

The different flood myths



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In the following essay, I am going to examine the flood myth that is written in The Epic of Gilgamesh, and compare its similarities and differences to the one that is found in the Book of Genesis. In both works, there is an immense flood that engulfs the earth. The question that remains to be answered is, is this the same flood recorded in both texts? The corresponding elements that occur between both texts have been somewhat of a puzzling issue for some researchers. On first speculation, it would be fair to say that both coincide with each other due to the major similarity between them. However, subtle differences could prove otherwise. The flood myth in The Epic of Gilgamesh was written somewhere around 2750 and 2500 BCE[1], whereas the Book of Genesis 6-9 was written around 500BC[2]. It could be said that the Biblical authors were aware of the flood recorded on Tablet XI and may have adapted it to correspond with the writings of the Biblical text. Alexander Heidel explores three central theories about how the two accounts may be linked. He states that " first, the Babylonians borrowed from the Hebrew account; second, the Hebrew account is dependent on the Babylonian; third, both are descended from a common original." [3]Heidel goes on to say that because The Epic of Gilgamesh was written before the Book of Genesis " The most widely accepted explanation today is the second, namely, that the biblical account is based on Babylonian material." [4]However, a theory of this nature causes some controversy within the Christian faith as it could be said that it may question the reliability of the Bible. As I have previously stated, both myths share many of the same elements. Merrill F. Unger believes that when comparing the two, there are certain components that have to be looked at, in order to create an understanding of both accounts; the first being that the flood was planned by the god in both The Epic of

Gilgamesh and the Book of Genesis. Secondly, that a warning was given to both protagonists prior to the flood happening. Thirdly, is that the flood is connected with the destruction of mankind. Another being, the protagonist and his family were allowed to escape from the disaster. The building of the vessel to protect various life-forms is another. Also, what should be noted is the physical destruction of each flood and the duration of it. The landing place of the boat should also be mentioned and the releasing of the birds. Finally, the last similar element that should be discussed are the sacrifices the hero's presented to their gods and what they received in return.

[5]Although these similarities cannot be ignored, Kenneth A. Kitchen says that there are also many differences that run through each of the flood accounts, even though the " general similarities suggest a definite relationship between the two traditions." [6]Kitchen goes on to say that it is these differences that provides a clear view of why the flood happened, that they define the characters of the gods and protagonists. By using specific details such as, the landing places of the ships, the releasing of the birds, numbers and genders of the surviving animals and humans and the building of the ships, we can compare the differences, enabling one to study the relationship between the flood accounts in both The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Book of Genesis. [7]Both stories tell a tale about a righteous figure who is informed by divine beings that a great flood is going to destroy the earth. In The Epic of Gilgamesh, the main protagonist of this myth, Utnapishtim, is met by Gilgamesh whilst on his journey in pursuit of immortality. Utnapishtim is asked by Gilgamesh how he became immortal and that is when he tells him about the flood that happened in a city called Shurruk, ' which stands on the banks of the river Euphrates'. [8]It is the noise that man makes the

Gods deem to be intolerable, so they decide to eliminate all of mankind. The god of waters, Ea, is the one to warn Utnapishtim of what is about to come. [9]In the Book of Genesis, God recognises how man has become wicked, so in turn, God feels it necessary to flood the earth and be rid of man. We learn that Noah is seen by God as a righteous man and is spared, [Noah]" found grace in the eyes of the Lord".[10]Noah is then told by God to build an ark and take both his family and two of every animal with him. The first similarity to notice here is the use of divine involvement in both myths. However, it is here where a difference occurs. In the Book of Genesis, it is evident that monotheism (only one god) is present. Whereas, in The Epic of Gilgamesh, it is clear to see that polytheism is visible (more than one god). As stated previously, the gods in The Epic of Gilgamesh want to flush out mankind because of their noise. " The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reasons of the babel"[11]. While in Genesis, God floods the earth because of the wickedness of man. " It repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart".[12]" I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth. . . "[13]In addition to this, man's fate is to die in the epic, yet in Genesis, Noah tries to save the evil by preaching to them. This again is a striking difference between the two myths. Additionally to this, in both the Book of Genesis and The Epic of Gilgamesh, the hero of the story is warned prior to facing the major disaster and vessels are built to shield them from the catastrophic flood, to maintain the life of each species. Utnapishtim is told not to take anything of worth on the boat, but does so anyway. Like in the Book of Genesis, animals are taken on the boat and the storm continues for six days and nights.[14]In the epic, Utnapishtim is warned though a dream by Ea,

whereas God tells Noah about the coming flood in Genesis, and it rains for forty days and forty nights. Something that can also be found in both accounts is the use of the number seven. In the Book of Genesis the world was created in seven days. The number seven also appears in the flood account. "After seven days the waters of the flood were upon the earth"[15]. This is also apparent in The Epic of Gilgamesh. Although the rain only lasts for six days and six nights, when the storm calms and the boat lands, it remains there for seven days. In the epic, the storm calms on the seventh day and the boat stops at the mountain of Nisir. After a week, Utnapishtim releases birds from the boat. This is also parallel to what happens in the Book of Genesis. In The Epic of Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim releases three birds from the vessel. First he releases a dove which returns because there is no food or resting place. A swallow is then sent out, but still returns. Then finally, a raven is set free and does not return, meaning it has found land and food. "I loosed a dove...but finding no resting-place she returned...then I loosed a swallow, and she flew away but finding no resting-place she returned...I loosed a raven...and she did not come back"[16]. In the Book of Genesis, Noah also does this but only using two birds. First a raven that returns and secondly a dove that brings back an olive branch. It could be said that the olive branch is used as a symbol of peace and that mankind's suffering has now come to an end.[17]In addition, a raven could be seen as a messenger of the gods, so by using this particular species of bird in each myth, it highlights the powers that the deities have in both texts. However, the subtle difference is that in the Book of Genesis, the raven was unsuccessful, whereas in Gilgamesh it was the raven who found land. This could link to my earlier point that in the epic, that the fate of mankind will

always lay in the hands of the gods. Yet, in Genesis, the symbol of peace, suggests that God has put an end to the punishment of mankind and will let them begin a new life. Another similarity is that both Utnapishtim, in the epic, and Noah, in Genesis thank the God's for sparing them from the flood. However, they offer their thanks in different ways. In Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim pours "out a libation on the top of the mountain".[18] Yet, Noah builds an altar for God. "Then Noah built an altar to the Lord..."[19]. Furthermore, both protagonists make a sacrifice once the flood had ended. In the Book of Genesis, Noah is told by God to leave the ark, "Leave the ark, you and your wife, your sons and their wives"[20] Noah then makes a sacrifice to God by burning some animals on the altar that he made. In The Epic of Gilgamesh a sacrifice is also made to the Gods. Yet, when Utnapishtim offers a sacrifice, Enlil is enraged because Utnapishtim was excluded from the destruction of all man. Then Ea persuades Enlil that Utnapishtim escaped through his own means, and Utnapishtim is then granted immortality by Enlil. Finally, there is a symbol shown, in both texts, to indicate that the earth will not be flooded by the gods again. In Gilgamesh there is a necklace and it is exclaimed that the gods will not "forget these days"[21]. Whereas in Genesis a rainbow appears. "I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth."[22] Both flood accounts in The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Book of Genesis are extremely alike as well as possessing major differences. As the source of each flood story differs between the two, there can be some conclusions brought up about the Babylonian culture in comparison to the Hebrew culture. As stated previously, polytheism is apparent throughout the Babylonian culture and they believe that the gods are separate from each other and that they have restricted power. So, the

people cannot always rely on the gods to be rewarding to the serving and the just. Additionally, monotheism is used within the Hebrew culture, where God is seen as almighty, that his power is unrestricted and he is good. The belief is that God created the world that is orderly and therefore rewards men who worship him. However, this theory is dependent on each individual's personal moral grounds. What I wanted to examine throughout this essay is the relationship between the flood myths that occur in both The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Book of Genesis. There are three theories that could possibly link the two that I would like to discuss; the first being that The Epic of Gilgamesh may have been derived from the Genesis account. However, the epic flood myth was written long before the one found in Genesis. So, because of the dates in which both of the flood accounts were written, this theory has been disproved. Another hypothesis that may link the two is that the account found in the Book of Genesis may have been taken from the one found in The Epic of Gilgamesh and altered slightly. Conversely, this theory poses some major complications. If this were true, then the writer of the Genesis account would have had to thoroughly go over the Epic and change many of its components. Things such as the reason why the gods decided to cause the flood, changing it to a righteous motivation. Also, descriptions of the flood would have had to be altered, making it to be universal so the whole account would be credible. Lastly, changing the use of polytheism to a completely monotheistic world would have been very difficult. So, even though there are major mirroring images between the two, this would have been almost impossible to recreate, rendering this theory to be inconceivable. The most plausible possibility is the third theory, that both of the flood accounts may have come from one event. Kenneth A. Kitchen

believes that it is probable that “ The Hebrew and Babylonian accounts may go back to a common ancient tradition, but are not borrowed directly from each other.”[23]After considering all of the similar and dissimilar elements of both texts, it seems that in The Epic of Gilgamesh, a warped account of an event was recorded, which lost its historical precision and it could be said, that the version recorded in the Book of Genesis may be a more precise report of the disaster. So, to conclude, after comparing the two accounts of the flood in each text, it is evident that there is a relationship between the two, despite the many differences. Each story provides a learning curve from culture to culture about historical events though the medium of storytelling. Separate cultures develop over time, and it would be fair to say that it inevitable that some events are going to become overlapped and repeated throughout different historical and religious texts.