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AMERICAN GENESIS The Cosmological Beliefs of the Indians

by Bill Johnson*

With the rise of uniformitarian geology and Darwinian evolution in the nineteenth century, the stage was set for a naturalistic interpretation of life. Naturalism would soon pervade every facet of life (biology, sociology, theology, etc.). The "higher" critics applied this philosophy to the Bible in their quest to strip it of the supernatural. Events in the book of Genesis such as the creation of man, original sin, the worldwide flood, and the Tower of Babel, were written off as mythological. One anti-creationist boldly stated, "Nearly all peoples have developed their own creation myth, and the Genesis story is just the one that happened to have been adopted by one particular tribe of Middle Eastern herders."¹ It is commonplace today to view the book of Genesis, as well as the whole Bible, through the spectacles of naturalism.

Despite the widespread acceptance of this philosophy, anthropology has yielded strong evidence in favor of the miraculous events recorded in Genesis. Nearly all people of the world, including the American Indians, have cosmological beliefs that are similar to the Genesis account. Although gross exaggerations have worked their way into their stories through thousands of years of retelling the tales, it is evident that the main points in the Genesis account (chapters 1–11) have been preserved.

Creation of Mankind

" . . . the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. . . . the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and He took one of his ribs . . . made . . . a woman, and brought her unto the man" (2:7,21–22).

The question of man's origin has been debated for thousands of years. All men, regardless of race or religion (even atheists) have a creation story that accounts for man's existence. Most Indian tribes attribute this creation to a Creator, and their stories show great similarities to the creation story outlined in the book of Genesis.

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The Salinan Indians of southern California say: “When the world was finished, there were as yet no people, but the Bald Eagle was the chief of the animals. He saw that the world was incomplete and decided to make some human beings. So he took some clay and modelled the figure of a man and laid him on the ground. At first he was very small but grew rapidly until he reached normal size. But as yet he had no life; he was still asleep. Then the Bald Eagle stood and admired his work. ‘It is impossible,’ said he, ‘that he should be left alone; he must have a mate.’ So he pulled out a feather and laid it beside the sleeping man. Then he left them and went off a short distance, for he knew that a woman was being formed from the feather. But the man was still asleep and did not know what was happening. When the Bald Eagle decided that the woman was about completed, he returned, awoke the man by flapping his wings over him and flew away.”²

The Pima Indians of southern Arizona believe, “Earth Maker took some clay in his hands, mixed it with his own sweat, and formed it into two figures—a man and a woman. He breathed life into them and they began to walk around. They lived. They had children. They peopled the land. They built villages.”³

Original Sin

“ . . . the LORD God commanded . . . of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat . . . in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. . . . the woman . . . took of the fruit thereof, and did eat . . . her husband [also] did eat. . . . [the Lord said] . . . cursed is the ground for thy sake . . . for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (2:16–17; 3:6,17,19).

While the idea of original sin is not common among all Indian tribes, some, like the Incas of Peru, record the story in great detail:

“The natives of this land affirm that in the beginning, and before this world was created, there was a being called Viracocha. . . . when he had created the world he formed a race of giants of disproportioned greatness painted and sculptured, to see whether it would be well to make real men of that size. He then created men in his likeness as they are now; and they lived in darkness.

Viracocha ordered these people that they should live without quarrelling, and that they should know and serve him. He gave them a certain precept which they were to observe on pain of being confounded if they should break it. They kept this precept for some time, but it is not mentioned what it was. But as there arose among them the vices of pride and covetousness, they transgressed the precept of Viracocha Pachayachachi and falling, through this sin, under his indignation, he confounded and cursed them.”⁴

Flood

“ . . . the wickedness of man was great in the earth. . . . the LORD said, I will destroy . . . both man, and beast . . . and [He said to Noah] Make thee an ark. . . . I will cause it to rain upon the earth. . . . the waters prevail[ed]. . . . and the mountains were covered. . . . every living substance was destroyed . . . and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him . . .” (6:5,7,14; 7:4,20,23).

There is no other story among the Indians as prolific as the worldwide flood. Nearly every tribe has a flood story that is similar to the Genesis flood.⁵ The Tehuelche of Patagonia attribute the flood to the wickedness of man:

“At a remote time in the past, the earth was inhabited also by people other than those created by the sun-god. They were very bad and fought among themselves all the time. When the sun-god saw this he decided to annihilate these people and to create another population in their stead. To destroy the bad people, the sun-god sent torrential and continuous rain, the springs opened, and the ocean overflowed. In the deluge all mankind and all animals were swept away. . . . the sun-god sent [out] the dove, which returned with blades of grass in its beak, proving thereby that it had found dry land. Then the sun-god decided to create new people. First he made a man, then a woman, and finally a dog to keep them company.”⁶

The Lillooet of British Columbia believe that one day a great and continuous rain flooded the world. The Lillooet Noah, Ntci’nemkin, took refuge with his family in a large canoe. The others ascended to the mountaintops but the flood soon covered them. Only the peak of Split Mountain remained uncovered. As the waters receded, the canoe rested on Smimelc Mountain. When the ground was dry the people descended and repopulated the earth.⁷

Tower of Babel

“ . . . the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. . . . And they said, Go . . . let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven. . . . the LORD said. . . . let us go down, and there confound their language. . . . So the LORD scattered them abroad . . . and they [ceased] to build the city” (11:1,4,6–8).

Unlike the proliferation of flood legends, those concerning the confusion of tongues are mostly confined to the tribes of the southern states and Mexico. Most stories are only brief allusions, usually tacked on to the end of a flood legend, but some tribes, like the Choctaw of Louisiana, have preserved a detailed account:

“Many generations ago Aba, the good spirit above, created many men, all Choctaw, who spoke the language of the Choctaw, and understood one another. These came from the bosom of the earth, being formed of yellow clay, and no men had ever lived before them. One day all came together and, looking upward, wondered what the clouds and the blue expanse above might be. They continued to wonder and talk among themselves and at last determined to endeavor to reach the sky. So they brought many rocks and began building a mound that was to have touched the heavens. That night, however, the wind blew strong from above and the rocks fell from the mound. . . . The men were not killed, but when daylight came and they made their way from beneath the rocks and began to speak to one another, all were astounded as well as alarmed—they spoke various languages and could not understand one another. Some continued thenceforward to speak the original tongue, the language of the Choctaw, and from these sprung the Choctaw tribe. The others, who could not understand this language, began to fight among themselves. Finally they separated. The Choctaw remained the original people; the others scattered, some going north, some east, and others west, and formed various tribes. This explains why there are so many tribes throughout the country at the present time.”⁸

The Anahuac Indians of Mexico believe that after the flood, the survivors began building a vast pyramid of bricks to reach the heavens. This angered the gods, who destroyed the pyramid by sending down fire from heaven.⁹

Conclusion

What are we to make of all these similarities? Does the evidence point to a common source? Is there a reasonable alternative?

Those persuaded by naturalism believe these stories are widespread because the Indians learned them from missionaries. There are several reasons why this explanation fails. (1) The first missionaries recorded some of these stories. (2) The Indians often distinguish between the traditions of their ancestors and those of the white man. (3) The heart of the Christian message is Christ, who is non-existent in Indian mythology, and (4) great exaggerations speak of long ages, which would predate missions to the American continents.

The most reasonable explanation for the similarities between the stories contained in American Indian folklore, and those recorded in the book of Genesis, is that all people are descendents of Noah's family. After the flood, mankind multiplied once more; and these stories were fresh in the minds of men who would soon be dispersed throughout the whole world.

Despite the failures of naturalism, this worldview continues to hold the minds of countless individuals. One might wonder why there is such a strong propensity towards a naturalistic interpretation of life. The main reason lies with the religious and ethical implications supernaturalism has on man. (cf. John 3:19–20.)

Naturalists would claim to reject supernaturalism on scientific grounds alone. The truth is that naturalism cannot account for the known facts. It isn't driven scientifically, but is a philosophical position that has excluded the supernatural. An honest evaluation of all the data, especially the anthropological evidence, should lead one to the conclusion that supernaturalism is the position that fits the facts better than its rivals.

Endnotes

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3. Erdoes, Richard, *American Indian Myths and Legends*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1984, pg. 473.
4. Markham, Sir Clements, *History of the Incas*, 1967, pp. 28–29.
5. The author has amassed over 200 flood legends from North and South America.
6. Wilbert, Johannes and Karin Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Tehuelche Indians*, UCLA, 1984, p. 104.
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8. Bushnell, David L., "The Choctaw of Bayou Lacombe St. Tammany Parish Louisiana" in *Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, vol. 48, 1909, p. 30.
9. Tylor, Edward B., *Anahuac: Or Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern*, London, Longman & Roberts, 1861, pp. 276–277.



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