evil which humans continue doing.

It is very difficult to preach from Genesis 1-11. Careful exegesis inevitably invites the question as to how these chapters relate to the myths of the pagan nations surrounding Israel. In many evangelical churches any suggestion of a link between the Biblical primeval history and other Near-Eastern myths is seen as undermining the authority of Scripture and "not believing the Bible." In this article I will argue that Genesis 1-11 is set as a reaction against certain myths from the nations surrounding Israel to challenge the underlying ideas which make myth-making possible: a world-view in which there is no final and distinct barrier between humans, the world and God. This is done through a process of deconstructing existing myths by using them to set up a radically alternative world-view. Those who insist on reading the events depicted in Genesis 1-11 in a positivistic historical sense as 'factually' true, I will suggest, may actually perpetuate a non-Biblical mythological world-view.

The events related in Genesis 1-11 are often treated as a patchwork of stories that lacks coherence and purpose. This approach is nowadays being challenged more and more.¹ In the book of Genesis there are, for instance, ten instances of a major new section starting with the words "This is the account of..." Five of these instances are found in Genesis 1-11. The intra-textual allusions also point

¹ Thomas A. Keiser, *Genesis 1-11: Its Literary Coherence and Theological Message* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, n.d.), 23.

to an integrated theological purpose.

Texts Whose Purpose is to Create an Understanding of the Whole of Reality

John Searle in his speech-act theory, has indicated that communication often carries an illocutionary or intentional force to affect and change the receiver's behaviour.² Habermas suggests that in the communicative event we rely on a cooperative process of interpretation in which participants relate simultaneously to something in the objective, the social and the subjective world. This cooperative process allows the speaker and hearer to "use the references system of the three worlds as an interpretive framework within which they work out their common situation definitions."³ Different texts want to do different things: entertain, inform, persuade etc.

Texts which are intended to orientate people within their everyday reality by telling them who they are, what God or the gods are like, and how they relate to God(s) and the world, are technically designated as myths.⁴ In this article I broadly follow Brevard S. Childs' definition: "The myth is an expression of man's understanding of reality."⁵ In popular speech the term 'myth' is used to indicate generally accepted 'truths' that are, in fact, false – hence the name of the popular TV programme *Mythbusters*. In ancient times myths came in the form of stories which functioned to convey deep truths about ultimate reality – to tell people what God or the gods are like, who humans are, where they come from, how they fit into the big scheme of things, including the world and the whole cosmos. While we may consider mythical stories to be 'fictional', this does not necessarily undermine the truths that they want to convey.⁶ A myth is not debunked when its story is shown to be fictional; only, when

² John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 30.

³ As quoted in Robert S. Fortner, *Communication, Media, and Identity: A Christian Theory of Communication* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 98. "In any typical situation, people tend to ask the mental question, 'What is going on here?' Their answer constitutes a definition of the situation": Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss, *Theories of Human Communication* (Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning, 2008), 165.

⁴ There are many definitions of myths. Gunkel, for instance, defined myths as "stories about gods. They are to be distinguished from sagas where the active persons are human." Hermann Gunkel and Mark E. Biddle, *Genesis* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 382. Texts, here, does not exclude oral transmitted stories.

⁵ Brevard Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 17.

⁶ The mythical mindset would not readily have conceived the idea of myths being 'fictional'. It is only when the mythical world-view is destroyed that the possibility of the historicity of the stories in which the myths are cast rises to the fore. A mythical world-view stems from "...a thought pattern which differs in decisive points from the modern critical one. This is especially true in regard to the manner in which the world is conceived. Whereas the man of critical mind thinks of the world about him as passive and impersonal, the primitive man conceives of his surroundings as active and living, with powers which influence every area of his life. The activity of these powers in nature is perceived by him in the manifold impressions of nature which force themselves vividly upon him. Corresponding to his intimate contact with nature there is an unusual quality of openness and receptivity to these impinging powers. The growth and decay of his fruit tree, the birth and death of his family, the rise and setting of the sun, are the overwhelming signs of a reality which determines his life." Ibid., 17. Referring to the Greek author Pausanias, Greta Hawes, *Rationalizing Myth in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014),

the truth that it wants to convey about reality is shown to be false. Myths thus convey general, universal and timeless truths by which to make sense of reality. Genesis 1-11 was written as a response to the underlying world-view which allowed myths to flourish: an understanding of the world where there are no clear boundaries between God or gods, the natural world, and humanity. Because ancient myths expressed this underlying world view, the stories in which these truths were cast were never open to be questioned as to their historicity.⁷

Myth and Parables

There is a resemblance between myths and the stories (or parables) that Jesus told in that both communicate truths through the use of stories. The truth conveyed by the story of the prodigal son does not depend on whether the events related actually ever happened. Parables are different from myths in that they do not, in the first place, deal with universal, eternal truths but are closely bound to a particular and immediate context that they wish to address. The story of the prodigal son, for instance, was told in response to the Jewish leaders' complaint that Jesus mixed with sinners. In it the Jewish leaders were exposed as being like the older brother in the story. However, when we interpret the text in such a way that we take universal, general, and, timeless truths from it – such as focusing on the character of God as portrayed by the Father in the story, we are treating the story more as a myth than a parable.⁸

The use of parables shows that, at least in principle, God can use fictional stories to convey his truth to us. Some people may argue that in the case of the parables the Bible clearly indicates that we are dealing with fictional stories. If Genesis 1-11, however, was responding to some of the myths that Israel already knew, then there would be no need to tell them that the stories recounted in Genesis should not to be understood in the same way as the salvation historical events in which they have participated experientially. The stories in Genesis 1-11 would quite naturally be understood as engaging with existing myths, challenging them and creating an alternative world-view for God's people.

The first question that needs to be answered is whether there are, indeed, other instances in the Old Testament where myths from the surrounding nations were challenged to create an alternative understanding of reality? Psalm 82 furnishes us with a clear example of this.

181, points out that the relationship between mythical truth and rational historical truths are complex. It is not so easy to discern what the Greeks believed to be 'true' in their myths.

⁷ Israel was unique in embracing an historical rather than mythical world-view. Israel, through her encounters with the God of promise and fulfilment, emphasised new events, done by her God, that created history for-, and with-, her and which ultimately determined her world-view.

⁸ At the time of Jesus the mythical world-view had already been destroyed by texts such as Ps. 82 and Gen. 1-11 which succeeded in demythologising the world-view Israel shared with the other Near Eastern nations and replace it with an alternative world view in which historical events play a much more pronounced and critical role. Jesus' stories were thus understood as stories.

Psalm 82

This Psalm starts with a mythical “assembly of the gods”. God enters this assembly and quickly turns it into a court with him as the judge and the “gods” as the accused. The case centres on whether the gods have the right to claim divinity. The Psalm does not directly debunk the mythological idea of ‘an assembly of gods’. If, however, none of the gods ultimately meet the criteria to be recognised as gods then the whole notion of an “assembly of the gods” also becomes redundant. I will argue that Genesis 1-11 forms part of this process of demythologising the myths that Israel encountered, especially during the exile, and replacing it with an alternative world view which makes myth making impossible.⁹

The Purpose of Genesis 1-11

In many places in the Bible truth is grounded on the narrative’s historicity: If Jesus did not die in history and did not physically rise from the dead, then the truth claims of the message are annulled.¹⁰ We can say that both the Old and the New Testaments are marked by an emphasis on historical events; events where God miraculously intervened to overcome real obstacles in the realisation of his promises to his people. Israel’s world-view had to be enabled to accommodate a reality in which (a) the nation was no longer subject to the capriciousness of the gods but, instead, subject to a gracious God; (b) Israel had no final exclusive claim to God but had to understand herself as being created by God to bless the other nations of the world; (c) Israel (or the other nations) could not lay claim to any vestige of divinity; and, (d) the natural world was no longer seen to be alive with spiritual realities but instead viewed as a created entity subject to one God. Genesis 1-11 was written to challenge the alternative mythological understandings or reality that may have tempted Israel. The text does this by either co-opting certain myths and deconstructing them by setting them in an alternative historical theological framework, or by constructing an antithetical account which engages with themes and issues in the myths. Gerard Hasel, focusing on the depiction of creation in Genesis 1, stresses the polemical nature of the Genesis account, which to his mind excludes any notion of demythologising:

It appears that the Genesis cosmology represents not only a “complete break” with the ancient Near Eastern mythological cosmologies but represents a parting of the spiritual ways brought about by a conscious and deliberate antimythical polemic which meant an undermining of the prevailing mythological

⁹ In the case of the tower of Babel, the author does not transform an existing myth, but sets the impressive Babylonian temple towers within a new historical theological framework to enable Israel to think differently about their world and their place in history.

¹⁰ Bultmann embarked on a project of demythologising Scripture. He understood the whole of Scripture, including the death and resurrection of Jesus, to be cast in the form of myths. Salvation then becomes a sub-set of anthropology rather than theology or Christology.

cosmologies.¹¹

Hasel, nevertheless, does not deny that the Biblical account of creation critically engages with other mythological depictions or reality.

With a great many safeguards Gen. 1 employs certain terms and motifs, partly taken from ideologically and theologically incompatible predecessors and partly chosen in deliberate contrast to comparable ancient Near Eastern concepts, and uses them with a meaning and emphasis not only consonant with but expressive of the purpose, world-view, and understanding of reality as expressed in this Hebrew account of creation.¹²

As previously expressed, in this article I use the verb “demythologise” not to indicate a mythological adaptation within a similar mythological interpretive frame as the nations surrounding Israel, but to illustrate the smashing of these nations’ mythological interpretive frame. We miss the radical deconstruction of the mythological world-view if we continue to read the different events in Genesis 1-11 as ‘literal’ accounts of what ‘actually’ happened. In the process we are in danger of maintaining, defending or even promoting a non-Biblical mythological world-view.

There are two particular Near-Eastern myths that spring to mind when considering Genesis 1-11. The first of these is the so-called *Enuma Elish* and concerns creation, while the second, the so called *Gilgamesh epic*, concerns the flood account.

The Creation Myth (*Enuma Elish*)

The *Enuma Elish* is described as one of the oldest myths in existence. The story is most often dated in 1800 BC., when the god Marduk rose to prominence. Other Sumerian versions are thought to date even further back.¹³

There are a number of similarities between the *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1.

1. The sequence of the days of creation.
2. The events of creation are similar: firmament, dry land, luminaries and humanity.
3. Darkness precedes creative acts.
4. There is a division of water above and below the firmament.

¹¹Gerhard F. Hasel, 'The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology', *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974), 91.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 25.

5. Light exists before creation of sun and moon.¹⁴

There are also obvious differences. Genesis 1 is not a copy of the *Enuma Elish*. It rather reads as a polemic against the myth. In the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk battled with his great-great-grandmother Tiamat and then, after he had killed her, created heaven and earth from her body. Enns, to my mind correctly, points out:

Despite these differences, however, the problem remains. However different these stories may be, they unquestionably share a common way of speaking about the beginning of the world; both Genesis and *Enuma Elish* breathe the same air.¹⁵

This myth will obviously have to be taken into account when considering the Biblical accounts of creation. In this article I will not focus on the superficial links between the myth and the Biblical accounts but rather on the allusions to the myth which provide a door for the Biblical account to address the underlying mythological world-view.

The Myth of the Flood (*Gilgamesh*)

There are also a number of very old myths concerning a flood. "It is truly astonishing: everywhere on earth we find stories of a great primeval flood."¹⁶ The story of *Gilgamesh* reflects a number of similarities with the Genesis account. The earliest Sumerian copies we have of this account is around the first half of the second millennium BC although some scholars argue for an even earlier date.¹⁷

There are, as with the creation myth, quite a number of similarities (as well as some crucial theological differences) between this account and the story of Noah that we have to take into account when trying to understand Genesis 1-11.

It may, of course be argued, that somehow the near eastern myths only copied the Biblical accounts. There is, however, no evidence at all for the existence of Hebrew as a language before the tenth century. The dates for written copies of some of the myths, as we have seen, go back a long time before this.¹⁸ We also need to recognise that the other cultures existed long before Israel. Israel, according to Genesis 12 (which starts the salvation-historical narrative) was created through someone called Abram who lived in the Babylonian city of Ur, from where he moved to Haran. Abram was thus brought up in a world where these myths operated to inform the people who they were, who their

¹⁴Ibid., 26.

¹⁵Ibid., 27.

¹⁶Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary* (Augsburg Publishing House, n.d.), 51.

¹⁷Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 27.

¹⁸"...since the Mesopotamian story was written down centuries before the people of Israel came into being, the Biblical story must be derived from it." Norman Cohn, *Noah's Flood: The Genesis Story in Western Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 15. For further dating see p 3ff.

gods were, where they, as a nation, came from and what the world was really like. At some or other time, the God of the Bible, had to reveal to the people of Israel, who He, the only God, was in contrast to these myths, as well as who they really were, where they actually came from, why they were created, and what the world in truth was like.

Specific Indicators that the Events in Genesis 1-11 are Not to Be Read as Literal History

Are there indications within the text of Genesis 1-11 which point to critical engagement with the myths from the nations around Israel and require a non-literal interpretation of the text?¹⁹ I would like to suggest a number: Firstly, the communication of universal truths which apply to all people over all time and everywhere concerning God(s), the world and ourselves. As most of the Bible is historically and contextually grounded, this is a good indication that we may be dealing with a form of truth seeking to inform and shape Israel's world-view in contrast to that of the other nations.

A second indication is the presence of direct or indirect references and/or allusions to other myths, including critical challenges to the truths promoted in other myths. These may come to expression in 'other worldly' elements that do not easily 'fit in' with depictions in the rest of the Bible. Elements within the Biblical narrative which clearly must be taken figuratively to make theological and logical sense but form an integral part of the story, also point to a mythological interest. This includes contradictions and/or unanswerable questions when we read the text as relating to a historical narrative.

A final indication refers to stylistic features such as the use of poetry; symbols i.e., symbolic numbers referring to extraordinary time spans that go well beyond the time spans in the rest of the Bible, as well as theological symbolism, such as allusions to the receiving of the land and exile.

An analysis of Genesis 1-11 shows that many of these elements are present in the different stories.

Genesis 1: Creation

The mere fact that there are two different accounts of creation which have been placed directly after each other, points to an alternative purpose than simply informing the reader of historical data. The two accounts differ in a number of significant ways: In Genesis 1 there is, for instance, too much water, while in Genesis 2 there is too little. Genesis 1 is about the whole universe, while Genesis 2

¹⁹Framework truths do not, of course, exclude historical truth. A framework truth may be embedded in a story which relates to historical events – the many accounts of the flood that have been told over thousands of years point to such an event being a distinct historical probability. "Excavations indicate that around 2,800BC the ancient Sumerian city of Shuruppak was destroyed by a flood... and of the three major flood stories that are preserved in writing, one refers to Shuruppak by name, while in another the chief protagonist bears the name of the King of Shuruppak, who is known to have reigned around the time of that catastrophe" (Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 1). Our experience of sin tells us that there definitely must have been an event when humanity turned from God.

offers a more intimate account, depicting a garden into which God leads the people he has created. In Genesis 1 humanity is created after the animals; in Genesis 2 humanity is created before them.²⁰ Alter argues that these two depictions should be seen as complementary, rather than alternative accounts.²¹ It is, nevertheless, true that if they are interpreted literally as historical events the differences present significant difficulties.

Many scholars have pointed to the poetic structure of Genesis 1.²² This poem deals with mythological issues in that it wants to situate Israel within the cosmos and in relationship with God and the surrounding nations. It also refers to humanity in general, abstract, terms rather than as individual characters, so for instance it depicts male and female together as reflecting the image of God. Its scope encompasses the formation of the whole cosmos and all the people of the world.

This passage clearly also wants to challenge other myths about creation and show Israel that their God is the true creator of everything. The first line of the poem uses the Hebrew words *tohu wa bohu* (formless and void). The Old Testament scholar, Claus Westermann, points to a possible word play here on the God *Tiamat* who features in the *Enuma Elish*.²³ David Tsamara disagrees:

I have thoroughly reexamined the problem from a linguistic point of view, and it is now clear that it is phonologically impossible to conclude that *tehôm* ocean was borrowed from *Tiamat*. The Hebrew *tehôm* 'ocean' together with the Ugaritic *thm*, the Akkadian *tiamtu*, the Arabic *tihamat*, and the Eblaite *ti-à-ma-tum / tiham(a)um* / is simply a reflection of a common Semitic term *tiham*.²⁴

While any direct allusion to Tiamat is questionable, the poem in Genesis 1 clearly alludes to similar themes, objects and events as in other mythological creation accounts.²⁵ While there is no direct dependency between the *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1, the word *tehom* provides a natural allusion to the myth.²⁶ Genesis 1, however, reflects a radically alternative theology, ontology and anthropology

²⁰Adrio König, *New and Greater Things: Re-Evaluating the Biblical Message on Creation* (University of South Africa, 1988), 23.

²¹Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 145.

²²See *ibid.*, 12ff.

²³Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 8. So too, Gunkel, see Abigail Pelham, *Contested Creations in the Book of Job: The-World-as-It-Ought-and-Ought-Not-to-Be* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 215.

²⁴"Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern Stories of Creation and Flood: An Introduction Part I," no page number, accessed August 24, 2015, <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2007/02/17/Genesis-and-Ancient-Near-Eastern-Stories-of-Creation-and-Flood-An-Introduction-Part-I.aspx#Article>.

²⁵"Although some early scholars such as Gunkel (see Wenham) saw a connection between *tehom* and the Mesopotamian goddess Tiamat, this has subsequently been discounted as unwarranted, especially because in Genesis there is no indication of any struggle like the one in which Tiamat was involved." Jacques Van Heerden, *Creation and Evolution* (Author House, 2014), 61.

²⁶John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (CUP Archive, 1985), 4, argues for a Canaanite mythological background. "Since the discovery of the Ugaritic texts from 1929 onwards, however, it has become clear that the immediate background of the Old Testament allusions to the sea-monster is not Babylonian but Canaanite." He identifies the Hebrew word *tehom* with the Ugaritic *thm*. *Ibid.*, 7 and argues that the similarities between the *Enuma Elish* and the Canaanite Baal-Yam

than the myth. At the centre of Genesis 1 is a theological vision of God. *Elohim* is repeated 34 times in the chapter. While the plural for God is used here, it is a *pluralis amplitudinis*, a plural which does not denote a numerical number but points to the overwhelming nature of the subject.²⁷ By using a plural form for God who, then, functions as a singular entity, Genesis 1 emphasises the difference between Israel's Creator God and the multiplicity of gods amongst Israel's neighbours as demonstrated in the *Enuma Elish*. The references to the sun and moon as *big and little lights*, that are nothing more than created objects, bound to a set path within which *Elohim* has set them, would have sounded shocking to a world in which the sun and the moon were revered as gods in their own right. Furthermore, *Elohim* does not fight against the formless emptiness or other gods, as in the *Enuma Elish* or other Canaanite creation myths, but just speaks a word that transforms the given chaos. God creates because he wants to and not out of need, or external pressure such as a divine cosmic battle.

Ontologically, creation is radically secularised and all traces of the divine within it summarily removed.²⁸ Both the world and humans are shown to be created, made by the God who remains radically different from his creation. The world becomes a physical object. While the Genesis account shares certain cosmological ideas with the *Enuma Elish*, the world is depicted as having been created good and not flawed through a voluntary decision by *Elohim*. Anthropologically, humans are given the unique status as "created in the image of God."²⁹ While male and female together reflect the image of God, God is nevertheless not depicted in sexual terms as either a male or a female.³⁰

conflict is the result of a common intellectual background. Ibid., 12. It is my contention that Israel shared this same intellectual background which accounts for the mythological allusions in Gen.1.

²⁷A van Selms, *Genesis* (Nijkerk: G.F. Callenbach, 1973), 21. Wiggins, S. A. (2002). A reassessment of biblical *Elohim*. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 121(3), 538-540. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview> questions if the term *Elohim* does not point to an original form of polytheism in Israel. Fretheim is of the opinion that it does: "Its pl. form may mean it had polytheistic (or at least less than fully monotheistic) overtones at one time. Yet its use in the OT for Israel's God (always with sing. vbs.) probably means that the pl. has reference to intensification or absolutization or exclusivity (say, God of gods)." According to Fretheim "...it is less commonly considered a pl. of majesty." Fretheim, in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 2.

²⁸While the world becomes an object that humanity must rule over (v.28) this does not imply humans being given the freedom to exploit the world: "The term used in the text is not "to dominate" but "to have dominion" (the Hebrew "v 'yirdu" suggests "to rule over" or "to take care of"). The distinction is important: having dominion over something is a matter of having it in one's charge, of needing to see to its needs, stability, and orderliness." S. D. N. Cook, "Technology and Responsibility: Reflections on Genesis 1-3," *Judaism* 45, no. 4 (Fall 1996): 415.

²⁹"The possibility that a human being might bear the image of a god was granted in Assyria and Babylon, but it was bound to the elitist notion of sacral kingship. All other human beings were created to serve the gods. Such an ideology legitimated a rigidly stratified social order, and it guaranteed oppression of the masses. Of this powerful and pervasive culture Israel provided an ideological critique. It grounded its egalitarian social order in a "democratized" notion of *imago dei* in which all human beings share God's ruling function within the sacral temple that is God's creation. By perceiving in human beings the gift and responsibility of stewardship in the earth, described as kingly rule shared by all, Israel delegitimated both royal and priestly hierarchies and elevated the status of the individual." W. Sibley Towner, "The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1," *Interpretation* 59, no. 4 (October 2005): 409.

³⁰The only time goddesses are mentioned in the Old Testament it is to condemn them. It is noteworthy, however, that the final author of Genesis 1-11 replaces an individual character in both the creation and flood myths with a

Genesis 2: Second Creation narrative

In this chapter there are also a number of indications that the account does not want to be read as plain history. There is reference to a garden which is surrounded by four rivers.³¹ Two of the rivers exist and the other two do not. This may indicate that the account wishes to deal with our reality on earth, but also wants to say that it is about something that goes beyond our everyday world. A second indication is that when 'Adam' does something, it does not only have consequences for the individual but affects the whole of humanity.³² In the third place there are some theological allusions which reflect God's covenantal engagement with Israel. The way Israel is taken into the garden and then banned from the garden could be seen as reflecting the giving of the promised land to Israel and their later exile from the land because of their sin. All this points to an engagement with Israel's underlying symbolic world by which they interpreted reality, rather than simply relating an historical account.

The account also challenges certain mythological presuppositions underpinning the symbolic worlds of Israel's neighbours, such as the notion that humans were created by the gods to be of service to them, such as providing food for them. In Genesis 2, in contrast, God provides for the people he has created. The story, furthermore, sets a clear boundary between humanity and the animals, i.e., an animal could not be found as a suitable helper for man. It is also notable that humanity is said to have been made from the earth and even bears the name 'ground'. To be human is to be earth, not a heavenly, divine or semi-divine being. To be human is to be a physical object. While the passage also depicts God as breathing life into the little clay dolls he had formed, his breath is only said to bring their physical existence into life. The story gives no indication that humanity's true existence is spiritual rather than physical, or that it somehow participates in the divine through this God-breathed life.

Genesis 3: The Fall

There are a number of strange 'other-worldly' elements in this chapter which create great difficulties if we read it as a literal historical account. The snake is depicted as an animal that could both walk and talk. There is also a, so called, 'tree of life' in the garden. God fears that if people somehow manage to eat from this tree they would live forever. This raises an obvious question: Is eternal life really about eating fruit from a physical tree? The story ends up with the two people being excommunicated from the garden, with angels (cherubim) with flaming swords placed on the east side of the garden to bar

man in the context of a family (wife and children). David L. Petersen, "Genesis and Family Values," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 9.

³¹According to Terje Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2-3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (ISD, 2000), gardens in ancient mythology presented a liminal border between humans and the divine.

³²The whole of Genesis 1 -11 consistently does not speak of Israel and her history but instead focuses on humanity and the destiny of all the nations of the world.

their way to the tree of life.³³ There is no escaping the strong mythological characteristics that mark the story as a whole.

While the Eden narrative is presented in the form of a myth the story also deliberately deconstructs the mythological world-view's lack of distinction between the natural and supernatural worlds. The otherworldly snake ends up as a normal reptile. The idea of an idealistic garden (utopia) that humanity may still regain is debunked. Humanity is supernaturally barred from ever re-entering the garden. The story, furthermore, radically condemns any mythological presupposition that humanity is somehow intrinsically god-, or semi-god-, like. The endeavour to be like God is shown to lie at the heart of human sinfulness. In this story humans are not inherently heroic, or the helpless victims of the capriciousness of the gods. Humanity is, instead, shown to be guilty in seeking to be like God: the very idea presupposed in many of the creation myths of the nations surrounding Israel.

This account does not directly reflect any known ancient Near Eastern myths. The closest resemblance is the myth of *Adapa*. He turned down the offer to eat the bread and drink the water of life, and thus lost immortality. The Biblical account, on the other hand, responds to the perplexing question how the world, which God had declared to be *very good*, has now come to be marked by evil.

Genesis 4

In this chapter we, again, encounter a number of unanswerable problems if we insist on asking historical questions of the text. Who are the people that Cain fears? Where did these people come from if the second child, Seth, was only born after the death of Abel? How did Cain manage to build a city if he was the only other person on earth apart from Adam and Eve? Such questions obviously go against the intention of the text. Genesis 4 exposes the violence perpetrated by humans against each other as being against God's will and signs of human sinfulness. Genesis 3 and 4 are counter-examples of the command for Israel to love God (Deut. 6:1) and their neighbours (Lev. 19:18). The theme of human violence is later repeated in Genesis 6 as the reason for God's condemnation of humanity.

The text also challenges a key theological truth which forms part of many myths, namely that violence is sanctioned by God. In Genesis 4 God is shown as neither the instigator, nor the justifier of violence, but as the judge and avenger of violence. And yet, God is also depicted as the One who is gracious,

³³ Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 2-3* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), XII sees the Genesis 3 account as linking obedience to the attainment of eternal life, and suggests that this reflects "significant elements of Deuteronomistic theology, the law and obedience." Theodore Hiebert, "The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 2-3," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (April 2009): 384, "links the Eden narrative to two other Near Eastern myths: "In the Eden narrative, just as in *Adapa* and *Gilgamesh*, wisdom and immortality are two divine prerogatives, one of which - wisdom - humans come to share with the divine, but the other - immortality - humans are denied."

even towards the guilty murderer.

Genesis 5: Genealogy

In this chapter we find a strange extension of time, probably indicating that the events described here go back a long, long time. Its purpose is not to give us exact historical records of how long everybody lived, but places the primeval history in the context of long long ago. The genealogy thus depicts people as becoming very old (Methuselah became 969 years old) which is very different from the life-span for individuals that the people of Israel knew. These supernatural lengths of time reflect a similar indication in the Sumerian flood accounts (where people lived for extraordinarily lengths of time before the flood and a more normal life span afterward).³⁴

The account has some symbolic overtones which militate against a direct historical reading. There are ten generations from Adam to Noah and ten from Noah to Abraham and they each end up with three sons born to the last entry. The genealogies (with ten generations and naming only one son) parallel ancient Sumerian King lists.³⁵ The names Enoch and Lamech also feature in the genealogies of both Cain and Seth with some added narrative comments in both cases. The first Enoch finds protection in a city, the second escapes death.³⁶ The first Lamech justifies himself and claims his sin should go unpunished while the second Lamech hopes for deliverance from sin.

The text challenges the existing myths regarding the foundation of culture. An example is the ancient Sumerian myth “which told of sages who rose from the ocean and taught mankind the arts of civilisation such as metal working, city building and music. By ascribing such arts to the line of Cain and Lamech, Genesis is intimating that for all their glory they too are tainted by human sin.”³⁷

Genesis 6: The Sons of God

The narrative which tells of the Sons of God having sexual intercourse with humans and the resulting offspring being giants and ‘heroes of old’³⁸ clearly draws on ‘gods’ and ‘sons of god as characters in the Near Eastern myths. Robin Routledge argues that the *Nephilim* are ‘the offspring of the ‘sons of God’, understood as divine beings, and human women.”³⁹ He concludes that the reference to the

³⁴James D. G. Dunn and John William Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 36.

³⁵David McLain Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 72.

³⁶In the Sumerian tradition the seventh sage *Utuabzu* is also said to have ascended to heaven.

³⁷Dunn and Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 42.

³⁸“The majority of commentators take the view that the terms *Nephilim* and *Gibborim* in Gen.6:4 both refer to the divine-human offspring of the ‘sons of God’ and daughters of humans’.” Robin Routledge, “The Nephelim: A Tall Story? Who Were the Nephelim and How Did They Survive the Flood?,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 66, no. 1 (2015): 23.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 40. According to him the *Nephilim* are also linked to the *Gibborim*, the ‘heroes of old’. His article

Nephilim in Genesis 6:4 is

linked with the hubris of human beings who intentionally consort with the sons of God to seek to re-acquire some kind of immortality. Their description as ‘heroes’ serves to emphasise the distorted values of that generation, and so serves as an important element in the characterisation of the widespread human corruption that results in the flood. If that is the primary purpose of the reference to the *Nephilim* Genesis 6:4 it would account for their very rare appearance elsewhere in the OT.

Routledge also points to the play on words regarding the term *’olam*. In Genesis 3 God had announced that the humans will not live forever (*le’olam*) which is linked with the birth of the *Gibborim* who are ‘from the old’ (*me’olam*). “It thus suits the theological purpose of the writer to include the reference to them here, in the catalogue of human sin leading up to the flood. And having referred to the offspring of these divine-human liaisons, it is natural, further, to identify them with the *Nephilim* of folklore.”⁴⁰

The intention of this account as a cause for the flood is clearly to *demythologise* the idea that humans (or particular nations) somehow have a spark of the divine in them. Israel had to understand herself as being created by God, being a creature who is different from God, but the same as all the other nations. The story depicts the same attempt by humans as depicted in the stories about Adam and Eve and the tower of Babel, to cross the boundary between themselves and God. Whereas the other nations could boast about their divine DNA and having giants as forefathers, Israel was forced to see any attempt to be like God as a taboo, in this case the final straw which led to God’s decision to destroy the world.

Genesis 6-8: The Flood

If the oldest accounts of the flood were already known from the time of Abram (who was a Sumerian) then it is probable that the Israelites would have read and interpreted the Biblical account of the flood against the backdrop of those ancient myths. It is important to note that the Bible does not simply repeat these myths but writes an alternative account which interprets the flood event in a radically different way. It thus functions as a critique of the ancient flood myths and not simply as the historical account of “what actually happened.”⁴¹

identifies how in later extra canonical representations they became the epitome of evil, being responsible for the flood. In the Bible itself, however, he argues, “these demigods are not viewed essentially negatively; and in the popular mind might have included Gilgamesh, Nimrod and figures from Greek mythology, such as Herakles.” Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., 32..

⁴¹B.W Anderson, “From Analysis to Synthesis: The Interpretation of Gen. 1-11,” *JBL* 97 (1978): 28. There are

The structure of the flood account shows that it was written with a theological rather than historical intent:⁴²

Reason for flood: the inclination of humanity towards evil	6:5
7 days	7:4
7 days	7:10
40 days	7:17
150 days	7:24
God remembers Noah	8:1
150 days	8:3
40 days	8:6
7 days	8:10
7 days	8:12
Reason for not repeating the flood: the inclination of humanity towards evil	8:21

There are significant differences between the Biblical account and the Sumerian accounts of the flood. In an old Mesopotamian myth, the gods are not fully in control of the situation: they are said to “cower like dogs after the flood.”⁴³ In contrast to this, while God is said to ‘repent’ about sending the flood, He remains in full control of the situation. Similarly, in the Biblical account “God remembers Noah” and makes the flood cease while in the parallel *Gilgamesh* epoch *Enlil* (one of the top three gods), when visiting the sacrifice of *Utnapashtim*, is astonished to find that there are still some humans alive.⁴⁴ The list goes on: Whereas in the *Gilgamesh* epoch it is the noise people make which irritates the gods and leads to the decision to destroy them, in Genesis 6 it is the sin of humanity and their violence against each other which lead to the flood.⁴⁵ In the Sumerian myths the gods want to limit the number of

some difficulties in reading the text as an exact historical account. There seems to be two stories of the flood which were skilfully combined to form one account: (a) One account consistently refers to God as Yahweh, and the other as Elohim; (b) According to the one account seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of unclean animals entered the ark (7:2-3). According to the other there was one pair of each (6:19,20, 7:15-16); (c) According to one account after seven days rain fell for forty days and forty nights (7:4). According to the other account the water rises for 150 days (7:3) and recedes for 150 days.

⁴²Walter C. Kaiser, *The Christian and the Old Testament* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 35.

⁴³Gordon Wenham, “Genesis” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John William Rogerson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 37.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵“Whereas the Babylonians ascribed the flood to divine caprice, the Hebrews attribute it to God’s anger at

people on earth, in this passage God commands humanity to be fruitful and multiply. Finally, unlike the Sumerian myths Noah is not built up as the hero of the story: he simply obeys God's command. The Lord, for instance, shut Noah in the ark, while in the *Gilgamesh* epoch *Utnapashtim* shut himself in.

Intra-textually, it is also important to note the contrasts and similarities between the creation account in Genesis 1 and the flood account in Genesis 6-9. They indicate that Genesis 1-11, as a whole, was constructed to present a theologically balanced picture rather than a purely historical account.⁴⁶ The phrase, used repeatedly in Genesis 1, "God saw that it was good," is, for instance, replaced in Genesis 6 by the contrasting phrase "God saw that the hearts of humans were evil." Also, in Genesis 1, water is separated and removed from the earth, with the exact opposite taking place in the flood narrative with water now again covering the whole earth. Both accounts also stress the supply of food for humans and animals but there is a post-flood reversal of the depiction of humans as essentially vegetarian. There are also a number of similarities to be noted between the two passages. In both cases there is a strong wind that hovers over the water. Both accounts use the same terminology referring to animals. In both accounts God blesses both humans and animals with the command to be fruitful and multiply. Finally, in both passages there are references to humans being created in the 'image of God'.

Genesis 9: Rainbow

In the cases of both Noah and the *Gilgamesh* epoch a rainbow is given as a sign of the survivor of the flood's sacrifice being accepted. In the *Gilgamesh* epoch the rainbow is *Isthar's* jewelled necklace that is given with the promise that she will never forget the flood.⁴⁷ In the Genesis account the rainbow becomes a sign of God's commitment that He will never again destroy the world by a deluge. The rainbow thus becomes a sign of God's heart of compassion towards humanity and his turning away from a final judgement of the world. In *Gilgamesh*, *Utnapashtim* is granted immortality but not Noah in the Biblical account. The idea of the deification of humankind is thus again avoided.

Genesis 10-11: Table of the Nations and the Tower of Babel

In chapter 10 we have a normal dispersion of the nations "by their clans within their nations, each with its own language." This statement is repeated for every clan and stands in sharp contrast to the story of the tower of Babel in chapter 11, where everybody spoke the same language and lived together before being scattered across the earth. The story of a wall or tower of Babylon should obviously not be read as an historical account concerning the origin of different nations and languages; it

human violence": Wenham, "Genesis" in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 37.

⁴⁶Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis*, 65.

⁴⁷Lorena Laura Stookey, *Thematic Guide to World Mythology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 55.

appropriates the folk-lore around the Babylonian *zigurath* or temple tower and then mocks and challenges its claim to fame.⁴⁸ Instead of depicting the Babylonian buildings as an impressive technological feat by which humanity “can reach heaven,” it is now re-described as being so small that God has to come down from heaven to have a closer look at it.⁴⁹

Intra-textually God’s comment in Genesis 11:6: “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them,” and his subsequent action to curb humanity’s ability to work together, mirror God’s statement in Genesis 3:22 “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever,” and his action to banish humanity from the garden.” This story again de-constructs the idea of humans trying to become like God (Gen. 3 and 6) or reach God’s abode.

It is clear that the story also acts as a bridge between the prehistory and salvation-historical starting in chapter 12 with Abram and leading to the story of Israel by acting as a foil to Abram’s faithful obedience. While the people at *babel* want to make a great name for themselves, for instance, God promises to give Abram a great name. Similarly, whereas the people at *babel* drew together and had to be dispersed by God, Abraham willingly left his home to follow God’s leading to a new country.

What about the New Testament?

Does the fact that the New Testament refers to some of the characters that we meet in Genesis 1-11 mean that they have to be historical? The obvious answer is that reference to a character does not necessarily bestow ‘existence’ on that character. I may refer to Humpty Dumpty in my sermon to illustrate a point about human frailty, without implying that Humpty Dumpty has to exist for the point that I am making to be true.

The way in which New Testament authors refer to some of the characters mentioned in Genesis 1-11 resembles the way the author of Genesis 1-11 employed myths to make a theological point. Let us shortly consider the way the apostles referred to Enoch, Abel and Noah to make their theological points.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Westermann points out that the reference to Babylon puts the story on the boundary between history and prehistory. He does not believe it had originated in Babylon. “A wealth of parallels to the tower story exists throughout the world, although scarcely any have been found in the immediate environment of Israel.” Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, n.d.), 80.

⁴⁹ There is a mocking wordplay between *babel* (Babylonia) and *mabel* (confusion). There is also a mocking of the technological expertise of the Babylonians’ use of clay bricks. *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁰ In later Jewish writings the person of Enoch became very important. The fact that he was the first person to ascend to the presence of God (2 Enoch 22:5) meant that he was seen as the source of human knowledge.

Enoch

Jude 14-15 refers to a prophecy by Enoch which is not found in the Biblical text but in the apocryphal book 1 Enoch 1:9. It is clear that the author of Jude thus included some traditional folk-lore which had developed around the mysterious figure of Enoch to make his theological point. The author of Hebrews in chapter 11 also quoted extensively from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the so called Septuagint (designated as LXX).⁵¹ The Septuagint, for instance, expanded the Hebrew text of Genesis 5:24 by adding the words: “*and Enoch pleased God...*” The author of Hebrews used this extra bit of information and qualified it further by adding that it was *by faith* that Enoch was taken away. In the same way, in Genesis 5:22 the Septuagint also added the words: “*and Enoch pleased God.*” Here again the author of Hebrews quoted from the Septuagint and then elaborated further on it by inserting the words: “*before Enoch was taken away, he pleased God.*”⁵²

Abel

We see the same methodology being used in the reference to Abel in Hebrews 11. The Septuagint had introduced a reason why Abel's sacrifice was more acceptable than Cain's - because Cain did not divide the offering correctly.⁵³ The author of Hebrews linked his comments to the tradition shared by the Jewish philosopher, Philo, who had stated that Abel's sacrifice was of a superior quality to Cain's offering.⁵⁴ The author of Hebrews expanded on this by indicating that Abel's offering had been reckoned as superior because of his faith. Again, the reworking of the original Hebrew text and the traditions around it, served the author's theological intention – to show the importance of faith in Christ.

Noah

The reference to Noah in 2 Peter 2:5 links closely to the tradition that Noah preached righteousness, either to his children (Jub. 7:20ff) or to the nations (see Josephus' *Antiquities*, 1.3.1 par.74; Sibylline Oracles, 1.125 -95; I Clement 7:6, 9:4).⁵⁵ Here also, the author of 2 Peter incorporated extra-Biblical material to develop his theological argument. In Hebrews 11 we again find a number of references with added words taken from the Septuagint.

⁵¹It is true that the author of Hebrews resisted a lot of the Jewish speculations regarding Enoch. For him the person of Enoch was not the point, he only used him to serve his theological point.

⁵²Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2006), 282.

⁵³Joel N. Lohr, “Righteous Abel, Wicked Cain: Genesis 4:1-16 in the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the New Testament,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (July 2009): 485–96.

⁵⁴David A. deSilva, “Hebrews” in *The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary: John's Gospel, Hebrews-Revelation*, ed. Craig A. Evans (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2005), 240.

⁵⁵Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 578.

Implication: World-view transformation

The apostolic authors took the characters in Genesis 1-11 out of their original context and placed them in a new context, the context of the risen Christ. The characters, and the stories and traditions surrounding them, were used to serve the apostles' theological purpose: to proclaim Christ and the new reality in Him. From the New Testament writers' perspective, everything had to be understood in a radically new way. For this reason they included all the things which were shaping the world-view of the people they were addressing. It is thus not strange that they used the Septuagint, which was the popular text being used at that time, rather than the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to certain Old Testament characters. And it is therefore also not surprising that they could refer to extra Biblical literature which many people read and believed. This is exactly what the final author of Genesis 1-11 also did when he used myths from the nations around Israel to challenge and transform Israel's world-view. New Testament references to certain characters in Genesis 1-11 do not offer any automatic or direct proof that these characters were necessarily historical. These characters were used to serve a bigger purpose: to point the church to Christ, the one in whom everything has been made new.

Conclusion

I have argued that Genesis 1-11 differs from the rest of Genesis in that its primary purpose was not to provide Israel with historical facts about her past but rather to help her orientate herself in the world in the light of her God. In order to do so, Genesis 1-11, appropriated the same kind of stories that other nations used to convey world-view truths. But Israel could not simply adopt the myths from the nations around them. These myths had to be challenged, reworked and transformed to comply with God's revelation of himself to Israel.⁵⁶ A careful reading of the text of Genesis 1-11 shows a remarkable number of elements usually associated with myths.

The composition challenged the underlying world-view which made myth-making possible for a new world-view favouring a theological-historical understanding of reality. It did this by drawing sharp boundary lines between God, the natural world and humanity, showing that these boundaries may not be crossed at will. In doing so, the text grants freedom to humans to be fully human, people bearing the image of God, but never being gods. It also enabled Israel to see the world as a created object: a concrete reality that may be shaped and transformed by human endeavour. In of all this God was shown to be, and remain, God: the creator and ruler of everything.

The 'history' operating in these passages is a present continuous existential history. Adam becomes the designation of being 'human' and his sin reflects the sins we still continue to do today. This does not mean that the stories are not real. They are theological windows to reality.

⁵⁶In the case of the tower of Babel, the author does not transform an existing myth, but sets the impressive Babylonian temple towers within a framework truth story to enable Israel to think differently about their world.

I have also shown that the way in which the New Testament refers to characters within these stories, does not force us to treat them as literal historical figures.

While some may fear that accepting the presence of myths in Genesis 1-11 opens the door to seeing the whole Bible as purely fictional or mythological, I have shown that this is not a necessary conclusion. Understanding what the text wants to do, enables us to read it in a richer way. It wants to challenge our deepest understanding of how the world works, who we are, and most of all who the God whom we worship, really is. It is ironic that those people who insist on reading Genesis 1-11 as literally true, may end up reading the text with the very same mythological world-view that the text wanted to destroy and replace with a new, alternative historical vision of reality.