

## BIBLICAL STUDIES

### THREE MODERN MYTHS IN INTERPRETING GENESIS 1

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**H**ow do we reconcile Gen 1 with science? Three modern myths often interfere with understanding Gen 1. We propose to uncover these myths, in order to remove obstacles to understanding Gen 1.

Rather than beginning with the myths immediately, let us first consider one strand in contemporary interpretation. This approach begins by reading Gen 1 within its ancient Near Eastern context. It compares and contrasts Gen 1 with ancient Near Eastern myths. By so doing, it endeavors to show that many modern readers misread Gen 1. They read with scientific assumptions and scientific questions already in mind, and they may easily read into Gen 1 detailed scientific information that is not there. Depending on what they read in, they may find that Gen 1 does or does not agree with modern science. But the whole procedure is mistaken, because it involves misinterpretation. Readers should not seek for scientific teaching in Gen 1, but treat it for what it is, a document that comes from another culture than our own.

#### I. *The Idea of Outmoded Cosmology*

There is much to be said in favor of this kind of approach, because the interference of modern assumptions generates misunderstanding, among both defenders and critics of Gen 1. Yet for our long-run spiritual health, a great deal depends on just *how* the interpretive task is accomplished. It is not always accomplished well. Some books and articles tell us that Gen 1 naturally and understandably contains outmoded and erroneous cosmological notions common to the ancient Near East, because it was written within that cultural milieu. For instance, scholars may say that Gen 1:6-8 refers to a solid dome of sky (“the expanse”) and a heavenly sea held in by the dome (“the waters that were above the expanse”).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of a solid dome holding in a heavenly sea appears in numerous places in OT scholarly literature (e.g., T. H. Gaster, “Cosmogony,” *IDB* 1:703, 704), and has made its way into lexicons

Such claims have been around for more than a century among liberal scholars, but now they are cropping up in some broadly evangelical circles as well. People who think that erroneous cosmological ideas occur in the Bible might still say that they want to affirm the divine authority of the Bible. For instance, they might say that Gen 1 contains erroneous cosmology without any compromise to its divine authority, because the authorial intent is to teach theology, not science or ancient cosmology. The cosmological trappings are only the vehicle, while the “cargo” that the vehicle carries consists in the theological content of the passage. The cargo of Gen 1 consists in the theological affirmation that God is the only God and the unique Creator. Consequently, Gen 1 contains no errors in its teaching. In fact, its teaching harmonizes well with modern science, because when rightly understood it is not teaching anything directly *about* science or anything that *could* contradict science. For convenience, I will call this kind of approach a vehicle-cargo approach. How people construe the distinction between the cargo (the core teaching) and the vehicle leads to important debates, which we cannot pursue here.<sup>2</sup>

The vehicle-cargo approach can say that God “accommodates” himself to the erroneous views of ancient addressees, and allows such views to find a place in the Bible. But we must be careful. The word *accommodation* has several usages. Several kinds of “accommodation” have occurred through the history of the church. In the ancient church, the classical doctrine of accommodation said that Scripture spoke in a way that took into account finite human capacities. But it maintained that Scripture did *not* “accommodate” error. By contrast, a more recent form of accommodation, associated with biblical criticism, allows the inclusion of error, and that is the decisive difference.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these usages, interpreters have sometimes spoken of progressive revelation as a form of accommodation, since the revelation given at earlier times is suitable for or “accommodated” to the earlier redemptive-historical epoch and the capacity of people at that time.<sup>4</sup> The word *accommodation* could also be applied to God’s redemptive acts, in distinction from his speech: God’s fatherly care takes into account the weaknesses of his people.<sup>5</sup>

We meet still further complexities about accommodation because in the last few decades some writers have interpreted statements from Luther and Calvin

(BDB 956, עֲרִיבָה sense 2). For a better approach, see C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), 45-46; and a sequel article to this one: Vern S. Poythress, “Rain Water versus a Heavenly Sea in Genesis 1:6-8,” *WTJ* forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> See Noel Weeks, “Cosmology in Historical Context,” *WTJ* 68 (2006): 283-93; Noel Weeks, “The Ambiguity of Biblical ‘Background,’” *WTJ* 72 (2010): 219-36; Vern S. Poythress, “Problems for Limited Inerrancy,” *JETS* 18 (1975): 93-102.

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 19.

<sup>4</sup> I. M. Sweet and G. W. Bromiley, “Accommodation,” *ISBE* 1:25.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Balsarak, “The God of Love and Weakness: Towards an Understanding of God’s Accommodating Relationship with His People,” *WTJ* 62 (2000): 177-95.

and before as though these statements used a vehicle-cargo distinction (or something like it). I do not agree with these interpretations, but it is not my purpose here to engage in a complicated historical discussion.<sup>6</sup> Even if we were to grant that a vehicle-cargo approach appears in pre-modern interpretations in orthodox circles, it would only mean that we need to inspect carefully the older ideas along with the newer ones.

Clearly the modern writings on Gen 1 are not all the same. It is unfair to lump them all together. But to treat each one individually would go far beyond the scope of this article. And more writings of a similar kind continue to appear. Consequently, I do not want to single out any particular one. My point is that there seems to be some common patterns. Among these patterns is the idea that Gen 1 includes pieces of erroneous ancient cosmology.<sup>7</sup> For convenience, I will address only this one idea, for which I use the label “the vehicle-cargo approach”—though this label does not do justice to the variations.

For my limited purpose, I propose to focus on three traps into which a vehicle-cargo approach may fall. All three traps have to do with the challenges in understanding documents from other cultures. When we try to bridge cultures, one of the greatest hindrances lies in the hidden assumptions that we carry with us from our own native culture. The vehicle-cargo approach sees well enough that many people are falling into traps due to the influence of modern science when they read Gen 1. Unfortunately, and somewhat paradoxically, the vehicle-cargo approach may fall into traps of its own, due to the presence of at least three modern myths.

But as we proceed in the analysis, we must be careful and be charitable. We are not saying that everyone who adopts a vehicle-cargo approach falls prey to the myths. We want only to show that readers of Gen 1 and readers of the modern writings need to guard against the myths, in order to head off misunderstandings.

## II. *The Myth of Scientistic Metaphysics*

The first myth concerns the ways in which the knowledge from modern science surpasses the knowledge of the ancient world and tribal cultures that have no contact with modern civilization. The stock example of this improvement in knowledge has to do with the sun. It goes like this:

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., the critique in Vern S. Poythress, “A Misunderstanding of Calvin’s Interpretation of Genesis 1:6-8 and 1:5 and Its Implications for Ideas of Accommodation,” *WTJ* 76 (2014): 157-66.

<sup>7</sup> As a sample, we may mention Peter Enns, *Inspiration & Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 25-27, 49-56; Kenton Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 231-36; Denis O. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus & I Accept Evolution* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 46-70; John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 55-57; John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 155-61.

The ancient world thought that the earth did not move and that the sun, moon, and stars moved around it. Copernicus showed that the sun did not move and that the earth rotated and moved around the sun. Ever since, we have known that the ancients were wrong. The sun does not rise; rather, the earth rotates. Consequently, the Bible contains demonstrable errors in cosmology. Jesus himself talks about the sun rising (Matt 5:45). He does not correct the erroneous cosmology, but uses it as a vehicle to express spiritual truth. The doctrinal teaching concerning God's love and mercy is true; the statement about the sun is false, but is not part of the teaching. This is no error, because Jesus does not intend to teach us that the sun rises.

For a long time some interpreters have approached the issue about the sun in a different way. They contented themselves with the principle that the Bible describes things as they *appear*. John Calvin speaks this way in discussing Gen 1:

For, to my mind, this is a certain principle, that nothing is here [in Gen 1] treated of but the *visible form* of the world.

It must be remembered, that Moses does not speak with philosophical acuteness on occult mysteries, but relates those things which are everywhere *observed*, even by the uncultivated, and which are in common use.

Moses makes two great luminaries [sun and moon]; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons, that the star [i.e., planet] of Saturn, which, on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. Here lies the difference; Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labour whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend. . . . If the astronomer inquires respecting the actual dimensions of the stars, he will find the moon to be less than Saturn; but this is something abstruse, for *to the sight it appears* differently. Moses, therefore, rather adapts his discourse to common usage.<sup>8</sup>

Bernard Ramm, writing in 1954, includes a discussion of *phenomenal language*, that is, language describing how things appear to ordinary human observation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 1:79 [on Gen 1:6], 1:84 [on Gen 1:14], 1:86-87 [on Gen 1:16], italics mine. For Calvin on Gen 1:6, see Poythress, "Misunderstanding."

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 67-68, quoting from John H. Pratt, *Scripture and Science Not at Variance* (7th ed.; London: Hatchards, 1872), 24-29. See also Collins, *Genesis 1-4*, 46 n. 23, 264-65.

Almost all the events described in Gen 1 took place before any human being existed to observe them. But Gen 1 as a written description is addressed to human beings, including those without contact with modern science. Quite appropriately, it describes the events in a manner pertinent to what would have been observable by a human being, and in a manner analogous to present providential events that are regularly observed ("phenomena"). Calvin's discussion of Gen 1 understands this point. In a similar manner, Job 38:27 describes grass sprouting "where no man is." No human being observes this grass. But it is easy for a human reader to understand what is happening. The grass is really there in various desert places. A human being knows what it *would* be like to see

The Bible characteristically uses phenomenal language. And once we recognize it, many of the elementary problems dissolve.

But nowadays this approach does not seem to satisfy everyone. People continue to bring up the topic of the sun. They are clearly not satisfied with the well-known appeal to phenomenal language. Why not?

The issue of the sun's rising comes up, not because it is so bothersome in itself, but because it is thought to illustrate the way our interpretations of the Bible must adjust more widely. That is, more is at stake. What more? A vehicle-cargo approach claims that the Bible contains erroneous cosmology, not merely phenomenal language.

Accordingly, a vehicle-cargo approach may press the point that the church was wrong about Copernicus, and that even the language in Scripture about the sun rising and the earth not moving (Ps 93:1; 96:10) is erroneous. It does so in order that we may reassess the actual character of Scripture. As a result of the reassessment, we will no longer bring Scripture into conflict with modern science. (And some advocates of a vehicle-cargo approach want to extend their principles to other areas of potential conflict, such as history or ethics.)

This route of harmonization is understandable, but it depends on a myth with regard to Copernicus, a myth propagated by the popularization of science in modern culture. The myth has several distinct elements, not all of which are always present. The first and least important element concerns the story of Copernicus himself.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes people have the impression that Copernicus *demonstrated* that the earth moved. Actually, he knew that it could not be easily demonstrated, because both the earlier Ptolemaic mathematical model and Copernicus's sun-centered model could account for the main observations. His model had the virtue of greater simplicity.<sup>11</sup>

A second mythic element says that the sun does not move. But according to Newton's theory of gravitation (which came later than Copernicus), it does move in one obvious sense. The sun and Jupiter both move in orbits around their common center of gravity. Because the sun is more massive, the movements of the sun are much smaller, but still significant.

The third mythic element is more subtle. It lies in the popular assumption that the language about motion is unambiguous. Either the sun moves or it does not. But the assumption breaks down immediately when we ask, "Moves with respect to what?" From a suitably chosen observational standpoint in a neighboring galaxy, the sun is moving in a huge orbit around the center of

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the grass (phenomenally). A sequel article picks up on this positive aspect in the descriptions of Gen 1 (Vern S. Poythress, "Correlations with Providence in Genesis 1," *WTJ* forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> We cannot enter into the details of the history (see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992]), or the mistaken reactions to Copernicus on the part of some theologians and philosophers of the day. Our discussion of myth is in part relevant to Copernicus's critics as well.

<sup>11</sup> There was also a third model, by Tycho Brahe, according to which the moon and sun revolved around the earth, while the other planets revolved around the sun.

the Milky Way Galaxy. From the standpoint of the sun itself, it is not moving at all, but that is trivial. Likewise, from the standpoint of the earth, the earth is not moving. Scientists who work in pertinent specialized areas know all this very well, but it is not part of the popularized view concerning the sun and the earth. My point is partly to make plain the flawed character of popularized knowledge of science.

The fourth mythic element involves the assumption that one observational standpoint is the original or “right” one. Einstein’s general theory of relativity places observers in accelerated systems on the same mathematical “level” with all other observers. An observer standing still on earth is one such observer. From the point of view of this scientific theory, the statement that the earth is moving is not intrinsically “better” than the statement that it is not. Both statements are ambiguous until we specify the observational standpoint. Either statement may be true, depending on what observational standpoint we specify. Equations of transformation allow us to move from one standpoint to the other.<sup>12</sup>

Once we recognize the mythic character of elements three and four, the modern critique of the rising of the sun threatens to disintegrate. The problem is with modern myth, not with the Bible or the ancient Near East.

The vehicle-cargo approach might undertake a repair job by insisting that the problem with the ancient Near East is that the people thought that the sun *really* rose, not just that it *appeared* to rise. We know better. They did not have our modern sophistication about observational standpoints.<sup>13</sup> To this attempted repair the simplest reply might be, “Perhaps they thought as they did because it was true. Given their observational standpoint, the sun did rise (and still does).” The vehicle-cargo approach appeals to the contrast between “reality” and mere “appearance.” This appeal illustrates that the modern approach has still not grasped that it is caught in a myth. It speaks as if we could settle what “really” is the case. But we could do that only if we eliminated what it thinks is the unenlightened observational standpoint of the ancient observer. But, as the theory of relativity has made amply evident, to eliminate the observational standpoint is to eliminate the very ability to talk coherently about motion and rest.

So we may let the vehicle-cargo approach try again. “What I mean,” the advocate might say, “is that the ancient people carried along a raft of assumptions about the cosmos, and that we now know that those assumptions were wrong. For instance, they thought that the earth was at the center in an absolute sense.” Well, perhaps they did. And perhaps they did not. Might it just be the case that the average Israelite did not worry about complicated physical and mathematical systems for describing motions of the heavenly bodies? Maybe

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<sup>12</sup> Readers for whom these ideas are new territory may receive a clear introductory explanation from none other than the originator: Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920).

<sup>13</sup> Actually, it is quite easy for an ordinary ancient observer to see that the world looks different from inside a house or a tent than from outside, and different from the top of a hill than from the bottom of a valley.

he just thought that the sun rose, because it did (given his standpoint). Maybe he also thought that it rose because God made it rise, as Jesus says (Matt 5:45).<sup>14</sup> You see, it is possible that, accustomed as we are to having a huge framework of popularized science in the back of our minds (including mythic elements generated in the process of popularization), we project such a science-like interest onto ordinary Israelites, and we suppose that they must have had a false kind of science in their minds, substituting for the true science that we have now.

Finally, let us suppose for the sake of argument that the Israelites did have such false assumptions about the cosmos in their minds. The Bible does not endorse their assumptions merely by saying that the sun rises. It simply does not speak to such questions. Ramm in 1954 made the point that “*the language of the Bible is non-postulational with reference to natural things.*” That is, it does not postulate any particular scientific cosmology. It lacks “*theorizing.*”<sup>15</sup> The vehicle-cargo approach is correct in implying that the Bible does not immediately correct all possible false assumptions about cosmology, biology, or any other field of specialized knowledge. The dispute is not about that, but about what it means for communication to be truthful. It can be truthful if it does not speak about such false assumptions. It cannot be truthful if it actively endorses the assumptions or clearly presupposes them.<sup>16</sup>

The four small mythic elements dealing with Copernicus contribute to a much larger myth that has little to do with Copernicus. The grand popular myth is that modern science exposes the way things “really are,” as opposed to the mistaken character of appearances. According to this grand myth, the “reality” is that the earth moves, and only falsely “appears” to be unmoving. A solid-looking table is mostly empty space between elementary particles, and only falsely appears to be solid.<sup>17</sup> A rainbow is really light waves of various frequencies, and only appears

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<sup>14</sup> The last point presupposes a distinction between God as primary cause and secondary causes within creation. For discussion, one may consult Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, ch. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ramm, *Christian View of Science*, 69, italics original.

<sup>16</sup> Interested readers can pursue further discussions and illustrations of this point in Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), especially chs. 3–4, 8–13. In addition, questions could be raised about a mental-picture theory of truth (Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2012], ch. 7). A mental-picture theory confuses the meaning of the text with the mental picture produced in readers’ minds. When this theory is present, any mistaken pictures of the cosmos present among Israelite readers get read back into the text as if the pictures were part of the meaning.

<sup>17</sup> There is some irony here in the fact that the popularized picture of particles with empty space in between has been qualified in its turn by quantum field theory, a mathematical theory that has no accurate intuitive representation by means of three dimensional space. The mathematics uses complex infinite dimensional vector space (Hilbert space), and suggests as a simplified model that “empty” space is a sea of virtual particles, especially virtual photons that mediate the electromagnetic force within and between atoms. Thus, the confident assurance that the table is mostly empty space is itself one of the popular myths, left over from earlier forms of physics (e.g., the Rutherford model of the atom).

I have no objection to simplified models, including the Rutherford model of empty space, as long as we understand that the model explicates one “layer” of reality. When, however, a person

to be beautiful colors to our eyes. Our mind is really the electrical and chemical firing of neurons, and only appears to have thoughts.

This grand myth constitutes an extended metaphysical statement about what is real and what is not. According to this myth, current science allegedly provides ultimate metaphysical answers. We may call this myth the myth of *scientistic metaphysics*.

To refute this grand myth takes metaphysical reflection, more than we can do here.<sup>18</sup> But we can at least observe that the grand myth is ill-grounded. The work in specialized sciences uncovers additional “layers” of meaning of which we were previously unaware—for example, the microscopic level, the macro-level of astronomy and cosmology, and layers in biology, geology, meteorology, chemistry, and physics. That in itself does not imply that the initial, “phenomenal” layers of ordinary observation are “unreal.” The “unreality” of appearances follows only if we have a metaphysical principle of reductionism, which says that science gets to the “bottom,” the “real” foundation of being, and that everything above the bottom is unreal in relation to the bottom.

This metaphysics has no real warrant based on details of scientific investigation, but is a groundless assumption that is imposed on the investigation as an interpretation of its metaphysical significance. In other words, we have here an instance of credulity, faith without grounds. The metaphysical claim has credibility partly because it is socially transmitted from one person to another, and the modern atmosphere is such that few people question the key assumption.

Interestingly, a similar lesson was relevant to generations before the rise of modern science. The Ptolemaic system of ancient Greek astronomy and its popularized forms tempted people to interpret the system as a metaphysical statement about the ultimate foundation of the cosmos rather than a specialized framework for astronomical calculations. Jews, Christians, and pagans alike sometimes fell into this trap, and then projected parts of that metaphysics into Gen 1.

The period during which Copernicus and Galileo lived was influenced by Aristotelianism, which also seemed to provide answers about the ultimate metaphysical character of the world. If people viewed the Copernican theory as a metaphysical claim, it contradicted Aristotle. The fight was then a fight between two metaphysical systems, each claiming to reveal the “ultimate” structure of the world.

Of course, it was natural for biblical interpreters to explore how Gen 1 might have correlations with the astronomical claims of their times. But to explore *possible* correlations is distinct from locking in a particular metaphysical analysis or overestimating the quality of knowledge contained in pre-modern astronomy.

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uses such a model to teach the unreality of ordinary experience, his arrogance and bad metaphysics are showing, and then it seems to me fair to criticize both.

<sup>18</sup> Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chs. 15–16; Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton: Crossway, forthcoming), parts 2–4.



Relief from fights of this kind comes partly from seeing that more than one perspective can offer a true but not exhaustive account of the world.<sup>19</sup>

We have brought in some rather heavy discussion of mythic influences in order to assure people that the sun rises. But actually all of the heavy apparatus ought not to have been necessary. Ordinary people in virtually any culture tacitly understand that if someone describes events without overtly indicating an observational standpoint, he is describing the events from his own standpoint. Hence, it is correct and true to say that the sun rises. We have introduced the apparatus only because we need to become aware of the myths in the background, in order to enable us to see straight and admit to ourselves and to others that the sun rises (really!).

### III. *The Myth of Progress*

The second myth is the myth of progress.<sup>20</sup> The popular myth of progress says that, since science gives us more knowledge and more gadgets, we are getting better and better, scientifically and religiously and morally and in our understanding of ourselves and God. We are superior to the “primitive” cultures of Amazonian tribes and the ancient Near East. That is what we think. But more sensitive people avoid saying it out loud. If we say it out loud, it is hard to conceal from ourselves questions about cultural paternalism, prejudice, and overreaching generalizations. So we may draw back a bit, and say only that we are superior in our knowledge of the universe. But even that is not fully true. As we have seen, superiority in details is compatible with bad metaphysics.

Consider another aspect of the modern myth of progress. This myth says that demons do not exist, but are a product of primitive superstition. The myth says that we know this due to specialized scientific investigation, but actually we do not. Natural sciences investigate empirically, while demons are spiritual beings and therefore outside the focus of most natural science. Moreover, the average secularized Westerner thinks he “knows” that demons do not exist, not because he has extensively investigated the question or demanded extensive evidence from those who have, but because the people around him believe the same thing. And they believe it because demons are incompatible with the reigning materialism. The nonexistence of demons is an atmospheric assumption—a myth.<sup>21</sup>

Many modern people think that science supports scientific metaphysics, and this metaphysics says that the world is material, and therefore at root impersonal. By contrast, many ancient people and some tribal cultures and

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<sup>19</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (repr., Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> There are affinities to Noel Weeks’s discussion of “progressivism” (Weeks, “Cosmology in Historical Context,” 283-84).

<sup>21</sup> In the West the myth is being challenged by certain kinds of modern mysticism, spiritism, and monism, but right now it seems to me still to be “on top” in circles of power. The myth has to marginalize non-Western cultures where people believe in a spirit world.

non-Western cultures populate the world with personal beings—spirits and gods. Religiously, they are deeply wrong when they give themselves over to worship these spirits and gods. But in one sense they are close to the truth because God is personal, and his personal activity is present in all the world. Furthermore, God has created angels as personal beings. Some of the angels rebelled, so that there are now both good and evil angels (the demons). These angels may be involved in the world, including the world of nature (Job 1:12, 19; Dan 6:22; Acts 12:7-10, 23). In affirming the presence of personal intentions in the world of nature, non-Western cultures are closer to the truth than the modern materialistic worldview, which declares that the world and the laws of the world are completely impersonal. In this respect, then, mainstream modern Western thinking has regressed rather than progressed.

Nevertheless, for the sake of argument, let us suppose that our knowledge is overwhelmingly superior. The assumption that it is may still have unfortunate effects. It may close down serious attempts to understand other cultures with an insider's sympathy, because they have nothing interesting from which we could learn. The myth of progress applied to Gen 1 says that it is an ancient document, from an ancient culture, and so can have little to say except perhaps for some core religious message about God, if indeed that message can rise above the limitations of its cultural trappings. This attitude undermines empathy, and lack of empathy hinders genuine understanding.

#### IV. *The Myth of Understanding Cultures from Facts*

Our observations about cross-cultural understanding lead to considering a third myth, a popular myth about understanding other cultures. It is less powerful than the first two, but still influential. The heart of the myth is the idea that we can study and understand a culture effectively with a dose of armchair learning about the facts. "After all," says popular thinking, "everyone else is like us, except that variant customs and beliefs are plugged in at appropriate places here or there."

The difficulty here is that other cultures can be startlingly different, in ways not easily anticipated by an inhabitant of modern culture. Moreover, in analyzing another culture people can give multiple interpretations to the same facts, each interpretation having some plausibility. The feeling of "understanding" can be illusory.

In fact, deep understanding of a radically different culture is challenging business. Cultures are radically different in some ways and subtly but irritatingly and surprisingly different in others. It is not easy for just anyone to progress beyond a tourist's impression. With the ancient Near East, these difficulties go together with the absence of direct contact. We cannot function like a well-trained field worker in social anthropology, actually immersing ourselves within an ancient culture and learning it seriously and empathetically "from inside." In addition, the ancient Near East consists of many interacting subcultures that

changed over a period of millennia. The extant documentary and archaeological evidence is fragmentary. People who are richly informed by evidence, who have skills in cross-cultural thinking and adaptation, and who have innate empathy, may often make good inferences up to a point. But knowledge of such a culture *as an interlocking whole* remains partial and tentative.<sup>22</sup>

There are further worries. It is eminently feasible for an intelligent modern person to read ancient Near Eastern myths while constantly recognizing that they come from a different culture. Indeed, it is easy, because the evidence is there constantly, in the form of references to ancient gods and goddesses. What is not so easy is for this same intelligent modern person to read ancient material without fitting the mythical references to items in “nature” into the scheme of nature that he himself knows to be “true.” In other words, he still carries around with him the baggage of modern science.

For example, a reference to the sky in ancient literature is automatically a reference to the blue sky overhead, which the modern student knows is the atmosphere, and in which the blue color comes from diffracted sunlight. The modern student thinks in terms of a scientific account of the sky, rather than a poet’s view or a painter’s view or a farmer’s view or a priest’s view or a description in terms of appearances, because the scientific analysis provides us with what is “real” according to the myth of scientific metaphysics.

The modern student also knows that the ancient writer did not have this modern scientific information. The ancient writer must be referring to something, namely, to the sky. He must be referring to it as a *physical* object (because, remember, scientific metaphysics has told us that the physical aspect of things is ultimate). The modern student proceeds then to infer that the ancient people, who did not have modern knowledge of the atmosphere, must have faulty ideas about the physical structure and composition of the sky instead.<sup>23</sup> For instance, it may be alleged that they thought that the sky was a solid dome. In other words, they must have had a kind of faulty substitute for the “right” account given by modern science. The faulty substitute may even be labeled as “ancient science.”

All of this is eminently plausible, given the starting point of the modern student. But it may involve a misreading. Into his reading the modern student can easily inject the assumption that questions about physical structure and

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<sup>22</sup> Horowitz indicates the difficulties: “This approach poses certain dangers, not the least of which are our distance in time and space from the ancient writers, as well as the vagaries of archaeological discovery. . . . The current evidence simply does not allow us to know, for instance, if ancient readers of Gilgamesh really believed that they too could have visited Utnapištim by sailing across the cosmic sea . . . or if a few, many, most, or all ancient readers understood the topographical material in Gilg. IX-X in metaphysical or mystical terms” (Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998], xiii-xiv).

<sup>23</sup> Weeks makes the same point about false inferences: “It follows that we need to ask whether the similar attempt to read a physical and geometrical cosmology into the biblical text also faces the danger of substituting the primary concerns of the modern world for those of the biblical text (Weeks, “Cosmology in Historical Context,” 290).

physical causes are ultimate, not merely in the eyes of modern culture but for all mankind. Hence, the ancients must have had views on the subject that got expressed in their favorite cosmologies and myths. Modern cosmology is a materialistic, physical-structural account, and hence ancient cosmology would have included that too. The ancients wrote poetry, but that too must somehow reveal what they thought about the “real thing”—physical structure.

I do not know everything that the ancients believed. It looks to me as if in the ancient Near East beliefs varied from one subculture to another, and that one belief sometimes contradicted another, though also showing affinities.<sup>24</sup> But when a modern student postulates the presence in the ancient world of a detailed mistaken physicalistic account of what the world is like, I might still venture to suggest that we should be cautious. The actual interests of the ancient peoples in the Near East may have been wide-ranging. But (except for the Bible) the most noteworthy writings about the cosmos as a global whole, so far as we can recover them from fragmentary remnants of the cultures, appear to me to be found mostly in poetic accounts that explained how the gods were involved in both the origins and the present patterns in what they observed around them.

In Egypt it appears that gods were confusedly identified with sun, sky, Pharaoh, the Nile, and the earth. The interaction of gods accounted for what an Egyptian saw around him, and especially what he could expect in the underworld:

The universe was for them [the ancient Egyptians] an awesome system of living divine beings. The earth, the sky, and the Nile were all entities that had a distinct life-force and personality and drew their life from the original creative power, no matter what name that power may have borne.<sup>25</sup>

The Egyptians lived in a universe composed not of *things*, but of *beings*. Each element is not merely a physical component, but a distinct individual with a unique personality and will. The sky is not an inanimate vault, but a goddess who conceives the sun each night and gives birth to him in the morning.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*, 283-93. Consider an example: Wallis Budge, in analyzing the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, claims that the “ceiling [of the sky]” was “either flat or vaulted.” If flat, it “was rectangular, and was supported at each corner by a pillar”; the pillars were identified with the gods Amset, Hapi, Tuamautef, and Qebhsennuf, who “were supposed to preside over the four quarters of the world, and subsequently were acknowledged to be the gods of the cardinal points” (E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani in the British Museum; The Egyptian Text with Interlinear Transliteration and Translation, a Running Translation, Introduction, etc.* [London: Longmans, 1895], ci, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/egy/ebod/> and [http://books.google.com/books/about/The\\_Book\\_of\\_the\\_Dead.html?id=SGBDAQAIAAJ](http://books.google.com/books/about/The_Book_of_the_Dead.html?id=SGBDAQAIAAJ) [accessed March 7, 2013]). This description is technically inconsistent with a materialistic interpretation of the pictures of Nut (for sky) and Shu (for air), which Budge mentions a few lines later. Inasmuch as both pictures involve gods, one may doubt whether a materialistic interpretation captures the point in either case. Both pictures may perhaps be artistic representations, not quasi-scientific models of physical structure.

<sup>25</sup> Vincent Arieh Tobin, “Myths: Creation Myths,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (ed. Donald B. Redford; 3 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:471; also 2:469.

<sup>26</sup> James P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (Yale Egyptological Studies 2; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 8; see also p. 62.

This kind of description is antimaterialistic, antithetical to science, not at all akin to the interest in secondary physical causes and physical structure characteristic of modern science. It is so different that it is challenging to imagine what it would be like actually to live in a culture of that kind. Egyptologist Vincent Tobin observes:

Creation myths in any culture are not intended as scientific explications of the way in which the universe came into being; rather, they are symbolic articulations of the meaning and significance of the realm of created being.<sup>27</sup>

Note how Tobin contrasts creation myths with “scientific explications.” According to Tobin’s view, creation myths are not crude substitutes that attempt to give the same *kind* of information as modern science. Rather, they are “symbolic articulations.” They focally address religious depth and the meaning of the world relevant to human living.

Over against Tobin’s view, a student may of course find other modern interpretations of myths that move in physicalistic directions; these interpretations may see in the myths a direct analogue to “scientific explications.” My point is not to decide between various interpretations, but to point out that the existence of variant interpretations constitutes a difficulty. Typical semi-popular accounts of the ancient Near East may pass over these difficulties. Such accounts are written not for specialists in Egyptology or in the study of ancient Mesopotamia, but for a broader audience. Understandably, simplifications take place. Semi-popular accounts may then end up with physicalistic interpretations of some of the pieces from ancient myths. These physicalistic interpretations may look plausible to beginning readers, because such physicalistic interpretations can cite both primary and secondary literature in their favor. Nonspecialist readers remain unaware of the possibility of different interpretations.

The vehicle-cargo approach has a difficulty here. This approach is appealing only if it is correct in making the claim that Gen 1 contains some erroneous views with respect to the physical structure of the cosmos. But does such a claim hold up?

Actually, the vehicle-cargo approach can be tempted to want to have it both ways. At one time it may tell us that Gen 1 is only about theology, and not about events. It says that God is the sole Creator. God exhibits his power in the world, he made a world suitable for human habitation, and he made things that would give us human benefits. But, according to this view, Gen 1 is not at all about particular events that happened in space and time, such as the appearing of the dry land (Gen 1:9). The vehicle-cargo approach tells us that this is so because Genesis is correcting the false theology of the surrounding polytheistic myths, which were also theological in essence.

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<sup>27</sup> Tobin, “Myths: Creation Myths,” 2:469. Also Allen: “The Egyptian explanations are more *metaphysical* than physical. They are concerned with what lies beyond physical reality” (*Genesis in Egypt*, 56).

At another time the vehicle-cargo approach may tell us that Gen 1 includes and does not correct a false cosmology of ancient times. Common examples would include the earth-centered description and the theory of the solid dome of sky with a heavenly sea above it. But Genesis includes such things “innocently,” because it does not intend to “teach” this cosmology. The vehicle-cargo approach tells us that this is so because Gen 1 exhibits some parallels with the surrounding polytheistic myths, which (it alleges) contain a false cosmological view of the physical composition and physical structure of the universe.

But we need to make up our minds. Are the cosmological myths in the surrounding cultures only interested in religious explanations for natural phenomena, together with the practical benefits for mankind, or are they also interested in issues of physical composition and structure and secondary physical causation in a manner similar to modern scientific interests? If the former, then they do not really address physical composition and structure. For example, according to a narrowly religious, poetic interpretation, the ancient Near Eastern myths did not say that the sky is literally a solid dome. Rather, they merely used a stock of poetic or symbolical pictures to communicate what they considered to be religious truths about the gods and their relation to the visible sky (its appearance). Therefore, Gen 1 cannot be using or including false materialistic cosmology borrowed from the myths, because such cosmology did not exist.<sup>28</sup>

Suppose, on the other hand, that cosmological myths *do* include an interest in physical structure. Suppose that they do say, among other things, that the sky is a materially solid dome. According to the vehicle-cargo principle that says that Gen 1 is analogous, Gen 1 also addresses the same concerns. In that case, the vehicle-cargo claim that Gen 1 is restricted narrowly to theological concerns collapses.

I believe, then, that the vehicle-cargo approach borders on incoherence. I suspect that behind this lack of coherence lies the difficulty of understanding

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<sup>28</sup> One possible reply from the vehicle-cargo approach might be to say that information about the material composition, material structure, and physical causation has a kind of indirect presence in the myths. Allegedly, such information is—more or less—presupposed but not discussed. But this should be recognized for what it is, a tenuous inference, given our cultural distance from the ancient Near East and given the partial character of our knowledge. Tenuous inferences become more problematic when they are influenced by the myth of modern scientific metaphysics, which generates a confident expectation that “of course” the ancients would have had materialistic theories in the background, on which the myths were built.

The question also arises whether the vehicle-cargo approach is distinguishing adequately between what the myths actually say and the total corpus of what the surrounding cultures believed. Likewise with Gen 1: Israelite cultures through the centuries may have included a variety of mistaken beliefs and assumptions, and these would vary somewhat from one individual to another, from one group to another, and from one time to another. That is different from what Genesis says. On a fair reading, Genesis simply does not address all the detailed beliefs of individuals. We are back to Bernard Ramm’s discussion of “non-postulational” language (Ramm, *Christian View of Science*, 69); and to Calvin’s point that Scripture addresses ordinary people in ordinary ways (appearances). See also Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, 96 n. 8; and Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview*, chs. 3–4, 8–13.

cultures that not only lack modern scientific knowledge, but do not really have anything like a global framework of complex interlocking theories of physical structure and secondary causation to serve as a plausible substitute. Instead, they have a spiritistic, antimaterialistic vision that sees gods in the forces and phenomena (appearances) of nature. Such a vision is not a twin to science but merely a counterfeit spiritual analogue to the biblical teaching about angels and demons and the presence of God in nature.

Theoretically, such antimaterialistic visions could of course be combined with speculations of a materialistic sort. Once a culture enters the darkness and confusion of false gods, confusions can multiply. But one may still ask questions about relative likelihood. Within the theistic worldview of the Bible, we may distinguish between God as the primary cause and secondary, physical causes within the world (e.g., Exod 22:6; Neh 4:3; Job 1:19; Eccl 11:3; Matt 7:27), because God as creator is distinct from his creatures.<sup>29</sup> Within a polytheistic worldview, there is no such distinction. The lack of distinction may lead to single-level thinking in which the gods are mingled willy-nilly with natural forces. The gods are identified with natural forces, and so there is only one kind of cause. Interest in a second, subordinate level of physical causation may collapse into interest in the activities of the gods. Within a worldview of this kind, it is not clear that it would make sense to seek for a materialistic explanation *in addition to* or *as background for* the personalistic explanations involving gods.<sup>30</sup>

It might also be the case that people in these cultures retained an interest in a separate level of secondary causes, but that the polytheistic mythic genre ignored this level. In this case also, it would be a mistake to try to infer theories of physical causation from the myths.

Finally, it might be the case that the OT from time to time drew on a stock of typical images and analogies used by Israelites in discussing the world around them. We can use stock images and analogies without hardening them into a materialistic *theory*. Today, we can talk about the mind without adopting a particular *theory* of cognition. We talk about a person with a big “ego” without committing ourselves to Sigmund Freud’s *theory* of the ego. Likewise, might ancient discussion of the observable world creatively use the imagery of a house, with pillars, windows, doors, or upper chambers, or the image of a tent, or an

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<sup>29</sup> The technical expressions “primary cause” and “secondary cause” came into use subsequent to biblical times. But their use summarizes distinctions found within the Bible. In Job 1:19 the house falls because of “a great wind”—a secondary cause; in Job 1:21 Job acknowledges God as the primary cause. Similarly, Exod 14:21 says that “the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind,” thereby acknowledging the Lord as primary cause and the strong east wind as secondary cause. One could multiply such examples.

<sup>30</sup> “Causation emanates from the divine [gods], not from within the material world itself” (Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, 39). There is also the issue of *magic*, which according to Mesopotamian records can be used by either gods or humans. Does magic presuppose an impersonal, abstract order on which the tricks of magic rely? See John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 40.

expanse?<sup>31</sup> Could such imagery appear, without teaching a detailed physicalistic *theory*? Modern physicalistic readings run the danger of not recognizing analogy and metaphor in ancient texts.

### V. *Examples from Myths*

For the sake of illustration, let us consider some brief examples.

#### 1. *Tiamat Becoming the Sky*

The first example comes from the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish*. Tablet 4 describes how, after Marduk has killed Tiamat,

He split her like a shellfish into two parts:  
Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky,  
Pulled down the bar and posted guards.  
He bade them to allow not her waters to escape.<sup>32</sup>

Consider now some possible interpretations, and how they are affected by the interpreter's assumptions. Student A offers a materialistic interpretation:

The ancient people, having no knowledge of scientific explanations of physical structure and causal origin, produce stories of gods as a substitute explanation. The poem attributes the origin of the sky to Marduk, which is natural, given that Marduk was the patron god of Babylon. The physical stuff with which he begins is the slain body of Tiamat, the water goddess, which implies that the material composition of Tiamat is water. Marduk splits Tiamat in two. The sky consists of half the body of Tiamat. It is a body of water. It is held in by a physical barrier, which is symbolized by the bar. This picture coheres with other ancient Near Eastern texts, which have essentially the same picture of a heavenly sea held up by a solid barrier of sky.

We shall make only a few critical observations about this and the other interpretations to come. This interpretation by Student A proposes that one of the purposes of the ancient myth is to explain the same *kinds* of things that are in focus in popularized modern science, namely, physical composition and causal origins. Given that assumption, the explanation is plausible. But there are a few flies in the ointment.

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<sup>31</sup> A list of instances from the ancient Near East might be quite expansive. We could begin with Amos 9:6; Job 38:4-11, 22; Isa 40:22.

<sup>32</sup> E. A. Speiser, trans., *ANET* 67, Tablet 4.137-140. An alternate translation is offered by Benjamin R. Foster:

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,  
And ordered them not to let her waters escape. (*COS* 1:398 [item 1.111])



One fly is that earlier lines in the poem *Enuma Elish* depict Tiamat in bodily form (with references to legs, mouth, lips, belly, heart, and carcass). This depiction, if taken as a description of physical “composition,” is at odds with the view that she is water (as suggested by her role as water goddess and by the line [line 140] that refers to “her waters” that must not be allowed to escape).

Second, within the poem, where is the alleged solid barrier that holds up the heavenly sea? Tiamat is water. The upper half of her split body may plausibly be described as a heavenly sea. But the poem mentions no solid barrier that separates the upper half of her body from the lower half. Marduk “split her”—whether by a sword, a knife, an axe, his bare hands, or by other means is not mentioned. Are we to infer that, after the split, the two parts stay apart by themselves, or perhaps by the bare power of Marduk? Line 138 in the poem says that Marduk “ceiled it [half the body] as sky.” Again, no barrier is mentioned. The key word is “ceiled,” not “sealed.” Marduk brought it about that the sky functions as the ceiling of the world. It does *not* serve as the barrier keeping the waters up; rather, the sky *is* the half body of Tiamat, which is water. The sky apparently *is* the heavenly sea. These details do not match the modern theory, which postulates two distinct substances, the lower one of which is a solid dome, while the upper one is liquid water comprising the heavenly sea.

Or suppose we postulate that the half body of Tiamat is not water but is a solid sky. If half her body has been used for this purpose, the modern student cannot plausibly claim that she is *also* liquid and is the heavenly sea *above* the sky, the sky which of course is also Tiamat. Thus, the modern theory of two substances does not cohere with this alternate view of a solid Tiamat any better than it matches the original view that Tiamat is the water and not a solid sky.

Third, the bar, the only apparently inanimate object in the description, is a “bar” or “bolt” rather than a solid dome.<sup>33</sup> The word “bar” suggests a bar on a door or a gate, but there is no mention of a door or gate.<sup>34</sup> Even if there were,

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin Foster (*COS*1:398) offers the alternate translation “stretched out the hide,” instead of “pulled down the bar” (see n. 32 above). Presumably the “hide” is the hide of Tiamat. It might serve as a solid barrier for her internal waters. But Foster offers no explanation as to what motivates his alternate translation. Wayne Horowitz offers a similar translation, “stretched out a skin,” again with no explanation (Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, 112). The underlying Assyrian word is *parku*, “bar, bolt” (*CAD* 12:188 B); “part of a lock, or bolt” (William Muss-Arnolt, *Assyrisch-englisch-deutsches Handwörterbuch* [Berlin: Reuther & Reichard; New York: Lemcke & Büchner, 1905], 2:829). King offers the translation, “He fixed a bolt” (L. W. King, ed., *The Seven Tablets of Creation, or the Babylonian and Assyrian Legends concerning the Creation of the World and of Mankind* [2 vols.; London: Luzac, 1902], 1:77, <http://king-of-heroes.co.uk/enuma-elish/> [accessed March 26, 2013]). Similarly, Budge translates, “He pulled the bolt” (Budge, *The Babylonian Legends of Creation* [1921], <http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/blc/blc11.htm> [accessed March 26, 2013]). Langdon has “He slid the bolt” (Stephen Langdon, *The Babylonian Epic of Creation: Restored from the Recently Recovered Tablets of Aššur; Transcription, Translation & Commentary* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1923], 147).

<sup>34</sup> “The gates on both sides” are mentioned later on (*ANET* 67, Tablet 5.8), but in the context of a different function.

it would say nothing about a solid dome.<sup>35</sup> The visible sky in its appearance normally shows nothing that would suggest a bar or a door or a gate. And, as we have seen, according to the most plausible materialistic interpretation, the visible sky is the heavenly sea constituted by Tiamat's half body. A solid bar, as a physical object, would be out of place. So it appears that the whole description is metaphorical or symbolical, or at least not physical.

Fourth, Marduk posts "guards" and gives instructions. So the more fundamental feature that keeps in the waters is the personal activity of the guards. What are they guarding against? Presumably, against some other personal being or beings who would come and open the gate. The picture as a whole is really not materialistic, but remains decidedly personalistic, we might say spiritistic. If so, one may raise the question of how much this myth is really intent on giving an explanation based on physical causation in the sense of modern science.

It is sometimes alleged that the division of Tiamat in two parts, like a shellfish, corresponds to the division in Gen 1:6-8 between upper and lower waters. But it should be noted that later in the poem, Marduk divides the Anunnaki, a group of six hundred gods, into two companies and assigns one company to carry out tasks in the heavens and the other on earth.<sup>36</sup> The whole picture of two realms focuses on works by spirits, not mechanisms.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, the description in *Enuma Elish* occurs in lines of poetry, which are part of a large epic poem about the gods. The genre encourages us to expect imaginative, metaphorical, symbolical, and evocative language, rather than a focus on the physical composition or structure of the cosmos. There is, moreover, an obvious use of figurative language in a detail: the comparison with a shellfish.<sup>38</sup>

Next, student B offers a spiritistic interpretation:

The author of the text was a spiritist, who saw spirits everywhere. There is no "matter" in the modern sense. Tiamat, the water goddess, is after all a goddess, a spiritual being. The water is simply a phenomenal manifestation of her being and her activity. When Marduk kills her, he kills her chaotic fighting activity, but the resulting corpse is an inactive spirit. The language about her bodily parts is a pictorial representation, expressing the fact that she has powers to produce visible effects. The guards are spirits, subordinate gods under Marduk's orders. The breaking out of

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<sup>35</sup> "There is no direct evidence that ancient Mesopotamians thought the visible heavens to be a dome" (Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, 264). Horowitz does, however, supply some indirect evidence that the ancients pictured the "Path of Enlil" for the stars as curved (pp. 264-65). This idea of a curved path for stars is natural: a naked-eye observer watching a star or a constellation through the entirety of a clear night would in most cases see it moving on a curved path. Horowitz rightly distinguishes between the path of the stars and what Mesopotamians thought about the shape of the sky itself (p. 265).

<sup>36</sup> ANET 68, Tablet 6.39-46.

<sup>37</sup> See also Weeks's observations about the difficulty in harmonizing a physicalistic interpretation with the distinction between fresh water and salt water (Weeks, "Cosmology in Historical Context," 286-90).

<sup>38</sup> According to Foster's translation (*COS* 1:398), it is "a fish for drying" instead of "a shellfish."

the waters would represent a breaking out of the spirit of Tiamat, which would imply the reintroduction of her chaos-creating effects. The bar is a pictorial representation of spiritual binding (which might, for example, take place through a spell).

This interpretation has the advantage of taking seriously the presence of gods and the personalistic character of the overall description. According to this interpretation, the purpose is not to offer an explanation of physical composition and physical causation that would ignorantly substitute for modern science (Student A). Rather, the purpose is to supply the audience with a picture that in the long run will enable them to interact in wise and profitable ways with the world of spirits around them.

Student C offers a dualistic interpretation:

The author of the text was a dualist, who believed in body and spirit and the interaction of the two. Gods as well as human beings have both body and spirit, the latter animating the former. Tiamat's body is water, while her spirit is the spirit of chaos. Marduk's triumph over chaos is depicted by the killing of the spirit of Tiamat. The water then becomes the sky. But it is still capable of being reanimated and breaking out to reintroduce chaos. So Marduk appoints subordinate gods ("guards") to make sure it does not happen.

According to this interpretation, the narrative makes suggestions about why things are as they are in appearance, namely, because some kind of body has been fixed in a certain location. But there is little worry about whether the "body" is solid or liquid or gaseous (to import modern terminology), or just how this "body" is geometrically shaped. The principal purpose, as with the spiritistic interpretation, is to help orient people on how to interact with the spirits of the gods, who are the principal power sources. It is important that a human being either has a god or goddess on his side or at least takes care that the gods not become antagonistic to him. Information about the gods is supplied in the long run in order to guide humans about how to interact with the gods. For example, by worshiping Marduk people guard against chaos entering their lives.

The main weakness of the dualistic interpretation is that it may be anachronistically projecting into the ancient Near East a later dualism, such as that of Plato or Descartes.

Student D offers a monistic interpretation:

The author thought in terms of fluid wholes, rather than dualistic separation between body and soul. The water is both water and the water goddess Tiamat. And Tiamat is present when we speak about her manifestations through bodily parts, which show us the visible side of an integral whole. When Marduk splits Tiamat like a shellfish, he is splitting the water in two and splitting the goddess in two, because they are the same thing in the end—two different ways of describing the same thing. When Marduk makes the sky out of Tiamat, the sky is both the sky and water and also the goddess Tiamat. The "guards" to whom Marduk gives orders are presumably both subordinate gods and processes that result in the water remaining up there.

This interpretation is similar to the spiritistic interpretation of Student B. But it does not result in quite the same flavor of antimaterialism. That which is visible or “material,” whether water or sky or earth or sun, is not “matter” in the sense of an Aristotelian form-matter distinction. It is “matter” that is simultaneously “spirit,” because spirits are in water and sky and so forth, to the point of identification.

In addition to these interpretations, we can contemplate interpretations that are somewhat minimizing. For example, Student E offers a sociological-functional interpretation:

Myths serve to unify a social group by explaining its origin and nature and by giving it common foundational guiding beliefs. A myth need not be literally true to accomplish these goals of social stability and unity. So it is with the myth concerning Tiamat. The victory of Marduk and the utter defeat of Tiamat provides the society with a functional basis for religious unity in worshiping Marduk, and that in turn leads to social unity in serving the Babylonian kingdom, for whom Marduk is the patron god.

This kind of interpretation shows the influence of reductionistic assumptions that crop up within some modern forms of social anthropology. It is weak partly because it does not distinguish clearly between the modern view by the anthropological observer and the view of those who lived within the ancient culture. The ancient people could only have successful results in social unity if they actually believed the myth to be true. For all we know, there may have been skeptics here and there, analogous to the skepticism about gods that cropped up among Greek philosophers. But the myths would cease to produce social allegiance if the majority of people ceased to believe them.

Student F offers an allegorical interpretation:

The myth of Marduk and Tiamat is an allegory about the conflicts and harmonies among natural forces, such as those of water and sky.

The allegorical interpretation still allows for the myth to have some social effectiveness, because people still believe it to be “about” something other than social effectiveness. It is about natural forces, and social unity results from unified views about these natural forces and how people should interact with them. But this allegorical interpretation is implausible as a general explanation for the ancient Near East, because there is widespread evidence—including child sacrifice—that many people of the time took seriously the actual existence of gods.

There may be still other interpretations. But this list should be enough to illustrate the difficulty of interpreting the full significance of a text coming from an ancient culture. The background assumptions that we bring to the text, whether materialistic or sociological or dualistic, contribute to the shape of the interpretation that comes out. All but the materialistic interpretation lead to doubts about whether the ancient texts testify to some detailed theory about

the composition, physical and spatial structure, and secondary physical causes of “nature” and of the sky in particular.

Still, there are some commonalities. All the interpretations share an interest in saying something about the sky. They all address in one way or another basic human interests in the meaning of appearances. Except for the reductionistic sociological-functional interpretation by Student E, all the interpretations give an “account” of the appearance of the sky and how it came about. They differ radically in what *kind* of account they give.

## 2. *Egyptian Picture of the Sky Goddess*

Our second example comes from Egypt. Egypt has a number of pictorial representations of Nut, the goddess of the sky, in which the front of her body faces downward. The body as a whole forms a kind of tent-like shape, with her trunk as the roof, her arms and hands as the sloping side to the right, and her legs and feet as the sloping side to the left.<sup>39</sup> Her body is held up by the uplifted hands of the air god, Shu. Lying at Shu’s feet is the earth god, Geb. In some of the representations Shu’s arms are propped up on either side by the uplifted arms of two images of Heh, the androgynous deity/deities of eternity.

Student A offers a materialistic interpretation:

Lacking modern science, the Egyptians explained such things by a primitive substitute. They said that the material composition of the sky was the body of a goddess. They explained the physical structure of the sky by saying that it was formed into a tent-like shape by the bends in the goddess’s body, and that it was held up both by the hands and feet of the goddess herself and by the hands of the air god.

Like the earlier interpretation of Tiamat, this interpretation suffers the weakness of injecting into ancient Egypt the questions about material composition and physical structure that are of interest to modern science. It may have postulated, against the background of scientific metaphysics, that such questions must reveal the most ultimate realities, and that the Egyptians in searching for ultimate reality must have been trying to answer these questions, but in a confused way.

An additional weakness lies in the fact that this interpretation has to put into the background the personal interactions of the gods and between gods and humans that form part of Egyptian thinking.<sup>40</sup> These interactions must be interpreted as only a primitive way of leading up to answering the “real” questions about physical structure. The physicalistic interpretation is also made implausible by the presence of Shu, the air god, and Heh, representing eternity,

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., the photograph from the Greenfield Papyrus (the *Book of the Dead* of Nesitanebtashru), by the British Museum, available online at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Geb,\\_Nut,\\_Shu.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Geb,_Nut,_Shu.jpg) (accessed February 11, 2013). The same picture appears in ANEP183, #542. Another picture of Nut can be found in Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 115, Plate 1, with discussion, pp. 1-7.

<sup>40</sup> According to various Egyptian stories, Geb and Nut were the offspring of Shu and Tefnut, and the two of them produced further gods (Osiris, Isis, Seth, and others) as offspring.

because it is implausible to think that the Egyptians were giving an ultimately mechanistic account involving literal physical props from the “hands” of air and eternity to hold up the sky.

In addition, there are features in the picture that have no visible counterpart in the sky. For example, where in the visible sky can one see the eyes, ears, hair, and mouth of Nut? Where in the sky is the line of division between her two arms or two legs? Where in the sky are her feet, toes, hands, and fingers? These features suggest that we have an imaginative representation of a goddess in human form, not a physical, literal representation of parts of the sky. The goddess as a spiritual reality is represented spatially, but the pictorial representation is symbolical. Thus, a modern materialistic interpretation may be missing the nature of imagistic representation in Egypt:

The Egyptian gods, unlike the anthropomorphic gods of the Greeks, were not understood to be limited to the forms in which iconography portrayed them.<sup>41</sup>

Student B offers a spiritistic interpretation:

In Egyptian thinking, sky, air, and earth are not composed of “matter” as we know it. Rather, they are the visible manifestations of the gods and goddesses of sky, air, and earth, respectively. The picture is a metaphorical representation of the reality.

In this interpretation, the world is composed of spirits. It has plausibility, since the focus is on the gods and their activities.

Student C offers a dualistic interpretation:

The regions of nature are composed of matter and spirit, dualistically conceived. The matter of sky, air, and earth are animated by the corresponding spirit/gods.

This interpretation too has plausibility, but suffers from the weakness that it may unwittingly have read into the picture a body/soul dualism that is characteristic only of later cultures more familiar to us.

Student D offers a monistic interpretation:

The gods flow into the realities of sky, air, and earth with no sharp distinction between gods and visible realities.

We could also consider sociological-functional interpretations and allegorical interpretations that would discount some of the mythic elements. We will pass over these, since the pattern should be evident.

### 3. *The Making of Mankind from the Blood of Kingu*

Finally, we may consider another piece from *Enuma Elish*, concerning the making of mankind:

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<sup>41</sup> Vincent Arieh Tobin, “Myths: An Overview,” *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (ed. Donald B. Redford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:464.

They [the assembly of the gods] imposed on him [ the god Kingu] his guilt  
 [for inciting the rebellion] and severed his blood (vessels).  
 Out of his blood they fashioned mankind.  
 He [Ea?] imposed the service and let free the gods.  
 After Ea, the wise, had created mankind,  
 Had imposed upon it the service of the gods—<sup>42</sup>

Since the description of the severed blood vessels and blood sounds physicalistic, this description seems to offer an opening for Student A's materialistic interpretation:

We have an account of the origin of mankind, with Kingu's blood as the material composition of mankind.

This interpretation has the weakness that the bodies of human beings are quite obviously composed of skin and bones (mentioned in *Enuma Elish* 6.5) as well as blood. The interpretation therefore has to include an additional inference, perhaps that the "fashioning" by the gods transforms blood into other materials. The tablet also does not make clear whether the immediate result of creation consists of a single individual man or a pair or a large group. It does not go into detail about the process. Nor does it answer the question as to why blood is singled out.

This omission gives space for a spiritistic interpretation from Student B:

The blood represents the life of Kingu, as a spirit. His spirit is transmuted into the spirit animating mankind. Man as a spiritual being has within him a divine spark, deriving from Kingu's divine being. Like the rest of the poem, this description of creation has a sustained focus on spirits, not on "matter."

Student C may similarly produce a dualistic interpretation:

The blood of Kingu is a part of his body, but simultaneously a metaphorical representation of his spirit. Thus we infer that the poem is saying that both body (the blood as literal stuff) and the spirit of Kingu are transmuted (by "fashioning") into the bodies and spirits of mankind.

#### 4. *Sifting Among Interpretations*

These examples should suffice to indicate that materialistic interpretations are not the only ones possible. The materialistic interpretation is the only one that finds in these ancient texts and pictures evidence for a full-blown physicalistic cosmology. The variety of other interpretations makes it clear that the materialistic interpretation is in danger of reading into the texts the focus of modern science on material explanation. This reading-in can easily take place because of the influence of the myth of understanding cultures from facts.

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<sup>42</sup> ANET 68, Tablet 6.32-36; COS 1:401, with minor variations in the translation.

All this is not to say that the ancient Near Eastern cultures had no physicalistic theories about material composition, physical structure, and physical causation. Perhaps they did. But do we *know* that they did? Even if they did, we can still doubt whether the genre of cosmomic myth is suited to reveal underlying physicalistic theories. If, as Tobin believes, the myths are about “symbolic articulations” of meaning, they move in other directions.

Our purpose is not to debate these questions in further detail, but to show that discerning the actual character of cultures is more difficult than it appears at first. A simple summary taken from sources, either primary or secondary or both, may only communicate an armchair “knowledge” of a culture. The danger increases when such summaries are presented for popular consumption. The myth of easy understanding then remains unchallenged.

### VI. *The Sacred*

I call the three mistaken modern notions *myths* for four reasons. First, they are not true, but distortions of truths. Second, they function at a popular level, and are seldom challenged at that level. Rather, they underlie and guide the global directions of people’s thinking. They have coherent social functions, and that is one reason why they endure and propagate from one person to another. Third, though not all the myths have a prominent narrative structure, they all interlock with and depend on the second myth, the myth of progress, which definitely employs a narrative. The myth of progress is the story of enlightenment triumphing over darkness.

Fourth, the myths are sacred, particularly the first myth (scientific metaphysics) and to some extent the second. People are tempted to respond to critical questions about the myths not with careful analysis, but with mere dismissal, or with astonishment that anyone would be so obtuse as to entertain doubts. Because the myths have an important role in guiding people’s thinking, questioning or abandoning them threatens to leave people spiritually and intellectually “naked,” disoriented, and frightened by the loss of familiar landmarks. People’s stake in them is deep. People give their allegiance. They live their lives based on them. In practice, the myths are treated as we treat what is sacred.

### VII. *Misreading?*

My concern, then, is that a vehicle-cargo approach to Gen 1 may still allow the unwitting propagation of modern myths. These myths interfere with understanding Gen 1 and result in projecting modern ideas into the interpretive process. Interpretation may include negative projection that detects alleged primitive mistakes, such as the rising of the sun or the idea of a heavenly sea, or positive projection that sees in the ancient world a direct but primitive analogue to modern science.



The irony is that a vehicle-cargo approach arises directly from a desire to hear Gen 1 on its own terms, rather than in terms of modern science. The vehicle-cargo approach is reacting to a real need, in fact two needs. On one side, dismissive critics reject Gen 1 completely because they allege it is contradicted by science. On the other side, some young-earth creationists endeavor to find detailed harmonies with technical science, with the hope of showing that the Bible holds up under such scrutiny. The vehicle-cargo approach rises to the challenge by trying to teach people on both sides that they are misreading the text.

I agree that the two sides are both misreading the text.<sup>43</sup> But I differ from the vehicle-cargo approach by raising the question of whether it too unwittingly propagates more misreading, albeit of a different kind.

There is a further irony in the vehicle-cargo approach. The vehicle-cargo approach criticizes naïve modern readings of Gen 1 for artificially projecting into Genesis ideas from modern science. It also criticizes the philosophers and theologians who resisted Copernicus, because they projected Aristotelian and Ptolemaic theories of ultimate structure—metaphysics—into Gen 1. But is it doing something analogous? The vehicle-cargo approach also projects its own brand of “metaphysics” into Gen 1, namely, the metaphysics that it has found from reading ancient Near Eastern myths. As a result, instead of being captive to modern science or to Ptolemaic metaphysics, Gen 1 is made captive to a hypothesized ancient Near Eastern metaphysics—a view of ultimate material structure.

The vehicle-cargo approach would of course reply that its projection is legitimate, because such projection originates from the environment in which Genesis was originally written. Yes, an environment helps us to understand a text. But an environment is not a text. If one moves too easily from environment to text, one makes the mistake of assuming that, when God writes, his writing is captive to the culture at the time. An additional subordinate mistake can arise if we fail to make a careful distinction between what the Bible says and the full complex of beliefs held by people to whom it comes. Despite its appeal to Copernicus, the vehicle-cargo approach has not learned the lesson that it should have learned from Copernicus: do not read culturally derived physicalistic metaphysics into the Bible. Bernard Ramm’s principle needs attention: the Bible lacks “*theorizing*.”

### VIII. *A Minor or Major Problem?*

Is my disagreement with the vehicle-cargo approach major or minor? In a way, it might seem to be a small matter, because some forms of a vehicle-cargo approach assure us that they believe in the divine authority and the inerrancy of the Bible. They work within that framework, but they want to say that Gen

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<sup>43</sup> Readers who want to know what I think a good reading would look like may see Collins, *Genesis 1–4*; Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, ch. 6, and more broadly chs. 4–10; and a second article that will follow as a sequel to this one, “Correlations with Providence in Genesis 1.”

I simply does not mean what many modern readers think it does. The naïve modern reader thinks that Gen 1 is about science, or at least that it is about particular events in space and time in which science has a stake. Some forms of the vehicle-cargo approach say that it is only about theology and human benefit, but not about events. It teaches that God is the only God and sole Creator, and emphasizes how various aspects of creation serve human interests (e.g., that plants provide food for man and animals, as is indicated in Gen 1:29-30).

I agree that Gen 1 is centrally about theology and about human benefit, but I also think that it sets forth particular events that illustrate and express the theology by exhibiting God's rule over the world. The events are described not in a technical scientific manner, but in ordinary language. In sum, the vehicle-cargo approach and I disagree about details, but we agree (and the young-earth creationist also agrees) about the core of the theological teaching.

Nevertheless, hermeneutical questions make the disagreement one of larger consequence. The vehicle-cargo approach invokes principles about the nature of Scripture in its interpretation of Gen 1. A reader can take these principles and run further with them than more cautious interpreters would approve of. For instance, suppose that a modern interpreter says that Gen 1 is about theology and *not* specific events in time and space. This dichotomy is problematic. Theology is expressed precisely through God's actions in events in time and space. If we make a false dichotomy in Gen 1, this same dichotomy can spread to other parts of the Bible. A principle of this kind easily becomes a wedge by which people pull away from the reality that God acts in history and speaks about history. God does not merely teach general truths about himself.<sup>44</sup>

As a second step, people may also find themselves pulling away from NT teaching that refers to OT events. One difficulty with the vehicle-cargo approach is that the NT often refers to OT events in ways that presuppose that the OT is actually giving us history, not parable. So if a vehicle-cargo approach reconfigures OT history as parable (or folklore with a small historical core, or theology dressed out to imitate historical narrative), the next step is to reconfigure the NT by saying that its writers were men of their time, who mistakenly believed that the OT gave them history, and that this feature in the NT is a form of vehicle-cargo communication. At this point, the idea of the "vehicle" expands to remove not only history but pieces of NT teaching. Of course, an advocate of this approach may say, as his mantra, that the pieces in question are not the "teaching" (the "cargo") but merely the "vehicle" for the actual core of real teaching. By a series of such concessions, vehicle-cargo thinking may arrive at a point where the actual "teaching" of the Bible shrinks to a smaller and smaller core.

It gets worse. Given the propensity of sinful human nature not to submit to any teaching whatsoever that it does not find pleasing to the flesh, readers armed with a sufficiently expansive view of the vehicle can simply excise

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<sup>44</sup> Weeks, "Cosmology in Historical Context," 293.

anything they want by labeling it in their minds as merely a vehicle. By such a process, one may, for example, arrive at the conclusion that the real teaching of the Bible is the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man and the principle of love—old-fashioned liberalism.

The advocates of a more conservative form of vehicle-cargo approach disagree with these conclusions. I am glad they do. But I want to point out that an alleged distinction between vehicle and cargo needs critical inspection.

### IX. *Further Alternatives*

There remain many other approaches to explaining Gen 1. We have touched on some of them just now by reflecting on ways in which people might travel well beyond the starting position of the vehicle-cargo approach. We cannot explore these alternatives fully within the scope of this article, but it is worthwhile mentioning a few, if only to compare them with their more conservative alternatives.

Some people adopt a full-blown critical stance. They say that the Bible is a human document, not a divine document at all. As a human document, it is subject to all the foibles of humanity and the foibles of the cultures within which it arose. In principle these foibles may include mistaken ideas not only about the cosmos but about God or gods. People with such a critical stance may still admire the Bible after a fashion. They may say that the Bible includes some of the best of the world's religious literature; we can learn a lot from it. But they also draw a clear conclusion: there is no particular reason for anyone to trust its theological explorations any more than one trusts what it says concerning the cosmos.

Another alternative is found in neo-orthodox theology. Neo-orthodoxy takes various complex forms, which we cannot catalog here. If we are allowed to simplify, we might say that it wants to allow full scope to historical criticism at the level of propositional content, but still wants to ascribe to the Bible a role in divine encounter. Since, however, the "encounter" does not have stable propositional content, in practice the Bible does not function as a divinely authoritative text in any sphere. As a result, neo-orthodox theology itself does not have any authoritative basis.

Other people might draw the line between theology on the one hand and science on the other. According to this view, the Bible is right in everything it teaches about God and religious ideas, but may fall into error in statements that impinge on science or cosmology. This position is akin to what we have described above as a vehicle-cargo approach, because it draws similar conclusions about what we can trust in the Bible. But it differs by directly and openly allowing for errors in matters of science. It does not hesitate to call them errors, and so it does not find it necessary to give elaborate explanations that appeal to genres in the ancient Near East. Traditionally, this position has been labeled "limited inerrancy"—that is, inerrancy limited to the sphere of theology. By contrast, a more cautious vehicle-cargo approach insists that the Bible is without

error in what it teaches, but that modern readers have largely misunderstood the actual teaching of Gen 1.

The theory of limited inerrancy at least has the advantage of being able to talk in a simple, coherent way about the message of Gen 1 in comparison to the surrounding myths. In principle, it leaves open what is the exact relationship between Gen 1 and the myths. The myths may or may not be making physicalistic claims. And Gen 1 may or may not be making similar claims. Whatever may be the truth about such things, the theory of limited inerrancy says that the separation of truth and error in Gen 1 does not depend on answering such detailed questions. Rather, the separation of truth and error takes place by a clear-cut criterion, namely, the criterion of *content*. Theological content is true, while scientific content or content touching on issues of science need not be true.

Some of the writings that adopt a form of vehicle-cargo approach travel beyond Gen 1. They use NT as well as OT examples, taken from various genres of literature. This broader selection of examples raises a broader question. Are these vehicle-cargo writings merely making a claim about Gen 1 as a unique text, or Gen 1–11 as a unique text? Or do they address the larger issue of whether we have to accept as true certain kinds of content, whenever this content occurs *anywhere* in the Bible? Some forms of the vehicle-cargo approach might answer that only Gen 1 or Gen 1–11 is affected; in that case the dispute appears to limit itself to the meaning of a single text. If, on the other hand, a vehicle-cargo approach makes a claim about a whole list of other texts, a general principle may be at work: certain kinds of content are judged to be outside the scope of divine truth-telling. Inerrancy is limited to contents *inside* the scope of truth-telling—primarily “theological” content. This position is a form of limited inerrancy. Such a form of vehicle-cargo approach may be dressed up with appeals to the ancient Near East and to questions of genre, and may gain plausibility by expanding its arguments. But at heart it is just a variation on the doctrine of limited inerrancy.

Limited inerrancy may sound simple on paper, but it is not as simple as it sounds. It has liabilities:

(1) Science, particularly science that researches the past, cannot be rigidly isolated from history, and history cannot be rigidly isolated from the theological teaching found in the Bible. God works in history; the work of Christ took place in history; and the Bible indicates that it is important to maintain that this is so (1 Cor 15:1-28). The entanglement of the three spheres means that other forms of limited inerrancy can easily develop, where the scope of divine truth-telling is further narrowed. Not only science, but also history, and if history then also theology entangled in history, are moved outside the scope of inerrancy. Only some theological core may remain as the guaranteed center.

(2) The Bible in its teaching about the word of God makes no distinction as to when it can be trusted, and does not indicate that its trustworthiness is

confined to one sphere. The theory of limited inerrancy disagrees with the Bible's teaching concerning its authority.<sup>45</sup>

(3) Following Christ involves submitting to him as master, which in turn involves submitting to his teaching, teaching that includes affirmations of the divine authority of the OT. So where are we? Are we following Christ or not? Does the theory of limited inerrancy have the practical effect of redefining Christian discipleship? I fear that it truncates Christian discipleship of a genuinely biblical kind, because it releases would-be disciples from a submissive attitude to the OT in selected spheres where modern people now experience desires to escape.

By contrast with limited inerrancy, a more modest form of the vehicle-cargo approach has the advantage of trying to preserve Christian discipleship in a recognizable form. It says that we should accept whatever the Bible teaches on any subject, but that we need to be thoughtful in trying to interpret the Bible. Fair enough.

### X. *Consequences of a Failure to Dispel Myths*

But we need to be equally thoughtful about modern myths. Otherwise, we may take them in by unconscious osmosis. Having absorbed the myths, we find ourselves with no reasonable alternative *except* to follow hermeneutical practices that conform to the patterns dictated by the modern myths. In practice, we end up dismissing anything and everything in the Bible, from whatever genre and in whatever context, that does not fit comfortably within the confines of the alleged assured verities projected by the modern myths. That is, we dismiss material on the basis of content, prior to detailed interpretation, rather than receiving it positively on the basis of sound interpretation.<sup>46</sup>

The myths dictate, for example, that "modern people" know that the sun does not rise. Thus, any statement to the contrary within the Bible is already an infallible signal to modern people. They "know" that they are reading a genre that does not really intend to say what it says, but only uses an accommodated, erroneous expression as a vehicle for some theological truth. As a result, modern mythic "truths" become unchallengeable. The myths tell people beforehand the limits of what the Bible must actually be communicating.

Consider another illustration of how the process works. Let us say that popularized modern science tells us that mankind evolved gradually from simian ancestors. Rather than ask critical questions, the person who accepts

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<sup>45</sup> It would be nice if some of the advocates of new theories of inspiration and divine truthfulness would wrestle directly with major defenses of the "old" theory, such as John M. Frame's *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2010), rather than just ignore them.

<sup>46</sup> Noel Weeks, "Problems in Interpreting Genesis 1," *Creation 2* (June 1979): 27-32, <http://creation.com/problems-in-interpreting-genesis-part-1> (accessed May 6, 2013).

the myth of progress just accepts this pronouncement as the fruit of superior knowledge. Then, without making any effort to re-engage the interpretation of Gen 2–3, Rom 5:12-21, and 1 Cor 15:21-22, 44-49, he instantly “knows” that any apparent claim about a historical Adam must be part of the vehicle, whereby the Bible uses a historically erroneous picture to teach theological truth.

This approach is different from merely using modern knowledge claims as an occasion to re-examine both sides together: we examine (1) whether we have properly understood what the Bible is saying, and (2) whether the modern knowledge claims are as solid as they are commonly assumed to be. We should critically analyze not only simple, popularized summaries from the scientific establishment but simple summaries of the worldview of the ancient Near East and summaries of critical and traditional claims about what Gen 1 or any other key text allegedly means.<sup>47</sup>

### *XI. Positive Understanding of Genesis 1*

I have a further reason for criticizing vehicle-cargo alternatives, both of the more extreme kind and of the more modest kind. I love Gen 1 and what God says through it. I think that if God is gracious to us and if we take Gen 1 with the utmost seriousness, including its cultural alienness, we may be progressively freed from bondage to modern cultural myths, including, preeminently, the myth of scientific metaphysics. This freedom is important for spiritual health. I am disappointed with the vehicle-cargo approach because it unwittingly conceals the meaning of Gen 1 and reinforces rather than challenges the myths that stand in the way of understanding it. As we understand it, we may more and more receive the full impact of its spiritual nourishment.

In a sequel article I intend to take up the positive teaching of Gen 1.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> My own encounters with a sample of modern arguments and explanations suggest to me that in discussions about the ancient Near Eastern environment, uncertainties in interpreting details, uncertainties about a focus on physicality, and incompatibilities between different ancient Near Eastern texts often disappear from view as one moves from the texts themselves to further stages of interpretation: translations, specialists' analyses, surveys for pastors and seminarians, and finally popular summaries for the general public.

<sup>48</sup> Poythress, “Correlations with Providence in Genesis 1.”