

SUNDAY, July 21, 2024 "Bible Story Connections"

Luke 24:36-49 Genesis 6-9 Noah Exodus 1-2 Judges 6:1-40

We continue in our summer sermon series "At your Request" with this week's focus on how Bible stories connect us to ancient documents, the story of a super man, and a Greek mythological figure which causes us to wonder about the origins of the Bible. These stories have been passed on for generations with modifications to each yet the general overall story is the same. Other Bible stories have been modified or just portions have been used in the develop of some other wonderful adventures as well. For example, with last week's focus on Jonah, we recall that Jonah ended up being saved by God by ending up in the belly of a big fish for 3 days. This story was referred to by Jesus when he tells the disciples that he would be entombed after death for three days and then will rise again.

A similar story was written in 1883 and modified in the Disney movie (1940) of Pinocchio, Gepetto who wishes his marionette to be a real boy. A fairy grants his wish by bringing the puppet to life but she tells Pinocchio that he must prove his worth before she will make him into a human boy. Under the guidance of his insect friend, Jiminy Cricket, Pinocchio experiences a series of incredible adventures on his way to becoming a real boy. He is deterred from deceit in his new life by his nose, which grows longer every time he tells a lie. At one point Pinocchio runs away and Gepetto searches for him, and Gepetto ends up being swallowed by a giant fish. When Pinocchio hears of this news, he travels deep into the ocean to find the fish along with his conscience Jiminy. Pinocchio makes his way inside the fish and reunites with Gepetto. They build a huge fire causing the whale to sneeze and they are then blasted ashore. They are left to start their lives over together. A similar story to Jonah? Yes! And this story teaches that disobedience does not pay, telling lies is seldom prudent, and children who love and take care of their parents will be rewarded. It may not have the same faith based desire of God calling Jonah to serve in Nineveh out of faith and love but the story still has a time of repentance and change in behaviour. <https://pinocchioandreligion.weebly.com/jonah-the-whale-and-pinocchio.html>

Another well-known Bible story is of Noah whose story is in Genesis 6-9. His story is of a faithful man serving God who is told to builds a huge ark to save his family and all animals. God will be destroying the earth He created by flooding it with water. It is Noah and his family who is saved from death and they work to keep the animals of the land and air by supplying food and care while they live on the ark. It rains a long time and eventually Noah sends out different birds to find any sign of new life so that they may have an idea of when they can stop living on the

boat. When the time comes for this, God and Noah enter in the covenant that he would never destroy the earth again by flooding it. A reminder of this covenant is the rainbow. This is well loved story of hope, covenant with God and a great story.

But there is an older story, perhaps the oldest written story on Earth which is the Epic of Gilgamesh. This Epic of Gilgamesh was written before any books of the Bible. This epic is about the adventures of the historical King of Uruk (somewhere between 2750 and 2500 BCE). It comes to us from Ancient Sumeria on 12 clay Babylonian tablets, which are dated to about 1800 B.C. Thus the oral form of the story was finally recorded on tablets many years after Gilgamesh's death. In Mid 19th century archeologists discovered these twelve tablets and these writings showed that stories linked to what we know as some stories in the Bible were shared many generations before.

Gilgamesh experiences different people in his life but it is with the death of his friend Enkidu that he searches for the meaning of life and some way to defeat death. It is on Tablet XI of these texts that Gilgamesh travels far through mountains and past the Scorpion People hoping to find Utnapishtim, the man who survived the Great Flood and was rewarded with immortality. It is his Utnapishtim who states that there is nothing he can do for him. He was granted immortality by the gods, he says, and has no power to do the same for Gilgamesh. Even so, he offers the king two chances at eternal life. First, he must show himself worthy by staying awake for six days and nights, which he fails at, and then he is given a magic plant which, in a moment of carelessness, he leaves on the shore while he bathes, and it is eaten by a snake. Having failed in his quest, he returns home to have his story recorded. It is in Tablet XI that Utnapishtim was told how to build the boat in order to survive the flood.

Tear down the house and build a boat!

Abandon wealth and seek living beings!

Spurn possessions and keep alive living beings!

Make all living beings go up into the boat.

The boat which you are to build,

its dimensions must measure equal to each other:

its length must correspond to its width.

So do we receive this story written well before the story of Noah as part of our tradition? Or is it merely a part of the narrative of human history which was oral in nature for thousands of years and yet we are still discovering history and text and story in new ways. Bible story connections to ancient worlds do lead us to question where these stories come from but in the bigger picture,

Does Noah's or Gilgamesh's epic tale share a similar meaning? That God did destroy the earth with water and saved those faithful to him. And that God entered into covenants like he had done with Abraham and would do with Moses as well? The bible story connections, may cause us to wonder, but also to reflect that the oral tradition of the Hebrew people is just that, of one group of people while other lived before and experienced God in different ways. Isn't it just amazing to think that there are other people who knew of God's covenant relationship in some form? www.worldhistory.org/gilgamesh/
<https://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab11.htm>

The next Bible Story to make connections with is Moses as an infant. We understand that the population of the Hebrew slaves was increasing rapidly in Egypt and the Pharaoh decided to do something about it. He instructed the mid-wives for the Hebrew women to toss the male infants into the Nile River. But the problem was for the mid-wives was as they put it "the Hebrew women just give birth too fast" and we cannot do this. Two Levites marry and bear a son and they keep him hidden for 3 months. But Jochebed the baby's mother, could no longer do this and decided to place the baby in a basket and hid the baby in the reeds and hopes that the baby will be picked up and have a safe life as his sister Miriam watched from a distance. It is then that the daughter of the Pharaoh came to bathe, discovers the infant and looks around. The sister of the infant offers to get a woman to nurse the child and the princess pays the woman to do so until he is old enough. The child grows up and the mother brings the child to Pharaoh's daughter and she takes him as her son. This is Moses' story. We like this story because we know that it is Moses who eventually leads the people out of slavery and into the desert as they journey to the Promised Land. But it is this portion of the story which has been picked up not that long ago to create a fictional character story that has been beloved for many years.

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster came up with the idea and inspired in 1933 while students in high school as they were both sons of European Jewish immigrants. They leaned on their own Jewish traditions and created Superman. Superman like Moses is born in dangerous times. He is also sent away from certain death by his parents, who put him on a (space)ship hoping someone would eventually find him and keep him from danger. Like Moses, he is raised in an alien environment where he is forced to keep his true identity concealed, and is only allowed to reveal it to protect others from harm.

There are three fundamental similarities: (1) the "godlike" nature of Superman's family name of Kal-El- includes the Near Eastern name for God El as in El-Shaddai (almighty God", Elohim (the living God); of even connections to Isra- El, Dani-El, Gabrie El. ; (2) the theme of

immigration for the sake of survival whether from down the Nile to the palace or from another planet (Krypton); and (3) the adopting of a “dual identity” as an issue that eventually needs to be resolved from duelling with self- identity and being true to who they are in the favour of helping others.

So why do we like Superman? Because he can be read as a religious character, whether Jewish or Christian and it is through his character we are still provided with hope that lives will change for the better. One just needs to be clear as to who Superman might become in one’s eyes- a deliverer of new possibilities. <https://aleteia.org/2021/11/02/superman-a-pop-moses-figure>

The last story to share Bible connections with may not be as well known. It is the story of one of the judges named Gideon found in chapter 6 who served for about 40 years. An Angel of God came to Gideon and said, “The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor!” The Israelites were ruled over by Midianites for 7 years because they had disobeyed God. And now the angel comes to him and tells him that God wanted him to fight the Midianites. The people had been worshiping Baal and so Gideon was told to take down the altar of Baal and the wooden image that was next to it. He was told to build an altar of rock and there upon sacrifice a bull. Gideon took 10 men and tore down the altar of Baal during the night. When others saw the Baal altar gone the next morning, they asked who had taken it down. Someone said Gideon and so people from the different tribes started gathering with Gideon and asked him questions about what he had done. And Gideon was not sure what to do to show them that God was with them again.

Gideon asked God that “if you really want me to save Israel, I will put a piece of wool on the ground. If You put dew on the wool only and there isn’t any dew on the ground, then I will know you will save Israel by my hand.” The next morning, Gideon could wring water from the wool and there wasn’t any dew on the ground. Gideon asked God again, “Don’t be angry with me, but one more test, will You put the dew on the ground and make the wool dry this time?” And, of course, when Gideon woke up, there was dew on the ground and the wool was dry. This was the test Gideon had asked God to fulfil in order that the people would know God was with them and wanting them to beat the Midianites for their land.

When Gideon and the people woke up and gathered together they were ready to fight the Midianites. To decrease the numbers, Gideon told those who were afraid to go home- This meant that 22,000 left yet remaining were still 10,000 people. God said, “That is still too many. God instructed Gideon to test them by taking them to the water and to separate them by how

they drink water—cupping their hands, or going on their knees. Those who cupped their hands were taken by Gideon- 300 men and this would be sufficient to beat the Midianites.

There were many Midianites were camped together. Gideon divided the 300 men into three groups. He then gave each one a trumpet, and empty pitcher with a torch inside. Gideon told them to watch him and copy what he does. When he would blow the trumpet, then they would do the same and shout, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon."

Gideon had 100 men with him and when they got to the camp about midnight, they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers. Then the other groups of men did the same thing! They held the torches in the left hand and trumpets in their right hand. The Midianites woke up and cried out! Some of them killed each other and then they ran! Gideon sent messengers to tell the other tribes to seize the Midianites that are hiding. Gideon had defeated the Midianites and regained their land.

Gideon's fleece test was a means by which he proved to the people of Israel that God was indeed on their side again and that God would enable them to regain their land being held by the Midianites. A simple act of no dew/ dew on the fleece one night and ground the next convinced the people that God had heard their plea to again protect and guide them. But they had to believe God was with them and to remove the statue and altar of Baal a false god.

Fleece was not something just introduced to the people of Israel but truly a symbol of prosperity and necessity for survival at the time. Fleece was often seen as a commodity or valued for its worth as it is the coat of wool covering a wool-bearing animal (such as a sheep). Yet in Greek mythology there is a story about fleece which Golden Fleece is the fleece of a flying, winged ram named Chrysomallos, or 'Golden-fleeced Ram', in Greek mythology. It is best known from the story of Jason and the Argonauts. According to a Roman poet (Ovid (43 BCE to 17 CE)) the golden-fleeced ram, was born of Poseidon, the god of the sea, and Theophane, who had been transformed into ram and ewe to produce this golden fleeced ram Chrysomallos.

Why is this Greek mythological creature important to our understanding of Gideon and the fleece used as a test for God's presence? It is simply because it is valuable and knowing that if there was dew/ no dew according to what Gideon had shared with the people, God was with them. They needed reassurance that God was going to help them fight the Midianites and win their land back. They needed to know that God was going to help them to see who they were as followers in faith. By using the fleece it was an important part of who they were as they needed fleece to keep warm. This is in contrast to the Greek myth which used the golden fleeced ram as an object of power and whoever had control of it had power. Gideon used the

fleece to show that God was in charge and He would bring about the desired change to the people to once again live in the land under his guidance and law and teachings.

https://www.worldhistory.org/Golden_Fleece/

In these Bible stories there are connections to past civilizations, history and even stories of recent times which modify and call us to them. The stories may have changes in characterization, but the Biblical narrative of God being with those whom he has created throughout time do not. There may be questions of faithfulness in Greek mythology, or ancient civilizations, but this is why the Bible was created. For when Jesus appeared to His disciples after His resurrection, he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. Their purpose was to tell others of repentance and forgiveness of sins made possible through his death and resurrection, so that all people will come together as God's people. This is what was first intended by God at the time of creation, and it is the hope for all things to come.

The Biblical narrative helps us to grow in faith to have faith and to trust God to lead us in the way everlasting. But first of all, we must believe and know that God is with us. God's Spirit will guide and the stories of Jesus are accounts of people who saw and experienced him as he prepared to die and rise again for our sakes. Jesus' purpose was to enable us to be forgiven and tell others of the gift and hope of eternal life.

This is the message of making connections to beloved stories in the Bible. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

God we thank you for the stories, people and teachings of those in the Bible. We pray that each time we hear these words spoken or read that we will be blessed to know that you love us so much that we may grow in relationship with you. Hear our prayers we ask. In Jesus' name.

Amen