

## **Noah's Flood: Babylonian or Egyptian in Origin?**

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There can be little doubt that some sort of literary relation exists between the Genesis Flood story and the Flood story in Tablet XI of the seventh century B.C.E. Gilgamesh epic. The nature of that relationship is unclear. Since the discovery of this tablet's Flood story, versions of the legend as early as the seventeenth century B.C.E. have been found. While the idea that the Babylonians borrowed from the Hebrews is widely rejected, scholars debate whether there is a direct dependence of Genesis on a version of the episode in Tablet XI or the two stories share an earlier common ancestor text.

My problem here is that Near Eastern scholarship treats the Noah-Gilgamesh relationship as a starting point for analyzing the origins of the Genesis Flood story and I see it as the end stage in a chain of literary relationships rooted initially in Egyptian Creation traditions, with the later Mesopotamian influences arising from harmonizing redactions that conform somewhat with the Gilgamesh version. I say "conform somewhat" because it is widely recognized that despite some parallels there are also significant differences between the two versions that need to be accounted for. Let's look first at some of the similarities between the two stories and then at some of the differences.

### **Similarities between Genesis and the Gilgamesh epic**

In both stories:

- The Flood occurs after humanity has populated the earth.

- The chief deity becomes angry with humanity.
- The chief deity wants to destroy mankind.
- A god warns one of the humans to design a special boat and take aboard the seed of living creatures.
- A great flood fills the earth.
- The boat eventually lands upon a mountain top.
- Birds are released to look for signs of land.
- A sacrifice is made at the end of the peril.
- A god regrets that the flood was unleashed.

### **Differences between Genesis and the Gilgamesh epic**

- In Genesis, the same god sets out to destroy mankind and warn one of the humans to build a boat. In Gilgamesh, rival gods perform these actions.
- In Genesis, God wants the flood the hero to survive. In Gilgamesh, the punishing deity wants the hero to die.
- In Genesis, the flood lasts a lot longer than it does in the Gilgamesh version.
- In Genesis, there is no secret as to why Noah was to build the ark. In Gilgamesh, the protective deity and the hero engage in deceit to hide the true purpose of the boat.
- In Genesis, the shape and dimensions of the boat differ radically from those in the Gilgamesh version.
- In Genesis, only eight humans get on the boat. In Gilgamesh, a much larger but unenumerated group enter the boat.

- In Genesis, the crafts workers are destroyed in the flood. In Gilgamesh, they are brought onto the boat and saved.
- In Genesis, the exact number of animals to be saved is given. In Gilgamesh, there is no limit on the number of animals to be saved.
- In Genesis, two different birds are released, first a raven, then the same dove released three times. In Gilgamesh, three birds are released, a dove, a swallow, and a raven, in that order.
- In Genesis, the hero remains mortal although he lives for almost 1000 years. In Gilgamesh, he becomes immortal.
- In Genesis, the survivor is named Noah. In Gilgamesh, the survivor is named Utnapishtim. (In the Sumerian version of the Babylonian story, the survivor is named Ziusudra.<sup>1</sup>)
- And, very importantly, there are significant moral differences between the two stories. In Genesis, morality is the central point of the story. Mankind had become corrupt and evil, and, while the evil must be eliminated, the good people must be preserved so that they can repopulate the earth. In the Babylonian account, mankind is simply a noisy inconvenience to be eliminated, and *all of mankind* is to be destroyed.

### **The Problem of the Genesis Raven**

From a literary standpoint, perhaps the most convincing piece of evidence for some sort of relationship between the Genesis and Babylonian Flood stories is the releasing of birds after the storm while the ark remains perched upon a mountain top. Gilgamesh has three different birds

released, each time to test if the flood waters have sufficiently retreated. In Genesis, the same bird is released three times for the same purpose. This is the sort of odd detail that one might not expect in a generic flood myth. But in Genesis, before the dove is released three times, a raven is released and that bird never returns. Why is there a fourth bird flight in the Genesis story and why doesn't the raven come back?

A partial answer has to do with the differences between the J and P sources for the Genesis Flood story. The raven belongs to the P source and the three birds corresponding to the Gilgamesh epic belong to the J source, but the two bird sources are tightly interwoven to create a single episode. The key sequence here is Genesis 8:5–13. Let me separate the two bird texts. For this division I rely on Richard Elliot Friedman's *Who Wrote the Bible?*<sup>2</sup>

Verse 8:5, from the P source, says, "The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared."<sup>3</sup> This is followed by verse 8:6, a J verse, which says, "At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made. . ."<sup>4</sup> That J verse is completed by verse 8:7, a P verse, which says, "and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth."<sup>5</sup> This is followed by Verse 8:8, a J verse, which says, "Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground."<sup>6</sup> Genesis then follows up with J verses that tell the story of the three doves.<sup>7</sup> Finally, at 8:13a, a P text, we are told, "In the six hundred first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth;" and that notice is completed by 8:13b, a J text, which says, " and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying."

What we see from this Genesis sequence is that the raven belongs to the P source and the release of the three doves belongs to the J source. In the J sequence, it is the second, third and

fourth birds that follow the Gilgamesh pattern. This suggests a literary link between the Genesis J source and the Gilgamesh Flood story but implies no connection between P and the Gilgamesh sources.

Further, the behavior of the raven is inconsistent with the behavior of the first release of the dove. Putting aside the issue of whether the raven and the dove were released on the same date, the dove returns to the ark but the raven doesn't. It flits about until the waters were dried up from the earth. If we remove the J verses from the sequence, the raven flies about from the first day of the tenth month to the first day of the New Year, a period of three months. In the J verses, the three birds are released over a period of two weeks. The redactor appears to be struggling over efforts to establish chronological harmony between J and P. I'll return to the raven later. First, however, we need to look at the Egyptian Creation traditions.

### **The Egyptian Creation Myths**

The ancient Egyptians left us no complete version of any of their creation myths. Egyptologists, however, have managed to piece together versions of the major accounts from a large number of inscriptions and texts that allude to the creation stories. Each cult center had its own version of events and the evolution of each cult's tradition often contain inconsistencies over time and sometimes a changing roster of gods associated with the story. Because of time limitations, I can only give a very brief summary of the essential facts.

The four major cult centers were in the cities of Heliopolis, Hermopolis, Memphis and Thebes. Each had variations on the Creation stories, sometimes with inconsistent and/or multiple versions. At the same time, the later cult versions were often influenced by ideas present in the

older versions from the other cults. Despite differences among the various cults as to details within the creation stories, they all agreed on certain fundamentals. All accept that:<sup>8</sup>

- In the beginning, all was a large watery deep and it was called the Nun.
- The chief deity responsible for creation lay formless within the Nun but somehow managed to take shape and initiate the creation process.
- Among the first stages of this process, the Creator arranged for a mountain to arise out of the deep so that he would have a place to stand.
- This deity created the other gods and everything else.
- These creation myths are based on the flooding and retreating of the Nile and the role of the sun.

The oldest traditions that we have come from the Heliopolitans, primarily from the Pyramid Texts dating to the middle of the third millennium. In that tradition, Atum, a solar deity, is the creator god who appears on the mountain and initiates the process of creation. His initial form is that of a primitive serpent in the deep.

Egyptologist George Hart says that in the beginning of the creation, a lotus and a mountain emerged from Nun, and Atum emerged from the lotus as a child.<sup>9</sup> He also says that the Benu bird, also known as the benben bird, which the Greeks identified with the Phoenix, became the symbol of the birth of Atum.<sup>10</sup> Citing Utterance 600 from the Pyramid Texts, he says Atum is addressed with these words: “you rose up as the benben in the mansion of the Benu in Heliopolis.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, Atum took the form of the benben bird after emerging as a child from the lotus.

There is much more to the Heliopolitan creation cycle but we need not review it now for our present purposes. Approximately contemporary with the Heliopolitan traditions are those of Hermopolis. In this system, the Creation process begins with eight deities associated with the properties of the deep, four male and four female.

In the later stages of the tradition, the eight gods were identified as Nun and his wife Naunet, representing the formless waters; Hehu and his wife Hehet, representing extended space; Kek and his wife Keket, representing darkness; and Amun and his wife Amaunet, representing invisibility.<sup>12</sup> It is their collective actions in the deep which stir the emergence of the creator god, the solar deity Re, The eight primordial deities are thought of as his collective parents.<sup>13</sup> Re is sometimes described as “the infant of the ogdoad.”<sup>14</sup> In the tradition, the four males appear with the heads of frogs and the four females with the heads of serpents.<sup>15</sup>

In one version, the eight deities produced a great egg that was hatched by a bird known as The Great Cackler.<sup>16</sup> The egg is thought to represent the deep. Out of the egg came a lotus that appeared on the mountain from which the creator god emerged as a child.<sup>17</sup> This solar deity initiated the creation process. In the Hermopolitan tradition the emerging mountain was known as the Isle of Flame because it was believed that the sun came forth from a lotus on the mountain.<sup>18</sup>

In Spell 76 from the Coffin Texts, late third millennium to early second millennium, we are told, “The Phoenix of Re was the form of Atum which came into being in Hehu, Nun, Kek, and Amun.”<sup>19</sup> What this passage says is that the Phoenix, i.e., the Egyptian benben bird of Heliopolis, was a form of the Heliopolitan Atum created by the Hermopolitan Re. Here we see how easily the Egyptians borrowed aspects of other cult doctrines and merged them with their own.

In that regard, the Memphis cult simply adopted the Heliopolitan creation myths but placed their own local chief deity, a craft god known as Ptah, at the center of the creation process, and it was he who was responsible for bringing forth Atum and everything else.

In an even more expansive form of adaptation, Thebes, the last of the major cult centers to produce a creation mythology, the priests assigned the process to their chief deity, Amun, who was also one of the eight Hermopolitan primeval gods. In the Theban creation tradition, Amun took on various forms, one after the other, and these incorporated the Heliopolitan, Hermopolitan and Memphite traditions, all of which represented forms of Amun, who was the creator god. Therefore the Hermopolitan Amun was only one form of the Theban Amun.

Analyzing the Egyptian creation myths for literary patterns, we can say the following. In the beginning was a great watery deep that had four characteristics represented by four male gods and their four wives. These characteristics were formless water, darkness, extended space, and invisibility. From the intermingling of these essences, a creator god was empowered to act and brought a mountain out of the deep so he would have land on which to stand. He then created a lotus on the mountain to function as a womb from which to emerge. The creator came out from the lotus as a child in the form of the benben bird. This child was the sun, and the initiator of all creation.

### **Comparison with the Genesis Flood Story**

Compare now the elements of the Genesis Flood story with the broad framework of the Egyptian Creation myths.

- A universal flood covers the earth.



- Four males and four females appear on the deep.
- A mountain emerges out of the waters.
- The ark appears on the mountain.
- A lone bird flies off of the mountain.
- The light of the sun appears.

I submit that Noah and his family, four males and four females, replaced the eight deities that created the solar child, and appear as humans instead of reptile-headed gods; the mountain that emerged in Genesis was originally the primeval mountain; the life-saving ark that appears on the mountain replaces the life-giving lotus; and the raven released by Noah that flies away without landing on anything for three months originally signified the benben bird. The sunlight after the flood replaces the solar deity emerging from the lotus. All that is missing is the child. Let's see if we can find him.

After the Flood, we have some puzzling passages about another potential member of Noah's family, Canaan. According to Genesis 9:18–19, “The sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. *Ham was the father of Canaan.* These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled [emphasis added].”

Why is Ham singled out as the father of Canaan? The child hasn't even appeared yet in the Genesis narrative and almost immediately thereafter, in Genesis 10, we are introduced to the descendants of Noah's three sons, with Canaan simply being listed as the fourth of Ham's four children. Here, however, he is the only one listed and the only offspring of any of Noah's children to be mentioned. Something is odd here.

Immediately after this passage mentioning Canaan, we are told Noah planted a vineyard, drank wine, became drunk, and went to his tent. The next verse, Genesis 9:22, says, “And Ham, *the father of Canaan*, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside [emphasis added].” Again, Ham is singled out as the father of Canaan.

As a result of Ham's behavior we learn, “When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what *his youngest son* had done to him, he said, “*Cursed be Canaan*; lowest of slaves shall he be *to his brothers*.” This is a very strange passage. Is Ham the youngest son of Noah or is it Canaan? Is Canaan a brother to Noah's sons or a nephew? The text is vague. Ham sins and Canaan, who has not yet been introduced into the Genesis narrative, is cursed to be a slave to his brothers. Why Canaan and not Ham, or Ham's three other sons?

Other than these mentions, Canaan, as a person, disappears from the remaining narrative, and the curse never comes up again. I suggest that Canaan is originally the solar deity child who emerged from the lotus, the Egyptian Re, the child of the Ogdoad. The Genesis redactor changed the name, put a curse on him, and singled out Ham alone as the father, all these changes disguising the fact that in the Egyptian version of the story, all eight primeval gods were the parents of this one important child.

I further suggest, that if this Egyptian story of Creation actually appeared in the Gilgamesh tablet instead of the present text, scholars would have had no problem seeing the parallels between the elements of the Egyptian and the biblical narratives. But because the story comes from Egypt, the parallels are never even looked at.

END

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<sup>1</sup> Heidel, 105.

<sup>2</sup> (Friedman, 1989)

<sup>3</sup> (Friedman, 1989), 246.

<sup>4</sup> (Friedman, 1989), 246.

<sup>5</sup> (Friedman, 1989), 246.

<sup>6</sup> (Friedman, 1989), 246.

<sup>7</sup> (Friedman, 1989), 246.

<sup>8</sup> (Clagett, 1989), 264–267.

<sup>9</sup> (Hart, 1990), 16

<sup>10</sup> (Hart, 1990), 16.

<sup>11</sup> (Hart, 1990), 16.

<sup>12</sup> (Clagett, 1989), 299.

<sup>13</sup> (Clagett, 1989), 300.

<sup>14</sup> (Clagett, 1989), 301.

<sup>15</sup> (Clagett, 1989), 299.

<sup>16</sup> (Clagett, 1989), 301.

<sup>17</sup> (Clagett, 1989), 302.

<sup>18</sup> (Clagett, 1989), 302.

<sup>19</sup> (Clagett, 1989), 47.