

Did the Bible Borrow Its Creation Story?

Hi there, my name is Tim Perry, pastor of Spiritual Discovery at Christ Community Church – and I want to welcome you to week one of Tough Questions.

As you read through your Bible, the first story that you encounter is the story of creation, and it's probably one of the most interesting stories you are going to read in the entire Bible. It raises so many questions for us. One of the questions I want to deal with in this video blog has to do with how unique that story is. Could the Bible have borrowed its story from other ancient creation mythologies? When you study mythologies, you realize right away that there are hundreds and hundreds of them. A researcher by the name of Dr. David Leeming has written a two-volume encyclopedia of creation mythologies. He details over 214 creation mythologies from – and with so many pluralistic options available to us, how do we know that the Christian story is true? How do we know that it's utterly unique?

Well, what I want to do in the next couple of minutes – is compare a couple of ancient creation mythologies that are similar to Christianity's story, but somewhat different and see what we learn about how unique the Bible's account of creation actually is.

Let's go over to the white board to do that. Here is our comparison chart. We're going to take a look at the creation account out of Genesis and compare it to these two other Mesopotamian creation mythologies. The Enuma Elish which dates from about 1100 BC, the Atrahasis Epic, which dates from around 1700 BC and the Genesis account which many conservative scholars would place around 1400 BC with the other writings that Moses was responsible for.

What we're going to do is trace these four different aspects of each creation account.

Who or what is God?

What were the conditions like before God created (primordial conditions we call those)?

What did the act of creation itself look like?

Who are people?

Well, first of all, in the Enuma Elish, the principle God is Marduk. He's not alone – there are other gods that he's in charge of, but he works his way to the top - so Marduk plus other Gods.

In the Atrahasis epic, there are three principle deities. There's Anu who is in charge of the sky – there's Enlil, who's in charge of the earth - and Enki, who's in charge of the sea. In the Genesis account, we have essentially one God in three persons and that God is Yahweh. In the Old Testament, there are even hints of the trinity in the creation account – because as you recall reading, right in the very first chapter of

Genesis, it states – let US make man in OUR image. The fingerprints of the trinity are right there in Chapter One of Genesis - so one God – three persons.

What about the primordial conditions that were in existence? Well according to the Enuma Elish, there was a god called Tiamat, a goddess actually, and Tiamat is defeated by Marduk. Tiamat is the goddess of the salt waters – not the fresh waters – the salt waters – the oceans. So all of what is created is created out of Tiamat.

And the Atrahasis Epic, there are actually three different spheres of influence that these three gods are placed over. Anu was over the heavens or skies as I mentioned, so heavens existed - Enil was over the earth - and Enki was over the water. We're not sure where the heavens, the earth or the sky came from, but there they are.

In the Genesis account, there are two words used to describe the primordial conditions: formless and void. So God is starting essentially with nothingness. Not necessarily chaos, which was associated with water – just nothingness.

Now what about the act of creation itself? According to the Enuma Elish, Tiamat when she is slain by Marduk, half of Tiamat's body or cadaver is used to make the skies and half of Tiamat's body is used to make the water or the land in the water. Half of her body is used for the land and half of it is for the water. So essentially, it's Tiamat's cadaver that forms all of the creation according to this account.

In the Atrahasis Epic, there are a series of minor deities – smaller and less important than Anu Enlil and Enki and they're kind of bossed around by the major three and they are responsible for making all of what happens on earth. In fact, their job is to carve out the Euphrates River and the Nile River so they're working hard to make everything according to the specifications to these three gods.

Well, in the Genesis account, we have an interesting idea that God just speaks and things come into existence. He speaks things with his powerful creative word and they come into existence out of nothing. And there's a fancy term for that called ex-nihilo – from nothingness. So there's no material in existence before God speaks everything into existence and brings it into design and form and shape.

Well, lastly how about people. How do people compare in these three creation myths. Well people in both of these accounts (Enuma Elish and Atrahasis Epic) share the same classification – they're basically the slaves of the gods – the workforce if you will. The gods get tired of carving out creation and so they create people in order to do their work. Essentially, those people are made out of a combination of clay and blood – blood from one of the deities. That's very different from the story we have in Genesis where people are made out of clay, but not out of god blood, but spoken into being like God did everything else - brought into being – fashioned and shaped. There's a particular characteristic that's important in the Genesis story and I want you do learn this term – Imago Dei – that humanity is not created as some subservient workforce, but humanity is created in God's image.

Humanity is not made the slave of God – humanity is actually put in charge of all of the rest that God has created – thus elevating humanity’s status. Humanity alone out of all of creation is given the personal attributes of God.

So there we have a comparison of these three creation accounts. What’s especially important is to notice that while there may be some overlap in some of the details – let’s say clay being used as a raw material for humanity – the worldviews couldn’t be further apart in terms of their meaning. In the Genesis account, you have a personal God – in the others – you have deities that are in competition with one another. In Genesis, you have a God who is able to speak everything into existence out of absolutely nothing – and in the other two creation accounts – they have to work with raw material that are already in existence – so we don’t know who created the things that they used in order to make creation. It’s a much more comprehensive explanation of how the world came to us.

So how do we get so many creation accounts? If God gave us a basically a reliable story in Genesis, where do all these other creation mythologies come from? Essentially, they come from the way that God made us. God made us with minds and creativity. And in the wake of things that we don’t understand, if we aren’t told what really happens, our human imagination can take over and fill in the blanks. So we have all kinds of creation stories that have similar sounding themes to the ones of Genesis because humans would overhear part of the story but take only a small piece of that story and run with it and imagine all other kinds of outcomes. What’s needed in this scenario is to not be just left to our imagination even though we’ve been told the story once, it would be for God to come back into the situation and give us what only he can give us. He needs to come back into the circumstances and give us an account of what actually took place. We need divine revelation to countermand our human imagination. Because in this situation, if God shows up and tells us what actually took place, then we’re accountable to God for them. It creates the possibility of relationship and accountability to Him. Otherwise, our natural tendency as fallen creatures is to prefer our human imagination because we can control that – we can make that what we want it to be.

A couple of passages you could look at to help you understand this better are found in Isaiah 44 in the Old Testament and Acts 17 in the New Testament. In the passage in Isaiah, it talks about an artisan who is an idol maker. He’s sitting in his workshop and he takes a stack of wood from the corner and he takes some of the wood and he sets it over on his bench and he starts tooling it and shaping it and making it into an idol. But then he gets cold and so he takes some of the wood in the corner and he puts it in the fireplace and he warms his hands by the fire. At the end of the text, it says that he doesn’t even stop to think that part of the wood he’s using as fuel and part of the wood, he’s made into this idol that in his imagination – hears his prayers – when it’s just a chunk of wood.

Paul, the apostle, also encountered religious pluralism. When he came to the city of Athens he took the time to look around the city and to see what was taking place, and in his opinion the city of Athens was a very religious city. So he came to one of

the centers of trade and the exchange of ideas called the Areopagus. He preached a sermon and here are some of his words from that very famous sermon. *“God 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 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 for in Him, we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, for we are indeed his offspring. (It’s God creating us – not us creating God – Paul is saying). Being then, God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone or an image formed by the art of the imagination of man. The times of ignorance God has overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent 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.”*

And so Paul is making the same appeal that I want to make of you. Compare the creation accounts. See if you can discern a difference between those that flow from human imagination and those that come from divine revelation and seek God. He is not far from you.

Thank you for watching this video. Let me know if you have a comment or two.