Historical Adam and the Ancient Near East

Part 1 of 2: Comparing the Bible to Other Creation Accounts
with Darrell L. Bock and Richard Averbeck
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Welcome to the Table, where we discuss issues of God and culture. And today, our topic is the historical Adam. And we're going to be discussing this with Dr. Richard Averbeck, who is professor of Old Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and also is director of the doctoral program there. And we're going to look at the background of the story of creation, as well as well as the Book of Genesis together.

Dr. Averbeck has expertise in Ancient Near Eastern literature. And so we figured since most of your neighbors don't have that kind of expertise that we'd bring him in and let him discuss this topic with us. As people are aware of, the nature of historical Adam is much discussed and debated today. And understanding where the stories of creation fit in the Ancient Near East is part of the conversation that we need to have when we look at the opening chapters in the Book of Genesis.

So I can't think of a better person to have with us than Dr. Richard Averbeck. So welcome, Dick, and we're glad you could be with us today, and we really do appreciate you taking the time to discuss this with us.

Thank you, Darrell. I'm looking forward to it.

Well, let me just dive right in. Let's talk a little bit about creation stories in the Ancient Near East. Why don't you mention to us some of the key accounts that we have and how they approach this issue. And then we'll turn our attention to how the story of Genesis is like or unlike those accounts.

Probably the most well known one is from Babylonia. It's called Enuma Elish, which means "when on high." It's a starting with a watery abyss and talks us through the creation, first of the various gods of that society, but also then into the battle that leads to the creation of the world and humanity and so on. It's got all sorts of different motifs in it. Some of them are similar to the Bible, like starting with a deep, dark, watery abyss, and others are very different. For example, in Genesis 1, there's no battle going on there.

So there are quite a number of stories from Babylonia from early on, long before the 7th century BC, way back into the third millennium BC. We have sources for creation and the creation not only of the gods, but also of humanity and of the world. There's a Sumerian story as well that has both creation of man and the flood in the same story, much like we have in Genesis 1 through 11.
And then also from Egypt we have quite a number of different stories from different temple contexts, therefore, from different perspective of different gods in terms of how creation was done. There we have various kinds of concepts that are very different from the Bible on the one hand. But then there are certain similarities, like one of them we do have a God speaking and the creation happens. But then you have all sorts of other kinds. Sometimes people are made out of the tears of the god or various things along that line. So there's lots of different kinds of stories from the Ancient Near East.

And then related stories, like from Ugaret in Northern Lebanon, which we have texts from there. And it talks about Baal and how he's related to nature. And that affects how they would understand in the Ancient Near Eastern world how a world is put together and how it works. And that then finds some of the motifs associated with that coming on into background concepts that the ancient Israelites would have been familiar with because the ancient Israelites were Ancient Near Easterners too.

*Darrell Bock:* Okay. So we've got these stories. Do the stories take on the character like we see in Genesis of a single family at the start? Are they about creation of humanity in general? How is that part of the story told?

*Richard Averbeck:* Yeah. It's more or less about how mankind was created so that man could replace lower gods who were responsible for working and, therefore, feeding the gods. And so man was created so that the lower gods don't have to work, because they were complaining about the hard work.

*Darrell Bock:* Oh wow. So it's the first union movement.

*Richard Averbeck:* Yeah. So we have those kinds of stories. We have the story of Adapa, of a particular primeval person. We have different kinds of things. We have Babylonian Noah-type stories with concepts of the flood and survival from the flood. And these early chapters of Genesis have a lot of different kinds of connections to things that were understood in the Ancient Near East, and in the Bible, what God is doing is he's connecting to them in their world, but also taking them places they’ve never gone before in their understanding of who God is and how the world came into being.
Darrell Bock: So the way in which Genesis tells the story would not be unfamiliar to someone if they were familiar with some of these other accounts that exist in Ancient Near East, at least in terms of some of the motifs.

Richard Averbeck: Yeah, there would be a lot of things that'd be very simple. One of the things that would be very similar, like the beginning with the watery deep and so on, like that. But there are also in the Ancient Near Eastern context, you have to have not only the creation of the world and so on, but before that, the creation of the gods. So you have theogony, creation of the gods. And that is something that the Bible just stamps out completely from any kind of concept. In the beginning, God created.

Darrell Bock: So we have the uncreated god as opposed to creation of gods in the Ancient Near East. Is that what you're saying?

Richard Averbeck: Yes.

Darrell Bock: Now, sometimes it's said that these accounts outside the New Testament – or outside, sorry, the Old Testament – are dealing with explaining the origin of things. They are a certain kind of story that etiology, which explains why certain things happen – is that also what's going on?

Richard Averbeck: In those stories, yes. There's quite a lot of explaining how did this come into being, how did that come into being. How was it arranged in such a way that the world actually works? Things along that line are very common in these stories. And in the Bible, a big part of what God's concern is is to explain to us our world. Who are we and where'd we come from? How do we fit into what's all around us, and what place are we supposed to take in it as far as God is concerned?

Darrell Bock: So these stories frame the creation of humanity, explain where humanity fits in relationship to the gods, in relationship to the responsibilities that they have on earth. Is that what's going on in those stories?
Richard Averbeck: Yes. And they do that in such a way that they make it very clear that man has this particular position. One of the things that really stands out about the creation story in Genesis, in that regard, is that we're created in the image and likeness of God, not just kings in our culture and not just the elite or anything, but all of humanity is created as God's image and likeness and is meant to reflect who he is in the world and to handle the world in a way that's pleasing to him. We're put in charge.

Darrell Bock: So there is an exalted role for all people in the way that creation works in the Old Testament.

Richard Averbeck: Yes. And that really does stand out. We do have quite a number of accounts that talk about kings being the image of God, and so on. But the thing that stands out in the Bible is that people, just common people, are put here to be God's statues, so to speak, in the world, those who stand here for him.

Darrell Bock: Now, this is a poor question, but I'm going to ask it anyway because it's kind of a catchall. In terms of the background, is there anything that we haven't mentioned or touched on yet that's relevant to Genesis that you think we should be aware of before we turn our attention to the Book of Genesis.

Richard Averbeck: Maybe I should mention that in a lot of the Ancient Near Eastern accounts – we mentioned this briefly – you do creation by doing battle between the gods in various ways. It's got a name for it, the chaos battle, okay, battle of chaos. So you can bring order out of this by doing battle with this god of chaos, and so on.

And there are reflections in the Bible of God being the one who can defeat all this chaos and so on, sometimes in relation to creation. But in Genesis, what we have is an account that makes it very clear that God doesn't have to do any battle here at all. God speaks and it happens.

And things like the sun and the moon and the stars that are gods in the Ancient Near Eastern world, they're just called the Big Light and the Little Light. They're even demoted. They don't even have the name of Shamash or something like that, the name of the sun god. So it's very clearly telling us these things that are so commonly thought of as gods are not, and there is no god that can stand against our God.
Darrell Bock: Now, you talk about this battle motif. In the Old Testament, is that reflected in the figure known as Leviathan? Is that what you're alluding to in terms of potential connection or is that something else?

Richard Averbeck: That is one of the names, also Rahab. Different names are used for this. So like in Isaiah 27:1, the little apocalypse of Isaiah, it looks forward to the great final defeat of this great Leviathan, this evil monster. Whereas in Psalm 74 and other places it refers to this Leviathan that's been defeated in the olden days. It's a way of talking about how God is the one who defeats evil and stands against those forces in the world.

Darrell Bock: You know, one of the problems that you run into in the early chapters of Genesis is understanding how evil is even present when we come to Genesis 3 and where it's come from. And there really is, in the unwinding of the Genesis story, no backdrop for where this has come from. It just comes in, if you will. In your own mind, do you connect the Leviathan imagery with the backdrop to explaining why we have evil in Genesis 3? How should we connect those things biblically before we turn to Genesis?

Richard Averbeck: This is something that I've been working on for a long time. And what I think is happening in Genesis, in creation we don't have a battle between God and the great monster, the chaos monster. What happens is in the Old Testament and in Genesis 1 through 4, the battle doesn't begin at creation. It begins with the fall. That is the battle of the ages that's encountered there.

And the serpent attacks the image of God, us, and in so doing he attacks God. And so the battle that we're in the middle of is this force of chaos in the world. Sin, disruption, the kind of thing of corruption that we are and that is a big part of who we are and that we struggle with in the world. So I think what happens in the early chapters of Genesis is that the Bible does something very different from what the Ancient Near Eastern world does. It takes this battle and puts it right in our laps, and it says the battle came through the temptation and the fall, and now the battle is the great battle of the ages.
And it's very interesting that if you go through the Book of Revelation, Chapter 12, it talks about this woman who's about to have a child, and it has all of this imagery from the Old Testament and how this great one is the dragon of old, this great evil one. And he gets defeated by this child who rules the nations with a rod of iron and so on. And it's really like what in Jewish circles we call a midrash, where it explains what's going on in the ultimate day by taking about how that great evil that began back then and that great evil one, that's all going to be destroyed, and we're going to end up, eventually, in Revelation 21 and 22 with a new heaven and a new earth where that sort of corruption just does not exist.

**Darrell Bock:** So this spiritual battle is really something that runs through the entirety of Scripture from start to finish.

**Richard Averbeck:** Yeah. We're in the middle of a great, big cosmic fray. It's a brawl and we're the territory under dispute, you and I and everyone in this world. It's us as people because we were created as God's image. And so the attack was upon God. It was because it was an attack upon the image of God.

And this ties into all sorts of things that we have from the world of the Old Testament, where if they made statues of a king or of a God, especially of kings, what they would talk about at the end is curses on those who would do any damage to that statue and so on, or put their own name on it or various things. And the point, really, is that doing damage to this statue – us – is to be in a direct attack upon God, himself. That's where the battle gets engaged. The battle starts in history in Genesis 3, and it will be consummated in history.

**Darrell Bock:** And I think if I've been listening to you carefully, that portrayal of the battle is a different kind of battle than the battle we're seeing in the Ancient Near Eastern text, which is more – how can I say – between the gods, themselves, in many ways. Is that right or is humanity a part of that battle in the Ancient Near Eastern background as well?

**Richard Averbeck:** Humanity is part of the battle because, say, there might be one particular god who’s the good god. For example, in Canaan, Baal was considered a good god. In the Old Testament, he's evil. And he is. But in that Baal is defeating the great evil monster, Leviathan, in the Ugaritic material. And what happens is that because he defeats Leviathan, there is fertility and, therefore, prosperity in the world of mankind.
So mankind is involved in relationship to the gods, but the battle is on that divine level, on that level. And in a certain sense there's a relationship to that with the great evil one, you know, the angelic powers and so on. So it's different, but there are some connections that helped, I think, the ancient Israelites understand who they were.

In other words, God was speaking into their world in a way that really made sense, was true about what really happened and was put in such a way that they could really get the point. They could really see the power of this great evil, but the greater power of their great God.

_Darrell Bock:_ Now, this Leviathan figure, I'm getting very specific here. What kind of a beast is this? Is it a fish? And you know we have the image of Revelation of a dragon. What are we looking at when we talk about Leviathan? Do we know?

_Richard Averbeck:_ Yeah, we actually have quite a few descriptions. He's the great sea monster, and he has multiple heads according to Psalm 74. It's interesting. And these kinds of pictures come out in other literatures of the Ancient Near East too. There's a sense of this great evil power. People all over the world knew about evil; they knew about the corruption, and they faced it. All of us do every day in our lives.

And so what happens is that in it they had this picture of this great evil serpent. In fact, we have actually pictures of this great serpent with seven heads. And we have multiple heads, and sometimes seven. And there's a battle going on. And this is actually in Ancient Near Eastern picture material, iconography. And in this material, they will have, like, seven heads on this serpent. And maybe three of them are hanging down dead and four of them are still striking out. And, yes, they have pictures of this sort of thing.

_Darrell Bock:_ They're kind of the old form of the nine lives of the cat.

_Richard Averbeck:_ Yeah.
Darrell Bock: I've got about five questions in my head. I'm trying to decide which one to ask next. When we think about this battle and the way in which it is portrayed in Scripture, as you said, the opening of Genesis – and I'm transitioning – the opening of Genesis is much more tranquil, isn't it, in comparison to the chaos of the battle that is a part of the creation in these other stories. We're starting in a slightly different place. Is that right?

Richard Averbeck: Yeah. One thing that's very clear from Genesis is that there's only one God – in the beginning, God – and there's a deep, dark watery abyss, but he doesn't have to do any battle. He reshapes it by speaking and there is no battle that takes place. It's very tranquil. And, yet, we do have this Spirit of God hovering over the waters, kind of as ready to do creative work.

Darrell Bock: Now, some people when they come to these texts and, particularly, in light of everything that we've been discussing in terms of Ancient Near Eastern background, will apply the term “myth” to this material. And, oftentimes, what they mean by it is it's a story that has to do with explaining where things come from and those kinds of things. But it really isn't history. It's something else. Help us sort out that discussion. Do we call this myth? Does myth necessarily exclude history or should we think of this as history. How do we put that together? What kind of genre are we dealing with?

Richard Averbeck: This is one of those very difficult areas because there's nothing wrong with the word myth being used in this. But it gives a sense to people that this is fiction because people think of myth as fiction. But myth, mythos, really means a powerful story. It's something that really carries a lot of freight with it. And these accounts in Genesis really do. There's a lot there packed into a small space, and it's helping us to understand the big story of the world and of life and of our existence, and what happens between us and so on. So I don't have any problem using the term myth. But it's really easily misunderstood because people associate myth with fiction. And I do not mean, when I talk about Genesis on the level of this myth, like a story in terms of this really powerful story, I do not mean fiction.
**Darrell Bock:** So myths are – a philosophical term is metanarrative. It's a big story about core elements of life. And we aren't making a comment, necessarily, in using the term about whether the story is – if I can say it – real or not, or history or not. We're not making a distinction by using that term. We're actually saying, "No, one of the things that makes this a real big, important, grand story, grand narrative, is the fact that it does reflect reality." Is that right?

**Richard Averbeck:** Yeah. In fact, it affects the most important realities of our lives.

**Darrell Bock:** Okay, let's turn our attention now to Genesis directly. And we talked about the opening start. Let's talk a little bit about the structure of – well, let me bring up something that often comes up in discussions that you hear if you turn on the television and people start talking about the creation stories. One if the things that you hear is this discussion on the use of the term myth, which we've already talked about. But the second thing that you hear about that often comes up is the claim that the story in Genesis 1 and the story in Genesis 2 are two very different stories of creation, that they don't connect. And, in fact, some people will say that they're even written by different authors. So let's talk about the relationship between Genesis 1 and 2 before we turn to any one of those accounts.

**Richard Averbeck:** Well, there is an important shift between Genesis 1:1 through chapter 2, verse 3. And then there's a particular expression: “these are the generations of the heavens and the earth” – often translated “these are the accounts of the heavens and the earth.” And it refers to what comes out of, what generates from what's already going before it. And so we have this whole cosmos, this whole universe in Genesis 1:1 through 2:3. And then Genesis 2:4 goes on and really zeros down into the work of humanity.

There's an interesting thing that happens. In the first chapter, the name for God is Elohim. It's the broad name for the great God. Then what happens in Chapter 2 is there's a shift. We still use the name, Elohim, but along with it the name, Lord. Now, this is pronounced in Hebrew, Yahweh. Some people have pronounced it Jehovah. But this is referring to Yahweh, the God of the Israelites in Exodus when he delivered them from Egypt.

And so what happens is in Genesis 2:4, going from Elohim in the Chapter 1 story, it moves to Yahweh Elohim, and uses Yahweh Elohim throughout the account in Chapter 2. And so what happens is the writer – and I do take it to be Moses, okay – the writer is actually taking and telling the people of Israel, who are the recipients of this material, this story of this account.
He's telling them the Yahweh who is the God delivering you from Egypt is the same God who created all that we have, all that we're in the midst of here in this universe. And so it's really tying the history of Israel into – and the importance of Yahweh as the covenant God of Israel into – who he really is. And he is the great Creator God.

**Darrell Bock:** Okay. Now, you ended kind of where I was going, which is the difference between the two chapters then is that in Genesis 1, we're getting a look at Elohim – if I can say it this way – the sovereign Creator God, the all-powerful God, the only God. In the context of the Ancient Near East, that's a very important statement. And then in Chapter 2 when we go to Yahweh Elohim, we're dealing with the personal covenant God who has relationship.

And so this explains, in part, the shift between the grand creation in seven days that we get in Genesis 1, and the more personalized focus on the creation of Adam and Eve as a development of being created in the image of God, but in very personal and in very direct and – if I can almost use this word – in fellowshiping terms almost. Is that a fair way to think about it?

**Richard Averbeck:** Very much. It really is what's going on because this name, Yahweh, brings that with it. And so he combines the two names in a very, very significant way as we develop that. And then, of course, there are other things too that really distinguish Chapter 2:4 and following from Chapter 1.

**Darrell Bock:** So it's a little bit like – well, before I forget this. I'm going to forget it otherwise. The name, Yahweh, of course is the name that we see when Moses asks the question, "Who should I tell them sent me. I'm going to have to explain myself here and justify what I'm getting ready to ask God's people to do. So who sent me?" Isn't Yahweh the name that we get in the burning bush episode?

**Richard Averbeck:** Absolutely. Yeah, that's the very name that is made clear there, that he's the one that is and he will be with them.

**Darrell Bock:** Let's – again, thinking about Genesis 1 in relationship to Genesis 2. In Genesis 1 then it's kind of like we've got the big picture. This is like a director of a movie, if I can make an analogy, where first we get the huge panorama and we get the big picture. And then, we zero in and we kind of zoom in with a close up and we take a look at a particular feature of what's gone on in the big sweep.
So Genesis 1 is the big sweep and Genesis 2 is the zeroing in with the camera and zooming in, if you will, and saying, "Let's talk about this one aspect of this creation." Is that what's going on between those two chapters?

Richard Averbeck: Yes. Yeah, that's the general idea and it's developing – really, if you look at the two, that the Chapter 2 account is really a much fuller, down to right in the soil kind of development of day six in Chapter 1.

Darrell Bock: Okay. Now, let's go back to Chapter 1 because, obviously, another important feature of Chapter 1 is this seven-day element. And let's talk about that in relationship to the idea of the Sabbath, the seven days, and the day – of course, the six days of labor and the one day of rest in Genesis 1.

One of the things that's happening in Genesis 1 – we talked about etiology again – is explaining the creation and how the Sabbath is a mirror of what happened in the creation. How do we think about that? How did Jewish theology think about that in reading Genesis?

Richard Averbeck: Well, the word “day” is the regular word that's used for day. And the fact that we have evening and morning suggests that we're talking about the regular day, evening and morning at the end of the day and so on. One of the things that stands out is that there is this – there's good reason to believe that these are actual literal days.

But, on the other hand, there's also this pattern in Scripture, this six-seven pattern where they use a lot of sixes with seven or seven patterns. Like even in Proverbs Chapter 6, there's six things the Lord hates, yes, seven. There's these various kinds of combinations of six and seven patterns. And we have them not only in the Bible, but also in the Ancient Near Eastern world in a number of texts that we have.

And so one of the things that we consider, then, is whether we're talking about this – and the ancient Israelites would have been familiar with this pattern of sevens and six sevens and so on. And so one of the questions we have to ask is whether they would have understood then this to be actual a literal six days and then the seventh day, or whether they were saying, "Oh, wow. This is the regular six-seven pattern and it's a literary way of shaping the story.”
It's kind of like you can tell the same story in different ways, so like we have the four different Gospels in the New Testament and they're not all arranged the same. They tell the truth, each one. But they tell it and they shape it in such a way that makes particular points, too, in a certain way. And we have the same thing in the Old Testament in other places, as well as in this place.

And we even have, like Psalm 104, another account of God's creation that does the similar kinds of differences, but with a lot of parallels. So the question becomes then, do we take these days as literal days, or do we take these as literary days? And I've been probing, myself, in the direction of literary days in the current time here.

**Darrell Bock:**

But it is framed as a week. Is that correct? So your point here is that we've got the picture of a week. Obviously, we're connecting this chapter to the idea of the Sabbath. But we also get a framing in such a way that it is somewhat distinct.

You know it's the same kind of discussion we run into in the New Testament. There's a very famous passage that's much discussed among serious students of the Bible. It's the rich man and Lazarus. And in this passage, there's a huge debate about whether we're dealing with a parable or whether we're dealing with an actual event.

And the discussion that comes into it has to do with, "Well, it begins like a parable, 'There was a certain man,' " and so that's supposedly a tipoff. And then in the middle of the story, you get this communication between heaven and hell – if I can say it that way. Technically not quite exactly what's happening in the passage, but most people get it. And so you've got the rich man in hell communicating with Abraham in heaven. And most people think that, theologically, there isn't kind of this cosmic Internet thing going on.

And so they recognize that's a figurative way of moving the story along and making the true points even about the afterlife, very true points about the afterlife that are in it. And so I look at that text and I go, "Well, is that a real event or is that a parable?" And the literary clues in it tell me it's parabolic. There are things happening within it that don't fit.

And one of the discussion that, of course, happens in relationship to Genesis 1 is that, yes, we've got evening and morning, and we've got the figure in the picture and the framing of literal day, but we also don't have the sun functioning until day four. And we've got light and darkness but we don't have the discussion of how that works until later on in the sequence.
So the point here is just that there are clues within the text that make this a legitimate conversation to have about what exactly is going on in the passage, just like the passage in Luke 16 with the rich man and Lazarus. Is that part of what you're trying to communicate here about the difficulty of getting your hands around what's going on in the passage?

Richard Averbeck: Yeah. And the reason it's done this way is because God does want to shape the story as a way of helping them understand they need to observe the Sabbath. And so the very nature of the way the story is laid out, I think, would be understood that way. It is, I think, literary in that way.

But it's telling us that God actually did create. He actually made this, all that we're right in the middle of, and we are put in a particular place within it. So the point is then that Israel is supposed to live a pattern that reflects how this story is shaped so that they can have the kind of life that they should have coming out of slavery. Now, even slaves and animals and so on get this day of rest.

Darrell Bock: You know another thing to think about in relationship to the day of rest is this idea, and that is that even though God rested in terms of the movement of shaping the creation and making the core creation the way it is, he doesn't rest because he's the one who sustains the creation and keeps it going and operating. So we even have to think about how we think about the concept of rest when we're talking about the picture of the Sabbath, right.

Richard Averbeck: Yeah because rest does not necessarily mean sleep. It means that you've ceased – and I think, really, what's going on there on the seventh day is – he's already said everything's completed. I think the word, Shabbat, or word for Sabbath that's used there in chapter 2, verses 1-3 of Genesis, is the word that just means stop. It means to cease. And so he's finished the work so he stopped.

Darrell Bock: And the work that we're talking about is just the core structure of, like I say, ordering the creation. That's what we're talking about.

Richard Averbeck: That's what we're talking about.