

Myth and Mythology: How Stories Shape the World

COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGY: THE FLOOD AND
DESTRUCTION OF MANKIND

(HPHP4006)



Flood myth archetype

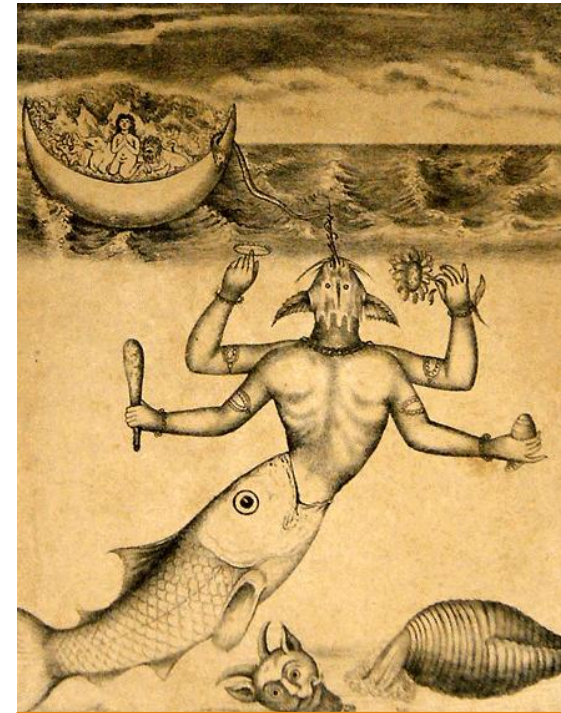
- Flood myths common, especially in the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean (e.g. Sumerian and Babylonian myths, Torah, Indian and Chinese flood myths, etc.).
 - *Epic of Gilgamesh* – Gilgamesh meets the immortal Ut-napishtim who had survived the flood sent by Enlil.
- Archetype of wickedness, punishment and salvation (of flood hero) by divine revelation?
- Near Eastern myths:
 - Atramhasis-Epic: humans “disturbing” the gods.
 - Sumerian: so-called ‘Eridu-Genesis’: no reason given.
 - Gilgamesh epic (XI): no stated reason.
 - Zoroastrian flood myth: Cause – too many immortal beings. Yima gathering animals on a mountain-castle.
 - Genesis (6.5-6): violence and wrong-doing of mankind.



Old Babylonian Epic of Atrahasis; clay tablet found in Sippar (ca. 1635 BCE) – British Museum

Why were flood myths widespread?

- Source of flood myths – Euhemerism (narratives linked to historical memory of real events)?
- Symbolism of creation (and destruction) through primordial waters.
- A shared human metaphor: deluge touching on the human search for stability and security?
- Extremely difficult to identify locations and historical contexts of cultural exchange for this mythic archetype.
- Difficult question: Why was a “foreign story” embedded in new contexts?
 - How do they become “anchored” in these new contexts?



The Matsya avatar comes to the rescue of Manu

Iris behind Juno



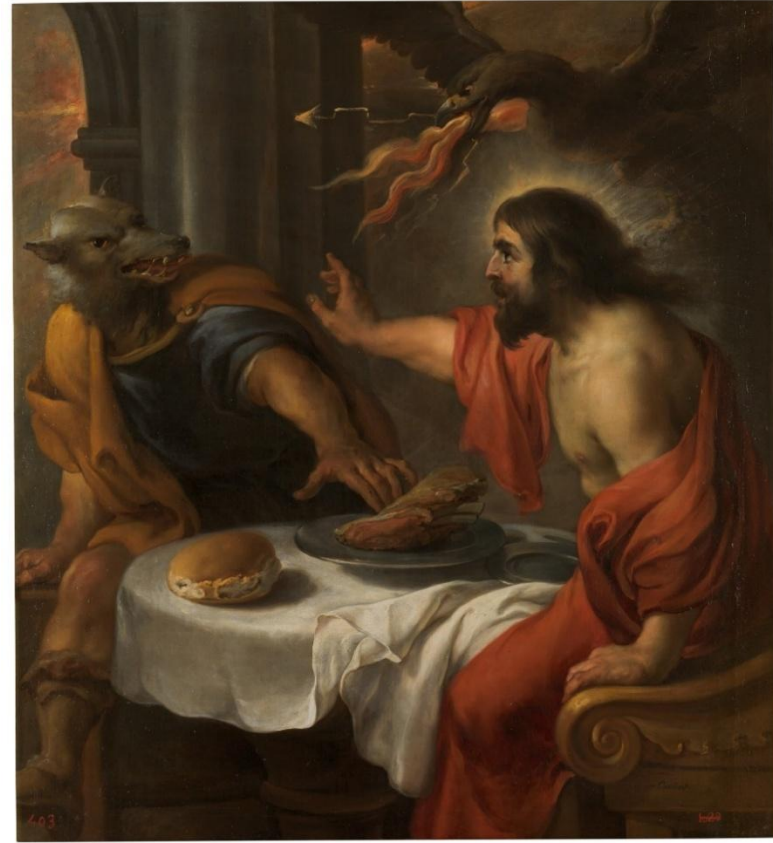
Punishment of Ixion scene, Casa dei Vettii ("House of the Vetii", VI 15, 1) in Pompeii

Ovid and the flood myth

- Near Eastern influence on Graeco-Roman? Ovid has most detailed surviving Classical account [cf. Apollodorus 1.7.2]
- Possible allusion to the biblical Mts. Ararat? [Genesis 8:4]
 - 'Occupat hic collem, cumba sedet alter adunca et ducit remos illic, ubi nuper **ararat**'; 'This one occupies a hill, another sits in a curved skiff, and leads his oars there, where recently he had plowed' [*Met.* 1.293] – Fletcher (2010).
 - arare = to plow.
- Other parallels: Iris (rainbow) at the beginning in Ovid, end in the Pentateuch; Ovid's bird dies at end of flood contra dove; Deucalion and Pyrrha turn back ward when throwing the stones, while Shem and Japheth turn backward to avoid seeing their father's nakedness.

The Wickedness of Man

- Wickedness of mankind and Zeus roaming the earth disguised as a mortal.
- Zeus a guest of Lycaon (tyrant of Arcadia). Lycaon tries to kill Zeus during the night and roasted human flesh (a Molossian hostage) to serve as a meal.
- The fleeing Lycaon was turned into a wolf-man.
- Zeus decides to punish all humankind.



Jupiter and Lycaon, by Jan Cossiers, 1636 – 1638.

The Flood

- Zeus/Jupiter decides to send a flood to wipe out humankind.
 - The South Wind unleashed, Iris fed the clouds.
- Poseidon/Neptune order the rivers to overflow and caused an earthquake.
- Crops, animals and people were all washed away.
 - Those who survived the flood died of starvation.
- Deucalion (son of Prometheus) and Pyrrha (daughter of Epimetheus) were carried in his little boat to Mount Parnassus.



Deucalion and Pyrrha surviving the flood caused by Jupiter; picture from a medieval copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon

Deucalion and Pyrrha

- Deucalion and Pyrrha at Mount Parnassus worship the Corycian nymphs (mountain gods), and Themis goddess of the oracles.
 - ‘No one was more virtuous or fonder of justice than he was, and no woman showed greater reverence for the gods.’ – **Ovid *Met.* 1.320 ff.**
- Zeus/Jupiter orders the North wind to clear away the storms and for the rivers to abate flooding.
- Themis gives them an oracle, to throw the “bones” of the mother behind their backs. From this a new race of people were born.
- Deucalion and Pyrrha had a son called Hellen – i.e. the eponymous ancestor of the Greeks.



Sarcophagus, c. AD 270, Deucalion and Pyrrha appear at the far right, with Deucalion standing by a tree (influenced by Adam, Eve and the Tree of Knowledge?). To the left are the Cyclopes creating a new generation of mankind.

Bibliography

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