



The Drama of Redemption: From Chaos to the Dawn of New Creation- Providence Prep Academy-Fall 2018 *The Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* Rev. Charles R. Biggs, Th.M.

"This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead... For the living know that they will die..." – Ecclesiastes 9:3, 5a

Revelation from God

As God's people we are privileged to have special revelation from God that is found in the Bible. From the beginning, man has relied on God's revealing Himself even before the fall. God has condescended from the beginning of creation to reveal Himself and to teach mankind. Although mankind sinned against God in rebellion, and desired to know for himself autonomously apart from God, God has nevertheless written large His power and attributes in creation and even within man's conscience (Gen. 3:1-5; Rom. 1:19ff; 2:14-16). Notice the way the Bible teaches mankind was deceived through a denial of God's clear revelation:

***"Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden,³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die.⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."* (Genesis 3:1b-5).**

The Apostle Paul teaches that all of mankind knows God to a certain extent, and the truths that He has revealed about Himself and us still remain to a certain degree in our hearts and consciences:

***For [God's] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse...For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.* (Romans 1:19-20; 2:14-15).**

As theologian Herman Bavinck wrote: "The creation is the first revelation of God, the beginning and foundation of all subsequent revelation. The Biblical concept of revelation is rooted in that of creation. God first appeared outwardly before His creatures in the creation and revealed Himself to them."¹ We must assert from the beginning of our studies that revelation is an act of God's

¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. I: Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 307.

condescending grace and kindness to His humanity. God was not obligated to reveal Himself to His creatures and to invite them to know Him (and thus know themselves). But God has revealed Himself clearly, and we want to know Him from the Bible. We then should desire to know all other things using the Bible as our eyeglasses to see all other things.

The confident foundation and starting point we must have when comparing the Bible with other ancient Near Eastern literature is knowing confidently that the Bible is God's Word of special revelation to mankind and it is trustworthy. ***God has spoken*** (2 Tim. 3:16ff). ***The True and Living God has spoken...to us!*** This should absolutely amaze you! Not only do we know His revelation is true because God has spoken, but when we live submitted to it, it makes sense of our experiences, and answers all of our deepest questions with great satisfaction.²

Theologian Herman Bavinck wrote about the revelation found in Holy Scripture in the early twentieth century: "Holy Scripture proceeds from the existence and revelation of God. God does not leave Himself without a witness, and for that there is reason there is from the side of humans a searching to see if they could perhaps grope for Him and find Him (Acts 17:27). Revelation, according to Scripture, existed both before and after the fall. Revelation is religion's external principle of knowing."³

Our starting point in studying beliefs and worldviews found in ancient Near Eastern epics and legends should be from God's viewpoint as revealed in the Bible. In contrast to other ancient Near Eastern literature, the Bible gives us a transcendent, objective perspective to know ourselves and the world in which we live. As Old Testament Professor John Oswalt writes: "Revelation assumes that this world is not self-explanatory and that some communication from beyond is necessary to explain it."⁴ If the world is not explained by God, as He gives it through the Bible, we will still ask questions about ourselves and the world, but we will more often than not get these answers wrong, and add a bit of perversion to the little truth we do comprehend and get right.⁵

When studying ancient Near Eastern literature, and comparing it with the Bible, there have been essentially two paths that students have followed⁶:

1. Some of claimed that the Bible is just another piece of ancient Near Eastern literature; it is no different than any other ancient writing. These would say that there is nothing special about the Bible; it is in fact merely another literary artifact of an ancient culture.

² "No mythology can ultimately satisfy our desire for truth [as image-bearers]. Only God can do that. As Augustine once remarked, 'You [God] have made us for yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.'" Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008).

³ Herman Bavinck, *ibid.*, 277.

⁴ John Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation of Just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Books, 2009), Kindle Location: 104.

⁵ In other classes, you may recall that I have spoken about the great questions that all mankind have asked (and still ask!), and these questions are formulated in great literature: "Who are you?" (speaking of God); "Who am I?" (learning about who we are as beings); "Where am I?" (what is the world, etc); "Where am I going/what is my purpose?"; "What went wrong?"

⁶ These types of studies are called "Comparative Religion" or "Comparative Literature" studies and are barely two hundred years old.

2. The Bible is unique, and its revelation from God, and is to be our starting point for considering all other literature.

We will choose and walk carefully on the latter path using the Bible as our eyeglasses to help us to see well, and to follow God in His thoughts as we think these things through. As Christians, we should begin with the premise that the Bible is the very revelation of God, and the Word of God to all mankind.

The Original and the Copies: Similarities and Differences

We should expect there to be similarities between the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern literature, and we should in no way be intimidated by this. We should expect to find mankind who is made in God's image, seeking to tell the story of creation, the flood, or other great events in history. God's revelation is given to man in real history, in time and space.

If you think of the Bible as the original copy of all revelation (even if some of the revelation was written down formally later), then you would expect that there would be copies. In Genesis chapters 4-11 we learn that mankind has been sent "East of Eden" away from the special presence of God because of sin. We might expect mankind to take the little revelation that is known and to continue to make it known with a certain degree of truth (common grace because although fallen and sinful, we are still like God to a certain degree). We may also probably find that the further one wanders from the special presence of God, the further one is from the truth (common curse because of sin, a refusal to acknowledge truth, thus leading to idolatry as Romans 1:21-25 so accurately tells us).

If the original copy of the story is with and from God, then the further one is away from the only True and Living God, the further from the truth the story will be, but there would still exist many copies because the Bible says we are significant beings made in God's image, and we are made to know truth. Even when we don't know the whole truth, and refuse to submit to the revelation we do have, we desire to know something rather than nothing, thus why history is full of stories, particularly stories about origins and major events.

What we find is that there are similarities between the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern literature (from here on "ANE literature"), but there are important differences as well. Scholars and students who tend to think the Bible is just another piece of ANE literature tend to focus on only the similarities; but there are very important differences that reveal that the Bible is God's Word, and that it is unique among all the ANE. Before we consider the specific similarities and differences between the Bible and ANE literature, let us sketch a brief overview of the last two hundred years.⁷

A Brief Overview of the Studies of Ancient Near Eastern Studies and the Bible

Before 1798, the knowledge of the history of the ANE was principally derived from the Bible. With the growth and expansion of archaeological research in the 1800s and early 1900s, there was much

⁷ This is an outline from John Currid's book, *Against the Gods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013). Kindle HDX version.

new information and new questions being asked, and conclusions being posited about the relationship between the ANE literature and the Bible.

Between 1873 and 1905, a period of suspicion began after the finding of an Assyrian flood story. The archaeologist who found this flood story was named George Smith and he wrote: "...This account of the deluge opens to us a new field of inquiry in the early part of Bible history. The question has often been asked, 'What is the origin of the accounts of the antediluvians, with their long lives so many times greater than the longest span of human life? Where was Paradise...From whence comes the story of the flood... [this supplies us with] material which future scholars will have to work out.'"(See Appendix for Timeline).⁸

The future scholars have been working this out up to this day, and not necessarily ways that honor God. Much of the working out of these findings have tempted and turned many students toward a liberal view of the Bible. Many scholars between the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries began to be suspicious about the Bible and asserted that the flood story found in the Bible must be dependent upon early Mesopotamian texts. In other words, some scholars began to claim that the biblical flood had evolved from the Mesopotamian story.

Some began to teach that the biblical stories has been stripped of polytheism, but were all derived from Babylonia. During the first half of the twentieth century there was the archaeological discovery of thousands of tablets of ANE literature (discovery of language and cultures of Egypt, Hittite, Mesopotamian, Babylonian, et al). This is very unfortunate and has caused Christians to be intimidated about studying ANE literature.

Nevertheless, if there is a good foundation on God's Word of revelation, then we can follow God's thoughts after Him as we are learning, and there should be no reason to be intimidated and/or apprehensive. In fact, there is much room for confessional, evangelical, conservative Christians to study this formally if God should interest you and call you to it. The studies are very fascinating! As part of preparing ourselves for the study of ANE literature, let us commit ourselves to God's Word as the final authority from God and the revelation to rightly interpret the literature, then let us consider both the similarities and differences between ANE literature and the Bible.

Comparing Worldviews of Ancient Near Eastern Literature and the Bible

The Old Testament in our Bibles is essentially different from its ANE neighbors, but there are significant similarities we want to note. In the ANE, there are creation stories and there are flood stories. As we considered above, these should not intimate Christians; this is what we should expect and is consistent with what God has revealed in the Bible. Should these similarities make us think that the Bible is guilty of "crass plagiarism" from other ANE works?!⁹ Have the Biblical authors

⁸ Currid, *Against the Gods*, Kindle Location: 188-196. Also, George Smith, "The Chaldean Account of the Deluge," *Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 2 (1873): 213-234.

⁹ This was the position of Frederich Delitzsch (son of conservative Old Testament scholar Franz Delitzsch whose excellent Old Testament commentaries are still in print). Currid in *Against the Gods* notes that liberal commentators think that Genesis is the Hebrew version of a Babylonian legend (S. R. Driver) and that many biblical texts show the path along which the Marduk myth was transformed into Genesis 1 (Hermann Gunkel).

cleansed the pagan elements of the stories and “Yahwized” them to fit the purpose within Israel’s storyline or worldview as liberal scholars have asserted?¹⁰

Wouldn’t it make more sense to understand that the Bible is God’s true revelation in history, in real time and space, and that there are similar stories, motifs, metaphors, and images that we might find in other ANE literature because the Bible was written in real history to real historically and culturally rooted people? Isn’t it more honest to acknowledge the Bible’s own teaching of man’s fallenness, and see that while these ANE stories have been repeated, they also have been “bastardized” and “perverted” the further they were told away from the revelation of the Bible and its influence?¹¹

In ANE literature, we discover, as we would expect, kernels of historical truth. The pagan authors are subject to clear general revelation in creation and are God’s image bearers who have God’s law written in their consciences as we have learned (Rom. 1:19ff; 2:14-16), nevertheless, they also distort the truths and “dress them up with polytheism, magic, violence, and paganism.” As Old Testament scholar John Oswalt writes helpfully: “**Fact became myth.**”¹² Professor Oswalt means that much of the facts of God’s Word were perverted into myth, and the stories became contaminated with error, while retaining some elements of the truth.

We should remember as Christians with reading any stories, or studying any literature well, there will be always be **affirmation** (or “Yes!”) of the truths that we find, because we know that there is common grace and we should expect to find elements of truth in the works of image bearers made in God’s image. Remember that “all truth is God’s truth!”¹³ But as good students, we should also expect **antithesis** (or “No!”) where sin has perverted the truth, or darkness has kept the light of truth from shining which is the common curse on mankind because of sin. Let us be careful to note the affirmation and expect to find truth, but also look for antithesis, or that which is contrary to Biblical revelation and is a perversion of the truth of God. When we focus on similarities, we will tend to find affirmations between ANE and the Bible, but when we focus on the differences we will see more clearly that there are many places where we must deny in antithesis to the claims made by the ANE author (s).

When we read the Bible with this understanding, we will see clearly that the Biblical authors are not borrowing, nor are they “Yahwizing” from the pagan elements to present the same story, but when they are using metaphor, images, and cultural references they are often doing so in a polemical manner to purposely rebuke the pagan, polytheistic versions of the story (e.g. The plagues of Egypt are a revelation of God’s power against all the so-called polytheistic gods of Egypt (Exodus 7-12); Moses’ Word from God defeats the magicians of Pharaoh’s court (Exodus 7); Psalm 29 teaches us that YHWH is the “Rider on the Storm/Clouds” not Baal as was thought in Ugaritic ANE literature; The use of God’s “strong hand” and “Thus says” in His revelation is to demonstrate

¹⁰ Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible* (New York: Putnam, 1903), 50. “Yahwized” refers to what some liberal scholars have thought about Genesis begin “sanitized” from an originally mythic text and reconfigured into a historical narrative.

¹¹ “Bastardized” and “perverted” were the words of Old Testament professor John Currid.

¹² Oswalt, *ibid.*, pg. 32.

¹³ “If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God” (J. Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, 2.2.xv).

God's Almighty power over the other gods of paganism). There is indeed a polemical element, but no perversion of the truth in Scripture. God's revelation in the Bible is a polemical, inspired antithesis against lies, half-truths, and errors. Here is an example of the polemical nature of Scripture (against Egypt and against Baal):

“Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.” (ESV Isaiah 19:1)

“He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind...” (ESV Psalm 104:3)

Old Testament professor John Currid writes that polemical theology is one of the most important ways of examining and studying the relationship between the Bible and other ANE literature. “It helps to highlight the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the Hebrew worldview over against the dominant setting of the rest of the ancient Near East.”¹⁴

Major differences in ANE literature and Bible

In comparing the Bible and other ANE literature, let us remember to balance our interpretation by affirming where we see elements of common grace and truth, and disagreeing where we find antithesis and elements of common curse because of sin. In the worldview of all ANE literature other than the Bible, there is an “immanent frame” or focus on what is in this world strictly from man’s perspective; the worldview of ANE literature is based on a “closed” world, even though there are deities and heavenly creatures. There is continuity in this frame rather than transcendence from without as with the Bible.¹⁵

In other words, with the ANE worldview of continuity there is always a close relationship between deity, humanity, and nature, but there are no boundaries, neither is there revelation received from outside this frame (as in the transcendent worldview of the Bible). “[The] gods are humans and natural forces; nature is divine and divinity has human-like characteristics; humanity is divine and is one with nature. There is no distinction in nature among deity, humanity and nature, only in roles. All things that exist are part of each other.”¹⁶

In this closed, immanent frame of perspective found in continuity, the gods have attributes of what man sees and observes in nature; nature can be controlled through the gods; man must seek the favor of the gods, although the characteristics of the gods are sinful humanity written large (the gods are sneaky, cranky, deceptive, manipulative, etc). Professor Oswalt writes: “...Since the idol is like Baal, it *is* Baal. What is done to the idol is done to Baal. But Baal is also like the storm: he is potent; he is life-giving; he is impetuous; he is destructive. Therefore, he *is* the storm. Thus, what is done to Baal is done to the storm, and what is done to the storm is done to Baal.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Currid, *Against the Gods*, Kindle Location: 501-509.

¹⁵ Language of “Continuity” and “Transcendence” from Oswalt, 2009.

¹⁶ Oswalt, Kindle Location: 647-654.

¹⁷ Oswalt, Kindle Location: 656-668.

This continuity between deity, humanity and nature is the logic of idolatry: Man from this closed perspective buries a seed, a tree grows, and they form an idol out of the tree in order to access the gods who may make them prosper. The tree is not just symbolic of the god, but the god is within nature, the tree, and thus in the idol as well (that is why after years in Egypt, the Israelites could so easily, with a little help from leadership, make a golden calf, not to worship another god, but to worship the right and only God who redeemed them *wrongly!* It was not the God they had wrong, the method of worshipping him which was taught in *Egyptian Polytheism and Idolatry 101*). This is known formally in philosophy and theology as **“Pan-en-theism”: Deity is within all things**. There is continuity in that all is in a sense divine, or the gods are within all things: man, nature, etc. The Prophet Isaiah revealed God’s perspective on the folly of idolatry and this helps to better understand the idolatrous mindset:

“The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint. ¹³ The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. ¹⁴ He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. ¹⁵ Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. ¹⁶ Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, “Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!” ¹⁷ And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god!” ¹⁸ They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand.” (ESV Isaiah 44:12-18).

This is why in this way of looking at reality, there are no boundaries, and this is clearly seen in blatant and pathetically sickening immorality found in paganism. From this closed perspective if one is childless, one does not pray, but goes to the temple of the goddess of fertility, undergoes rituals that emphasize seed, then they may seed the ground on which they live, and there may be interactions between man and land, man and beast, and man and other women. There may be an eating of seeded fruit of the land in order to manipulate or use a kind of magical technique to bring about the desired results.

All of this is “logical” to this kind of ANE pagan thinking because all is connected. There is no sacredness of marriage, no marriage covenant; no God outside the world one can pray to; only technique or magic, or ritual that one can perform in order to find help or wholeness in this world. There are no boundaries therefore between parent and child, around marriage, members of the same sex, and between man and animals, or man and the divine or angelic (see what may be going on in Genesis 6:1ff, according to some biblical scholars??).

Contrastly, the Biblical worldview begins with a self-existent, transcendent God who is distinct from, but never separate from His creation. Transcendence is the underlying principle of Biblical revelation; there is a Creator-creature distinction, but God has been kind to reveal Himself clearly to His creatures.

“In the beginning God...

...I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me..." (Gen. 1:1a; Isaiah 46:9)

In the Bible, there is a condescending kindness on God's part to reveal Himself and to make Himself known; there is revelation from outside, and the focus is on God and His revelation, not first or primarily on man.

Before we get into specific differences between the Bible and other ANE literature, let us list some of the common features of ANE literature, particularly in epics and mythical literature:

Common Features of ANE Literature¹⁸

(1) **Polytheism** (a pantheon of gods); (2) **Images** (gods are represented by images); (3) **Existence of eternal chaotic matter** (ANE literature assume that matter is the fundamental element that has always existed; matter is animate, but not necessarily personal); (4) **Low view of the gods** (they are untrustworthy, selfish, contemptuous, tricky, conniving, etc. They are not respected by mankind); (5) **Conflict is the source of life** (there was conflict between gods and chaos as the dawn of time); (6) **Low view of humanity**; (7) **Magic is ultimate source of power**; (8) **History is not important**.

The Revelation in the Bible

(1) **Monotheism** (one God, and one God alone); (2) **Iconoclasm** (No images of God; God is to be worshipped as the Spirit He is!); (3) **First Principle of all things is God**, not matter; (4) **God is all-powerful**, there is no conflict at creation; (5) **High view of humanity** (man is made in God's image as a servant-son); (6) **God is reliable**, trustworthy, faithful, full of loving-kindness and mercy ("Hesed" or "Chesed"); (7) **Prohibition of all magic** and technique of controlling creation and/or others; (8) **Importance of history** (time and space as we know it).

Theology

Bible: Monotheism- One God. There is a strict monotheism revealed in the Bible. God alone is God; there are no other gods. God creates by divine fiat (power of His Word alone), and into nothing. There is no self-existence chaotic matter that must be organized. God speaks and creates ex nihilo, out of nothing, and then orders the world in beauty and for His glory. God does this to glorify Himself and to make a home for humans to enjoy Him. Always remember that ex nihilo creation is unique in the Bible; there is no other literature like the Bible, because it is the Holy and Infallible revelation of Almighty God. God alone is Sovereign King who is Self-Existent, Omnipotent, Omniscient, and Omnipresent. As God says in Isaiah (against the gods):

"I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, ⁶ that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other.... Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. ²² "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other." (ESV Isaiah 45:5-6, 21-22).

ANE Literature: Polytheism- Many gods. The gods are like sinful man writ large. They are the kinds of beings you would expect if man was inventing gods, or making stories of what they think

¹⁸ See Currid, Oswalt, Matthews and Benjamin.

god is like. The gods are just aspects of nature (love, war, beauty, thunder, weather, fertility, etc), and they possess characteristics of sinful man writ large; they are tricky, deceptive, cranky, and sexual promiscuous. They do possess some great powers, but they are limited by a greater “force” which is magic. In the polytheistic worldview, the gods are not holy, they are not perfect, they are all self-created, or created by another god, and they do not possess ultimate, unlimited power, only magic does. In ANE literature, Magic is supreme power.¹⁹ The God of the Bible alone is Self-Existent, Omnipotent, Omniscient, and Omnipresent. I dare you to find any other God like Him. As God says, “Who will you compare with me?” The greatest of the ANE gods was essentially the greatest magician.

“To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One....To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike?” (ESV Isaiah 40:25 ; ESV Isaiah 46:5)

Morality

Biblical Morality: The Bible teaches what is right and wrong as being an expression of God’s attributes and character. God alone determines what is right and wrong, and mankind is to follow these rules. The rules are given in the context of covenant and love so that mankind will not live as slaves, but freely and joyfully follow the will of the Creator. There is an objective morality revealed by God, and not merely what is good for a family or a group of people.

ANE Literature: Morality is what is good for groups of people to live together peacefully and helpfully. It is subjective, and is not a revelation from outside, from beyond as revelation from the gods necessarily. Morality and laws that have been found in ANE are wise and often reveal how much God has revealed Himself in the consciences of man (Rom. 2:14-16). Man often lives deceptively and sinfully with a selfish, self-focused bent, only seeking not to get caught, or to have enough technique in magic to oppose the inevitable circumstances that must follow because of folly and immorality in God’s world.

History

Bible and History: The Bible is revealed in real space and time history. God reveals and redeems in history. There is a particular grammar in the Hebrew language that clearly reveals that what is being taught in Genesis in particular, and in the Bible generally is meant to be historical narrative; events that really happened (called from Hebrew *vav-consecutive-plus-imperfect*, often translated “**And it was...**” in our English Bibles—this is extremely important). God is the Creator and Lord of history, of all time and space and has created man to live within history (thus the focus on a Sabbath rest every week, to remind man of his created-ness and historied-ness). History is moving to an end, a climatic, Sabbath-Rest-Cosummation ruled over by Jesus Christ:

“...[God’s] revelation of His will] as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth....to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal

¹⁹ See Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 40.

purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord... There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God." (^{ESV} Ephesians 1:10, 3:10-11; Hebrews 4:9).

ANE Literature and History: Particularly epics and myths are not intended to be history, but to teach lessons to humanity and to answer questions that mankind has. History does not matter, because all of life is connected and will just repeat itself in cycles, and what matters most is now. Professor Oswalt writes: "'Now' is all there is, all we have by which to explain reality. Time has always rolled and it always will, but it is going nowhere. The task is to find ways of ensuring that it does not stop rolling or that it does not roll in some completely unforeseen way."²⁰ ANE epics and mythical literature have no interest in being historical. The use of the grammar in the language is often poetic, and perhaps can be called "mythico-historical" but it is not necessary that it be truly history.

Humanity

Biblical Account: Man is made in God's image as a prophet, priest and king over God's creation to bring glory to God, to depend upon God's power, goodness and revelation to Him, and to extend the peace found with God in the garden to the ends of the earth (Gen. 1-3).

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." - Genesis 1:26-28

Man is sinful because he rebelled against God and became interested in gaining knowledge and wisdom apart from God and His revelation; he believed the lie of the serpent. Sin has made man idolatrous, and now he exchanges the truth of God for lies (the Bible only makes sense of the consistent idolatry and paganism we find everywhere in the world, particularly in the ANE):

"Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen." - Romans 1:22-25

ANE Literature: Man is insignificant, a mere slave of the gods. In the ANE you will find no history of unique individuals for the sake of that particular person. You will find stories of individuals but only insofar as the story is intended to communicate a larger lesson to an audience. There was no reason to understand or speak of the uniqueness of human beings, they were insignificant in ANE literature.

²⁰ Oswalt, Kindle Location: 692-699.

Creation Accounts (Biblical versus *Enuma Elish*, or Babylonian Creation Story):

Biblical Creation Account: In the creation account, the one God who is Spirit and eternally self-existent creates all things out of nothing, by divine fiat (by powerful word). Only God exists in Himself, with no need of nothing outside of Him. God creates man in His image to have dignity as a servant-son. Everything that is created is dependent upon God and He exists independently of all creation. Reason for being written: The gracious condescension of God to covenant with his creatures to reveal Himself as a gracious, powerful, and all-knowing King and father.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light..."

***Enuma Elish*, Babylonian Creation Story:** Creation is the result of the cosmic struggle between order and chaos at the dawn of time. Cosmic matter is eternal and must be ordered. The god Ea defeats Apsu and from his body comes the cosmos. Marduk defeats Tiamat (the chaos monster) and Marduk sets up his temple-palace. Marduk becomes supreme deity through magic. Humans are created for slavery to the gods and for the enjoyment of the gods. Reason for being written: Why should the people serve the Babylonian king? Because the Babylonian king is Marduk's representative, and this will bring flourishing and peace to the people.

*"When a sky above had not (yet even) been mentioned,
(And) the name of firm ground below had not (yet even) been thought of;
(When) only primeval Apsu, their begetter, And Mummu and Tiamat—
she who gave birth to them all—
Were mingling their waters in one;
When no bog had formed (and) no island could be found;
When no god whosoever had appeared,
Had been named by name, had been determined as to (his) lot,
Then gods were formed within them."²¹*

Flood Accounts (Biblical versus *Gilgamesh*, or Utnapishtim's Story):

Biblical Flood: God sees mankind's great sin and wickedness on the earth (Gen. 6). He warns Noah, who is a righteous and believing man, to build an ark to save his family and two of every creature. It rains for forty days and forty nights, the flood subsides, then eventually Noah and his family represent a new creation, a new beginning for the human race. There is a sacrifice of worship to YHWH that is pleasing, and a rainbow is revealed to show God's good and gracious (common grace) intentions toward mankind. This is a covenant sign (Gen. 9) which is unique in ANE literature.

***Utnapishtim* (or Sometimes "*Atrahasis*")/*Gilgamesh* Flood Story:** Utnapishtim survives flood and is granted eternal life. The gods are frustrated with humans and brought a flood (no mention of sin, it is more because the gods are like sinful men in that they are cranky and moody, never holy, holy, holy as only YHWH is!). Utnapishtim builds great ark and on the ark there is a micro-cosmic

²¹ Thorkild Jacobsen, "Mesopotamia: The Cosmos as a State," in Henri Frankfort et al., *Before Philosophy* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973 reprint), 184. Quoted in Currid, *Against the Gods*, Kindle Loc. 604-12.

preservation of life. After flood of six days and seven nights, there is a sacrificial meal that is instigated by fear (not love or gratitude!) and the gods like filthy flies gobble up the meal.

While there are similarities between the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern literature, we see that there are significant differences. These significant differences point to the fact that the Bible is Holy Scripture, the very trustworthy and reliable Word of God.

The Bible is in no way the mere word of man. Although men were inspired and carried along by the Holy Spirit: *"...Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit"* (ESV **2 Peter 1:20-21**).

As we learn in the Bible, it is the very Breathed-Out Word of Almighty, sufficient for all the special revelation we need from God, and needful for correction of our ideas about the world in which we live: *"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work"* (ESV **2 Timothy 3:16-17**).

Let us thank God that while we can enjoy the beautiful and excellent literature from the ancient Near East, and we can thank God for the truths that we find in it. But we should also thank God that He has not left Himself without a witness, and we can come and truly know Him through the Lord Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul teaches at Mars Hill in Acts 17, there is great truth to be found in pagan literature, particularly ancient Near Eastern literature, but it is to be carefully examined by the truth of God's own revelation of Himself in creation and Holy Scripture:

*"The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,²⁷ that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,²⁸ for *"In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring."*²⁹ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."* (ESV **Acts 17:24-31**).

Let us use the revelation that God has given to us in Acts 17 to learn as students of the ANE literature that culture can be a good starting point in engaging and interacting with culture. Notice how the Apostle Paul begins with affirming where there is truth (common grace: "Yes....yes....yes..."): *"As even your own poets have said..."* (Acts 17:28).

Notice the Apostle Paul in Acts 17:28 uses no quotations from the Old Testament because he is addressing those who are far from special revelation in the Bible, and are pagan idolaters, but he

does use their own cultural writings: *"In him we live, move and have our being..."* quoting Epimenides of Crete,²² as well as Aratus of Cilicia: *"We are his offspring"* (Acts 17:28).²³

A Brief Introductory History of 'The Gilgamesh Epic'

The Epic of Gilgamesh is the most significant work to come out of ancient Mesopotamia (from two Greek words "Meso" middle or between and "Potamos" River = Civilization between the two rivers, Euphrates and Tigris). The epic is essentially a search for knowledge and wisdom. Gilgamesh was a hero of the Third Millennium BC (ca. 2700-2500 BC). There are about 72 poems in epic that are arranged in translation in a 12-tablet format. The epic was originally written in Cuneiform (concepts through wedge-like shapes).

Most material to our translation of Gilgamesh came from the library of Ashurbanipal in ancient Nineveh during his reign as king (ca. 668-627 BC- his reign overlaps with King Josiah and the prophecy of Jeremiah). The story itself is of Gilgamesh the Shepherd-King of the city-state of Uruk. This epic has been very popular and appeals to many because of the nature of Gilgamesh's search for meaning and understanding. It has been translated in Sumerian, Akkadian, and Hittite languages (long before English translations). Tablets were found circa 1880 by archaeologist George Smith.

*"The heart of man is not compound of lies,/ but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,/ and still recalls him.
Though now long estranged,/ man is not wholly lost or wholly changed./ Disgraced he may be, yet is not
dethroned,/ and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned..../Whence came the wish, and whence the power to
dream,/ or some things fair and others ugly deem?/ All wishes are not idle, nor in vain...."*

- J. R. R. Tolkien

Rev. Charles R. Biggs

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²² "They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high.../the Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies!/But thou art not dead; thou art risen and alive forever,/for in thee we live and move and have our being".

²³ "...In reading pagan/profane [unbelieving] authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them should remind us, that the human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with gifts from its Creator" (J. Calvin, Institutes, 2.2.xv).

Appendix: Timeline of Research in the Ancient Near East²⁴

The Beginnings of Research in the Ancient Near East (1798-1872)

Ancient Near Eastern Historian Herodotus of Halicarnassus (fifth century BC)

Napoleon invaded Egypt and brought a scientific expedition of scholars, architects, draftsmen to survey the ancient monuments of Egypt. They discovered the Valley of the Kings, which were tombs of the great pharaohs (1798).

Rosetta Stone helps to unlock Egyptian hieroglyphics (1799).

Thomas Young and Jean-Francois Champollion (1822) cracked the language of Rosetta Stone and this marked beginning of Egyptology.

The Period of Suspicion Begins (1873-1905)

Archaeologist George Smith discovers Assyrian account of the flood (1873).

Liberal scholars Friedrich Delitzsch and S. R. Driver assert that the Bible has plagiarized the stories from Babylonia (1903).

New Horizons (1906-1940)

Important Hittite excavations at Hattusa (1906). Striking parallels were found between Hittite covenant ceremonies and those in the Bible.

Major cuneiform archives from Nuzi (1925-1933).

Ugaritic texts from Ras Shamra were found (1929).

The Age of Synthesis (1945- Present)

²⁴ Currid, Chap. 2, *Against the Gods*.

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