“Isn’t the Old Testament Just a Rip-Off of Older Tales From Other Cultures?”

Dear Mr. Williams,

I’m curious on your thoughts toward the common charge that the Old Testament did nothing more than rip off older tales from other cultures. Have you read the *Genesis of Justice*? I’m very curious on your thoughts, Sir. . .

Thank you for your recent e-mail. Let me try to give you a little background on this question and then offer an explanation.

It is true that there are some documents relating to events recorded in Genesis which **predate** the projected time of the writing of the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy), commonly known among the Jews as the ***Torah.***

By way of background, first of all, we must acknowledge that the Hebrew Old Testament is an ancient Semitic book and bore a close relationship to the environment out of which it came. The setting for the first eleven chapters of Genesis, which record the primeval history of mankind, is laid in “the cradle of civilization,” the Tigris-Euphrates River Valley (part of the Fertile Crescent). Archaeologists and Anthropologists all agree that here we find the first and earliest major civilization.

The controversy surrounding the question you have asked came about with (1) the discovery and decipherment of the Babylonian- Assyrian cuneiform script in 1835, and (2) the subsequent excavations at Nineveh (the ancient capital) between 1848 and 1876, which yielded various clay tablets which made up the Library of Ashurbanipal (668-626 B.C.) Among

them were seven tablets of the great Creation Epic known as "*Enuma Elish,*" or "When Above." Although these tablets date to the 7th century B.C., they were composed much earlier in the days of Hammurabi (1728-1676 B.C.). Also found at the same site was *"The Epic of Gilgamesh"* which incorporates an account of the Flood. There are other resemblances to Genesis 1-11 as well, but these are the two main ones. And there is no question that these documents came **before** the writing of the Semitic Pentateuch. There is also no question that there is a relationship between these two traditions, but there are both *similarities* and stark *differences*.

In the **creation story** they are similar in that both accounts (1) know a time when the earth was "waste and void", (2) have a similar *order* of *events* in creation, and (3) show a predilection for the number *seven*.

They are very *different*, however, in that one account is (1) intensely *polytheistic*, the other strictly *monotheistic*; (2) and one account confounds *spirit* and *matter*, while the other carefully *distinguishes* between these two concepts. Merrill Unger says,

> *As a result of this salient difference in the basic concept of deity, the religious ideas of the two accounts are completely divergent. The Babylonian story is on a low mythological plane with a sordid conception of deity. . .The great gods themselves plot and fight against one another.*
>
> *Genesis, in striking contrast, is lofty and sublime. The one God, supreme and omnipotent, is in superb control of all the creatures and elements of the universe. . . the crude polytheism of the Babylonian creation stories mars the record with successive generations of deities of both sexes. . .(producing) a confusing and contradictory plurality of creators. (Archaeology and the Old Testament, pp.32-33).*

I have just been reading Augustine's *City of God.* The first

half of the book (about 300 pages) addresses this same difference: the many Graeco-Roman gods, and the One True God:

> *We, however, seek for a mind which, trusting to true religion, does not adore the world as its god, but for the sake of God praises the world as a work of God, and purified from mundane defilements, comes pure to God Himself Who founded the world. . . . But if any one insists that he worships the one true God—that is, the Creator of every soul and of every body—with stupid and monstrous idols, with human victims, with putting a wreath on the male organ, with wages of unchastity, with the cutting of limbs, with emasculation, with the consecration of the effeminates, with impure and obscene plays, such a one does not sin because he worships One Who ought not to be worshipped, but because he worships Him Who ought to be worshipped in a way in which He ought not to be worshipped. (VII., Chapters 26 & 27)*

Augustine goes on to say that there *was* ONE nation—among all of the other nations—which gave testimony of this God through unique religious thought and practice: the *Hebrews. (VII., Chapter 32).* This is truly remarkable, historically, and I believe is a strong argument in support of Genesis over the Sumerian/Assyrian/Babylonian tradition. I will give another reason shortly, but let me turn to the Flood Stories.

Like the Creation Accounts, the Biblical and Babylonian *Flood Accounts* contain similarities and differences. Both accounts:

• Hold that the deluge was divinely planned;
• Agree that the impending catastrophe was divinely revealed to the hero;
• Connect the reason for the deluge with the corruption of the human race;
• Say that the hero was divinely instructed to build a huge boat to preserve life;
• Tell of the deliverance of the hero and his family;

• Acknowledge the physical causes of the flood
• Mention the duration of the flood;
• Include similar, striking details,
• Describe acts of worship after deliverance and the bestowing of special blessings.

The contrasts, or differences, include: A radical contrast (1) in their *theological* conceptions (Genesis attributes the Flood to an infinitely holy, wise and all-powerful God, while the Babylonian describes a multitude of disagreement—quarreling, self- accusing deities, who crouch in fear "like dogs"); (2) in their *moral* conceptions (Genesis presents the Flood as a divine, moral judgment, while the Babylonian account portrays mixed standards of conduct on the part of the deities, a hazy view of sin, and the result of the caprice of the gods; (3) and in their *philosophical* conceptions (one of speculation confusing spirit and matter, finite and infinite, and ignorance of the first principles of causation. The Genesis account has no such ambiguity).

Now what can we make of all this? First, it is extremely unlikely that the Babylonians borrowed from the Genesis account. The relative dating of historical events will not allow it. And so we must concede that the Hebrews (Moses) were aware of these events and **may** have incorporated them into the Genesis account, either through direct knowledge of the Babylonian literature, or through oral transmission. Which leads us to a third alternative, namely, **that both the Biblical and Babylonian accounts go back to a *common source of fact*, originating from actual, historical occurrences!**

If the Genesis account is recording actual, historical events, then we should find some evidence of that across the world. Do we? Yes. Cosmologies from primitive and distant parts of the globe (Micronesians, Eskimos, New World Indians, Scythians, Celts, Australian Aborigines) contain stories about Creation and the Deluge. There are some 150 flood accounts across the world recording many of the things mentioned above

(notwithstanding that the accounts become more inaccurate the farther away they are geographically from the Fertile Crescent).

The Babylonian accounts may antedate the writing of Genesis, but there appears to have been a strong, world-wide oral tradition concerning these events which preceded even their accounts created at the time of Hammurabi early in the Second Millenium B.C.

We also must focus on the entire question of inspiration of the Biblical documents. There is no question that these final, written records which now make up our Old and New Testaments were revealed, recorded (written down), and preserved by a Divine Hand. In answering the above question, we must come back to either deny or affirm that God, in His own time, and in His own way, made Himself and His redemptive plan known to us (Hebrews 1:1). The purpose of both testaments was to demonstrate His holiness and justice, as well as His love and grace, and how He brought about Reconciliation for those of us who believe and accept His provision by faith.

The startling thing to me is the absolute **uniqueness** of the Judeo-Christian God in comparison with all of the bizarre alternatives we still find throughout all the world and throughout all of history. That uniqueness helps me to make my decision to trust the Genesis account rather than some other:

> *What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things; and He made from one every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should see God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each*

one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being. . .(Acts 17:24-28).

Hope this helps answer your question.

Jimmy Williams
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Thank you, Sir. Well written. I really appreciate the response. I've read about the Flood stories that are prevalent throughout history which seems really interesting (obviously something happened). But how do we know there wasn't simply a great flood and these stories were made by common folk (or even the leaders of the time) and written down as their own interpretation? Curious, _____.

Glad you received the information. With respect to your question in this e-mail, I think the main issue is the widespread, global awareness of this event. Obviously the "tale was told" from generation to generation. The fact that it is present and widely-distributed among the folklore of so many cultures in describing their "distant past would argue for a real, historical basis. Sometimes this was handed down through oral tradition, and sometimes written. The fact that certain "particulars" vary in the accounts would indicate **some** interpretive innovations (this is to be expected) as the story moved on, but there is a basic "core" that seems to be consistently preserved, though some details are altered, or embellished.

There is no doubt that, sometime in the remote past, there was a gigantic flood. Theologians still argue as to whether it was global or local. What we **do** know, however, is that a very high percentage (I'm guessing at least 80%) of the earth's crust is *sedimentary* rock; that is, rock that was formed by the pressure and weight of *water*.

Warm Regards,

Jimmy