

Gen 1-3 in Ancient and Contemporary Culture (Myth, Literature and Evolution)

LESSONS FROM GENESIS 1-3

3. The Creation

The three sessions:

- 1) Gen 1: The World as God's Temple according to the Priest
- 2) Gen 2-3: The Garden, the Presence of Evil and the First Gospel
- 3) Gen 1-3 in Ancient and Contemporary Culture (Myth, Literature and Evolution)

3. The Creation

1. The Creation and Myth

1.1. The scientific and popular definition of myth

The religious definition

In a religious context, myths are storied vehicles of **supreme truth**. By them people **regulate and interpret their lives** and find worth and purpose in their existence. Myths **put one in touch with sacred realities**, the fundamental sources of being, power, and truth.

The literary definition

Myth is a folklore genre consisting of narratives that play a fundamental role in society, such as foundational tales. Myths often consist of sacred narratives about gods.

The popular meaning

If you describe a belief or explanation as a myth, you mean that many people believe it but it is actually untrue.

1.2. The Creation in extra-biblical texts

A) Babylon

a) *Enuma Elish* („when high above”)

The first version of the epos (old-Babylonian) comes from 1800 - 1600 BC. Recited probably during Babylonian New Year celebration.

„ When no gods whatever had been brought into being”, at the arbors of creation Apsu (the Abyss) and Tiamat (the Ocean) existed. They symbolized male and female elements of the universe.

e-nu-ma e-liš la na-bu-ú šá-ma-mu

šap-liš am-ma-tum šu-ma la zak-rat

ZU.AB-ma reš-tu-ú za-ru-šu-un

mu-um-mu ti-amat mu-al-li-da-at gim-ri-šú-un

*A.MEŠ-šú-nu iš-te-niš i-ḫi-qu-ú-šú-un
gi-pa-ra la ki-is-su-ru su-sa-a la she-'u-ú
e-nu-ma DINGIR.DINGIR la šu-pu-u ma-na-ma*

" When on high the heaven had not been named,
Firm ground below had not been called by name,
Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter,
(And) Mummu²-Tiamat, she who bore them all,
Their³ waters commingling as a single body

The crucial moment is the creation of gods :

*" No reed hut⁴ had been matted, no marsh land had appeared,
When no gods whatever had been brought into being,
Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined—
Then it was that the gods were formed within them (Apsu and Tiamat) ”.*

Minor gods with their behavior annoy the great deities :

Apsu, opening his mouth,

Said unto resplendent¹⁵ Tiamat:

“Their ways are verily loathsome unto me.

By day I find no relief,¹⁶ nor repose by night.

I will destroy, I will wreck their ways,

That quiet may be restored. Let us have rest!”

Tiamat originally opposes the plan:

“What? Should we destroy that which we have built?

Lesser gods come to know about Apsu’s plan and kill him. Tiamat infuriated swears revenge and prepares her son, Kingu, to lead against them an army of monsters :

“I have cast for thee the spell, exalting thee in the Assembly of the gods.

To counsel all the gods I have given thee full power”.

Marduk leads the lesser gods to war and kills Tiamat:

He [Marduk] divided the monstrous shape [Tiamat] and created marvels (from it).

He sliced her in half like a fish for drying:

Half of her he put up to roof the sky,

Drew a bolt across and made a guard hold it.

Her waters he arranged so that they could not escape.

The creation of mankind in Mesopotamian myths involves the blood of slain deities and sometimes the mixture of clay material:

“Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.

I will establish a savage,⁸⁶ ‘man’ shall be his name.

Verily, savage-man I will create.

He shall be charged with the service of the gods That they might be at ease!

“It was Kingu who contrived the uprising,

And made Tiamat rebel, and joined battle.” (30)

They bound him, holding him before Ea.

They imposed on him his guilt and severed his blood (vessels).

Out of his blood they fashioned mankind.

He⁹³ imposed the service and let free the gods.

b) Atrahasis – the old Babylonian version ca. 1600 BC.

In the Atrahasis epic the minor gods called upon the mother-goddess, Nintu, to create mankind:

„Let Nintu [mother-goddess] mix clay, that the god and man may be thoroughly mixed together in the clay”.¹⁷¹

Later, after Nintu’s incantation, she pinches off fourteen pieces, constituting seven males and seven females.

B) Egypt

a) For the ancient Egyptian the universe consisted of beings, not things. There are no impersonal forces, only the will and actions of the gods. Creation is a process of the unfolding of undifferentiated matter, the primeval Monad.

“I am Atum when I was alone in Nun; I am Re in his (first) appearances, when he began to rule that which he had made.”

“I am the great god who came into being by himself.” Who is he? “The great god who came into being by himself” is water; he is Nun, the father of the gods.

“He who created his names, the Lord of the Ennead.”

Pritchard, James Bennett (Hrsg.): *The Ancient Near East an Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1958, S. 3

b) The lesser gods have a genealogical relationship to Atum. “Magic” is the operative power that enables the idea or concept of creation to be realized through command.

c) As for the creation of mankind, there are diverse accounts in Egyptian literature, but a recurring conception is the making of man from clay.

d) man comes to being from god's tears, ca. 2000 BC

"I made the four winds that every man might breathe thereof like his fellow in his time. That is (one) deed thereof.

"I made the great inundation that the poor man might have rights therein like the great man. That is (one) deed thereof.

"I made every man like his fellow. I did not command that they do evil, (but) it was their hearts which violated what I had said.⁴ That is (one) deed thereof.

"I made their hearts to cease from forgetting the West, in order that divine offerings might be given to the gods of the nomes.⁵ That is (one) deed thereof.

"I brought into being the four gods from my sweat, while men are the tears of my eye."⁴

J. P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts*, YES 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988);

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C) Greece

In the beginning, **Chaos**, an amorphous, gaping void encompassing the entire universe, and surrounded by an unending stream of water ruled by the **god Oceanus**, was the domain of a **goddess named Eurynome**, which means "**far-ruling**" or "**wide-wandering**". She was the **Goddess of All Things**, and desired to make order out of the Chaos. By coupling with a huge and powerful snake, **Ophion**, or as some legends say, coupling with the North Wind, she gave birth to **Eros**, god of Love, also known as Protagonus, the "firstborn".

Eurynome separated the sky from the sea by dancing on the waves of Oceanus. In this manner, she **created great lands** upon which she might wander, a veritable universe, populating it with exotic creatures such as Nymphs, Furies, and Charites as well as with countless beasts and monsters.

Also born out of Chaos were **Gaia**, called Earth, or Mother Earth, and **Uranus**, the **embodiment of the Sky** and the Heavens, as well as **Tartarus**, god of the sunless and terrible region beneath Gaia, the Earth.

Gaia and Uranus married and **gave birth to the Titans**, a race of formidable giants, which included a particularly **wily giant named Cronus**.

In what has become one of the recurrent themes of Greek Mythology, Gaia and Uranus **warned Cronus that a son of his would one day overpower him**. **Cronus therefore swallowed his numerous children** by his wife Rhea, to keep that forecast from taking place.

This angered Gaia greatly, so when **the youngest son, Zeus**, was born, Gaia took a stone, wrapped it in swaddling clothes and offered it to Cronus to swallow. This satisfied Cronus, and Gaia was able to spirit the baby Zeus away to be raised in Crete, far from his grasping father.

In due course, Zeus grew up, came homeward, and got into immediate conflict with the tyrant Cronus, who did not know that this newcomer was his own son. Zeus needed his brothers and sisters help in slaying the tyrant, and Metis, Zeus's first wife, found a way of administering an emetic to Cronus, who then threw up his five previous children, who were Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon. Together they went to battle against their father. **The results were that all of his children, led by Zeus, vanquished Cronus forever into Tartarus' domain, the Dark World under the Earth.**

Thus, Zeus triumphed over not only his father, and his father's family of Giants, he triumphed over his brothers and sisters as well, dividing up the universe as he fancied, in short, **bringing order out of Chaos.**

He made himself **Supreme God** over all, creating a great and beautiful place for his favored gods to live, on **Mount Olympus**, in Thessaly. All the others were left to fend for themselves in lands below Mount Olympus.

Zeus made himself God of the Sky and all its phenomena, including the clouds as well as the thunderbolts. **Hestia** became goddess of the earth. To his brother **Poseidon**, he gave the rule of the Sea. **Demeter** became a goddess of Fertility, **Hera** (before she married Zeus and became a jealous wife), was goddess of Marriage and Childbirth, while **Hades**, one of his other brothers, was made god of the Underworld.

Zeus did indeed bring order out of Chaos, but one of his failings was that **he did not look kindly upon the people**, those creatures that populated the lands over which he reigned. Many were not beautiful, and Zeus had **contempt for anyone who was not beautiful**. And of course they were **not immortal**, as the Olympian gods were, and they complained about **the lack of good food** and the everlasting **cold nights**. **Zeus ignored their complaints**, while he and the other gods feasted endlessly on steaming hot game from the surrounding forests, and had great crackling fires in every room of their palaces where they lived in the cold winter.

Enters **Prometheus**, one of the Titans not vanquished in the war between Zeus and the giants. It is said in many myths that Prometheus had **created a race of people from clay**, or that he had combined specks of every living creature, molded them together, and produced a new race, **The Common Man**. At the very least he was their champion before Zeus.

Fire for cooking and heating was reserved only for the gods to enjoy. **Prometheus stole some of the sparks of a glowing fire from the Olympians**, so that the people below Olympus could have fire for cooking and warmth in the winter, thus greatly improving their lot in life.

Zeus was furious at this insult to his absolute power, and had **Prometheus bound and chained to a mountain, sending an eagle to attack him daily.**

Adding insult to injury, Zeus had his fellow Olympian, Hephaestus, **fashion a wicked but beautiful creature to torment Prometheus**. It was a **woman**, whom they named **Pandora**, which means "all gifts". She was given a precious and beautiful box, which she was told not to open, but curiosity got the better of her, and out flew "all the evils that plague men." The only "gift" that stayed in the box was "Hope".

1.3. Differences between Gen 1-3 and extrabiblical cosmogonies

The similarities

- a) the presence of tehom, abyss, primordial ocean
- b) the divine origin of the universe and man
- c) logic and order of the created world

The differences:

Regarding the nature of God

- a) there is no theogony in the Bible
- b) Jahwe is not present in the natural phenomena

Regarding man

- a) man is not created as gods' minion destined to live life of labor and suffering
- b) man is good by nature, created on the image and likeness of God

Regarding the purpose of the story

Mesopotamia's creation epic was shaped to justify the political ascendancy of Babylon and its chief deity Marduk by setting their origins and character of their rule in the mythic, eternal present.

1.4. the truth of the creation account

A) The Church does not require Christians to believe either that the universe came to be in six literal days or that it did not; Christians are free to interpret the scientific evidence for themselves.

B) The truth of Genesis, however, is not at all in doubt. Genesis may use poetic and figurative language, but the important message that language expresses is clear.

C) The Church has given some guidelines for understanding the scientific data about cosmic and human origins in light of the biblical doctrine. It has ruled out atheistic evolution—the belief in blind progress unguided by God (see Pius XII, *Humani Generis* 35).

D) The Genesis creation narrative establishes a theological worldview. Its purpose is not scientific, but apologetic, countering the many myths of the ancient Near East. The relationship between God and creation is the basis for all the rest of biblical revelation (CCC 337–44).

2. Creation and Evolution

Hefner, P., 1999–2003. Evolution. *The encyclopedia of Christianity*, 2:228-234

2.1. The multifaceted concept of evolution

evolution as

- (1) an idea of change over time;
- (2) an idea of emergence, by which novelty arises from preceding entities and processes;

(3) an idea that describes the origins of things, both proximate and ultimate;
and (4) an idea of selection, explaining why things die or survive.

2.2. Problematic origins of things

If evolution is considered to be a description of ultimate origins, as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett suppose, then the scientific description becomes the negation of theology, and science becomes a materialist metaphysics in its own right.

2.3. Theological issues

The fundamental issues raised for theology by evolution may be placed in three categories, which, at least for heuristic purposes, correspond to the three persons of the Trinity.

A) First, there are the questions concerning origins, which engage the theology of creation with particular force. **These issues relate particularly to the first person of the Trinity.**

B) Second, how can a good God be reconciled with a creation in which death and evil are inherent? The theological belief in divine providence is engaged at this point.

C) Third, the question of the origins and purpose of morality, as described by sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, challenges theology to speak of transcendent moral truths. This question engages the doctrines of revelation and of Christology and thus falls within the purview of the second person of the Trinity.

2.4. Christian responses:

1) Opposition – creationism vs. materialistic and agnostic evolution

Opposition is expressed almost exclusively by thinkers who are identified as creationists (Creationism), for whom Phillip Johnson is the leading spokesperson.

Since creationists do not allow for any rapprochement between evolution and Christian faith, they construct alternatives to evolutionary explanations. The alternatives most vigorously presented are

(1) the view that the biblical stories of creation, interpreted literally, are scientifically accurate depictions of origins, and

(2) theories of “intelligent design” and “irreducible complexity”.

A) Young Earth creationism

Young Earth creationism rejects completely the conventional scientific approach and argues for the belief that the Earth was created by God within the last 10,000 years, literally as described in Genesis, within the approximate timeframe of biblical genealogies

B) Old Earth creationism

Old Earth creationism holds that the physical universe was created by God, but that the creation event of Genesis within 6 literal days is not to be taken strictly literally. This group generally accepts the age of the Universe and the age of the Earth as described by astronomers and geologists, but claims that details of the evolutionary theory are questionable.

C) Neo-creationism

Neo-creationists intentionally distance themselves from other forms of creationism, preferring to be known as wholly separate from creationism as a philosophy.

D) Agnostic evolution

Agnostic evolution is the position of acceptance of biological evolution, combined with the belief that it is not important whether God is, was, or will have been involved.

E) Materialistic evolution

Materialistic evolution is the position of acceptance of biological evolution, combined with the position that the supernatural does not exist (a position common to philosophical naturalists, humanists and atheists). It is a view championed by what have been called "*The New Atheists*", who argue strongly that the creationist viewpoint is not only dangerous, but is completely rejected by science.

2) Taking account of evolution

The first attempts: Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834)

Adam and Eve are not viewed as a primal pair, the fall is interpreted as universally valid myth rather than as a historical event, and original sin is understood, not as the biological inheritance from an original pair, but rather as culturally transmitted sin.

G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) employed a version of evolutionary thought that, though elaborated in the context of natural history, is more powerfully set forth as a theory of human history. Hegel placed a full-blown theological treatment of Christian faith within this dialectical evolutionary scheme.

The 20th century

Protestant theologians Paul Tillich (1886–1965, who gave contemporary expression to many of Schleiermacher's ideas) and Emil Brunner (1889–1966), and Roman Catholic theologians Karl Rahner (1904–84) and Edward Schillebeeckx (b. 1914).

Pontifical Academy of Sciences on October 22, 1996, seems to indicate a conditional acceptance of evolution. The Vatican position has been interpreted as uncongenial to a creationist position.

In 1950, Pope Pius XII stated limited support for the idea of evolution in his encyclical *Humani Generis*, 36.

In 1996, Pope John Paul II stated that, "New findings lead us toward the recognition of evolution as more than a hypothesis," but, referring to previous papal writings, he concluded that "If the origin of the human body comes through living matter which existed previously, the spiritual soul is created directly by God."

Theistic evolution

Theistic evolution is the general view that some or all classical religious teachings about God and creation **are compatible with some or all of modern scientific theory, including,**

specifically, evolution. It generally views evolution as a tool used by God, who is both the first cause and immanent sustainer/upholder of the universe.

3) Evolution as a guiding theological motif

The tradition of French Jesuit and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin

Teilhard draws primarily from two authorities: the classic Roman **Catholic tradition** of spirituality and **sacramental worship, and the scientific knowledge** of his day, particularly but not exclusively **geology, biology, and paleontology.**

Teilhard conceives of evolution in broad terms, embracing cosmology, physics, and chemistry, as well as biology, history, and culture, and he argues that this total evolutionary process is **the modality of God's presence and work in the world.**

“Complexification” is his overarching concept for interpreting evolution; it is constituted by two simultaneous sets of processes—**quantitative growth, termed “aggregation,” and individuation** which Teilhard described as **“organized multiplicity” and “centrated complexity.”**

In physicochemical processes, **molecules are thus more complex than atoms, humans** more complex than other primates, **the global society** of the period after World War II more complex than the preceding epochs of more isolated nation-states. This process is marked by tension and conflict, even though it culminates in love, which is defined as the increasing solidarity of persons who are growing ever more individualized.

Christ is the paradigm and dynamic force of complexification; the most complex of all realities is **the omega state of eternity, which is characterized as a “center of centers.”** Evolution as **the process of complexification** can therefore also be termed a process of **“Christification.”**

Teilhard comes as close as any thinker to a Trinitarian synthesis: the origins of the cosmos lie in God, who has set evolution into motion, giving it direction and meaning in Christ; the evolutionary process is in itself the providential working of God, who brings all reality, including what we call evil, to a divine consummation that is coincident with what is revealed in Christ. Teilhard invoked the **“cosmic Christ” tradition**, which is epitomized in Col. 1:17, according to which Christ himself “is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” No other Christian thinker has used evolutionary ideas more powerfully and fashioned so full a Christian synthesis on the basis of evolution. Although his architectonic proposals are at points hardly more than a sketch and sometimes highly ambiguous and controversial, they rise as a monumental achievement of constructive Christian theological engagement with the idea of evolution.

John Polkinghorne

John Polkinghorne was a leading theoretical physicist before his work took a theological direction. Standing in the evangelical stream of Anglicanism, his work aims to elaborate how a Christian perspective provides a richer understanding of the world than the sciences, particularly physics, describe.

Indeed, he seeks to do justice both to science and to “our experience of a much wider reality than that which science could ever claim to explain.” Although he deals with many traditional themes, he does so mainly **on the basis of the physical and chemical dimensions of evolution,**

rather than Darwinian themes. He defines evolution from his stance as a physicist as a “**process of development that proceeds through the interaction of contingent factors and lawful rules**” (“Evolution,” 1749–50). One of his most notable contributions is an extended argument to the effect that our physical understanding of the cosmos, exemplified in chaos theory, as well as in Prigogine’s theories of nonlinearity and complexity, suggests that **there is a “looseness” to reality, an indefiniteness and openness to the future that make it possible to bring together both the scientific understanding of nature’s evolutionary processes and the Christian view that God is at work in those processes.** He has said that he holds, not to a theory of gaps in the evolutionary picture of science into which God can fit, but rather to a dimension of “**gappiness**” in reality, to which science itself testifies and which is an aspect of God’s creation.

2.6. How many were they at the beginning? Monogenism and polygenism

Monogenism or sometimes **monogenesis** is the theory of human origins which posits a common descent for all human races. The negation of monogenism is **polygenism** (*polygenesis*), a theory of human origins positing that the human races are of different origins.

This issue was hotly debated in the Western world in the nineteenth century, as the assumptions of **scientific racism** came under scrutiny both from religious groups and in the light of developments in the **life sciences and human science**. It was integral to early conceptions of **ethnology**.

Environmentalist monogenism describes a theory current in the first half of the nineteenth century, in particular, according to which **there was a single human origin, but that subsequent migration of groups of humans had subjected them to different environmental conditions**

In France 1850s, **monogenism was an unfashionable point of view**. The biblical associations of monogenism told against it in scientific circles. On the other hand, monogenism retained support in London's learned societies. **Monogenism received a second wind after the recognition of the antiquity of man**, and the almost simultaneous publication of Darwin's theory of evolution. The "unity and migration" hypothesis of the origins of human diversity could operate over tens of thousands of years.

The monogenesis is supported by the theory of **recent African origin of modern humans**. Monogenesis is also embraced, because of the doctrine of the original sin, by the Pope Pius XII in the Roman Catholic Church (see *Humani generis*).

2.7. Conclusions

- 1) Evolution as a multifaceted concept
- 2) Christian theology has been engaged with evolutionary ideas for two centuries
- 3) The engagement of theology with evolution: Can Christian convictions about God and transcendence be integrated with full appreciation of the natural world?

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D.C. District of Columbia

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