

Noah's Flood Story, Real or Myth

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The story of Noah's Flood is one of the most recognized and popular stories of the Old Testament (OT), which is assumed to have taken place around 2500 BC.

The text of the OT recounts how human beings began to increase on earth and how God saw that the daughters of man were beautiful, and they were marrying anyone they chose and that God saw wickedness within human beings and sent a global inundation (Genesis 6:1-5). However, since Noah was a righteous man, God instructed him to build an ark for himself, his family, to carry with him two of every beast, bird and creeping thing, and get shelter in the Ark, because a destruction was about to come upon earth.

The question here is, did the Great Flood that destroyed the earth, as described in the OT, really happen? How do we justify the presence of millions if not billions of different species and viable population on earth today? The overwhelming majority of these species are not mentioned in Noah's Flood story of the OT. It is logical to argue that many species ceased to exist since many animals, birds and crawling things could not make the trip from various distant regions where they existed in time to reach southern Mesopotamia and to enter the Ark in order to be saved. It is very reasonable to argue that all the animals, birds, etc. of the world did not exist in southern Mesopotamia, because the weather in southern Mesopotamia was, and still is, not suitable for all world's creatures to live there.

Therefore, if only selected species entered the Ark, judging from the names mentioned in the OT and using the argument above, how could all the thousands, if not millions, of varieties that we have today originate from just two of the selected animals and birds that entered the Ark? Science tells us that one pair of any creature would not be able to have enough genetic diversity to create this variety that we have today and in the span of only 4500 years. Studies have shown that the evolution from one species to another takes sometimes millions of years.

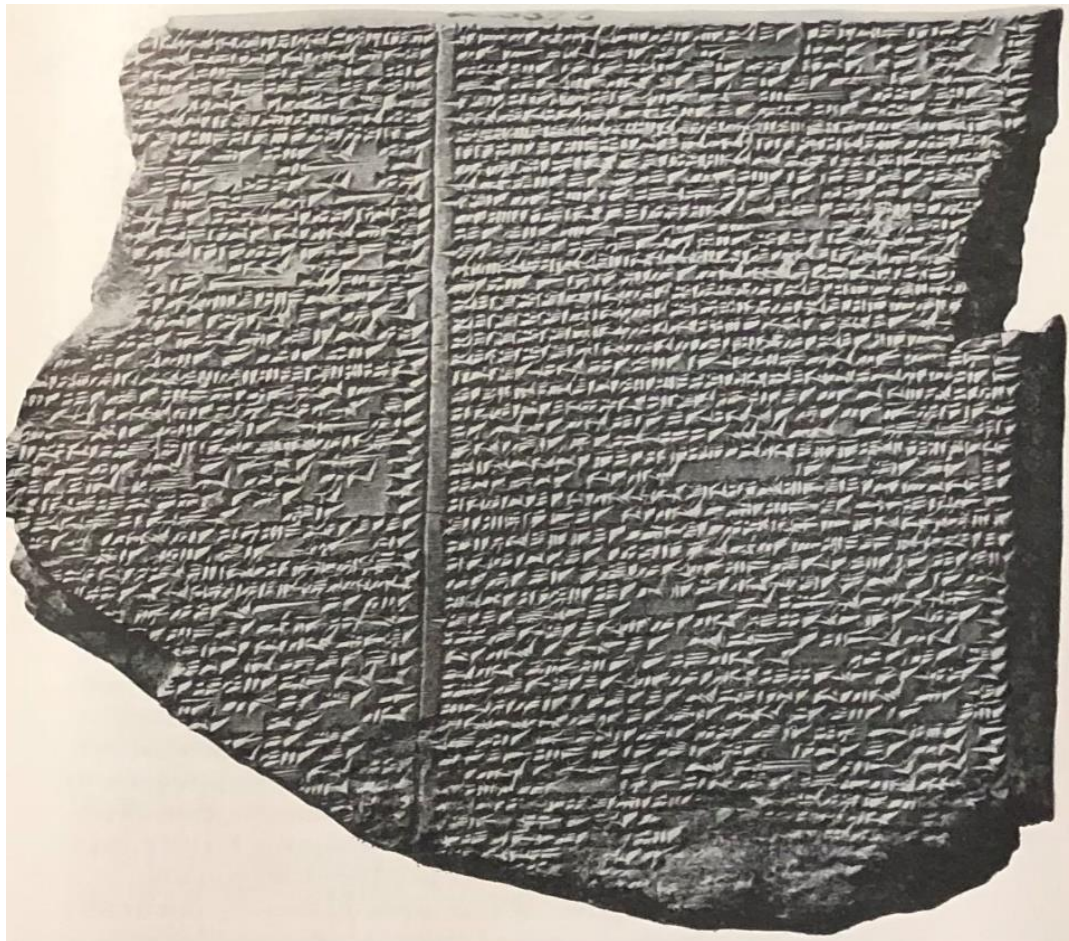
Many scholars and historians assert with confidence that certain OT stories that were written between 800 and 500 B.C., were more likely copied from older oral traditions that were in reality myths or legends in their origin. Remember that Abraham and the members of his family were born in the Sumerian city of Ur of southern Mesopotamia. They obviously were familiar with the Sumerian myths and legends. They carried this knowledge with them as they migrated from Ur to Haran, in northern Mesopotamia, first and later to Canaan.

In 1872, George Smith was going through some 20,000 archeological pieces that had come to the British Museum from excavations in the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. Smith came upon half of a tablet which had originally contained six columns of text. Casting his eye down the third column, he caught a reference to a ship resting on the mountains of Nishir¹, followed by an account of the

¹ Mount Nishir or Nimush. It is also called Pir-I Mukurun or Pir Omar Gudrun is a mountain near the modern city of Sulaimaniya, northern Iraq.

sending forth a dove, finding no resting place and returning. On December 3, 1872, Smith read a paper based on his findings of the fragment piece at a meeting of the Society of Biblical Archeology at the British Museum with distinguished audience of scholars, theologians and archeologists on the platform. Smith said, on reviewing the evidence, it was apparent that the events of the Flood narrated in the Bible and the Inscriptions from Nineveh were the same and they occurred in the same order.²

After hearing about Smith's lecture, and hoping for more revelations of popular interest, the London Daily Telegraph proposed the reopening of the excavations at Nineveh at the expense of the said newspaper. Within less than two months, Smith was on his way to Nineveh and began digging on May 7, 1873. He soon discovered a fragment containing seventeen lines which belonged to the missing portion of the first column of the Deluge tablet which filled up the only serious gap in the story.



A fragment of a large clay tablet from the Library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, inscribed with the Assyrian version of the Flood story

² Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archeology, vol. 2, 1873, p. 213

What else do we have in addition to the tablets discovered in Nineveh? In the Sumerian inscription from Nippur³ it is stated that the deluge was decreed by the assembly of the Gods. According to the 11th tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Flood was decreed by “the great gods”. Likewise, the Book of Genesis, attributes the sending of the deluge to the one and only true God recognized in the OT.

The OT emphasizes the moral depravity of the human race as the cause for the Flood. The earth was corrupt before God (Gen 6:1-13). Also, in the Epic of Gilgamesh the reason is that the heart of the gods prompted them to bring a deluge⁴, that is interpreted due to divine caprice.

Meanwhile the fragmentary Atra-Hasis⁵ contributed to the fact that people have become prosperous, noisy and too many that began to deprive Enlil of his sleep. In the Assyrian Recension, we read:

*... The land extended [and the people multiplied].
He got disturbed [with] their noise,
[With] their roar [sleep] did not overcome him.
Enlil convened his assembly
And addressed the gods his sons,
The noise of mankind has become too intense for me, ...*

The episode of the Flood represents only one scene in the Epic of Gilgamesh, one in which the hero of the Flood, Utnapishtim, recounts the story of how he escaped the general destruction of mankind, a divine decree that came in a vision where the voice of the god Ea said to him, “Thou man of Shuruppak⁶, son of Ubara-Tatu, pull down thy house, build a ship, forsake thy possessions, take heed for thy life, abandon thy goods, save thy life, and bring up living seed of every kind into the ship.

Upon the completion of his specifically designed ship, via the instructions from god Ea, Utnapishtim loaded aboard it “all his gold and silver and whatever he had of the seed of all living creatures, caused all his family and relations, the game of the field, the beasts of the field, all the craftsmen, and the boatman to go into it”.⁷ The Sumerian fragmentary account shows that Ziusudra took at least sheep and cattle with him into the boat, for after the flood he killed an ox and offered an abundant sacrifice of sheep.

According to the Epic of Atra-Hasis, the deluge hero put into the ark his grain, his goods and chattels, his family, his relations, the craftsmen, beasts of the field, as many as eat herbs.⁸ The

³ Nippur is the modern Nuffar in southern Mesopotamia.

⁴ Tablet XI:14

⁵ Atra-Hasis is the Akkadian/Babylonian Epic of the Great Flood

⁶ Shuruppak is the modern Tell Fara, which is about 35 miles south of Nippur or modern Nuffar in southern Mesopotamia.

⁷ Tablet XI: 80-85 and 94-95

⁸ The Semitic Nippur Fragment III

OT account of Genesis 6:21 talks about food that God ordered Noah to take on his Ark to eat and survive.

On the 7th day after the landing of the boat on Mount Nishir (Nisir), Utnapishtim released a dove for the purpose of testing the subsidence of the water, but it returned because it did not find a resting place. He later sent a swallow, but it returned as well. Finally, he sent a raven, that did not return. The OT account of Genesis, Chapter 8, speaks about the same events that involve sending the raven and the dove.

On March 4, 1875, Smith wrote a letter to his former patron, the Daily Telegraph, stating that he had recognized tablets of clay listing the history of the world from the Creation down to some period after the Fall of Man. The Enuma Elish, or the Babylonian story of the Creation, is contained in a long poem which was recited in its entirety on the 4th day of the New Year celebration each year. And that is another side of the [influence of the Mesopotamian myths and legends on the Biblical narrative](#).

References

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