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Ancient Flood Stories

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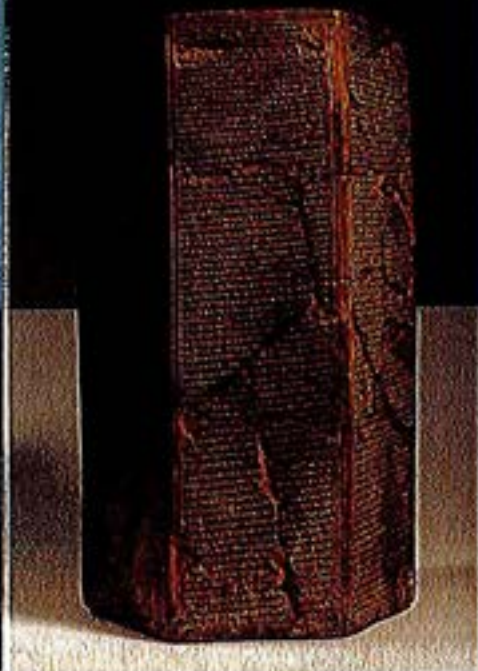
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The Ark Prepared

13 And God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth.

14 Make yourself an ark of gopherwood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and outside with pitch.

15 And this is how you shall make it: The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits.

16 You shall make a window for the ark, and you shall finish it to a cubit from above; and set the door of the ark in its side. You shall make it with lower, second, and third decks.

17 And behold, I Myself am bringing floodwaters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh



Ancient Flood Stories—Genesis 7

Ancient flood narratives were common across a wide variety of cultures (e.g., Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome). Such extrabiblical stories resemble some aspects of the biblical flood account of Genesis 6–9. Three from Mesopotamia have become famous because of their parallels with biblical flood motifs. A few Egyptian flood stories do exist, such as one from the *Book of the Dead* in which, after people rebelled, the god Atum wanted to destroy everything on the earth (see also the *Legend of the Destruction of Mankind and Myth of the Heavenly Cow*). However, the Egyptian flood stories have very few similarities to the biblical story or even the Mesopotamian myths.

The first record of the three major Mesopotamian extrabiblical flood myths is preserved in the *Eridu* Genesis dated from approximately 1600 BC. This single fragmentary Sumerian tablet was found in ancient Nippur in 1914. It describes how the gods, for some unknown reason, decided to wipe out humanity, but the water-god Enki insisted on saving them. He informed Ziusudra, a pious and humble king, of the terrible decision and advised him to save himself by building a large boat. Most of the details are now lost, but the remaining fragments tell of powerful winds and a deluge of water covering the surface of the earth. Those in the boat survived. After a break, the text mentions that Ziusudra worshiped An (sky-god) and Enki (chief of the gods) and received immortality.

The second narrative is the *Old Babylonian Atrahasis Epic*, written on various Akkadian tablets around 1600 BC and found in 1956. The story reports that as humans multiplied, they began to make so much noise that the gods could not sleep. Consequently, the god of Earth, Enki, decided to destroy humanity. First, Enki sent a plague, but his plan failed when Atrahasis, whose name meant "very woe" with the assistance of Enki, showed the people how to defeat the plague by sacrificing to the specific god that Enki had placed in charge of spreading the deadly disease. He also gave the same advice to defeat Enki's attempts to wipe out humans through drought

and famine. Finally, Enki decided to flood the whole world. Enki insisted that no god was to warn Atrahasis, and they were not to let humanity's sacrifices influence them.

Nevertheless, Enki revealed the plan to Atrahasis, who built a giant boat for himself, his family, and the animals. The entire earth was flooded for seven days and nights, and only those in the boat escaped death. After seven days, the flood ceased, and Atrahasis offered sacrifices to the gods.

The third extra-biblical flood account appears in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, discovered in 1872. Though the version we have today is a Neo-Assyrian one from ca. eighth–seventh century BC, the account is much older, probably dating from before 2000 BC. This narrative from ancient Babylonia is undoubtedly the most significant literary achievement of the ancient world. The hero in the epic is Gilgamesh, a mighty king of Uruk. Distressed by the death of his friend Enkidu and faced with his own mortality, he sets out on a series of journeys in search of immortality. He sought answers from and looked for his ancestor Utnapishtim, who had received eternal life, but Utnapishtim counsels Gilgamesh to abandon his search for eternal life. Later he tells Gilgamesh about a plant that can make him young again. Although Gilgamesh obtains the plant from the bottom of the sea, a serpent cunningly steals it, and Gilgamesh returns home to the city of Uruk, having abandoned hope of either immortality or renewed youth.

The flood portion of this narrative relates how Utnapishtim was commissioned by Enki to build a colossal ship called "Preserver of Life." He brought on board his wife, family, and relatives as well as the craftspeople of his village; baby animals; and stores of grain. The flood destroyed all the animals and the people, but Utnapishtim and those with him survived. After 12 days on the water, Utnapishtim saw land and rested on his ship for seven days. On the seventh day, he sent out a dove and later a swallow that returned with nothing. In the end, he dispatched a raven that did not return, a sign that the water had receded. Utnapishtim then freed all the

in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die.

18 But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall go into the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.

19 And of every living thing of all flesh you shall bring two of every sort into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female.

20 Of the birds after their kind, of animals after their kind, and of every creeping thing of the earth after its kind, two of every kind will come to you to keep them alive.

21 And you shall take for yourself of all food that is eaten, and you shall gather it to yourself; and it shall be food for you and for them."

22 Thus Noah did; according to all that God commanded him, so he did.

ANCIENT TEXTS AND ARTIFACTS

animals and made sacrifices to the gods. He and his wife received immortality, as well as a place among the heavenly gods, because of his devotion to them and the fact that he preserved humanity.

There are several important distinctions between the biblical flood story and the Mesopotamian flood stories. First, the biblical story is monotheistic and describes the actions of a single God, the Creator, while the mythological accounts are polytheistic, mentioning many gods. Second, in the biblical story, the motivation for the flood is related to the wickedness of people who violently destroy everything good, beautiful, and meaningful. Even though they were the cause of the destruction, God in His mercy intervened to preserve life (Gen. 6:11-13). In the Mesopotamian story of Atrahasis, the gods give only an arbitrary reason for the flood; they were disturbed by the noisy humans, so the gods decided to destroy them. Third, the non-biblical stories do not present the same sequence of events like the biblical narrative, namely, Creation, Fall, Flood, and Re-creation. While the Atrahasis Epic contains three broad sequential segments—creation, multiplication of humanity, and the flood—it says nothing about humanity's fall into sin, one of the principal points in the Genesis account.

Fourth, the length of rain and the duration of the flood do not match. Fifth, the mythological narratives depict angry deities who need to be appeased. The biblical story pictures a loving and caring God who feels deep pain in His heart when forced to destroy those who are agents of destruction (Gen. 6:5-6; cf. Rev. 11:18). Sixth, Noah's offering of sacrifices illustrates how to approach the holy God and points to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ who takes away our sin, guilt, and shame. Sacrifices in the extra-biblical accounts seek to appease angry gods and are depicted as food to be given to them. The gods need the food for sustenance but in the Bible, it is God who provides food.

Seventh, the non-biblical accounts have no reference to a covenant that God makes with humanity, while the biblical story culminates with the concept of such a covenant. The rainbow is a sign of His mercy and faithfulness. The flood is an



Tablet 11 of the Gilgamesh Epic relating its version of a flood story

undoing of Creation and a new beginning with a re-creation. Eighth, the Mesopotamian gods try to hide the impending flood to ensure the destruction of humanity. In the Bible, God Himself makes provision for the deliverance and salvation of humanity in collaboration with Noah. Ninth, God preserves the fulfillment of His promise given in Genesis 3:15 that from a godly woman will come the Promised Seed, the Messiah. If God had not intervened, the wickedness would have overtaken even the last faithful family, and the Savior of the world could not have been born.

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BELIEFS AND TEACHINGS

Clean and Unclean Food—Leviticus 11

The biblical dietary laws recorded in Leviticus 11 are unique (Lev. 11:1-23, 41-47, and the main parallel passage in Deut. 14:1-21; also Lev. 20:22-26). Such an elaborate list of clean and unclean animals is unknown outside of Leviticus 11 or Deuteronomy 14 or elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern literature. We must keep in mind that the biblical legislation is about more than not eating pork. The list is broadly comprehensive and includes all the categories of living creatures mentioned in the creation account of Genesis 1 (land animals, birds, and swarms), but only verses 2-3, 10-20, 23, and 41-43 refer to animals unfit for human consumption.

The literary structure demonstrates that only a specific portion of Leviticus 11 applies to the topic of clean and unclean food laws (Lev. 11:1-23 and 41-47).

It's a general rule, "unclean" does not mean dirty or sinful. A person can do something moral and perfectly ethical, yet he or she may be proclaimed ritually unclean. For example, when a son buries his father, he becomes unclean for seven days because of his contact with a dead body. A mother who gives birth becomes unclean for a certain period of time. Those who were unclean could not come to the temple and worship God (2 Chron. 29:19) because of the realization that uncleanliness reflects humanity's basic broken condition. The terms "clean" and "unclean" therefore refer to different levels in different contexts related to cultic practice, hygiene, health, a need for physical recovery or protection, etc. The biblical categories of clean and unclean, in general replicate life and death principles in which "clean" points to life and "unclean" to death. Also, the clean and unclean food category is more specific because "clean" means edible and "unclean" means, i.e., not fit for human consumption (see the parallel in Lev. 11:47).

Scholars and interpreters have offered a wide range of hypotheses to explain the rationale behind the divinely instituted distinction between clean and unclean animals. We can summarize such theories into the following 14 categories: literary command, cultic, sociological, symbolic, didactic, psychological/repulsive, taboo/totemism, death-life antithesis, anthropological, nature/culture boundary, ethical/moral, artificial paradigm, economic, or hygienic/health. However,

the main rationale behind the distinction between clean and unclean food is theological, namely, respect for the Holy Creator God. This theological interpretation recognizes a close connection between the biblical Creation account and the Mosaic food laws.

In the majority of cases, meat consumption in the Middle East consisted of domestic animals such as cattle, sheep, goats, poultry, and fish, which Scripture categorizes as clean food. Archaeologists have found that the inhabitants of towns outside of Israel also consumed pork and seafood, but not in places where the Israelites lived. Most probably, pigs came to Canaan from Mesopotamia as well as from ancient Greece by the Sea People.

Mesopotamia abhorred pigs for their filthy habits. One ancient text declares: "The pig is unholy [and] bespattering his backside, making the street smell, polluting the houses. The pig is not fit for a temple, lacks sense, is not allowed to tread on pavements. An abomination to all the gods, an abhorrence [to his god], accused by Samas!" However, it did not prevent people from consuming or sacrificing animals to their gods.

Nowhere in the NT do we find the distinction between clean and unclean food abolished despite attempts to prove otherwise. All texts used for this purpose, such as Matthew 15:17-20, Mark 7:19, Acts 10:15, 15:28-29, Romans 14:14, 1 Corinthians 8:8, 10:23-27, and 1 Timothy 4:1-5 fall short either because they use different terminology from that which refers to unclean animals or their specific contexts suggest another interpretation. These passages must always be studied in their specific contexts and interpreted according to their intended purpose. Neither Jesus nor the apostles changed the biblical legislation regarding food that upholds our Creator and shows us how to demonstrate our respect to His creation order. The food table should be a silent witness to our respect for our Holy Creator who, by the fact that He created us, knows what is for our best. The apostle Paul aptly states the main principle that should guide believers in their choices of food, drink, and other activities: "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

Hanson, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 444.
 Lambert, *Babylonian Talmud Literature*, 13-16.
 Mitchell, "The Validity of the Levitical Food Laws of Clean and Unclean Animals: A Case Study of Biblical Hermeneutics," 3-21.
 Mitchell, *The Laws of Clean and Unclean Animals in Leviticus 11: Their Nature, Purpose, and Rationale: An Historical Study*.
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...the king's scribes were called on the first day of the first month, and a decree was written according to all that Haman commanded—the king's satraps, to the governors who were in each province, to the officials of all people, in every province according to its script, and to every people in their language. In the name of the king, it was written, and sealed with the king's signet ring.

King Ahasuerus It was written, and sealed with the king's signet ring.

13 And the letters were sent by couriers into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions.*

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Fasting—Esther 4:1

Fasting is a well-attested biblical practice, usually performed for religious purposes that represents the voluntary abstinence from consumption of food for a certain period. It prepares the body and mind to hunger for God and helps to fix our attention on spiritual things in order not to be distracted by worldly matters. Not meant to earn special favor from God, fasting seeks to bring Him closer to us. It is a response to His Spirit that enables us to be more receptive to His Spirit and to accept His grace and leadership.

The Hebrew term for fasting includes the verb *tsom*, and is often used along with expressions such as "humbled himself" (Lev. 16:29; "afflict oneself" [Lev. 16:29], and "fast" [Lev. 16:29]). Greek uses the word *nepeuo*.

While fasting lasted for a day, but on special occasions the abstinence from food and even water was longer. Moses and Aaron fasted for 40 days (Exod. 34:28; Matt. 4:2). David fasted for 40 days for his son (2 Sam. 12:16, 18). Daniel fasted for three weeks (Dan. 10:3), and Esther for three days on behalf of God's people (Esther 4:16). We also read that Ezra (8:23) and Nehemiah (1:4) fasted, even though the text does not mention how long they fasted. Paul fasted involuntarily for two weeks during the *Paul's Journey* (Acts 27:33), but deliberately after His encounter with Jesus (Acts 9:9) and before his first missionary journey (Acts 13:3).

The OT and NT contain additional examples of fasting. Moses fasted several times on behalf of Israel (Deut. 9:9, 10:10; 32:10). David fasted and mourned the death of Abner (2 Sam. 11:12) and Abner (2 Sam. 3:35). Elijah fasted and was strengthened by God (1 Kings 19:8). Ahab fasted and humbled himself before God (1 Kings 21:27-29). Darius could not eat out of concern for Daniel (Dan. 6:18). Daniel fasted on behalf of Judah's sinners (Dan. 9:1-19), and he also fasted after receiving a vision from God (Dan. 10:2-3). Ezra (8:23) and wept for the sins of the returning remnant (Ezra 8:21). The Ninevites fasted after hearing Jonah's message (Jonah 3:7).

Anna fasted to see the redemption of Jerusalem through the coming Messiah (Luke 2:36-37). John the Baptist's disciples fasted (Matt. 9:14-15). The elders, prophets, and teachers in Antioch fasted before sending Paul and Barnabas into ministry (Acts 13:1-3; cf. 14:23).

Scripture frequently connects prayer and fasting (Dan. 9:3; Luke 2:37) because fasting helps to focus on things above (Col. 3:1-5). The *Textus Receptus*—an edition of the Greek text of the New Testament established and first published by Erasmus—associates fasting with prayer in several texts (Matt. 17:21; Mark 9:29; 1 Cor. 7:5) even though in some early Greek manuscripts the word "fasting" does not appear in these verses. However, it is evident in the biblical material that fasting and prayer often go together. Fasting prepared Moses and Daniel for receiving God's revelation, and Daniel fasted to understand the Scriptures (Dan. 9:3; 10:2-3; cf. Deut. 9:9, 18).

As in the case of Ahab (1 Kings 21:27-29), fasting often was a part of repentance (2 Sam. 12:15-23; Neh. 9:1-2; Ps. 35:13; Joel 2:12-13). The Day of Atonement was the only day when fasting was prescribed (Lev. 16:29; 23:26-32; Num. 29:7; "afflict oneself" is an idiom indicating physical self-denial, including fasting). Jesus mentioned that His followers would fast after His death (Luke 5:35).

Isaiah 58:6-9 and Zechariah 7:5-10 describe true fasting and stress that it consists of an authentic life of helping others. Jeremiah lamented God's disapproval of people's hypocritical fasting (Jer. 14:11-12), and Joel and Jesus explain that genuine fasting is not an external display but a matter of the heart (Joel 2:12-13; Matt. 6:16-18; cf. Jer. 36:6, 9). Fasting is also beneficial for self-control and practicing self-discipline because this biblical practice enhances spiritual life. It is interesting that Judaism, which underlined the importance of fasting, did not practice it on Sabbath (except when the Day of Atonement fell on Sabbath) because the Sabbath is to be a time of joy and delight (Isa. 58:13-14) and thus not compatible with fasting.

8 Rehum^a the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes in this fashion:

9 From^b Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions—representatives of the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the people of Persia and Erech and Babylon and Shushan,^c the Dehavites, the Elamites,

10 and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnapper took captive and

settled in the cities of Samaria and the remainder beyond the River^d—and so forth.

11 (This is a copy of the letter that they sent him

To King Artaxerxes from your servants, the men of the region beyond the River, and so forth.)^e

12 Let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us in Jerusalem, and are building the rebellious and evil city, and are finishing its walls and repairing the foundations.

13 Let it now be known to the king that, if this city is built and the walls completed, they will not pay tax, tribute, or custom, and the king's treasury will be diminished.

14 Now because we receive support from the palace, it was not proper for us to see the king's dishonor; therefore we have seen and informed the king,

15 that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. And you will find in the book of the records and know that this city is a rebellious city, harmful to kings and provinces, and that they have incited

LANDS AND PLACES

Susa—Ezra 4:9



www.qsfafez.com/ba/eng/ezr1.html

4:8 ^aThe original language of Ezra 4:8 through 6:18 is Aramaic. 4:9 ^bLiterally "then." ^cOr Susa. 4:10 ^dThat is, the Euphrates. ^eLiterally "and now." 4:11 ^fLiterally "and now."



RULERS AND EMPIRES

Darius I, King of Persia—Ezra 4

Darius I (522–486 BC), the third ruler of Persia, was not a member of the family of Cyrus and Cambyses but belonged to a collateral Achaemenid line. Both Persian and Greek sources have preserved his fame. His trilingual inscription



on the famous Behistun rock in western Iran (see the inscription) records his rise to power and the suppression of rebels against his government. The inscription was the key to the decipherment of the Akkadian language of Mesopotamia. In the postexilic period, construction had resumed the Temple after the decree of Cyrus. The encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1–2; Haggai 1:5) caused opposition from the enemies of the Jews. They sent an inquiry to Darius. Darius located a copy of the decree issued by Cyrus and ordered the Persian provincial governor Tattenai to support and provide government funding for the project (Ezra 6:1–12).

A trilingual inscription (Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian) Darius I had carved on a rock wall at Ganj Nameh near Hamadan, Iran. The stone carvers duplicated the wedge-shaped marks by a reed stylus in soft clay, the main method used in cuneiform writing.

And the hands of the common people will tremble.

I will do to them according to their way, and according to what they deserve I will judge them; then they shall know that I am the LORD!"

Abominations in the Temple

8 And it came to pass in the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in the house with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord GOD fell upon me there. Then I looked, and there was a likeness, like the appearance of fire—from the appearance of His waist and downward, fire; and from His waist and upward, like the appearance of brightness, like the color of amber.

He stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my hair; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the north

gate of the inner court, where the seat of the image of jealousy was, which provokes to jealousy.

4 And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I saw in the plain.

5 Then He said to me, "Son of man, lift your eyes now toward the north." So I lifted my eyes toward the north, and there, north of the altar gate, was this image of jealousy in the entrance.

6 Furthermore He said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel commits here, to make Me go far away from My sanctuary? Now turn again, you will see greater abominations."

7 So He brought me to the door of the court; and when I looked, there was a hole in the wall.

8 Then He said to me, "Son of man, dig into the wall"; and when I dug into the wall, there was a door.

9 And He said to me, "Go in, and see the wicked abominations which they are doing there."

10 So I went in and saw, and there—every sort of creeping thing, abominable beasts, and all the

GODS AND GODDESS

Tammuz—Ezekiel 8:14

Tammuz is a Hebrew name for the Sumerian god, Dumuzi, who was worshipped all over Mesopotamia from the third millennium BC onward. Dumuzi means "the good son" or "the right son." Although a deity of Sumerian origin, he was widely venerated in Egypt as Osiris, in Palestine as Eshmun, in Phrygia as Attis and in Syria and Greece as Adonis. In Sumerian mythology, Tammuz represented the life cycle of crops, thus a vegetation deity, where he was considered to be a "dying-and-rising" god. His worshippers believed that Tammuz died with the plants in the scorching heat of the dry summer but rose again during the next rainy season. He is associated with the cult of Inanna/Ishtar, his wife and sister, who descended to the underworld to bring him back to life in early spring after his annual death. Several ancient poems described the courtship and marriage of the two deities. Tammuz is related to the fertility cults (like the fertility god Baal), in other ancient traditions; Tammuz is presented as a shepherd, a god of pastures and flocks. The Babylonians, as well as the Assyrians, revered Tammuz in their pantheons.

Tammuz appears only once in the Bible, in a vision of the idolatrous practices at the Jerusalem Temple complex (Ezek. 8:14). After Tammuz was supposedly dead, worshippers cried during the annual ceremonies to bring the god back to life. The ritual lament for Tammuz was similar to the cult of

Hadad Rimmon, referred to in Zechariah 12:11, whose followers performed mourning ceremonies in the plain of Megiddo.

After the Babylonian captivity, the Jews adopted the Babylonian month names for their postbiblical calendar. Their religious year began in Nisan (March/April), and the fourth month (June/July), was named Tammuz. However, Tammuz as the name of a month does not occur in the Bible, most of the time the months simply being designated by their order in the calendar (first month, second month, etc.).

A modern clay impression from an ancient cylinder seal showing demons torturing the god Dumuzi in the underworld. A god who died and then rose back to life was a common religious motif in the ancient Near East. Osiris in Egypt and Baal in the Levant reflected this concept.

