

It's helpful for a pastor – and for Christians in general – to know a bit about the ancient religions of the near east. Ancient Egypt, Canaan, Babylon. And there are a number of reasons why this is useful.

One of the most obvious is that a good portion of the Old Testament is written specifically to contrast the God of Israel against the false gods of the region. In essence, God says to his people, “You understand me like this false god, because that's all you've ever known. But I'm really nothing like this false god, and here's why.”

The account of the Creation and Fall of man is a perfect example. You see, stories about the creation of the earth were common in the ancient world. Interestingly, they were all fairly similar. And they all looked a little something like this:

In the beginning, there was a whole bunch of uncreated, chaotic, stuff. They usually called it water, because in their minds, water was the most chaotic, disorganized substance in the world. And this uncreated, chaotic, stuff would spontaneously gain consciousness and become a god.

And this first god would begin taking pieces of himself and forming them into some major aspect of creation. The sun or the moon or the wind. And that element of creation would gain consciousness and become another god.

And those major gods would take more uncreated, chaotic, stuff and form them into minor aspects of creation. A tree or an animal or an insect. And those would become conscious and become more gods.

And slowly but surely, you'd end up with a complete creation. Made of all these individual components, who were all individual gods. Each one formed out of the chaos that preceded them into something less chaotic.

And somewhere in the midst of all this creation, man would appear. And the creation of man was usually just a side note in all this. “And, oh yeah, one of these gods needed slaves. So he created men to be his slaves. And then he forgot about them.”

That's how it often goes. Without exception, the story of creation in the ancient world was about the creation of the gods. They were the focal point. They were all that really mattered.

But Genesis 1 and 2 are nothing like that. Despite the fact that the Israelites lived in Canaan and Egypt and Babylon for thousands of years. The story of creation in the Bible looks nothing like the creation stories of Canaan or Egypt or Babylon.

For one thing, it starts with, “In the beginning, God...” God was there in the beginning. Before creation. He wasn't ever part of the uncreated, chaotic, stuff. He was separate from it. Hovering over it, the Bible says.

And yes, He does then set to work creating a new orderly creation from this chaotic stuff. But they don't become gods. They are just part of creation. Once again, God is over creation. Separate from creation. He does not lose anything by creating the world. He does not share credit for creating the world with anyone else.

Until finally, He creates man. And it is in the creation of man that God finally creates something in His own image. To other ancient religions, all of creation is in a god's image. Because every part of creation is a god.

But not in the Bible. Only humanity has the image of god. Because we are the whole point of creation. Man is not an afterthought in Genesis. He is not a side note in the story. He is not a forgotten slave in God's workforce.

He is the goal of all God's work. When God sees Adam and Eve standing upon the earth, he says, “That's it. I'm done. It's perfect. There's nothing else that I need to make. This creature standing here in front of me was the goal all along. Now I can stop. Now I can rest.”

It should give us pause when we consider the stories of creation in our world today. The theory of evolution doesn't just bother me because it disagrees with a couple chapters of the Bible. It bothers me because it changes our entire view of our existence.

And another reason why it's helpful to study ancient religions is that you begin to see just how much the modern, supposedly scientific worldview is just a regurgitation of ancient creation stories. Because the theory of evolution is really quite similar to the mythology of ancient Egypt or Canaan or Babylon.

There was a big “BANG!” and suddenly there was a whole bunch of uncreated, chaotic, stuff. And it spontaneously formed into more orderly stuff. And that formed into even more orderly stuff. And finally, we had a creation. And, oh yeah... along the way, man appeared. But he doesn't really matter.

Do you see the similarity? We've come full circle. We've gone from worshipping Isis and Ashur and Baal to worshipping matter and physics and evolution. But the results are the same. A world in which there is no god who loves you, and you are a meaningless afterthought in creation.

And that's sad. Because we have so much more to live for than to be the forgotten slaves of gods or the pointless by-products of evolution. We have a God who created everything for us. Who considered our needs at every step of creation. Who looked at us and said, “Because they exist, my creation is now very, very good.”

And yet we fell for a lie. Not just the lie of evolution. Not just the lie of idolatry. We fell for the lie that God held something back from us.

That's what the devil told to Adam and Eve. This tree will make you like God, knowing good and evil. This tree will give you something that God didn't. This tree will make you better than God made you to be.

That's the supreme irony of mankind's fall into sin. We ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But we already knew good. We already knew every goodness that God could give us. We could only learn evil from that tree. And in doing so, it didn't make us more like God. It didn't make us better. It made us less – far less – than what God created us to be.

Every step of creation is the story of God holding nothing back from us. Of pouring every good thing into our lives. Because that's who God is. That's His personality. That's His nature. He is the giver of every good thing. He considers it His supreme glory to give us good things.

Which is why He made the promise that He did on the day that we fell into sin. The very same day that we disobeyed Him. That we felt shame in His presence. That we hid from Him, crushed with guilt. He made a promise to us.

A promise that a savior would come. A descendant of Adam and Eve. Who would crush the serpent's head. Even if it meant being struck by the serpent on His heel. Even if it meant being bitten by the sting of death.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus confronts the scribes who say he is possessed by Beelzebub. Possessed by the prince of demons. And Jesus points out just how comical that would be. Jesus is destroying the works of Satan under his feet. Jesus is binding the ruler of this world and plundering his house by taking humanity back from his grasp. You really think Satan would cast out himself like that? No, only the one prophesied to destroy the devil does that kind of work.

In Christ, the God who throughout the days of creation had held nothing back from us once again held nothing back from us. Even if it meant suffering pain and abuse. Even if it meant being nailed to a cross. Even if it meant sacrificing His very life. Jesus would do anything and everything to crush the serpent's head and free humanity from his lies.

The Bible is a history of the world. But it is not focused on how we are ignored, forgotten, or meaningless. It is the story of how we are sought after, saved, and redeemed by Him who loved us from before time began.

Because that is the glory of God. To give us every good thing. No matter the cost. To hold nothing back, just so that we can know His goodness in our lives once again.

So that we can one day look around at a new heavens and a new earth and a new Tree of Life and say, “Now we can rest. For this is as good as God's creation will ever be. He didn't do this for some other god. He didn't do this by random accident. He did this for me. Because, by the blood of the Lamb, I am in His image. And I will never feel shame again.” Amen.