

## Gilgamesh and Other Stories

Sometimes, as Christians, we are faced with people who try to disprove the accuracy of the Bible. We can respond to this in various ways. We can ignore it and refuse to discuss it with these people, we can allow our beliefs to be shaken or broken, we can stand firm in our faith and attempt to persuade the other person, or we can attempt to understand what the other person is saying and have a respectful conversation. While we may not understand everything, God is the author of life and history. Regardless of what facts are presented, everything will point back to Him. With this in mind, I prefer to attempt to understand the point of view of others and discuss the options rather than only look for data which supports my initial opinion. This will be a discussion about some of the arguments against the accuracy of the Bible and how we, as Christians, can think about them.

The first 5 books of the Old Testament are thought to have been written (at least to some extent) by Moses. Moses lived around 1500-1300 B.C. Therefore, we can guess that the first 5 books, called the Pentateuch, were written (or begun) sometime in this range.

A popular story from the Babylonian region is called the Epic of Gilgamesh. It is thought to have been written around 2100-1900 B.C. Therefore, this story was recorded centuries before the Pentateuch. In this story, Gilgamesh embarks on a journey which brings him to the realm of the gods. Toward the end of his journey, he meets a man named Utnapishtim, now immortal, who used to live alongside the other mortals. I have copied a summary of this portion of the story from Wikipedia.

Gilgamesh observes that Utnapishtim seems no different from himself, and asks him how he obtained his immortality. Utnapishtim explains that the gods decided to send a great flood. To save Utnapishtim the god Ea told him to build a boat. He gave him precise dimensions, and it was sealed with pitch and bitumen. His entire family went aboard together with his craftsmen and "all the animals of the field". A violent storm then arose which caused the terrified gods to retreat to the heavens. Ishtar lamented the wholesale destruction of humanity, and the other gods wept beside her. The storm lasted six days and nights, after which "all the human beings turned to clay". Utnapishtim weeps when he sees the destruction. His boat lodges on a mountain, and he releases a dove, a swallow, and a raven. When the raven fails to return, he opens the ark and frees its inhabitants. Utnapishtim offers a sacrifice to the gods, who smell the sweet savor and gather around. Ishtar vows that just as she will never forget the brilliant necklace that hangs around her neck, she will always remember this time. When Enlil arrives, angry that there are survivors, she condemns him for instigating the flood. Ea also castigates him for sending a disproportionate punishment.

It should not have taken long for you to recognize this story as quite similar to the biblical story of Noah. So what's the deal here? The argument some present is this: the story of Noah was written centuries after the story of Gilgamesh. It is clearly a copy of the older story and simply altered to reflect Yahweh as the divine being rather than the multiple gods mentioned in Gilgamesh. Therefore, the story of Noah is not literally true. It is simply a recycled story from the region. And...it gets worse. That's not the only flood story outside of the bible. Meet Atrahasis.

Atrahasis is the name of the story and the man it is about. It does not have the surrounding elements of travels and tribulation the Gilgamesh story does, but is only about the flood. And in this element, it is

quite similar to Gilgamesh. Only minor details are different. Which story is older? People have opinions, but it's hard to tell. So now we have multiple flood stories written down centuries before Noah was written about. This just strengthens the argument of those wanting to disprove the Bible.

So is this the only story in the Bible this happens with? Of course not! That would be too easy. Ready to dig into more? Here we go.

The Enuma Elish is thought to have been written sometime between 1894-1595 B.C. The Enuma Elish is a creation story from the Babylonia region. Though there are many creation stories from each region, this one sticks out as it follows the unique pattern of divine beings bringing about creation through the separation of waters. This was distinct from the other stories in the surrounding regions. Then the Bible has a similar story led by a different deity. So now there are 2 stories, one seemingly written before the other, very similar to one another, but quite different from other stories. So why are they so similar?

That's enough for the point of this discussion. It's easy to see the argument made by people hoping to disprove the Bible. Some well-known stories from the Bible were very similar to unique stories of other cultures in the area which were written centuries before the Bible's accounts. The question for Christians is, how do we handle this?

Personally, I do not feel these facts threaten my faith or the validity of the Bible. I'll work through a few reasons why I feel this way. First, the written records of other stories we have found are older than and we have found of the Bible. This does not mean the stories could not have been written down earlier, for either language, but just that this is all that has been found. Second, let's just assume the other stories actually were written down first. All that proves is that the other cultures began writing first. These stories were likely passed down in an oral tradition long before any of them had been written down.

Let's look at this, for just a moment, from an unbiased position, meaning we assume any of these stories, biblical or not, have the same chance of being right or wrong. With this perspective, only two possibilities occur to me. One, none of these stories are true. Some culture or people invented the stories and the stories travelled and were adapted to each new culture. Two, there is truth in all the stories. This isn't to say every part of every story is true, but that there was some sort of ripple effect.

What is a ripple effect? Think about a rock being dropped into the middle of a lake. Where it breaks the water, there is a motion of the water being displaced. This is a reaction to the rock. Immediately beside where the rock fell into the water is a ripple almost identical to the original reaction. The ripple spreads out across the lake, but slowly resembles the original reaction less and less.

Using this imagery, let's assume there was an original event. This could be creation, the flood, or any other part of the Bible. For this example, let's use the flood. Ok, a flood happened. That was a big event! It seems reasonable to assume this would be talked about for a long time and many people would have passed the story on down to their children.

Now let's switch back to a Christian mindset. Think about all these people who would want to tell the story of this massive flood. How many of them followed Yahweh? After a while, the majority did not. So could we expect these people could attribute a large event to a deity they do not want to acknowledge? Obviously not. They will attribute the story to their own gods, whether you think of them as false gods or demons. So the deity who caused the flood has now changed in several cultures.

What about the motivation of causing a flood? Yahweh caused the flood because of the evil of man. That could be a troublesome point for people who want to worship idols, have cult prostitution and maybe even have child sacrifices. Easy fix, the flood was not because people are evil. The gods just wanted to get rid of people. Why? There were too many people. There we go. Now we have a story that explains away an action of Yahweh as something false gods did. Once these cultures developed writing, they wrote it down. Does it make the story more correct or original just because it was written first? Not in my opinion. I think the fact that multiple cultures had a common story only lends to the conclusion that there was indeed an original event. Therefore, we simply need to determine the most reliable source of facts.

I believe this is a good place to reach with those hoping to disprove the accuracy of the Bible. If it can be agreed that an event did, in fact, take place, then discussion can go on regarding how the story was disseminated throughout time and to different cultures. How did each culture receive its version of the story and what motivations could they have for the differences in their story? Do the changes do away with the punishment of evil? Do they make another god a dominant god over others? Do they illustrate a righteous god who punishes evil? The reason for changes could be illuminating to determine if the changes were to excuse existing behavior, fit a current lifestyle, or to bring people closer to righteousness. Hint: Yahweh is the only deity in these stories punishing evil.