

Adam, *what* are you? The Primeval History against the Backdrop of Mesopotamian Mythology

Jens Bruun Kofoed
Copenhagen Lutheran School of Theology
jbk@dbi.edu

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I am not a myth.

MARLENE DIETRICH

Postmodernists believe that truth is myth, and myth, truth. This equation has its roots in pop psychology. The same people also believe that emotions are a form of reality. There used to be another name for this state of mind. It used to be called psychosis.

BRAD HOLLAND

1. Introduction

Though Gunkel's once favored reading of Gen 1-11 as *sagas* has been abandoned, mainstream critical scholarship continues to use the similar label *myth* for the Primeval History. That is, non-historical narratives containing deep, important, and timeless truths. Or, to use a more postmodern term, *true stories*. There can be no doubt that the texts of Gen 1-11 are comparable to a number of Sumerian and Babylonian texts, and that there *is* a literary and historical connection. The problem is how to explain it. While critical *biblical* scholarship deems the biblical texts just as mythical as their Mesopotamian counterparts, Evangelicals insist that the former are historical while the latter are mythical. But on what grounds does one recognize what is mythological and historical in these ancient texts? And in what *sense* does one categorize these texts as mythical or historical?

The aim of the present paper is not to present new information on these texts' form and content, but to investigate what happens when the already accessible and well-known information on form and content is seen through the lens of current literary, linguistic and historical theory in order to gain a better understanding of the primeval history's genre and heuristic value. Being a methodological rather than analytical, let alone exegetical, paper, the natural point of departure must be a discussion on epistemological and methodological issues involved in the analysis of the primeval history.

2. Worldview Contingency

From a postmodern point of view, it is a matter of course that worldview matters both in writing and reading texts. The ancient author of Gen 1-11 selected, wrote and edited his material according to his worldview. The modern reader interprets the text according to *her* worldview. Now, it may seem rather trivial to begin a description of genre in the primeval history by discussing worldview, but I think, nevertheless, it is of utmost importance since the

exposure of the ancient author's *and* the modern reader's worldview reveals the epistemic value of the arguments put forward for this or that genre label. It enables us, in other words, to distinguish between arguments based on personal belief, i.e., a particular worldview, and arguments based on "neutral" methods, i.e., ways of analyzing data that are "common academic property" and therefore used by scholars with *different* worldviews. Why is this important? It is important because in the first case we are obliged to admit the *path-dependency* of our arguments and conclusions, namely that without certain fundamentals of knowledge in place, new knowledge cannot be understood.¹ Both individuals and societies develop cognitive frameworks and schemas that limit the ability to perceive events in ways that differ substantially from the past. Differing historical perspectives between any two different entities will inevitably result in different interpretations of the same piece of knowledge. A different personal belief or worldview, therefore, will often invalidate the arguments put forward for a given interpretation and in turn change the overall picture, while arguments grounded in "neutral" or agreed-on methods can be made and held more strongly *independent* of the scholars' worldview.

Every scholar has an obligation, therefore, to reveal his or her *a prioris*, since it is these *beliefs* that set the perimeter for what in a given text should be placed in the real world and what should be considered part of the authors imaginary world. The decision to label a text "factual" or "fictional" is thus contingent upon the decision maker's own discrimination between what is fact and what is fiction.

Now, one could argue – and Niels Peter Lemche, Philip R. Davies, Lester L. Grabbe, and others *have* in fact argued – that this emphasis on the scholar's obligation to expose his worldview and presuppositions is nothing but an Evangelical apology for being just as academic as their historical-critical colleagues, but it is a matter of fact that this obligation is not only called for by Evangelicals but a commonplace in current literary and historical scholarship. Both Paul Ricoeur and Hayden White, just to mention two internationally and interdisciplinary recognized scholars, acknowledge the importance of this obligation, and as Ricoeur's three tier description of the process of history writing is representative for this approach, it will serve as the "neutral" or "common property" method for our continued discussion on genre in the primeval history.²

3. The Process of History Writing

Ricoeur points out three distinct phases in the process of history-writing: the documentary phase, the explanatory or comprehensive phrase, and the literary phase.³ The initial stage is dubbed "documentary" because it is from written documents or "testimonies" that the historiographer takes his departure. The next step is the explanatory/comprehensive phase, in which questions about causes and reasons are asked. In the final, literary phase, the trusted, "raw" material of the first phase is given order, based on the explanation of the second phase, in a literary representation, the *narrative* or historical discourse.

¹ A useful treatment of epistemic and cognitive path-dependency can be found in R. R. Nelson and S. G. Winter. *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change*. Cambridge, MA: Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982, and D. T. Campbell. *Methodology and Epistemology for Social Science – Selected Papers*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988.

² For a detailed discussion of Ricoeur's model see my *Text and History. Historiography and the Study of the Biblical Text* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005) 201-212.

³ Paul Ricoeur, "Humanities between Science and Art," pp. 3-4. Speech by Paul Ricoeur at the opening ceremony for the "Humanities at the Turn of the Millennium" conference, University of Århus, Denmark (June 4, 1999). Available online at <http://www.hum.au.dk/ckultur/f/pages/publications/pr/hbsa.htm> (accessed November 9, 2005).

Besides being representative of current literary and historical methodology, Ricoeur's three-tier model has several epistemological and heuristic advantages. First, it accounts for the observation that history is after all a kind of literature and that as such it must be exposed to the same methods of criticism and interpretation as literature in general. Second, Ricoeur highlights the potential tension between the deployment of various literary devices and the referential character of historiography. There is no equation between literary device or *narrative*, on the one hand, and fiction on the other—only *tendentiousness*: (historical) narratives *tend* to draw the reader into a literary world without any necessary referents in the real world. By describing this feature of historiography as a *tendentiousness* toward "exclusion of the real past from the linguistic realm," Ricoeur not only acknowledges the *dehistorizing* power of literary devices deployed in the historical narrative, he also suggests that, because this "exclusion" is a *tendentiousness* and *not* a necessity. We cannot tell from the literary level whether various elements in the (historical) narrative refer to the real world by analyzing the *literary* level of a given text. Whatever literary devices it contains, it may or may not refer to real events in time. In order to discuss the epistemic value of these elements, we must regress – Ricoeur continues – from the representational level via the explanatory/comprehensive to the documentary.⁴

Though Ricoeur's model is a good description of the literary mechanisms involved in history writing, it needs, however, to be complemented on one point. Instead of being a linear process moving from documents (i.e. evidence, sources) via explanation (i.e. how the author selects his sources in order to answer his questions) to narrative discourse (i.e. the literary representation of his findings) it is better to view the process as a circle or, even better, a spiral, since the narrative discourse or *historiography* in turn becomes a document itself that can be selected by another author in another process of history writing.

4. Literary Analysis

The starting point for an attempt to describe the genre of the primeval history *must* be, therefore, a literary analysis. Not only of the text's form and content, but also, literary critics suggest, of its function and reception history. Arguments on the basis of the text's reception history cannot, of course, carry as much weight as the text's form, content and function, but do, nevertheless, give us at least some idea of how the text was understood by its early readers and, by implication, to which genre it belongs. This may again seem banal, but if this is so, why do so many distinguished scholars get it wrong?! If the use of literary devices does *not* rule out simple historical referentiality as argued by Ricoeur and other historical and literary theorists, how come we find scholars like Thomas L. Thompson, Niels Peter Lemche, Mario Liverani and others arguing, e.g., that because the story of Moses' birth and rise in the court of pharaoh resembles the so-called Sargon birth legend, we are dealing with a literary motif anchored in a literary, not a historical world? As Mehmet-Ali Ataç remarks in a somewhat critical review of Mario Liverani's recent volume on *Myth and Politics in Ancient Near Eastern Historiography*:

⁴ It should be noted, though, that this approach is disputed by certain narratologists who claim that utterance acts in fiction is distinguishable from utterance acts in historical discourse, and that it for the same reason is possible to distinguish between fact and fiction even on the literary level. Main proponents of this critique of mainstream historical theorists like Robert Berkhofer and Hayden White includes Dorit Cohen, Gérard Genette, Ansgar and Vera Nünning. See the bibliography of this essay for references to their works.

Why, for instance, may it not have been the case that a usurper also provided a scribal milieu with good raw material for the kind of 'initiativ' subtext that the fairy tale mode was able to convey? ... it is somewhat unclear in Liverani's treatment of these texts to what extent the archetypal story *per se* takes the upper hand and becomes autonomous and to what extent it remains subservient to a distinct political aim. For instance, the story of Joash perfectly parallels that of Moses, and how would one then comment on the Moses story along these lines? What are our criteria that help tell the 'prototype' from the 'derivative'?⁵

Or, if form and content are not always inseparable, how come the sort of patterning that makes days 1-3 correspond to days 4-6 in Genesis 1 in many scholars' view detract from the text's simple, historical referentiality, while the employment of parallelism, chiasmic structuring, and other literary devices in other biblical texts does not? There are, admittedly, a great number of literary features or devices in the opening chapters of Genesis, but just as little as 'literary' equals 'literal' does 'literary' equal 'fictional'. The categories 'literary' and 'literal' are neither mutually exclusive nor even necessarily in tension. The question of genre cannot be answered by focusing on the literary phase alone, but must regress *from* literary analysis, to the explanatory/comprehensive phase in which the author or editor asked questions about causes and reasons. We have, for obvious reasons no direct access to the ancient author's or editor's actual thoughts in this phase, but traces of these thoughts are often to be found, sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly, in the text. When the author or editor of 2 Samuel 1 remarks that what he writes about David, Saul and Jonathan **כְּתוּבָה עַל-סֵפֶר הַיָּשָׁר** 'is what is recorded in the book of Jashar' (v.18), we may reason that he intended to recount what really happened. And when the author or editor of the Books of Kings again and again refers to **סֵפֶר דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים לְמַלְכֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל/יְהוּדָה** 'the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel or Judah,' he assures his readers that his account is in accord with the official recordkeeping thereby expressing his intention to give an accurate account of Israel's and Judah's history.

5. Comparative method

Before a verdict can be brought on a given text's genre, the result of the literary analysis must be compared, however, with the literary analyses of other texts in order to establish a taxonomy of genre. That is, importantly, an "emic" taxonomy established on the basis of the comparable texts themselves, and not on temporarily and culturally foreign texts. A triviality in non-biblical scholarship, but nonetheless a triviality disregarded by many *biblical* scholars. One example is the discussion on Israelite history writing. The histories of Herodotus and Thucydides *may*, e.g., be the yardstick for measuring what can and cannot be dubbed "historiography," and the label "antiquarianism" may be the best fit for the historical texts of the Hebrew Bible among conventional *Hellenistic* and *Classical* genre designations. But it does not follow that, because the historical texts of the Hebrew Bible lack the formal characteristics of Greek (and Roman) historiography, they also lack what these characteristics reveal—namely, a genuine historical consciousness and historical intent. This kind of argumentation (a) arrogantly sets up Greek historiography as the standard against which all other pieces of history-writing in the ancient world must be measured, and (b) precludes the

⁵ Mehmet-Ali Ataç, "Review of Mario Liverani, *Myth and Politics in Ancient Near Eastern Historiography*. Edited and introduced by Zainab Bahrani and Marc Van de Mieroop. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004." *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2005.01.24. Available at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2005/2005-01-24.html>. Accessed October 11, 2005.

possibility *a priori* that other ancient Near Eastern genres existed but employed different literary conventions and narrative strategies for the same purpose. Even if, strictly speaking, we cannot talk about Israelite *historiography*, the historical texts in the Hebrew Bible may very well have historical intent. Another example is, of course, Gunkel's description of the primeval history as *sagas* and *legends* on the basis of an universal approach, identifying genres that were common to cultures from different continents all over the world.⁶

In order to avoid these pitfalls it is necessary to employ a closely reasoned methodology. Already in the early fifties the literary critic Haskell M. Block could write on cultural anthropology and contemporary literary criticism that

it is almost a commonplace among a respectable number of critics that literature – or indeed any art – cannot be understood and appreciated as an isolated expression, cannot be limited to the working out of a pattern within the framework imposed by an art form, but rather must be viewed as part of the totality of human experience. Thus the simple separation of form and content, intrinsic and extrinsic values, or the like, falls away even for purposes of analysis – indeed, especially for such purposes. From this central assumption it is but one further step to assert that literature is part of a social situation and that literary works must be approached primarily as modes of collective belief and action.⁷

Probably no one has applied this "commonplace" better to the study of ancient Near Eastern texts than William H. Hallo, with his emic approach to a classification system based on form and function,⁸ and Shemaryahu Talmon, with his principles for using the comparative method in biblical interpretation: proximity in time and space, priority of inner biblical parallels, correspondence of social function, and the holistic approach.⁹ Also worth mentioning is Meir Malul's call for a three-step analysis by (1) determining the type of connection (direct connection, mediated connection, common source), (2) performing the test for coincidence versus uniqueness in determining the connection, and (3) providing the necessary corroboration for a historical connection between the two sides of the equation.¹⁰

6. Primeval History: Literary Analysis and Generic Comparison

6.1. Form

As far as *structure* is concerned, it has long since been remarked by scholars that Genesis 6-9 has a tripartite structure similar to the structure found in comparable Sumerian and Akkadian texts (the Sumerian King List, the Atrahasis Epic and The Gilgamesh Epic) with the flood as a dividing point, and that the primeval history has been arranged along a line of time as cause

⁶ Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History* (translated by W. H. Carruth. WIPF & Stock Publishers, 2003).

⁷ Haskell M. Block, "Cultural Anthropology and Contemporary Literary Criticism." In Robert A. Segal (ed.), *Theories of Myth. From Ancient Israel and Greece to Freud, Jung, Campbell, and Lévi-Strauss*. Garland Series 4 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996) 5. Reprint of Haskell M. Block, "Cultural Anthropology and Contemporary Literary Criticism." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 11 (September 1952): 46-54.

⁸ H. H. Hallo. "Biblical History in Its Near Eastern Setting: The Contextual Approach." In C. D. Evans, William W. Hallo, and John B. White (eds.), *Scripture in Context: Essays on the Comparative Method*. PThMS 34. Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980; idem, "The Limits of Scepticism," *JAOS* 110 (1990) 187-199.

⁹ S. Talmon, "The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation – Principles and Problems." In J. A. Emerton (ed.), *Congress Volume: Göttingen, 1977* (VTSup 29. Leiden: Brill, 1978) 320-356.

¹⁰ M. Malul, *The Comparative Method in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Legal Studies*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990. For at lengthy discussion on comparative method see Kofoed 2005: 48-58.

and effect.¹¹ Nowhere except in the early second millennium B.C. Sumerian King List and in Genesis 1-11 do we have pre-Flood lines of people in which everyone lives much longer than is recorded in later times. The author or editor of the primeval history thus uses an existing literary convention, namely the tripartite structure, but creates, nonetheless, a new configuration of literary forms by combining this epic structure with the historical "interest in numbers" as evidenced by, e.g., the Sumerian King List. Whatever this new configuration, based on *existing* literary forms as it was, should be considered a new *genre* or a natural development or refinement of an existing *genre* is open for discussion, *but it does not alter the fact* that there was a continuous historical interest from the early Sumerian texts right down to the period of composition of the primeval history *and* that the epic material in the primeval history was combined with list-form material under the influence of this historical interest.

As to *linguistic markers* it has also long since been noted that there appears to be a seamless connection between each Genesis account and the one to follow. A more controversial issue in regard to the *linguistic form* is the referentiality of language, most recently discussed by Kevin J. Vanhoozer.¹² One thing is to establish the historical *intent* of the author or editor of the primeval history, another thing is to determine in what way his narrative refers to the real world, and Vanhoozer points in this regard to the crucial distinction between *locutions* and *illocutions*, the locutionary act being "the act of saying something by uttering or writing words," and the illocutionary act being "what one does by *means of* such locutionary acts."¹³ The biblical example given is the sun standing still in Joshua 9, and Vanhoozer's argument is that "[w]hat the author is *doing* in Joshua 9 is narrating history in order to display how God has made good on his promise to Israel to bestow the Promised Land. As in other instances of God making himself known, here too we would do well to employ Calvin's notion of 'accommodation': the story of the sun standing still is an example of God using baby-talk, adapting his communication in order that it be intelligible to finite, historically-conditioned creatures. God *stoops* to speak and show."¹⁴ Vanhoozer continues that "[t]he biblical authors did not intend every one of their sentences to be an assertive statement. To return to Joshua 9: the author's use of phenomenal language is merely background scenery for what really matters, the theodramatic assertion about the act of God in history. Some draw from examples such as Joshua 9 the inference that God accommodates fallen (and thus errant) human interpretative horizons and then conclude that Scripture 'contains' error even if it does not 'teach' it. But we need not to go so far if we distinguish locutions from illocutions, what one says from what one is *doing* by means of one's words."¹⁵ Vanhoozer's conclusion is that "[i]n treating 'truth and interpretation,' then, it is crucial to acknowledge that authors can do more than one thing with their texts. In particular, we must be careful not to confuse *using phenomenal language* (locution) with *affirming the phenomena* (a specific illocution)."¹⁶

It is probably safe to say that only very few scholars disagree with Vanhoozer's conclusion *as a principle*. It is one thing, however, to endorse the overall principle. It is another thing to apply it to concrete texts. Vanhoozer may be right that Joshua 9 does not *affirm* that the sun

¹¹ Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of The Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 426; Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (CBQMS 26. Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1994) 150. Cf. also Hess 1993: 106.

¹² Vanhoozer, Kevin J. "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics." *JETS* 48/1 (March 2005) 89-114.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

stood still, but *mentions* it, illocutionary speaking, in order to affirm, "in a manner that his readers could understand, that God supernaturally intervened on behalf of Israel?"¹⁷ And it is probable that such illocutionary language is also to be found elsewhere, but what are the hermenutical controls for deciding *where* we are dealing with *mentioning* and where we are dealing with *affirming* phenomena in the biblical text. Is the author of 2 Kings 1 using *phenomenal language* when he tells about the fire consuming the captain and his fifty men sent by Ahaziah to capture Elijah, or is he, in addition, affirming the phenomenon so we should understand the fire to be real fire and not the author's way of expressing that Elijah *somehow* was able to withstand their attempt to capture him? Should we consider the talking serpent in Genesis 3 phenomenal language that merely serves as background scenery for what really matters? Hopefully Vanhoozer will provide us with a sequel to his highly recommendable article. Meanwhile we must content ourselves with Ricoeur's three tier model, being aware of the dehistoricizing power in the literary phase and therefore seeking for clues to distinguish between fact and fiction or *mentioning* and *affirming* on the explanatory or comprehensive level and in the text's reception history.¹⁸

6.2. Content

There can be no doubt, as argued above, that the author or editor of the primeval history worked within the literary conventions of the creation-flood story genre. When it comes to the content, however, we find a marked difference. While both the Mesopotamian and the biblical texts explore existential and cultural issues, scholars have noticed an all-important difference in the concept of god. Rejecting previous attempts to describe the uniqueness of Israel's God in terms of divine planning and linear history, Saggs is representative of mainstream scholarship when he states, that

This suggests a new direction in which to look in seeking a principle to which to attach the differences ascertainable between Israelite and Mesopotamian religion. The usual procedure has been to look for something positive in Israelite religion which is not found elsewhere, such as particular view of history or a particular view of the nature of man. Here, however, in the Israelite view of God in history and nature, we find close parallels between the Israelite and Mesopotamian concepts right up to the final question of the being of God himself. At this point comes a marked divergence; the sense of Israelite religious thought is given by a negative – not by what God is but by what he is not. He is not immanent in the heavenly bodies or the wind, and – by another negative in another context – God is not representable in human form or animal form, and – by yet another negative –

¹⁷ Ibid., 106. When Niels Peter Lemche makes the sun standing still in Joshua 10 the parade example of Evangelical scholars' naïve literal interpretations (debate article in the leading Danish newspaper: "Solen stod næppe stille i Ajjalons dal," *Kristeligt Dagblad*, June 29, 2005), he only showcases his ignorance of Vanhoozer and other Evangelical scholars' sophisticated hermeneutics and up-to-date linguistic readings of the biblical text.

¹⁸ For additional arguments related to the texts' form, see W. Gary Phillips and David M. Fouts. "Genesis 1-11 as Historical Narrative." *Ankerberg Theological Research Institute* [<http://www.johnankerberg.org>] January 2000. Accessed October 11, 2005: 1) Non-historical narrative in Scripture does not include a lot of geographical (Scaer, 1977), genealogical (Scaer, 1977), or cultural detail; 2) In Scripture, non-historical literature consistently includes a person who receives or tells the story as well as an interpreter; 3) Numerology, figures of speech, textual symmetry (e.g. Days 1 through 3 vs. 4 through 6) and phenomenological language found in Genesis 1-11, are also found in both Hebrew poetry and historical narrative (see Bullinger, 1898; Scaer, 1977); 4) Biblical passages which do describe the creation account in the genre of poetry (e.g. Psalm 104:5-9, Psalms 8 & 19, and Job 38:8-11) contrast sharply with the literary style of Genesis One (Surburg, 1959; Grier, 1977:10); 5) The creation account is referred to in other portions of Scripture as if it were historical narrative.

the divine has not a multiplicity of forms. Furthermore, as we shall see later, he is not approachable by certain techniques.¹⁹

It is this overriding concept that forces a different perspective to emerge in the primeval history with its central theme of God and his dealing with mankind in contrast with – simplistically put – man and his dealing with the god's.

6.3. Function

As mentioned above, one of Talmon's four principles for using the comparative method in biblical interpretation is the comparison of the texts' social function. Literature in general – and the texts under discussion in particular – cannot be understood or appreciated as an isolated expression, but must be analyzed as part of the totality of human experience. The separation of form, content, and function of a given text is blind, therefore, to the fact that even if a given corpus of Mesopotamian and biblical texts share a number of *formal* features, they may very well have been embedded in different social and societal situations and used for different purposes. Richard E. Averbeck writes in a recent study on the importance of this principle that "[t]exts and the phenomena that they describe or recount are integrally related to other phenomena in the community from which they derive, and superficial comparisons of isolated phenomena that appear to be similar are often misleading and counterproductive. With regard to texts in particular ... the point is that if a certain (kind of) text has a specific function in a society, comparative work should see to it that the corresponding (kind of) text in the other society has a similar function in that society."²⁰ This attention to the texts' *Gattung* and its corresponding *Sitz im Leben* must, Averbeck argues, go "hand in hand with the study of textual *genres* and their production and use in societies as part of the 'form critical' enterprise."²¹

Two important observations on genre and social function in Mesopotamian and biblical texts respectively may help us in this regard. The first observation is exemplified by James Barr, who argues that "[i]n Israel we have a very radical departure from the characteristic mythical thought in terms of harmony or correspondence ... [P]erhaps its clearest example is the creation story in Gen. 1, where the old creation story is very thoroughly demythologised. The very sharp distinction between God and his creation here carried out seems to be characteristic of the central currents of Hebrew thought from early times also. It is not too much to say that the main battle of the Hebrew faith is fought against the confusion of human and divine, of God and Nature. The historical *Sitz im Leben* of this movement in thought may well be the problem of Canaanite Baalism, in which the confusion of God and nature was a basic principle."²²

And Barr argues in the conclusion of his argument on the function of the primeval history that "[t]he functional idea of the cult, where the cult stabilised society by reproducing the

¹⁹ H. W. F. Saggs, "The Divine in History." In Frederick E. Greenspahn (ed.), *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East* (New York: New York University, 1991) 42. Cf. the classic study by B. Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1967), and also James Barr, "The Meaning of 'Mythology' in Relation of the Old Testament." *VT* IX/1 (1959) 1-10; Jacob J. Finkelstein, "Bibel and Babel: A Comparative Study of the Hebrew and Babylonian Religious Spirit." In Frederick E. Greenspahn (ed.), *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East* (New York: New York University, 1991) 355-380; and Richard E. Averbeck, "Sumer, the Bible, and Comparative Method: Historiography and Temple Building." In Mark W. Chavalas (ed.), *Mesopotamia and the Bible. Comparative Explorations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 88-125.

²⁰ Averbeck 2002: 96.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

²² Barr 1959: 7.

primeval divine event, was checked in Israel by the understanding of the transcendence of God, evidenced in the Exodus and contradicting a simple harmony picture of God and the world."²³ However right or wrong Barr may be in his approach to the process of demythologization, he is certainly right in pointing to a marked difference in the texts' social function. Whereas we find an inextricable connection between myth and ritual in the Sumerian and Akkadian context, the primeval history – at least in its present form – serves the completely different purpose of providing Israel with a "metanarrative" as Averbek dubs it, that "goes much further than any other history writing in the ancient Near East by presenting a history of Israel and the world that is, in turn, a *function* of the nature of Israel's view of their God and how he relates to the world."²⁴

The other interesting observation on the genre and social functional of the Mesopotamian and biblical texts is argued by David Damrosch, who believes "that biblical historiography can best be understood as the result of a confluence of the techniques and themes of prose historiography with those of poetic epic. The assimilation of historiography and epic toward each other was already under way in Mesopotamia in the second millennium B.C., and this process accelerated and was redirected in the Hebrew tradition."²⁵ The impetus for such a development was, according to Damrosch, "extraordinary historical events, which created the need for historical narrative to explain and justify a rapidly changing situation," and "ideological shifts that led to dissatisfaction with existing narrative forms." Damrosch mentions the establishment of the monarchy under David and Solomon and the destruction of the nation of Israel and the exile into Babylon as candidates for such "extraordinary historical events" with corresponding ideological shifts. Though these events hardly changed the situation 'rapidly', they no doubt caused the Israelites to rethink and rewrite their history, and backing his argument with a number of parallel developments in the literary history of Mesopotamia and Greece, Damrosch makes a good case for a similar development taking place in Israel. Again we must acknowledge a marked difference between the early and relatively disconnected Sumerian and Akkadian epics, and the 'metanarrative' character of the primeval history. Compared with the Gilgamesh Epic the primeval history must – in its present form - be considered nothing less than *sui generis*.

6.4. Reception

We have already argued that there appears to be a seamless connection between Genesis 1-11 and the following apparently historiographical narrative, and wherever the primeval history is alluded to in the remainder of the Old Testament we find no departure from this apparently *historiographical* approach to or reception of the primeval history. This is also true of the New Testament, where it is hard to argue against a "historiographical" reading of the primeval history, e.g., in Paul's reference to and exposition on Adam in his epistle to the Romans.

In later reception history both Jewish and Christian expositors, especially up to the time of rationalism, with few exceptions, regarded the Genesis accounts as factual and historical.

As far as the comparative material is concerned, Kitchen is probable representative when he argues that "[a]ll these Mesopotamian sources belong to the second millennium, and specifically were composed during its first half (ca. 2000-1600). In succeeding ages these texts (or some of them) continued to be recopied down to the seventh century B.C.; this was a

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ Averbek 2002: 113.

²⁵ David Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant. Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 3.

merely replicative process, just as we continue to reprint old classics such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Milton today, which is simply edited replication, not creative writing. Significantly, no further literary works of this kind seem to have been composed in Mesopotamia after circa 1600."²⁶

6.5. Result of the Literary Analysis

As far as *form* is concerned, the author or editor of the primeval history stood in the ancient tradition of historical interest and used the long established literary conventions of the creation-flood genre to arrange his material. As far as the *content* is concerned he separates himself from his Mesopotamian counterparts by the way his unique concept of God controls the content and arrangement of the material. As for the *function* of the texts the primeval history separates itself from its Mesopotamian counterparts, though tendencies are found in late versions of the Mesopotamian texts, especially in the Gilgamesh Epic. Though the reception history cannot carry as much weight as the observations on form, content and function of the texts themselves, it does show that the primeval history was referred to and therefore apparently received by later biblical authors as well as Jewish and Christian expositors as having simple, historical reference. It also reveals that the primeval history as part of a larger metanarrative was not only replicated as was the case with the Mesopotamian texts, but has been referred to, enlarged upon and discussed continuously from the time of composition to the present. The latter tell us nothing, of course, about its reception as history writing, but does demonstrate that the tradition was more vital than its Mesopotamian and other counterparts.

If the genre label 'myth' is understood as a representation in fictional form of truths or values that are sanctioned by general belief, and as stories in which some of the chief characters are gods or other beings larger in power than humanity whose actions take place – with Mircea Eliade's phrase – *in illo tempore*, i.e. in the sacred time of a self-contained literary world,²⁷ it should be clear by now that such a generic classification of the texts in Genesis 1-11 runs counter to at least the *intent* of the author(s)/editor(s) to embed the various stories or traditions in a historical narrative, and that we – epistemologically and heuristically speaking – *at least* are dealing with a chain of historicized myths if not a proto-history proper. Whether the author(s)/editor(s) succeeded in writing a primeval history with simple, historical referentiality is another question that cannot be answered by way of literary analysis, and we turn, therefore, to a brief discussion of the documentary evidence.

7. The Documentary Phase

Having demonstrated that the author or editor of Gen 1-11 *intended* to write history, we have said nothing, as mentioned above, about whether he succeeded in doing so. The only way we can assess the *historicity* of the primeval history, is by checking the apparently historiographical information against the extrabiblical sources, or – to return to Ricoeur's model – to regress from the explanatory/comprehensive level to the documentary, and here at least two areas seem promising, namely the study of placenames and personal names.

²⁶ Kitchen 2003: 423.

²⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*. Willard R. Trask (transl.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971. For a discussion on the definition and character of myth, see the various essays in Robert A. Segal (ed.), *Theories of Myth. From Ancient Israel and Greece to Freud, Jung, Campbell, and Lévi-Strauss*. Garland Series 4. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996.

As far as placenames are concerned, Kenneth A. Kitchen has demonstrated that in the table of nations there is no anachronisms in the naming of places and peoples: "Thus, in the late second and early first millennia alike, the earliest Hebrew geographers had a wide range of places and peoples in their tradition, and of which they had gained knowledge. What is interesting, also, are the omissions. For example, none of the later Ammon, Moab, or Edom got included, nor Midian nor Amalek; nor their predecessors, such as Shutu ("Shet") for Moab or Kushu (Kushan) for Edom. Hostility might explain the former omissions, but not the latter."²⁸

Even stronger evidence comes from the study of personal names. Richard S. Hess, in a comprehensive study of the personal names in Genesis 1-11, analyses the semantic and grammatical elements which constitute the names and their onomastic environment. Some names are not useful for purposes of dating the texts in which they occur, since they have elements that occur in West Semitic onomastica throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages. A significant number of other names, however, occur with elements that appear most often in the Bronze Age and in several of these cases clearly more often in the Middle Bronze Age. The analysis therefore suggests, he argues, "that the personal names in Genesis 1-11 have an origin other than the Iron Age."²⁹ In a carefully balanced conclusion Hess states that

It is difficult to assess the value of these conclusions for Old Testament criticism. Care must be taken so that no more is made of the evidence than is warranted. Perhaps the clearest result is that these names cannot be dated to the exilic or post-exilic period, given the present state of onomastic evidence. Nor are they obviously artificially constructed names. Instead, the evidence for most of the names suggests an early date. In itself this says nothing about the date of the genealogies or the narratives in the form in which they appear in the present Hebrew text. However, it does suggest a terminus ad quem to the traditions lying behind the material in the early part of the second millennium. For those who would date the Priestly source of the Pentateuch to the sixth century B.C. or later, allowance must be made for the early date of the personal names contained within the text.³⁰

The conclusion that can be drawn from these studies is that though it is clear that the Hebrew of Genesis 1-11 is from the Monarchy (Iron Age), the texts may very well originate in another time. Since the personal names, as Hess has demonstrated, fit best in the onomastic world of the earliest West Semitic name collections, the onomastic evidence strongly suggest an early second millennium B.C. date – at the least – for the traditions behind the primeval history.

8. Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the aim of the present paper has not been to present new information on the primeval history's form and content, but to investigate what happens when the already accessible and well-known information on form and content is seen through the lens of current literary, linguistic and historical theory. In the literary analysis we saw that there was a continuous historical interest from the early Sumerian texts right down to the period of composition of the primeval history *and* that the epic material in the primeval history very likely was combined with list-form material under the influence of this historical interest to provide the intended readers with some sort of metanarrative. Because of the dehistoricizing

²⁸ Kitchen 2003: 438

²⁹ Richard E. Hess, *Studies in the Personal Names in Genesis 1-11* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament 234. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993) 103-104.

³⁰ Hess 1993: 105-106.

power of literary devices, we cannot tell from the literary analysis alone, however, whether this metanarrative should be labeled myth or history (understood as opposite poles in the fact/fiction genre spectrum). Literary analysis does, of course, matter. It rules out *impossible* labels like "saga" and sets the perimeters for *possible* genre descriptions, but does not prescribe which of several possible genre descriptions is the best fit. What decides whether we choose the label "myth," "proto-history," "historicized fiction," "metaphorical narrative" comes down, therefore, to the texts' referential character and, ultimately, to our worldview or *belief*. In the discussion of the documentary level we concluded that both the onomastic, topographical and ethnological evidence strongly suggest an early second millennium B.C. date for the traditions behind the primeval history. Combined with the results of the literary analysis on structure and authorial intent, the evidence – based on "common ground" methods and arguments – strongly suggests that the primeval history reflects a historical reality in the second millennium B.C. (at the latest), and that the author had an intent to write a history of some kind. Taken together, the results from the literary analysis and the discussion of the documentary level consequently rules out the more fictional genre labels of the fact/fiction genre spectrum like "myth" (defined as fiction), "symbolic story" and "metaphorical narrative." Instead, the evidence suggests a number of possible genre labels in the factual end of the continuum, and this is as far as we get on common ground. For we cannot decide whether to choose the label "historicized fiction" or "proto-history" on the basis of "common ground" methods and arguments. One thing is to agree on the onomastic and topographical framework as reflecting an early second millennium B.C. reality, another thing is to agree on the historical referentiality of the narratives *embedded* in this framework. Arguments *pro et contra* the historicity of the creation account or the flood account, cannot be made with recourse to "neutral" or "common ground" methods alone, they are also – or to be more precise: *ultimately* – worldview contingent. It is thus my personal Christian theistic worldview and belief that *rules out* the label "historicized fiction" and *rules in* the label "proto-history,"³¹ just as it is other scholars's personal a-theistic or non-theistic worldviews that rule out the possibility of God as *causa*. My *personal* description of the primeval history is of minor importance, however, since the point to be taken is that any attempt to genre label the primeval history must recognize what can be argued on common ground (that the author intended to write history and that the onomastic and topographical framework reflect an early second millennium historical reality) and what must be argued on the basis of (different) worldviews. Or, in other words, that *any* generic description of the primeval history *to some extent* is based on a particular worldview, and that the answer to the question "Adam, *what* are you" ultimately depends on what I believe *I am*.

³¹ And perhaps also – depending on the definition - "myth." Averbecks combination of 'founding myth' and 'permeating myth' in the term 'historical myth' comes very close to Kitchen's use of 'proto-history,' cf. Averbeck 1994 and Kitchen 2003.

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