

Skinner on the origin of Creation, Fall, and Flood Stories

p. xi Aetiologi- cal or explanatory myths: i.e. those which explain some familiar fact of experience by a story of the olden time. . . . The classical example is the story of Paradise and the Fall in chs. 2, 3, which contains one explicit instance of aetiology (2.24: why a man cleaves to his wife), and implicitly a great many more: why we wear clothes and detest snakes, why the serpent crawls on his belly, why the peasant has to drudge in the fields, and the woman to endure the pangs of travail, etc.

Fall A

Similarly, the account of creation explains why there are so many kinds of plants and animals, why man is lord of them all, why the sun shines by day and the moon by night, etc.; why the Sabbath is kept.

Creation A

The Flood-story tells us the meaning of the rainbow, and of the regular recurrence of the seasons: the Babel-myth accounts for the existing diversities of languages amongst men. Pure examples of aetiology are practically confined to the first eleven chapters; but the same general idea pervades the patriarchal history, . . .

Flood A

p. 93 Skinner believes some features seem to point to Phoenicia as the quarter whence this stratum of myth entered the religion of Israel; others . . . point rather to Babylonia, or at least Mesopotamia. In the present state of our knowledge it is a plausible conjecture that the myth has travelled from Babylonia, and reached Israel through the Phoenicians or the Canaanites.

Fall A

p. 95 . . . the aetiological motive is strongly marked throughout. The story gives an explanation of many of the facts of universal experience, - the bond between man and wife (2.24), the sense of shame which accompanies adolescence (3.7), the use of clothing (3.21), the instinctive antipathy to serpents (3.15). But chiefly it seeks the key to the darker side of human existence as seen in a simple agricultural state of society, - the hard toil of the husbandman, the birth-pangs of the woman, and her subjection to the man. . . . Nor does it appear that the narrative seeks to account for the origin of sin. It describes what was, no doubt, the first sin; but it describes it as something intelligible, not needing explanation, not a mystery like the instinct of shame or the possession of knowledge, which are produced by eating the fruit of the tree.

Fall D

p. 223 The Tower of Babel. The story reflects . . . the impression made on Semitic nomads by the imposing monuments of Babylonian civilisation. To such stupendous undertakings only an undivided humanity could have addressed itself; and the existing disunitedness of the race is a divine judgment on the presumptuous impiety which inspired these early manifestations of human genius and enterprise. Cf. also p. 228 . . . It is evident that ideas of this order did not emanate from the official religion of Babylonia. They originated rather in the unsophisticated reasoning of nomadic Semites who had penetrated into the country, and formed their own notions about the wonders they beheld there . . . The stories travelled from land to land, till they reached Israel, where, divested of their cruder polytheistic elements, they became the vehicle of an impressive lesson on the folly of human pride, and the supremacy of Yahweh in the affairs of man.

p.177 Flood Story. The dependence of the biblical narrative on this ancient Babylonian legend hardly requires detailed proof. It is somewhat more obvious in the Yahwistic recension than in the Priestly; but there is enough in the common substratum of the two accounts to show that the Heb. tradition as a whole was derived from Babylonia. p.181 The most natural explanation of the Babylonian narrative is that it is based on the vague reminiscence of some memorable and devastating flood in the Euphrates valley, . . .

Flood A