

Noel Weeks on Genesis

Noel Weeks was a zoologist who studied theology, and went on to do doctoral work in Assyriology and Ancient Near Eastern history and languages. He taught Ancient Near Eastern History at the University of Sydney for many decades. He was well-equipped to discuss the overlaps between the Bible, ancient history, and science. The following comes from an interview he did for "The Australian Presbyterian" in 2011.

Did Genesis borrow ideas from the Babylonian Creation epic *Enuma Elish*?

Is there any truth in the claim that Genesis 1 has been borrowed from ancient Babylonian or Egyptian creation accounts?

When you read a lot of the modern literature on the subject you get the impression that everyone in the ancient world wrote creation stories that were basically the same. That is simply not true. What is true is that there are three ancient cultures around the Bible for which we have really extensive literature.

I'm referring of course to ancient Iraq, ancient Egypt and the Hittite kingdom in what is modern-day Turkey. There are a few other places where we have some literature on the subject, but certainly not enough to say that we have a fair picture of what that culture believed.

The first thing that we need to know is that there are no creation stories from the Hittites. I don't know why they didn't have any, but they didn't. Not everybody felt a need to write creation stories.

The second thing we need to know is that while there are some allusions to creation in Egyptian sources, there is really no detailed account of creation except in an extremely mythological version.

To get some idea of what the Egyptians meant by creation, you have to put together a number of texts to produce an Egyptian theology of origins, which might be producing something artificial and un-Egyptian. The important thing to remember is that there is no one complete Egyptian account of creation.

Ancient Iraq, or Mesopotamia, is the place that produced more creation stories. Hence people have tried to find parallels between them and the Bible.

Basically, these accounts start with primal elements that are also gods, and they give different versions of how the world came to be. One late version involves a conflict between the gods. This account is called *Enuma Elish*, or the Babylonian creation story. The earliest Sumerian versions don't refer to any primal conflict: they just say that initially undifferentiated matter existed and then certain gods took their bit of it and established the universe.

Why do so many modern Biblical scholars suggest that there may be some dependence of Genesis upon *Enuma Elish*?

Many of them have naturalistic assumptions in their approach to the text of the Bible and they find it hard to believe in the notion of divine inspiration, that is, that the Bible comes directly from the mind of God. Driven by deistic or deterministic principles they try to find a naturalistic explanation for the Bible, which is a version of what existed in pagan cultures. However, there is not much to choose from as the possible prototype of

Genesis 1. So it has to be *Enuma Elish*, even though it is quite different.

The major difference between the Genesis story of creation and *Enuma Elish* is that the Babylonian account starts with the assumption that the primal elements are also gods. The Bible takes an entirely different approach and draws a distinction between the created order and the Creator Himself.

Some scholars have said that the Genesis creation account is really just a polemic against idolatry and it really makes no claims about how God created the world in six days.

What's your view?

One of the fascinating characteristics of Genesis is its lack of polemic against idolatry. Of course, the rest of the Old Testament maintains a sustained attack against idolatry. However, Genesis hardly mentions it. It is mentioned in one or two places, such as the idolatry of the people of Shechem or when Rachel steals the teraphim from her father Laban (Gen. 31:9). We're not exactly sure what the teraphim are. It seems as though they are some form of household god. However, it's not until you get to the Ten Commandments that the Bible spells out its concern with idolatry. I think there is a purpose in that. The Bible is saying that the first thing that we must understand is that the world originated from the one God. Against this background, it's hard to say that the central purpose of Genesis 1-11 is to attack idolatry. This only becomes clear when God gives His people the Ten Commandments.

Why do so many evangelical scholars claim that Genesis 1 is a major polemic against the false gods of the ancient world?

My own personal view is that this approach has come about so that many of them can accommodate the theory of evolution into their view of creation.

Genesis 1, on the face of it, is a text which contradicts the modern scientific world view. If you want to overcome this collision of world views, then one way of doing it is to assert that Genesis 1 tells us nothing about how God created the world.

Is Genesis Hebrew poetry?

Some scholars say that the creation account shouldn't be taken literally because it's either poetry or myth. Is that true?

No, it's not. On a purely technical or linguistic basis, it is untrue to say that Genesis 1 is poetry. It's a narrative and it reveals all the marks of narrative writing.

If people want to know what Hebrew poetry looks like, they should read Psalm 104. Psalm 104 is Genesis 1 in poetry. If you compare the two passages, the differences are fairly obvious.

What are the characteristics of Hebrew poetry?

One of the main features of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. If you look at the psalms, you will see it again and again. There is nothing like this in Genesis 1. We certainly have structure in Genesis 1, but it is nothing like normal Hebrew poetic structure.

Some people suggest that Genesis 1 is actually written in the form of an ancient Hebrew hymn. What do you think?

I think they should read the psalms if they want to know what a hymn would look like in biblical times. As I've already mentioned, Genesis 1 is not structured like any psalm. To suggest otherwise is to fail to see the difference between normal Hebrew poetry and narrative.

It's been popular in some circles to say the Genesis creation account is a fable or a myth. People say that it teaches universal truths through the device of a simple story. It's not necessary for the story itself to be true even though the truths it conveys are. What's your response to that?

My response is that the rest of the Bible does not interpret Genesis 1 and 2 as though it were myth. For example, both Moses and Jesus believed that there was an original Sabbath day and it is upon that event that they develop the law of the Sabbath. Neither of them regards it as a legend or myth. Jesus certainly regards marriage as grounded in an actual historical event when God created Eve and gave her to Adam as his wife.

If people want to claim that the events that are recorded in the Bible are actually myths, then why stop with the creation account? Why not also apply it to the Gospels? Why not apply it to the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus?

The reason why we shouldn't is that the Gospels actually tell us when Jesus is using a parable. Clearly, the Gospel writers understood the

difference between the historical reality of His deeds and miracles and some of His teaching devices which we call parables.

Again, my problem with this whole approach of calling Genesis 1 and 2 a myth is that what we are doing is that we are making a decision outside of the text as to how we are going to read it. You see, there is no marker in the text that tells us, "Here is a myth." However, in the case of Jesus telling His parables, we do have a marker in the text. Further, there are no markers in the text of the Gospels that suggest to us that each of the Gospels is a parable, nor is there any marker in the book of Genesis that indicates that we are meant to understand it is a parable.

How would you construe the literary genre of Genesis 1 to 11?

It tells a story in a narrative form.

Frankly, I don't think we should get too hung up on the issue of genre. Genre is one of those fads that everyone loves to talk about today. However, it's interesting that there are some developments in the field of ancient history, especially in the Mesopotamian field, where scholars are saying, "Hold on a minute. Truly great and ground-breaking literature occurs when an author draws upon a multitude of sources and creates something original." There's an interesting paper on the Gilgamesh Epic, the great literary work of ancient Mesopotamia, where Professor Arthur George, an expert on the subject, says, "What is the genre of the Gilgamesh Epic? Well, we can't find a particular genre for it, simply because it draws on so many different sources. It is a great and original work that stands in its own class." I think this is true of many works in literature; it's impossible to pigeon hole them.

What basic indications in the text itself flag that it is an historical narrative?

One of the characteristics of biblical narrative (and there are all sorts of explanations for this) is that a verb form which is normally used for continuing present or future actions is used to describe past action. Further, this is done within a structure that signals to the reader that the past is being described. People have come up with all sorts of explanations from the original Semitic languages to explain this, but the important point is that it is characteristic of narrative within the biblical text. You find it in historical books like Genesis and in Kings and other places. In other words, the use of this verbal form in Genesis 1 to 11 indicates that we are dealing with historical narrative.