

Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Lecture 10, Literature of the Babylonian Period

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This is Dr. Don Fowler in his teaching on Old Testament Backgrounds. This is session 10, Literature of the Babylonian Period.

As we do this next lecture, I mentioned to you at the end that we have shifted now from focusing on kingship to studying the literature of the old Babylonian period.

What I'm trying to do is make the point to you that this period, the Old Babylonian period, which stretched roughly from 1800 to 1600 BC, is the golden age for connections, I think, between the Hebrew Bible and its world. We're going to look at a series of sites where tablets have been found. As you can see in our class notes, the first one is a site called Mari.

The second one is called the Enuma Elish, the creation account, which we really aren't going to look at that one. The third one is the Gilgamesh epic, and so on. So we're looking at these various literary accounts from the old Babylonian period.

So that's where we would like to go. The first one that we're going to actually look at is the Mari materials. As we look at this one, let me point out to you where Mari is at.

Here's our old map on the Hyksos, but if you look over on the right, you can see Mari in upper Mesopotamia. It sits on the Euphrates River, and I mentioned to you that it was a port city of some consequence in the old Babylonian period and before that. So, this is where a great tablet find was made.

Around 20,000 tablets, and I believe it's more than that now, were found in the royal palace at Mari. The palace at Mari is the largest from the old Babylonian period. It had over 300 courts and chambers covering about two and a half acres.

A building of two and a half acres is a pretty big building. Some of the original wall paintings are still in evidence and are invaluable for their representation of royal life and Amorite art. Every time I come to this, in spite of the fact that I've been doing it for many years, I always pause to remind myself how amazing this is.

The art scenes have survived 3,600 years, nearly four millennia. We still have art scenes. I can't get paint to last on my doorstep for much more than a couple of years.

So, that says something about modern technology. So, the letters themselves represent the single largest find from the old Babylonian period. So, remembering

that this is the time period of the patriarchs, from 1800 down to 1600 would be the time period of Isaac and Jacob, and to a lesser degree, perhaps Joseph.

So, this is a really important time period. They cover a wide variety of topics, but especially important, we're told, is the study of prophetism. There is some controversy about how to relate the information from the various types of prophetic figures at Mari with Old Testament prophets, but the comparisons are interesting.

Some have argued that because the religious functionaries at Mari were ecstatics, then so were the Hebrew prophets. Now, I only tell you this because if you do study this at a university, you're going to be told this as a matter of fact, as if it's factual. The functionaries at Mari may have been ecstatics, but it is a stretch to call them prophets.

So, I'm going to take exception with that concept. I'm going to take exception with the concept that the core idea of Israelite prophecy was ecstasy, and I'm going to take exception with the idea that these religious functionaries at Mari were prophets. But you remember when I talked to you early in our class experience about Samuel Sandmel's article on parallelomania? Well, we're going to see some examples of that, and that's what we have here.

I am not particularly bothered by similarities between the ancient Near Eastern world and the Bible. I can't imagine that there wouldn't be similarities. God gave his revelation within their world.

Because he is gracious, he spoke to them on their terms. That's an important theological point. There are things that if God were speaking to them on the terms that you and I know today, I think we could assume that God would have spoken to them some different things and words and ideas and commandments than what he does today.

But because he spoke to them in their world at that time, he graciously spoke to them in their language. So I'm not bothered by many of the similarities because I would expect those similarities to be true. What I propose in my class is that we have to be prepared to explain both similarities and differences.

We have to be able to explain both. What I see happening at Mari is that we have similarities and differences. So, I question whether the core concept of the Hebrew prophets was ecstaticism.

Now, ecstaticism is a word of the trade. I have a trade. It's called Old Testament Studies.

And ecstaticism is a word that belongs to that trade. Of all things, it's taken from two Greek words. The Greek word from which we get the word to stand and the Greek preposition out.

And so, we have ecstasy comes from ecstasis in Greek. And what it meant etymologically is to stand outside yourself. In other words, to be sort of out of your mind.

Now, you remember when I drew the world of the ancients, and their world is up there, and our world is here. And that the idea was to create a connection that could unite the two worlds. Now, in their thinking, what they thought was that a person in a state of ecstasy was a person who was taken out of this world and brought somehow into the world of the gods.

Paul himself tells us in Corinthians that he was caught up into the third heaven. We're told that that was ecstaticism, that it's an out-of-body experience. And so, the purpose of the religious functionaries at Mari were sort of to have... They wanted the king to think that they had an out-of-body experience because the king wanted to know from them specific answers to questions he had.

The most common of which are called OBB, oracles before battles. The king wanted to know from these religious functionaries whether the gods would bless him if he went up to battle. So, the king would go to these religious functionaries, and he would ask them, should I go up to battle? Theoretically, the way it was supposed to work is the religious functionary would be caught up into heaven and then the gods would then reveal to that functionary whether the king should go up to battle.

If that's what is meant by ecstaticism, then perhaps the functionaries at Mari were ecstatic. They were also charlatans because they didn't have a word from the gods at all. But nonetheless, virtually every scholar, including many evangelicals, sees the material at Mari as a rubric for the Old Testament prophets.

All right? While I don't want to be extreme and say that there are no concepts of ecstaticism in the Bible, I would like to say that I am convinced that ecstaticism is not the standard by which Old Testament prophets function. Now, I understand that in the Old Testament, prophets would have visions, see things, and so on. But this is not the standard that Old Testament prophets tried to achieve.

When we look at Old Testament prophecy, what we see is that there is, in the vast majority of cases, there is an ethical message. These functionaries at Mari were being asked to give an answer that could be answered in one word: should I go to battle? Should I do this or that? When you read the prophets in the Old Testament, they are men and women whose message is tied to the law. They're ethicists.

I don't think that they were reformers because they weren't creating something new. They were demanding that the Israelites keep the law. So, to call the Old Testament prophets ecstatics seems to me to be imbalanced.

Secondly, they were royal prophets, and so in that sense of the word, some of these prophets, like Isaiah and Micah, come to mind; these were prophets that served the king as advisors and counselors. They were court specialists. There's very little to justify calling them ecstatics.

So, I think it's a case, when we look at the Mari material, it's a case of forcing an idea onto the pages of the Bible because of how it's understood to have occurred in the text, say, at Mari. I think when we look at the passages that are proposed as passages showing the prophets were ecstatics, we come to find out that they really aren't doing that. So, I don't think that I'm going to let myself go in.

Normally in my class, I look at the passage in Numbers and 1 Samuel 10 and 2 Kings 3 and Ezekiel's strange behavior, but I think what I will say to you in my audience is that in all four of these examples in Numbers, Samuel, Kings, and Ezekiel, what we're looking at are things that are not the norm, but things that are the exception. No other prophet in the Old Testament acted like Ezekiel. When we look at the examples of events that occurred in these other biblical passages, each is what I would call context-specific.

They're not normative. So, if all of that is the case, and there really aren't prophets at Mari, nor are the prophets of the Old Testament at their core ecstatics, then why would we want to look at the Mari documents? Well, the answer to that is worth investigating. So, I mentioned to you further down in our notes that one of the most intriguing contributions of the Mari tablets revolves around how they employ covenant language.

That is to say, covenant language is language that has a special meaning because it's language that fits the covenant. Let me illustrate with some of these terms like father, son, brother, love, hate, and so on and so forth. In the ancient world, when you made a covenant with an individual, you employed a special language.

Just like in legal language today, legal language is its own language. It's so complicated to study legal language that you have to spend three or four years of your life studying as hard as you possibly can to control the ideas and the vocabulary of legalese. Well, covenant language had its own context in the ancient Near East as well.

So, when you made a covenant and both of you, I'm going to just draw sigla, and both of you were equal, this is Joe, and this is Bob, and they just made a covenant,

and they're equal, then the covenant language that would describe them is brother. Now, they weren't really brothers. They weren't biological brothers.

They weren't kin. Because they formed a covenant, however, if they were equal, then they would have called one another brother. Now, an example like this in the Bible might be the example of the special covenant between David and Jonathan.

They were equals, and if they had indeed formed a covenant, then David and Jonathan would have regarded each other as brothers. This is what we call a parity covenant. Okay? Parity, as you can see, is related to the English word pair, P-A-I-R, and so they were an equal pair.

Okay? If, however, we had a covenant relationship like this, and this would have been the inferior, then this person in the covenant would have been called the father, and this person in the covenant would have been called the son. This is what we call a fan- I wouldn't want you to feel like you have to use this terminology, but this is a suzerainty treaty. This is a fancy way of saying sovereign.

So, in this kind of covenant, this person was superior to this person. So, this person, therefore, would be called the father, and this person would be called the son because this person was the suzerain. So, in covenant language, the father wasn't biologically the father.

The son wasn't biologically the son. In this kind of covenant, in actuality, they are pairs, and this would be the subordinate. So, this was the suzerain, and this was the subordinate.

Okay? So, what happens is, because covenants are sacred, then they ended up using family terms to express the closeness that should have been there in a covenant. We don't do this today. If President Trump made a special treaty with President Netanyahu, they would not call one another father or son.

This is something they did in the ancient world, but we don't do this today. But it's all over the pages of the Bible, this terminology of father and son, and we have to look at the context then when we see terms like father and son or brother. We have to look at them to make sure because if it's covenant language, then it's a way of expressing the closeness of the covenant, and it has nothing to do with biology.

So, covenant language takes upon special form. I can't help but wonder if this has something to do with the Trinity in the sense that God the Father is the Sovereign, and as the Son, God the Son is there to do the will of God the Sovereign. and wondering if those kinds of terms came to fit the way that the Trinity functions. I am not primarily a theologian, so I don't want to say that that's exactly what it is.

What I would say is that some of the most fruitful terms in covenant language from Mari that we've learned about are simple terms like love and hate. What we have come to see in the ancient world is that love and hate are terms that take on radically different meanings if they occur in covenant context. So, here's where Mari can help us understand important passages in the Bible in ways that are more biblically correct than just reading them by transferring vertically the meaning of these words that we know so well.

So, let's take an important passage to illustrate what I mean. Deuteronomy chapter 6, a passage that we know well. In Deuteronomy chapter 6, we have a passage that tells us, we shall love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all of our soul, soul doesn't mean soul, and with all of our might.

All right, and so almost everybody in a modern American context would read that in emotive terms, emotionally. Almost everybody would read that as, therefore, you must have a deeper experience of God. You must love him in deeply emotive ways, and so love in those kinds of terms is a strange mixture of quantity and quality.

Ah, this is covenant language. The queen of Mari, a queen named Shibtu, wrote to her subordinate, a general, and she said to her general, if you truly love me, you will do such and such. Well, this isn't a case of royal hanky-panky.

This is a case of the queen of Mari is saying, you are my subordinate, and if you're truly faithful or truly obedient, you will do such and such. Now then, what this means in Deuteronomy 6 is that love really doesn't mean love. What it means is, you shall act completely faithful.

Completely means with all your heart, with all your living, with all your body, and with all your strength. In other words, what God is saying as we think about law, I think this is so helpful to us if we just listen carefully and absorb this. In Deuteronomy, ten times God says this to Israel.

Ten times, you shall love the Lord your God. What he is saying to them is you must keep the covenant with every portion of your being. You say to me, but it says love.

Okay, but remember that love in the covenant context doesn't necessarily mean the thing that love means in other contexts. When the text says that Jacob loved Rachel, that's probably talking about love the way we use the term. But when the text says, you shall love the Lord your God, and it's in a book like Deuteronomy, and Deuteronomy is a book in which the covenant is being reaffirmed or re-established with the second generation, then what Moses is actually saying is, not you shall love the Lord your God by digging into the deepest emotive parts of your being, but what he's really saying is, you shall commit yourself fully and completely to the covenant in such a way that there are no aspects absent from your willingness to be obedient.

All right? Let me see if I can illustrate. Here is a statement made from Ashurbanipal, who was the last great king of the Assyrian Empire. Listen to what Ashurbanipal said in a treaty with Esarhaddon, his son.

Does this sound familiar? If you do not love Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, as you do your own lives, if you do not instruct your sons, grandsons, your offspring, your descendants who will live in the future in this covenant, such and such and such and such, let this word be acceptable and good to you. Do not set over yourselves another king, another lord. All right? In that treaty that's recorded by Esarhaddon, notice what's there from Deuteronomy.

Love Ashurbanipal, the king. In the Bible, it would be love God. Instruct your sons and your grandsons.

Deuteronomy 6.6 is exactly what Deuteronomy says about you shall instruct your sons and your grandsons. This is covenant language. And so, what it means is that we can all benefit from in our culture is, at least in Deuteronomy 6 and those other nine passages in Deuteronomy, God isn't necessarily asking them to reach into the deepest part of their emotional wellspring and love God in powerful emotive ways.

What God is saying in Deuteronomy is, you shall be utterly faithful to everything that I said to you. This springboards right into the New Testament, does it not? Because in the New Testament, when the Jews asked Jesus, what's the greatest commandment? Jesus said what? Well, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul. And the second commandment is just like the first.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. All right? I don't think in the New Testament, in Matthew, I don't think Jesus was saying that you need to love God with a full interior being that makes your person. Jesus knew Deuteronomy better than I know Deuteronomy.

And in Deuteronomy, the context is you shall utterly be faithful to the covenant. Commit yourself fully to the covenant. And that means, secondly, when you love your neighbor as yourself, what he means is that every law that Moses gave about how you treat the people of Israel, your covenant partners, should be kept equally.

Then what he's talking about is acting faithfully toward the law that God gave. Keeping it at all costs. I'm standing here feeling a bit inadequate for the task in front of me that's so great.

We're in a culture that puts feelings above everything. Literally, when a couple falls apart when their marriage falls apart, I've had them say this to me, they look at me,

and they say to me, as if this settles the argument, why are you divorcing? Because I don't love her anymore.

What they mean by that is that I no longer feel like a husband to this woman. I don't love her. We see in the Bible that's not the way the word love is being used.

There, when God says, love God and love one another, what he means is to act faithfully. Do you see how this just radically changes how we think? We think that faithfulness comes from a feeling. In the biblical picture, faithfulness emanates from the covenant.

My wife and I have had a remarkable ministry in many ways. I don't think any ministry is greater than our ministry to couples. We've married pegs and are in the process of counting them up now.

It's over 350. We are moving to a figure that will probably finalize at around 400 marriages. In every one of these marriages, I teach my couples that when you marry, you are making a covenant.

It's a covenant that to which you must be true. To which you must be true, listen, apart from your feelings. Not because of your feelings.

Now, I'm not saying that we don't have feelings. As a matter of fact, Peg and I will, tomorrow, celebrate our 48th anniversary, June of the 28th. I feel toward my wife like no other woman on this earth.

But that's not why I've been married for 48 years. I've been married 48 years because I'm true to my covenant. So, what Mari helps us do is revisit and rethink this whole concept of what love is in key places of the Old Testament.

I'll deal with one more of these before I leave this concept of Mari and what it teaches us. And that's the word hate. I have students ask me this all the time about a passage out of the book of Malachi.

And in Malachi, the passage there tells us in Malachi 1, verse 30, you know, guys, Malachi is not the last book of the Old Testament. The last book of the Old Testament is 2 Chronicles. Malachi is the last book in the canon that we follow.

And in Malachi 1, the text tells us this. Well, let's read verse 1. The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. You notice what was completely missing was an ecstatic state.

This is an oracle, a written thought that God gives through Malachi. And here's what God says to Israel. I have loved you, says the Lord, but you say, how have you loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother, declares the Lord, yet I love Jacob.

But I hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation, and so on and so forth. Well, this is very confusing to the average reader of the Bible. Jacob, have I loved, Esau, have I hated.

Well, once again, the context makes a difference. So what we want to do at all costs is avoid this phenomenon, where we impose our meaning onto the text of the ancient world. Jacob, have I loved, and Esau, have I hated, doesn't mean love and hate.

What it probably means is that God made his covenant with Jacob, and he didn't make that covenant with Esau. As a matter of fact, what we know is that God did make a covenant with Esau and his descendants, but he didn't make the Abrahamic covenant with him. So, when it says Jacob have I loved, it means that God had a covenant with Jacob.

When it said Esau have I hated, it means I probably didn't make that covenant with Esau. The covenant I made with Abraham goes through Jacob, not through Esau. In other words, to come up with English words that would be more accurate, it would be in the context of law, chose and didn't choose, or chose and rejected.

This even plays a part in the teachings of Jesus. When Jesus said to his disciples, you must hate your mother and father and follow me. Well, naturally, that's a disturbing passage because if you read it literally, then Jesus just said you must hate your parents.

It's not what it meant. What it really meant is you must not put your parents over me. So, we're moving here toward the direction of ending this tape.

But what does it mean when Jesus then says you must hate your mother and father? Jesus cannot possibly be telling us to hate our parents because that would be a violation of commands like love your enemy. So, what is he saying there? Well, it seems likely to me that what Jesus is doing is saying, all right, in a patriarchal culture, we know this. In a patriarchal culture, which is the culture we had in both the Old and the New Testament, the father owned, literally and legally, he owned his children.

If he fell on hard times, he could sell them into slavery. This truth was so powerful that when a daughter was being married, her suitor had to buy her from the patriarch. You paid a bride price, a dowry.

Not a dowry, a bride price. So what Jesus is saying in practice is, a follower of Christ must on some level reject the patriarchal model. In an agricultural culture, we're going to draw something like this.

So, here's the P. The P stands for patriarch. In an agricultural society, let's say the patriarch had five children. In a patriarchal culture, the five children were to build their homes around the patriarch.

The land always stayed within the family line. So, in a patriarchal culture, the five children of the patriarch would all stay physically proximate to him. See, this won't work where the Messiah is concerned because with the Messiah, what he's saying to them is, come follow me.

Well, you can't follow the patriarch and Jesus at the same time. Jesus said you need to leave your father and your mother and come follow me. And so, he used typical covenant language to say you must hate your mother and father, which means you must reject the patriarchal claims they have on you, and leave the patriarch and come follow me.

Pick up your cross and come follow me. There are a lot of remarkable things we learn about the covenant, about words that in English take on completely different meanings because of what we've learned from legal documents in things like the Mari archives. So, the Mari tablets have been more than a little helpful in clarifying the meaning of words that function in legal contexts.

And so, what I would like to ask my audience is to remember what I mentioned to you here. Significantly about hating your mother and father, it doesn't mean hate. That's an absolute certainty.

What it does mean is you cannot put the legal way the patriarchal world functioned in the path of the Messiah. The Messiah has as his core message to people, come follow me. And when the Messiah is gone, he tells his disciples to go into all the world.

Well, go into all the world is not possible if you're following the patriarchal model and you literally physically must have your home within walking distance of the father. Well, all of this now becomes functionally clear because of the covenant language that we have now, not just at Mari, but many other locations as well, many other tablets as well. So, the Mari archives are very helpful in explaining how etymology is inadequate.

Context is where words get their meaning and their nuance. If you haven't learned that already in the audience, I will tell you that in marriage, the meaning of words finds their identity because of the context of your life partner. So, I think the Mari

tablets have been very helpful, and I hope that you can enjoy the truth of some of these things that I've been sharing with you.

So, we are going to bypass the Enuma Elish. It's called the Babylonian Genesis because this document has its origins in the old Babylonian period, but it's a document about the creation account from Mesopotamia, and so here you can see the order in which the creation account supposedly occurred, and there was a time 30 years ago when people were proposing that there were similarities between the Babylonian creation account and the Bible and a lot of that has now diminished. And so, I'm just going to bypass the information on the Enuma Elish, which is one of the Mesopotamian creation accounts, and instead turn our attention toward the Babylonian flood account.

As you will see, there are similarities between the Babylonian flood account and the Bible, and we have to come up with an explanation for those similarities as well as differences. Now, first of all, let's just make the point: the Babylonian flood story or the Gilgamesh epic represents a series of flood accounts that have similarities but have their own differences as well. There are actually four main flood stories from Mesopotamia.

Both in the Bible and in Mesopotamia, there are accounts that suggest that both the Babylonians and the Bible believed that there was a flood that destroyed human civilization. Now, in the Bible, as you well know, there's only one account of the flood. But in Mesopotamia, there are four different accounts.

There's a very fragmentary copy of a Sumerian version dating to the early second millennium, written in Sumerian. The tablet is so small you can hold it in your hand. And it describes a flood account in Sumerian language.

There is an old Babylonian version known by the name Atra-Hasis. This account has been found not only in Mesopotamia but at Ugarit. It is a comprehensive epic covering the creation of the flood, the Atra-Hasis account.

The Neo-Assyrian version, called the Gilgamesh Epic, dates back to the early second millennium. However, only tablet 11 of the famous Gilgamesh epic mentions the flood. The Gilgamesh Epic is a long narrative—one of the longest narratives of antiquity—that really is about the creation and primarily about the hero of that account, Gilgamesh.

So, while we talk about the Gilgamesh epic, only one of its tablets has to do with the flood. And we can talk about that later. The fourth account is a much later document written by a Babylonian priest named Berossus in the third century BC.

And it, of course, also talks about this great flood, but it doesn't tell it in exactly the same way as the other three accounts. So, let's take a few minutes, talk about the epic, and then we'll be able to start moving toward a conclusion. How do we explain the similarities and the differences between the biblical account of the flood and the epic? The Gilgamesh epic is actually an epic of epic proportions.

It talks about, it's really about the hero named Gilgamesh, and it's really about his exploits. He's the star. If we were looking at the movie credits at the end of the movie of Gilgamesh, the star in the account would be Gilgamesh, not the gods.

And in this account, Gilgamesh turns out to be somebody who is sort of half god and half man. And in the accounts, Gilgamesh is unique. He's powerful.

He's successful. And so, Gilgamesh is so successful that the gods decide they're going to bring him down to size. So, they create, in the epic, they create an adversary for him, and his name is Enkidu.

And Enkidu needs to be special because Gilgamesh is special. So, Enkidu is a being who is sort of half man and half bull. Now, you know, we need to be reminded, friends, that we're not an agricultural community, and probably the vast majority of you who are watching this tape have never been next to a powerful bull.

They are really large, and they can kill you. Well, in antiquity, the bull was the symbol of ultimate strength. In mythology, there's no one more powerful than Baal, who is this sexual bull, a great figure.

And so, Enkidu was half bull and half man. And so they created him as an adversary. And so, when he and Gilgamesh first hook up, it is the WWF, the World Wrestling Federation, unlike anything the world has seen.

One whole tablet describes this gigantic wrestling match between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Well, at the end of the matches, the two of them have a bromance. It turns out that even though Enkidu was created to be an adversary to Gilgamesh, they turn out to be great friends.

Of course, this is not why they created him. So, the gods gave him the ultimate recall and killed Enkidu.

Well, this has a monumental effect on Gilgamesh because Gilgamesh has never personally known death. For all we can tell in the mythology, Gilgamesh maybe would never have died. So, when he loses his friend Enkidu to death, Gilgamesh is devastated.

And about that time, he hears the story of a man who will never die, a man who knows the secret of eternal life, and his name is Utnapishtim. Utnapishtim is literally day of life. And Utnapishtim equals Noah.

He has been through the great flood and has survived it and has learned the secret of life eternal. So, forgive me for taking all this time to describe the epic to you, but I'm describing it to help contextualize the so-called similarities because there are similarities for sure, but there are differences in these two accounts. So Utnapishtim has survived the flood because he was tipped off by the gods, by one of the gods, that they're going to destroy the earth.

It turns out that in humanity there is way too much noise. And as they describe it, the gods are unable to sleep because human beings are making so much noise. Well, it sounds to me like dorm life.

So, they decide they're going to destroy the earth because of this. Now, some very respected scholars argue that this is really just metaphor for the fact that there are way too many human beings. So, the gods are being kept awake either because the human beings are too noisy or because there are way too many human beings and they're going to depopulate the earth.

So, they conceive of the idea of destroying the earth by a gigantic flood. So Utnapishtim hears about the flood, and so he builds a boat, or as my friend Dr. Fink used to call a ship. He was a Navy guy, and it was an offense to him to refer to an ocean-going ship as a boat.

You referred to it as a ship. So Utnapishtim builds a ship on which he and his family will survive, and so they survive the flood. And so, Gilgamesh is going to find Utnapishtim and ask him, what is the secret of life eternal? How is it that you have learned to avoid death? So, he finds where he's at, and Utnapishtim is out in the Persian Gulf somewhere.

And so Gilgamesh rows his way out in his little ship out to Utnapishtim, and I'm having fun with you, he says to him, O Utnapishtim, because that's really serious language, O. O Utnapishtim, what is the secret of eternal life? And Utnapishtim says to him, well, you have to eat from the tree of Life, which lives at the bottom of the ocean. The ancients love to tell myths, and they're very creative. They aren't always very believable.

How is it that you have a tree growing at the bottom of the ocean? Well, obviously, it doesn't make a lot of sense. However, in the myth, Gilgamesh then proceeds to row out to this ocean, the Persian Gulf, what we call the Persian Gulf, and there he knows where the Tree of Life is. And so, he swims to the bottom of the ocean, and he plucks a branch from the tree.

He takes the branch with him back to his boat, but he's so exhausted that while he has this piece of the tree with him, he falls fast asleep in his exhaustion. And while he is sleeping, oh, the sea monster named Tanim lifts his horrid, ugly head above the whale of the boat, and Tanim, the name for the monster, eats the branch, and the sea monster lives forever, and Gilgamesh is consigned to go the way of all flesh. Now, I know that there are parts of the story that are not airtight, like, well, if the tree is growing at the bottom, Tanim, who lives in the ocean, could go down there at any time and eat it.

There are many things about the story that are not exactly foolproof, but that's the story. So, how does this story relate to the Bible? Well, I have listed the parallels for you in your notes that I've made available, and they seem to me to be undeniable. There is a divine decision to destroy humankind by a flood.

Only one man is chosen to live. There is a great flood that destroys the world. When the flood recedes, the boat grounds on a mountain.

Birds are sent out to see if the flood has abated, and humankind prospers in its new beginning. I'm willing to concede that those are some pretty impressive similarities, but there are also some pretty serious differences. The cause of the flood.

In the Bible, you know full well that the flood was caused by human sinfulness. There is a contrast between God and the counsel of the gods. For example, the gods contrive to conceal their actions from humankind, while Noah spends his lifetime warning mankind.

Well, that's a pretty serious difference. In the one account, the gods are being secretive, and the other, God warns them. Utnapishtim is saved only by a trick of one of the gods against his colleagues.

Well, that's pretty radically different. The size and type of the craft is really pretty comical. We actually have been able... I'm going to have to stop here today pretty quickly, but we actually have been able to take the dimensions of the ark, as described in the Bible, and it's actually a ship.

And if you want to see what it looked like, it is a pretty good recreation of it. It's been now recreated south of Cincinnati in Kentucky, and you can go see the ship. It's very believable.

If you did the dimensions of Utnapishtim, here's how it looked. Folks, that won't float. It's pretty obvious that the myth-makers in this story knew absolutely nothing about ships.

It's kind of like a rectangular skyscraper, and it won't float. That's a pretty serious difference, isn't it? Even the details of the birds, which are... Well, the number of individuals and so on are saved differs. The details of sending out the birds are different.

It's not even mentioned, for example, in Atra-Hasis. The incidences surrounding the departure into the boat are different. The replenishment of mankind is accomplished differently.

In the Bible account, God promises that he will never do it again. That's a big thing in the Bible. There's this seal showing that he won't do it again, the rainbow, ever.

Well, the gods don't promise that in the Gilgamesh epic. So, here's the point, then, as we get ready to close this account. And I'll tease you, because we have a segue that I'm going to make for our next video.

And the segue goes like this. The similarities are undeniable, but the differences are substantial. So, we need to come up with an explanation for why there are dramatic similarities and dramatic differences.

So, in our next video, that's exactly what we will do, is give you three possible explanations for the similarities and the differences. We'll save that for the next time, because we're almost out of time on this video. Three explanations for how we can explain either the similarities or the differences, or an explanation that covers both the similarities and the differences.

I hope that you'll enjoy it. It's a relatively important concept that we deal with in the next video. So, thank you for paying attention, and we'll see you in the next video.

This is Dr. Don Fowler in his teaching on Old Testament Backgrounds. This is session 10, Literature of the Babylonian Period.