

Reading the OT Week 2

Question: 'Do we no longer describe the Bible with terms like inerrancy?' I took from that that a placing of the Old Testament in the culture of the Ancient Near East, sharing so many similarities with current, non-Israelite beliefs, could raise questions about the uniqueness and trustworthiness of the Bible.

Proposed Outline

1 Introduction

2 Genesis 1-11

3 Patriarchs

Abraham to Joseph

4 Exodus

Moses

Covenant(s)

God's revelation of himself Ex 3 and elsewhere. Job

The Passover, wilderness, Tabernacle, Promised Land

Relationship with surrounding nations.

5 Sinai. Ten Commandments. The laws and the feasts. Sacrifice.

6 Israel asks for a king.

Saul. David.

God's promise to David.

Solomon.

The Temple

7 Psalms

8 Proverbs and wisdom literature, Eccles. SS

9 Historical books

10 Prophets

11 Exile

12 Return. Rebuilding of Temple

GENESIS 1-11

"Authorship"

Authors and "tradents"

Evidence of multiple sources being put together. "This is the account of ..."

Creation

chs 1-2

The Fall

ch 3

Cain and Abel

ch 4

Genealogies

ch 5

The Flood

chs 6-9

The Table of Nations

ch 10

Tower of Babel

ch 11:1-26

CREATION STORIES

What are your questions?

What kind of stories are these?

ANE parallels

Enuma Elish	Babylonian
Hesiod's Theogony	Greek
Ovid's Metamorphoses	Latin

Polytheistic

"Creation" began with a struggle between gods for supremacy

Things just happened (Hesiod)

Things were put in order by "a god," we don't know which one.

What we have in Genesis is a major *theological* reinterpretation of traditional origin stories.

Throughout the ancient Near East people believed in a multitude of gods and goddesses: they were polytheists.

But in Genesis there is one supreme God, who creates everything and controls everything.

The Atrahasis epic tells of the lesser gods going on strike against the higher gods, and the higher gods are divided among themselves. We read of the gods cowering like dogs at the flood they have released, whereas at the height of the flood "God remembered Noah" and immediately the waters start to subside. Whereas the Babylonian gods cannot control the flood, the God of Genesis can.

The biblical insistence on the unity and sovereignty of the one God is clearest in Genesis 1. There he speaks and, stage by stage, the world is brought into existence.

In the thought of the other cultures the sun and the moon were important gods, but Genesis affirms they were simply created by God on the fourth day.

Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament* (adapted)

Strikingly different is Genesis' portrayal of God's attitude to man from that in the other texts.

According to the Atrahasis epic mankind was created as an afterthought to break the strike called by the lesser gods and to supply food to the gods through the offering of sacrifice. But in Genesis 1 the creation of man constitutes the climax of the creation story: created in God's image beings are God's representatives on earth. Far from man supplying God with food, it is God who supplies human beings with food.

As far as the Babylonian world-view was concerned one of the big problems with humanity was its fertility. The population explosion disturbed the rest of the gods: three times they tried to control it by plague, drought and famine before they resorted to the flood. Then after the flood they resorted to disrupting the reproductive process by making some women infertile, letting children die young and assigning other women to celibacy.

Genesis has a very different perspective. From the start God blesses mankind and encourages procreation with the words "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28). After the flood the same command is given to Noah, not once but three times (8:17; 9:1, 7).

The Babylonian gods squabble among themselves and are not averse to deceiving one another or humans. The flood was sent not because of human sin but simply because there were too many people around. Atrahasis escaped because he worshipped Ea, who did not approve of the flood, whereas Noah escaped because of his exemplary behaviour.

Thus as Genesis retells familiar stories about the origins of the world, it dramatically transforms them theologically.

Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament* (adapted)

SUMMARY

Babylonian epics

Polytheism

Divine weakness

Humans a sideline

Humans supply gods with food

Flood sent to control population growth

Continual improvement

"Babel" in Akkadian means

"Gate of God"

Genesis

Monotheism

Almighty power

Humans central to God's purpose

God supplies humans with food

Flood sent because of human sin

Increase of evil

"Babel" means "folly"

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

“In the beginning....” Genesis is not talking about the absolute beginning, whatever that was; I guess there wasn’t one, because God had no beginning. It’s talking about the beginning of the world. The standard Jewish translation of this opening verse is “When God began to create the heavens and the earth”; that avoids giving the impression that Genesis is talking about the absolute beginning. It doesn’t pretend to know what God was doing before the beginning of the world.

John Goldingay, *Genesis for Everyone*

The early African theologian Augustine raises this question and passes on the jocular reply he once heard that God was preparing hell for people who pry too deep. This idea was a bit too facetious for Augustine, though not for the Reformation theologian Martin Luther, who liked the remark. But in a way that jocular reply does mesh with Augustine's own comment: "I do not know what I do not know." Genesis also isn't interested in satisfying our curiosity about the beginning of other supernatural beings such as the angels or about the "fall of Satan." Genesis does not tell us. What we do not know we do not know. Genesis focuses resolutely on the beginning of the world and of humanity.

John Goldingay, *Genesis for Everyone*

Biblical account:

planned, systematic activity of God
emphasizes the functions of things

Do we ask the wrong questions of Genesis 1 and 2?