“Did Christianity Come From the Pagan Story of Nimrod and Ishtar?”

I am reading a book by Pastor David Jeremiah, *Escape the Coming Night*. In this book he tells of the “true legend” (his words) of Nimrod’s wife, how she was concieved by a sunbeam, whose son was killed and raised up after 40 days, and the celebration of Ishtar. I just read your article “Did Christianity Borrow From Pagan Religions?” about whether Christianity borrowed from other pagan religions, but this one wasn’t there and I wondered if you might know anything about it?

My question is. how did this story get around when Christ was not born yet? I have had someone actually tell me that Christianity copied this story. While I don’t believe it for a minute, I do want to have a defense for it and to file it away in the proper perspective.

[*Editor’s Note: It is unclear whether or not the above account of Dr. Jeremiah’s work is indeed accurate. Following is simply a response to the greater issue with guidelines for discernment in such matters.*] I have not actually heard of this story before, so I cannot really comment on the details. There are, however, some general principles to bear in mind when evaluating such claims.

First, we need to establish that this really was a story that was told in the ancient world. For that we need to know what the original source of the story was. Was this story recorded on ancient clay tablets or written on the walls of a temple, etc.? If so, where are these tablets housed today? Where is this temple?

If the story is recorded by an ancient historian, then which

historian is it? Where can we find this work for ourselves? When did the historian write his account? Where did he get his information from, etc? Does the historian claim the account actually occurred, or does he refer to it as a myth? And so on, and so forth.

Once one begins to ask such questions, one sometimes finds that the story hasn't been related correctly, or that it dates to after the time of Jesus and early Christianity, or that the details of the story are very different from what Christians claim about the life of Christ, etc.

All of this is important. If we cannot find any ancient record of the story, then maybe the story really isn't ancient after all. Maybe somebody invented the story more recently. If the story is ancient, but dates to after the time of Christ, then it's quite possible that the story actually copied early Christian beliefs—and not vice versa. Copying can work both ways, after all. Maybe this story copied from the early Christians.

Finally, if there is an ancient record of the story, and if it is prior to the time of Christ, then we have to ask whether early Christians actually borrowed the story. And this is often extremely unlikely. In the first place, the details of the stories are often so different that it would be absurd to say that one borrowed from another. Second, it's highly unlikely that the early Christians (who were, after all, predominantly monotheistic Jews) would borrow religious concepts from pagan myths. Jews typically regarded such myths as perverse, morally repugnant, and idolatrous. It's very difficult to believe that they would borrow from such myths to describe the life of Christ.

So let's take the story related in Jeremiah's book. Was Jesus conceived by a sunbeam? Was He raised after 40 days? The answer to both questions is "No." Also, how was Nimrod's son supposedly killed? My guess is that it wasn't by crucifixion,

a practice developed much later by the Romans. These are some of the questions we would want to ask to determine if it is reasonable to believe that Christianity borrowed ideas from a pagan religion. And you can see the point. Even if this story circulated before the time of Christ, it's a very different story than the Christians were telling about Jesus, making borrowing at least highly suspect.

In addition, we have plenty of good historical evidence for the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Not only do we have all of the New Testament documents (e.g. different Gospels, letters, etc.), we also have ancient evidence for Jesus from non-Christian sources. See my article by that title. But what good historical evidence do we really have for Nimrod's son? I'm guessing we don't have much of anything, quite honestly. This makes the events of Jesus' life much different from those of Nimrod's alleged son. In the one case, we have good historical evidence for Jesus, but we do not have equally good historical evidence for Nimrod's son.

These are just some of the issues that one must carefully investigate and consider before the charge of Christians borrowing from pagan religions can be seriously sustained. And once one begins to carefully investigate these matters, the charge of borrowing becomes less and less plausible. I honestly don't think we have anything to fear or worry about in these charges.

I hope this information is helpful. Shalom in our true Lord Jesus Christ!

Michael Gleghorn

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“Did the Jesus Stories Arise from Pagan Myths?”

In his book *The Jesus Mysteries* Tim Freke speculates that the New Testament stories originated as pagan myth. Clearly there are very close resemblances to stories of Greek Dionusis and Egyptian Osiris, and others such as nativity stories, 12 disciples, ministry, miracles and message, last supper, crucifixion, resurrection, and return to judge man.

Bishops in the 4th century selected and revised the books of the New Testament to be consistent with their agreed-upon orthodox doctrine. Some openly acknowledged the more than coincidental “Jesus” stories in pagan mythology. They explained this as the work of the devil trying to deceive the faithful by creating these myths years before the supposed birth of Jesus. This is far too much of a stretch for me to accept.

If Biblical stories originated from pre-existent myth, how can we Christians reconcile this with our faith?

Thanks for writing Probe Ministries. You raise some interesting issues that are still debated among scholars today. Although I am far from an expert in this area, the little bit of reading which I have done leads me to a conclusion roughly as follows.

First, it is true that some of the Mystery Religions and pagan stories arose prior to Christianity. What’s not always as clear, however, is the precise doctrinal content of these religions prior to Christianity. In other words, some of the doctrines which are very similar to Christianity did not arise until AFTER the origin and spread of the Christian church. Thus, while a particular Mystery Religion, etc., may have existed prior to Christianity, it may still have borrowed

Christian themes, symbols and doctrines after the origin of the Christian church. In those cases, the doctrinal borrowing was done by the Mystery Religions – not by Christianity.

Second, we have to ask, "Are these pagan stories history, or are they myths?" Although we may not always have all the evidence we would like, most scholars would readily acknowledge that there is no good reason for believing these stories to be anything other than myths. The Gospel stories, on the other hand, are firmly rooted in history. Additionally, when one looks very carefully at the alleged parallels between Christianity and pagan religions, what one typically finds is that the "parallels" are actually quite superficial. For instance, one might find myths related to the cycle of seedtime and harvest, in which a god dies and rises ANNUALLY in conjunction with the pattern of "death" and apparent "rebirth" in nature. This is, in a sense, a mythological expression of what happens in nature each year. But the Gospel writers don't speak of Christ's death in these terms. His death is not an annual event associated with seasonal changes, it was a once-for-all-time event in which God reconciled the world to Himself through the death of His Son as a substitutionary sacrifice for the world's sins! For reasons such as these (i.e., the non-historical qualities of the pagan stories and their superficial similarities to Christianity), I think it's somewhat of an unwarranted leap to conclude that early Christians stole their ideas from these pagan beliefs and practices.

Third, Christianity arose out of Judaism, which was thoroughly monotheistic at the time of Christ. But these theories have early Jewish Christians borrowing from pagan, polytheistic beliefs, rather than from Jewish, monotheistic ones. Frankly, I find this thesis extremely difficult to swallow if, as the critics say, Christianity arose by purely naturalistic processes (as opposed to a unique set of supernatural events).

Finally, suppose that there are some pagan accounts which seem

to resemble Christianity and which are earlier in time. Since most scholars agree that these accounts are mythological, not historical, what might we conclude from this evidence? Personally, I like what C.S. Lewis had to say. He said that these ancient myths, largely the products of poetic imagination, were essentially good dreams sent to the pagans by God foreshadowing the good things to come. What they had seen in these dreams ("through a glass darkly," as it were), God later did clearly and in history when He sent His Son to be our Savior. According to Lewis, the Gospel story about Jesus is "myth become fact." That is, the ancient myth has now become true history in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This idea, in my opinion, has genuine merit.

As for the idea that bishops in the 4th century selected and revised the books of the New Testament to be consistent with their agreed-upon orthodox doctrine, this is simply false. We have manuscript evidence for the New Testament as far back as the early second century. No such revision occurred. There were, of course, selection criteria. But these were hardly arbitrary. The doctrinal content of the books did have to conform to the "rule of faith." But this insured the purity of the church's doctrine – not its corruption. Thus, many false and spurious "gospels" of the second century and later were rejected. But this was because they were not written by apostles (or companions of apostles), they did not conform to the "rule of faith," they had numerous historical and theological inaccuracies, and the church recognized them as inferior products which lacked any sign of God's divine authorship and inspiration, etc.

Thus, biblical stories did not originate from pre-existent myths. They are firmly rooted in history, as even extra-biblical historical sources and archaeology repeatedly confirm.

Hope this sets your mind at ease a bit.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin?

Aren't Miracles Impossible?

Of the four canonical gospels, there are two, Matthew and Luke, that provide details about the birth of Jesus. The accounts may reflect the unique perspectives of both Joseph (in Matthew's gospel) and Mary (in Luke's), for there are many differences between the two.{1} However, of the things they share in common, one cannot be missed. They both declare that Jesus was miraculously conceived through the supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit in the womb of a young virgin named Mary.{2} Today, some scholars regard the doctrine of Jesus' virgin birth as simply a legendary development of the early church. The story is said to be myth—not history.{3} But if we ask why they think this, we may notice something very interesting. For the virgin birth is usually not rejected on grounds of insufficient historical evidence. Rather, it is more often rejected on the presupposition that miracles are simply impossible.{4} This is quite revealing. For if such scholars really believe that miracles are impossible, then no amount of evidence can convince them that one has actually occurred. Their minds are made up before they examine the evidence. In theory, they view miracle claims as guilty until proven innocent. In actual practice, however, they never reach a verdict of "Not Guilty"!

The belief that miracles are impossible often arises from a naturalistic worldview. Strict naturalism completely rejects any notion of the supernatural.{5} All that exists are atoms and the void.{6} If naturalists are right, it follows that miracles are indeed impossible. While strange things that we do not fully understand may sometimes occur, there must, in principle, be a naturalistic explanation for every event in the universe.

But are such naturalists right? Since my aim in this article is to explore the historicity of Jesus' virgin birth, I will not attempt now to refute naturalism. Instead, I will simply point out that if a personal Creator God exists (and there is good evidence to believe that One does), then miracles are at least possible. For clearly, such a God might choose to intervene in His creation to bring about an effect for which there was no prior natural cause. And that is at least one way of describing a miracle.

Thus, if a personal Creator God exists, miracles are possible. And if miracles are possible, then Jesus' virginal conception and birth are possible. And if the virgin birth is possible, then the only way we can determine if it actually occurred is by carefully examining the evidence both for and against it. Next we will continue our inquiry by looking at an ancient prophecy that some think actually foretold Christ's virgin birth!

Didn't Matthew Misread Isaiah?

Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus was conceived through the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit while Mary was still a virgin.{7} He then goes further, however, by declaring that this miraculous event fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy in the book of Isaiah. He writes:

> *Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Behold, the*

> *virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel," which…. means, "God with us."{8}*

Some scholars are unimpressed with Matthew's interpretation of Isaiah. John Dominic Crossan unequivocally states, "The prophecy in Isaiah says nothing whatsoever about a virginal conception."{9} Did Matthew misread Isaiah?

Let's acknowledge that the original context of Isaiah's prophecy may not be exclusively about the virginal conception of Jesus. The year is 734 B.C. and King Ahaz of Judah is terrified to learn that Aram and Israel have formed an alliance against him. Isaiah is sent to reassure Ahaz that God is in control and that the aims of the alliance will not succeed. Ahaz is told to request a sign from the Lord, a means of confirming the truth of Isaiah's message. But he refuses!{10} Annoyed at the king's stubbornness, Isaiah declares that the Lord will give a sign anyway: an *almah* (a maiden of marriageable age) will conceive a son and call his name Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey upon reaching an age of moral discernment. But before this happens, the land of the two dreaded kings will be forsaken.{11} Should this prophecy be understood to refer exclusively to Jesus' virginal conception? If so, how does it relate to the promise that the Aram-Israel alliance would soon be broken and their lands forsaken (a promise fulfilled within twelve years time)?{12}

It's quite possible that Isaiah's prophecy had a *dual fulfillment*:{13} initially, in Isaiah's day; and ultimately, at the birth of Jesus. In this view the *almah*, or young maiden of Isaiah's prophecy, is a type of the virgin Mary, who later conceived Jesus through the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit.{14} So although a young woman in Isaiah's day bore a child named Immanuel, Jesus is later recognized by Matthew to also be Immanuel, "God with us" in a new and unprecedented way. Thus, Matthew didn't misread Isaiah. And if

this is so, we must continue to consider this prophecy in weighing the evidence for Jesus' virgin birth.

But even if we've correctly explained Matthew's use of Isaiah's prophecy, we must still consider the alleged contradictions in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. We will address this issue in the next section.

Don't Matthew and Luke Contradict Each Other?

{15} Some scholars see the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke as contradictory. If so, their historical reliability is in doubt, along with their accounts of Jesus' virgin birth. But are these narratives really contradictory? Let's take a closer look.

First, some think Matthew implies that Mary and Joseph resided permanently in Bethlehem before Jesus' birth, whereas Luke says they lived in Nazareth and only came to Bethlehem for the census.{16} But Matthew never actually tells us the couple's residence before Jesus' birth. He simply says that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, just like Luke.{17}

But if Mary and Joseph resided in Nazareth prior to Jesus' birth, then why, after their flight into Egypt, does Matthew seem to suggest that they intended to return to Judea rather than their home in Nazareth?{18} It's helpful to recall that Jesus was "the promised king of David's line."{19} Might not his parents, then, have wished to raise Him in His ancestral home?{20} This is actually quite probable. But regardless of their original intention, let's not forget that Matthew goes on to write that Joseph, being warned in a dream not to settle in Judea, did take his family back to Nazareth after all.{21}

Finally, some think Luke's narrative leaves no room for Matthew's account about the visit of the magi and sojourn in Egypt. These events could only have occurred after Jesus'

presentation in the Temple, forty days after His birth.{22} But Luke 2:39, which concludes this presentation, says that when Jesus' parents "had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to . . . Nazareth." This raises a question. Does Luke's statement prohibit an initial return to Bethlehem, thus casting doubt on Matthew's account of the magi and flight into Egypt?

It's important to notice the emphasis in Luke 2:39. It's not so much on when Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth, but rather that they did not return until after they had fulfilled the requirements of the Law.{23} Strictly speaking, Luke 2:39 does not disallow the events recorded by Matthew. Luke may not have known of the visit of the magi and flight into Egypt, or he may have chosen to omit this information. Either way, however, "the silence of one narrative regarding events recorded in another is quite a different thing from actual contradiction."{24} Thus, the virgin birth cannot be dismissed on the grounds that the infancy narratives are contradictory—they're not.

But aren't we forgetting the most obvious hypothesis of all? Is the story of Jesus' virgin birth simply a myth, comparable to other such stories from the ancient world? We'll examine this question in the next section.

Wasn't the Virgin Birth Story Derived from Pagan Myths?

Not long after Matthew and Luke finished writing their gospels, some scholars began contending that the story of Jesus' virgin birth was derived from pagan myths. Unfortunately, such ideas continue to haunt the Church even today. John Dominic Crossan cites parallels between the deification of Octavius by the Roman Senate and that of Jesus by the early church.{25} In each case, says Crossan, the decision to deify their leader was closely connected with the

invention of a divine birth story. The official biography of Octavius claimed the god Apollo in the form of a snake impregnated his mother.{26} Jesus' biographers claimed the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary conceived Him. In Crossan's view, neither story is historically true: "The divine origins of Jesus are…just as…mythological as those of Octavius."{27} The stories simply help explain why these men received divine honors.

Is Crossan's hypothesis plausible? One can certainly find scholars who embrace such ideas. But a careful comparison of the biblical accounts of Jesus' birth with the many miraculous birth stories in pagan literature reveals several important differences.

First, the accounts of Jesus' virgin birth show none "of the standard literary marks of the myth genre."{28} Matthew and Luke are written as history—not mythology. They mention places, people, and events that can be verified through normal methods of historical and archaeological inquiry. The beginning of Luke's gospel "reads very much like prefaces to other generally trusted historical and biographical works of antiquity."{29} Thus, there is a clear difference in genre between the gospels and pagan myths.

Another difference can be seen in the religious atmosphere of these stories. The pagan myths are polytheistic; the gospels, monotheistic. The miraculous birth stories in pagan literature usually focus on a god's lust for some mortal woman.{30} Since this lust is typically gratified through sexual intercourse, the resulting conception and birth are hardly virginal. We are thus far removed from the description of Jesus' virginal conception in the gospels. There we find no hint that God's love for Mary in any way parallels the lust of Apollo for the mother of Octavius.

These are just two of many differences between the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth and the miraculous birth stories in

pagan literature. But even these differences make the theory of pagan derivation unlikely. Remember, this theory requires us to believe that strict moral monotheists, who claimed to be writing history, borrowed some of the crudest elements from polytheistic myths to tell the story of Jesus' birth! Frankly, it's incredible. But could a theory of Jewish derivation still work? We'll conclude with this question.

Wasn't the Virgin Birth Story Derived from Jewish Thought?

Some scholars have speculated that the story of Jesus' virgin birth may have been derived from an imaginative Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament.{31} The story is not historical; it is a literary fiction of early Jewish Christians. It may have resulted from reflection on Isaiah 7:14, which says in part, "Behold, a virgin will be with child." What could be more natural than this verse becoming the source of inspiration for a legendary tale about the virgin birth of the Messiah?{32}

But would this really have been natural? There's actually no clear evidence that pre-Christian Judaism understood Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of the Messiah at all, much less his virginal conception.{33} Indeed, many contend that the Hebrew text of Isaiah says nothing whatever about a virginal conception and birth.{34} But if that is so, it would seem quite unlikely for early Jewish Christians to have read the verse in such a way!

Others believe the translation of Isaiah from Hebrew to Greek, known as the Septuagint, may have provided the initial impulse for such a reading. The Greek text of Isaiah 7:14 translates the Hebrew term *almah*, meaning "a young woman of marriageable age," with the Greek term *parthenos*, meaning "virgin". Could this translation have led some Jewish Christians to conclude that Isaiah was prophesying the virgin birth of the Messiah?

And if so, might they have invented the story of Jesus' virgin birth as the alleged "fulfillment" of Isaiah's prediction?

While one can claim that they might have done so, there's no evidence that they actually did. But if not, what could account for early Christianity's understanding of Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of the Messiah's virgin birth? Well, the historical reality of Jesus' virgin birth could have done so! After all, it's one thing to think that early Jewish Christians, without any precedent in Jewish thought, would invent the story of Jesus' virgin birth from an imaginative interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy. But it's another thing entirely to think that by beginning with a historically reliable account of Jesus' virgin birth, they eventually concluded that Isaiah had indeed prophesied such an event.{35}

Only the latter hypothesis is supported by evidence. Particularly important in this regard are the gospels of Matthew and Luke. These sources have been shown to be quite historically reliable. Their accounts of Jesus' birth, though apparently written independently of one another, are free of contradiction. Indeed, apart from an unproven bias against the supernatural, there is little reason to doubt the accuracy of their reports. Thus, there do appear to be adequate grounds for believing that Jesus really was born of a virgin!

Notes

1. Such differences do not, of course, imply contradictions. See the third section for more information.

2. See Matt. 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-35.

3. For instance, John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), writes, "I understand the virginal conception of Jesus to be a confessional statement about Jesus' status and not a biological statement about Mary's body. It is later faith in Jesus as an adult

retrojected mythologically onto Jesus as an infant. . .” (23). And again a little later, “Jesus . . . was born . . . to Joseph and Mary.” (26)

4. For example, in Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), 61, Dr. Craig questions Dr. Crossan about his anti-supernaturalistic presuppositions and whether they do not rule out the possibility of miracles a priori. Dr. Crossan admits that, insofar as miracles are concerned, “[I]t’s a theological presupposition of mine that God does not operate that way.”

5. Ibid. In fact, although it is difficult to pin him down this appears to be Dr. Crossan’s position. At one point in the debate, Dr. Craig asks Dr. Crossan, “What about the statement that God exists? Is that a statement of faith or fact?” Dr. Crossan responds, “It’s a statement of faith for all those who make it” (49). But suppose no human beings existed to make such statements of faith. In order to clarify Dr. Crossan’s response, Dr. Craig later asks, “Was there a being who was the Creator and Sustainer of the universe during that period of time when no human beings existed?” Dr. Crossan’s answer is quite revealing: “Well, I would probably prefer to say no because what you’re doing is trying to put yourself in the position of God and ask…’How is God apart from faith?’ I don’t know if you can do that. You can do it, I suppose, but I don’t know if it really has any point” (emphasis mine, 51). This answer appears to commit Dr. Crossan to an atheistic (and thus strictly naturalistic) worldview.

6. So said the famous Greek atomist philosopher, Democritus of Abdera.

7. See Matt. 1:20-25.

8. Matt. 1:22-23.

9. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography,* 17. He goes on

to say, “Clearly, somebody went seeking in the Old Testament for a text that could be interpreted as prophesying a virginal conception, even if such was never its original meaning”(18).

10. See Isaiah 7:1-12.

11. See Isaiah 7:13-16.

12. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978). Ryrie comments, “Within twelve years after this prophecy, Damascus was captured by Assyria (732) and Israel had fallen (722).” (1024)

13. Although some writers object to the notion of a “dual fulfillment” of prophecy, there appear to be other examples of this phenomenon in Scripture. For instance, in Joel 2:28-32 we find a promise of a future outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The prophecy is linked with various cosmic disturbances that will immediately precede the Day of the Lord. Later, in connection with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter declares, “This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel” (v. 16). He proceeds to quote almost the entire passage of Joel 2:28-32. However, it seems that only the first part of the prophecy, concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, was actually fulfilled in Peter’s day. What’s more, the book of Revelation seems to indicate that the cosmic disturbances mentioned by Joel await a yet future fulfillment (see Rev. 6:12). While scholars have offered various solutions to account for Peter’s use of Joel in Acts 2, it seems best to understand Joel’s prophecy as having some sort of “dual fulfillment”: an initial fulfillment on the day of Pentecost; an ultimate fulfillment before the second coming of Christ. The “dual fulfillment” view has the advantage of preserving the original integrity of the prophet’s message, while at the same time recognizing that some prophecies may be Divinely intended to include more than one fulfillment throughout salvation history. In light of this very real possibility, we should humbly acknowledge that Matthew’s use of Isaiah and

Peter's use of Joel confront us with complex interpretive issues. It is partly for this reason that very capable scholars reach different conclusions about the meaning of these passages. After careful consideration I was inclined toward the "dual fulfillment" position; however, I recognize that others will want to adopt some other perspective.

14. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, 1024.

15. In this section I have relied heavily on the analysis given in J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1971), 192-97.

16. I have chosen to examine some of the more difficult "contradictions." But it's important to point out that some of the alleged difficulties are quite easily dealt with. For instance, Luke records that shepherds visited the baby Jesus in response to an angelic announcement (Luke 2:8-20). Matthew, however, tells not of shepherds but of magi, who responded not to an angelic announcement, but to an astronomical observation (Matt. 2:1-12). But surely there's no contradiction here. After all, it's entirely possible that both the shepherds and the magi visited Jesus! Doubtless the accounts are selective and have not recorded every detail, but this does not mean they are contradictory.

17. Matt. 2:1; Luke 2:1-7.

18. Matt. 2:19-23.

19. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 193.

20. Ibid.

21. Matt. 2:22-23.

22. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 196, explains: "The visit of the magi could hardly have taken place during this forty-day interval; for it would have been impossible to take the child into the Temple when the wrath of the king was so

aroused…Evidently, therefore, the flight into Egypt took place immediately after the magi had come; no visit to the Temple could have intervened. If, therefore, the two narratives are to be harmonized, we must suppose that when the presentation in the Temple had been completed, Joseph and Mary returned with the child to Bethlehem, received there the visit of the magi, and then fled into Egypt."

23. Ibid., 196-97.

24. Ibid., 197.

25. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 1-5, 26-28.

26. Peter Jennings, interview with John Dominic Crossan, "The Search for Jesus," ABC Special, June 26, 2000. More general information about this ABC special program can be found at the following URL: http://more.abcnews.go.com/onair/abcnewsspecials/pjr000626_jesus_promo.html. A conservative, evangelical response to Peter Jennings' ABC special was done by John Ankerberg, "A Response to ABC's The Search for Jesus: Part 1: Questions About His Birth," The John Ankerberg Show (videotape copy), 2001. More general information can be found at John Ankerberg's Web site at: www.ankerberg.com.

27. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 26-27.

28. Norman L. Geisler, "Virgin Birth of Christ," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 763.

29. Craig Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 39-40.

30. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 338.

31. This might be referred to as midrash, or midrash pesher, which "is an imaginative interpretation or expansion based on

some OT text." B. Witherington III, "Birth of Jesus," in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 60.

32. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 287.

33. Witherington, "Birth of Jesus," 64. See also Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 297.

34. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 288. See also, John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 17.

35. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 286-87.

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Modern Myths

Myths and Modern Myths

Have you ever heard someone describe the Bible as *myth*? All those supernatural occurrences couldn't possibly have taken place, it is said. It's a good story, intended to help people lead a good life and perhaps get closer to God (if there is one), but not to be taken literally.

What is a *myth*? A myth is a story that serves to provide meaning and structure for life. It *might* have some history behind it, but that isn't important. It is the ideas that count. Myths are intended to translate the supposed abstract realities of the world in concrete, story form.

Myths were important to the ancient Greeks for defining who they were and what the world was like. In modern times,

however, we try to de-emphasize the significance of myths for a culture; we equate *myth* with *fiction*, and fiction isn't to be taken seriously.

In his book, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization*,{1} Philip Sampson debunks the notion that we've given up myths, even in the arena of science! According to Sampson there are a number of myths that have become significant for our culture even though they are false—or at least misleading—with respect to the facts. In this book, Sampson gives the true stories behind some of the myths our culture holds as true, such as the idea that Galileo's fight with the church provides a good example of the supposed warfare between science and religion.

Myths such as these serve to perpetuate certain notions their promoters want us to believe. They can develop over time with no conscious aim, or they can be knowingly advanced for the good of a certain cause. So, as with the Galileo story, if one wishes to advance the notion that there is a tension between Christianity and science, with science being clearly in the right, one might employ a story which pits the knowledgeable, good scientist just out to present facts against the hierarchy of a church which seeks to keep people in darkness so as to advance its own cause.

In ancient Greece, myths weren't told as though they were historically true. In our society, however, facts are important, so myths are told as if they are scientifically or historically accurate. Thus, with the Galileo story, there is enough history to seem to give it a factual basis—although significant facts are left out!

In this article we will look at three of these modern myths: Galileo and the church, the purported oppression of people by missionaries, and the witch trials of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Galileo and the Church

One myth that is deeply ingrained in our culture is that of the supposed "warfare between science and religion." Science deals with fact; religion deals with nice stories, at best. Whenever there is a conflict, obviously science wins the day. This myth goes deeper than just who has the best interpretation of the data. It's as if there is, *of necessity,* a conflict between the two, and religion has to be shown to be inferior to science.

One story that seems to serve this myth especially well is the story of Galileo. You've probably heard about Galileo's celebrated battle with the church over his views on the nature of the universe. As the story is typically told, Copernicus discovered that the earth revolves around the sun. Galileo, who agreed that the earth was not the center of the universe after all, then developed his work. Supposedly the church wanted to keep man at the center of God's creation and thus as the supreme part of the created order. To move earth out of the center was to somehow lower man. Thus, the church persecuted Galileo and eventually silenced him, showing its raw power over society.

George Bernard Shaw said, "Galileo was a martyr, and his persecutors incorrigible ignoramuses."{2} Says writer Patrick Moore, "The Roman Catholic Church attacked Galileo because the [heliocentric] theory was not reconcilable with certain passages of the Bible. As a consequence, poor Galileo spent most of his life in open conflict with the Church."{3} However, reason ultimately prevailed and science won the day over religious obscurantism.

The problem with this story is that it ranges from the true to the distorted to the blatantly untrue! Galileo's primary trouble was with *secular scientists*, not with the church. It was when he began reinterpreting Scripture to promote his cause and publicly ridiculed the pope that he got into big

trouble.

“The Galileo story was developed by French Enlightenment thinkers as part of their anticlerical program,” says Philip Sampson, “but by the late nineteenth century it had created a language of warfare between science and religion.” Science became the fount of reasoned knowledge, and religion was “reduced to ignorance and dogma.”{4} To accomplish this, however, history had to be distorted.

Let’s see what really happened with Galileo. It needs to be noted up front that in Galileo’s day the theories of scientists were not thought to give an actual account of the way the heavens worked; they simply provided models for ordering the data. They “were regarded as the play things of virtuosi,” as George Sim Johnston put it.{5} “To the Greek and medieval mind, science was a kind of formalism, a means of coordinating data, which had no bearing on the ultimate reality of things.”{6}

The fact is that the church didn’t *care* all that much about what Copernicus and Galileo thought about the order of the universe, scientifically speaking. Copernicus’ book on the subject circulated for seventy years without any trouble at all. It was the *scientists* of the day who opposed the theory, because it went against the received wisdom of Aristotle. Copernicus believed that his theory actually described the universe the way it was, and this was unacceptable to the academics. When Galileo published his ideas, it was the ridicule of fellow astronomers that he feared, not the church.

According to Aristotle, the earth was at the center of the universe, and all the rest of the universe was situated in concentric spheres around it. From the moon out, all was thought to be perfect and unchanging. The earth, however, was obviously changing and thus imperfect. All matter in the universe was thought to fall downward toward the center of the earth. The earth is therefore like the trash bin of the

universe; it was no compliment to man to emphasize his place on earth. In other words, to be at the center of the universe was *not* a good thing!

To now say that the earth was out with other planets where things had to be perfect was to seriously undercut Aristotle's ideas. So when Galileo published his notions it was the ridicule of fellow astronomers that he feared, not the church.

It's true that Galileo got into hot water with the church, but it was *not* because his theory moved man physically from the center of the universe; that was a *good* thing, given Aristotle's views. Man was already considered small in the universe. Most people already believed that the earth was created for God, not for man. "The doctrine that the earth exists for man's use," says Philip Sampson, "derives from Greek philosophy, not the Bible."{7} Thus, the Copernican theory "ennobled" the status of the earth by making it a planet. So the church in general didn't see the heliocentric theory as a demotion.

The fact is that Galileo was on good terms with the church for a long time, even while advancing his theory. He made sure that the idea he was attacking of the incorruptibility of the universe with its perfect heavens and imperfect earth was an Aristotelian belief and not a doctrine of the church. "Indeed," says Sampson, "the church largely accepted his conclusions, although the die-hard Aristotelians in the universities did not. . . . Far from being constantly harried by obscurantist priests, he was feted by cardinals, received by Pope Paul V and befriended by the future Pope Urban VIII."{8} As historian George Santillana wrote in 1958, "It has been known for a long time that a major part of the church intellectuals were on the side of Galileo, while the clearest opposition to him came from secular circles."{9} He wasn't afraid of the church; he feared the ridicule of his fellow scientists!

What *did* get Galileo in trouble with the church were two things. First, because the church had historically followed Aristotle (as did secularists) in interpreting scientific data, it wanted hard evidence to support Galileo's views, which he did not have. For Galileo to insist that his theory was true to the way things really were was to step outside proper scientific boundaries. He simply didn't have enough hard data to make such a claim. The problem, then, wasn't between religion and science, but between methods of interpreting the data. But this, in itself, wasn't enough to bring the church down on him.

The bigger problem was Galileo's manner of promoting his beliefs. To do so, he reinterpreted Scripture in contradiction to traditional understandings, which ran counter to the dictates of the Council of Trent. Perhaps even worse was his mockery of the pope. His treatise, *Dialogue Concerning the Chief World Systems,* took the form of a debate. The character that took Aristotle's view against the heliocentric theory was called Simplicio. His "role in the dialogue is to be a kind of Aunt Sally to be knocked down by Galileo. . . .Galileo puts into Simplicio's mouth a favorite argument used by his friend Pope Urban VIII and then mocks it. In other words, he concluded his treatise by effectively calling the very pope who had befriended him a simpleton for not agreeing with Galileo. This was not a wise move," says Sampson, "and the rest is history."{10} In fact, Galileo himself believed that the major cause of his trouble was the charge that he had made fun of the pope, *not* that he thought the earth moved.

So the condemnation of Galileo did *not* result from some basic conflict between science and religion. It "was the result of the complex interplay of untoward political circumstances, political ambitions, and wounded prides."{11} However, the myth continues to bolster the status of secular, naturalistic thought by making religion look bad.

So is there warfare between science and religion? Hardly. This

is really warfare between worldviews.

The Missionaries

A favorite charge against Christians for many years is the belief that missionaries effectively destroyed other cultures: running roughshod over the natives' beliefs and culture. Like the myth of the warfare between science and religion, the myth of the oppressive missionary provides a vehicle for exalting secularism while denigrating Christianity. According to this myth, the Christian missionary arrogantly strips natives of their own culture and forces western Christian culture on them, even to the point of oppression and exploitation.

Secular literature often leaves one with an impression of missionaries as stern, joyless oppressors who took advantage of innocent natives in order to advance their own ends. They forced their art and music on other cultures, made the people learn the missionaries' language, and manipulated them to wear western clothing. "Missionaries are accused of exploiting natives for commercial gain," says Sampson, "colluding with expansionist colonialism and even committing 'ethnocide.' They are implicated in the theft of land, the forced removal of children from their parents, the destruction of habitats, torture, murder, the decline of whole populations into destitution, alcoholism, and prostitution. Even when they provide disaster relief, they are guilty of 'buying' converts."{12} There are no "half tones," says Sampson. Missionaries "impose rigid, joyless, and patriarchal rules" on natives who are "portrayed as residents in an idyllic land, the victims of the full might of Western oppression incarnate in the person of 'the missionary.'"{13}

One of the problems in this assessment is the ready identification of missionary activity with that of western colonialism and trade. While missionaries often *did* import their culture along with the Gospel, they were not, for the most part, interested in taking over other peoples.

Colonialists, however, were. It was “the Enlightenment visions of ‘civilization’ and ‘progress’ that inspired colonial activity from the eighteenth century and rejected faith in God for faith in reason.” Colonialists had no qualms about attempting to “civilize” the “barbarians” and “savages.” *Civilized* was a term which “had ‘behind it the general spirit of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on secular and progressive human self-development.'” Traders, also, were guilty of exploiting other peoples for their own profit. Consider the power of commercial enterprises such as the search for gold by the conquistadors and the activity of such organizations as the British South Africa Company that brought exploitation.{14}

What this reveals is the role of *modernism* in the oppression and exploitation of native peoples. Romanticism established the image of the “noble savage,” the pure, pristine individual who, living close to nature, had not been corrupted by the influences of civilization. The fact is that some native peoples were given to human sacrifice and cannibalism, among other vices. However, the myth of the noble savage took root in western thinking. Then Darwin taught that there were weaker races that were doomed to extinction by the unstoppable forces of evolutionary change (new ideas about eugenics grew out of this thinking). These two images—the noble savage and the weaker race—combined to paint a picture of vulnerable nobility. According to the myth, Christian missionaries were guilty of taking advantage of this vulnerability to advance their own causes. The reality was that it was often *colonialists* who exploited these people, and salved their consciences by picturing the people as doomed to extinction anyway.

By contrast, what one finds in the literature about missionary activities includes occasions where they stood against the colonial and trading powers. The Dominican bishop Bartolomè opposed slavery in the sixteenth century. John Philip of the

London Missionary Society supported native rights in South Africa in the early nineteenth century. Lancelot Threlkeld demanded "equal protection under the law for the Awabakal people of Australia."{15} John Eliot stood up for the Indians in Massachusetts' courts against unjust settler claims. Even one critic of missionary activity conceded that evangelical missions in Latin America "tended to treat native people with more respect than did national governments and fellow citizens."{16} Missionaries taught people to read their own languages, good hygiene to indigenous groups, farming skills, and even brought medical help. In some regards, the missionaries *did* try to change other cultures, and sometimes illegitimately. But sometimes that isn't wrong; there should be no apologies for trying to stop such practices as human sacrifice and cannibalism. Compare the efforts of contemporary secularists to end female genital mutilation practiced by some African tribes.

Scholars have known for many years that the identification of missions with oppression is unfair, yet the myth continues to be told. It simply isn't true that missionaries were responsible for the destruction of native cultures. But the myth persists, for "it provides the modern mind with an alibi for its own complicity in oppression."{17}

The Witch Trials

Some critics like to portray the Christian Church as the great persecutor of the weak and helpless. A popular vehicle for this myth is the story of the witch trials in Europe and America in the 16th and 17th centuries. Philip Sampson says that this story "relates that many millions of women throughout Europe, mainly the elderly, poor and isolated, were tortured by the church into confessing nonexistent crimes before being burnt to death."{18} The story of the witch trials provides a handy illustration for the myth that that the church actively persecutes those who aren't in agreement.

“The history of Christianity is the history of persecution,” said one writer,{19} and this is seen in no bolder outline than in the story of the witch-hunts. Furthermore, this story provides a good example of the supposed women-hating attitude of the church since the vast majority of witches tried were women.

There is no denying that Christians were involved in the trial and execution of witches. But to paint this issue as simply a matter of the powerful church against the weakest members of society is to distort what really happened.

Before considering a couple of facts about the trials, the bias of the critics who write about them should be noted. For most, there simply is no such thing as a supernatural witch, meaning one who can actually draw on satanic power to manipulate nature. If this is true, it *must* be the case that there is some natural explanation for the strange behavior of those charged with witchcraft, and the church was completely unjustified in prosecuting them. But this is a naturalistic bias; it ignores the fact that “most people of the world throughout most of its history have taken supernatural witchcraft to be real.”{20} Modern writers like to think that it was the dawning of the Age of Reason that brought about the end of the witch trials, but today this is seen as mere hubris, “the prejudice of ‘indignant rationalists’ [who were] more concerned to castigate the witch-baiters for their credulity and cruelty than to understand what the phenomenon was all about.”{21} It was the centralization of legal power that brought the trials to an end, not a matter of “Enlightenment overcoming superstition.”{22}

This leads us to ask who and why these charges of witchcraft were brought in the first place. What we find is that this “was not principally a church matter, nor was the Inquisition the prime mover in the prosecution of witches,” as is often thought. It was ordinary lay people who typically brought charges of witchcraft, and mostly women at that!{23} The

primary reasons were not bizarre supernatural behavior or heretical beliefs, but the tensions brought about by a loss of crops or the failure of bread to rise. “People commonly appealed to magic and witchcraft to explain tragedies and misfortunes, or more generally to gain power over neighbors.”{24} Even kings and queens saw witchcraft as a very real threat to their thrones and well-being. The Inquisition actually supplied a tempering influence. Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper said, “In general, the established church was opposed to the persecution” of witches.{25} Likewise, the Protestant churches were not the real aggressors in the witch trials. John Calvin believed that witchcraft was a delusion, the cure for which was the Gospel, not execution.{26}

Estimates of executions in the millions are grossly exaggerated. Recent studies estimate about 150300 per year, making a total of between 40,000 and 100,000 who were executed over a period of 300 years. While “this is an appalling enough catalog of human suffering,” as Sampson says,{27} it pales in comparison to the slaughter of innocent people in the 20th century, resulting from the excesses of modernistic thinking. “Genocide is an invention of the modern world,” says one writer.{28} Compare the numbers slaughtered under Nazism or Stalinism to that of the witch trials. If the witch trials demonstrate the danger of religion to society, the slaughters under Hitler and Stalin demonstrate the much greater danger of irreligion.

Modern writers like to think that it was the dawning of the Age of Reason that brought about the end of the witch trials, but today this is seen as mere hubris. It was the centralization of legal power that brought the trials to an end, not a matter of “Enlightenment overcoming superstition.”{29}

Conclusion

From the days of the early church we have been called upon to

defend not only our beliefs but also the *activities* of individual Christians and the church as a whole. In his book, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization,* Philip Sampson has given us a tool to better enable us to do that today. I encourage you to read it.

Notes

1. Philip J. Sampson, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

2. George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946), 17, quoted in Sampson, 28.

3. Patrick Moore, *A Beginner's Guide to Astronomy* (London: PRC Publishing, 1997), 12, quoted in Sampson, 28.

4. Sampson, 45.

5. George Sim Johnston, "The Galileo Affair," downloaded from http://www.catholic.net/rcc/Periodicals/Issues/GalileoAffair.html May 7, 2001.

6. Ibid.

7. Sampson, 34.

8. Sampson, 36-37.

9. George de Santillana, *The Crime of Galileo* (London: Heinemann, 1958), xii, quoted in Sampson, 37.

10. Sampson, 38.

11. William R. Shea, "Galileo and the Church" in *God and Nature*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald Numbers (Berkley: University of California Press, 1986), 312, quoted in Sampson, 39.

12. Sampson, 93.

13. Sampson, 94.

14. Sampson, 94.

15. Sampson, 97-98.

16. D. Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1990), 12, quoted in Sampson, 98.

17. Sampson, 99.

18. Sampson, 130.

19. Laurie, Cabot, *Power of the Witch* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1992), 62, quoted in Sampson, 130.

20. Sampson, 133.

21. Sampson, 144.

22. Sampson, 133.

23. Sampson, 134-135.

24. Sampson, 134.

25. Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1969), 37, quoted in Sampson, 139.

26. Sampson, 141.

27. Sampson 137.

28. Trevor-Roper, 22, quoted in Sampson, 137.

29. Sampson, 133.

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“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
Founder, Probe Ministries

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