

Comparative Ancient Near Eastern Study

The Genesis Flood Narrative in Relation to Ancient Near Eastern Flood Accounts

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INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

One of the methods of Old Testament study that has grown up over the past century-and-a-half has been that of comparing the Bible with other ancient Near Eastern texts. This approach has been enormously successful in shedding new light on the background of Scripture and thus enabling us to read it in its original setting. Comparative ancient Near Eastern study can come in various forms. The particular type with which I am concerned here is that where an ancient Near Eastern text may actually have been a source lying behind what we find in the Old Testament.

There is a danger in this kind of study of what has been called 'parallelo-mania'.¹ How are we to know what the significance of a particular parallel is? Is the parallel without any real significance or is there a definite connection with the biblical text? If the latter, does the parallel betoken direct influence on the Bible from the text in question or is the relationship more indirect? Could it be that both have a common source rather than one being dependent on the other? And if there was influence, when and how should we suppose this took place? Finally, if we conclude that there is a genetic relationship between the Bible and an ancient Near Eastern text, and we have established the priority in date of the extra-biblical source and how and when it could have influenced the Bible, we need to consider the ways in which the Bible has dealt with its source: how has it transformed it?

¹ Cf. Sandmel (1962: 1-13).

I shall now discuss these questions with special reference to the flood story in Genesis 6–9. In pursuing the story of the flood and its background there are two further methodological considerations we need to consider that scholars have sometimes failed to observe. The first is that the Mesopotamian flood story is not all of a piece but is found in various recensions, so we cannot assume without more ado that it is the Gilgamesh epic version which lies behind Genesis. Similarly, the Genesis flood account is not a seamless garment, but is widely agreed to be composed of two separate accounts that have been joined together. We need, therefore, to pay attention to each account separately when comparing the underlying Mesopotamian tradition.

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN FLOOD ACCOUNTS

As mentioned above, it is first necessary to establish that a parallel really does have a genetic connection with the biblical text. In the case of the flood story, we have to take account of the fact that there are flood stories all over the world,² so in seeking the origin of the biblical flood account, why should we single out the Mesopotamian tradition? In reply, we may say that Palestine is not a region particularly prone to floods but rather to excessive dryness, so the story must have originated elsewhere in the ancient Near East; furthermore, it is the flood story from Mesopotamia—a country very much subject to floods—that is overwhelmingly the closest in content to the biblical account. What these parallels are will be examined in detail below. As for other ancient Near Eastern flood narratives, although there is an Egyptian flood story, it is unrelated to the biblical story,³ while the Greek flood story of Deucalion is unattested before the fifth century BCE and appears dependent on the Mesopotamian,⁴ and the version in Lucian of Samosata is even later and considerably dependent on Genesis.⁵

The Mesopotamian flood story was known in antiquity from the Greek account of Berossus,⁶ a Babylonian priest c.280 BCE, and already Josephus (*Ant.* 1.93; *Apion* 1.130) recognized its connection with the biblical account. Here the flood hero is called Xisouthros (cf. the Sumerian name Ziusudra below), whom Berossus has earlier named as the tenth in a line of long-reigned antediluvian kings. The coming of a flood on 15th Daisios is revealed to Xisouthros in a dream by Kronos (Berossus' name for Ea), who instructs

² Riem (1925: 10–160) recounts over 300 flood stories; cf. Gaster (1969: 82–131).

³ Cf. Gaster (1969: 84). ⁴ See West (1997: 489–93).

⁵ See Oden (1977: 26–9); West (1997: 492 n. 162; 2003: 254–7); Lightfoot (2003: 339–42). Contrast Kraeling (1947), who thought both Genesis and Lucian shared a common tradition.

⁶ For Berossus see Burstein (1978: 20–1). For an older study with Greek text, see Schnabel (1923).

him to build a boat fifteen stades long and two stades wide, and embark on it with kin and closest friends. After the waters had receded, Xisouthros sent out some birds on three separate occasions, which returned the first two times but disappeared on the third. The ark landed in the Korduaian mountains of Armenia, where Xisouthros offered sacrifice. Finally, together with his wife, daughter, and pilot, Xisouthros went to live with the gods.

However, the first discovery of a cuneiform account of the flood was of tablet 11 of the *Gilgamesh* epic in the nineteenth century.⁷ It was discovered at Nineveh in the library of Ashurbanipal, the seventh-century Assyrian king, but it is now generally accepted that it was part of the *Gilgamesh* epic from the later part of the second millennium BCE.⁸ The story, which was recounted to *Gilgamesh* by the flood hero, *Utnapishtim*, in connection with the former's quest for immortality, goes as follows.⁹ Having been forewarned of a flood by *Ea*, *Utnapishtim* built an ark, *Enlil* and the gods brought the flood for six days and seven nights, after which the ark landed on *Mt Nimush*.¹⁰ After seven days *Utnapishtim* released a dove, which returned, then a swallow, which also returned, and finally a raven, which disappeared. *Utnapishtim* then sacrificed on the mountain, the gods gathering round like flies to smell the sacrifice. Finally, *Utnapishtim* was made immortal.

However, an even earlier version of the Mesopotamian flood story was later discovered in the form of the *Atrahasis* epic.¹¹ This is attested in various recensions from the second and first millennia BCE and all are fragmentary, but the best preserved and earliest is the Old Babylonian version from the seventeenth century BCE, which we shall summarize here. This flood story is the climax of a larger work. Originally the gods were like men, performing labour on the earth, but eventually man was created to relieve the gods. However, as humanity increased, so noise increased, which disturbed the chief god *Enlil*'s sleep, so he brought first a plague, then drought, next a famine, and finally a flood to eliminate mankind. *Enki* (*Ea*), however, by ostensibly addressing a reed hut, communicated to *Atrahasis* the coming of a flood in seven days and the necessity of building an ark (of wood, reeds, and pitch). The flood subsequently came for seven days and seven nights, and afterwards *Atrahasis* offered sacrifice and the gods gathered round like flies to smell the sacrifice. After the flood, a new order of society was established by *Enki*, which allowed humanity to continue but various restraints were put on human reproduction to stop numbers getting out of control again.¹²

⁷ Smith (1873). ⁸ Tigay (1982: 238–9).

⁹ For translations of *Gilgamesh* tablet 11, see George (1999: 88–99; 2003, vol. 1: 700–25) and Dalley (1989: 109–20).

¹⁰ Previously read *Nišir*. See Lambert (1986).

¹¹ For various recensions of *Atrahasis* see Lambert and Millard (1969) and Foster (2005: 227–80). Dalley (1989: 1–38) translates just the Old Babylonian version.

¹² If the restoration of Lambert (1980: 58) is correct, *Nintu* also decreed death for humans at this point (*Atrahasis* 3.6:47–50).

Unfortunately, parts of the Atrahasis epic are missing. But we know from both a Ugaritic and a Neo-Babylonian fragment that Atrahasis was made immortal following the flood. It is particularly unfortunate that the Old Babylonian Atrahasis epic is lost at the point where the sending out of the birds was presumably mentioned. But it is generally agreed that some form of the Atrahasis epic (presumably the Middle Babylonian version from the second half of the second millennium BCE) lies behind the flood narrative in Gilgamesh epic tablet 11, since the versions are generally so similar, including much common wording.¹³ Interestingly, on two occasions Utnapishtim is actually called Atrahasis (Gilgamesh 11.49, 197). However, whereas in Atrahasis the flood story is reported in its original primeval context following the creation and growth of humanity, in Gilgamesh it is wrenched from its original context.

A further Mesopotamian version, the Sumerian flood story (seventeenth century BCE),¹⁴ is preserved only in a fragmentary text from Nippur. Following the creation of man, the institution of kingship, and the first cities, the decision of the divine assembly to bring a flood is revealed (presumably by Enki) to King Ziusudra. This lasts seven days and seven nights but Ziusudra is saved in a boat, after which he offers sacrifice to the gods and is made immortal in Dilmun.

Clearly, the version in Berossus is too late to have directly influenced Genesis, but as we shall see later, the Priestly source did share some common traditions with it. As for the Sumerian version, the fact that it is attested only in one seventeenth-century text in Sumerian probably means that we do not need to consider it further when seeking influences on the Bible.¹⁵ The main question to consider, therefore, is whether it was the version in the Gilgamesh or Atrahasis epic that ultimately lies behind the biblical flood narrative. However, before we consider this we need to note that the biblical flood story is itself made up of different sources.

THE TWO BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS

It is widely accepted that the biblical flood story is composed of two sources: J and P.¹⁶ The J account consists of Gen. 6:5–8; 7:1–5, 7–10, 12, 16b–17, 22–23; 8:2b–3a, 6, 8–12, 13b, 20–22. Here the deity is called Yhwh (the LORD), seven

¹³ See Tigay (1982: 215–17).

¹⁴ For the Sumerian flood story, see Civil in Lambert and Millard (1969: 138–45); also Jacobsen (1981).

¹⁵ Contra Jacobsen (1981), who speculatively combines the Sumerian flood story with other texts, which overall provide a better parallel to Genesis 1–9.

¹⁶ I continue to prefer the designation 'J' rather than the currently fashionable 'non-P'.

pairs of clean and a pair of unclean animals enter the ark, and the flood lasts forty days and forty nights. Noah sends out a dove three times to see whether the waters have subsided. Afterwards he offers a sacrifice to the LORD, who smells the sweet savour of the sacrifice. Finally the LORD promises no further flood.

The P account is in Gen. 6:9–22; 7:6, 11, 13–16a, 18–21, 24–8:2a; 8:3b–5, 7, 13a, 14–19; 9:1–17. Here the deity is called Elohîm (God), we learn that Noah has three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and a pair of every animal enters the ark. The ark is made of gopher wood, reeds,¹⁷ and pitch, and is three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits broad, and thirty cubits high. Noah is 600 years old when the flood comes, the waters bursting forth for 150 days, but the earth is not dry till one (lunar) year and ten days have passed (the flood having commenced on the seventeenth day of the second month and ended the following year on the twenty-seventh day of the second month). The ark lands on the mountains of Ararat and Noah sends out a raven from the ark.¹⁸ After Noah and his family leave the ark, God blesses Noah, commands his descendants to be fruitful and multiply, and gives other regulations, making a covenant with him and setting his rainbow in the cloud as a sign that there will never be another universal flood.

In spite of the many challenges to the documentary hypothesis in recent years, the case for this source division is overwhelming, since the flood story is replete with doublets using two different divine names—Yhwh and Elohîm—and containing discrepancies, such as over the number of animals going into the ark and the length of the flood.¹⁹ Those who oppose source division have no convincing response to these points.²⁰ For example, Wenham's much-cited attempt (1978) to demonstrate the unity of the narrative by arguing that it has an impressive chiasmic structure is flawed, since, as Emerton has shown (1988: 6–13), some of the alleged chiasmic parallels are arbitrary, weakening the overall pattern. In any case, a degree of parallelism between the two halves of the flood narrative was inevitable.

However, Wenham (1978: 345–7) and Rendsburg (2007) have further claimed that it is odd that the full range of parallels with the Mesopotamian story—all occurring in the same order—is found only in the complete

¹⁷ Reading *qānim* for *qinnim* in Gen. 6:14; see discussion below.

¹⁸ The sending out of the raven (Gen. 8:7) is often attributed to J (cf. Gen. 8:8–12). However, the minority view that it is from P is preferable, since if v. 7 is also from J, it is odd that the reason for the sending out of the various birds is not stated here at the beginning, but only later with the sending out of the first dove (v. 8). This suggests that v. 7 is not from J.

¹⁹ Incidentally, the contradictions are a strong argument in favour of P being a source rather than the redactor, since though it might appear strange for a redactor to combine two contradictory sources, it would be far more odd for P as a redactor to introduce contradictions into his own account. On P as a source, see Nicholson (1998: 196–221).

²⁰ See Emerton (1987, 1988).

account, the alleged J and P sources each having only some of the parallels. This, they claim, supports the unity of the biblical narrative. However, in his reply to Wenham on this point (overlooked by Rendsburg), Emerton (1988: 14–15) shows that this argument for unity is also unconvincing. The case for distinguishing J and P is too strong to be dismissed so summarily. Each probably had a more or less complete account, the redactor sometimes choosing one in preference to the other, sometimes citing both.

Anyway, the upshot is that we need to consider the J and P accounts separately when attempting to evaluate the Bible's relationship to Mesopotamian sources.

THE J ACCOUNT AND MESOPOTAMIAN PARALLELS

Although there are several references in the Old Testament to sacrifices constituting a sweet savour to the LORD (e.g. Lev. 1:9; Num. 29:2), the flood story is the only place where Yhwh is actually spoken of as smelling the sweet savour of a sacrifice (Gen. 8:21). However, it has a striking parallel in both Atrahasis (3.5.31–35) and Gilgamesh (11.157–163), where we read that after the flood the gods gathered round like flies to smell the sweet savour of the flood hero's sacrifice.

Another striking parallel concerns the sending out of the birds (Gen. 8:6, 8–12). The passage is not currently preserved in Atrahasis (the text is broken) but is well preserved in Gilgamesh (11.147–156). Utnapishtim sends out first a dove, then a swallow, and finally a raven to establish whether the flood has ended, while J has a dove sent out three times. In both Gilgamesh and J the first two birds return and the third disappears. Moreover, in both accounts this happens after the ark has landed on a mountain, and in both there is a reference to seven days. In Gilgamesh (11.147–150), it is on the seventh day after the ark's landing on Mt Nimush that the dove is sent out, while in Genesis the second and third doves are sent out after successive periods of seven days (Gen. 8:10–12). Many scholars think the first dove was also sent out after seven days, the words having fallen out of v. 8 (cf. *BHS*), since the second dove was sent out after 'another seven days' (v. 10). This would make the Mesopotamian parallel even closer.

Both these striking parallels clearly indicate that J was dependent on the Mesopotamian flood tradition. But which version was he using? Scholars most frequently compare the Genesis account with the version known from Gilgamesh tablet 11.²¹ But as we have seen, the Mesopotamian story is actually

²¹ For example, Rendsburg (2007); Dykgraaf (2009: 233).

attested in several versions. Is J really closest to the Gilgamesh version, as is sometimes supposed, or is this supposition simply the result of the Gilgamesh version being better preserved and therefore more prone to produce parallels? I believe this latter to be the case and will argue that J knew some version of the Atrahasis epic.

First, in both Genesis and Atrahasis the flood story is set in the context of a primeval narrative of the origins of the world, starting with creation and continuing with the multiplication of humanity prior to the flood. This contrasts with Gilgamesh tablet 11, where the flood story is wrenched from its original context and recounted by Utnapishtim to Gilgamesh in connection with the latter's quest for immortality.

Secondly, related to this, it should be noted that the biblical account, like that in Atrahasis, reports the story in the third person, whereas in the Gilgamesh epic Utnapishtim recounts the flood story in the first person.

Thirdly, a point rarely noted, in J Yhwh specifically announces to Noah that the flood will take place after seven days (Gen. 7:4; cf. 7:10), which is in exact agreement with the Atrahasis epic (3.1.37), where we read that 'He [Enki] announced to him [Atrahasis] the coming of the flood for the seventh night'. Although in Gilgamesh the flood similarly began seven days after the start of the building of the ark, this timescale is not announced in advance to Utnapishtim. Moreover, it is only apparent that the flood comes after seven days in Gilgamesh when one pays extremely close attention to the text.²²

Fourthly, in contrast to Gilgamesh, there is a statement towards the end of the Atrahasis epic, in a recently discovered Neo-Babylonian fragment, that there will never be another worldwide flood. Ea declares:

Henceforth let no flood be brought about,
But let the people last forever.²³

George (2003, vol. 1: 527) compares this passage with Gen. 9:8–17 (P), but it would have been equally, if not more, relevant to compare the earlier J account in Gen. 8:21–22, where the promise of no more floods follows on immediately at the corresponding point following the flood, unlike P's, which is somewhat separated by Gen. 9:1–7.

²² Wenham (1987: 177) fails to note that this is explicit in Atrahasis, but says 'The Gilgamesh epic seems to envisage that seven days were needed to *build* the ship (11.76) . . . ' However, this line (= George line 77, '[before] sundown the boat was finished') is actually referring to the sixth day (cf. line 57's previous reference to 'the fifth day'). It is only in line 88 that we read 'In the morning he will rain down . . . ', referring to what is presumably the seventh day. This is finally recounted in line 97 onwards.

²³ Lambert, in Spar and Lambert (2005: 199, reverse, col. 5, lines 13–14).

THE P ACCOUNT AND MESOPOTAMIAN PARALLELS

Unlike J, there is evidence that P knew some later Mesopotamian traditions also attested in Berossus. This should not surprise us, since they are both relatively late sources. I have already discussed this in detail elsewhere (Day 2011), so will be brief here. First, the flood has a precise starting date, which is similar in both: the seventeenth day of the second month in P (Gen. 7:11) and the fifteenth day of the second month (Daisios) in Berossus.²⁴ Secondly, in P the ark lands on the mountains of Ararat, that is, Armenia (Gen. 8:4), just as in Berossus it lands on Armenian mountains, in contrast to Mt Nimush (in Iraqi Kurdistan) in the earlier tradition (Gilgamesh 11.142–146; Atrahasis is broken at this point). Thirdly, the ark has dimensions more suggestive of a raft in both P (Gen. 6:15) and Berossus, rather than the cube-shaped object in the earlier tradition (Atrahasis 3.1.25–26; Gilgamesh 11.28–30). Fourthly, in both P and Berossus the flood hero is the tenth of a line of ten long-lived antediluvian figures of whom the seventh was Enoch/Euedoranchos = Enmeduranki (Genesis 5). These parallels are best explained by supposing that both P and Berossus had access to similar late Babylonian traditions.

That P also knew the flood story through some form of the Atrahasis epic rather than Gilgamesh is supported, as in the case of J, by the fact that his story is set in the context of the primeval history of the world, starting with creation, in third-person narrative form. A further suggestive point is that P has a series of divine regulations for the new era following the flood (Gen. 9:1–7), which is also the case in Atrahasis but not in Gilgamesh. However, whereas in Atrahasis (3.6.45–7.11, only partly preserved) these regulations are concerned with limiting the future growth of the human population in various ways, P emphasizes the need for humans to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 9:1, 7; cf. 8:17), repeating the original divine command at creation (Gen. 1:26, 28). This supports the contention that P is polemicizing against the Atrahasis epic,²⁵ where the flood is a draconian response to the noise resulting from the growth in the human population. In addition, like J, P has a divine promise that there will be no more universal flood (Gen. 9:8–17), something which, as noted above, is attested in a Neo-Babylonian fragment of the Atrahasis epic, but not in Gilgamesh.

Some other parallels between P and the Mesopotamian flood tradition are attested in both Atrahasis and Gilgamesh, but in the light of the above comments we may assume Atrahasis to have been the source. Thus, in Gen. 6:14, referring to the construction of the ark, God says to Noah, ‘pitch it inside and out with pitch’. Strikingly, the word used for ‘pitch’ here is *kōper*, a noun attested nowhere else in the Bible (the denominative verb ‘pitch’ here is also

²⁴ For this and the subsequent references to Berossus, see Burstein (1978: 20–1).

²⁵ Moran (1971: 61); Kilmer (1972: 174–5); Frymer-Kensky (1977: 150).

unique). Interestingly, the cognate Akkadian word *kupru* is specifically mentioned in Mesopotamian accounts of the building of the ark (Atrahasis 3.2.51; Gilgamesh 11.55, 66).²⁶ We thus have good evidence of the Mesopotamian background of P's reference here.²⁷

Immediately before the reference to pitch in Gen. 6:14 we are told that the ark is also to be made with gopher wood and *qnym*. The word *qnym* was vocalized as *qinnim* by the Masoretes, and is generally rendered as 'rooms' in modern translations, although elsewhere the singular *qēn* means 'nest', with reference to birds, even if it can be used metaphorically of a human dwelling in poetic passages (e.g. Hab. 2:9). However, a strong case can be made that we should read *qānim*, 'reeds', rather than *qinnim*, 'rooms', a view supported by a minority of scholars,²⁸ the NEB, REB, and NJB. First, both Atrahasis (3.2.12; CBS 13532, rev. 7) and the Gilgamesh epic (11.51) imply that reeds were used in the making of the ark. Secondly, the reference to *qnym* in Gen. 6:14 is mentioned in between gopher wood and pitch, suggesting it was one of the materials used in the ark's construction, just as Atrahasis 3.2.11–13 and Gilgamesh 11.50–55 refer to reeds in between wood and pitch. Thirdly, the division of the ark into sections does not come until Gen. 6:16, so a reference to 'rooms' would be premature in v. 14. The use of reeds in the making of the ark was thus not merely a part of P's Mesopotamian *Vorlage*, but also intended by P himself.²⁹

A further parallel to P in both Atrahasis and Gilgamesh has been claimed by Kilmer (1987).³⁰ She argues that the Mistress of the gods' lapis lazuli fly necklace mentioned after the flood, which serves to remind her of the flood (Atrahasis 3.6.2–4; Gilgamesh 11.164–167), denotes the rainbow, thus providing an analogy with Gen. 9:12–17, where the rainbow is a sign of God's covenant promise that he will never bring another universal flood. However, Kilmer's arguments are rather tangential, and we have no explicit evidence anywhere that the Mother goddess's necklace symbolized a rainbow. Consequently, if a rainbow were envisaged here, we should expect the narrator to have spelled this out clearly. Nevertheless, it is quite attractive to suppose that P's rainbow has been constructed on the basis of this allusion in the Mesopotamian account. Not only do they occur at the same point in the narrative following the flood, but just as we read that the Mother goddess's necklace will

²⁶ Cf. Cohen (1978: 33–4, 53–4).

²⁷ The view of Van Seters (1992: 165) that Gen. 6:13–16 is from J is unconvincing. Not only is Elohîm the only divine name found in this context (Gen. 6:11–13, 22), but the precise figures given for the dimensions of the ark in 6:15 are the kind of thing we should expect from P, not J.

²⁸ This view was proposed almost simultaneously by Gordon (1953: 38 n. 31), Ullendorff (1954), and Driver (1954: 243), and has been followed by a few others, e.g. Wenham (1987: 149, 152, 173).

²⁹ I deal with the *qānim/qinnim* question in greater detail in Day (forthcoming).

³⁰ Also Kvanvig (2011: 232).

remind her for ever of the flood (which she now regrets having consented to), so the rainbow will remind God for ever not to bring another flood.

It is intriguing that P declares Noah to have been 600 years old at the beginning of the flood (Gen. 7:6), since the Babylonians employed a sexagesimal numerical system, unlike the Israelites. This figure is therefore suggestive of a Babylonian background. Indeed, it suggests knowledge of the antediluvian King List, something already utilized by P in Genesis 5. In the Weld-Blundell 62 version of the King List, the flood hero (Ziusudra) reigned for 36,000 years. If P or his source knew this figure, they could have divided it by sixty and applied it to his life at the time of the flood.³¹ (Division by sixty is, of course, central to the Babylonian sexagesimal system, and it is to the Babylonians that we ultimately owe our sixty seconds in a minute and sixty minutes in an hour.) In Berossus' version, the flood hero (Xisouthros) reigned 64,800 years,³² which is 18×600 years, so alternatively this figure could have been divided by 18 (a much rounder number in the sexagesimal system than in ours) and applied to Noah's age. Either way, P's figure of 600 years had a Babylonian background.

HOW AND WHEN WERE MESOPOTAMIAN TRADITIONS ABSORBED?

There have been a few scholars who have claimed that the biblical flood account is not dependent on the Mesopotamian but that both are dependent on a common earlier tradition or event. These scholars tend to be extremely conservative, such as Heidel (1949: 267) and Millard (1967: 17–18), seeking to avoid the unpalatable notion that the Bible is dependent on a pagan source. However, bearing in mind the certainty that the Mesopotamian tradition is much earlier than the biblical—even on the most conservative dating of Genesis 6–9—this supposition is unwarranted and reflects the logical fallacy known as positing entities beyond necessity.

We cannot know for certain how and when the Mesopotamian flood traditions were appropriated. However, Lambert has suggested (1965: 299–300) that these traditions spread westwards about the time of the Amarna age (fourteenth century BCE), which is plausible since Akkadian was the *lingua franca* of the ancient Near East at that time, and copies of various Akkadian

³¹ Cf. Cassuto (1964: 17, 22, 81). He was followed by Bailey (1989: 167), but the latter wrongly gives 36,000 years as Ziusudra's age, rather than length of reign, and does not note the precise Mesopotamian source.

³² VanderKam (1984: 37), normally a most meticulous scholar, mistakenly says that Berossus attributed a 36,000-year reign to Xisouthros.

literary works are attested in the west then, for example Atrahasis at Ugarit,³³ Gilgamesh at Megiddo, and the Hittite capital Hattusa, and various other works at Amarna itself. If so, it is likely that the Mesopotamian flood story was originally mediated to the Israelites through the Canaanites. This, I have argued above, was in the form of the Atrahasis epic. Eventually the story reached J, whom I hold to have written c.800 BCE.³⁴ In addition, P also seems to have had independent access to Mesopotamian flood traditions, including a version of the Atrahasis epic as well as some traditions found later in Berossus. In view of the fact that P is generally dated to the sixth century BCE, it is plausible to suppose that these traditions were derived by P from a Babylonian source in the exile.³⁵

HOW GENESIS HAS THEOLOGICALLY TRANSFORMED THE MESOPOTAMIAN FLOOD TRADITION

There are numerous details in which the biblical writers have transformed the underlying Mesopotamian flood tradition—for example, the name of the flood hero and the length of the flood—but the four most fundamental theological differences are as follows.

First, the Bible has ‘monotheized’ the Mesopotamian flood story. Whereas in the Mesopotamian account Enlil and the gods bring the flood and Enki/Ea delivers the flood hero, in Genesis there is simply one deity who does both. Other polytheistic references have also been eliminated. This ‘monotheization’ is of a piece with the way in which the Bible transforms other ancient Near Eastern traditions, for example those concerning Enoch, Balaam, and Daniel.

Secondly, the story has been ethicized. In the Atrahasis epic the flood was brought by Enlil because he could not get to sleep at night as a result of the noise of humanity, which resulted from its increase; the claim of Pettinato (1968) that this refers to a rebellion on the part of humanity is unjustified, and is now generally rejected.³⁶ In Gilgamesh no reason is given for the flood, though we know it was a decision of the gods (11.14), especially Enlil,

³³ The fragmentary Atrahasis text from Ugarit contains only the flood story and has Atrahasis speaking in the first person, thus providing a parallel to Gilgamesh tablet 11. See Lambert and Millard (1969: 131–3).

³⁴ Cf. Gen. 10:12, where Calah is ‘the great city’, Calah being the capital of Assyria from c.880 to c.700 BCE.

³⁵ Contrast Van Seters (1992), for whom it was J who appropriated Babylonian traditions in exile.

³⁶ Moran (1971); Kilmer (1972).

something not only Ea but also the Mother goddess later felt lacked wisdom (11.170, 184). The biblical flood story thus represents a new development in the motivation for the flood, both J and P attributing it to humanity's sin. P refers particularly to humanity's violence and corruption (Gen. 6:11–13), whereas J speaks more generally of wickedness and evil (Gen. 6:5).

Thirdly, a point that biblical scholars often overlook is that towards the end of the Mesopotamian flood story, in both Atrahasis (3.5.36–6.40) and Gilgamesh (11.164–206), some divine sympathy is expressed for the victims of the flood in speeches from the Mother goddess and Enki/Ea. In contrast, the Bible regards the flood as a just punishment for wicked humanity, so there is no need for God to show regret.

Finally, in all versions of the Mesopotamian flood story (Sumerian, Atrahasis [as preserved in Ugaritic and Neo-Babylonian fragments], Gilgamesh, Berossus) the flood hero is made immortal after the flood. It was therefore a deliberate move on the part of the biblical writers or their sources to omit this part of the story. Probably P transferred this motif to Enoch (Gen. 5:24) who, uniquely with Noah, is described by P as having walked with God (Gen. 5:24; 6:9).³⁷ As for J, after the flood he goes on to present a very human Noah—one who becomes drunk and naked in the process of discovering wine (Gen. 9:20–27)—a story which Baumgarten (1975: 58–61) hypothesizes was placed here deliberately by way of rejection of the traditional apotheosis of the flood hero. This is possible but cannot be proved. The suggestion³⁸ that the name Noah derives from a root cognate with Ethiopic *nōḥa*, 'to be long' (especially of time), by analogy with the names Ziusudra ('Life of long days') and Utnapishtim ('He found life') therefore seems unlikely, since Noah is depicted as mortal.³⁹ Conceivably, of course, the Hebrew name Noah might have arisen with this etymology prior to the rejection of the immortality motif, and the etymology might subsequently have become forgotten. However, this is unlikely since a Hebrew verb with this meaning is otherwise unattested, whereas Akkadian and Amorite personal names based on *nwh*, 'rest, be satisfied', are well known.⁴⁰

It is a great pleasure to dedicate this chapter to John Barton, my esteemed and genial colleague for over thirty years. His contributions to Old Testament interpretation are prodigious and always stylishly expressed.

³⁷ VanderKam (1984: 31) and Day (2011: 218). Contrast Borger (1974).

³⁸ Hilion (1925: 50–3); Driver (1950: 350); Barr (1992: 75). Cf. Bailey (1989: 165–7).

³⁹ Even less likely is the view of Schwartz (2002: 236–7) that the name Noah, 'rest', derived from that of Utnapishtim via Aramaic *'tnbš* (understood as reflexive of *npš*, 'he refreshed himself, rested').

⁴⁰ Cf. Tigay (1982: 230 n. 41).

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