

# Genealogies, Myths, and Old Wives' Tales

*By Andy Chambers*

*"Myths and old wives' tales" was a stock phrase in Paul's day for identifying someone who talked endlessly but never said anything.*

**S**OUND DOCTRINE mattered to Paul. The Greco-Roman world in which Paul ministered brimmed with an endless variety of beliefs and practices that were contrary to the gospel. For example, in the Pastoral Epistles Paul warned against devotion to myths, endless genealogies, and old wives' tales. What are these false teachings against which Paul sounded the alarm? Why was it necessary for Paul to warn against them? How does sound doctrine lead to a healthy faith? This article will attempt to answer these questions.

### Genealogies, Myths, and Old Wives' Tales—What Are They?

Paul told Timothy to command certain men not to devote themselves to "myths and endless genealogies" (1 Tim. 1:4) and to have nothing to do with "godless myths and old wives' tales" (4:7; compare 2 Tim. 4:4).<sup>1</sup> He described these false teachings to Titus as "Jewish myths" (Titus 1:14) and warned him to "avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments . . . about the law" (3:9).

What was Paul referring to with these warnings? Paul did not explain the ideas of the false teachers. Apparently he did not want even to dignify their teaching by wasting time delineating their positions. Also the ideas of the false teachers are rarely mentioned outside of the Bible, which makes identification even more difficult. Some think Paul was referring to early Gnostic tendencies making inroads

into the church.<sup>2</sup> Others see Paul addressing an obsession among some Hellenistic Jews<sup>3</sup> with mythological traditions about Old Testament characters and their genealogies.<sup>4</sup> Timothy in Ephesus and Titus on Crete probably confronted false teachings that contained a combination of Gnostic and Jewish elements. Both influences deserve consideration in an attempt to identify the false teachers.

Even though Gnosticism was not a full-blown movement until the second century A.D., some early Gnostic tendencies may have been present in the mid-60s when Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles. Gnostic systems of thought relied heavily on myths about the world's origin. Gnostics taught how "the divine being . . . descended into the lower world in order to rescue those men who had the divine spark in them."<sup>5</sup> Paul may have been contrasting the nonhistorical character of these myths

with the gospel, which was grounded in historical truth and the testimony of eyewitnesses (John 21:24; 1 Cor. 15:5-8; 2 Pet. 1:16).<sup>6</sup> Gnostics rejected the entire material world and its Creator as evil. However, John declared that the Word became flesh and came to live in this material world (John 1:14; 1 John 4:2). God affirmed creation by entering the world and history through Jesus to save sinners (John 3:17; 1 Tim. 1:15). If Paul was referring to early Gnostic tendencies' gaining a foothold in the church, he clearly stated that he would have none of it.

**Below: Stone box carved with mythological scenes, Early**

**Dynasty III (2600-2400 B.C.), probably from Khafajeh (in modern Iraq).**

### LESSON REFERENCE

BSFL: 1 Timothy 1; 4; 2 Timothy 4

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON (31/21/54)



## A FISHY STORY



ILLUSTRATION PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (25/12/20)

**T**he Bible tells us that Abraham was from Ur of the Chaldees. (Muslim folklore claims modern-day Sanliurfa in Turkey as his birthplace.) Other ancient Jewish writings explained that Abraham studied the stars and thus came to believe in the existence of only one God. This belief created strife between him and his father, Terah, who was an idol maker. Terah turned in his son to King Nimrod, who had him bound and thrown

into a fiery furnace. Like the biblical story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the cords burned off, but Abraham was unharmed. At this point, the Muslim version alters the story by claiming that when Abraham was thrown in the fire, God intervened by turning the flames into water and the firewood into carp. Locals claim the carp at Sanliurfa (shown above) descended from those original fish.

Early Gnostic thinking may have been present, but Paul also clearly identified the myths as Jewish in character (Titus 1:14; 3:9). Fascination with mythological stories about Old Testament persons flourished among certain Hellenistic Jews in Paul's day. For example, in the Jewish Book of

Jubilees we find a myth from Abraham's childhood where a cloud of ravens came to devour the seed he had planted. Seventy times in a single day Abram commanded the ravens not to descend. They obeyed and no ravens came near where Abram lived, resulting in his name becoming famous among the

Chaldeans. Jubilees and other Jewish books from the New Testament era contain many such fictional stories.<sup>7</sup>

Some Hellenistic Jews were also enamored with tracing genealogies. One's family line was important in Greece as it helped establish a person's "prestige, status, [or] even moral character."<sup>8</sup> The false teachers Paul opposed likely obsessed over genealogies, especially when disagreement arose over which teacher to follow.

Precisely how much of the false teaching came from early Gnostics and how much came from Hellenistic Jews is unclear. However, what Paul thought of those teachings is quite clear. He said, "They do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm" (1 Tim. 1:7). Paul called them "warped and sinful" (Titus 3:11) and their teachings "godless myths and old wives' tales" (1 Tim. 4:7).

"Myths and old wives' tales" was a stock phrase in Paul's day for identifying someone who talked endlessly but never said anything.<sup>9</sup> Philo, the first-century B.C. Jewish philosopher, held a strikingly similar attitude toward the sceptics. He called these Greek philosophers "word-traffickers and word-eaters, who ... [act] as if happiness consisted in an interminable and profitless minuteness of accuracy in the matter of nouns and verbs, and not in the improving. . . [of] moral character."<sup>10</sup>

### Paul's Warnings— Were They Necessary?

The warnings against false teachers were necessary for two reasons. First, the warnings were necessary because of what the false teaching produced—arguments and divisions (1 Tim. 1:4; Titus 3:9). The false teachers' obsession with fruitless topics that led to controversy tended to undermine unity in the church. Jesus prayed that the church would be one (John 17:21-23). Further, a quarrelsome attitude was contrary to the unity Paul wanted to preserve (2 Tim. 2:23; Eph. 4:3). To be sure, some controversies

are necessary, and some divisions inevitably happen, especially when the gospel is at stake. For instance, in the Book of Galatians Paul took on the Judaizers because their message of Jesus plus circumcision was a different gospel altogether (Gal. 1:6-9). Taking such a stand was necessary and would actually lead to unity rather than to division. Some people who are divisive, however, seem to enjoy conflict for conflict's sake. Paul said divisive people should not have any influence in the church (Titus 3:10).

Second, the warnings were necessary because of what the false teachings caused people to ignore. The endless arguments and controversies kept the believers from God's work, which is done by faith (1 Tim. 1:4b). The arguments distracted the believers from focusing on the truths of the faith and the discipline that leads to godliness (4:6-7). When people spend all their time debating and obsessing over irrelevant matters, they have no time for what truly matters, sound doctrine that leads to a healthy faith.

### Sound Doctrine and a Healthy Faith

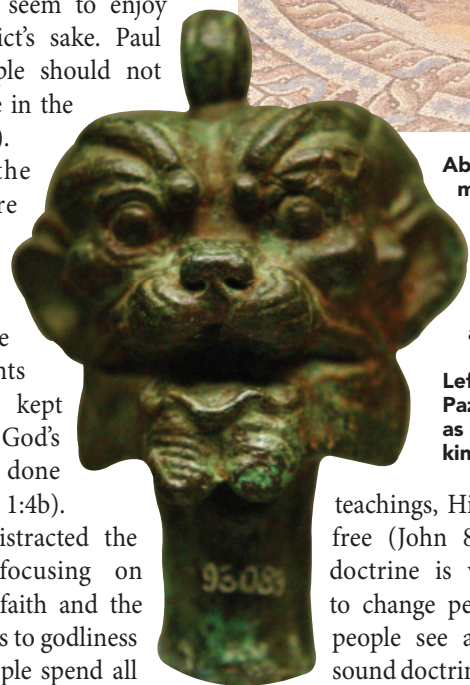
Paul challenged Timothy and Titus to teach what is in accord with sound doctrine (2 Tim. 1:13-14; Titus 1:9; 2:1). Sound doctrine is teaching that accurately conforms with the truth and message of Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:20) and His apostles (Acts 2:42) and with the Old Testament (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Acts 17:11). Paul opposed the false teachers because he wanted truth taught.

Why is sound doctrine so important to a healthy faith? Sound doctrine accurately communicates the truth about Jesus, and the Father sanctifies Christ's followers by the truth (John 17:17). A person is transformed when he renews his mind according to truth (Rom. 12:2). When you hold to Christ's

ILLUSTRATION PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ (27/1719)



**Above: Circular mosaic in House of Orpheus. The image in the center shows several Greek gods in a scene.**



**Left: The demon Pazuzu is described as son of Hanpu, king of the Lilu**

**demons. Myth stated Pazuzu ascended a mountain and battled against the winds. Despite his ferocious appearance, which varied in detail, Pazuzu helped humanity because he was anathema to Lamashtu, the**

**female demon who preyed on women in childbirth, and he sometimes appears on amulets directed against her. The head displayed here was probably attached to bedroom furniture.**

teachings, His truth sets you free (John 8:31-32). Sound doctrine is what God uses to change people. Too often people see an emphasis on sound doctrine as too divisive.

They would rather focus on deeds and reformation of character. However, Paul did not set doctrine and deeds against each other. He told Timothy to watch his life *and* doctrine closely—because doing this would evidence salvation both for himself and for his hearers (1 Tim. 4:16). Paul knew that both were essential.

The enemy has always worked to destroy the witness of the church. In the earliest church, one of his tools came wrapped as genealogies, myths, and old wives' tales. Through the centuries the tools may have changed, but his intent has not. So, what protection does a believer have? That too has not changed through the centuries. A healthy faith is still based on the "teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and . . . the teaching that promotes godliness (1 Tim. 6:3b, HCSB). This is crucial to personal change and a healthy faith. Unlike the fables, old wives' tales, and myths that are temporal and meaningless, these

teachings are eternal and provide hope, life, guidance, instruction, and comfort for those who follow our Lord. **B**

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

2. Leonard Goppelt, *Apostolic and Post-Apostolic Times*, Robert A. Guelich, trans. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1970), 101-102.

3. "Hellenistic Jews" refers to Jews who generally lived outside of Israel in places such as Ephesus and Crete and who were heavily influenced by the Greek culture and way of life. See Acts 6:1 (HCSB) for a New Testament use of the word.

4. Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, *New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 41.

5. Anthony Tyrrell Hanson, *The Pastoral Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 23.

6. William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 20.

7. This story and others from the Book of Jubilees are in *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, R. H. Charles, ed., vol. 11 "Pseudepigrapha" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 11.18-22 (p. 30).

8. Rosalind Thomas, "Genealogy" in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, eds., 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 629.

9. Robert J. Karris, "The Background and Significance of the Polemic of the Pastoral Epistles," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973):557; F. H. Colson, "Myths and Genealogies"—A Note on the Polemic of the Pastoral Epistles," *Journal of Theological Studies* 19 (October 1917): 265-271.

10. Philo, "On Mating with the Preliminary Studies" (De Congr.) in *The Works of Philo, Complete and Unabridged, New Updated Version*, C. D. Yonge, trans. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 53 (p. 309).

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