

REPLY TO PETER LEITHART

I'm grateful to Peter Leithart for his thought-provoking response. A couple of points are worth making in counter-response.

1. *The genre analysis of Genesis 1-11 as mytho-history is quite plausible in light of the evidence.* In chapter 2 of *In Quest of the Historical Adam* I examine the folklorist's concept of "myth" and derive ten family resemblances exhibited by paradigmatic myths. Then in chapters 3-4 I examine Genesis 1-11 in considerable detail and show that the primaeval history exhibits nearly all of these family resemblances. This approach provides firm, objective evidence that the primeval history is in some form myth.

I proceed to argue in chapter 5 on the basis of the genealogies that order the primaeval narratives into a primaeval history that Genesis 1-11 is not pure myth but has an interest in history. How then to classify this literature? The most plausible suggestion that I have seen is that of Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen that Genesis 1-11 belongs to the genre he calls mytho-history. Those who disagree with this classification need to provide an alternative explanation of the objective evidence I provide that is as plausible as Jacobsen's.

It hardly needs to be said that the plausibility of this genre classification for Genesis 1-11 does nothing to show that other parts of the Bible—none of which exhibit the relevant family resemblances—should be classified as mytho-history. To anyone attentive to the relevant family resemblances it is quite "clear what part of the Bible *isn't* 'mytho-history.'"

The plausibility of this genre classification for Genesis 1-11 in no way depends upon our ability to tease apart which aspects of the stories are mythical and which historical. I suspect that the blend is more like coffee and cream than like colored marbles in a bag. We most emphatically do *not* "determine what Genesis teaches about Adam by mining the nuggets of history hidden under layers of metaphor." That is not how literary criticism works.

Now to his credit Leithart recognizes that "Craig warns us to avoid a simplistic antithesis between myth and history." But, he contends, Craig still "ends up with his own antithesis, sorting bits of the creation narrative into baskets marked 'metaphorical' and 'literal.'" Aha! This is not a complaint about trying to separate myth from history but rather a frustration about trying to separate figurative from literal aspects of the narratives. That leads me to our next point.

2. *Mythological narratives need not be read literalistically.* In chapter 6 of the book I examine in some detail Ancient Near Eastern myths and show that they are frequently figurative in their representations. I am confident that when ancient Babylonians and Egyptians looked to the sky, they saw neither the desiccated corpse of the dragon goddess Tiamat nor the naked body of the goddess Nut overhead because no such things are there to be seen. Look for yourself! If this point is correct, then why are we bound to read the narratives of Genesis 1-11 with a wooden literalness? And why must we be able to distinguish confidently which aspects are figurative and which literal? So long as my genre analysis is correct—which Leithart does not refute—, then a literal interpretation—such as Leithart seems to assume—is not compulsory for us.

In many cases, however, I think there are good reasons for seeing certain aspects of the primaeval narratives as figurative:

(i) *If an aspect of a story contradicts what the Pentateuchal author believed, it is unlikely to be literally intended.* A prime example is the portrayal of God as a humanoid being in Genesis 2-3, which contradicts the Pentateuchal author's anti-iconic Jewish faith, as well as his own description of the transcendent, incorporeal Creator of Genesis 1. To posit an actual incarnation of God is to introduce a foreign element into the story that has no basis in the literary genre. By contrast God's being conceived as personal is not anthropomorphic because we know that the Jewish religion of the Pentateuchal author held that God is personal, so that this element is not due merely to the myth.

(ii) *If an aspect of the story contravenes common sense and common knowledge at the time, it is less likely to be literal.* For example, the Pentateuchal author would have known that the primordial waters of creation could not have drained away in 24 hours (cf. Genesis 8.3); that sunset and sunrise could not have occurred prior to the creation of the sun; that trees do not bear fruit that would naturally impart immortality or knowledge of good and evil; that the world at the time of Abraham was more than 2,000 years old; that the Table of Nations does not list peoples by genealogical descent but by political alliances, languages, cultural similarities, and so on.

(iii) *If the stories are inconsistent with one another when read literally, that suggests that a literal interpretation is not intended.* One thinks, for example, of the many inconsistencies between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 concerning the order of the creation of man, the vegetation, and the animals, which have bedeviled literalists for years.

The point is that a figurative reading of the primaeval narratives is not only permitted by the mytho-historical genre in general but is also suggested by various clues in the narratives themselves that make such a reading plausible.