

Lesson 23: Ancient Near East Literary Background to the Books of Moses

Introduction

In this lesson we are taking a short break from the Pentateuch to consider Ancient Near Eastern parallels to the Bible. This lesson pairs with lesson 8 Ancient Near Eastern Backgrounds. How do we think about stories or ideas or behaviors that are mirrored outside of the Bible in Egyptian or Babylonian or Hittite sources?

We have just finished our overview of Numbers, the fourth book in the Pentateuch. If you want to keep going with the Pentateuch, then feel free to skip this podcast and jump to the next lesson, which is the first lesson on Deuteronomy. If you have ever wondered what to do with multiple flood stories or similar law codes or biblical references to Leviathan, then this lesson is for you.

In 2300 BC, Sargon the Great established the rule of his city Akkad over all Mesopotamia. This Akkadian empire became the caretaker of Sumerian culture which had accumulated in the region for more than one thousand years. After 200 years of Akkadian rule, a devastating threat spilled over the Zagros mountains from the plateaus of modern-day Iran. Gutian barbarians swept through the land of two rivers. They brought no written language; no record of history. In what seems to be a historical pattern, the barbarian hordes overwhelmed Sumerian civilization.

The resurgence of Sumerian domination began in Lagash. Susan Bauer writes, “The warrior Gudea of Lagash rid his own city of Gutians, took Lagash’s reins as king, and then began to purify and rebuild the temples of the Sumerians, which had apparently been wrecked by the Akkadians or the Gutians.”¹ An inscription records Gudea’s narration of how he came to know how to rebuild a Sumerian temple for the god Ningirsu. Gudea says,

In the dream a man, whose stature reached up to heaven [and] reached down to earth, who according to the tiara around his head was a god...at whose feet was a storm, to whose right and left a lion was at rest, commanded me to build his house...a second [man], like a warrior...held in his hand a tablet of lapis-lazuli, [and] outlined the pattern of a temple.²

600 years before Moses received the tabernacle pattern from God amidst the storm on the mountain, Gudea, King of Lagash, received a temple pattern in a dream from his god, at whose feet was a storm. This story was recorded and has made its way down to us. Did it also make its way down to Moses? What do we make of this? Coincidence? Some parallels may be coincidence. Some parallels may only be apparent parallels, which, upon closer inspection, show up not actually to be that similar. But there are too many connection points between the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern sources to write off every case as accidental. We need to thoughtfully assess potential connections.

Assessing Parallels

Let’s start with potential ways to assess Ancient Near Eastern parallels, then we will look at some examples. I am heavily in debt to Dr. Jeffrey Niehaus, my Old Testament professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Dr. Niehaus became a believer in Jesus Christ the same month that he received his doctorate from Harvard University. He is a born-again believer whose critical thinking was developed in the secular university before being applied to the Bible. I have taken principles for assessing parallels from classes with Dr. Niehaus and from his book, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*, which, by the way, is a great place to start if you would like to further investigate the issue of parallels.

First, let’s acknowledge a very widespread presupposition that exists in secular academia. It is generally assumed that human religion has evolved from a primitive state to an advanced state. Dr. Niehaus cites George Frazer’s classic anthology, *The Golden Bough* as an example. Frazer admitted that his thirteen-volume work was primarily a collection of data, but he added in his own interpretation of

¹ Susan Wise Bauer. *The History of the Ancient World*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007) 123.

² Jeffrey J. Niehaus. *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008) 94-95.

the data. Niehaus writes, “Frazer detected a pattern in the evolution of human thought: from belief in magic through belief in religion to belief in science. He thought the pattern was universal.”³

Though often skeptical or even hostile to the Bible, this presupposition that human religion has only moved from primitive to advanced can also have proponents who are socially conservative and generally positive toward the Bible. The Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson advocates a worldview that originates with primitive man discovering moral values that promote human society. The display of commendable moral attributes are recorded in the stories of heroes. The heroes of those myths are later elevated to the status gods and goddesses. The commendable attributes are finally brought together from many gods to one supreme display of goodness in God the Father and the true god-man hero Jesus Christ. Jesus, then is the pinnacle of human thought on moral values that began with no gods and ended up with Jesus. That’s my paraphrase of Peterson. He says it much, much better than I have here. The point I am drawing from Peterson, is that he does not believe religion to be based on historical events. He might call it truth, but he is talking about psychological truth. And in that, he is talking about his version of psychological truth which assumes evolutionary development of religion. He assumes a growth from the primitive to the advanced.

As a believer in the Bible, I automatically question this presupposition of religious evolution. I hold to a very different story. I hold to a story of devolution. Adam and Eve were created good, with advanced knowledge of one supreme Creator God. Humanity did not start with no knowledge of God and then move towards God. Humanity started with God and moved away from Him. Paul describes the human cycle of devolution this way in Romans 1:21-23,

²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

The Bible recognizes this tension in people. While we yearn for what we can only find in God, we resist submission to God, turning away to shadows.

This is Europe. This is modern America. We are moving from a past general acceptance in our cultures of one true creator God towards paganism, towards a belief in a world of spirits. And it’s not evolution, it’s devolution. The New Atheists think that by eliminating the god of Islam, the god of Judaism, and especially the God of Christianity, they will usher humanity into a more evolved state free of religion, free of spirit, free of heaven and hell, and free of an imposed moral standard. But looking at our recent human past, we ask, “Is that the result in communist Russia during the 20th century? You officially remove God. Is he gone? Is that what is happening now in communist China? Is that the path modern Europeans and Americans are taking?” When you remove God, does humanity embrace a purely materialistic vision of the world? No. Some might. But on the whole, we are still seeking the spiritual and the spirits. How do we interpret that? How do we understand that? We are either still caught in our primitive human state, not yet evolved enough to accept there is no god or eternity cries out in our hearts, drawing us inevitably to the belief that there must be something more, and if God be removed, we will find something to put in his place.

Even if we do not accept the story of the Bible, we still have some challenging sociological data to consider. For example, if you have never read Don Richardson’s, *Eternity in their Hearts*, that is another intriguing place to start. Richardson notes culture after culture that recognizes a distant creator god, too holy to approach, existing in the far-off past. Did humankind really evolve religion through time? Is that the best interpretation of the data? Or is it possible that we began with knowledge of God and have cycled through the generations sometimes coming closer to worship of the one true God, sometimes turning away to develop our own vision of spiritual reality?

³ Niehaus, 16.

So, while recognizing that for non-Christian scholars, it is a possible hypothesis that the Bible took from some other culture and built upon what it borrowed, that is not our presupposition. It is a possibility that must be addressed, but there are other possibilities to consider. As with most serious endeavors in life, understanding parallels between the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern culture is not so simple as to have a one-size-fits all answer. We have to consider possible parallels on a case by case basis and consider different possible reasons for those parallels. Coming from my presupposition that the Bible is God's Word and does provide us with an accurate world-view, I suggest four possibilities to keep in mind when considering parallels between the biblical story and various Ancient Near Eastern sources.

1. There exists a common source event from which both the Bible and other sources draw.
2. God is intentionally using a known element of culture to communicate spiritual truth.
3. God is rebuking or correcting false elements of the Ancient Near Eastern worldview.
4. Spiritual forces of evil have worked to pervert God's truth.

Now, let's consider some examples for each of these four possibilities, starting with the first possibility that there exists a common source event.

Examples of Parallels

1. *There exists a common source event from which both the Bible and other sources draw.*

Possibly the most famous example of parallels was discovered in 1827 by a 27-year-old Englishman named George Smith who taught himself how to read cuneiform script and the Assyrian language. Browsing the British Museum in his free time, Smith was the first to read and understand portions of the now famous *Gilgamesh Epic* which provides parallels both to the biblical creation story and the flood story. Let's consider the flood.

The most complete standard version of the *Gilgamesh Epic* comes from Assyria and is dated somewhere from 1300 to 1000 BC. That would be after Moses wrote down the story of Noah, according to our dating of Moses around 1500 BC. But the oldest tablets recording part of the *Gilgamesh Epic* stretch back before Moses to 1700 BC and are thought to represent a story written around 2100 BC, taking us back to the Empire of Ur in Abraham's era. So, it seems to be a flood story that predates the writing of Genesis by about 600 years.

This example becomes more interesting by the existence of other flood narratives from the same region of the world. There are five total. The biblical story and the *Gilgamesh Epic* are two. There is an older Sumerian story that has been dated before 3000 BC called *Eridu Genesis* as well as the later Akkadian *Atrahasis Epic* from around 1600 BC and the Ugaritic *Ras Shamra* version from around 1400 BC. All of these epics are from the region stretching from Israel up North to the source of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers curving east down to the Persian Gulf. It's what we call Mesopotamia.

How do we assess these parallel flood stories? Is it a coincidence that every major culture in Mesopotamia seems to have its own flood story? Is it a myth that got copied? Once we get past the similarities in the stories, there are some striking differences. For example, in both the *Gilgamesh Epic* and in the Noah story, the heroes make sacrifice after exiting the boat. In the *Gilgamesh Epic* the gods are compared, not very flatteringly, to flies buzzing over the sacrifice, eager to eat after having gone long without food. There is an interesting connection to Genesis 8:21, which states,

²¹ The LORD smelled the soothing aroma; and the LORD said to Himself, "I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done."

In the biblical account the Lord does smell the soothing aroma of the sacrifice. But unlike *Gilgamesh*, instead of indicating hunger, this implies God's reception of the sacrifice from Noah. Sacrifice is pleasing to the God of the Bible when it comes from obedience and a right heart. The Bible never depicts God as needing sustenance from sacrifice. The motive of the story is similarly connected.

None of the other stories establish the motive for the flood as judgment on mankind for wicked behavior. In the *Atrahasis Epic*, the god Enlil decides to destroy mankind because they are making so much noise he cannot sleep. So, while we have a definite parallel in some aspects of the story, the biblical story also stands out as theologically unique.

So, how do we explain the parallels. Well, in the case of the flood, one very reasonable possibility is that there was a flood. There exists a common source event from which both the Bible and other sources draw. That may not be the only possible explanation, but it is a good explanation which takes into account the number of different stories. Paul Kriwaczek, who is not sympathetic towards the Bible acknowledges in his work *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization* that non-Christian scholars also suggest that a real flood event stands behind the various sources, though they posit a regional catastrophe such as a possible flooding of the Black Sea basin or a re-flooding of the Persian Gulf rather than a world-wide flood.⁴ Still, it is an interesting acknowledgement that the stories are not simply fiction but best explained by a real event.

The conversation does not tend to end with suggesting a reason for the parallels. We then want to know which of the stories, if any, comes closest to an actual flood event.

Scholars with a bias towards the evolution of religious thought might argue that the biblical story is shown to be the youngest version based on its higher theological development. That does not necessarily follow. It is possible that we have progress of thought, it is also possible that we have devolved to a lower state of thought. As we quoted from Paul above, knowledge of God may have been lost in this case. In a more recent example, consider Renaissance architects who glorified the great structures of Rome but did not know how to build them. That knowledge was lost. One hundred years into the building of the cathedral in Florence, the technical know-how to complete the dome without buttresses was still not available, they didn't know how to do that, even though that kind of dome existed in Rome. They could see it; they couldn't reproduce it. Not until Brunelleschi finally figured out the mathematics for the Roman Parthenon, regaining the knowledge that had been lost for over 1000 years and finished the cathedral. We might agree that the biblical flood story shows advanced theological knowledge but that does not help us conclude whether it came before or after the more primitive stories. The biblical flood story could have existed 1000 years before the *Gilgamesh Epic*, and yet have been lost to the otherwise advanced Sumerian and Assyrian cultures.

There is reason to believe that the biblical story and the *Gilgamesh Epic* are the older two out of these five. Gilgamesh and the Bible share 17 story elements, which include...

Story Element	Gilgamesh Epic	Atrahasis Epic	Eridu Genesis	Ras Shamra	Biblical Account
1. Divine decision to destroy mankind	Present	Present	Present	Present	6:6-7
2. Warning to a flood hero	Present	Present	Present	Present	6:13
3. Command to build an ark	Present	Present			6:14-21
4. Hero's obedience	Present	Present			6:22
5. Command to enter	Present				7:1-3
6. Entry	Present	Present			7:7-16a
7. Closing the door	Present	Present			7:16b
8. Description of the flood	Present	Present	Present		7:17-21
9. Destruction of life	Present	Present			7:22-23
10. End of rain	Present		Present		8:2-3

⁴ Paul Kriwaczek. *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2012) 67.

11. Ark grounding on a mountain	Present				8:4
12. Hero opening a window	Present		Present		8:6
13. Birds sent out in reconnaissance	Present				8:7-12
14. Exit from the Ark	Present	Present			8:15-19
15. Sacrifice	Present	Present	Present		8:20
16. Divine smelling of sacrifice	Present	Present			8:21-22
17. Blessing on the flood hero	Present		Present	Present	9:1-17

All of those elements exist in the same order in Gilgamesh and in the Bible, in Genesis 6-9. The other three narratives contain only some of these elements, interestingly, they all keep the same order, suggesting that there was an original telling of the story that these tales draw upon. Was it Gilgamesh or Moses or an older lost text? We simply do not know what kind of textual material Moses might have had to work with. There is no way to prove which story came first. We can say that nothing about the available data makes it unreasonable to believe that the biblical story is communicating an ancient retelling of an actual event.

Let's move on to a second reason for the existence of parallels between the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern sources. In some cases, God is intentionally using a known element in culture to communicate spiritual truth.

2. God is intentionally using a known element of culture to communicate spiritual truth.

In this series on the Pentateuch, I have referenced several times a parallel between the 2nd Millennium Suzerain-Vassal treaty form and the form of covenant we find in the Bible. That form includes the seven elements of (1) Title, (2) Historical Prologue, (3) Stipulations, both general and specific, (4) deposition and regular reading, (5) Witnesses, (6) Blessings, and (7) Curses. The elements are less distinctive in the covenants with Adam and Noah and more apparent with Abraham and Moses. This makes sense considering that the covenants made with Abraham and Moses both occurred when the 2nd Millennium versions were being used in the ancient cultures.

I will not give examples of the treaty text here. You can look back at lesson 4 on Abraham and lesson 6 on Isaac and Jacob for examples from Ancient Near Eastern kings. And you can go to lesson 11 to see the parallel example in Exodus at Mt. Sinai. When we get to Deuteronomy, I will show how the seven elements of the 2nd Millennium Suzerain-Vassal treaty form are most clearly seen in that renewal of covenant with the second generation out of Egypt. It really shows up in Deuteronomy.

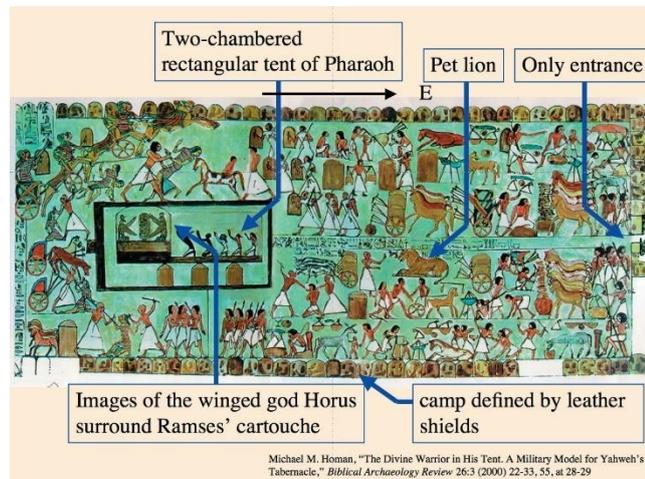
The parallels are present. The question arises as how to explain those parallels. I believe that God intentionally uses known cultural elements to communicate truth to his people. God intentionally cut covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 using a form Abraham would recognize. God intentionally patterned his communication of covenant in Exodus and again in Deuteronomy, according to an already known form.

Why would God do that? Why would God not be more original? Well, because God is a great communicator. When Jesus chose to explain spiritual truth through parables, he used what was known – flowers in a field, lost sheep, a farmer sowing seed – to communicate powerful truths that were not readily known. Jesus set up context through that which was commonly known in order to shake up his listeners up with some twist or some surprise that revealed something they did not know.

When God cut covenant with Abraham it all made sense to Abraham. He could understand what God was doing, at least until, the smoke and fire passed through the cut sacrifice of covenant. That part would have blown his mind. That made no sense. The great king, the suzerain, never walks through the covenant pieces. It seems as though God is communicating, "If you break covenant with me, let me be cut in two, let me die." But how can that be? How can my king who is holy die for me? What is this? It

is great communication, that's what it is. God takes what is known to communicate his radical grace; to communicate what is not known.

To take a second example, the tabernacle pattern does not stand out as a radically different temple pattern. Scholars have noticed a striking resemblance between the tabernacle of Israel and the war camp of Ramses II. In a relief taken from an Egyptian temple, the war camp is marked out in a rectangle, like the outer curtains of the tabernacle. Inside the war camp is a second rectangle, the tent of Ramses, which is divided into two-chambers, bearing resemblance to the tabernacle's holy place and holy of holies. The inner chamber of Ramses' tent is depicted with images of the winged god Horus. Pharaoh understands himself to be the incarnation of Horus. He is a god, and he makes his dwelling in the inner most place. God himself also makes his presence to dwell in the tabernacle's innermost holy of holies.



Again, we are left wondering how do we assess these similarities? Did Moses just copy some Ancient Near Eastern pattern? Why would God use a known pattern for his tabernacle instead of presenting Moses with a completely unique vision? And again, I would say that God does so because he is an excellent communicator, and he is also aware of the difficulty his people have in absorbing radically new information. They have to have some context. One thing at a time is going to be enough. The tabernacle pattern, though bearing similarity to other Ancient Near Eastern temple forms, teaches a number of spiritual truths to the Israelites, but none more than the one most important truth. And it is a radical truth. The tabernacle was beautiful, all gold and blue and scarlet, filled with light, and smelling of incense. It was a special place. But in some sense, it was a known kind of place. It looked like what an Ancient Near Eastern person might expect of a mobile temple. Approaching the tabernacle, a person might be impressed, but not confused. At least, not until they would enter in. At that moment any Ancient Near Eastern man or woman would be baffled. They would immediately notice the absence of the most important element of a temple. What do you think they would have noticed? What was missing from all the furnishings that God gave Moses to create for his tabernacle? What was not there? There was no idol and that means no god. The Hebrew word for temple is e-gal. That is an ancient Sumerian word adopted by the Hebrew language. It simply means big house. The whole point of a temple is that it is a house for a god. And everyone knows that gods and goddesses dwell on earth as idols. The idol is the god. And the temple is his house. It makes no sense to have a house with no God.

The Israelites, themselves, recognized this potential oversight, even before Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the tabernacle pattern, they formed a golden calf so that god might dwell with them in his tent. They fixed what God was leaving out. A central truth God was communicating through the tabernacle was that he would dwell among the Israelites but not as an idol. He is a completely different kind of God. God rejected that theology. At times, God communicates the unknown, the radically different, by using the known and giving it a twist. This is our second reason for parallels between the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern culture.

Another reason for parallels is that God is rebuking or correcting false elements of the Ancient Near Eastern worldview.

3. God is rebuking or correcting false elements of the Ancient Near Eastern worldview.

In places the biblical text connects with ideas from other ancient texts. For example, the *Enuma Elish* Babylonian creation myth, which may reflect a story dating back to the Old Babylonian Empire of 1800-1500 BC, tells of the battle between the goddess Tiamat and the god Marduk. Tiamat becomes a sea dragon embodying the Ancient Near Eastern link between the sea and chaos. Marduk wins the battle, killing Tiamat. He cuts her in two, making the sky out of one half of her body and the earth out of the other half. Marduk puts likenesses of gods in the heavens as the sun and stars, creates day and night and places other likenesses of gods on the earth, presumably these are idols.

When you know Genesis chapter 1 and then read *Enuma Elish* connection points between the two stories jump out. In the end, the differences between the two stories provide the key take away. Tiamat embodies chaos represented by the sea. God's spirit hovers over the waters of chaos, which are formless and void. God then brings order out of that chaos. Marduk creates something out of something, out of the body of Tiamat. God creates something out of nothing. The stars in the sky are images of the gods in the heavens for Marduk. But God calls light out of the darkness by his word and fixes physical stars in the heavens. Marduk places gods on earth in the form of idols. God creates man on earth to reflect his image.

I think it is saying too much to assert that Genesis 1 is an apologetic against false Ancient Near Eastern beliefs about creation. God and his creation, particularly his creation of man, both male and female, are the center of the story. God is creating an environment for his vassal king and queen who will reign as his stewards on earth. God's creation of man and woman is at the forefront of the story. The refutation of false myth is in the background. The Ancient Near Eastern context does not dominate God's communication, but it's part of God's communication. The truths presented in Genesis 1 communicate to the Ancient Near Eastern culture but also more broadly. These truths help establish an accurate worldview, speaking to every generation. God exists apart from the universe. That was important then, that's important now. All things have been created by his word. Important then – important now. All things were created good. Important then – important now. Evil would come later through beings originally created good. Important then – important now. And every human being has inherent dignity and worth, being created in the image of God. Important then – very important now. These truths challenge both the Ancient Near Eastern worldview detected in the background of the story while continuing to challenge modern pagan and modern secular worldviews.

We should expect to come across parallels between Ancient Near Eastern ideas and biblical ideas. Biblical events and teaching occur in historical time and place, within culture. When we see potential parallels, we should stop and consider, what the biblical text is communicating. Is this a rebuke or a correction of a contrary worldview? What is the Bible saying to culture? When we read about Leviathan in Isaiah 27:1, we should not immediately assume that Isaiah believes in a god or monster called Leviathan. We should assume that the great poet-prophet has chosen his words carefully and is intentionally making a reference to known mythology. It is not always clear how to interpret such references, though I think we should give God and the writers of Scripture considerable credit in their knowledge of the false belief systems of their day and in their ability to relevantly address those false beliefs with truth.

Let's consider one last possible cause of parallels. Spiritual forces of evil have worked to pervert God's truth.

4. Spiritual forces of evil have worked to pervert God's truth.

Here is a test question for you after our study of Leviticus. Which festival required the following burnt offering: one bull, seven lambs, one goat, bread and wine? What do you think it is? Passover? Tabernacles? You know of course it's a trick question. The answer is a 2nd millennium Hittite festival. Here is one more. Which festival required the following burnt offering: one bull, seven lambs, two rams, bread and wine? That one is the Feast of Weeks described in Leviticus 23:18-19. There is no significant difference between the two.

How do we assess parallels between religious practices in the Bible and in the Ancient Near East? Sacrifice of lambs and grain were received by God from the very beginning of fallen human experience as recorded in the story of Cain and Abel. In that story Cain's sacrifice is not acceptable to God because Cain's heart is not a right heart of worship. God warns Cain that sin is crouching at the door. Cain does not take responsibility for his own internal problem, but similarly to how his father Adam blamed Eve, Cain blames his brother Abel. Cain turns from God, murders Abel, and is cast out. When we reject true worship and turn from God, what are we turning to? When humankind turns away from true sacrifice that has a true heart of worship, what else is out there?

In Deuteronomy 32:16-19 we read this regarding Israel's participation in Moabite ritual at Peor:

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| <p>¹⁶ "They made Him jealous with strange gods;</p> <p>¹⁷ "They sacrificed to demons who were not God,
New gods who came lately,</p> <p>¹⁸ "You neglected the Rock who begot you,</p> <p>¹⁹ "The LORD saw this, and spurned them</p> | <p>With abominations they provoked Him to anger.
To gods whom they have not known,
Whom your fathers did not dread.
And forgot the God who gave you birth.
Because of the provocation of His sons and daughters.</p> |
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In the New Testament, Paul also recognizes demonic activity as a part of false religious practices. He writes in 1 Corinthians 10:20, "No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons."

In Romans 1:21-23, we read Paul's view on human responsibility for false worship. When human beings turn away from the glory of God and begin to worship created things, whether idols of men and animals or relationships, careers, money, the horoscope, Paul describes that turn from God as having a further effect on the person. Turning from God leads to a further darkening of the mind and heart. In 1 Corinthians 10:20, Paul is adding that turning from God to false worship is not only a human activity, but also involves the activity of fallen angels, demons. False religion is created both by fallen human beings and by spiritual forces of evil. Both bear responsibility.

Satan works to destroy what God has made, to wreck his glory. Humanity is Satan's number one target. A major strategy to further devastation among men is the promotion of false religion of all kinds. Satan takes what is true and perverts it to feed the human drive for control, for identity, for pleasure, and for worship. We should not be surprised at parallels to biblical worship and ritual. We should not be surprised to see that which God reveals taken and deformed, perverting the truth of who God really is and perverting the way of life that truly honors him. We should not be surprised if we believe in spiritual warfare and the reality of evil spiritual forces.

So, what do we make of Gudea of Lagash receiving a temple pattern in a dream from his god? Is that a purely psychological event? I don't think so. I think we recognize a perversion of the truth. The writer of Hebrews affirms in 8:2 that the true temple is a heavenly reality. That is God's true dwelling place. God handed down to Moses a pattern that symbolized deeper truth. The story of Gudea acknowledges that physical temple is meant to be a pattern of heavenly temple. The pattern must come from heaven. But in the case of Gudea the story is a demonic perversion of this principle, there is a handing down a false pattern of worship and behavior.

Dr. Niehaus has pointed out an overarching pattern in the pantheons of Ancient Near Eastern cultures. It is a pattern that mimics the real and the true. In the pattern, each system of gods and goddesses has a far-off, supreme, creator god. In Mesopotamia the supreme god was An, in Canaan El, in Greece Chronos, in Rome Saturn. This was not the god one typically dealt with. Usually, one of his sons, the storm god, took the throne and became the focus of the pantheon. In Mesopotamia this was Enlil, in Canaan Baal, in Greece Zeus, and in Rome Jupiter. Surrounding this storm god, as his court or as his rivals was a divine assembly of other gods and goddesses. Below this divine assembly are human beings.

Mesopotamia	Canaan	Greece	Rome
An (supreme god)	El (supreme god)	Chronos (supreme god)	Saturn (supreme god)
Enlil (storm god)	Baal (storm god)	Zeus (storm god)	Jupiter (storm god)
Divine Assembly	Divine Assembly	Divine Assembly	Divine Assembly
Humans	Humans	Humans	Humans

Biblical view

The Father (supreme God)
The Son (also God, of course, appearing in storm theophany)
Angelic assembly (e.g. Job 1-2)
Humans⁵

This pattern mimics spiritual reality. It's not completely false. It's based on a true pattern. There is a supreme creator, God the Father. Though he does not remain far off and aloof. He has made himself accessible, and he has not been deposed by his Son. The Son is Jesus Christ. He is also connected with the storm. In his vision in 7:13, Daniel says, "And behold, with the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man was coming." Jesus, himself, says of his return in Matthew 24:30,

³⁰ And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory.

But Jesus is more than a storm god. Jesus is one with the Father. He is God. The Divine Assembly is not a host of gods and goddesses but a host of angels, created beings. And instead of idols reflecting the image of God on earth, God the Father has created men and women to reflect his image.

The biblical worldview is not an evolution of religion mutating out of pagan religion or primitive thought. The pagan worldview is a devolution of religion that comes about both by human beings turning away from God and by Satan working to spur on that separation and perversion.

Conclusion

Parallels between biblical thought and Ancient Near Eastern thought should not surprise us. If the Bible is what it claims to be then we should expect parallels with surrounding cultures. There are some excellent scholarly resources that present factual evidence of parallels and contact points between the Bible and other cultures. Those can be very helpful. They're very interesting. At the same time, when reading these resources, Christians need to use their mind, to remain alert and thoughtful when those scholars stop simply providing the data and start interpreting that data. When you encounter scholarly interpretation, you need to ask, "What presuppositions is this scholar depending on to guide their own assessment of the data?" We have discussed three presuppositions to keep in mind. (1) First, is the scholar assuming an evolution of religion or do they remain open to the idea of devolution, that in the history of human thought there has at times been significant loss of knowledge. We do not assume perpetual progress. (2) Second, is the scholar assuming that the oldest dateable occurrence of a story is in fact the oldest version of the story or do they remain open to the fact that we do not have access to all the information regarding when a story was first composed. For example, we cannot date Moses' writing of the Pentateuch before 1500 BC, but we also do not know what sources he may have been working from. Those sources could have been much older. They are lost to us, and we have to admit that. We just don't have all the data. (3) Third, does the scholar dismiss immediately the supernatural and spiritual. We addressed this common presupposition in Lesson 8. A thinking Christian cannot dismiss the supernatural, since the biblical worldview asserts that God is and that God acts in history. An atheist is acting consistently on his worldview if he rejects the spiritual. We just need to be aware of the presupposition the scholar is working from.

⁵ Niehaus, 180.

After considering the presuppositions of scholarly interpretations, we should try to read first-hand accounts of the parallels, so that we not only get a feel for what is similar, but also recognize the differences, in truth similarities are often fairly superficial and the differences are crucial. That's the key. For example, some scholars have made a lot of the Baal cycle as a source for the Christian idea of resurrection. But the more you study the Ancient Near Eastern account, the more you marvel that the Bible could ever come up with its view of the afterlife based on the cycle of Baal. Baal being taken down to the underworld every year and then brought back from the dead by his sister-lover provides a mythical explanation of the seasons. The rains cease when the storm god is taken down to the underworld and resume when he is set free. But as far as any connection to biblical resurrection, the differences are so striking there is no real similarity. It's a completely different worldview. They are different ideas.

So, in assessing parallels, first, we need to check the presuppositions of any proposed interpretation. Second, we need to consider the data closely, so that we see for ourselves the similarities and differences. And then third, we need to consider four possible reasons for the parallels. (1) Is there a common source event explaining similar stories? (2) Is God intentionally using cultural practices and ideas to communicate his truth? (3) Is God rebuking or correcting false cultural ideas? (4) Could demonic perversion of true worship and practice be involved?

May God bless you in your study of his word as you commit to loving him with all your soul, with all your heart, and also with all your mind. To God be the glory!

Reflection Questions

1. a. If you have never considered Ancient Near Eastern parallels to the biblical text, how does it make you feel to think that ancient Mesopotamian culture produced stories of the creation, the flood and dreams about temple patterns, required similar rituals and laws, and promoted similar spiritual concepts about the gods and the afterlife? Does that intrigue you or make you uncomfortable? What is your emotional response?
- b. If you have already considered Ancient Near Eastern parallels to the biblical text, can you think of past conversations about those parallels? How did you feel? Did you ever feel threatened or confused? Why do you think you felt that way?
2. If the biblical story is true, should we expect other worldviews in various cultures to parallel or contain overlap with the Bible or not? What would you expect to find?
3. How would you describe the difference between the evolution of religion and the devolution of religion? How might someone describe religion as having evolved over time, moving from a more primitive state to a more advanced state? How might someone argue that religion has devolved over time, moving from advanced to primitive?
4. Which of these four recommendations for assessing parallels seems particularly helpful to you? Can you think of an example conversation where one or more of these might help you communicate your belief? Do you see any problems with these considerations? Would you add a fifth possibility for parallels?
 1. There exists a common source event from which both the Bible and other sources draw.
 2. God is intentionally using a known element of culture to communicate spiritual truth.
 3. God is rebuking or correcting false elements of the Ancient Near Eastern worldview.
 4. Spiritual forces of evil have worked to pervert God's truth.
5. Below is a translation of the flood story from Gilgamesh. Make a first quick read through of the story. As you read, note some things that stand out to you as similar to the biblical story and some things that stand out to you as different from the biblical story? How do the four recommended considerations for assessment help you think about this parallel to the biblical story?

The Gilgamesh Epic, Tablet XI, The Story of the Flood

<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab11.htm>

Gilgamesh spoke to Utanapishtim, the Faraway:

"I have been looking at you,
but your appearance is not strange--you are like me!
You yourself are not different--you are like me!
My mind was resolved to fight with you,
(but instead?) my arm lies useless over you.
Tell me, how is it that you stand in the Assembly of the Gods, and have found life!"

Utanapishtim spoke to Gilgamesh, saying:

"I will reveal to you, Gilgamesh, a thing that is hidden,
a secret of the gods I will tell you!
Shuruppak, a city that you surely know,
situated on the banks of the Euphrates,
that city was very old, and there were gods inside it.
The hearts of the Great Gods moved them to inflict the Flood.
Their Father Anu uttered the oath (of secrecy),
Valiant Enlil was their Adviser,
Ninurta was their Chamberlain,
Ennugi was their Minister of Canals.
Ea, the Clever Prince(?), was under oath with them
so he repeated their talk to the reed house:

'Reed house, reed house! Wall, wall!

O man of Shuruppak, son of Ubartutu:

Tear down the house and build a boat!
Abandon wealth and seek living beings!
Spurn possessions and keep alive living beings!
Make all living beings go up into the boat.
The boat which you are to build,
its dimensions must measure equal to each other:
its length must correspond to its width.
Roof it over like the Apsu.

I understood and spoke to my lord, Ea:

'My lord, thus is the command which you have uttered
I will heed and will do it.
But what shall I answer the city, the populace, and the Elders!'

Ea spoke, commanding me, his servant:

'You, well then, this is what you must say to them:
"It appears that Enlil is rejecting me
so I cannot reside in your city (?),
nor set foot on Enlil's earth.
I will go down to the Apsu to live with my lord, Ea,
and upon you he will rain down abundance,
a profusion of fowl, myriad(!) fishes.
He will bring to you a harvest of wealth,
in the morning he will let loaves of bread shower down,
and in the evening a rain of wheat!"'

Just as dawn began to glow
the land assembled around me-

the carpenter carried his hatchet,
 the reed worker carried his (flattening) stone,
 ... the men ...
 The child carried the pitch,
 the weak brought whatever else was needed.
 On the fifth day I laid out her exterior.
 It was a field in area,
 its walls were each 10 times 12 cubits in height,
 the sides of its top were of equal length, 10 times 12 cubits each.
 I laid out its (interior) structure and drew a picture of it (?).
 I provided it with six decks,
 thus dividing it into seven (levels).
 The inside of it I divided into nine (compartments).
 I drove plugs (to keep out) water in its middle part.
 I saw to the punting poles and laid in what was necessary.
 Three times 3,600 (units) of raw bitumen I poured into the bitumen kiln,
 three times 3,600 (units of) pitch ...into it,
 there were three times 3,600 porters of casks who carried (vegetable) oil,
 apart from the 3,600 (units of) oil which they consumed (!)
 and two times 3,600 (units of) oil which the boatman stored away.
 I butchered oxen for the meat(!),
 and day upon day I slaughtered sheep.
 I gave the workmen(?) ale, beer, oil, and wine, as if it were river water,
 so they could make a party like the New Year's Festival.
 ... and I set my hand to the oiling(!).
 The boat was finished by sunset.
 The launching was very difficult.
 They had to keep carrying a runway of poles front to back,
 until two-thirds of it had gone into the water(?).
 Whatever I had I loaded on it:
 whatever silver I had I loaded on it,
 whatever gold I had I loaded on it.
 All the living beings that I had I loaded on it,
 I had all my kith and kin go up into the boat,
 all the beasts and animals of the field and the craftsmen I had go up.
 Shamash had set a stated time:
 'In the morning I will let loaves of bread shower down,
 and in the evening a rain of wheat!
 Go inside the boat, seal the entry!'

That stated time had arrived.
 In the morning he let loaves of bread shower down,
 and in the evening a rain of wheat.
 I watched the appearance of the weather--
 the weather was frightful to behold!
 I went into the boat and sealed the entry.
 For the caulking of the boat, to Puzuramurri, the boatman,
 I gave the palace together with its contents.
 Just as dawn began to glow
 there arose from the horizon a black cloud.
 Adad rumbled inside of it,
 before him went Shullat and Hanish,

heralds going over mountain and land.
 Erragal pulled out the mooring poles,
 forth went Ninurta and made the dikes overflow.
 The Anunnaki lifted up the torches,
 setting the land ablaze with their flare.
 Stunned shock over Adad's deeds overtook the heavens,
 and turned to blackness all that had been light.
 The... land shattered like a... pot.
 All day long the South Wind blew ...,
 blowing fast, submerging the mountain in water,
 overwhelming the people like an attack.
 No one could see his fellow,
 they could not recognize each other in the torrent.
 The gods were frightened by the Flood,
 and retreated, ascending to the heaven of Anu.
 The gods were cowering like dogs, crouching by the outer wall.
 Ishtar shrieked like a woman in childbirth,
 the sweet-voiced Mistress of the Gods wailed:
 'The olden days have alas turned to clay,
 because I said evil things in the Assembly of the Gods!
 How could I say evil things in the Assembly of the Gods,
 ordering a catastrophe to destroy my people!!
 No sooner have I given birth to my dear people
 than they fill the sea like so many fish!'

The gods--those of the Anunnaki--were weeping with her,
 the gods humbly sat weeping, sobbing with grief(?),
 their lips burning, parched with thirst.
 Six days and seven nights
 came the wind and flood, the storm flattening the land.
 When the seventh day arrived, the storm was pounding,
 the flood was a war--struggling with itself like a woman writhing (in labor).
 The sea calmed, fell still, the whirlwind (and) flood stopped up.
 I looked around all day long--quiet had set in
 and all the human beings had turned to clay!
 The terrain was as flat as a roof.
 I opened a vent and fresh air (daylight!) fell upon the side of my nose.
 I fell to my knees and sat weeping,
 tears streaming down the side of my nose.
 I looked around for coastlines in the expanse of the sea,
 and at twelve leagues there emerged a region (of land).
 On Mt. Nimush the boat lodged firm,
 Mt. Nimush held the boat, allowing no sway.
 One day and a second Mt. Nimush held the boat, allowing no sway.
 A third day, a fourth, Mt. Nimush held the boat, allowing no sway.
 A fifth day, a sixth, Mt. Nimush held the boat, allowing no sway.
 When a seventh day arrived
 I sent forth a dove and released it.
 The dove went off, but came back to me;
 no perch was visible so it circled back to me.
 I sent forth a swallow and released it.
 The swallow went off, but came back to me;

no perch was visible so it circled back to me.
 I sent forth a raven and released it.
 The raven went off, and saw the waters slither back.
 It eats, it scratches, it bobs, but does not circle back to me.
 Then I sent out everything in all directions and sacrificed (a sheep).
 I offered incense in front of the mountain-ziggurat.
 Seven and seven cult vessels I put in place,
 and (into the fire) underneath (or: into their bowls) I poured reeds, cedar, and myrtle.
 The gods smelled the savor,
 the gods smelled the sweet savor,
 and collected like flies over a (sheep) sacrifice.
 Just then Beletili arrived.
 She lifted up the large flies (beads) which Anu had made for his enjoyment(!):
 'You gods, as surely as I shall not forget this lapis lazuli around my neck,
 may I be mindful of these days, and never forget them!
 The gods may come to the incense offering,
 but Enlil may not come to the incense offering,
 because without considering he brought about the Flood
 and consigned my people to annihilation.'
 Just then Enlil arrived.
 He saw the boat and became furious,
 he was filled with rage at the Igigi gods:
 'Where did a living being escape?
 No man was to survive the annihilation!
 Ninurta spoke to Valiant Enlil, saying:
 'Who else but Ea could devise such a thing?
 It is Ea who knows every machination!
 La spoke to Valiant Enlil, saying:
 'It is yours, O Valiant One, who is the Sage of the Gods.
 How, how could you bring about a Flood without consideration
 Charge the violation to the violator,
 charge the offense to the offender,
 but be compassionate lest (mankind) be cut off,
 be patient lest they be killed.
 Instead of your bringing on the Flood,
 would that a lion had appeared to diminish the people!
 Instead of your bringing on the Flood,
 would that a wolf had appeared to diminish the people!
 Instead of your bringing on the Flood,
 would that famine had occurred to slay the land!
 Instead of your bringing on the Flood,
 would that (Pestilent) Erra had appeared to ravage the land!
 It was not I who revealed the secret of the Great Gods,
 I (only) made a dream appear to Atrahasis, and (thus) he heard the secret of the gods.
 Now then! The deliberation should be about him!
 Enlil went up inside the boat
 and, grasping my hand, made me go up.
 He had my wife go up and kneel by my side.
 He touched our forehead and, standing between us, he blessed us:
 'Previously Utanapishtim was a human being.
 But now let Utanapishtim and his wife become like us, the gods!

Let Utanapishtim reside far away, at the Mouth of the Rivers.'
They took us far away and settled us at the Mouth of the Rivers."

"Now then, who will convene the gods on your behalf,
that you may find the life that you are seeking!

Wait! You must not lie down for six days and seven nights."
soon as he sat down (with his head) between his legs
sleep, like a fog, blew upon him.

Utanapishtim said to his wife:

"Look there! The man, the youth who wanted (eternal) life!
Sleep, like a fog, blew over him."

his wife said to Utanapishtim the Faraway:

"Touch him, let the man awaken.

Let him return safely by the way he came.

Let him return to his land by the gate through which he left."

Utanapishtim said to his wife:

"Mankind is deceptive, and will deceive you.

Come, bake loaves for him and keep setting them by his head
and draw on the wall each day that he lay down."

She baked his loaves and placed them by his head
and marked on the wall the day that he lay down.

The first loaf was dessicated,

the second stale, the third moist(?), the fourth turned white, its ...,

the fifth sprouted gray (mold), the sixth is still fresh.

the seventh--suddenly he touched him and the man awoke.

Gilgamesh said to Utanapishtim:

"The very moment sleep was pouring over me
you touched me and alerted me!"

Utanapishtim spoke to Gilgamesh, saying:

"Look over here, Gilgamesh, count your loaves!

You should be aware of what is marked on the wall!

Your first loaf is dessicated,

the second stale, the third moist, your fourth turned white, its ...

the fifth sprouted gray (mold), the sixth is still fresh.

The seventh--suddenly he touched him and the man awoke.

Gilgamesh said to Utanapishtim:

"The very moment sleep was pouring over me
you touched me and alerted me!"

Utanapishtim spoke to Gilgamesh, saying:

"Look over here, Gilgamesh, count your loaves!

You should be aware of what is marked on the wall!

Your first loaf is dessicated,

the second stale, the third moist, your fourth turned white, its ...

the fifth sprouted gray (mold), the sixth is still fresh.

The seventh--at that instant you awoke!"

Gilgamesh said to Utanapishtim the Faraway:

"O woe! What shall I do, Utanapishtim, where shall I go!

The Snatcher has taken hold of my flesh,

in my bedroom Death dwells,

and wherever I set foot there too is Death!"

Home Empty-Handed

Utanapishtim said to Urshanabi, the ferryman:
 "May the harbor reject you, may the ferry landing reject you!
 May you who used to walk its shores be denied its shores!
 The man in front of whom you walk, matted hair chains his body,
 animal skins have ruined his beautiful skin.
 Take him away, Urshanabi, bring him to the washing place.
 Let him wash his matted hair in water like ellu.
 Let him cast away his animal skin and have the sea carry it off,
 let his body be moistened with fine oil,
 let the wrap around his head be made new,
 let him wear royal robes worthy of him!
 Until he goes off to his city,
 until he sets off on his way,
 let his royal robe not become spotted, let it be perfectly new!"
 Urshanabi took him away and brought him to the washing place.
 He washed his matted hair with water like ellu.
 He cast off his animal skin and the sea carried it off.
 He moistened his body with fine oil,
 and made a new wrap for his head.
 He put on a royal robe worthy of him.
 Until he went away to his city,
 until he set off on his way,
 his royal robe remained unspotted, it was perfectly clean.
 Gilgamesh and Urshanabi bearded the boat,
 they cast off the magillu-boat, and sailed away.
 The wife of Utanapishtim the Faraway said to him:
 "Gilgamesh came here exhausted and worn out.
 What can you give him so that he can return to his land (with honor) !"
 Then Gilgamesh raised a punting pole
 and drew the boat to shore.
 Utanapishtim spoke to Gilgamesh, saying:
 "Gilgamesh, you came here exhausted and worn out.
 What can I give you so you can return to your land?
 I will disclose to you a thing that is hidden, Gilgamesh,
 a... I will tell you.
 There is a plant... like a boxthorn,
 whose thorns will prick your hand like a rose.
 If your hands reach that plant you will become a young man again."
 Hearing this, Gilgamesh opened a conduit(!) (to the Apsu)
 and attached heavy stones to his feet.
 They dragged him down, to the Apsu they pulled him.
 He took the plant, though it pricked his hand,
 and cut the heavy stones from his feet,
 letting the waves(?) throw him onto its shores.
 Gilgamesh spoke to Urshanabi, the ferryman, saying:
 "Urshanabi, this plant is a plant against decay(!)
 by which a man can attain his survival(!).
 I will bring it to Uruk-Haven,
 and have an old man eat the plant to test it.
 The plant's name is 'The Old Man Becomes a Young Man.'"

Then I will eat it and return to the condition of my youth."
At twenty leagues they broke for some food,
at thirty leagues they stopped for the night.
Seeing a spring and how cool its waters were,
Gilgamesh went down and was bathing in the water.
A snake smelled the fragrance of the plant,
silently came up and carried off the plant.
While going back it sloughed off its casing.'
At that point Gilgamesh sat down, weeping,
his tears streaming over the side of his nose.
"Counsel me, O ferryman Urshanabi!
For whom have my arms labored, Urshanabi!
For whom has my heart's blood roiled!
I have not secured any good deed for myself,
but done a good deed for the 'lion of the ground'!"
Now the high waters are coursing twenty leagues distant,'
as I was opening the conduit(?) I turned my equipment over into it (!).
What can I find (to serve) as a marker(?) for me!
I will turn back (from the journey by sea) and leave the boat by the shore!"
At twenty leagues they broke for some food,
at thirty leagues they stopped for the night.
They arrived in Uruk-Haven.
Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi, the ferryman:
"Go up, Urshanabi, onto the wall of Uruk and walk around.
Examine its foundation, inspect its brickwork thoroughly--
is not (even the core of) the brick structure of kiln-fired brick,
and did not the Seven Sages themselves lay out its plan!
One league city, one league palm gardens, one league lowlands, the open area(?) of the Ishtar Temple,
three leagues and the open area(?) of Uruk it encloses.