Is Genesis 1–11 unique? Notes and arguments

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COHERENCE OF GN 1–11

We need to review the background arguments in Westermann and Scullion, *Genesis: an introduction* before discussing the uniqueness of Genesis 1–11. He makes important points regarding the cohesion of Genesis 1–11 and the need to study it by itself before comparing it to other cosmogonies:

1. first of all, Westermann argues that it is the intention of P and J to relate an "event in the middle" with an event in the beginning. The central element "in the middle" for Westermann is the story of Exodus 1-18, the salvation story. This salvation story at the heart of Exodus provides a powerful religious explanation and answer for the catastrophic failure of the Israelite and Judaean monarchies. It has been developed over time and took the shape it has now in the post-exilic period (6th-5th c. BCE). In Babylonia or in Greece, on the contrary, history does not have radical breaks of that kind, and the need is less great for a radical explanation.

2. The second argument made by Westermann is that Genesis 1-11 is a late addition to Genesis, something put at a later point before Genesis 12-50, and with a view to lead to the Exodus story. The whole text of Genesis 1-11 is important because it can be shown it holds together as a unit. The genealogies are as important as chapters 1-4, which are the usual focus of exegetes.

3. Westermann considers that it is important to examine the history of the biblical story of Genesis 1-11 by itself before examining the significance of its borrowings from or differences with the neighboring myths. Quote, " why did Israel speak of its rescuer at the Creator of heaven and earth in a way which has so many points of contact with what the surrounding world said of its gods in the same context?" (page 6).

GENESIS 10–11 AND OTHER EPICS

1. The first point then is that the story of Genesis 1-11 has many points of contact with the epics and myths of the surrounding world. Among some of those points of contact are: the idea of chaos or abyss, or at least an echo of it; the plurality of the gods, who are mostly masculine; the use of numbers, repeatedly, such as seven; the organization of elements of the cosmos such as water and land, and so on; the creation of man from soil and a divine element;

2. the second point is that we know something of the history of Israel and Judah in the eighth, seventh, and sixth century. In that period, Israel and Judah have become part of the Assyrian empire, soon to be replaced by the Babylonian empire, and finally the Persian Empire. These empires have a great tradition of epic telling and cosmologies, and it is this culture, similar in disconcerting ways to their own cultural heritage, that the Judean writers have to contend with in their own explanation of their origins.

   From the "beginning," either monarchic, priestly, or other interested parties needed to adjust the traditions they had at hand, especially when written, to the needs of an ever-changing situation. Political, technical, social, linguistic situations changed and demanded that whatever traditions had become enshrined in the memory of the people be re-understood. Two political and military events left an especially deep mark, namely the conquest and exile of northern Israelites in –721 by Assyrians, and the conquest and exile of Judaeans at the end of the 6th c. bce, especially in –587, to Babylon by Babylonians.

   The role of the conquest of Juda (after that of Israel) and the exile to Babylonia in shaping the relationship of the Judaean community to the text cannot be overstated. In antiquity, such an event meant at one and the same time the loss of political independence, monarchy (the king being a religious figure, seen as a savior / protector), temple and significance of it, that is, a complex relationship to the cosmos. It meant the loss of control over the land, loss of freedom, and actually physical loss of the land for those who were exiled. It normally meant also that your god or gods had been incapable of protecting you and were at the very least second to the conquerer's god(s). It could mean the end of your nation, religion, language, culture.

   But the interpretations by exiled Judaeans of this catastrophe had been prepared by an understanding they had of the previous conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in –721. Prophets already, both in Israel and Juda, had proposed explanations for the threat and previous events, explaining that the divinity would eventually abandon the people if they did not

change their ways and correct especially their social behavior. The Deuteronomist (book of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and in its essential features, the Samuel and Kings books) proposed a more rigid interpretation along the same line, namely that the land was conditional upon the obedience to the god-given laws, and that straying from the laws, esp. cultic laws but also social justice, would by punished by the divinity using conquerers as chastizers.

So, the explanations given in the post-exilic period pursue the prophetic and deuteronomistic notion. Apparently the god of Israel and Juda is a weak, defeated god? On the contrary, answer the exiles, this god is a universal figure, hidden behind many names, but unique, and with a unique plan, and using empires for his own purposes. Apparently the land was lost to conquerors? In fact, it was promised on certain conditions: the people were the first object of choice for the divinity, the land second. Babylonia itself was conquered by new invaders in mid-6th c. bce. This defeat of the conquering empire itself by another one (Mede, then Persian) reinforced the view of a hidden divinity's plan. In consequence, the answer to all these upheavals was a renewed zeal for the law, which became the defining characteristic of the Judaean people (soon called Jews, or belonging to "Judaism"). The textual traditions (the "law" or "torah" = law and teaching) in effect became a substitute for the lost form of pre-exilic polity, a sort of portable land. But an all-encompassing role for a textual tradition implied accurate transmission, copying, and reading. Sages, teachers, scribes, schools, therefore, who could ensure the accuracy of the transmission and understanding.

It is in this context that Genesis 1–11 was added to the story of the patriarchs (Gn 12–50), in a revised view of history in which the central event was the true foundation (or re-foundation) of the people as told in the story of Exodus. It provides a universal framework, while setting itself as completely different from the cosmologies of neighboring peoples.

3. How different?

   a) Its format is different, in that it is not in poetic form. The Babylonian epic of creation, Ugaritic legends, and Hesiod's Theogony are in verse and meant to be sung.

   b) The oneness of the divinity is repeatedly insisted on. It has no paredra, and the verbs following the plural "Elohim" are in the singular. Furthermore, its real name is revealed by the narrator in the second part of the story of creation as "Yahweh Elohim".

   c) The divinity is not engendered and does not give birth.

d) The basic elements of the world are not the product of an engendering either, or of a truncating or dismembering of primeval divinities. They are made (the words used are: "made, created," in the first part of the story, and "shaped" in the second part of the story).

e) The notion of a pre-existing chaos is kept ("tohu wa-vohu") but this chaos is not divine. It is actually di-divinized, as Hebrew "tehom" (the abyss) may correspond to Babylonian Tiamat. The waters are made and are not the divine Tiamat and Apsu of the Babylonian epic.

f) The world is good, in all its parts (including the wind or spirit). This contrasts with the world of strife and uneasy balance described in the Babylonian epic. The violence of the mythic world can only be subdued by a rebellious, focussed violence, that of Marduk-king, which itself can preside over the world and guarantee its order and security only by eliminating competitors.

g) Humans haven't been created as slaves for the divinity. They are to work and eventually to toil (in the story of punishment), but not in service to the divinity. The humans are both divine and earthly in both the Babylonian and Genesis stories. In Genesis, however, what is added to the clay is not the blood of the slaughtered, rebellious god Kingu, but divine breath or spirit. Blood is in human bodies by virtue of being made of the ground or reddish clay ("adamah"). Furthermore, the human beings are expelled (sent away or expelled, Gen 3.23–24). There is no autochthony in Genesis 1–11 (and this is an on-going theme, right through Exodus). Or to put it differently: human origin is ex-centered, or its center is unreachable. There is no mention either of a temple like that of the Esagila, the great Babylonian temple, in the Babylonian story: it is built by and for the gods, and is at the heart of the Babylonian kingdom and empire. One could argue that Eden, with its flame in Gen 3.24 and its "keruvim" (mythical figures, half-human, half-animal, guarding the king's and god's throne), is that center and a figure of the historical Jerusalem temple, but if this is true, it is an oddly removed center, difficult to reach.

h) Finally, a word on the notion of time in Genesis 1–11: the story is not closed unto itself, as epic poems are more wont to be, and it is not a self-contained image or mimickry of human polity, but it opens to the history of the universe and its peoples (the genealogies), quickly narrowed down to Abraham and his lineage, Israel (=Jacob), and the birth of the people in the story of Exodus.

REFERENCES

Westermann, Claus and John Scullion. *Genesis: an introduction*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.