



THEOLOGY CORNER

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“The Book of Genesis is a Myth, but is it Fiction?” (Part I)

This past month, I have been thinking a lot about the Christian duty to evangelize to others who do not share our Christian faith, let alone our Catholic faith. One of the things that seems to serve as an obstacle for many of our non-Christian friends is that they believe our faith conflicts with science. It is essential to understand that, as John Paul II set out to explain throughout his papacy, “faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.” (JPII, *Fides et Ratio*). He says this because, in all reality, there is only one truth. There is no such thing as a supernatural truth that will contradict a natural truth. Something is always either true or false. However, supernatural truths are *above* reason, meaning that it reaches a level that we cannot know by our own human powers. To say that supernatural truth is *above* reason is quite different from saying that it is *against* reason. This is a very important distinction to make. To understand this more fully, it may help to meditate upon that concept in prayer for a while.

Now, what does this have to do with Genesis? Well, we know that if we are to take Genesis literally (especially chapters 1-11), then we face a lot of strong criticisms from the scientific/historical community. Some Catholics might be tempted to take a “blind faith” position and say something like, “Well, that’s what the Bible says and that’s what I’m going to believe.” But the problem with a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible is that it fails to take into account the various “genres” of scripture. You may have heard it said that the Bible is not *a* book; rather, it is a *collection* of books. The Bible did not fall, whole and entire, from the heavens above. They were written by inspired authors at different times, for different audiences, and for different purposes. Some of the books are historical accounts, others are prophetic, and others are poetic (or even mythic). Just as it would be a mistake to walk into a short-story section of a library and read those books in the same manner as you would read books in the non-fiction section, so too would it be a mistake to read every book in the Bible literally.

While it is not a newfound concept, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI wrote extensively on Genesis and have both concluded that the book of Genesis contains myths. To be clear, myth (in its original sense) does not mean mere fiction. Myth, as John Paul II states it, “does not designate a fabulous content, but merely an archaic way of expressing a deeper content.” (*Wednesday Audience*, 1979). A lot of these discussions have been had within the Church for a while now, in large part, as a response to biblical historians who have taken a historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation and archaeology. Since faith and reason (or science) do not contradict, then scientific discoveries must be utilized if we are to have a better grasp of the truth as a whole.

What scientific and historical findings have shown in just the past couple of centuries is that the origin of mankind did not occur in the precise way that the book of Genesis communicates. Moreover, it also shows that many of the stories have direct parallels to other stories told from ancient Mesopotamia which pre-dates the Old Testament (e.g., Epic of Gilgamesh/Enuma Elish). The Epic of Gilgamesh contains a flood, an ark, and a serpent; the Enuma Elish contains a story of creation over seven tablets, while the Genesis story details creation over seven days. What is clear from this comparison is that the Hebrew authors of Genesis used the narratives of their time to communicate the truth of the faith in a mythic style. Biblical scholars call the Genesis narratives “anti-myths” because they were primarily written to combat the false narratives of Babylon (e.g., a multitude of gods, the nature of the world, the nature of the human person, etc.). The Babylonian myths make at least four claims that the inspired authors of Genesis want to refute: 1) The Babylonian myths claim that the world was created from chaos (war, rape, etc.), but Genesis tells us that the world was created through the Divine Word – the *logos*, the mind of God. In other words, the world is not fundamentally chaotic but is ordered and is “good.” 2) The Babylonian myths said that many things in the world are gods, but Genesis teaches us that they were all created by the *one* true God. 3) Babylonian myths claim that the human person was created to be a servant over which the gods would rule, and humans would complete tasks that the gods do not want to do, but Genesis tells us that we are created in the image of God who does not need us, but creates us to communicate his goodness. Genesis also shows that we are not only made for work, but are called most importantly to *rest* on the Sabbath. Work after the Fall was not a punishment, *per se*, but was a remedy to the disorder of sin (i.e., through sacrifice). 4) The Babylonian myths say that the world was created from a carcass of a god, whereas Genesis teaches that the world was created from nothing (*ex nihilo*).

There is so much to say about this topic, but I will have to push some of it until next time. For now, it is important to know that while at least the first eleven chapters of Genesis are written in a mythic genre, there are deep truths interwoven throughout these stories that our Lord wants to reveal to us. Reading Genesis in its native context using history to fill in any gaps in our knowledge, brings the scriptures to life as we discover precisely what God is teaching us through these narratives about who *he* is and who *we* are in relation to him. Stay tuned the next couple of months for a closer look at some of the creation narratives of Genesis and what they could mean in relation to evolution, the 7-day structure of creation, the relationship between man and woman, and the human person as being formed from the dust of the earth.