Prof. John Day

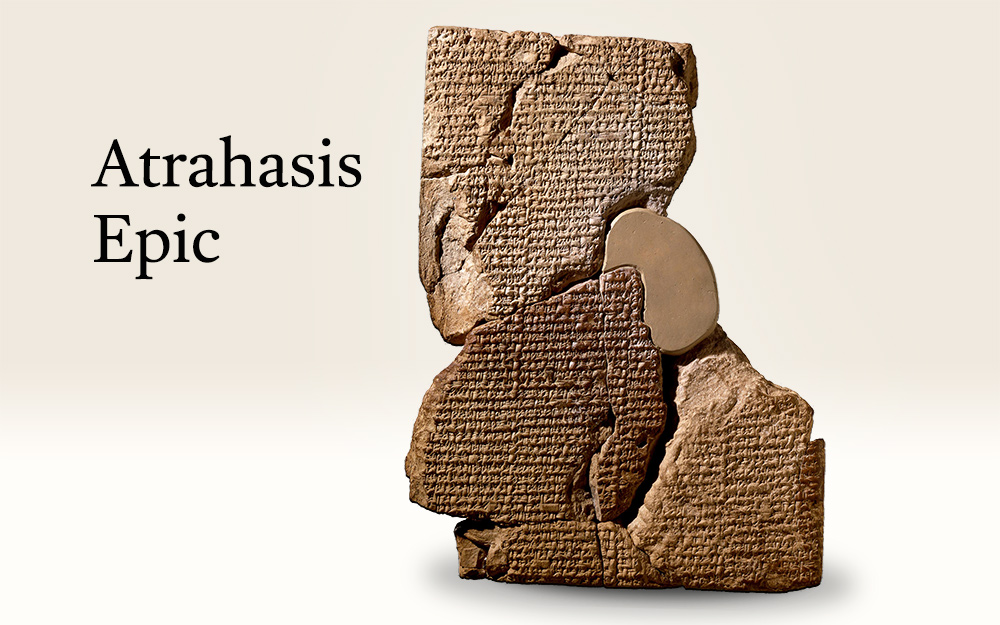
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The Mesopotamian Origin of the Biblical Flood Story

In the Gilgamesh epic, Utanapishti tells Gilgamesh the story of the great flood and how he survived it. Scholars have often held that this story lies behind the biblical account of Noah and the flood. However, a good case can be made that an even more ancient tale, the Atrahasis epic, on which the flood story in Gilgamesh draws, is the source of the biblical flood story.

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Part of the Epic of Atrahasis, found in Sippar, dating from the reign of King Ammisaduqa of Babylon (ca. 1635 B.C.E.). British Museum (Museum #78941). Parts of the epic are broken, with quite a number of the lines missing.

The biblical flood story is a composite of two flood stories spliced together (commonly called Yahwistic and Priestly),[1] and most biblical scholars agree that it is ultimately dependent on a Mesopotamian flood story. The land of Israel, and the Levant more generally, is more subject to drought than floods, so it is natural to suppose that the story originated outside this area.

Although many flood stories exist throughout the world,[2] the biblical parallels to the Mesopotamian flood story are particularly close. A connection between the two stories was in fact already proposed two thousand years ago by the first-century C.E. Jewish historian Josephus (in *Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.93 and *Against Apion* 1.130), who clearly regarded them as narrating the same event.

Berossus and the Priestly Flood Story

Josephus knew the Mesopotamian flood story from the work of the Babylonian priest Berossus (ca. 280 B.C.E.),[3] who had had access to Babylonian cuneiform sources but recounted Babylonian history (including supposed history) in Greek for the Hellenistic world. Of course, Berossus was too late to have influenced the biblical flood story itself,[4] but some particularly close parallels, often overlooked, between Berossus and the Priestly (P) version of the flood story in Genesis suggest they shared some common traditions.

**Precise dates for start of the flood**—Berossus, unlike earlier versions of the Mesopotamian flood story considered below, gives a precise date for the beginning of the flood. This is 15th Daisios, equivalent to 15th Iyyar in the Hebrew calendar (Daisios/Iyyar is April/May), only two days different from the date given by P in Gen 7:11 (17th day of the second month, 17th Iyyar; P used the spring New Year calendar).

**Armenia**—In Berossus, the ark landed in Armenia, which is exactly what “the mountains of Ararat” refer to, the landing place of Noah’s ark in Genesis 8:4. Ararat alludes to Urartu, the ancient name of Armenia. The current Mt. Ararat in eastern Turkey, where ever-hopeful explorers go looking for remains of Noah’s ark, has only been regarded by some as the site of the ark landing since the Middle Ages.

**Oblong shaped Ark**—In Berossus, unlike earlier Mesopotamian flood narratives, the ark is longer than it is wide, like the ark in P’s Genesis account (Gen 6:15), though their precise dimensions are quite different.

**Tenth Generation**—In Berossus, the flood hero Xisouthros is the tenth in a line of long-lived antediluvian kings, just as in Genesis 5, Noah is the tenth in a line of long-lived antediluvian patriarchs. The names are quite different, but all of Berossus’s names are attested for antediluvian kings in earlier versions of the Sumerian King List.

It should also be noted that the name Xisouthros is a Greek form of the Sumerian name Ziusudra, the flood hero in a Sumerian version of the flood story from about 1600 B.C.E.[5] While this version is ancient enough to be the source of the biblical text, it is unlikely that the biblical flood story is dependent on such a recherché language.

The Gilgamesh Epic

In the nineteenth century, with the discovery of tablet 11 of the Gilgamesh epic, the Mesopotamian flood story was finally found attested on an ancient cuneiform tablet. This discovery caused a sensation; the orientalist Sir Wallis Budge[6] reported that, on first reading the cuneiform tablet in the British Museum, its discoverer George Smith declared:

“I am the first man to read that after more than two thousand years of oblivion.” Setting the tablet on the table, he jumped up and rushed about the room in a great state of excitement, and, to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself!

When, now fully dressed, he announced his discovery to the Society of Biblical Archaeology in London on December 3rd, 1872 there was again great excitement. At this gathering a number of noteworthy Victorian dignitaries were present, including even the Prime Minister, William Gladstone, who was an amateur theologian.[7]

In the Gilgamesh epic, arguably the earliest great piece of world literature, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk (biblical Erech, modern Warka in Iraq), after various adventures and the death of his best friend Enkidu, is on a quest for immortality. In the account of the flood in tablet 11, which was not part of the original Old Babylonian Gilgamesh epic, the flood hero Utanapishti recounts to Gilgamesh the story of the flood, which was the prelude to his being made immortal, the only man to achieve this.

The flood story recounted by Utanapishti runs as follows.[8] The god Ea warned Utanapishti of an imminent flood and instructed him to build a boat to preserve life. The chief god, Enlil, then brought a flood upon the world which lasted six days and seven nights, following which the ark landed on Mt Nimush[9] (in modern Iraqi Kurdistan).

After another seven days, Utanapishti released a dove, which returned, then a swallow, which also returned, and finally a raven, which did not return. The flood clearly now over, Utanapishti offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and the gods gathered round like flies to savor the smell of the sacrifice. Finally, Utanapishti was made immortal.

Apart from having the same general outline, the following parallels with Genesis are particularly striking:

**Landing on a mountain**—The ark lands on a mountain, either in Iraqi Kurdistan (Gilgamesh), or in Armenia (Genesis), which is not that distant.

**Three birds**—The flood hero sends out three birds in succession to see if the flood is over, two of which return and the final one does not (dove, swallow, and raven in Gilgamesh, and a dove three times over in Gen 8.8-12 [J]; the lone raven in Gen 8:7 is from P).

**Smell of sacrifice**—Following the flood, the flood hero offers a sacrifice, and the gods, or YHWH, savor the smell of the sacrifice.

While the Gilgamesh epic is certainly ancient, archaeologists in the nineteenth century discovered an even earlier version of the Mesopotamian flood narrative, the Atrahasis epic.

The Atrahasis Epic

The Atrahasis epic is known in various recensions dating from the second and first millennia B.C.E. None is perfectly preserved, but the best preserved is an Old Babylonian version dating from the seventeenth century B.C.E.[10] This was discovered at Nineveh in the nineteenth century, and has since been in the British Museum, but the tablets were not all put together and properly understood till the 1960s.[11]

The story of the deluge comes at the climax of a larger work. Originally, we read that the gods were like men, undertaking labor on earth, but finally humans were created in order to relieve the gods of work. However, as human beings multiplied in number, so their noise increased, and this disturbed the sleep of the chief god, Enlil. In consequence, Enlil brought first a plague, then a drought, next a famine, and finally a flood to destroy human beings and their noise.

Another god, Enki (=Ea), warned Atrahasis (meaning “exceedingly wise”) of the imminent arrival of the flood in seven days, and he built a boat of wood, reeds, and pitch (cf. Gen 6:14, if we read *qānîm*, ‘reeds’ for *qinnîm*, ‘rooms’). The flood came and lasted seven days and nights. When it ended, Atrahasis offered sacrifice, and the gods gathered round like flies to savor the smell.

Following the deluge, a new order of human society was instigated by Enki. This new order allowed humanity to continue in existence, but various constraints were placed on human reproduction in order to prevent numbers getting out of control again.

Dependent on the Atrahasis Epic, Not the Gilgamesh Epic

Several reasons suggest that the Genesis flood story depends on Atrahasis rather than the eleventh tablet of Gilgamesh.[12]

**(1) Third Person Narrative Voice**—The Atrahasis epic is a third-person narrative, like the Genesis flood story. In contrast, the flood story in the Gilgamesh epic, tablet 11, is a first-person narrative recounted by the flood hero Utanapishti to Gilgamesh. It is generally accepted that the Gilgamesh flood story is based on an earlier version recounted in Atrahasis.[13] (Utanapishti is even called Atrahasis twice, in Gilgamesh 11.49, 197.) Consequently, to hold that the biblical flood story was dependent on Gilgamesh involves assuming that, after the Gilgamesh epic changed Atrahasis’s third-person narrative into the first person, Genesis changed it back again to the third person with knowledge only of Gilgamesh. It is simpler to assume that Genesis was dependent on Atrahasis.

**(2) Proximity to Creation Story**—As in Atrahasis, the flood story in Genesis is set a few generations after the creation of humanity. In the Gilgamesh epic, however, the flood story has been wrenched from its original context and is narrated in order to show how it was that the flood hero eventually gained immortality. So again, it would seem more natural to assume that Genesis was dependent on the Atrahasis epic rather than on Gilgamesh.

**(3) Seven Days**—In the Yahwistic (J) version of the flood story YHWH announces that the flood will take place after seven days (Gen 7:4; cf. 7:10).

בראשית ז:ד כִּי לְיָמִים עוֹד שִׁבְעָה אָנֹכִי מַמְטִיר עַל ־הָאָרֶץ...

Gen 7:4 For in seven days I will send rain on the earth…

Similarly, in the Atrahasis epic (3.1.37), the god Enki announces to Atrahasis that the flood will come on the seventh night:

He [Enki] announced to him [Atrahasis] the coming of the flood for the seventh night.[14]

Now in the Gilgamesh epic, although the flood does indeed begin after seven days (Gilgamesh 11.97ff.), the precise timing is not divinely communicated to the flood hero until one day before the rain comes (Gilgamesh 11.87-88), unlike with Atrahasis and Noah. It is difficult to believe that the Gilgamesh epic, having changed the announcement from seven days before to the day before the flood, should be followed by J, knowing only Gilgamesh, altering the divine announcement to seven days in advance again. It would be more natural to assume that J was familiar with a version of Atrahasis.

**(4) Two by Two**—In a fairly recently discovered cuneiform tablet, now in the British Museum, containing part of the Atrahasis epic (Irving Finkel’s so-called Ark tablet), the wild animals come into the ark in twos (lines 51-52).[15]

But the wild anim[als of the st]eppe [(…)  
Two by two the boat did [they enter] …[……]

We may compare Genesis, where in P all animals come into the ark two by two (Gen 6.18), and in J the unclean animals enter the ark two at a time, though clean animals enter in sevens (Gen 7:2). In contrast, the Gilgamesh epic says nothing about the number of animals entering the ark. Further, Finkel also reports[16] that, having re-examined the Old Babylonian version of the Atrahasis epic in the British Museum originally published by Lambert and Millard,[17] part of the word for “two” can be detected at precisely the right point in the narrative (Atrahasis 3.2.38).

**(5) No More Floods**—After the flood is over, in both the J and P accounts God promises that he will not bring about another comparable flood. Thus, in J, YHWH declares (Gen 8:21):

בראשית ח:כא לֹא־ אֹסִף לְקַלֵּל עוֹד אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה בַּעֲבוּר הָאָדָם כִּי יֵצֶר לֵב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְּעֻרָיו וְלֹא־אֹסִף עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת אֶת־כָּל־חַי כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי.

Gen 8:21 I will never again curse the ground because of humanity, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from its youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

And in P, God in Genesis 9 similarly promises that there will never again be another worldwide flood (Gen 9:11; cf. v. 15):

בראשית ט:יא וַהֲקִמֹתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם וְלֹא־יִכָּרֵת כָּל־בָּשָׂר עוֹד מִמֵּי הַמַּבּוּל וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה עוֹד מַבּוּל לְשַׁחֵת הָאָרֶץ.

Gen 9:11 I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.

Now, there is nothing comparable to this at the end of the flood story in the Gilgamesh epic. However, toward the end of the Atrahasis epic, in a Neo-Babylonian fragment, the god Ea declares[18]:

“Henceforth let no flood be brought about,  
But let people last forever!”

**(6) Fruitful and Multiply**—After the flood is over, we also read that God commanded humanity to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 9:1, cf. 9:7 [P]), reiterating what was said at the time of creation (Gen 1:28):

בראשית ט:א וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נֹחַ וְאֶת־בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמִלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ.

Gen 9:1 God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.”

As Tikva Frymer-Kensky, among others, has noted,[19] this sounds suspiciously like a polemic against the Atrahasis epic, where rather than receiving a divine command to multiply, humanity is destined to have its future growth limited by divine decree (Atrahasis 3.7.2–8):[20]

(Let there be) among the peoples women who bear and women who do not bear,  
Let there be among the peoples the *Pašittu*-demon  
To snatch the baby from the lap of her who bore it.  
Establish *Ugbabtu*-women, *Entu*-women, and *Igiṣītu*-women,  
And let them be taboo and so stop childbirth.

Yet again, nothing comparable is found in the Gilgamesh epic.

Counting Parallels

One apparent argument in favor of the Utanapishti story from Gilgamesh as the origin of the biblical accounts is that it provides more parallels with the biblical flood story than Atrahasis. However, parallels need to be weighed, not merely counted, and this is what I have attempted to do here.

Take, for example, the threefold sending out of birds from the ark in Genesis 8:8–12. As noted above, this has striking similarities to the account in Gilgamesh. Nevertheless, while we currently have no such parallel in Atrahasis, this is probably because the Atrahasis epic is broken at precisely this point.

In fact there are as many as approximately 55 missing lines between where the Atrahasis epic breaks off during the course of the flood in tablet 3, column 4, and where we read of Atrahasis's offering sacrifice after the flood in tablet 3, column 5,[21] which is more than enough space to record the sending out of the birds (which takes up only ten lines in Gilgamesh) and much else. As the Gilgamesh version of the flood is largely based on the Atrahasis epic, it is likely that the sending out of the birds was in Atrahasis too, and that the biblical account got it from there.[22]

In short, probably the reason we have more parallels between Utanapishti and Noah than Atrahasis and Noah is because the Gilgamesh epic is more fully preserved.

Noah and Atrahasis

The biblical sources, J and P, reworked the Mesopotamian tradition in various ways, but both attempted to make it fit with the Israelite worldview. Amongst other things, in the Bible, the story has been “monotheized,” as only one God both brings the flood and delivers the flood hero and the others on the ark. The story has also been ethicized, insofar as the flood is now a punishment for human sin, not a counter to human overpopulation and noise, as in Atrahasis (or a mere whim of the god Enlil, as in Gilgamesh).

P, a sixth century source, doubtless picked up flood traditions in the Babylonian exile. The earlier J’s sources are more obscure; presumably the flood was known from oral tradition, though when exactly it passed over from Babylonia is unclear. But the Utanapishti story in the epic of Gilgamesh is probably not the source for the Yahwistic and Priestly flood stories. Rather, as I have attempted to show, both J and P were likely indebted to the Atrahasis epic, just like Gilgamesh tablet 11.[23]

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-mesopotamian-origin-of-the-biblical-flood-story)

1. Editor’s note: For an discussion of the standard source division into J and P, see, TABS Editors, [“A Textual Study of Noah’s Flood,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/a-textual-study-of-noahs-flood) *TheTorah* (2014).
2. See Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 82-131 for numerous examples.
3. See Stanley M. Burstein, *The*Babyloniaca*of Berossus*,Sources from the Ancient Near East, 1.5 (Malibu, CA: Undena, 1978), 20-21.
4. We may safely dismiss the audacious thesis of Russel E. Gmirkin, *Berossus and Genesis, Manetho and Exodus: Hellenistic Historians and the Date of the Pentateuch*, LHBOTS 433 (London: T&T Clark, 2006), that Genesis was dependent on Berossus and only compiled in the third century B.C.E.
5. See Miguel Civil, in Wilfred G. Lambert and Alan R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 138–145; Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harp that Once…Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 145–150. Cf. too, Jacobsen, “The Eridu Genesis,” *Journal of Biblical* *Literature* 100 (1981), 513–529.
6. E.A.W. Budge, *The Rise and Progress of Assyriology* (London: Martin Hopkinson, 1925), 153.
7. Budge, *The Rise and Progress of Assyriology*, 113. For a very readable account of the rediscovery of the Gilgamesh epic, see David Damrosch, *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007).
8. For an up-to-date popular edition of the Gilgamesh epic, see Andrew R. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 2nd ed., Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2019), which is a thorough revision of the 1999 edition. George has also produced a magisterial critical edition of the text, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh* *Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts* (2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
9. Formerly read Niṣir. See W.G. Lambert, “Note brève, Niṣir or Nimuš,” *Revue d’Assyriologie* 80 (1986): 185-86.
10. See Lambert and Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs* (above, n. 5). A more recent translation may be found in Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2005), 227-80.
11. The summary here is taken from this version.
12. Editor’s note: Another argument for Atrahasis as the Bible’s source appears in Shalom Holtz, [“The Flood Story in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-flood-story-in-its-ancient-near-eastern-context) *TheTorah* (2014).
13. Though probably a Middle Babylonian rather than an Old Babylonian version. For evidence of dependence, see Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 214–229.
14. Translation from, Lambert and Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs*, 91.
15. Translation by Irving Finkel, *The Ark before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014), 365. It is not known where or when exactly this Ark tablet was excavated. But it came into Finkel’s possession at the British Museum in 2009, though he had known about it since 1985. See Finkel, *The Ark before Noah*, 7-9.
16. Finkel, *The Ark before Noah*, 189.
17. See the book cited above in n. 5.
18. See Wilfred G. Lambert in Ira Spar and Wilfred G. Lambert (eds.), *Cuneiform Texts in the Metropolitan Museum of* *Art. II. Literary and Scholastic Texts of the First Millennium B.C*. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Brepols, 2005), 199, reverse, col. 5, lines 13-14.
19. E.g., Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “The Atrahasis Epic and its Significance for Understanding Genesis 1-9,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 40 (1977): 147-55 (150), reprinted in *The Flood Myth*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 61–73 (66).
20. Translation from Lambert and Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs*, 103.
21. See Lambert and Millard, *Atra-ḫasis*, 97, 99.
22. Editor’s Note: For more on the releasing-birds theme in biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts, see Guy Darshan, [“The Motif of Releasing Birds in ANE Flood Stories,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-motif-of-releasing-birds-in-ane-flood-stories) *The Torah* (2017).
23. I have previously discussed various aspects of the material in this article in John Day, *From Creation to* *Babel: Studies in Genesis 1–11* LHBOTS, 592 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 61–76 and 98–112.