

BEGINNINGS: Lesson Twelve, Looking It Over ***Genesis 1 - 11***

Subject: The events of Genesis 1-11 find parallels in non-biblical ancient literature that reveal a superior biblical God.

Main Idea: Our beliefs about the doctrines of Genesis 1-11 impact our daily lives and decisions.

Principles:

1. *God is bigger than our failures.*
2. *The God of the Bible is superior to all other gods.*

Introduction

If I announced that I was going to present twelve weeks of studies on Bible doctrine, my guess is that many people wouldn't be interested. "Doctrine" sounds like a boring and complicated thing, but actually, the word simply means "set of beliefs." Whether we know it or not, each of us has formulated some kind of doctrine about God's identity, our own identity, and God's attitude toward us. What we know and believe is the bedrock upon which every one of us builds our lives. Our doctrine impacts the decisions we make and the way we live every single day. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are critical to the Biblical account, because they establish some of the most foundational "doctrines" or teachings of the Bible.

Early in our *Beginnings* study, I mentioned one theory about when and why Moses penned Genesis. As you recall, God sent Moses to deliver the Israelites (Hebrews) from 400 years of enslavement to the Egyptians and to bring them into the Promised Land. When God first called Moses, Moses had been tending sheep for forty years in the wilderness of Midian and he questioned God: "*Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt... Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?*" (Exodus 3:11-13). The Israelites had lived among a pagan people for 400 years and had little knowledge of the God of their forefather, Abraham. They had questions, and if they were going to brave following Moses out Egypt, they needed answers. The information contained in primeval history of Genesis 1-11 certainly would have told them who God is, who they were in relationship to Him, and how He felt about them at a time when they desperately needed it.

How desperate are you to know God, to know more about your relationship with Him, and to know the depths of His love for you? I would guess that most of us are interested when life is difficult and we're facing frightening possibilities (as Israel was). But if our doctrine impacts our daily decisions, shouldn't we be eagerly seeking out the Bible's doctrines all the time?

What *is* God's name? The four main events of Genesis 1-11 give us answers that question.

I. Overview of Primeval Genesis

A. Creation

- i. God: Genesis 1-2 portray God as eternal, spirit, present, powerful, sovereign, and morally good. He is the Creator of all things, the One who blesses, the Supreme, Detail-loving Landscape Architect and Designer, the Inaugurator of Marriage, the Giver of Meaningful Work, and the Friend of Mankind.
- ii. God and Man: Yahweh, God's personal name, appears for the first time in Genesis 2 in the context of God's relationship with Adam. Genesis 1-2 teach that we were created with an exalted nature, the apex of God's creation. We alone are stamped with His image. He made us to be in relationship with Him.

B. The Fall

- i. God: Genesis 3-5 portray God as the righteous but gracious Judge, mankind's Pursuer, the Promise-Giver, and the Rule-Setter. He sealed the entrance to the Garden. He is also the God of the cherubim. Direct entrance into His presence can only be gained by passing through the holy judgment of His sword.
- ii. God and Man: From the Fall, we learn that sin is the root of all our problems (death results from sin), but God can offer a solution because He is sovereign. The genealogies of chapters 4-5 indicate that two lines of humanity emerged: those who followed the Lord and those who rejected Him. To this day, every person belongs to one of these two groups.

C. The Flood

- i. God: Genesis 6-9 teaches us that God is serious about sin. While sin grieves Him as Creator and the Standard of Righteousness, His own character obligates Him to judge it. But these chapters also teach us that He is the all-knowing Reader of our hearts and minds, and thus, His judgments are completely fair and correct. Most importantly, these chapters reveal Him as the Faithful Provider of the Ark, the Author of Salvation. Immediately following the Flood, we also learn that He is the God of Second Chances, the Covenant Maker, and the Source of our Security.
- ii. Man: Mankind's complete depravity in the days leading up to the Flood tells us that, left on our own, the world doesn't become a better place. Rather, it deteriorates morally with the passage of time.

D. Babel: God had told mankind to spread out, but they refused. A quick return to the pre-Flood depraved condition was assured if mankind gathered in cities in joint defiance against Him. By confusing their languages, God forced them to spread out, slowing the influence of evil. From the incident at Babel and the dispersion of the nations, we learn that God is capable of ensuring His ultimate purposes prevail. Ultimately, He is Lord of the Nations.

Summary Statement: Genesis 1-11 tells of mankind's moral failure. Left on our own, we cannot save ourselves. However, the chapters also tell us who God is: because He is omnipotent, He can save us, and because He is good, He has promised to do so!

Principle: *God is bigger than our failures.*

His plans and purposes cannot be overthrown by the rebellion of powers in the invisible world (Ephesians 6:12; Romans 8:38) or our own weaknesses and failures (Genesis 3:15). He is bigger than all these.

It is possible to know these things with our minds without transferring the information to our hearts. It's not just the doctrine we know that impacts us. It is the doctrine we wholeheartedly believe! Our actions and attitudes reveal our true beliefs about who God is.

I find that I am exceptionally impacted by the Bible's teachings about God through worship, specifically in prayer. When I pray, I usually try to begin with expressions of adoration for God's specific character qualities. Focusing on these first changes my thinking about the requests I will make of Him. For example, when I say, "Oh God, I praise and adore You, because You are sovereign and all-powerful and good," those acknowledgments change the way I view my problems. They seem less overwhelming and I feel less fearful. I'm more interested in God being exalted than in my own discomfort. Instead of praying, "Take it away from me," by recognizing His sovereignty and goodness, I am more able to ask Him to sustain me and enable me to rejoice *in* them for His glory.

Application: How often do you meditate on and praise God for His character (not just the things He does for us, but who He is)? Thanksgiving is extremely important, but praise is exclusively God-focused. If the Bible's teachings about God's character aren't impacting our daily lives, it is either because we don't know what the Bible teaches or we don't yet fully believe it.

What is God's name? Who is He? Will you consider incorporating "You are..." statements about God to praise Him and focus on His character in your prayers?

Transition: Often an examination of the early part of Genesis, particularly the accounts of Creation and the Flood, leads to a discussion about evidence from the sciences. The historical validity of the Bible’s stories about primeval man and his history is of one major concern. Maybe you have wondered whether any other documents exist that substantiate or conflict with what Genesis 1-11 tells us. The answer is yes! In fact, archaeologists have uncovered literature with origins that predate Moses’ writings by several hundred years. Do they impact our thinking about the God of the Bible? If so, how?

II. Ancient Extra-Biblical Literature

A. Source of the Literature

- i. The Birthplace of Civilization: Until recent years, no one has doubted the Bible’s claim that the region often called the Fertile Crescent is the birthplace of civilization. Despite disagreements today about the origination of humankind from a single stock in ancient Mesopotamia, the history of the Mesopotamian region is confirmed by archaeological evidence. Interestingly, no culture has shown evidence of writing earlier than that of the Mesopotamian people group called the Sumerians.¹
- ii. The Geography of the Fertile Crescent: The Fertile Crescent, as the name suggests, is an arch-shaped, water-rich region. The less-habitable Arabian Desert “underneath” the arch creates the crescent shape. Understandably, the early civilizations settled where water was readily available. The eastern “arm” of the Fertile Crescent is the area of Ancient Mesopotamia. It lies between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, extending from the Persian Gulf from south to north through the central region of modern Iraq. The western “arm” of the Fertile Crescent extends from the northern region of the Euphrates River westward to the Mediterranean coast and then southward along the coastline. This area is modern Syria, Lebanon and Israel. Although doing so challenges the crescent shape a bit, the upper Nile region of Egypt (to the southwest of modern Israel) is often also included in discussions of the Fertile Crescent, since it is also fertile and its civilization is ancient.
- iii. The Ancient Peoples of the Fertile Crescent
 1. *Mesopotamian People Groups*
 - a. *The Sumerians* are the most ancient of the people groups known to occupy Mesopotamia. The influence of their laws, language, and ideas on succeeding people groups cannot be overestimated.
 - b. *The Akkadians*, a Semitic group, rose to power and occupied southern Mesopotamia, along with the Sumerians, near the end of the third millennium BC.

- c. *The Amorites*, yet another Semitic group, appeared in the area by the turn of the millennium. These people established Babylon, Assur, and Nineveh as their centers of power. The Babylonians in the south and the Assyrians in the north played a significant role in Old Testament history.ⁱⁱ
2. *Syria-Palestine*: Syria-Palestine is not known for having advanced ancient civilizations, as Mesopotamia and Egypt are. The significance of this region was (and continues to be) political, since it served as a land bridge in ancient times between Mesopotamia and Egypt (and between Asia Minor, Europe, and Africa today). The Canaanites, Amorites, Arameans, and later, the “Sea People” called Philistines are some of the early occupants of this region. The land to which God called Abram is the southern portion of this area.
3. *The Egyptians*: Unlike Mesopotamia, the history of ancient Egypt is not one of changing people groups. However, Egypt was a major power in this ancient region.

B. Finds with Some Correspondence to the Genesis Account: In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, archaeologists began discovering ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian literature that predates Moses’ writings of the Genesis record. Genesis 1-11 contains some interesting parallels to these documents, although the differences are significant. These parallels and differences point to some important conclusions about the God of the Bible and His self-revelation.

i. The Sumerian King List

1. *Background*: This genealogy is believed to be semi-historical. The places named are real, and some of the kings named have left inscriptions proving they, too, existed.ⁱⁱⁱ Although the list appears to date back as far as the Early Bronze Age (3300-2100 BC), it was put into its final form in the Middle Bronze Age (2100-1550 BC).^{iv} (Moses didn’t live until the Late Bronze Age.)
2. *Content*: The document describes eight kings who supposedly ruled over five cities for a total of 241,000 years before the Flood. (Each ruled between 28,800-36,000 years!) After this time, according to the List, the Flood occurred. Following the Flood, 23 kings are listed as ruling for a total period of 24,510 years, 3 months, and 3½ days.^v

3. *Correspondence with Genesis*: Interestingly, we see a correspondence to the Genesis account. Both claim that a Flood occurred, that people lived in the time before it, and that lifespans shortened afterward. Additionally, the achievements of the kings are reminiscent of those of Cain’s descendants (described in Genesis 4).^{vi} By comparison, we also note that the length of years given for the ancients in Genesis 5 and 11 are quite moderate.

ii. The Eridu Genesis (The Sumerian Creation and Flood Story)

1. *Background*: This document dates to around 1600 BC, but as with most of these documents, records a story that is far more ancient. What has been discovered is quite fragmentary.
2. *Content*: Like the Bible, the document describes the creation of mankind, the institution of kingship, the founding of the first cities, and the great Flood. The details of the account are very different though: the first fragment begins with four gods creating the “black-headed people,” along with a place for animals to live. Next, kingship descends from heaven and the first cities are formed. Eridu is named as the first city (scholars named the document for this reference).^{vii} After a missing section, the Flood occurs. King Ziu-d-sura and many animals are onboard a huge boat, which is rocked by floodwaters for seven days and nights. Then the sun god appears. The king makes a hole in the boat and prostrates himself before the sun god, offering him animal sacrifices. After yet another break in the text, the king and the animals disembark, more sacrifices are offered to other gods, and these gods grant the king eternal life for having saved the animals and the seed of mankind.^{viii} The differences with the Genesis account are as striking as the similarities.

iii. The Epic of Gilgamesh

1. *Background*: A later version of the Sumerian flood story is the Epic of Gilgamesh, the most famous of the ancient flood stories. The document was discovered in the mid-nineteenth century when an entire buried library was uncovered at Nineveh, resulting in 25,000 broken tablets being brought to the British Museum. The Assyrian collation of the Gilgamesh Epic, written in ancient Akkadian cuneiform, was among these. The story was probably composed about 1700 BC but put into the form in which it was found about 1200 BC^{ix} (or even later^x). It is highly likely that Gilgamesh was an actual, historical, ancient king, since he is also named in the Sumerian King List: the fifth ruler of the first dynasty of Uruk after the flood.

2. *Content*: The story is about King Gilgamesh’s attempt to defy death, following the death of his close comrade. In the process, Gilgamesh meets Utnapishtim, the “Noah” of the story, who earned immortality by surviving a flood on an Ark.
 - a. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that the gods determined to send the flood because the expanding human population made “the uproar of mankind intolerable and sleep no longer possible by reason of the babel.”^{xi} In order to survive, Utnapishtim had built a square-shaped, seven-decked boat, and loaded it with supplies (including all his gold). He took his entire extended family, the animals, and all the vessel’s craftsmen onboard with him. As in the Eridu Genesis, the flooding lasted one week. The following week, the boat remained lodged on a mountain. At the end of that second week, Utnapishtim released a dove, then a swallow, and then a raven. Finding the waters abated, the raven did not return. Then, Utnapishtim offered sacrifices to the gods. “When the gods smelled the sweet savour (sic), they gathered like flies over the sacrifice.”^{xii} Following arguments among the gods, one blessed Utnapishtim and his wife with eternal life.
 - b. Since Utnapishtim’s opportunity to gain eternal life resulted from the flood, and the flood wasn’t an event Gilgamesh could duplicate, he tried by way of three other tests. One involved Gilgamesh obtaining a plant that offers rejuvenation from the depths of the sea. Gilgamesh found it, but a serpent stole it from him. As Gilgamesh fled, the serpent shed its skin (suggesting the desired effect of rejuvenation).
 - c. After telling of Gilgamesh’s failures with all three tests, the story ends with him consoling himself with thoughts of his accomplishments.

iv. Atrahasis Epic (an old Babylonian classic)

1. *Background*: This is the most complete ancient story, also recorded in the ancient Akkadian language.
2. *Content*: Atrahasis is the Babylonian equivalent of Utnapishtim (and Noah). The epic covers the history of the world, from Creation to the new world order after the Flood. According to the story, when the “lesser gods” rebelled against the greater gods because of their workload, the gods mixed their spittle with clay and created seven human couples to do their work. The Flood portion of the story bears many similarities to the Epic of Gilgamesh, but with several additional twists:

- a. A helpful god made a secret plan to preserve human life from a nasty god's decree to destroy it.
 - b. Once off the Ark, Atrahasis fed the gods, who had had no animal sacrifices to eat during the flood and thus, were starving.
 - c. Even the gods were afraid during the Flood.
 - d. In order to prevent further population over-growth, after the Flood, the gods caused some women to be infertile.
- v. Enuma Elish (meaning "when on high," taken from its opening words)
1. *Background*: This Babylonian/Akkadian Creation account dates to around 1800 BC, but once again, is based on even older Sumerian stories.
 2. *Contents*: The main point of the Epic is to prove that the Babylonian god Marduk won the right to be the supreme deity, thus giving Babylon the right to reign over all other city-states. Two gods, one named Tiamat, mixed to produce all the other gods. Fighting among the gods took place. In a drunken stupor, the gods made Marduk their king. War between Marduk and the female salt-water god ensued. The young and daring Marduk killed the monstrous mother-goddess, Tiamat, and divided her corpse, using half to form Heaven and half to form Earth. With his father's assistance, Marduk ultimately creates human beings for the purpose of doing the gods' work (as in the Atrahasis Epic).
 3. *Link with Genesis*: In addition to the obvious link to Genesis by virtue of being a Creation account, there is some evidence linking the ancient god Marduk with the Nimrod of Genesis 10 (either as the god whose worship Nimrod founded or as a god Nimrod claimed to be).
- vi. The Adapa Epic
1. *Background*: This Babylonian story has some interesting parallels to the Bible's first man, Adam, and the Biblical account of the Fall. Adapa (which bears a phonetic resemblance to Adam) was supposedly an early Mesopotamian priest, who, while known for his wisdom, lost an opportunity to gain eternal life

2. *Content*: According to the story, Adapa cursed the wind for overturning his fishing boat, breaking one of its wings, so that it could not blow for seven days. When Adapa was summoned before the sky god's heavenly court to give account for his actions, Ea (a third god), counseled Adapa against eating any of the food offered to him there. Adapa was exonerated in the court and then offered food capable of giving him eternal life. But following Ea's warning, Adapa refused to eat it. As a result, he was sent back to earth as a mortal, bringing illness to those among whom he lived.^{xiii}
- vii. Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta: This Sumerian account demonstrates their belief in "a time when all mankind spoke one and the same language," and that human speech was confounded by one of the gods.^{xiv}
- viii. Egyptian Creation Accounts: Ancient Egyptian documents record their diverse versions of the creation story, typically beginning with a god named Nun who represents watery chaos. The most extensive Egyptian account, the Memphite Theology, highlights the role of the god of Memphis (Ptah). Ptah identifies with the primal waters until he subsumes all chaotic matter. Then magically, by his spoken word, he creates the world.^{xv}

C. Understanding Primeval Genesis in Light of Extra-Biblical Accounts

- i. Similarities and Differences in Biblical and Extra-Biblical Accounts
1. *Similarities*: Ancient creation stories certainly resemble the Biblical account in some amazing ways. Both include the theme of immortality, mankind's role in service to God (the gods), portrayal of the serpent as mankind's deceptive enemy, a common interest in chronologies, the occurrence of a flood (with people living both before and after it), and an acknowledgement of antediluvian longevity and shorter life spans after the Flood.
 2. *Differences*: However, there is great disparity in the details, such as the order of events in creation, the duration of the Flood, and the size and shape of the Ark. The differences are not just in the details. Theologically, the Bible differs from other ancient accounts. The Bible's teachings about the world and world events, mankind, and God are vastly different.

- a. *View of the World*: According to the epics, the gods created the world from preexisting materials while the Bible says God created the world *ex-nihilo* (from nothing). The ancient epics explain the Flood as resulting from man's noise level, while the Bible says it resulted from man's complete depravity. Pagan religions deify nature (sun, moon, stars, sky, water, etc.), while the Bible says nature is just part of God's creation.
 - b. *View of Mankind*: The Bible also presents a different view of mankind. In other ancient accounts, man is merely a slave of the gods, with no personal dignity. In the Biblical account, man is made in God's own image, the apex of creation, and deeply loved. The Bible is clear that mankind's biggest problem is sin, while extra-biblical views portray it as a less insidious evil (fertility, the god's retribution, etc.). The extra-biblical accounts suggest a positive progression, that things were not as good to begin with as they have become. The Bible tells us just the opposite: things began perfectly but man's sin resulted in progressive deterioration.
 - c. *View of God*: The ancient documents' view of God (or the gods) is certainly not the same as that of the Bible. The Babylonian gods were weak: they could not control the Flood, they create man because they are tired of work, they are dependent on mankind for food, and some gods dominate others or are forgetful. The God of the Bible is all-powerful, all-knowing, and untiring. While the ancient gods are often drunk, deceitful, scheming, fearful, immoral, and squabble among themselves, the God of the Bible is utterly holy, righteous, and sovereign. The gods in the Mesopotamian stories desire to suppress human beings, while the God of the Bible desires to bless human beings. The gods of the other accounts often have male or female consorts or competitors, but the God of the Bible stands alone.
- ii. Conclusions: The similarities and differences lead to some important conclusions.
 1. *Common Knowledge*: First, the fact that ancient creation and flood stories exist independently of one another tells us that, at one time, there was a general recognition of the world's origin by divine will and a general knowledge of the Flood.

2. *The Bible's Superiority*: Second, those who read the ancient extra-biblical documents for themselves can easily attest to the vast difference in tone when compared to the Bible. The Bible's account is straightforward, noble, and authoritative, while the tone of the extra-biblical accounts is sometimes disjointed, often base, and always mythological. The theological differences offered by the Biblical account emphasize the superiority of the God of the Bible.
3. *Genesis' Correction*: The differences between the accounts, especially the Bible's unique theological perspective, indicate that the accounts could not have simply been borrowed from one another. In fact, some scholars believe that Moses did not even know of their existence.^{xvi} The Bible is absolutely unique in its perspective among all ancient literature. In an age where such low views of the gods dominated, the Hebrews could never have arrived at such an exalted view on their own. Its entire worldview is radically different. The only reasonable conclusion is that the Genesis account was intended to correct the record about who God is, who we are, and how He feels about us.

Principle: *The God of the Bible is superior to all other gods.*

Application: The Biblical doctrines of God have tremendous impacts for our everyday lives.

- The God who is powerful enough to call all things into existence out of nothing by His spoken word is powerful enough to create spiritual life in the heart of that person whom we love, even though they seem totally dead to spiritual things.
- The God who is able to separate day from night is able to free us, to separate us, from sins that enslave us.
- The God who blessed man at the very dawn of human life, who created us in His own image and made us to be in relationship with Him is concerned when life is difficult.
- Because God gave Adam and Eve instructions that pointed them toward the way of life, the instructions He has given us in the rest of his Word are trustworthy, even when we can't imagine how following one of them will make life better.
- The God who promised a Messiah all the way back in Genesis 3 and sent Jesus in fulfillment of that promise will also fulfill every one of His good promises, even if circumstances tell us differently.
- The God who saw into the heart of Noah, one lone man in a thoroughly corrupt society, also understands each of us, even when no one else does.
- The God who grieved over the sinful condition of the "sons of god" and "daughters of men" cries with us when our sons and daughters make bad choices.
- The God of the Ark is capable of carrying us safely through any trial we might face.

- The God who interrupted the plans of those who opposed Him at Babel still ensures His plans prevail, including His ultimate plans for your life and mine.

Conclusion

The Bible was written for people of all times and all places. It is the living word of the only living and true God. It tells us that He is supreme and that we are the apex of His creation and the objects of His affection.

ⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cradle_of_civilization

ⁱⁱ Arnold, Bill T. (1998). *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (44-45). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wenham, G. J. (2003). *Exploring the Old Testament, Volume 1: The Pentateuch* (13). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

^{iv} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumerian_King_List#Antediluvian_rulers

^v Wenham, G. J. (2003). *Exploring the Old Testament, Volume 1: The Pentateuch* (12). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

^{vi} Hess, R.S. (1996). Sumer. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible Dictionary* (3rd ed.) (1139). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

^{vii} *Journal of Biblical Literature (The Eridu Genesis)*, V. 100 (513).

^{viii} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumerian_creation_myth

^{ix} Wenham, G. J. (2003). *Exploring the Old Testament, Volume 1: The Pentateuch* (10). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

^x Dixon, R. J. (2012). *Noah, Builder of Ark*. In J. D. Barry & L. Wentz (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (J. D. Barry & L. Wentz, Ed.). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

^{xi} *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In: Sanders, N.K (1972). *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (108). London: Penguin Books.

^{xii} *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In: Sanders, N.K (1972). *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (111). London: Penguin Books.

^{xiii} Bloom, John & Collins, C.J. (2012). "Creation Accounts and Ancient Near Eastern Religions," *Christian Research Journal*, 35 (1). Charlotte, NC: Christians Research Institute.

^{xiv} Bloom, John & Collins, C.J. (2012). "Creation Accounts and Ancient Near Eastern Religions," *Christian Research Journal*, 35 (1). Charlotte, NC: Christians Research Institute.

^{xv} Arnold, Bill T. (1998). *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (47). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

^{xvi} Wenham, G. J. (2003). *Exploring the Old Testament, Volume 1: The Pentateuch*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.