

Article

What Makes Genesis Different?

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Abstract: In contrast to those who read Genesis 1 through 11 as myth, the story of Genesis is historical narrative with a theological purpose (theo-history). The Hebrew theo-history of creation was undergirded by a worldview that did not converge with her neighbors but significantly diverged from the surrounding nations. While the literary style of Genesis has elements common to other ancient mythologies, the content itself is quite distinct. Unlike other ancient cosmologies, the Hebrew worldview perceived the people, places, and events of Genesis as historical and not merely religious symbols. The divergence of the Hebrew worldview from all ancient Near East (ANE) cultures is illustrated in three observations: (1) Genesis is monotheism not polytheism/pantheism, (2) Genesis is special revelation not cultic theology, and (3) Genesis is theo-history not myth or mytho-history. These three distinctives of Hebrew cosmology reflect a unique worldview shaped by divine revelation, and because Genesis was written in the genre of theo-history, Hebrew cosmology offers us a dependable foundation for knowing something true about our material origins, shaping ethical priorities, safeguarding the sacredness of human life, directing moral decision making, recognizing the significance of historical progress, and guiding scientific inquiry into the book of nature.

Keywords: genesis; cosmology; ethics; ancient near east; myth; science; genre; Hebrew creation; history



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1. Introduction

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:1–2, ESV)

What should we make of Genesis and the Hebrew story of creation? Is it myth? Is it history? Is it a story just like every other story of cosmic origins from the ancient world? Or, if Hebrew cosmology is not the same, what makes Genesis different?

In the study of literature from the ancient Near East (ANE), a significant number of scholars over the past sixty years (both secular and religious) have argued that the creation story of Genesis is mythology akin to, and shaped by, the shared cultural perspective of the ancient world. The most recent scholar to go down this path is William Lane Craig in his book, *In Quest of the Historical Adam*. Those who share in Craig's claim that Genesis is mytho-history see Genesis as a point of convergence between the Hebrew worldview and the worldview of the typical person living in the ANE, but is this the best way to view the Hebrew creation account? Before I answer that question, let me define a few key terms.

In this article, cosmology and cosmogony are used to describe any system of thought that attempts to explain the origins of the universe in scientific, philosophical, and/or theological terms. The term worldview is used to describe the lens we use to interpret the world and focus our observations into a clear narrative that answers the questions of origin, meaning, morality, and destiny. A worldview answers these six questions: (1) How did I come into being? (2) How can I know the meaning for my life? (3) What is the right thing to do? (4) How can I fulfill my moral purpose? (5) What happens when I die? and (6) How will my legacy be judged?

Given a particular worldview, we apply it to various fields of inquiry such as cosmic and human origins through what is called a paradigm. A paradigm, then, functions

inside our worldview to provide a field-specific framework to determine what counts as knowledge. These concepts of worldview and paradigm are important for understanding what makes Genesis different from other ANE mythologies.

Scholars who accept what I call a convergent worldview paradigm treat the people and events of Genesis 1 through 11 as literary symbols with little or no relationship to history or to the material realities of the cosmos. Like every other people group of the ANE, the Hebrew priests and scribes used the mythologies of Genesis to teach important religious truths and justify Israel's temple practices. In this sense, scholars who advocate for the convergent worldview paradigm see a clear unity between Genesis and all ancient cosmologies.

In contrast to those who read Genesis 1 through 11 as myth, my own study leads me to the conclusion that the story of Genesis is historical narrative with a theological purpose (or what I call theo-history). Yet, we should not assume that the synergy of theology and history in Genesis undermines the historical accuracy of the text. As Eugene H. Merrill notes, "one cannot seriously lay claim to a theological history of the Old Testament that does not draw upon actual historical events that took place precisely as the biblical texts describe them (Merrill 2008, p. 26)." In this sense, we can approach Genesis with confidence knowing that neither the theological purpose nor the literary style of text isolates us—the modern reader—from the historical events of Genesis.

The Hebrew theo-history of creation was undergirded by a worldview that did not "converge" with her neighbors but significantly diverged from the surrounding nations. Scholars such as John Oswalt, in his book *The Bible Among the Myths*, share in this view, which I label the divergent worldview paradigm. Scholars in this camp argue that while the literary style of Genesis has elements common to other ancient mythologies, the content itself is quite distinct. The essential elements of the Hebrew origin stories are dissimilar from other ancient mythologies and similar only in their secondary (or what philosophers call accidental) elements. Specifically, there is broad agreement that the genre of Genesis has clear points of stylistic unity with many ancient mythologies. However, these common elements do not outweigh the contrasting elements of style that define the genre of theo-history. Unlike other ancient cosmologies, the Hebrew worldview perceived the people, places, and events of Genesis as historical and not merely religious symbols.

Hebrew cosmology—written by Moses in an ancient language for ancient peoples—reflects the unique Hebrew worldview, which was shaped through the direct revelation of YHWH. The inspired nature of Moses' historical narrative gives the modern reader confidence that we can understand the meaning of the text. The uniqueness of Genesis as theo-history means that Hebrew cosmology offers a dependable foundation for knowing something true about our material origins, shaping ethical priorities, directing moral decision making, and guiding scientific inquiry.

To understand how Genesis is unique from ANE mythologies, let us look at three elements that are essential to the Hebrew worldview: (1) Genesis is monotheism not polytheism/panentheism, (2) Genesis is special revelation not cultic theology, and (3) Genesis is theo-history not mytho-history.

2. Genesis Is Monotheism Not Polytheism/Panentheism

How much of Hebrew cosmology was shaped by ANE religions and how much was shaped by YHWH's self-revelation? Most scholars agree in principle that the Hebrew writings were influenced by the religion, culture, and politics of the ancient world. Numerous references to foreign kings, gods, and cultic practices make clear the necessity of understanding biblical cosmology within both its literary and historical contexts. However, the fundamental difference between scholars is what they accept as essential versus what they accept as secondary (accidental) to the Hebrew worldview.

One clear line of distinction between Genesis and other ancient myths is the revelation that YHWH alone sits as the sole creator and only God. Still, some critics note that the Old Testament uses language that implies there are many gods and not just one. Against this

charge, John Currid explores the polemical nature of the Old Testament as one explanation for this polytheistic imagery. Psalm 82 provides one such example. Noting the psalmist's imagery of God (Elohim) taking a stand against El in the midst of the gods, Currid observes:

This reference to Canaanite literature, in particular the meeting of the gathered council of gods before El, is not indicative of the God of Israel being part of the Canaanite pantheon. Rather, it is employed to picture the God of Israel as assaulting the pagan pantheon, or as Dahood comments, it is 'where God passes judgment on the pagan deities.' Here is seething hostility by the psalmist against Canaanite theology, as he claims instead that the one true God has deposed the pagan gods and that he is the only ruler of the earth (v. 8). (Currid 2013, p. 160)

While Currid concedes that an appeal to polemical theology does not address every parallel between the Old Testament and other ancient religions, the use of polemical language does reaffirm the assertion made here that Israel's resolute monotheism was an essential quality of their cosmology.

Unlike Israel, the creation stories written by the peoples of the ANE were steeped in polytheism; a belief that the world is inhabited by many finite gods (driven by their many human-like desires, such as sexual pleasure) who ruled over their own special domain. In the Pyramid texts of Teti, first king of Egypt's Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2323–2291 BC), the reader encounters the *Spells for entering the womb of Nut*. In this story, the goddess Nut recounts the glory of her son when she says, "Teti is my son, whom I caused to be born and who parted my belly; he is the one I have desired and with whom I have become content (Allen and Der Manuelian 2005, p. 67)." In addition to sexual intercourse, the birth of the ANE gods was attributed to a variety of bodily emissions from bleeding to masturbation—specifically from the gods Amun, Amenapet, Atumi, and Min—because the Egyptians saw the world as made of divine-beings married to the natural elements.¹

Another useful word suited to the discussion of ancient mythologies is pantheism or finite-godism. Pantheism, as defined by Norman Geisler, describes well the finite-godism of the various ANE religions whose gods were limited in power and existed simultaneously both in the human world and outside the human world.² We can see an example of this finite-godism in the West Semitic storm god Hadad who battled against the cosmic "Sea", which itself was thought to be another god.³ The Akkadian epic *Enuma Elish*, offers another example. In this tale, Marduk volunteers (at the prompting of Ea) to serve as the champion of the gods to defeat Tiamat. Anshar convenes a special council of the gods who, after a feast, transfers authority to Marduk who later tears apart the dead carcass of the defeated goddess Tiamat to fashion the heavens and the waters:

(135) [Marduk] calmed down. Then the Lord was inspecting [Tiamat's] carcass,
That he might divide (?) the monstrous lump and fashion artful things.
He split her in two, like a fish for drying,
Half of her he set up and made as a cover, heaven.
He stretched out the hide and assigned watchmen,
(140) And ordered them not to let her waters escape.
He crossed heaven and inspected (its) firmament,
He made a counterpart to Apsu, the dwelling of Nudimmud.
The Lord measured the construction of Apsu,
He founded the Great Sanctuary, the likeness of Esharra.
(In) the Great Sanctuary, (in) Esharra, which he built, (and in) heaven,
He made Ea, Enlil, and Anu dwell in their holy places. (Smith and Parker 1997, pp. 398–99)

These limited examples illustrate why pantheism is a useful word alongside polytheism in the sense that it reminds the modern reader that, unlike Israel, the peoples of the

ANE believed in a collection of gods who existed above the material world and yet in some way remained interconnected with the very fabric of nature itself.

Moreover, with the exception of Israel, the peoples of the ancient world did not perceive history as an arrow of progress from a past moment in time toward some fixed end. Human history for these peoples was a drama played out in the cycle of life and death among the gods. The Gods of the ANE were limited in power, lived in a nearly constant state of battle, and the death of any one god was meaningless to the existence of the cosmos. The people of the ancient world saw themselves as creatures in the service of these finite gods and goddesses: humans whose earthly existence reflected the same cycle of life and death. Humans—forever bound to their gods—were servant warriors in this eternal drama, and, as a consequence, the lives they extinguished in battle or the people they took as slaves had no moral significance.

Monotheism led Israel to see the cosmos, history, and human life in a very different way. Monotheism was foundational for Israel's understanding of history as linear with a fixed beginning in time and space.⁴ YHWH was not a cosmic warrior trapped in the natural cycle of life and death. YHWH stood alone as the eternal immaterial God and nature was His finite material creation. The story of Genesis, therefore, was accepted by the Hebrews as a revelation of the cosmic past, human present, and promised future.

For the Hebrews, their commitment to monotheism and their participation in God's linear history meant that from beginning to end both the cosmos and their lives had purpose. The land, plants, and animals had inherent value. Humans were created in the image of YHWH and as stewards of God's good creation. Human life was made with a sacred purpose and not something to be extinguished at the whim of the gods or of other humans. The choices Israel made each day to love God and love their neighbor had transcendent meaning. Israel's earthly obedience to YHWH was predicated on the revelatory knowledge that He alone was good and that He alone created humankind and the earth for a good purpose.

3. Genesis as Special Revelation Not Temple Theology

A cross-section of scholars within the unified and divergent worldview paradigms accept, at a minimum, that the Hebrews believed Genesis was given to Moses by God. Yet this modest concession that the Hebrews *believed* in special revelation is insufficient. The Old Testament is more than a story perceived by Israel as God's self-revelation. The Old Testament is not Jewish natural theology used to justify their temple worship. The Old Testament was and is God's transcendent self-revelation for yesterday, today, and tomorrow. This distinction between Israel's perception of the text as God's self-revelation and the truth of the text as God's actual revelation in space and time is significant. Carl F.H. Henry rightly observes:

The source of evangelical theology, then, is God made known in his own Word and deed. The Protestant Reformers rightly honored the Word of God as revelationally given not only above experience but also above the church as the control-point for every facet of Christian doctrine. God's revelation has been conveniently classified in two main types: general revelation, or the disclosure of God's eternal power and glory through nature and history; and special revelation, or the disclosure of God's redemptive purpose and work. (Henry 1999, p. 223)

Henry goes on to explain how this view of special revelation impacts the relationship between special and general revelation:

The Bible openly publishes man's predicament and God's redemptive remedy in the form of objectively intelligible statements. The scriptural revelation takes epistemological priority over general revelation, not because general revelation is obscure or because man as sinner cannot know it, but because Scripture as an inspired literary document republishes the content of general revelation objectively, over against sinful man's reductive dilutions and misconstructions of it. (Ibid.)

Given this understanding of special revelation, Scripture cannot be spiritualized as a cultic blend of myth and history. Scripture is, at its core, a book of objectively intelligible statements about cosmic history, human origins, and redemption. The objective reality of YHWH's revelatory knowledge—which transcended the general knowledge of God found in creation—enabled Moses to speak above the din of cultural influence and provide Israel with knowledge, purpose, and moral significance. Still, there are some evangelical scholars who question, “Did God reveal truth only about spiritual matters, or did His revelation through Moses also reveal truth about our material origins?”

As the twentieth century turned into the twenty-first, the seeds of the scientific revolution germinated among scholars who rejected as anti-scientific and anti-intellectual any view of special revelation which overlapped with the domain of science. For scholars who embrace the unified worldview paradigm, the concept of special revelation was applied only to the spiritual or non-material teachings of the Bible. Specifically, they claim, the special revelation of Genesis only applies to the immaterial world of spiritual truths. Regarding the material world, they conclude, Genesis was a product of the cognitive environment (worldview) shared by all the peoples of the ANE.

Scholars such as John Walton argue that the only way the modern mind can properly understand Genesis is to understand the ANE cosmologies which shaped the Hebrew worldview. Walton concludes:

As a result, we are not looking at ancient literature to try to decide whether Israel borrowed from some of the literature that was known to them. It is to be expected that the Israelites held many concepts and perspectives in common with the rest of the ancient world. This is far different from suggesting literature was borrowed or copied. This is not even a case of Israel being influenced by the peoples around them. Rather we simply recognize the common conceptual worldview that existed in ancient times. We should therefore not speak of Israel being influenced by that world—they were part of that world. (Walton 2009, pp. 11–12)

Walton, then, does not see the need to look for a common Babylonian, Hittite, or Egyptian source document but concludes that the fundamental worldview (what he calls the shared cognitive environment) of the Hebrews is the same: therefore, their basic cosmology in Genesis was the same. Walton reinforces his point in the following:

From the idea that the temple was considered a mini cosmos, it is easy to move to the idea that the cosmos could be viewed as a temple. This is more difficult to document in the ancient world because of the polytheistic nature of their religion. If the whole cosmos were viewed as a single temple, which god would it belong to? Where would temples of the other gods be? Nevertheless it can still be affirmed that creation texts can and do follow the model of temple-building texts, in this way at least likening the cosmos to a temple. (Ibid., p. 82. See also, Walton 2011, p. 190)

This concept of a structural parallelism between the Jewish temple and Hebrew cosmology are explored in depth by Margaret Barker who concludes, “the mythology and symbolism of the ancient temple are the key to understanding of this symbolism, for when the meaning of these symbols is lost, the meaning of Christianity will also be lost (Barker 2008, p. 181).” Tom McLeish, citing Barker's work, argues that this thesis may not be sustainable yet accepts the underlying point that Genesis 1 is written to connect cosmology and worship. McLeish writes:

Brown and independently the Orthodox scholar Margaret Barker both suggest a structural parallelism of the Genesis 1 text with the architecture of the temple, but, whether this suggestion can be sustained or not, what the 'priestly' account does is surely to enshrine the purpose and nature of creation within the repeated acts of worship of the community. . . . so, in Genesis 1, a context of communal

remembrance and worship provides the grounding of the text that the lack of a continuous history fails to. (McLeish 2014, pp. 72–73)

While these scholars have differences on the connection between cosmology and temple, they are each driven to some degree by a rejection of a hermeneutic which takes Genesis as a literal account of historic events.

Kyle Greenwood, in his book *Scripture and Cosmology*, builds on the same basic themes as Walton and argues that the only way to understand the meaning of a text is to learn its ancient Near East context. “Biblical cosmology,” he argues, “is ancient Near Eastern cosmology. Through the biblical authors, God spoke in the language of the common folk (Greenwood 2015, p. 204).” Greenwood concludes that because the Tanakh (the Jewish term for what Christians call the Old Testament) relies on the language of Divine accommodation, it is only possible to understand the meaning of Genesis as a product of the cultural, geographical, historical, and literary context.⁵ Greenwood’s assumption is that the Hebrews had a unified worldview with their ancient neighbors and, like their neighbors, the Israelites used the Genesis myth as a paradigm to justify their temple practices.

Greenwood points out that one possible definition of worldview comes from Kant’s use of *Weltanschauung* in his *Critique of Judgment*. In this work, Kant argued that humans observe the phenomena (the natural world) but may not have a right sense of its true noumena (reality). Greenwood modifies Kant’s concept of worldview using Walton’s “cognitive environment” and adopts this premise for his book. To make his argument, Greenwood cites on the following quote from Walton:

The Israelites received no revelation to update or modify their “scientific” understanding of the cosmos. They did not know that stars were suns; they did not know that the earth was spherical and moving through space; they did not know that the sun was much further away than the moon, or even further than the birds flying in the air. They believed that the sky was material (not vaporous), solid enough to support the residence of deity as well as to hold back waters.⁶

Greenwood, building on Walton’s idea, asserts that the Hebrew scientific worldview was shaped wholly by the cognitive environment of the ANE, whose cosmology formed the basic structure for how they perceived and interpreted the world around them. Greenwood postulates that just as it was for all ANE cultures, “the ancient Hebrews’ only knowledge of the world around them was limited to what their parents told them, what they had seen for themselves and what they imagined it must be like (Greenwood 2015, p. 24).” In short, Greenwood believes that Hebrew cosmology was grounded in the phenomena, with no insight into the noumena. In much the same way, Walton asserts that in order to properly interpret Genesis, one must recognize that it “pertains to functional origins rather than material origins and that temple ideology underlies the Genesis cosmology.”⁷

The distinction modern scholars like Walton and Greenwood make between the material and non-material world was not shared by the writers of ANE myth or by the writers of the Old Testament. Egyptian theology, for example, merged the divine and physical worlds in the story of Anum.⁸ In this tale, Anum started the creation process but left it for the other “Eight Great Gods” to finish. Anum does not create from nothing, but his own body forms the substance of the material world:

You began Becoming—
there was no Being, there was no Void:
The world was from You, in the Beginning;
all other gods came after. (Foster and Hollis 1995, p. 75)

While the Old Testament never merged the physical reality of God with nature, it is evident that Hebrew creation was deeply concerned with material origins. God’s answer, beginning in Job 38:4, to Job’s complaint makes clear that God, as the creator of the material world, had ultimate moral authority. Another example that undermines Walton and Greenwood’s theory is the preservation of the Old Testament in its written form. The effort

to preserve the writings of the Old Testament speaks to an essential characteristic of the Hebrew understanding of special revelation. The immaterial word spoken by YHWH was connected to the material word through both the voice of the prophet and ultimately in the inspired text itself. The Creator God not only made the material world, He revealed to Israel a set of texts that gave them a concrete understanding of their historical origins, religious practices, and moral obligations. The Hebrew story of creation made no epistemological distinction between the material and immaterial worlds. Genesis was accepted as a special revelation concerning both the material origin of the cosmos and of God's spiritual purpose for humanity.

General revelation—what we see in the world around us in the book of nature—then was accepted by the Hebrews as physical evidence of YHWH's creative power and holiness made visible to every nation in every generation. As the Psalmist wrote, "For YHWH is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land (Psalm 95:3–5, ESV)." The material world was God's general revelation to every nation and the truth of His good work was enshrined in His special revelation. YHWH's special revelation recorded in the Tanakh served, therefore, as the authoritative record of God's activity in history and through creation. Special revelation was given by YHWH to advance Israel's knowledge about general revelation and provide unique insight beyond their senses. In this way, Genesis is theo-history, a theology that reveals the truth regarding the origins of both the cosmos and human life itself.

4. Genesis Is Theo-History Not Mytho-History

Similar to scholars such as John Walton, Peter Enns believes that, "The reason the opening chapters of Genesis look so much like the literature of ancient Mesopotamia is that the worldview categories of the ANE were ubiquitous and normative at the time (Enns 2015, p. 53)." When God then chose Abraham to be the patriarch of Israel, writes Enns, He also chose to adopt "the mythic categories within which Abraham—and everyone else—thought (Ibid)." Therefore, Enns concludes, the cosmology of Genesis has the same essential qualities of other ANE mythologies. While Genesis can still be used to teach us about metaphysical reality, he argues, it cannot speak to the modern scientific conceptions of cosmology. Once Enns' definition is accepted, Genesis is determined to have no meaningful connection to history or material origins but serves only as a literary vehicle for conveying spiritual origins. Critical to this conclusion (shared in some fashion by scholars such as Enns, Walton, and Craig) is how they define myth.

The term myth is used by different scholars with a range of meanings across a philosophical and phenomenological spectrum. Many define myth using broad sweeping categories which include all ancient stories of creation. Others, such as William Lane Craig, argue that it is a fool's errand to offer a concise definition of myth. Instead, Craig relies on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein to offer ten literary elements which he believes demonstrate a "family resemblance" between Genesis and all ANE mythologies. These are:

1. Myths are narratives, whether oral or literary.
2. Myths are traditional stories handed down from generation to generation.
3. Myths are sacred for the society that embraces them.
4. Myths are objects of belief by members of the society that embraces them.
5. Myths are set in a *primaeval* age or another realm.
6. Myths are stories in which deities are important characters.
7. Myths seek to anchor present realities such as the world, mankind, natural phenomena, cultural practices, and the prevailing cult in a primordial time.
8. Myths are associated with rituals.
9. Myths express correspondences between the deities and nature.
10. Myths exhibit fantastic elements and are not troubled by logical contradiction or incoherence (Craig 2021, pp. 45–46)."

However, unlike Craig's overly-broad criteria for labeling Genesis as mytho-history, other scholars have suggested more exclusive definition of myth. T.H. Gaster suggests that, "Myth is a story of the gods in which results of natural causes are accounted for supernaturally (Gaster 1962, p. 481)." Joseph Fentenrose, quoted by Robert Oden, defines myth as "the traditional tales of the deeds of *daimones*: gods, spirits, and all sorts of supernatural or superhuman beings." (Fontenrose 1966, pp. 54–55. Quoted in Oden 1992, p. 949).

Despite the different approaches from scholars like Craig, Gaster, and Fentenrose, it is important to ask, what do these scholars have in common? Hugh White's simple criticism of Fentenrose applies to Craig and Gaster equally when he writes, "The simple labeling of a story as a myth in this sense, though helping genre identification, does not necessarily advance our understanding of it (White 1989, p. 144)." Consequently, these different approaches to defining myth ultimately fail for several reasons:

1. These definitions of myth use genre identification as a tool to justify the modern bias against the supernatural.
2. These definitions of myth offer no objective criteria for distinguishing between essential and non-essential elements within any given set of creation stories.
3. These definitions of myth do not advance our understanding of how each creation story reflects the divergent worldviews among ANE civilizations.

Turning back to Enns, he avoids some of these problems by defining myth as, "an ancient, premodern, prescientific way of addressing questions of ultimate origins and meaning in the form of stories: Who are we? Where do we come from? (Enns 2015, p. 50)" Craig makes a similar move by suggesting that Genesis 1 through 11 is mytho-history because these stories, he claims, are simply too fantastical and inconsistent for the modern rational mind to believe.⁹ The Tree of Life serves as one such story that, for Craig, if taken literally, is simply absurd. The idea of a magic tree planted by God in space and time with the power to give knowledge is a legend that no serious reader—today or in the ancient world—can take as historical (Craig 2021, p. 113). And while these rationalizations offered by Enns and Craig may to some degree eliminate the bias against the supernatural, they serve only to replace the old bias with a new bias against pre-scientific history. Genesis, it is assumed by such scholars, cannot speak about the material origins of humanity because the ancients did not have access to our modern scientific forms of investigation. In this way, scholars who embrace the unified worldview paradigm improperly treat modern science as the magisterial authority of interpreting Genesis. So where can we turn to find a better definition of myth that does not beg the question of history?

John Oswalt defines myth as "a form of expression, whether literary or oral, whereby the continuities among the human, natural, and divine realms are expressed and actualized. By reinforcing these continuities, it seeks to ensure the orderly functioning of both nature and human society (Oswalt 2009, pp. 45–46)." A myth was a story used to maintain the status quo of political and religious order. ANE mythologies reinforced the worldview that events and people were meaningless pawns in the cosmic cycle. These mythologies were rooted in the assumption that human experience is nothing more than a physical analog for the metaphysical drama of the gods. Based on this definition, Oswalt writes, "whatever the Bible is, it is not myth (Ibid., p. 14)." In other words, regardless of the literary style or what genre we assign to Genesis 1 through 11, the substance of the stories it contains was meant to be read as an historical account of material origins. Oswalt makes this important observation, "Ultimately, the unique worldview of the Old Testament undergirds its claims of historical reliability (Ibid., p. 14)."

Although Moses certainly wrote in a style that was understandable to his ANE readers, his use of so-called mytho-genre does not justify the claim that the content itself is poetic, figurative, uninspired, or void of historical accuracy. On the contrary, Genesis is neither mytho-history or mythology but a theological history of origins (or theo-history). The use of poetic or figurative language should also not be conflated with the use of mythical language. Both myths and the Bible use poetic, figurative language, but they use the

language for very different purposes. That is to say, the cosmology of Genesis 1—given the divergent worldview paradigm of the Hebrews—did not function as a fictional or cultic myth but as a theo-history meant to connect YHWH’s eternal purposes with real events that happened in space and time.

Hebrew theo-history was a roadmap of human progress from our past in Genesis 1, through the daily experience of Israel, and toward a future kingdom of God. In Hebrew theo-history, events and people were not meaningless characters in some primordial drama, but essential players in time and space used by God to advance His eternal plan. Hebrew theo-history was rooted in the presupposition that human experience is understood primarily through the special revelation of the one true God and secondarily through the natural order and progress of time. For the Hebrews, God was, and is, separate from His creation. The power of God’s spoken word recorded in Scripture not only brought the material world into existence and formed human life, but God’s spoken word shaped the worship practices and ethical mandates that set Israel apart from the surrounding nations (Ramm 1954, p. 26).

5. Conclusions

The Hebrew story of creation told in Genesis is neither myth nor mytho-history. Genesis 1 through 11 is a form of theological storytelling (theo-history) that God used to reveal the material origins, moral duties, and destiny of humankind. The divergence of the Hebrew worldview from all ANE cultures was illustrated in these three observations:

1. Genesis is monotheism not polytheism/panentheism,
2. Genesis is special revelation not cultic theology, and
3. Genesis is theo-history not myth or mytho-history.

While much more must be written to properly establish these three distinctives, it is sufficient here to note that these three aspects of Hebrew cosmology reflect a unique worldview among the Jews which was shaped by YHWH’s divine self-revelation. Consequently, because Genesis was written in the genre of theo-history, Hebrew cosmology offers us a dependable foundation for knowing something true about our material origins, shaping ethical priorities, safeguarding the sacredness of human life, directing moral decision making, recognizing the significance of historical progress, and guiding scientific inquiry into the book of nature.

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Notes

- ¹ Walton’s (2003, p. 162) source for this conclusion is noted as Allen (1988). See also, Wyatt (2001, p. 57). I use Walton here because his recognition that ANE myth married the divine to nature undermines his claim that ancient myths did not explain material origins.
- ² (Geisler 1976, pp. 173, 193). Stated in metaphysical terms, in panentheism the existence of any one god is not essential to the existence of the cosmos. This theology is distinct from absolute pantheism, which identifies the cosmos and god as mutually essential qualities. Outside of Geisler’s usage of panentheism, which is herein applied to ANE polytheism, the term panentheism is more often associated with platonic forms of monotheism, German idealism, and modern process theology. “However, Baltzly finds evidence in the *Timaeus* of a polytheistic view that can be identified as panentheistic.” See, Culp (2021).
- ³ (Smith and Parker 1997, p. 86). It is important to note that scholars have divergent views on how much the typical ancient Near East view of the cosmic seas influenced Hebrew cosmology. Clines says that Hebrew cosmology presupposes “the earth floating on the cosmic sea.” (Clines 2006, p. 635), whereas Greenwood says that unlike their ancient Near East neighbors, there is “no indication that the Hebrews had a notion of the earth floating on the cosmic sea.” (Greenwood 2015, p. 79). Some scholars associate Hadad with Baal, and the original name of the West Semitic storm god later referred to as “Lord” was “Bel.” See Herrmann (1999, p. 132).
- ⁴ Wyatt believes this concept of the linear progress of time is a modern paradigm, wrongly foisted upon the Old Testament, foreign to the Hebrew worldview, invalidated by modern scholarship, and an “embarrassment” to the serious study of ANE literature. See Wyatt (2001, pp. 305–6). In contrast to this view, a study of the A-Theory of time provides a viable integration point for a

coherent view of time, modern physics, and biblical theology, where time is not cyclical but linear in the progress of becoming. For a fuller discussion, see [Craig \(2001\)](#).

- ⁵ This article is focused on the cosmology of Genesis within the context of the Hebrew Bible which covers תּוֹרָה (Tôrâ, Law), נְבִיאִים (Nəbî'im, Prophets), and כְּתוּבִים (Kəṭûbîm, Writings). When referencing the entire collection of Hebrew Scripture, the acronym Tanakh is used in as a synonym for the term Old Testament, which is the familiar Christian designation. Tanakh is the most common term used in the Talmud and Midrash, and possibly modern Judaism and its use in this book helps draw a clear distinction when referencing the Hebrew Scripture from the Christian Scripture which includes both the Tanakh and the New Testament. When the term Scripture is used herein without qualification, it will be assumed to refer to both the Christian Old and New Testaments. For a history of Hebrew canon and the use of Tanakh, ([Sanders 1992](#), pp. 837–52).
- ⁶ ([Walton 2009](#), p. 16). For a robust critique of this quote from Walton, see [Lennox \(2011\)](#), pp. 139–48).
- ⁷ ([Walton 2011](#), pp. 198–99). Wyatt's book on ANE mythology is commensurate with Walton's concept of shared cognitive environment. However, the assertion that ancient cosmologies had no concern for material creation is rejected as Wyatt's book assumes these various mythologies were inextricably linked to beliefs about the material universe—specifically, their understanding of space and time. Wyatt writes, "The organization of space at all these levels was also vital to the smooth running of a community on any scale. In practical terms this might be called secular, but it was never entirely separated from the sacred in the ancient world, and ritual was the means by which both space and time were organized and harnessed to a community's use ([Wyatt 2001](#), p. 55)." This does not mean the myths are compaction with modern science, but it does undermine Walton's premise that cosmogenic myth had no relation to the material genesis of the universe.
- ⁸ Johnston notes that "Egyptian religion featured four major versions of the same basic mythic cycle of creation, each represented by rival sanctuaries: Heliopolis, Hermopolis, Memphis, and Thebes." ([Johnston 2008](#), pp. 180–81). While a complete study of each of these unique mythologies is beyond the scope of this study, Johnston's short article provides an excellent starting place for further investigation of the Egyptian literature.
- ⁹ ([Craig 2021](#), p. 101). For a critique of Craig's mytho-history, see [Miller \(2021\)](#).

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