

97-08-10b

Okay, we're back now from our break. And we are looking at what they like to call the cultural milieu of the times in which the Book of Genesis was produced and was taught to the emerging nation of Israel. We saw the accounts that we have preserved.

There were many more, but we have preserved for us some of the early Mesopotamian and Babylonian accounts of creation and of the flood. We reviewed Enuma Elish from about 1100 B.C. and the parallels, some of the common features of that account and also some of the great contrasts. We saw the Atrahasis account from 1600 B.C. which is a Mesopotamian myth.

It's also the flood story from that account is reflected in another account which is the Gilgamesh story. Tablet 11 of the Gilgamesh epic reflects the same basic flood story that you find in Atrahasis. And again, you have the sequence of creation, of divine displeasure, and of a flood.

And in Gilgamesh especially, you see the... That's a fascinating one to read. It's fairly easy to find a copy of that in a library or something and read about Gilgamesh. You can see that there are many differences, but there are some common features, some details of his survival of the flood in a boat and sending out a bird to see if there's dry land and offering sacrifice after the waters recede and so forth is interesting to see as parallel to the account of Noah.

The third account, the Sumerian flood epic also from around 1600 B.C., reconstructed from several different tablets and so forth. Many of the parallels as far as the state of man in the early days without clothes and not having irrigation and so forth sort of echoes and reflections of the actual state of things prior to the fall. And then man being in a sad state and the goddess trying to do something about it.

Her plan unravels and all kinds of chaos breaks loose. And because man is noisy, the gods send a flood to try to wipe him out, but one man is preserved and he preserves in his boat the building blocks of civilization. These have often been construed, especially by secular scholars, as sources for the Israelite account of creation and of the flood and so forth.

And they say, well, see, these things were woven together. They don't want to see any originality involved. These are the same people that say that the law of Moses, the ritual law and so forth, and the legal code came from Hammurabi or some other source and that it's all borrowed.

It's interesting that they are so anxious to try to explain away the biblical account and say that it's all derived from earlier sources, but they have no problem believing that the Mesopotamians and the Babylonians and the Egyptians invented these things ex nihilo,

that they created these flood myths and creation stories and legal codes from scratch. But it annoys them to no end to think that these things were created without precedent in the Israelite culture because that, of course, lends credence to the fact that the Bible comes from God and is an accurate record. They don't want to believe that.

But I'd like to point out seven contrasts that we find in Genesis with these ancient Near Eastern myths. And you might keep an eye on these because many of these contrasts are the same contrasts that we find today in our scientific myths and the religion of science that pervades our culture and our society. The first of these, in Canaanite and ancient Near Eastern mythology, you often see the opposite.

You have the gods and then you have opposition to the gods. You sort of have the good guys and the bad guys, and this opposition will often take the form of dragons or you have Tiamat, the goddess of chaos and this sort of thing. You have the more or less good guy gods seeking to struggle and overcome these equal but opposite forces.

And sometimes it's the gods against the gods. And even the good guy gods indulge in such bad behavior that it's like watching modern TV series. You don't really know who the good guys are anymore.

They don't wear white hats. They don't come in and rescue the fair maiden. You just don't really know who to root for anymore.

And that's the way it is. This first contrast, these dragons and other forces to be overcome, are portrayed as equal and opposite to the divinities in these pantheons. It's equals fighting equals.

This is a very great contrast because in Genesis, you don't have God struggling and wrestling with an equal and opposite force. God, the Lord God, Elohim, is presented from the very first verses of Genesis as supreme. There is no one like him.

There is no force that comes anywhere near him. He is in control. He creates.

And there wasn't any parallel for this. They say, well, these things were derived from Mesopotamian, Babylonian myths. Well, there's no parallel for this.

There were no stories of an absolute supreme God who was completely above any force of opposition. You get the idea that it's the opposition who would like to believe themselves to be equal and opposite to God. And you begin to detect a little bit of a satanic exaggeration in the cultural myths that he likes to bring up as alternatives.

So that's the first contrast. These forces that oppose the gods are equal and opposite. But in Genesis, the dragons in particular, the great sea monsters are mentioned in Genesis 1.21 and they are just creatures.

They are something that God created. They are subordinate to him. They came into existence because of him.

They are not equal and opposite in that account. Secondly, in these myths, there is a great struggle in the story of creation. One of the details that parallels the Genesis account is that there is the need to separate the waters.

Waters throughout the ancient Near East are used to symbolize and illustrate and represent the chaotic, uncontrollable forces of evil. You see this throughout the Old Testament in the Psalms. Why is it that it said that God has established his throne upon the seas or over the seas? Why is it that Leviathan and Behemoth and so forth are pictured as swimming in the seas? In the poetic section of Jonah, where he talks about descending to the foundations of the earth and the gates of Sheol and so forth, he is in the chaotic waters of the storm.

This is a very common motif and a way of representing and personifying or giving a metaphor for the chaotic, uncontrollable forces of darkness. In these ancient mythologies, the gods had a big struggle with these chaotic forces. In their myths, the gods had to work very hard to try to separate the upper waters from the lower waters.

What happens in the Genesis account? God speaks and it happens. God divided the waters from the waters and the gap in between he called the firmament. And it's done.

There's no struggle. There's no sweat involved here. There's no idea that he might not prevail over the waters.

God is completely sovereign, completely in control of his own creation. These things have come from his hand, by his word. You can't believe the amount of contrast in the ancient world.

There wasn't any story like this. Their stories had no such sovereign god. This is reflected in Genesis 1, verses 6 through 10.

When God speaks, these things obey unhesitatingly, without opposition, without struggle. Thirdly, celestial worship was big in the ancient Near East. It's thought that the Tower of Babel was a ziggurat, designed for astronomical observations.

The sun and moon and stars were thought of as deities and were worshipped as such. But, of course, Genesis 1 tells us that these things were created by God. They are not gods.

They don't represent God. They are subordinate to him. They are inanimate things created by him.

In the first days of creation, they're not even labeled as sun and moon and stars. They're

just called greater lights and lesser lights. They're not even given the dignity of a name in the first three days of creation.

This was a great contrast. People received this teaching and it stuck out in their mind. This is a legitimate application of what the original recipients would have thought and have seen in this account when it came out.

Fourthly, in the Babylonian tradition especially, man and the creation of man is sort of an afterthought. Their myths are all about the dealings of the gods. It's like a big patent place in the sky.

They're opposing one another and undercutting one another and stabbing one another in the back and having relations and giving birth to various gods and demigods. It's a big soap opera in the sky. Man is sort of an afterthought.

They reach a certain point and they say, you know, we really need somebody to do some of the work. We're involved in intrigue and conflict up here and we need somebody to get the mundane work done and to bring us our food. Let's create some little sub-creatures and let them do this mundane work and supply our food for us so that we can get on with the business of running our big unending story up here.

This is a contrast with the creation account in Genesis where the creation of man is central. You can tell as you go through the account that it's leading up to the ultimate act of creation on the sixth day, which is the creation of man and the forming by God in a personal way. God didn't just speak man into existence.

God manufactures him by hand, as it were, from the dust of the ground. God's personally involved. God is pictured as bending over and breathing into man's nostrils, the breath of life.

It's a personal and purposeful creation. It's the culmination, the pinnacle of the acts of creation that God has recorded as having performed. It's not sort of an ad-lib or an afterthought the way it is in these Babylonian myths.

In Genesis, who provides food for whom? In the Babylonian accounts, man runs around and gets food for the gods. In Genesis, God plants a garden. God provides food for man.

Fifthly, in these ancient myths, these gods of these various pantheons would create in all kinds of strange ways. Sometimes it would be magical utterances. They would chant and they would do the ancient equivalent of abracadabra or hocus pocus and bring something into existence.

A lot of times it would run amok. They would create something and then they could not control it. The flood story, where they got tired of man because he was noisy and they said, well, we'll just wash him away with a flood of water.

Well, the flood got out of control and the gods couldn't control it anymore. It completely left them at a loss. It ran amok and they couldn't stop it.

Sometimes creation would be the result of procreation, all of this intrigue and incest and one thing and another going on. Two gods would get together and here would pop up a new god or a demigod. This would be the sea or this would be the earth or this would be what they call an etiological story, a story of where something came from.

This is the origin of it. These two gods got together and now we have this. You see this even when you study Greek and Roman mythology.

Where did the Weeping Willow come from? Where did the Narcissus come from? Where did fire come from? You have the story of Vulcan and Thor and all these other things. These are stories designed to try to explain where something came from. A lot of times it came by accident and without purpose.

In Genesis you consistently have a purposeful, organized, planning god who through his spoken word and through his authority consciously and deliberately brings things into being. This was unique. People weren't used to seeing an all-powerful god who planned ahead, who wasn't subject to vagaries of other gods and wasn't capricious and unpredictable.

Seventhly, we have, well I guess that was number five. Sixth, myths offered many local, tribal and often petty deities. There was a pantheon of gods who interacted and this was sort of necessary to the mythology.

You had to have several of these acting in concert or in opposition to one another to account for everything and to provide all of these interesting stories. This is a contrast with the sovereign lord of all the earth, the source of everything, the creator of everything and the one who has ultimate authority, who never fails, who's never capricious, who's never subject to the foibles and the failures that you find in these other pantheons. The god of Israel, Jehovah Elohim, presented in Genesis was unique and that is pointed out not only in Genesis but throughout the history of Israel, even in the later prophetic books, the books of the prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah point out who is like the lord.

God, in Isaiah, points out his uniqueness. He says there is no god like me who tells you what's going to happen before it happens and so forth. He's purposely contrasting himself with the stories of these false deities that had proliferated.

Finally, the seventh point, the mythology in these ancient cultures showed the history of the gods and the history of man to be a series of sort of random acts, cause and effect, without a plan and without a purpose. Inherent in that is that man's plight, whatever our circumstances are and the problems that we have, we're victims of what happened with

the gods. You find this still today, this idea comes all the way down to the present.

You see it in Greek and Roman mythology and in our modern portrayals of it. They've got these series on TV now, Hercules, the legendary journeys, and the lady with the black leather stuff on, the princess, can't think of her name, that comes on right after Hercules. They're shown as having to put up with a lot of problems because of the gods and what the gods do, that man's problems are a result of the gods fouling up.

This is the way it has been throughout history in these myths and legends. This is contrasted with the portrayal in Genesis and in the Old Testament. God has a purpose and a plan and man's plight, man's problems, are a result of man's failures.

We got ourselves into this mess and it is the Lord God, who in grace and in compassion, reaches down to rescue us and to fulfill his purpose despite our failures. It's a very stark contrast that we find in these ancient myths and legends. When we do find those common elements, it reminds us that there was something of a cultural memory, something of a vestige of the truth that got passed down.

We were talking during the break about that it's been pointed out many times that virtually every culture has a flood story. In many cases you'll find that the survivor came through on a boat and there will be various other details that match the Genesis account. A lot of times this is not because there is a dependency involved.

That story didn't derive from the Bible or the Bible didn't derive from that story, but it is a vestige that goes back to the original event and to the original source. The reason the idea of a worldwide flood is all over the world is that it really happened and people made stories up about it. Those who were far from God, those stories corrupted and changed and were embellished and given different purposes and different meanings over the years, but you will still find traces of the truth in those stories.

So Genesis is a book of beginnings and Genesis is unique because it is a book of promise. God has a purpose. God has a plan.

God creates everything as good. The problem enters in when man fails, when man disobeys, when man rebels. And God enters once again into the darkness and brings light.

There are three areas of promise, three emphases in the promises of God in Genesis. The first of these is the promise of descendants. There is a future.

Even though the penalty for disobedience is death, God promises a future to mankind. You're going to have descendants. The human race is not going to become extinct.

And those descendants are going to be blessed. The promise of descendants is stated in Genesis some 19 times. 19 different places in Genesis God promises that there will be

offspring, there will be a seed.

Secondly, an emphasis in the promises of God is the promise of relationship. Not only is man going to survive, but he has the opportunity for relationship with God, for covenant blessing from God. This is stated explicitly in Genesis some 10 times.

And this extends on through the Pentateuch, the remaining books of Moses. We find the promise of relationship in Exodus 8 times and in Leviticus once. The third emphasis in the area of promise from God in addition to descendants and in addition to relationship is the promise of land.

The promise of a place, a home. The land promise is stated in Genesis 13 times. It is reiterated in Exodus 5 times.

But this is the emphasis. God intervenes. God steps in to the plight of man and offers promise.

It is often a conditional promise. The opportunity to receive the benefits and the blessings of that promise depends on what we choose. But the fact that there is hope and the fact that there is a promise at all is an act of God.

Unprompted, undeserved, it is an expression of the character of God in compassion and in grace and in love for us to step in where our situation is hopeless and helpless and useless and provide a perfect solution. Not only are these promises given with these three areas of emphasis, but these promises are brought to mind. They are alluded to not only in Genesis but in the rest of the Pentateuch and in the rest of the Scriptures.

But these promises are referred to, are brought to mind as reminders 17 times in Genesis. 17 times God reminds and refreshes our minds about His promises. In Exodus, they are referred to 11 times.

In Leviticus, 11 times. And in Numbers, 37 times. By the time you get to Deuteronomy, there are 50 allusions back to the promises of God that He gives in Genesis.

50 times God reminds Israel of His faithfulness, of His covenant with them, His promises to them. And this serves as an important reminder and lesson for us. First of all, the truth that we have in the Word of God refutes the common view in our day and in our civilization and in our culture just the way that it did then.

Science wants to tell us that we are an afterthought. That we are a byproduct of evolution. That we are a happy accident of molecular interaction.

That lightning struck the primordial soup in just the right way to start life on its track. And that we're a byproduct. We're not the focus.

We're not the emphasis. We're not a part of a purpose or a plan. It's the same type of

thinking that pervaded the ancient Near East.

And one of the great benefits that we see in the Book of Genesis is not just that there is a God and that there is a plan and a purpose and that we are the focus of divine attention, but what those are. What is God's purpose? What is God's plan? Why are we here? What is God going to accomplish through human history and through our place in it? We find those things out in the Book of Genesis just the way the nation of Israel found those things out when Moses first presented this book to them. Secondly, the modern thinking tends to tell us that we are victims of circumstance.

Our problems are a result of environment. Our problems are a result of forces beyond our control. I'm not responsible for my actions.

I shouldn't be held accountable because there were outside forces that shaped me and made me the way I am. I have a right to be this way. I'm justified in my failures or in my faults or in my crimes or in my bad thought patterns, my bad behaviors.

I'm justified. There's a legitimate reason for this. Look at the circumstances I'm in.

I'm a victim of circumstance. That's what the ancient Near Eastern myths and legends provided was an out, an excuse to dodge responsibility and dodge accountability. Scripture from the very outset tells us where responsibility and accountability lie.

And they lie with us. We are at fault. We are responsible.

We are accountable. And we look at God not as the author of our misfortunes but as the author of our salvation. And that's a contrast.

The religions and the philosophies of the world today as then try to provide a palliative, an explanation, a justification for things being the way they are rather than a true solution. Divine power in the inner man, transformation, hope in the present and hope in the future based on God and God alone is the truth of Scripture. And it isn't found in any other system of thought, any other religion, any other cult.

And the placing of blame and the placing of responsibility squarely on us is unique to the Scriptures. It's unique to Genesis. But along with that accurate assigning of where the problem came from comes the promise of God, the faithfulness of God, the love of God in being present and available and interested in resolving these problems, resolving these effects of our failure and our sin.

And God never points out the failures and points out the shortcoming and points out the problem without also offering the solution and himself being the solution in his perfection and in his omnipotence. And so we find, as the Israelites did and as mankind has from the days of Adam, relief, salvation, deliverance, comfort in God. We recognize that there are problems.

We recognize that we fail and that we suffer the consequences of our failure. And at the same time, we recognize that God is present. When you look at Genesis 1, verse 2, the principle, even before man comes on the scene, even before the curse comes, we have the communication of the principle because when God in the beginning created the heavens and the earth, the earth was *tohu wa mohu*.

It was empty and devoid of population. We'll look next time. We're going to do some very interesting excavation in the Hebrew and look at some of the words that are contained in these first few verses.

But God comes into a situation where there is emptiness, where there is darkness, where there is no fruit, no life, no production, no future. And in his presence, when it says that the *wach* of God, the spirit of God, or in some translations, the wind of God, the breeze of God hovers over the face of the deep, of the waters, where there is that problem, where there is that darkness and where there is that unfinished, unformed landscape, God is present. God makes himself present and then God acts.

God speaks and there is light. And it's unique because that's the situation in our lives, whether we're unbelievers or believers. Where there is confusion, where there is failure, where there is an unfinished work, God is present.

And it's God's presence that makes all the difference. It's his personal presence. We're going to see when we look at verse 2 next week that there is an emphasis here on the personal presence of God.

And that's the opportunity that we have as believers. Jesus talks in John chapter 15 about the possibility and the opportunity for us to experience the indwelling of God the Father, the indwelling of the Lord Jesus Christ, the filling of God the Holy Spirit. The personal presence of God is that active divine force that resolves everything that comes to us because of our failures, everything that is a result of our sin, everything that's a result of our corruption.

It is the gift and the grace action of God in making himself present in a hopeless situation that is our promise. It's our hope. It's our future.

Genesis is a book of promise. Genesis portrays for us the incredible restorative and creative power inherent in God's presence. And that same power is present within us.

It is a creative power. It is a restorative and a life-giving presence. And it's one that we should take advantage of, that we should seek and that we should prioritize more than anything else in our life.

We have the opportunity for the same Spirit of God that hovered over the face of the waters to do his work in our soul, his regenerative, restorative, transforming work. When we resume next time, be prepared to spend some time in the Hebrew and to see the

unique distinction between the actions of God and the word of God. As a preview, something you can look for as you read through this passage for next week, look at the difference between God acting and God speaking.

God does some things by speaking and he does some things by acting. And we'll draw out the contrast and the comparison of those two things next time. But let's close here in prayer.

Father, we thank you for the unique place that we hold at the center of your plan. We thank you that there is order, that you are supreme, that you have a plan and a purpose and a calling for us. We pray that as we meditate on the truth of your word, as we experience the power of your presence within us, that these things will live in our soul, that we will be transformed, that we will grow and become conformed to the standard of a mature and complete man, that we will be thoroughly equipped for every good work and that in so doing, we will reflect the glory of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

We ask it in his name. Amen.