

A comparison of flood myths of genesis 6-8 and the epic of gilgamesh essay

[Environment](#), [Disaster](#)



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Skeptics are of the opinion that the account of the floods that destroyed nearly everything on earth given in Genesis is actually a modified description of the original story given in the Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet XI. As far as the dates are concerned, while the Gilgamesh epic is said to have been penned before 2000 BC, the dating of Genesis has been placed by scholars between 1500 BC and 500 BC (Deem 1). This indicates that the Genesis' flood myth could have indeed been sourced by Biblical authors from the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh. As a result, the two stories share great many similarities, although as one goes deeper into the two tales, the differences become quite obvious.

Similarities between the Flood Myths of Genesis and Epic of Gilgamesh

One noticeable similarity between the flood myths of Genesis and the Epic of Gilgamesh is the fact that both the stories occurred in the Mesopotamian plains. This similarity is to be expected since the two cultures existed in the same region- the Middle East. A second similarity is that in both the stories something triggered extreme anger in God or god(s) that ultimately caused the floods. Also, in both the accounts there was a central character who was instructed by the higher power to redeem himself along with his family members and other creatures by building a water-worthy vessel i. e. an ark, as a means to escaping the devastating floods (Deem 1).

Towards the end of the myths in Genesis and the Epic of Gilgamesh, both of them have it that the vessels came to rest atop a mountain when the flood waters began to recede. Also, when the storm calmed down, in both the stories the lead characters released birds from their respective boats to

check whether it was safe to step out of their vessels. And at the end of the floods, both these characters made an offering to God or god(s) as an attempt to display their deep reverence to the latter and in return were amply rewarded (Deem 1).

Differences between the Flood Myths of Genesis and Epic of Gilgamesh

Although the broad story and a few details of the flood account remain similar between the versions given in Genesis and the Epic of Gilgamesh, there are quite a few significant differences existing too. The biggest difference is that in Genesis, God Yahweh sends down torrents of water after being provoked to an extreme point by increasing wickedness in humans. However, the Epic of Gilgamesh has it that it was too much of noisiness on the part of human beings that triggered anger in gods and prompted god Adad to cause the heavy rains, with help from a host of other gods (Deem 1).

The main character in Genesis is Noah who is warned by Yahweh of the floods and is instructed by him to build a boat of 450x75x75 feet dimensions to save himself, his family and other creatures from the ravaging floods. While the amount of people instructed to be saved remains the same in the Epic of Gilgamesh too, here it is god Ea who warns Utnapishtim of the impending disaster. The proportions of the boat are also different, with the epic laying it out as being a 200x200x200 feet sized cube (Deem 1).

One important difference in the two stories is in the amount of time taken by Noah and Utnapishtim to build the boat. While Genesis records 100 years as the time, the Epic of Gilgamesh says that Utnapishtim along with his family

and other city craftsmen built the boat in just 7 days. Genesis has also mentioned longer durations of rains and flood. According to this Biblical chapter, the rains lasted for a good 40 days and the floods continued for as many as 370 days. However, the Epic of Gilgamesh seems to provide a shorter version of the flood account as it speaks of the rains lasting for a mere 7 days and the floods existing for just 14 days (Deem 1).

When the floods began to recede, Genesis has it that Noah first sent a raven and then a dove to check if it was safe to come out of the boat. With Noah, both the birds returned and in fact, the dove first came back with an olive branch- a symbol of peace- and then some leaves. On the other hand, Utnapishtim sent three birds out- first a dove and then a swallow that both returned. However, his third bird, a raven, considered as a messenger of gods, did not come back which showed that the creature had found dry land outside (Deem 1).

One big difference in the two flood stories that deserves mention is the reaction of the higher power to the widespread death caused by the floods. Genesis does not hint at God regretting the killings whereas; in the Epic of Gilgamesh it is mentioned that the gods repented at having killed so many humans at one go. Also, while Noah offered one of every unsoiled animal and an avian to God at the end of the floods, Utnapishtim chose wines and one sheep as his offerings to the gods (Deem 1).

As an aftermath of the crisis, in Genesis God promises not to destroy mankind via floods again; however, in the Epic of Gilgamesh, while Utnapishtim and his family members are granted immortality, the gods quarrel between themselves. Finally, in Genesis, Noah is told to repopulate

the earth whereas; in the epic, gods Ea and Mami create 14 humans as a means to refilling the planet (Deem 1).

Genesis and the Epic of Gilgamesh and their take on Gods and Human Beings

According to Genesis, there is one God, Yahweh the highest authority that has the power to create and destroy mankind. In the Genesis' flood myth, God is described as one who loves righteousness and abhors wickedness. He is showed as being kind-hearted and at the same time fearsome, although only to the wicked.

With respect to human beings, the Genesis flood myth has it that men must be righteous; otherwise, they will be punished by God. This Biblical chapter also demonstrates that men are to revere God and must follow the path shown by Him. Essentially, the Genesis speaks of human beings as being dependent on God, as being mortal and as being created in His image.

In contrast, in the Epic of Gilgamesh there a number of gods and goddesses, as opposed to just one, whose demand from mankind is silence. Unlike in Genesis, where God is regarded as the Almighty, in the epic, the various gods and goddesses can be regarded as peripheral characters- capable of getting into petty quarrels, of lying and feeling regret- that must hand over the spotlight to Gilgamesh and Utnapishtim. However, like with Yahweh, the gods and goddesses in the Epic of Gilgamesh also require reverence from humans.

As far as humanity is concerned, as per the flood account in the Epic of Gilgamesh, men are to observe the rules laid out by gods, if they wish to be blessed with protection and good fortune by the latter. The Epic of

Gilgamesh also points out that humanity can look upon gods to intervene in their doings when needed.

Works Cited

Deem, Rich. "Is the Biblical Flood Account a Modified Copy of the Epic of Gilgamesh?" (2008): 1. Retrieved on 04/02/2014 from <http://godandscience.org/apologetics/gilgamesh.html>