

The Stones and the Scriptures

Archaeological Witness to the Book of Genesis

The biblical Book of Genesis is literally the "Book of Beginnings." Taken from the book's famous first words: "In the beginning . . .," the reader immediately understands that the origin and early history of mankind is its subject. However, since the secular origin theory as found in Darwin's *Origin of Species*, entered the mainstream through public education, the accounts of Creation and a Flood in the Book of Genesis have taken a back seat to the so-called "hard sciences." Stripped of their historicity and treated as only "religious myths," these "stories" are said to reflect primitive man's misunderstanding of natural forces. According to this theory, by attributing such forces to supernatural beings, man was able to explain the unexplainable and also exercise some control in a seeming uncontrollable world through the act of sacrifice. Thus, alternately hiding from the god's wrath and appeasing the gods, became the stuff of great stories. Yet, we must ask why it is that the stories of the Creation and the Flood are found in the history of almost every ancient culture? One suggestion has been that a "seminal story" like the Flood developed from a mythical matrix created by the attempt to explain some local disaster. However, such an explanation cannot account for the exceptional parallels that exist between accounts scattered the world over. It is much more plausible that these universal accounts were the result of a commonly remembered history, a history punctuated by the two pivotal events that created and re-created original human societies: Creation and the Flood. The plausibility of this increases when the "hard science" of the stones (archaeology) is considered as a witness to the biblical text. In this case, the archaeological witnesses are ancient cuneiform tablets discovered in Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire, in the 1800's. Three of the most ancient of these, the *Atrahasis Epic*, *Enuma Elish*, and the *Gilgamesh Epic* contain pagan accounts that parallel those in the Book of Genesis. Let us first consider each of these discoveries and then their contribution to the historicity of the Genesis account.

The first tablet to consider, the *Atrahasis Epic*, also known as The Babylonian Genesis, is dated to the 17th century B.C and contains some 1,200 lines of text. Although presented from the theological perspective of the Babylonians, it records an epic story similar in details to the biblical Creation and Flood. In the Babylonian tale, the gods rule the heavens and earth, just as in the biblical statement: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The gods made man from the clay of the earth mixed with blood, much like the biblical account of man made from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7, 3:19) and the later statement by Moses (who wrote Genesis) that "the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Lev. 17:11). According to this Babylonian account man was created to take over the lesser gods' chores of tending the land, as in the biblical story where man is assigned to the Garden of Eden to "tend it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). When men multiply on the earth and become too noisy, a flood is sent (after a series of plagues) to destroy mankind, much like the biblical account where mankind corrupted the earth and filled it with violence, resulting in judgment (Genesis 6:11-13). In the Babylonian story, one man, Atrahasis (which gave the tablet its present name), is given advance warning of the Flood and told to build a boat, in a manner similar to the biblical Noah (Genesis 6:14). He builds a boat and loads it with food and animals and birds, just as in the Bible (Genesis 6:14-22). Through this means Atrahasis is saved while the rest of the world perishes, like Noah and his family who board the Ark while "everything that is on the earth perishes" (Genesis 6:17-18, 23). Much of the Babylonian text is destroyed at this point so there is no record of the landing of Atrahasis boat, nevertheless, as in the conclusion of the biblical account, the story ends with Atrahasis offering a sacrifice to the gods and the chief god accepting mankind's existence (compare Genesis 8:20-22).

The second text known as the *Enuma Elish* presents a Mesopotamian version of the Creation. Actually seven tablets have been joined together to comprise an epic tale, but only one section records the Creation account. Here we are told that the universe, in its component parts, began with the principal gods (who represent forces of nature), and was completed by Marduk who became the head of the Babylonian pantheon (assembly of gods).

Like in the Genesis account, the watery chaos is separated into heaven and earth (compare Genesis 1:1-2, 6-10), light pre-exists the creation of sun, moon, and stars (as in Genesis 1:3-5, 14-18), and the number seven figures prominently (compare Genesis 2:2-3). However, beyond this the story is controlled by pagan concepts: the gods procreate other gods whom they in turn seek to destroy because of their loud parties. The mother of these gods, Tiamat, creates monsters to eat them up, but the strongest of them - Marduk - cuts her in half. It is from her two halves that the heavens and earth are formed. Mankind is created from the blood of the captured leader of the rebel gods (a sort of devil among the gods) in order to work as slaves for the lazy lower gods and feed the Babylonian pantheon. This mythological character leaves little in common with the early chapters of Genesis, where God creates man in His own image, gives him the world to enjoy, and cares for him and seeks fellowship with him. Nevertheless, there are enough similar elements, and unusual parallel concepts (such as light being created before the sun, moon, and stars), to indicate that the *Enuma Elish* shared in the knowledge of biblical cosmogony (Creation).

The third tablet, a Mesopotamian epic called the *Gilgamesh Epic*, is perhaps the best known and preserves numerous parallels to the biblical Flood. It was named after the its principal character, King Gilgamesh who is supposed to have ruled the Mesopotamian city of Uruk around 2600 B.C. and who in this story is searching for immortality. The entire account is recorded on twelve tablets, but the the Flood story appears in tablet eleven. In the story, Gilgamesh is told about the Flood by Utnapishtim, a man who had gained immortality, and like the biblical Noah, had also passed safely through the waters of the Flood. In his account of the Flood, he says the creator god (Ea) favored him by warning him of the Flood and commanding him to build a boat (compare Genesis 6:2, 13-17). On this boat he brought his family, his treasures, and all living creatures, as with Noah (see Genesis 6:18-22; 7:1-16), and escaped a heaven-sent storm which destroyed the rest of mankind (compare Genesis 7:17-23). By his reckoning, the storm ended on the seventh day, and the dry land emerged on the twelfth day, similar in terminology to the Bible's 40 days of flooding with dry land on the 50th day (Genesis 7:17, 24). In the *Gilgamesh Epic* the boat came to rest on Mount Nisir in Kurdistan, similar to the biblical story which has the boat land on Mount Ararat in Turkey (Genesis 8:4). Utnapishtim then sent out a dove, a swallow, and finally a raven, much like Noah who sent out a raven and then a dove (Genesis 8:7-11). Finally, in the Mesopotamian account, when the raven did not return to the boat, Utnapishtim left the boat and offered a sacrifice to the gods. Noah did the same when the dove failed to return and in sacrificed to God (Genesis 8:12-21).

These pagan accounts, when first published in Europe in the late 1800's, caused quite a sensation, rivaling the just published theory of Charles Darwin. Bible believers found in them evidence that the biblical stories were in fact true, while biblical critics claimed they diminished the Bible's claim to uniqueness proved the Bible had been copied from ancient mythology. Both these saints and skeptics were correct in recognizing that the issue raised by the discovery of these tablets was that of source; that is, from where did their stories come? Three different answers to this question have been offered by scholars: (1) They were originally Mesopotamian tales which were borrowed and adapted by the Israelites to fit their conception of God. (2) They were originally Israelite accounts that were borrowed and adapted for the Mesopotamian religion and culture. (3) Both the Mesopotamian and Israelite (biblical) accounts came from a common ancient source.

Concerning the first answer, as far as we know, the biblical accounts were not written down until Moses in the 15th century B.C. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the "older" (17th-19th century B.C.) Mesopotamian stories were derived from the Israelite. Concerning the second answer, it is probable that Moses used sources in compiling his accounts in Genesis. The account in Genesis 14 of Abraham's battle with Babylonian and Mesopotamian figures in order to rescue his family members bears indications that he had older sources at his disposal. Could this imply that there was a literary dependence on pagan mythological texts in compiling the biblical accounts? The plain answer is no. While the use of extra-biblical sources does not conflict with the doctrine of biblical inspiration (since there are numerous instances of non-canonical works cited in both the Old and New Testaments, see Joshua 10:13; 1 Samuel 24:13; 2 Samuel 1:18; Luke 4:23; Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12; Jude 14), the possession and occasional use of such texts by the biblical writers does not require there was a literary dependence. The biblical writers continually stress that their primary source was divine revelation, and even if secondary sources may have been used in some cases, it does appear that they were in this case. The many significant differences and omissions between the accounts make it unlikely that either the Mesopotamian or biblical authors borrowed from the other.

However, could there have been a *tradition* dependence, that is, could the biblical accounts simply be variations of Mesopotamian myths? Again, this is unlikely. One reason for this is that the biblical account is *monotheistic* (one God) and its characters ethically *moral*. By contrast, the pagan accounts are *polytheistic* (many gods) and its characters ethically *capricious*. This contrast is evident, for example, in the way the two texts treat the account of the post-Flood world. In the biblical text, God accepts Noah's sacrifice and promises to never again destroy the earth by a flood (Genesis 8:20-22). In the *Atrahasis Epic*, the gods discover to their chagrin that they have wiped out their only source for food (men's sacrifices), and so because they are hungry, decide to put up with mankind (who alone can feed them). Another reason is that important details in the accounts differ (such as the sizes of the boat, the duration of the Flood, the sending out of the birds, etc.). A.R. Millard, discoverer of the *Atrahasis Epic*, stated concerning the question of alleged borrowing: "All who suspect or suggest borrowing by the Hebrews are compelled to admit large-scale revision, alteration, and reinterpretation in a fashion that cannot be substantiated for any other composition from the ancient Near East or in any other Hebrew writing ... Granted that the Flood took place, knowledge of it must have survived to form the available accounts; while the Babylonians could only conceive of the event in their own polytheistic language, the Hebrews, or their ancestors, understood the action of God in it. Who can say it was not so?"ⁱ Therefore, it seems more likely that both the Mesopotamian and Israelite accounts reflect a commonly preserved knowledge of events that occurred in earth's pre-Flood history. The variations in these stories were passed down by each separate culture that developed after the division of nations in the post-Flood ancient Near East (see Genesis 10-11). Those nations that departed from the teaching of the one true God as Creator and Judge at the Flood re-interpreted the history they had learned in light of the deities they had come to worship. In this way, they preserved the essential historicity of the events while re-casting the religious elements according to their own perspective. Archaeology has made available evidence of a common knowledge of the essentials of the Genesis story. Now it is up to us to decide if the myths held in modern science concerning these events do not reflect their own departure from the original design.

ⁱA.R. Millard, "A New Babylonian 'Genesis' Story," *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967): 17-18.