

## The Bible in Context Ep 2: The Ancient Near East and Genesis 1

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Hey, Mercy Hill. This is Caleb Lewis with Mercy Hill's Deeper Dive podcast. And today I'm here with Pastor Nate, and we have no idea who you are, so introduce yourself to us. Well, yeah, I'm excited to be here, Caleb, in your garage while it's raining outside. And I'm excited about the potential with this podcast and looking forward to taking a deeper dive into Genesis. So what are we looking at today? Well

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Last time we talked about how the Bible was put together, a little bit about the process of inspiration and how that should influence the way in which we read our Bibles. And part of what we discovered is that we should expect the cultural elements of ancient Israel and the ancient Near East in the Bible since it is a book that is communicating to people in that time and place. This time we're going to try and

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take a look at some of those cultural elements that are going to show up in the beginning of Genesis and try to get a feel for some of the weight and the symbolism that is attached to the things that we do see in Genesis 1 from the perspective of an ancient Near Eastern person. We're going to try and pin down what uncreation looks like, what pre-creation looks like, what do waters mean to an ancient person.

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We're gonna take a look at symbols of darkness and uncreated land and wilderness, and try to give a, I guess I won't say a definition because these are symbols. We gotta realize that these can be used creatively. But we wanna understand what kind of connotations, what kind of weight do they carry when they appear in the narrative of Genesis.

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So what you're saying is that last week was pretty much an introduction on how to read the Bible and how to understand the scriptures in general. And then today we're going to start really diving into some of the presuppositions or the mindset of the ancient people, how they would have been understanding the world in general, which will help us better understand how to read Genesis. Is that right?

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Right, yeah, so as modern peoples we think of the beginning of the world as the creation of the atom, as the creation of space, but the ancient person didn't think that way. They had no concept of pure nothingness, of dust in a vacuum, of atoms and particles and neutrons, and just

all those things that I'm saying very poorly because I'm not a scientist. So they're not concerned with like the material universe.

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Right, right. Like we are at least. Yeah, they do pay attention to the materials in the universe, but they are more concerned of why are they there and who put them there for what purpose. So not so much like we are so consumed with like how did it all come together, but that's really not even on their radar is what you're saying. Yeah, the ancient person is focused more on the why we are here. They're focused on what is the function of the things in creation and the societies that come out of creation, not the material stuff.

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that those things are made out of. Now, the ancient person, they actually thought of the pre-creation state as endless waters. When they thought of what is on creation, what is nothing. When we think of nothing, we're thinking again of the empty vacuum of space. They're thinking of endless dark waters. And I have a couple of texts pulled up I could read as an example just to show. Yeah, let's do it. Dive deep. Into the deep.

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This first one is from a coffin text. What is a coffin text? Let's see, 714. And it says... Wait a second. What's a coffin text? Oh, good point. So, coffin texts are just texts and spells that were inscribed on coffins by the ancient Egyptians. Coffin text 714 says, I am the one who began therein in the waters. See, the flood is subtracted from me. See, I am the remainder. And this is the...

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first Egyptian deity talking about his, they have the idea of their deity self-generating, just coming out of nothing, which for them again, you can see their first deity is coming out of waters. Another one here is, so there's Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation story that talks about that. Everybody knows that one. We're going to go on to Marduk. Everybody, I mean, who doesn't know that? Another text, Marduk, the creator of the world.

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Marduk is a Babylonian deity and... So this is what they say about how their god Marduk created the world. No holy house, no house for the gods had been built in a pure place. No reed had come forth, no tree had been created, no brick had been laid, no brick mold had been created, no house had been built, no city had been created. Uruk had not been built, Ikur had not been created, those are a couple of cities. The depths had not been built,

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had not been created, no holy house, no house for the gods, no dwelling for them had been created. All the world was sea. The spring in the midst of the sea was only a channel, then Irudu was built." So here this text is focused on there's nothing functional working, there's no place for

the gods to dwell. Everything was just endless ocean, endless sea. So there's this pattern in the ancient mind of like...

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Pre-creation is not just an empty void, but a bottomless, endless sea that's just chaotic. Is that kind of what you're explaining here? Yeah, it's an endless ocean. And darkness is another element that carries those same foreboding connotations. And these are symbols throughout the ancient Near East and in the Bible that are packed with meaning. So what kind of symbols are you talking about? What do you...

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what do they represent? So, throughout the ancient eras there are other myths and creation stories where the most high or, you know, the quote-unquote good god of the story, the hero, has to face off against a sea deity, against some god that is associated with the sea, and in some cases, its name is the sea. So in some of these stories, in some of these mythologies, the sea and

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the darkness associated with it is seen as an enemy.

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So you're saying that the vast ocean or this chaotic sea in the Bible and in other ancient documents represents something that's evil. It's not neutral, but there's something... Sort of. So the Bible uses it a little differently, and we'll talk about that as we get into Genesis. But often there are these enemy deities in the ancient Near East. It's...

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something dark malevolent or something against the the creator god uh... now the one who is creating that's that's something good they're taking this uh... darkening and making it something functional is something good something that uh... allows humans to live if the c is against that d they are there are uh... and in evil agent and creation agent there are someone who is innocence and tie good creation

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The Leviathan, would that be an example of a sea creature that is a monster? Yeah, exactly. And we'll look at Leviathan 2 as we get into Genesis 1. So is there a correlation between the chaos of the sea and the wilderness on land? Are they similar in some way? Yeah, so in some of these Ancient Near Eastern stories,

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creator and that's where the Bible is a little different. Actually the sea is it's just there and it's inert. It's not a good thing but it's not an enemy. It's it's not something that is going to hinder Yahweh's sovereignty or creative process. Now in Genesis 1 we'll see that there is the land already there, unformed, and it is in the ESV formless and void. So there is a link between the

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and the sea. The unformed land, which we're gonna say is the wilderness, and the sea and the darkness all carry these very similar connotations of being places that are uncreated and don't support life and are bad. They're homes to spirits or people or things that are against Yahweh. Now we will see in some places in scripture, the sea is

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personified and portrayed as an actual enemy to Yahweh. It's compared to actual enemies. We're gonna see in Genesis 1, it's not a living active enemy of Yahweh, but for now, the takeaway is the darkness and the sea are very bad places in the Ancient Near Eastern's mindset. Ancient Near Easterner's mindset.

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In the biblical mindset, these are bad places, but they're not enemies of Yahweh. In other ancient Near Eastern texts, these are seen as enemies, but that is where the Bible and some of these other stories are different. So in the Bible, they're not necessarily evil places, but they're places of dysfunction or chaos. Yeah, we're going to see that these places...

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things that are against Yahweh are at home. They can go there and it's habitable for them and it's also places where humans can't live. His images, his agents that he has commissioned to expand his good creation, we can't live in those places. We can't thrive in darkness and we drown in the sea. So something else that is significant about the image of the sea, we should probably talk a little bit about the shape of the world. That's a significant

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how the ancient Near Easterner assumed something that they had in their mind when they thought of creation. We'll talk about this, I think, a couple times now on Sunday mornings. The ancient Near Easterner, and try to bear with me, I know this is audio, they saw the world as essentially a flat earth sitting inside of a bubble in that endless sea. So, if you go down into the sea, down below it, you're in the underworld.

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so you're you're you're in a bubble you're floating up on a flat piece of land that's so it's like the and there's water below you and there's water outside the ball right yes all around yet yet and god sets basically on top of the uh... so you don't want to go down below that's the endless of this it's further from god it's it's under on the tuesday underworld which you know anybody who knows anything about

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you know about the underworld, it's not a good place. That's where God's enemies reside. Is there anything that prevents us from sinking? Yeah. So you'll read in Job, for instance, about the pillars of the earth in Jonah 2. He goes down and he sees the bars of the earth. They imagine

these giant pillars that hold us up out of the waters. So we're basically kind of a floating, in their minds, we're a floating piece of land

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chaotic water all around us and God's sitting on top of the bubble above us. Kind of a crazy picture. Yeah, and this may seem like it's way out there, but this is actually going to become very integral to the biblical story, to understanding the world that Yahweh has created and that His people live in. A lot of imagery is going to be pulled from the shape of the world.

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Okay, so let me try to summarize where we've been already. There's been a lot already to this point. So we've talked about how the pre-creation world in their minds back then was one that was just an endless sea and that the earth actually floated on this sea and there's pillars kind of holding it up.

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And then there's a bubble all around us with waters outside the bubble and God enthroned on top of the bubble. And so we've talked about also just that in their minds, they weren't so much focused on the how all this came to be, but more like, why are we here? And so how did, give me some examples of like how that plays out.

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in the biblical narrative. Yeah, so let's move on and talk about how the ancient person thought about their creation, how they thought about the why are we here, not the how did we get here and what are we made of. Real quick though, we have covered a lot of ground and so I do just want to point out that we're going to touch on some of the highlights of this again. We've been jumping all over the place. This stuff is going to come back up.

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you know, what you just summarized is what we need to hold on to for now. And remember, as we begin to approach the biblical narrative, begin to approach Genesis 1. So, um, back to the, why are we here? Now there's a fancy word for this that we'll use, I guess, because it's, it's helpful, um, is a scholar named John Walton that has, I guess, coined this phrase and the phrase is functional ontology.

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ontology that that's like a twenty five dollar word man okay what's that mean ontology is the study of our being uh... that that is asking the question of why are we here on who are we now by adding that word functional we're saying that our being the reason for our being is related to our function to what not uh... what we are materially what we have been created by god to do

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So what you're saying is in the ancient mind, they viewed themselves not so much, they're not thinking about their anatomy or that they're just like a organized group of cells and blood vessels

and bones and skin. They didn't look at themselves like that. They more looked at themselves as, okay, this is why I'm here. This is the purpose. I am what God has purposed me for.

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That's what they're focused on, right? Yeah, exactly. And this extends to not just humans or societies, even though we've been talking about this in terms of humans up until now, but it extends out into broader creation. So whenever someone makes anything, they start with raw materials and you shape those raw materials into something to give it a purpose. And that is exactly how the Bible views creation.

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he comes to the seas and we'll see there is gadgets the dark c and this unformed massive land dot takes this thing is a bad state and puts it into a state of this is good this is very good so you actually used in a sermon the example of uh... of a house and so just to reiterate that uh... turtled help help everyone wrap their minds around this because this is definitely uh...

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but we actually think this way all the time. We just don't really, we haven't put our finger on it all that much probably. So again, say you wanna build a house and you're gonna build a mud brick house. You go out to the wilderness, this is uncreated space. So you gather up your mud. Essentially, they would look at this and say, as far as creation is concerned, that this mud, this wilderness is nothing. It is pre-creation. So you take it.

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and you form it into your bricks, you form it into your house, now that it has been shaped for a purpose and you have deemed it to have a purpose, it is now something. It has now been brought from the pre-creation state to become something functional within the created world. So in their minds, something is not truly created until it has some kind of function, it's being used in its intended way. Right. It is taken from the raw.

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massive material of uncreated material, it is separated from that, and then it is named or given some kind of purpose or destiny. And then at that point, it is something that has been taken from uncreation to creation. Okay, so this is a much different worldview than we have. How did we come to the point where we, like, how do we know that the ancient world thought

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than we do now. Yeah, so there are actually a lot of text in the ancient Near East that display that they think about the world in this way. And I'll read you one just for example. So this is the beginning of Enuma Elish, which is the Babylonian creation story. So just a little bit of background to this. It's going to mention a deity named Apsu. And then Tiamat, these were two deities that represented the waters, Apsu.

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was a deity of fresh water and Tiamat was the deity of salt water. So in the beginning all you have are these two these two waters mingling together and that'll help make sense of some of our passage. When on high no name had been given to heaven, nor below was the netherworld called by name. Primeval Apsu was their progenitor and Mother Tiamat was she who bore them all. They were mingling their waters together when no gods had been.

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brought forth, nor called by names, none destinies ordained, then were the gods formed within these two." So, in this you can see these two water deities, there's two waters that are mingling together, and the other deities are going to be separated out from them, from the waters, and then given destinies names. Now, this is just one example. Yeah, and at the beginning of it too, it talked about how nothing had been, things hadn't

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yet so that that seems to be something that significant as that creates things naming the things that he's ordering uh... it seems to be significant to you yet the the name and creation stories especially uh... is tied to the destiny of the thing that is made we'll talk about this more when we get there but just one is actually a really good example of this way of thinking yeah i totally agree and what i found is

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when you start to understand the mindset of the ancient Near East verses one and two especially in Genesis chapter one start to make a whole lot more sense and so We're gonna end this podcast with just a few resources if you are interested in taking an even deeper dive than what we've done Today, I would encourage you to check these resources out

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Yes, so John Walton is a really good scholar to read on this topic. A more easy to understand book, he has, what's it called, the Lost World series? Yeah, the Lost World series. The Lost World of Genesis 1 is where I would go first. Yeah, and if you want to take an even deeper dive, there is another book he made for a more academic audience called Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology. Those are a couple good resources that will get you a deep understanding of what we're talking about.

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just talk a little more about how and why we want to read the Bible in light of the Ancient Near East and Israel's neighbors. Good deal, Caleb. Thank you so much. So next week we're going to start really actually diving into the text itself. We're going to get out of the world of the Ancient Near East and really start picking apart the words of the text itself. So thank you for sticking with us in this.

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Podcast and looking forward to next time

