

MELITA THEOLOGICA

Vol XXXII

1981

Nos 1-2

THE FLOOD IN GENESIS AND THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

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INTRODUCTION: THE TWO VERSIONS

The flood in Genesis is recounted at length from 6:5 to 9:17. It is a relatively long account with a double introduction — the corruption of mankind and preparations for the flood — the actual flood and a double conclusion — the flood subsides and the disembarkment. Chapter 9 gives us the new world order, i.e. the second covenant.

In the Epic of Gilgamesh the flood is the fifth — from a total of seven — narrative. It is the most complete and the best preserved part of the whole Epic. In December 1872 at a meeting of the then recently-founded Society of Biblical Archaeology, George Smith announced: "A short time back I discovered among the Assyrian tablets in the British Museum an account of the Flood." This was the eleventh tablet of the Assyrian narrative of the Epic of Gilgamesh. It was part of the library of tablets excavated at Nineveh in 1853. In this collection there was the Assyrian collation of the Epic of Gilgamesh. The importance of the discovery began to be appreciated by Smith's announcement.

Soon after this, Smith published the **Chaldean Account of the Deluge**. The interest was great, but the flood tablet was still incomplete. The search for more tablets was renewed. The **Daily Telegraph** contributed 1000 guineas for further excavation at Nineveh. Smith undertook the excavation for the British Museum, and soon after his arrival at Nineveh he found the missing lines from the flood narrative. Hence, it became, and still is, the most complete of the whole Epic. It is the eleventh tablet, which is the fullest and best preserved of all, with over three hundred extant lines.

The Gilgamesh Epic is edited by Hugo Gressmann in **Altorientalische Texte**, published by Walter de Gruyter & Company, Berlin & Leipzig, second edition, 1926, pp. 175 ff. It is translated by James B. Pritchard, **Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament**, Princeton University Press, second edition, 1955, pp. 72 ff. At the turn of the century there was a great discussion on the relationship of the Biblical to the Babylonian story of the flood as it is in the Gilgamesh Epic. There is certainly a material relationship between the two versions. However, today no one holds that the Genesis narrative depends on Gilgamesh.

The two versions are independent arrangements of an older tradition, itself perhaps coming from the Sumerian. Israel came in contact with a flood tradition in Canaan during the immigration and assimilated it into her religious ideas. Though there are some similarities in the two versions, the Israelite account is very different from the Babylonian.

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

The concept of God in the Gilgamesh epic is very crude and polytheistic. The god Ea reveals to Utnapishtim, the hero of the flood, that the gods have decided in a council to destroy the city Shuruppak. Utnapishtim survives the flood in a ship. The flood is so dreadful that the gods "cower like watch-dogs" and Ishtar, the goddess of heaven, "screams as one in travail". When Utnapishtim goes out of the ship after the catastrophe, he makes a sacrifice: the gods "smell the savour" — and then the nauseating image — and "they swarm as flies around the sacrificer."

The motive for the flood is the "clamour" of humanity — insignificant compared with the "corruption" motive in Genesis.

In those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamour. Enlil heard the clamour and he said to the gods in council, "The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel." So the gods in their hearts were moved to let loose the deluge.

Ea warns Utnapishtim in a dream about the coming destruction and advises him how to save himself: "tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life, despise worldly goods and save your soul alive."

When he understands, Utnapishtim answers: "Behold, what you have commanded I will honour and perform." This corresponds to the test of faith and obedience in Genesis. In the Epic, too, there is the hindrance of the people of the city, but it is not as well interwoven in the story as in Genesis.

Then follows a description of how the ship was built and how it was made a good store — for preservation of life. On the seventh day the boat was ready and there was feasting like New Year's day.

Launching was difficult. Utnapishtim commands every one to get in: "my family, my kin, the beasts of the field both wild and tame, and all the craftsmen." In the evening the rain came: "I looked at the weather and it was terrible."

"One whole day the tempest raged gathering fury as it went, it poured over the people like the tides of battle." There is a description of the gods awed at the havoc wrought. The flood is not just a local event: it is "over hill and plain": "Nergal pulled out the dams of the nether waters; Ninurta the war-lord threw down the dykes."

"For six days and six nights the winds blew, torrent and tempest and flood overwhelmed the world, tempest and flood raged together like warring hosts. When the seventh day dawned the storm from the south subsided, the sea grew calm, the flood was stilled; I looked at the face of the world and there was silence, all mankind was turned to clay. The surface of the sea stretched as flat as a roof-top; I opened a hatch and the light fell on my face. Then I bowed low, I sat down and I wept, the tears streamed down my face, for on every side was the waste of water."

The description is achieved with a poetic insight. Utnapishtim seeks to hold fast the ship on dry land: "a fifth day and a sixth day she held fast on the mountain." On the seventh day he loosed a dove, but the dove finding no resting place returns. Then he loosed a swallow, but it too returns. Finally, he loosed a raven: it did not return.

At that he lets out of the ship all the living. Utnapishtim makes a sacrifice and "poured out a libation on the mountain top." The gods are pleased with the sacrifice, and they came round shockingly like flies. Ishtar, the goddess of heaven, makes a speech to commemorate a pact: "I shall remember these days."

Lay upon the sinner his sin,
Lay down the transgressor his transgression,
Punish him a little when he breaks loose,
Do not drive him too hard or he perishes.

The gods are saddened at the sight; they prefer a lion, a wolf, a famine, a pestilence had ravaged mankind, but not the flood. Finally, one of the gods says: "It was not I that revealed the secret of the gods; the wise man learned it in a dream."

This is the account of the flood in the Epic of Gilgamesh. It is an independent poem inserted into the framework of the whole epic. Unlike the account in Genesis, it does not say that from Utnapishtim were descended the rest of humanity.

GENESIS

The account of the flood in Genesis is well integrated within the whole history. It reinforces the theme of the earlier chapters: the sin of mankind. The conclusion is the covenant God made with Noah, recalling the covenant He made with Adam. Soon after in the account of Genesis there follows the third covenant: with Abraham.

The account begins with the motive: sinful humanity: "Yahweh saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that the thoughts in his heart fashioned nothing but wickedness all day long." (6:5). Then we have the picture of Noah, reminiscent of Adam:

"Noah was a good man, a man of integrity among his contemporaries, and he walked with God." (6:9)

Immediately following is a second picture of corrupt humanity: "The earth grew corrupt in God's sight, and filled with violence. ..." (6:11)

God decides to make an end of all men. He tells Noah about this and makes him build an ark giving him — as in Gilgamesh Epic — exact measurements. God tells him that he will destroy mankind by "a flood" (6:17), but "I will establish my Covenant with you" (6:18). Noah is given further instructions for the preservation of Noah's family, animals, fowls, etc.

"Seven days later the waters of the flood appeared on the earth." (7:10) — it is seven days as in the Gilgamesh Epic. It is evident that there are two different narratives going on at the same time. One says: "It rained on the earth for forty days and forty nights" (7:12, cf. also 7:17); the other says: "The water rose on the earth for a hundred and fifty days." (7:24; cf. also 8:4)

All life, except that in the ark, becomes extinct. After forty days Noah opens a "porthole" (8:6) and sends out a raven which goes off, comes back and off. He then sends out a dove which finding nowhere to perch returns to the ark. After seven more days (8:10) he sends out the dove again, which returns in the evening with a new olive-branch in its beak. After seven more days he sends out the dove again, which now does not return.

The ark finally settles on dry land. God tells Noah to get out of the ark with all that is in it. When the ark is emptied, Noah builds an altar for Yahweh on which are offered chosen burnt offerings. Then we have the image far superior to the one in the Gilgamesh Epic:

Yahweh smelt the appeasing fragrance and said to himself, "Never again will I curse the earth because of man, because his heart contrives evil from his infancy. Never again will I strike down every living thing as I have done." (8:11)

The conclusion of the whole story is the Covenant:

God spoke to Noah and his sons, "See, I establish my Covenant with you, and with your descendants after you;... There shall be no flood to destroy the earth again." (9:8-11)

And as a sign of the Covenant: the rainbow in the clouds — a beautiful image after a storm.

This is the story as narrated in Genesis. The difficulty about it is the two-versions narrative: the Yahwistic and the Priestly. The Priestly story was longer, and since it was composed later it remained essentially the definitive form and content of the final redaction. To understand the whole narrative one must refer to the Priestly story. For a correct understanding of the narrative as it is now, a knowledge of the characteristics of both traditions is necessary.

According to the Priestly tradition the catastrophe was much greater in every respect. In the Yahwistic tradition the flood was caused by a

rain during forty days and lasted sixty-one days. In the same tradition we read that "Yahweh smelt the appeasing fragrance". (8:21). It is a striking anthropomorphism coming from the ancient tradition, but the Yahwist author did not remove it: by it he could allude to Noah: **reah hannihoah**.

The Priestly tradition mentions man's corruption abruptly and simply as a fact. But the Yahwistic puts the flood much better with its inner motivation within the context of primeval history. The flood is the Last Judgment in which God stops sin spreading on the earth.

CONCLUSION

The story of the flood testifies to God's power and freedom which allowed humanity to be engulfed in sin. It shows also God as He who judges sin, and the whole story stands at the beginning of the Bible to stand for God's deadly anger over sin. It protects all succeeding words of grace from all kinds of evil. The story of the flood shows an eschatological world judgement seen from the standpoint of preservation. It shows God's miracle to defend the just.

There is the natural and historical aspect of the flood. Theology is not competent to state an independent opinion on this question. But even natural scientists have not considered sufficient the common explanation, that is that the world literatures about a flood was each caused by a local catastrophe. This kind of saga is found among Indians, Indians of the Americas, Australians, Africans, Melanesians, Persians, Eskimos, Kamchatkans. It is remarkably the same: flood caused by rain. It requires the assumption that there was an actual cosmic flood.

In Genesis as in the Epic of Gilgamesh the same elements are used: the building of the boat, the entry of the animals, the flood, loosing of birds and the sacrifice. Whereas in the Gilgamesh Epic the gods quarrel and cry, in Genesis Yahweh is the Judge and Overseer. Instead of the nauseating picture of swarming flies, in Genesis we read:

"As long as earth lasts,
sowing and reaping,
cold and heat,
summer and winter,
day and night
shall cease no more." (8:22)

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