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The Mesopotamian Deluge Accounts: Neither History Nor Revelation

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Abstract

For a long time, the discovery of Flood literature in Mesopotamia outside of the Genesis account has prompted a higher critical argument that the Genesis account must have borrowed from the Babylonian and Assyrian versions of the Flood story. This thesis, however, can be seriously challenged based on recent archaeological work that expands both our understanding as to how ancient Mesopotamian religion functioned, and how their scribes related to their texts.

The dating of the famous Gilgamesh epic rules out the possibility that it could have been used in a textual interchange and the existence of different versions of the poetic stories about the Flood strongly militates against these being regarded as history. The way these stories are listed in ancient library inventories also demonstrates that the scribal tradition in Mesopotamian had neither a developed idea of canonicity nor a notional idea that these stories were sacred and set apart from other texts. Lastly, Babylonian and Assyrian religion was not dependent on a preserved text. Its primary interest was in medicine and omen reading rather than preserving the orations of their gods.

For these and other reasons, the long-held higher critical argument about an alleged textual exchange is now outdated. It is untenable to argue that Hebrew scribal tradition based their sacred history on a foreign text that not only had a hostile religious worldview to that of the monotheistic Israelite one, but was not regarded as historical and sacred by those who circulated them.

Keywords: Mesopotamia, Flood Literature, archaeology, cuneiform, Atrahasis, Eridu Genesis, Epic of Gilgamesh, Genesis, higher criticism

Introduction

At least three major accounts of a great Flood have been discovered in Mesopotamian literature and are well known to scholars. The oldest known text is the *Atrahasis* poem, which is practically contemporaneous with another poem, the *Eridu Genesis*. Younger than either of these is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

There may yet be other texts to come. More recently, Irving Finkel, resident Assyriologist at the British Museum, has deciphered another cuneiform tablet containing instructions for the construction of a coracle-style ark built from bitumised rope (Finkel 2014). This small fragment has been dubbed "the Ark Tablet". Nonetheless, due to its fragmentary nature and limited scholarly attention, it is not one of the texts this paper addresses.

These deluge accounts in some points bear a striking resemblance to the account of Noah recorded in Genesis. They feature a man who is saved from a Flood by constructing an ark-like vessel. He takes some animals aboard, and as the waters subside, he releases birds. After a short duration—six or seven days—the vessel settles and the hero comes out.

The scholarly effect of the discovery of these poems has been to produce the prevalent idea that Genesis is not a historical record, and consists merely of borrowed and extended Babylonian myths. The Assyriologist William Hallo, for example, says that Genesis is best understood only as describing what the Israelites thought or believed happened in history (2020, 36), while the philosopher Joshua J. Mark takes as granted that Hebrew scribes merely borrowed Assyrian versions of the accounts recorded (Mark 2018a, 2018b). Under this view, Genesis, including the Flood, is merely a "compiled" collection of Hebraised Mesopotamian histories (Barton 1913, 249).

Nonetheless, a thorough critical analysis of the Mesopotamian poems significantly weakens this view. Firstly, there is strong evidence that neither the Babylonian and Assyrian scribal tradition regarded these poems as either history or divine revelation, unlike the status of these stories within ancient Jewish culture. Secondly, the relationship of the Babylonian clergy to their texts, and the function of religion in Babylonia and Assyria, is so different to the way monotheistic Jews regarded the Pentateuch (Hallo 2020, 9–10) that it is an irreconcilable cultural "angularity" that cannot be reconciled with the theory of borrowing.

The paganised deluge poems on the one hand, and the monotheistic Flood narrative in Genesis on the other, are best explained as two separate transmissions (Currid 2017, 22; Shea 1984) from the same ancient oral source (Finkel 2014; George 2008, 6). Within the Babylonian and Assyrian cultures, the story lost the properties of either history or divine revelation and came to function as a dramatic mythic history that served a range of religious and political

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purposes. It served as a means to envelope the culture within a more profound past (Card 2018, 7), for example by explaining that religious knowledge came from the antediluvian ancients (Geller 2018, 43). It also readily combined with a unique form of state propaganda to establish political supremacy (Robson 2019, 50).

The Dating of the Flood Poems

Most of the cuneiform deluge records from Mesopotamia are reconstructions, which makes it difficult to provide an absolute date for their origin. For example, the Eridu Genesis is reconstructed from a number of tablets with elements separated in time by a thousand years (Jacobsen 1981, 513–514). For this reason, dating for the tablets is usually given as a range.

There is also an important difference between the probable origin of a story, recension, oral or scribal tradition, and the actual age of the oldest cuneiform tablets. The former is the product of the assumption that the stories were around for some time before the recovered copies of the tablets. The latter is based on analysis of the physical evidence itself (the excavated tablets). Care must be taken to separate these two factors: the age of the tablets is not at all the same thing as the age of their content (George 2008) as seen in Table 1.

Of the Mesopotamian poems, the most complete and detailed story of the Flood is contained in the Standard Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh poem and undoubtedly receives the most attention in popular writing, yet this is the latest of our four texts. Professor George suggests the standardised version was written circa 1200 BC (2007, 5), but other scholarship maintains that it cannot be traced earlier than 1100 BC (Hallo 2020, 37). In any case, the oldest tablets found date to 700 BC.

The story of the Flood is entirely absent from the Old Babylonian tablets that formed the source material for the final Standard Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh poem (Millard 2018, 233). It is therefore sensible to conclude that when Moses wrote Genesis he could neither have sourced material from the Old Babylonian epic nor from the Standard Babylonian version of the poem. The latter of these texts was written too late in time; but none of the earlier models of the poem contained the story of the Flood.

From arguments that come dangerously close to circular reasoning, the reverse view is often reached by proponents of the documentary hypothesis who will shift the age of aspects of the Pentateuch between 5th to 9th century BC (Hallo 2020, 15–16; Wenham 2004b, 50). This is often done to make a scheme of textual dependence work. Again, as any reading of Hallo will demonstrate (2020, 1–15), the hard evidence for any of these suppositions does not exist, and the strength of the arguments ranges between "possibly" and "perhaps".

There are a number of good grounds to suppose that the origin of the Torah is older. Deuteronomy contains the last words of Moses to Israel before he died. Here Moses repeatedly speaks of himself in the first person (Wenham 2004b, 47) and carries on a dialog with the Israelites. "At that time *I* said to you" (1:9); "how can *I* bear your problems and *your* burdens and your disputes all by *myself*?" (1:12); "*You* answered *me*, 'What *you* propose to do is good'" (1:14). In his oration, Moses relates the events of the exodus not as a distant observer, but as a participant and eyewitness to them. It is improbable that any later Israelite scribe or editor would have dared to use Moses as a mouthpiece in this way.

Table 1. The Mesopotamian deluge accounts relative to the Book of Genesis

Name	Date of Tablets	Description of Tablet	Place(s) of Discovery	Language	Comment
The Epic of Atrahasis	c. 1650 BC	Many lacunae; highly fragmentary	Nineveh	Akkadian	Very fragmentary poetic story; the lacunae are so extensive that it cannot be understood without the later flood stories.
Eridu Genesis	1600–600 BC	Many lacunae; highly fragmentary	Nippur, Ur, Nineveh	Sumerian; Akkadian	Fragmented poetic story; survives in bits and pieces of varied although similar elements. Several tablets remain undiscovered.
Book of Genesis	1400 BC	N\A	N\A	Hebrew; Greek	A narrative unity.
Epic of Gilgamesh Tablet XI (Standard Babylonian version)	700–100 BC	A large number of tablets of varying condition; most in fragments. Nearly all lacunae have now been satisfactorily filled	Nineveh, Babylon	Akkadian	The large number of tablets recovered indicates that a standardised version of the poem had emerged by the 1st century BC and was in frequent use.

The idea of a composite authorship is also denied at the end of Deuteronomy where the explicit claim is made (31:24) that Moses wrote the words of the law "from beginning to end". This would tend to "exclude such a loose view of Mosaic authorship" (Wenham 2004b, 47). Additionally, the archaeological approach to the text of Genesis has demonstrated that whoever wrote it was very familiar with early second millennium culture:

> …the names of the patriarchs were typical names of the early second millennium, that the migrations and semi-nomadic life-style of the patriarchs also fitted this period, and that many of the legal rites and family customs mentioned in Genesis (e.g. giving dowries) were also attested in old non-biblical texts. (Wenham 2004b, 49)

The thousands of cuneiform tablets found at Nuzi, many of which deal with social, legal and administrative matters provide insight into the legal customs of the patriarchal period of the second millennium. They demonstrate that whoever authored Genesis was familiar with those customs (Currid 2017, 48), and intimately acquainted with the elaborate laws of possession, slave ownership, and the often-violent and oppressive social conditions of the period noted by the original archaeologists who worked on the tablets (Chiera and Speiser 1925, 85–90; Wenham 2004b, 52). This lends historical support for the origin of the Torah in the second millennium BC, probably at or around the middle of the millennium.

Whereas higher critics cannot agree on the age of the Pentateuch, Professor George who is perhaps the world's foremost expert on the Gilgamesh epic maintains that there is now little doubt that the final Standard Babylonian form of the poem was fixed by a scribe named Sîn-leqiunninni at the end of the second millennium (George 2008, 11). The scribe not only selected material from existing sources but added his own distinctive flourishes. It was he who interpolated "a version of the flood story adapted from the old poem of Atrahasis…" and through his extensive editorship probably "changed the poem so radically that it is no wonder the Babylonians later named him as its author…" (George 2008, 12).

Thus, according to the best scholarship at present, the source for the deluge account in the *latest* versions of the Gilgamesh epic derive from the *earliest* Mesopotamian accounts of the Flood. This relationship is near-certain because a comparison of the tablets shows that Sîn-leqiunninni plagerised a section of the Atrahasis tablet nearly verbatim in his production of the final form of the poem, besides there being numerous other textual similarities (Millard 2018, 232).

Below are the relevant lines from the Standard Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh poem. Ellipses indicate lacunae.

> Just as dawn began to glow
> the land assembled around me-
> the carpenter carried his hatchet,
> the reed worker carried his (flattening) stone,
> … the men …
> The child carried the pitch,
> the weak brought whatever else was needed
> (Kovacs 1998).

Compare the above with the following excerpt from the Atrahasis poem:

> The Elders…
> The carpenter carried his axe,
> the reedworker carried his stone,
> the rich man carried the pitch,
> the poor man brought the materials needed
> (Foster 2007).

Both passages describe the construction of an ark-like vessel in language that is nearly the same. Yet the two passages are derived from tablets that are separated in time by more than 800 years. This tells us three things.

Firstly, the writer of the latter relied upon an exceedingly ancient source for the basic idea of a flood, although the rest of his story appears to be novel.

Secondly, the way in which the writer borrowed and adapted his source material does not reflect the behaviour of a scribe who believed he was writing a factual history with real events and people, or passing on unchanging divine revelation in the same way that is commonly seen in the Torah. For example, there are no commands to pass the story on to their children as there is found in the Torah (Deuteronomy 4:10; 6:7; 11:19), nor even any curse formulas as Assyrian scribes occasionally attached to their work as a desperate copyright in order to encourage later scribes not to erase their names (Robson 2019, 51).

Thirdly, it tells us that despite the relative permanence of cuneiform texts, Babylonian sacred stories were subject to rapid alteration, the insertion of novel content, and stylistic revision in common with ancient poetic traditions in which a particularly gifted innovator might make a lasting impact (Albright 1994, 3–4).

Neither History Nor Revelation

Any meaningful concept of history or divine revelation includes a series of facts that need to be transmitted without change. This is because the legitimacy of a historical truth or a religious belief in the present is always contingent on the integrity of its transmission, and the truthfulness of its provenance. Even novel religious movements in the modern world grasp this and probe the past in search of a vintage.

Gary Beckman, a professor of Hittite and Mesopotamian studies, notes this in his investigation of the distorted history used by devotees of goddess worship in the modern neo-pagan movement. Beckman says that one of the aspects that struck him most was the evident deep need of many authors of goddess literature to "buttress their newly-adopted faith with claims of great antiquity and unbroken subterranean transmission" from prehistoric times to the present (Beckman 2020, 13). He quotes one of the leaders in the movement, the *thealogian* Carol Christ, who explains that it makes a great difference to her to know that goddess worship was not invented by twentieth century feminists but goes back into history and time (Beckman 2020, 14).

Likewise, the New Testament assures its readers that the gospel is "new" only in the sense of being revealed at a point in time, even as its truths and promises go back to creation and beyond. Thus, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews devotes much of his work to showing that the gospel is not a discontinuity with the ancient faith of Israel, but rather its fulfilment in the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity.

The writer of the Standard Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh poem did not think about his writing in this way. We can be quite sure of this because although he had access to the earlier poem he did not transmit it with painstaking attention to its details but freely made editorial changes. Neither were these changes insignificant. Among substantial deletions and massive additions, the most striking was that he changed the name of the main character from Atrahasis to Utnapishtim.

Clearly he did not fear to do this even though he must have known that if he had access to the Atrahasis poem, so too did other scribes who would be able to detect the alteration. There is no evidence here of a reverence for divine revelation that the Jewish community adopted toward the Torah:

> …the Pentateuch has always enjoyed a special devotion among the Jews. This "love of Torah" assumed the force of physical attraction in Tannaitic times…Even today the Torah commands palpable reverence in the synagogue. The congregation rises when it is lifted… the scroll is clothed in crown, breastplate and cloak reminiscent of the high priest's vestments; if—heaven forbid—it should be dropped or torn, the congregation fasts and mourns. The scroll is "kissed" before it is read, and touched only through the mediation of a pointer. (Hallo 2020, 12)

The scribes of Babylon evidently did not see the deluge poems as sacred words from a deity, or a true story handed down from antiquity that needed to be preserved. If the scribes were concerned with such things, we would expect to see a much greater harmony between the numerous records of this story. We would not find within the Babylonian literary corpus so many variations and difference between the tablets recording these stories (Jacobsen 1981, 514).

This exists in jarring contrast with evidence from the Jewish scribal tradition of great care with elements such as names. Although it is difficult to know much for certain about the pre-exilic Jewish scribal tradition, we do know that it transmitted names very accurately. Indeed, the meticulous care of ancient Jewish scribes is sometimes absent even in modern history. Care with such detail is not only a prerequisite for any meaningful history but also represents a high regard for history.

Millard notes, "Where ancient writings of these names are available, detailed study shows the Hebrew writings represent the contemporary forms very closely" (1982, 150–151). One such example is the Hebrew spelling of Tiglath-pileser which is found in near-identical form on the Bar-Rakkab stele from Zinjirli, carved either during the king's reign or very shortly after it (1982, 151).

Additionally, the Hebrew text correctly represents the preferred Assyrian spelling of the name *Sargon*. This is particularly noteworthy because the spelling of Sargon's name differed between the Assyrian and Babylonian speaking regions. During the king's rule, in the Assyrian region, his name was spelled with an *s*, *r*, *g*, *n*—Sargon. In the Babylon region, however, the name was spelled with an *sh* and appears as *Shar-ken*. Nonetheless, it is the Assyrian spelling of the Assyrian king "that has been preserved in the traditional Hebrew text of the Old Testament" (1982, 151).

Although this may seem like minutia to the casual reader, it nonetheless provides valuable insight into the pre-exilic Jewish scribal tradition. Whatever theories of transmission are accepted for the Old Testament, it is clear that the earliest scribes competently transmitted the names of important foreign dignitaries; down to the regional dialect and spelling. These details could not have been easily verified or checked by later scribes. The most plausible explanation for this level of accurate transmission is scribal care that arose from a self-consciousness of the historicity of the text.

In contrast, the Babylonian scribal tradition yielded three different names for the hero of the Flood (Atrahasis, Ziusudra, and Utnapishtim); two different time frames for the Flood (one poem says it lasted for six days, another for seven); and three different means by which the hero was warned about the coming deluge (one poem says he saw it in a dream, another states he did not see it in a dream but a vision, and the third says he was directly spoken to by one of the gods) (Arnold and Beyer 2002, 14, 29).

Furthermore, the names of a number of the gods are different (either in Sumerian or Akkadian, or different altogether) and the reasons the hero speaks to his people are different (in one poem he is prompted by a god to do so; in another poem he speaks of his own volition). There are at least ten substantial differences between the Atrahasis and Gilgamesh poems alone (Simoons-Vermeer 1974, 25–27); and five substantial differences between the Atrahasis and Eridu Genesis (Simoons-Vermeer 1974, 29–30)—this latter is highly significant since these two poems are the most close in time, yet differ markedly.

In addition to transmitting very few details with the consistency or precision required of a historical record, these works also lack a concern with instructing human behaviour which is normative in religious literature. The Standard Babylonian version of Gilgamesh, for example, makes no mention of the reason the gods decided to send a deluge. It simply mentions that that the hearts of the gods moved them to make this decision. Such an omission strongly suggests whoever wrote the Standard Babylonian version of Gilgamesh was disinterested in the ultimate cause of the Flood, and more concerned with telling his own story about how Utnapishtim became immortal (Frymer-Kensky 1977, 148).

In any case, the scribe chose to narrate the action and adventure of the flood itself with maximally lurid detail and to ignore any moral content. His concern is apparently with the drama and entertainment value of his work; entertainment being an integral factor to this genre of Mesopotamian story telling which most likely arose as a form of courtly entertainment (George 2007, 1; George 2008, 6). In all likelihood, these deluge poems formed part of a sung performance as was normative with early poetry. Albright notes:

> The reason for the relative antiquity of verse is very simple: poetry was then regularly sung or chanted to the accompaniment of stringed instruments such as the harp and the lyre, especially various forms of the lyre, which were known in both Egypt and Babylonia before the middle of the third millennium. Since the lyre appears in rock carvings in central Arabia at an even earlier date, it must have been known in Mesopotamia from Chalcolithic, if not Neolithic, times. (1994, 2)

The earlier poems do attempt to offer limited explanation for the Flood.

The Atrahasis is to some degree ambiguous and the gaping lacunae in the tablets of the Eridu Genesis obliterate key passages, nevertheless very strong exegetical arguments—which are well supported by other Mesopotamian mythological poems—show that the gods' decision to flood the world was due to the deafening noise of humanity that made it impossible for them to sleep (Jacobsen 1981, 521; Moran 1971, 56). Yet, this critical detail did not make it into the final Gilgamesh poem, which leaves the Flood story dangling without a moral anchor.

We may detect in this omission yet further evidence that the author of the final Gilgamesh poem did not see himself as a transmitter of history, divine revelation, or even see himself as handling a sacred text or holy story. To omit such a crucial detail would be unthinkable if he did. It is difficult to imagine any Hebrew scribe copying out the Flood account in Genesis and then simply omitting the cause of the Flood. The biblical story is only intelligible (and only has instructive moral power) in the light of God's judgement upon the world due to the wickedness of man. Without this explanation the story devolves merely into an epic adventure of an intrepid man defying the will of a capricious deity, which indeed is exactly what we find in the Gilgamesh poem in its latest and final form.

There have been unsatisfactory scholarly efforts to inject human sinfulness in the earliest poem. Were it proven that the Atrahasis story is about judgement on human sinfulness, this would be a small step toward the higher critic's case that Genesis borrows from these poems. Some scholars have even laboured to show that the poem's mention of the "din of the people" is a representation of moral evil that prompted the gods to take righteous action (which they later severely regret). Nonetheless this view should be rejected, for as the Assyriologist William Moran says, it "runs against all the evidence". Moran observes that the "Atrahasis epic ignores almost completely the ideas of sin and punishment, and it is not in any sense a theodicy…if man's sinfulness were the issue he would be charged with sin, but nowhere is man's responsibility expressed…" (Moran 1971, 56).

It is alleged by some higher critics that hypothetical Hebrew scribes developed the Pentateuch over time (Frymer-Kensky 1977, 155; Mark 2018b) and therefore the biblical Flood is not to be taken as literally historically true (Enns 2010). It is to be considered myth, maybe even proto-history, but not *history* as we understand it. Yet this is clearly not the view taken by whoever wrote Genesis, for the author of Genesis writes with nakedly evident self-consciousness of history. Though Wenham is himself ambivalent regarding the true historicity of the early chapters of Genesis, he nonetheless observes:

> The concern with birth and death, family disputes, grazing and burial rights etc. that characterizes these stories makes it plain that for the writer of Genesis the characters he described were real historical individuals. They are not personifications of clans or the products of his imagination (2004a, 54).

Albright observes that in all Old World literature,

prose follows poetry. The only exception to this is the Hebrew writings. Even when the most sceptical scholars place its texts very late in the first millennium, Albright notes that "the Hebrew Bible would probably be alone among Old World literature in having the earliest poetry follow the oldest prose instead of precede it" (1994, 2). One might suggest this is so because the Torah is history, and complex history with its rich framework of dates, times, names, numbers, and chronology is best conveyed in prose and not in poetry, which is greatly constrained by meter.

In contrast, the Babylonian writings mention few details that could be said to be efforts at history, and instead have a fixation with colourful adjectives and vivid dramatic flourishes. They describe the *elements* of the deluge but are far less concerned with the people involved, often providing an indefinite number of voyagers on the vessel, for example. The Genesis account, however, provides accurate names, places, measurements, the numbers of people involved, references to families, references to cultural and legal customs, to specific time periods, and a logical sequence of causes and effects. These are inherent features of historical reporting, without which there can be no historical reporting.

The writers of the Babylonian Flood stories were unmotivated by the same concerns. Their heroes are nearly empty of volition; their floods are mostly pointless (and seriously regretted by their divine instigators); and their description of the arrival of the Flood is apparently calculated to excite the senses and draw attention only to the calamity itself. Consider each of the following passages which describe the arrival of the deluge.

In the Gilgamesh epic:

The…land shattered like a…pot.
All day long the South Wind blew…
blowing fast, submerging the mountain in water
overwhelming the people like an attack.
No one could see his fellow
they could not recognize each other in the torrent
(Kovacs 1998).

In the Atrahasis poem:

The deluge bellowed like a bull,
The wind resounded like a screaming eagle.
The darkness was dense, the sun was gone.
(Foster 2007)

In the Eridu Genesis:

All the evil winds, all stormy winds
gathered into one
and with them, then, the Flood was
sweeping over the cities of the half-bushel baskets
for seven days and seven nights.
After the flood had swept over the country,
after the evil wind had tossed the big boat
about on the great waters,
the sun came out spreading light
over heaven and earth. (Arnold and Beyer 2002)

In the biblical account:

> In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month—on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights…The waters rose and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the surface of the water. (Genesis 7:11–12; 18)

Setting aside the differences in genre, there is a palpable difference in the author's method and intention in these four texts.

In the poetic texts the focus is on the visible and auditory elements of the Flood. It is to these elements to which the reader or hearer's attention is drawn by the frequent use of metaphors, vivid images, and hyperbole. Since these texts are poetic in form, they naturally prioritise description over narration, but in so doing, they also guarantee that important facts will simply be omitted when they do not serve the dramatic purposes of the poem. A comparison between our three texts proves this is so. For instance, the Gilgamesh poem simply ignores the causes of the Flood. It also makes no reference to the priestly occupation of Utnapishtim as the Eridu Genesis does.

The author of Genesis uses no such literary devices. All artificial means of driving up the drama of the story are conspicuously absent. Or, put in other words, the writer of Genesis is not trying to write a bestseller or create a blockbuster that will bring the house down when it is read aloud. If he were, the numerical data would be a distraction, and his lack of attention to the most spectacular feature of the story—namely the elements of the Flood itself—would represent a failure to achieve the literary aim.

By the inclusion of this information, the author of Genesis is clearly attempting to relate a real event that involved real people. As Professor Wenham observes, the story in Genesis is not the "creation of 'religious novelists' writing long after the era they profess to describe". (2004a, 54)

It is true that to a very limited degree, the Mesopotamian stories also include some information that could be regarded as historical. They provide references to six or seven days. At best, they offer allusions to an event that Babylonian and Assyrian scholars may have considered an historical divider of time (Geller 2018, 43). Moreover, it may be observed that the more such information an ancient account contains the more it resembles factual history. Jacobsen puts it this way in describing the Eridu Genesis:

> This interest in numbers is very curious, for it is the characteristic of myths and folktales that they are not concerned with time at all. They take place in "*illo tempore*" or "once upon a time" and the prince and princess live happily "ever after" never any stated number of years. No! Interest in the number of years belongs elsewhere, to the style of chronicles and historiography (1981, 528).

If Jacobsen can take this view of the Eridu Genesis with its single numerical reference and its evident priority for the theatrical, then the array of specific data in Genesis and its preference for explanation instead of description locates it to a far greater extent in the "style of historiography".

The Mesopotamian Scribal Inventories

It is important to recognise that the substantial variations that exist between the three Mesopotamian flood stories are not the result of alleged scribal error that simply compounded over time into new literary structures. Although this is a fondly held view by some higher critics, it is not an accurate view of the care that Near Eastern scribes applied to their texts.

Professor Millard, a specialist in Hebrew and ancient Semitic languages, writes at length about the scribal conventions of the Near East and outlines the advanced techniques that ancient scribes used in the reproduction of texts. Some of these techniques are still seen in the modern world. For example each of the Old Babylonian tablets of the Atrahasis includes a "tracking tag" in the form of an extensive colophon that displays the tablet number, title, number of cuneiform lines of text, the scribe's name, the month, day and year (Millard 1982, 145).

So rigorous were these techniques that, like the Bible, scribal transmission errors were infrequent. Millard observes, "…opportunities arise for comparison of copies made many centuries apart. There are compositions which were copied for a millennia or more with minimal change" (1982, 146). The exception to this is the Gilgamesh poem, of course, which changed "in large part due to deliberate editorial activity" (1982, 146). Nonetheless, Millard is still able to favourably compare the scrupulous tradition of both the Jewish and Babylonian scribes with the later Roman mass production of texts in *scriptoria* which were subject to complaints even by ancient authors (1982, 152).

With such attention to detail in the transmission of their poetic texts, why then did not one but *three* different deluge stories appear in Mesopotamia? How did it happen that one basic narrative plot could be appropriated differently for several dramatic retellings? The simple answer is that they are not authoritative canonical texts. There is no evident concept of canonicity in the Babylonian or Assyrian scribal tradition.

For those who consider the inventories of tablets found in various ancient Mesopotamian archives to be proof of the existence of a canon—even of technical or medical texts—these lists are too varied to yield this conclusion. "Although in broad terms such a comprehensive notion of canon might seem plausible, in reality such a definition cannot be applied with precision to most of the cuneiform literary production with any confidence" (Geller 2018, 43). Babylonian and Assyrian scholarship produced curricula, and they produced thematically organised corpuses of texts, but not canon:

As Lambert already pointed out in 1957, not all of Akkadian literature (or Sumerian, for that matter) was edited into a *textus receptus*, comparable to holy scriptures, but on the other hand Mesopotamian scholarship maintained a vague idea of antediluvian *apkallu*-sages who established the basis of formal knowledge (or 'classics') later to be studied in learned circles, and this fiction served as a useful model for curriculum and widely shared texts (Geller 2018, 43).

It was not possible for ancient Babylonian or Assyrian scholars to organise their libraries by the names of authors as modern bibliographies are organised, because Akkadian is written in a cuneiform script that is pictographic, and most ancient Mesopotamian literary works were anonymous (Steinert 2018, 8). The ancient scribes managing these libraries had to find other ways of listing, grouping or cataloguing their works, and they ways in which they did this reveal something about how they thought about these writings. For instance, compositions were often broadly associated with different scholarly practitioners who would use the text. Some texts are categorised for seers, others for conjurers, or astrologers, or physicians, or lamentation priests forming several *text corpora* (Steinert 2018, 8).

Many of the discovered inventories of texts, however, display no discernible order or pattern. Professor Finkel's publication of three tablets of inventories, each separated by considerable periods of time, is very instructive in this area. The inventories are lists of *incipits* (the first few words of a text), enabling the texts to be identified as works about omens, astrology, and so on. Two of Finkel's inventories show an astonishing mixture of genres (Finkel 2018, 26–31), with the texts listed apparently at random:

> It is clear, even at first sight that the genres are mixed, for the listed titles include omens (astronomical, *Šumma ālu*, physiognomic and liver), medicine, lexicography and even assorted items of Sumerian literature. Most importantly, these distinct genres are not grouped together, but are itemised as if at random… (Finkel 2018, 25)

Most significantly, literary works that refer to the gods are sandwiched among titles that have an entirely mundane purpose. For example one tablet with the incipit "When Utu comes forth from the lapis heaven…" is listed between a medical tablet titled "If his ears…" and a tablet about an omen involving thunder in the month of Tašritu (Finkel 2018, 30). Another tablet "The raging sea" which is addressed to the god Enlil, is listed after a medical tablet "If a man is attacked by…" and just before another medical tablet titled "If a man's hips continually hurt him" (Finkel 2018, 27). It speaks to a lack of a developed sense of holiness or "set apartness" in which Babylonian scribes thought about their texts.

Although the deluge poems are not mentioned in these inventories there is no reason to suppose that they would have received a special classification when other similar literary works that directly refer to the pantheon of deities do not. Although Mesopotamian scholarship developed greater systemisation—as shown in Finkel's third inventory tablet (Finkel 2018, 35–39)—even there the texts are still grouped into mixed titles. No text seemed to exist that was sacred enough to be set apart from works on omens, medicine and other matters.

It is a relatively small step to conclude from the way these texts are recorded in the tablet inventories that the deluge poems would not receive any special classification either. We may also conclude that even when Mesopotamian religious literary works mention the gods and narrate their activities, this did not mean they were considered sacred in the way that canonical biblical books are. Only this conclusion can adequately explain the apparent carelessness with which these works are grouped and listed.

Only a single tablet has ever been found seemingly attributing authorship of texts to a god—this being Ea, the god of wisdom. The tablet is fragmentary but lists a number of texts and genres which it reports, "[These are] the authorship (lit. 'from the mouth of') Ea" (Geller 2018, 44). The texts that are listed are related to exorcism, diagnosis, astrology, and so on, and do indeed include two literary works. Nonetheless, the conclusion of scholars working on this material is that the attribution is either cryptic or erroneous (Geller 2018, 45). They provide three good reasons for thinking so.

> There are several good reasons, based upon purely circumstantial evidence, for supposing that the reference to the god Ea in this particular passage is either erroneous or intentionally cryptic. 1) No other god is credited with authorship of any other texts…the only other comparable reference is to Adapa, who is not a god but an antediluvian sage. 2) Several of the texts ascribed to the god Ea in this passage are known elsewhere as being attributed to Esagil-kin-apli… 3) Esagil-kin-apli does not appear anywhere else in Lambert's list of authors… (Geller 2018, 45)

This presents a compelling argument that is especially strong at the second point. Any text taken seriously as the words of a god could hardly be confused elsewhere as authored by a human. Geller concludes: "Based on this evidence, we are forced to infer that in the statement, 'from the mouth of Ea', the writing is cryptic orthography for the full name of Esagil-kin-apli if not a simple scribal error" (2018, 45).

Of critical importance is Geller's observation that no text is attributed to the authorship of a god. While these texts refer to the gods, they are not authored by the gods. We have already seen that the manner in which these texts are handled—by being modified significantly in purpose, tone, and detail—militate against the possibility that they were considered divine revelation transmitted through a human agent. This argument is further strengthened by considering the composition of the royal court and the professions that existed within the Assyrian scholarly classes.

A well-known roster of scholars attached to the royal court in Nineveh lists 45 trained professionals. This roster is often used to understand the composition of the royal advisory committee to the king (Robson 2019, 100). The composition of these advisors suggests a primary interest in the king's health and the receipt of a steady flow of information from the gods through signs and omens:

> It names, in order, seven *ṭupšar Enuma Anu Ellil* (observers of celestial omens), headed by a chief scribe Issar-šumu-ereš, nine āš*ipu*-healers, five *bārû*-diviners, nine *asû*-healers, six *kalû*-lamenters, three *dāgil iṣṣūrī*-augurs, three Egyptian *harṭibu*-scholars and three Egyptian scribes. (Robson 2019, 100)

Robson documents the manner in which the courtly personnel attended to matters of ritual purification, for example following an eclipse (2019, 109), reading ominous celestial signs (2019, 111), giving open air night-time performances to placate the deities and tending to the royal family's medical needs (2019, 110, 108). Indeed, wherever the king went, he had a retinue of diviners to provide "mobile divination-on-demand" and in fact of all of the courtly professions listed, the *bārû*-diviners spent the most time in his presence reassuring the court that both king and gods were considering the issues of the day (Robson 2019, 105).

The heavy reliance of the courtly system on "divination-on-demand" does not support the concept of a religion that elevated written revelation. Moreover, divination was not always guaranteed and documents have been found of an "ominous calendar"

which highlighted days more favourable to divination than others (Robson 2019, 105), which suggests that the gods did not communicate in words, but through the provision of uncertain and haphazard signs to the diviners. The frequency in which divination manuals appear in tablet inventories suggests that this was very much part of the "religious science" of the culture.

In contrast, the Old Testament does function on the basis of divine revelation in the form of words. The centrality of text in the religious life of Israel therefore results in a very different religious culture and outlook from that found in Babylon or Assyria.

The Old Testament provided only one means of divination—the *Urim and Thummim*—but there are practically no documented instances of it ever being used. Kings in Israel did not have a retinue of omen-readers and diviners; outside of the Urim and Thummim, divination was specifically forbidden by the law. Whenever kings were addressed by the Old Testament clergy, it was most usual for God to enlist a prophet to make an oration. The oration was frequently unsolicited by the king and sometimes undesired, but the certainty of the oration is never doubted.

Throughout the Old Testament the content of God's speaking is never merely an interpretation of a complex set of mysterious omens that had bizarrely appeared in the world, but of a secure unfolding of history in a specified way. Moreover, of the two major religious offices in Israel—the priests and prophets—neither was preoccupied with reading omens. Their primary purpose was to either supervise a close adherence to the Mosaic Law—a shorthand term that referred to the entire Pentateuch (Hallo 2020, 10)—or, alternatively to call the nation back to obedience and faith. At all times and points in the Old Testament scripture the Torah is regarded as supreme written revelation; it is taken for granted that it is both history and divine revelation.

We may summarise the differences therefore in Table 2.

Conclusion

It is evident that there are serious problems with the idea that ancient Jewish scribes would simply borrow stories from other cultures and elevate them to divine revelation.

Firstly, there is strong evidence that the Babylonian and Assyrian cultures did not regard those stories as history or revelation.

Secondly, it is a view that persists despite a total absence of any evidence. Drawnel, who specialises in Jewish apocalyptic literature, finds that while there is a "palpable" influence of Later Babylonian culture on Jewish tradition a few centuries before the birth of Christ (though the Jewish apocryphal writers strongly condemn Babylonian scholarship as something doomed to destruction), nonetheless:

> There are no historical accounts to prove that the Jewish scribes in Babylonia were trained in the highly sophisticated and profoundly specialized areas of cuneiform literature. (Drawnel 2010, 373)

Learning cuneiform took a long time. For Hebrew scribes to be trained in this way "one has to assume that Jewish boys went through the long process of cuneiform education, which is not attested in historical sources from Babylonia" (Drawnel 2010, 396).

This raises the final—and quite possibly greatest—problem with the higher critical claim of the dependence of Genesis on the texts of Babylonian and Assyrian poems for the deluge account, namely the antithetical worldview represented in each textual stream. The deluge poems of Mesopotamia

Table 2. Comparison of the characteristics and content of deluge texts

	Babylonian and Assyrian accounts of the deluge	Pentateuch
Transmission	Advanced scribal techniques that transmitted text reliably over long periods of time based on an extant chain of cuneiform tablets.	Advanced scribal techniques that transmitted text reliably based on comparison of medieval and ancient manuscripts.
Narrative	Story appears in a broader narrative of creation, or adventure, or the seeking of immortality.	Story appears in a broader narrative of both a historical creation, and a post-deluge history.
Historicity	Regarded as vaguely historical by scribal tradition – an event "long ago" – but scribal treatment of the texts does not regard the content as history. Scribes freely change or omit names, perspective, and key details.	Regarded as history, and treated as such by the community. The author writes of the events and people as if they were real.
Religious function	Appear to have no religious function, and evolved in a form of dramatic entertainment.	Functions as the basis of a national covenant.
Genre	Poetic; dramatic	Narrative; mostly unadorned with dramatic features
Religious outlook	Multiple deities; disunited; do not see the future clearly; make mistakes; human noise interferes with their sleep; deities can die and are hostile to the spread of the human race.	One God; sees the future clearly; does not err; is kindly intended toward the human race; does not require sleep; cannot die; actively involved in the world.

are soaked in a moral and theological framework that is not just different from Genesis, but utterly hostile to it.

Put simply, the author of Genesis, with his burning conviction in one true God, and his certitude that he was recording history of real people and real events, and that God actually spoke in time and space, could never have tolerated the religious ideas found in the Mesopotamian deluge poems (Currid 2017, 15).

The possibility of exchange between these text traditions is so remote and has so many problems that for all practical considerations it lies beyond even determined scholarly ability to meaningfully surmount those difficulties.

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