The Atra-Hasis Epic (seen here) is one of many ancient creation and flood myths. How is Genesis distinct from these ancient myths?

Genesis—
The Original Myth Buster
by Abner Chou
MANY CHRISTIAN scholars have suggested that Genesis 1–3 was never meant to convey historical truth. Instead, they say it is like one of Christ’s New Testament parables. God merely shared a made-up story to convey spiritual truths. Does the Bible give us any clear guidance to know for certain whether Genesis 1–3 is a parable?

After all, as Christians, we believe that there is only one particular way to understand the Bible. The Bible is God’s Word, His perfect and personal communication to His people for all time (2 Timothy 3:16). Accordingly, we cannot carelessly read the Scripture any way we want. To rightly understand His Word pleases Him (2 Timothy 2:15), but to twist the Scriptures offends Him and can lead to destruction (2 Peter 3:16). God has placed a premium on grasping what He really said.

This raises the question: How can we be sure what Scripture asserts about a certain subject, or what we call a “truth claim”? We need a way to correctly identify what the Bible actually claims. For example, does Jesus’s parable of the prodigal son mean that an actual boy acted this way in time and space? It does not appear so. Instead, Luke 15:1–3 claims that Jesus, in time and space, spoke the parable; and the truth of the parable is that God loves sinners. We must be accurate with truth claims. After all, we do not want to put words in God’s mouth or take away from what He meant (see Deuteronomy 4:2).

How do truth claims impact Genesis 1–3? Some have argued that these chapters do not assert historical facts but rather resemble the parable of the prodigal son. They only represent certain theological truths without portraying a real event. If this is the case, then those who believe that Genesis portrays history are mistaken, and we need to change our position. We certainly do not want to say more than what our Lord intended to say.

MISCOMMUNICATION. Now let’s test the different views in light of clear revelation from Scripture. Could Genesis 1–3 be miscommunication? Two arguments undermine this suggestion. First, the grammar of the clauses in Genesis 1:1–2 simply cannot be used to sustain the gap theory. Second, the Hebrew words in Genesis 1:5 read one day and not first day. This argues that Moses believed one day is marked by a cycle of morning and evening, which directly contradicts the day-age view.

These two arguments show that these claims are actually quite clear and not intended to miscommunicate. The extensive use of a special Hebrew verb form found frequently in historical narrative, known as the wayyiqtol, testifies that Genesis 1–3 communicates a direct portrayal of literal events rather than something cryptic and figurative.

In fact, the language is so clear that most scholars have abandoned any notion of miscommunication and moved on to other approaches to deal with Genesis 1–3. They now ask whether Genesis has at least some mythical elements if it’s not entirely mythical. Unwilling to accept the literal claims of Genesis, most published scholarship now supports the view of myth or a non-historical reading of the Genesis narrative (or at least parts of it).
not just another myth

Is there any merit to the idea that Genesis was written as myth, like Ancient Near Eastern myths? While some details are similar, they are told in a style that highlights the contrast between pagan myths and historical reality.

SUPERFICIAL SIMILARITIES

- The Hebrew word deep in Genesis 1:2 sounds like the word for the goddess Tiamat of the Ancient Near Eastern creation myths.
- Both have waters above and beneath separated by a firmament.
- Both have light before sun, moon, and stars.
- Both describe mankind’s failure to please deity.
- Both refer to plants that confer immortality.
- Both mention a serpent.
- Both describe a global flood.

PROFOUND DIFFERENCES

- Battle elements. Genesis does not envision creation as a war of the gods.
- Pantheistic elements. Genesis does not talk about natural elements as gods.¹
- Creative activity as sexual activity. Genesis does not describe God’s creation in this way.
- Poetic language. Genesis does not have “synonymous parallelism” (restating the same idea in two ways) in every description.
- Reference to time. Genesis speaks of creation “in the beginning” and “days,” contrary to myths, which speak more about seasons.²

¹ Leroy Waterman, “Convergic Affinities in Genesis 1:2,” The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures 43, no. 3 (April 1, 1927): 161. Waterman argues that Genesis is unique in that it depersonalizes all the forces of nature. An easy-to-read reference is John Oswalt’s The Bible among the Myths (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

MYTH. Does this idea of myth have merit? Some have pointed out similarities between Genesis 1–3 and Ancient Near Eastern myths, such as the mention of a serpent and plants that confer immortality (see table).⁴

Based upon these overlaps, scholars suggest that God accommodated the Genesis account to His ancient Hebrew audience, which was supposedly steeped in pagan myths. He spoke to them in ways they could understand and so used myth as a platform to express His greatness. This would mean that the content of Genesis 1–3 refers, at least in part, to the mythical world that God used to prove His supremacy over all the earth.

While some may find these arguments compelling, there are some compelling reasons to reject them. For one, while God may accommodate His message by using His hearers’ language and terminology, would He actually accommodate His message to their false ideas and use them to express His greatness? Considering that God condemns idolatry and false religion frequently in the Old Testament (see Exodus 20:1–5 and Deuteronomy 4:16–24), it seems rather inconsistent for the Lord to reject the lies of paganism yet embrace them at the same time.

Furthermore, Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern myths have vast differences. The fact that Genesis does not use mythical poetic language, in particular, is quite significant. Myths were written in a poetic style that typically utilizes parallel lines repeatedly throughout the entire story line. Although Genesis 1 has some repeated refrains, it is nothing like the type of synonymous parallelism found in Ancient Near Eastern myths or even in Psalm 104, a biblical poem celebrating creation. The Hebrews wanted no confusion about the relationship between myth and truth, even in their poetry. (And even their poetry can sometimes teach literal historical truth, as in Psalms 78 and 136.)

Instead of a myth, Genesis 1–3 reads like history. Scholars acknowledge that Genesis talks about a topic unlike that of most Ancient Near Eastern myths. The myths often relate to how the seasons work out rather than how the heavens and earth were made, as Genesis discusses.⁵

MYTH BUSTING. Putting all these factors together, we can understand that when Moses spoke of an entirely different subject in an entirely different way, he wanted Israel to know that he was not embracing the mythical stories they may have heard in Egypt. Instead, he challenged the false ideologies all around him.

Moses was a myth buster. He mentions certain mythical elements in order to debunk them. He did this not by presenting a counter-myth but by presenting what actually happened. This explains why Genesis reads like history rather than poetry. This explains why Genesis includes allusions to false mythical elements in a way radically different from the myths of the Ancient Near East. Myth busting means that God tied the theology of His preeminence to
the historical reality of what He did in time and place, starting with the actual events described in Genesis 1–3.

I am not the first to say such things. In fact, many liberal scholars reach the same conclusions. They agree that the influence of various myths upon the Genesis text is not definitive. They also see how Genesis countered the polytheistic ideology of other nations.

More important, this interpretation is advocated by Jesus Christ (Matthew 19:5), Luke (Luke 3:23–38), and Paul (Acts 17:24–26; Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:1–16; 15:22, 15:45; 2 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 2:13–14). They all viewed these events as historical, and they viewed Adam as a historical person. They knew the difference between truth and myth (see 1 Timothy 1:4 and 4:7; 2 Peter 1:16). The clarity of the Old Testament is confirmed by the New Testament itself.

All of this confirms that Genesis 1–3 makes truth claims against real history. The Genesis account ties together the reality of God’s supremacy as Creator with the reality of His created world, where we now live. This is no fairy tale. Rather, the reality recorded in Genesis busts not just ancient myths but modern ones. Will we treat it as a cleverly devised tale or wholeheartedly embrace it as God’s inerrant truth? ■

NOTES


4. More comparisons could be listed. See Peter Enns, The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say About Human Origins (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 39–56. Enns provides a summary of comparisons between various Ancient Near Eastern myths and Genesis. As will be noted, he does not emphasize the significance of the differences between the accounts. He even rejects a literal Adam and a literal Fall.

5. Ibid., 38.


7. Alvar S. Kapekshu, "The Mythological Features in Genesis Chapter 1 and the Author’s Intention," Vetus Testamentum 24, no. 2 (April 1, 1974): 185. Some argue that Moses drew upon ancient sources that never had such mythology in mind. That is certainly a possibility. No matter what, the truth Moses presents challenges the errors of Israel’s time as well as the modern day. Myth busting simply argues that any mythical elements in Moses’s writing would have challenged false thinking rather than embracing it.