

Question: Is there myth in the Bible?

Answer: The Catholic Church teaches in its document *Dei Verbum* that all scripture is sacred and is “the word of God.” Scripture was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and both Old and New Testaments are sacred and canonical. Therefore, scripture teaches solidly and without error. *Dei Verbum* also teaches that for interpreters of scripture to avoid error, attention must be paid to the literary forms used in the various books that make up the Bible. The importance of recognizing literary forms is that each form expresses truths in various and different ways (*Dei Verbum* 12:6-7).

To best address the issue of whether or not there is myth in the Bible we need to have a working definition for the literary form of myth. Myth is not to be understood as something that was once believed by a population to be true that has now been proven false (*And God Said What?*, 29). The literary form of myth is the telling of an imaginative story using symbols to explain things beyond our human understandings and comprehension (*And God Said What?*, 30). While a myth may be imaginative, it speaks and reveals the truths of the thing it is explaining. For the audience of a myth, the reality that it speaks of is so complex and beyond understanding that the only way to properly explain the situation in the context of the world the myth is created is through the use of imagination and symbols. Myth speaks about reality. A fundamental question that myth has always attempted to answer is where did the earth come from and why are we here? Throughout human history, we have tried to explain the creation of the world through the limited means of our own understanding of time and space.

It may come as a surprise that our own stories of creation in Genesis can be seen as mythic in character. The stories of creation written by the ancient Israelites were not intended to mislead, but to convey the power of God’s love for his people. The stories the Israelites wrote on creation were made to show the relationship between God and humanity. Unlike other creation stories, the Israelites believed that God did not create man as an afterthought or by mistake, but created humanity in the “image and likeness” of himself (Genesis 1:26). Unlike many other religions of the ancients in which hundreds or even thousands of gods created the world and mankind for the use as slaves, the Israelites believed that Yahweh alone completed the task and he did it *with* love. The author’s intention in the first story of creation was not to give a scientifically accurate account of how the world and humanity came to be but, rather, was to show the intimate relationship and involvement of God with his creation and the love that he poured into doing so.

The second story of creation in Genesis (Genesis 2-3) is less about creation of the world and more about why we as human beings suffer (*And God Said What?*, 42). The man and woman are created in the Garden of Eden and given free reign to do whatever they want except one thing: eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In this story the tree represents all human beings choice to act contrary to the way God wants us to live. Eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil by Adam and Eve symbolize sin, something that was freely chosen by both of them. With our ability to sin, our knowledge of evil which directly affects our relationship with God increases, causing us to grow further from the hopes God has for us (*And God Said What?*, 45). The Catholic Church teaches in the *Catechism* that the account of the fall in Genesis 3, “uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place *at the beginning of the history of man.*” (*Catechism*, 390) So what does this do to our Catholic understandings of Adam and Eve and the fall? The answer is nothing. The integrity and truth of the first books of Genesis do not change when we recognize them as mythic in character. We still take from Genesis the value and richness of God’s love upon us and all creation. The words in Genesis’ beginning chapters continue to help us imagine the true love God had and continues to have for us as his creation throughout human history. While the first two human beings may not have known themselves as Adam and Eve, the legacy of mankind continues in them. The church teaches the doctrine of Original Sin which came through the gift of choice. That choice was and continues to be one of selfishness, self-love, and turning away from our creator God for our own interests and self glorification.