

# Genesis is a Myth. That's Great News

## Myths are truer than facts



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Literal readings of [Genesis 1–2](#) seek to defend the Bible's [inerrancy and infallibility](#). Ironically, they limit the power of the creation account.

[Literal interpretations](#) of Genesis stem from fear. If one questions Genesis, the logic goes, then one will also question the gospel accounts of Jesus.

If [Christian fundamentalists](#) can prove Genesis as literal fact, they believe the rest of the Bible will also be proven. Never mind the rest of the Bible's nuances; they seek reassuring certainty based on the first two chapters.

A faith of [certainty is no faith](#) at all.

A faith of certainty limits the fascination and power of Genesis. To unleash it, one needs to embrace Genesis as a myth.

### **Myths Aren't True But Are Truthful**

Modern people associate "myth" with ancient stories of pagan gods. We equate "myth" with "made-up." We view myths as inferior.

But this is a very poor understanding of myth that reflects our modern concerns for historical accuracy and reliability, concerns that ancient people simply didn't have.

We ask "what happened" and want an accurate factual answer. The ancients asked "what happened" as a vehicle to answering other, deeper questions.

Myths are cultural narratives that shape our thoughts, attitudes, behavior, and social structures. They may not be factually true, but they're far more *truthful* and influential than facts.

Consider America's stories of its founding.

The massive painting below hangs in the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol building. It depicts the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence gathered together as Thomas Jefferson presents the finished draft.

The painting captures the unity of the Founders and a certain majesty in a decisive moment. Americans look at it during Capitol tours and in their history textbooks, and they marvel at what the Founders accomplished on July 4, 1776.

But neither the Declaration's signing nor the United States' founding happened like the painting shows.



Declaration of Independence. [Architect of the Capitol](https://www.aoc.gov) (aoc.gov)

[In reality](#), the Founders signed the Declaration in smaller, hurried groups, over a period of weeks, while evading the British army. The Declaration didn't become official until August 2, 1776.

The Declaration didn't establish the United States of America. It merely separated the Colonies from Britain. In 1777, the Continental Congress established the [Articles of Confederation](#), the Colonists' first, failed attempt at a new government.

In 1787, the [Constitutional Convention](#) drafted the Constitution of the United States, a document riddled with compromises resulting from relative *disunity*. Most notably, the Founders couldn't agree on counting slaves in the population (the [Three-Fifths Compromise](#)), and they created the [Bill of Rights](#) to address other objections.

The real story of the United States hardly resembles the myth of the painting, our stories of 1776, and our July 4th celebrations.

### **Is a Story Diminished If It is a Myth?**

Not at all.

**The myth of the United States' founding shapes America more powerfully than the reality ever could.** The myth contributes to America's idealized self-understanding as a people who can accomplish anything when we come together with shared purpose.

Reality undermines both the ideal of unity and our striving for it. [In reality](#), America has never enjoyed much unity. But the fact that we look on our past and perceive periods of unity demonstrates the power of our founding myths. **Those myths provide an ideal toward which we can strive.**

**Myths may not be factually true, but they can still be *truthful*. Myths point us to profound ideas and descriptions of the human condition. Those ideas and descriptions shape our thinking, beliefs, behavior, and society.**

### **Genesis focuses on theological issues rather than scientific or historical questions.**

Reading Genesis as a myth, therefore, opens up depths that remain hidden if we limit ourselves to factually answering "what happened?"

### **The Context of Genesis**

For the following interpretation, I am indebted to [Tim Mackie](#) of [The Bible Project](#) as well as [Pete Enns](#) and [Jared Byas](#), hosts of [The Bible for Normal People](#) podcast and co-authors of the book [Genesis for Normal People](#).

The mental image of the earth as a sphere floating in space did not exist for the ancient Israelites. For them, “the earth and the heavens” were the ground under their feet and the sky above their heads. Existential questions like “where did the universe come from and how?” didn’t occur to them.

**Genesis is an ancient text written by and for an ancient people to address *their* concerns, not modern concerns. Scholars agree — based on linguistic and textual evidence — that Genesis includes material from multiple, distinct sources or Jewish traditions.**

Genesis — and the Old Testament — as we know it today didn’t (begin to) come together until roughly 539 B.C.E., the latter part of “the (Babylonian) Exile,” a period of Jewish captivity in Babylon.

Meaning, the Old Testament as we know it emerged when God’s chosen people were grappling with being conquered, enslaved, and removed from their homeland. These events cast major doubt (for them) on their chosen-ness.

In Babylon, the Israelites — and their descendants — also faced the major temptation of assimilating into Babylonian culture and religion. The Torah came together when Israelites needed persuasive reasons to continue worshipping Yahweh.

Once we understand these ideas, we can appreciate that *Genesis focuses on theological issues rather than scientific or historical questions.*

To put it another way, the ancient Israelites were not trying to grapple with the origins of the universe and humanity. They were focused on how their God ordered creation and why He should be worshipped instead of other gods.

## **Reading Genesis 1 as Myth**

Genesis begins with a formless, chaotic world:

*Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. — [Genesis 1:2](#) (NIV)*

Light and dark aren't separated. Chaotic waters cover everything. Life isn't possible in this disordered environment. Then Yahweh *speaks order out of chaos*, bringing life.

Yahweh separates the light from the dark and names them "day" and "night." Next, He separates the waters above from the waters below, calling the former "sky." He parts the waters below to reveal land, which produces vegetation. The water fills with ocean life, and the land fills with animals.

The Babylonian gods created order from fighting and killing each other, with Marduk emerging victorious over Tiamet and using her corpse as the earth's raw materials ([Enuma Elish](#)). The Israelite God is so powerful He can create order out of chaos and enable life to flourish with only a few words.

Yahweh finishes creation in Genesis 1 with *Adam* and *Eve*, or in ancient Hebrew "humanity" and "life." God makes humanity, from which He makes life, in His image. Then God invites humans to steward creation.

*So God created mankind in his own image ... God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue [rule] it. — [Genesis 1:27–28](#) (NIV)*

In Babylon and other ancient Near East cultures, the king claimed to be divine. Only the king, the elite of the elites, bore the divine image and thus the right to rule. Kings even dressed up like their gods.

The Israelite God, however, made every human a divine image-bearer and thus a kind of royalty. King Nebuchadnezzar declared himself a god, but God declared every Israelite royalty. God gave every Israelite inherent value, dignity, and authority.

*Psst!* Common Israelites exiled in Babylon, it's clear whom you should worship and why.

## **Reading Genesis 2–3 as Myth**

[Genesis 2](#) begins with God "resting" from his work. The Hebrew connotes that God's spirit — previously hovering over the chaotic waters — settles down into creation. Yahweh isn't remote or indifferent like pagan gods. He fills his creation and his people. He hears their groaning and sees their suffering.

The rest of Genesis 2 offers a distinctive, complementary account of creation. Scholars agree that Genesis 2 is older than Genesis 1. Remember, the Biblical editors put together multiple sources or traditions during the Exile.

## The failure to trust God leads to exile, a kind of death.

Yahweh brings water and life — vegetation, animals, and humanity — to the earth and establishes the Garden of Eden. He commands *Adam* to not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Then He creates *Eve*. They are naked and unashamed, vulnerable and intimate.

In [Genesis 3](#), the serpent — a “crafty” animal, a positive trait elsewhere in the Bible, — misleads *Eve* with a half-truth. You won’t die upon eating the forbidden fruit, he says, but you will know good and evil as God does.

*When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also **desirable for gaining wisdom**, she took some and ate it. —*

[Genesis 3:6](#) (NIV)

Nearly everywhere else in the Bible, wisdom is described as something to pursue and celebrate (see [Proverbs 8](#), in particular).

*Adam* and *Eve* didn’t disobey by eating the fruit and gaining wisdom. They disobeyed by gaining wisdom *before God guided them in doing so*.

Rather than trust God to lead them to wisdom, they reached for it prematurely. They trusted their own plans and power, not God. They brought myriad consequences on themselves, including exile from Eden.

The failure to trust God leads to exile, a kind of death.

The Babylonian Exile’s trauma can be seen in the entire Old Testament. Story after story shows Israelites failing to trust and worship Yahweh exclusively and then experiencing the consequences.

- Cain doesn’t trust God’s judgment of his sacrifice and kills Abel. [He is exiled](#).
- The first generation to escape Egypt worships the [Golden Calf](#) as the “gods who brought [them] out of Egypt.” They wander the desert in exile.

- Later Israelites violate God’s commands for [how to worship Him](#), [how to conquer](#) the Promised Land, and to [follow Him instead](#) of Canaanite gods. They are either executed or “handed over” to the Philistines, Assyrians, and Babylonians — that is, conquered and exiled.

**Interpreted literally, Genesis says that two individuals violated a command and the rest of us suffer for it. Interpreted as myth, Genesis explains the Exile to Babylon and the universal human nature of pursuing our will instead of God’s, of defining “good” and “evil” on our terms and failing miserably.**

But [God has mercy](#). He makes clothes for *Adam* and *Eve*.

He recognizes that they’re not yet ready for eternal life and banishes them from Eden and the Tree of Life (or one could say this passage simply explains mortality without intending other messages).

God also promises that the offspring of *Eve*— *not the man* — will crush the serpent’s head while being wounded by the serpent.

Jesus was born of a woman and the Spirit, *not a man*. He provides the way to eternal life after all, being wounded in the process. Jesus, God incarnate, restores us to life from our exile.

And Jesus models trusting God with defining good and evil — by simply loving God by loving others, even enemies, and resisting what is unloving.

## **Conclusion**

At some point, the overwhelming evidence for modern scientific understandings of cosmic and human origins led me to consider non-literal interpretations of Genesis. I found them invigorating!

As Dr. Tim Mackie says in his sermon on [“Science and Faith,”](#) I came to believe science and Genesis did not contradict each other — not because of science or Christian apologetics, but because of what Genesis says. Modern science and Ancient Israelites addressed very different questions and concerns.

Literal interpretations of Genesis limit the text to dealing with scientific and historical questions. They shut down pursuing and understanding Genesis’ full meaning and applying it to our lives today.

Many people have difficulty with a non-literal reading of Genesis because they fear turning Genesis into a myth.

But myths are far more interesting, powerful, and meaningful than literal scientific or historical accounts. Myths influence our lives much more than we realize, much more than any true story.

*Minor editorial modifications have been done by me to increase clarity.    nick 06 June 2021*